

Magestic

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www.geoffwolak-writing.com

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Part 1

No 10. Downing Street, London. Summer, 1985.

The Prime Minister ran a quick eye over a letter, initialling the corner before handing it back to the waiting messenger.

Thirty minutes later and a buff coloured file was keenly opened by Jack Donohue at the Ministry of Defence. The letter, a tip-off about an upcoming IRA terror attack, now had the addition of TOP SECRET stamped onto it in blood red ink. He touched the edges of the letter reverently and squared it off to the file; neatness was next to Godliness for Jack. He curled a lip at the fingerprint dust still adhering to the paper, pursed his lips and blew delicately.

Jack read the brief letter over and over, trying hard to read between the lines. He attempted to judge the tone and the style of writing, trying desperately to glean some intelligence about the sender – his assigned task. Magestic with a ‘g’, whoever the individual was, had already caused him some sleepless nights. If only the letter had been signed “Majestic”.

Majestic had been the CIA campaign of misinformation about UFOs in the 1960s; a tantalising link, so close. But why spell the word with a ‘g’? Was our friend simply a bad speller? No, the writing style had been exhaustively analysed by various linguists and handwriting experts. Our friend was deemed to be well educated and cultured. So, it was a deliberate spelling mistake. ‘Magestic’ was a noun, a few references around the world, but none of significance or relevance.

This new letter, typed like the rest, had been numbered by the sender in handwriting as ‘12’ and detailed an elaborate IRA attack, so much detail that some were certain that Magestic was *in the community of spies*, possibly a high ranking member of the IRA itself. Jack knew that to be nonsense, because lying next to him was a file of the first eleven letters, many detailing natural disasters. Being an intelligence researcher, Jack knew the limitations of field agents and double agents, and predicting the next winner of the Eurovision Song Contest was not amongst the attributes of any spy he ever knew of. No, this was something quite, quite different.

The fact that the Magestic letters had been assigned to him was a great honour, his career not quite working out as anticipated in his youth. Thirty-eight years old, if he was going to do anything noteworthy, he figured, he would have done so by now. Civil Service retirement at fifty-five loomed as the only light at the end of the long dark tunnel as he sat in his basement office, longing for a window.

He smiled when considering why they had assigned him this task; a degree in psychology. Actually, it was a 2.1, not so clever. But still, here he sat, grinning smugly at his assigned task, a task that his superior resented. His boss always read the letters first, just to make a point, but never gleaned anything of use outside of the obvious facts detailed. Like the other so-called ‘experts’, Jack considered, his boss was stuck in the detail, not the topics or the style. He considered again the detail of this latest message as he worked alone in his office, muttering to himself. ‘Playful, confident, sarcastic almost ... yet important, direct, necessary.’ He made notes, comparing them to a previously prepared summary.

‘Terrorists actions ... but only related to us, to the UK, not to any other country. Posted in the UK, London, various central locations, plus Cardiff, Reading and Swindon. Our friend uses the train a lot, a commuter like myself. Hell, I may have even sat opposite him, and I’m sure by the tone that *it* is a *him*. Mid to late forties, ex-military or similar I believe, and a powerful clairvoyant.’ Easing back, his chair issued a creak of complaint as he tapped his top lip with his pen.

He tipped his head back as far as it would go, stretching his neck muscles. ‘So why tip us off? Why not ... bet the races.’ He raised a pointed finger. ‘Maybe he does. Note: look for big, consistent winners at the races - stock markets maybe.

‘So far ... three IRA attacks, one faulty ship – which sank unfortunately, one spy escaping the safe house a day early, a rail crash averted – but disputed, an aircraft with a faulty fuel line – gratefully found in time, Reagan’s win at the polls, an attempt on our Ambassador in Angola – averted, the Eurovision Song Contest winner – just to make a point, the Iran-Contra affair...’

A thought surfaced, his features hardening quickly. He typed a hurried note and sent it directly to the Cabinet Office by courier, a deliberate breach of protocol.

The Prime Minister read the note, took off her glasses and eased back in her chair, staring out of focus for several seconds. 'I want the intelligence chiefs. Tonight. Oh, and this officer ... Donohue, fetch him as well.'

When the officers had assembled in Cabinet Office Briefing Room 'A', COBRA, the Prime Minister stepped purposefully in and sat quickly, placing down her handbag. Jack adjusted his tie, wondering just how annoyed his manager would be, yet not giving a damn. Deputy Director Sykes was in attendance and eyed Jack suspiciously.

Straight to the point, The Prime Minister said, 'This gentleman -' motioning toward Jack. '- has come up with a... very significant point. What if our good friend Magestic is sending tip-offs to other nations?' She waited as concerned looks swept around the assembled faces. 'Up to now we have assumed that this was just about us.'

Jack delicately raised a finger.

'Yes?' the P.M. curtly prompted.

'I hope you don't mind, but when I ... er ... got the idea I rang a good friend in the London CIA section, the researcher I'm supposed to co-operate with on the psychology of the Russian leadership -'

'Yes, yes,' the P.M. urged, beckoning Jack onward with her hand.

'I figured that, if they didn't already know, then they would not register anything about the name. I asked if he had heard the word Magestic...'

'And?' Sykes firmly nudged when Jack hesitated.

'My contact went apoplectic at the mention of the word, demanded to know what I knew.'

Numerous whispered conversations broke out, the P.M. staring hard at Jack. She cut through the chatter with, 'You have short-cut ... what could have been a lengthy process.'

Now they know that we've been getting letters. But, more importantly, we know that this is not just about us.'

Jack forced a breath. 'Prime Minister, we know that Magestic is probably London based, or a commuter along the M4 motorway. So ... so if the Americans have had letters, they would, most likely, be posted to the US Ambassador here ... in London.'

'Are you suggesting ... that we *intercept* the American Ambassador's mail?'

Jack decided to be bold. 'They can't possibly know when the next letter will appear, so they won't miss it if ... it went missing.'

The P.M. stood, a nod toward Sykes before exiting quickly. A chorus of overlapping whispers began. Jack tentatively raised a finger.

'Donohue, you don't need to raise a finger like a schoolboy wanting the toilet,' Sykes suggested. 'What is it?'

'Well ... er ... I firmly believe that our friend, well meaning that he is, may also be sending letters to others; Russians, Chinese...'

'Jesus,' Sykes let out.

November 21st, 2035, aboard the eco-submarine Warrior III, North East of Bermuda.

As I sat down at my cabin's small desk I knew exactly what I wanted to write, but still let my hand hover over the data pad. I finally touched the screen.

'Ready to begin recording and transcribing' came a pleasant, yet detached female voice. It had obviously been thoughtfully designed by some youngster at Chinchon-Microsoft to be non-patronising, and was the same voice as that on my PCD. If she was real I hoped she was on a commission; a penny a device would have made her billions!

'PCD' I repeated in my mind: Personal Communications Device. When I was lad a computer was called a computer,

then they became desktop computers – fair enough, then personal computers, PCs – or was it the other way around. Then everyone had a laptop to carry around. Soon mobile phones started to do what computers did and so they became Personal Communication Devices – shortened eventually to PCs, and it all got confusing. Your laptop worked like a phone and your phone worked like a computer, only smaller. And me, I often longed for the first IBM PC's keyboard, ivory keys that 'clunked' heavily when you hit them, so much better than touch screens with intuitive algorithms. The number of spreadsheets I accidentally sent my mum from thirty thousand feet over the Atlantic.

When I first started work in the city of London, mobile phones were called phones and were the size of a house brick, a thousand pounds to buy; only city brokers with pink shirts and briefcases lugged them around. Then they got smaller, soon everyone and their kids got one, then there were suddenly more mobile phones on the planet than people, and poor Africans tried to fix them, or melt them down or something; I remembered images of poor black kids sitting on a mountain of old phones, trying to make enough money to cover their next meal.

When was that, I considered, thinking back over the years; probably around 2013, before the troubles began. And talk about city traders, I was one for a whole six months before starting to work for Jimmy Silo. It was how we met. Actually, it was how he recruited me, and not for the first time. He came looking for me.

I took a breath, a quick glance at the wall and the photographs of my kids and ex-wife. 'Kids', I repeated in my mind, they were now parents themselves. But they would always be kids to me. 'My name ... my name is Paul Holton ... and this is my account of my life with Jimmy Silovich; time traveller, womaniser, philanthropist, reluctant politician ... and my friend.'

I caught my own image in the desk mirror; seventy years old going on twenty-five. At least I appeared twenty-five on the surface, thanks to the genetically modified stem cells floating about my system, hunting earnestly for something to

repair and rejuvenate. I could pass for twenty-five, but these days so could a lot of people if they had the money. My mop of black curly hair was still there, and still a mop. As a teenager I had tried to tame it, around the time I had tried in earnest to stop my mum from buying me shirts with wide collars, and cuffs that took ages to iron. The taming had not worked, neither the hair nor my mum. No matter what I tried, my hair had its own ideas. It was cut every six weeks and we agreed to ignore each other and do our own thing. In its favour it never needed combing and looked exactly the same after a futile attempt at male grooming.

Sometimes, these days, my eyes looked tired and I could imagine how I might actually appear at seventy: grey hair, or no hair, wrinkles and sun spots, opaque skin and errant strands of hair trying to escape from my nostrils and eardrums. But thanks to my mentor I, and everyone else on the planet, had the chance of eternal youth, a subject of much debate amongst many groups, some of whom wanted me dead.

I began.

1986, London. My 'digs' in Richmond.

The new guy was shaping up nicely. Six foot four, built like Darth Vader's big brother and smart with it, we were getting on well. He did the dishes, cleaned the house, bought way too much food and drink for just his own consumption and he nearly always picked up a take-away on the way home, from the Chinese next to Richmond tube station. Me, and Dave the other lodger, were getting fat and lazy after just two weeks. With England playing in the World Cup, and tonight's match against Argentina of all countries, we were well geared up; Chinese, cans of lager, ice cream slowly defrosting and some popcorn for later. Dave and I were as snug as we could get. All we needed was a pair of lap-dancers for half time and life would have been perfect.

Jimmy had joined McKinleys Stock Brokers almost a month ago now and had noticed my advert for a lodger. Rents were high in London, especially posh Richmond, and I had taken the lease on a whole damn house just to be near my parents. Four streets away, it was far enough away to be independent. Just. I was twenty-two and the hormones were raging. All I needed was some money, and not to be so damn tired on the weekends that I just slept. Somewhere out there was the big wide world and the bright lights, yet to be discovered.

Getting out on a Saturday night and *going large* was proving to be more difficult a task than I had anticipated when I moved out. Money was tight, better now with the last room occupied, and the working day was killing me; I was running on chocolate and coffee. Didn't know how Jimmy did it, he hardly slept and was always wide-awake, polite and pleasant. I suspected cocaine, since many of the lads in the office were using it, especially on a Saturday night. We were up at 6am, on the tube at 6.30am, two changes, into the office for 7.45am, pink Financial Times under arms and looking quite the part in our smart suits. We hadn't yet opted for pink shirts, and I definitely couldn't afford a mobile phone. Still, we were 1980's city traders, sons of the Thatcher's revolution and yuppies in the making.

The match had proved boring so far; a few chances, a few nudges and hard tackles, plenty of shouting at the TV. At least the food had been good and the beers were going down nicely. Holding my aching stomach I remembered the threat we had made to go around the corner and show the local girls how to dance. This was why I was single: getting home at 7.30pm knackered, stuffing my face and falling asleep till bedtime. I was twenty-three going on forty!

With ten minutes of the match left to go Jimmy said, 'You know what I reckon will happen.' He stated it in a voice that made him sound much older than myself, even though we were both the same age. 'I reckon ... that Maradona will *punch* the ball over Shilton's head, winning the match one nil.'

‘What?’ Dave said with a heavy frown. He shot me a look. ‘If he hand-balls it, it won’t be a goal, will it?’ He looked embarrassed for Jimmy, who we had already figured was not a football fan.

‘They’ll allow it,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Ten quid on it.’

‘Twenty quid on it,’ Dave countered, easing up from his slumber and flicking noodles off his smart work trousers.

‘Make it a round hundred,’ Jimmy confidently suggested.

‘A hundred?’ Dave repeated, another glance toward me. ‘That Maradona ... will hand ball the winning goal in? You’re on, sucker.’

Jimmy opened more cans and politely offered them around as we waited. A few minutes later Dave and I were on our feet, our jaws touching the floor. And I should have known then that there was something very odd about the big guy. Dave couldn’t speak for a whole minute. He rang his mates to check that the match really was live and not recorded. He even rang the BBC as Jimmy insisted that he did not want the money. And that was the start of it. My lodger could predict the future with pinpoint accuracy, a handy trait for a budding stockbroker.

The second clue came that Friday night when I actually felt like I had the energy for a few beers in the pub around the corner. In those days they were smoke filled, no laws against smoking in public places yet. And if there was a pretty girl present then she most definitely was a smoker. Still, in those days the birds were British at least, we were not knee deep in East Europeans yet. With no seats free we stood at the end of the bar, me and Dave picking Jimmy’s brain on politics, which he seemed to know way too much about; he had an opinion on everything. And I mean *everything*. In our work suits we soon caught the attention of two nice girls, smokers of course, and Jimmy bought everyone several rounds. Oddly, he had deep pockets, just one more mystery about mister mystery guy.

‘That’s my ex-boyfriend and his mates,’ the first girl whispered at some point, a nod towards the other end of the bar.

‘Not to worry, and not a problem,’ Jimmy quietly and confidently assured her, not even bothering to scan the would-be troublemakers.

I, on the other hand, was worried and glanced their way, a bit too obvious. Now the former Romeo knew we were discussing him, maybe even the size of his dick. Judging by the size of the rest of him it could well have been a whopper. We were in trouble. Dave was no fighter, and I preferred the *run very fast* approach to these things.

‘I think your ex is still interested,’ I suggested to the girl.

‘He’s such a wanker,’ she came back with, shaking her head. ‘Watch out for flying bottles.’

‘Shall we ... eh ... go somewhere else?’ I suggested. ‘Curry maybe?’ That was a bad idea, I just remembered, since I could not have even stuffed a packet of crisps into my bursting abdomen.

‘Sounds good,’ Jimmy enthused, a budding world champion at face stuffing; fella had the size to squeeze it into. Outside, in the cool night air and smoke free environment, Jimmy said, ‘Start walking, I’ll be a step or two behind you.’

With curious frowns the four of us plodded slowly towards the local curry house, Jimmy trailing behind. We could not have made ten paces before a shout caused the girls to snap their heads around; ‘wanker’ was on our trail. Jimmy waved us on as he turned to face six angry men. We took a step before what was left of our chivalry caused us to stop and turn, and wait.

‘You six gentlemen must be the local mutual masturbating society,’ Jimmy offered them. I turned my head to Dave. As far as tactics for diffusing situations like this went, it was a first for me. Dave and I exchanged worried looks.

Neither of us had seen someone move like that. To kick a man across the bonnet of a car, another through a plate glass window. In the time it took me to take three small steps there were six unconscious men sprawled on the pavement and road. And Jimmy, he stepped casually towards us combing his hair.

‘So ... curry?’ he said as he joined us.

Stunned, we fell into step with him and plodded on, numerous glances back. The second girl was most impressed and linked arms with him, a come-on smile spread across her face. It was clue number two, number three if you include his very deep pockets. We rounded the corner and ducked into a curry house just as flashing blue lights flickered by. The waiter offered us a seat by the window but Jimmy, ever the tactical thinker, chose one at the rear, me and him sat with our backs to the wall in an alcove. If the local coppers had looked in they would have seen the girls and Dave, probably not clocking us. I was getting suspicious of Jimmy, pleasantly suspicious. Was he a junior trader like me, or a secret agent of some sort?

Jimmy faced me. 'Why don't you guys just have some drinks, soft drinks, sober up a bit so that after this we can hit Stringfellows. I know the head doorman, get us all in.'

It was a plan I liked the sound of. Jimmy stuffed down a curry with the girls, God knows how he had the room for it, as me and Dave sipped shandys. And the odd thing about the big fella - he let me and Dave take the lead with the ladies, always managing to put himself down and play us up. He was helping me out like the big brother I never had.

At Stringfellows there was a monster of a winding queue and it had just started to rain, but we walked right past everyone. I noticed Jimmy fold a note into his palm before he shook hands with a doorman, who seemed to recognise him. The note changed hands with practised ease and I was back to thinking about secret agents again, and how little money I had on me, since drinks in here had to be pricey. No sooner had the thought crossed my mind than Jimmy gave me four tens without the girls noticing. Back then forty quid was a lot, especially for a night out.

'Pay me back when you can,' he whispered as we headed towards the VIP area. He stopped at the bouncer policing the VIP area entrance, another handshake and some whispered words in an ear. We were in, and rubbing shoulders with football players and TV stars. I rubbed my hands with glee.

Little more than an hour later Dave was done, well done and wobbling. Someone had given him a half drunk bottle of

champagne, mistakenly believing him to have just won some international award, and he had finished it off. Jimmy grabbed a bouncer and gave him some notes, telling him to stuff Dave in a taxi whilst placing our address in Dave's lapel pocket. Smooth, real smooth.

Suddenly, Jimmy and the girls seemed to be getting ready to go somewhere else, a worry for me because I was struggling as it was. 'I've got the use of a friend's penthouse flat, not far,' Jimmy told me. 'C'mon, let's get you some fresh air.'

We took a taxi around to Belgravia, pulling up in front of a very posh set of marble pillars, a doorman coming out to greet us, a strange fella in a long green coat and green top hat.

'Evening Jimmy,' the man offered, holding open a set of glass doors.

Jimmy slipped the man a note without the girls noticing as we stepped inside, the girl's heels clattering on the marble. We took a snug, gold coloured lift up to the tenth floor and opened to a corridor with just the one door, which I found puzzling in my drunken state. Jimmy turned a key in the door and we stepped inside, the heating already on, a champagne bottle in an ice bucket on a coffee table.

With a frown I touched the bottle. 'Is he in ... your mate?'

'No, away working,' Jimmy replied, slipping off his jacket. 'We can crash here, go home in the morning on the tube.'

As I stood there I was waiting for the girls to object, or to run off. I avoided eye contact with them and I waited; no objections came, no running off. Oh bloody hell - did I have clean underwear on?

Jimmy opened a door and said, 'Your room. Try the balcony, get some cool air.'

I stepped in and glanced around, almost fainting; it looked like the inside of Buckingham Palace, making me terrified to touch anything. Stepping across the vast room I noted the ensuite bathroom before opening a glass door onto a balcony. Breathing the cool air, I tried desperately to sober up, finally turning around and closing the door to find Sophie, the girl I had spent most of the time chatting with, bouncing on the side of the bed. Something started to get hard.

‘Very posh,’ she joked, kicking off her shoes with scant regard for whatever they impacted with.

‘Er ... drink?’ I asked, taking off my jacket.

‘Champagne,’ she said with that look in her eye. Actually, I had very little experience of that look up to that point, but I figured it out all by myself. Back in the lounge I found Jimmy sat by himself, sipping the cooled champagne.

‘So?’ he asked. ‘All ... OK?’

‘It’s like frigging Buckingham Palace,’ I said as I eased down opposite, two champagne flutes already full and fizzing. ‘What does your mate do?’

‘Trader, like us. Older and richer.’

‘Where’s your bird?’ I whispered.

‘Shower,’ he mouthed.

‘Have you got any –’

‘Bedside cabinet,’ he said with a grin. Easing forwards he softly said, ‘Let me be so bold ... as to offer some advice.’ I was all ears. ‘Shower together, do the business, robe on, back out here, cool off, coffee, do it *again* ... then to sleep. Get up first, shower – smellys in there, coffee, make her a tea, do it again, give her money for cab home and get her number. Fix a provisional date for tomorrow ... here.’

‘Money –’

‘Beside cabinet. Now, take the glasses and ... have fun.’

I was terrified and exhilarated, but I had been given a plan. I was even tempted to stop and write it down in case I screwed it up. As it turned out she was great, not pushy, and quite understanding of my drunken state. Coffee was waiting for me in the kitchen as she lay in bed and round two was better than round one.

In the morning I found Jimmy reading the papers. God knows where they had come from, since I hadn’t heard anyone go out.

‘Well?’ he gently probed. I gave a thumbs-up sign. He pointed at the second coffee mug. ‘I heard you moving. Milk and plenty of sugar.’ I sat. ‘Oh, if you need to take a dump use that door there, separate small bathroom that she won’t be able to smell.’

God he was good. I took my coffee and made a horrendous smell, extractor fan turned on. After another shower and a *firm* wake-up call for Sophie we both got dressed, finding Jimmy and his girl sat in robes.

‘Hungry?’ he asked.

‘Starved,’ we both said.

Jimmy checked his watch. ‘Be some food brought up in ... oh, about ten minutes or so. Grab yourselves a fresh tea, all laid out in the kitchen.

It was, and the damn kitchen was as big as the bedroom. Ten minutes later a woman appeared with a trolley, leaving with only a smile and a nod; four English breakfasts and extra everything. We settled around the kitchen table and tucked in, Jimmy and me trying to explain derivatives trading to the girls, who were both secretaries up the East End somewhere. After an hour of munching we flopped on the sofas around the coffee table and dozed, except Jimmy, who read the papers, circling a few articles. The girls had to head off and change, arranging to meet back here at 8pm for dinner; Jimmy was taking us somewhere and it was a surprise.

With the girls gone I said, ‘I’d better get back and get some clothes.’

‘Left hand wardrobe. Have a look.’

I found shirts of all sizes still in their packets, socks, pants, even trousers and shoes. Many were my size. ‘Won’t your mate be pissed?’ I asked as I re-entered the lounge.

‘No, he owes me *loads-a-money*. Help yourself, I’ll settle it when I see him.’

I sat, my brain starting to play catch up. ‘What do you do for McKinleys ... *exactly*?’ Up to that point I had not even seen where he sat in the office.

‘Private client investments and company trades.’

That put him about a million grades above me. ‘At your age!’ I blurted out, immediately regretting it.

He smiled. ‘I’m very good at what I do.’

‘So why are you staying at my gaff, you must be on good money?’

‘Money’s OK, but I tend to spend it quickly. I needed a room ... and you’re a trader from the firm, someone who’s not going to go through my company papers at home.’

‘Oh, well ... yeah, naturally like.’

Jimmy checked his watch. ‘It’s 2pm already –’

‘Shit!’ I said, checking mine.

‘So why don’t you get some sleep and be fresh for the ladies when they return.’

‘You think they will, you know, come back?’

He smiled a knowing and confident smile. ‘I’d bet good money on it.’

‘Right, well, er ... I’ll crash out for a bit then.’ I headed for the door and stopped. ‘Thanks ... you know... for all this.’

‘Someday you can help *me* out, when I need it. I’ll call Dave and see if he got home OK.’

‘Ah ... fuck ’im,’ I said, and got some sleep in a bed so big I couldn’t touch both sides, still smelling Sophie on the pillows.

That weekend’s format was repeated three times before we took the girls down to the coast, Jimmy borrowing his mate’s posh Mercedes. Dave got transferred to an office in Leeds for six months and so he moved out. It was just me and superman, and sometimes the girls since they only lived a few streets away with their parents.

One long weekend we drove the girls across to France, to a secluded chateau that Jimmy said he read about in the Times. And I was heavily in his debt, something that was starting to weigh on my mind. We took the girls on trips down to Bournemouth and to the Cotswolds, before Sophie had to move with her family to Germany for a year. We said we’d stay in touch, but I never saw her again. By then I was cool and relaxed about the whole sex thing and one of Jimmy’s numerous *mates* was teaching me to drive. I didn’t work on Jimmy’s floor, but I began to visit regular, often surprised to find the senior managers in with him having coffee. Everyone treated him like he owned the damn place.

Six months in and Jimmy said he was going it alone, going to trade some private client funds, and would I like to join him. There was the worry about making enough money to

cover my salary and to live, but Jimmy showed me a trading statement that indicated he had millions of pounds of client money under his control. I took the chance, afraid to upset him, not least because he could always sniff out a beautiful woman whose mate would shag me.

Jimmy explained that the owner of the posh apartment had moved to Singapore for at least a year and that he could now afford to rent it. A side room was converted to an office and it soon housed a multi-coloured live computer feed, stock prices ticking over. The second bedroom was now my room and the side room our office, no more trains to work. Jimmy was paying me more than I had been on, no rent for the room, so my money was mounting up nicely. As was my debt to him, and my concern about it.

My old landlord took back the house and I threw out a lot of stuff, buying new clothes. I had to look the part, I even thought about a pink shirt and a mobile phone. I never did get a straight answer from Jimmy about Maradona's handball, or a bunch of other things, but life was too good to knock it. But something was always nagging at me, and for good reason.

First day at school

Jimmy sat me down after we got the IBM PCs set-up and running, a link to the stock exchange via a dedicated phone line.

'Right,' he began. 'Trading: lesson 1.01. Don't trade when you're bored. Don't trade because you've just made a mint. Don't trade when you've just lost your shirt. In essence ... don't trade unless you planned it. I make good money by holding out for the right trades. I may make no trade for the next six weeks, or fifty. It depends.'

'If I have a feeling for which way the FTSE is going then I'll rotate overlapping Index trades, never selling against my stock or reserves. If I have such a feeling, as I do now, I'll tell

you what I think the FTSE may do ... and you manage the small, overlapping positions. That's the trading part of what we do. There's also investing, some of the stock tucked away for the long term; you'll see them listed, so don't go selling them. I'm hanging onto Microsoft, Apple Computers and Nokia in Finland. When there are large market corrections on the downside I often pick up more stock, sometimes off-loading first.'

I was following so far.

Jimmy continued, 'So ... at the moment I think Unilever will break out. Watch the FTSE and Unilever, wait for the index to stop falling and start to level out, then we buy about a hundred grand's worth of shares, not options, and hold for around six to eight weeks. I'm expecting a thirty-five to forty-five percent return.'

I did the sums quickly in my head. It wasn't hard. 'Not bad for six weeks.'

Jimmy nodded. 'Read the FT, do your bits, I'm off to the gym for three hours.' He stood.

'Any totty in this gym?' I enquired.

'Some, yes. And no, you can't come. I've got to have some time away from you ... *employee*.'

I read the papers, checked the charts, had several cups of tea and made myself scrambled eggs, and stood on the balcony a lot. Soon I had a *work from home* routine going, long before it became trendy or financially expedient. But also long before internet porn and music downloads.

We hit the clubs Thursday through to Saturday, so we were not always in the apartment, and Jimmy disappeared for a few hours every day to the gym. But the trading was worrying me. I was starting to believe there might be some insider-dealing going on here, but Jimmy firmly denied it when I nudged. Still, we were one hundred percent right in our trades, numerous accounts set-up with half a dozen brokers so that money could be spread around. Jimmy said it was in case one went bust, but he always said it with a grin. We had made our client fund two hundred thousand pounds in eight weeks, not including investments.

But it was not just the stock market that Jimmy was good at predicting, he also had a bad habit of predicting world events with uncanny accuracy. Looking back, I was being a bit thick, blinded by the money and the lifestyle. And the big guy often joked about crystal balls and other mumbo-jumbo stuff, joking away reasons to make trades and anticipate what the news would bring. It was as if he wanted me to catch him out, to confront him. I was just being slow. A good salary, a posh apartment and an endless supply of pretty girls will do that to you.

One day I bumped into a senior trader from the old firm.

‘Ah, Paul, how’s it going? You learning loads from the big guy?’

‘Yeah, sure,’ I said, since Jimmy had been teaching me a thing or two that I did not already know.

‘Must be great to be a trader ... and a fucking clairvoyant!’ the man joked.

As I walked off a bad penny finally dropped. I stopped in Oxford Circus and stood rigid for so long that a copper came up to me and asked me if I was OK. Back home I found Jimmy reading the papers, something he spent an inordinate amount of time doing.

‘Er ... tea?’ I asked, trying to summon up some courage.

‘Take a seat, Mr. Holton,’ Jimmy said without detracting from his study of some obscure war in some obscure country that I had never heard of. As I eased down, he lowered his paper. ‘Something on your mind, young man?’ He waited. I didn’t know where to start. ‘Guess you’ve been wondering about ... many things. Such as ... my ability to predict the future, and not just in stocks.’

‘It’s a bit ... you know ... spooky.’

‘But a good kind of spooky ... because it makes me lots of money and allows me to have nice apartments and cars and the money to ... well, help you live the life you’ve become accustomed to.’

He hit the nail on the head and made me feel very ungrateful for all he had done for me. ‘Well...’ was all I could get out. The last thing I wanted to do was to spoil our friendship.

‘If you have a question ... ask it, before we both get hungry just sitting here.’

I forced a breath. ‘How can you predict the future? Are you, you know –’

‘Clairvoyant? No, not clairvoyant, but I *can* predict the future with great accuracy.’

My poor brain was puzzled. ‘Isn’t that ... a clairvoyant?’

He seemed amused. ‘A clairvoyant can see the future... if you believe in all that crap. I can *remember* the future. Your future, my past.’

‘My future ... your past?’ I gave it some careful thought. ‘That would make you a ... what, like a time traveller?’ I said in an off-the-cuff manner, a dismissive wave of the hand.

‘Yes,’ he answered with a smug grin.

‘Yes ... to what?’

‘Yes ... I’m a time traveller.’

‘You’re a ... time traveller. What, like Doctor Who on the TV?’ I scoffed.

‘Similar, I guess. But my TV sidekick doesn’t have large breasts.’

‘Not from this planet, then?’ I joked.

‘Technically ... no,’ was not the answer I expected. He focused on me. ‘Ever seen me sleep?’

I thought back, realising that I hadn’t, that he was always awake; last to bed, first up. And if I got up in the middle of the night he’d be reading, telling me he could not sleep. Oh shit.

‘You’ve seen how strong I am,’ he added. ‘And yesterday you saw me burn my hand.’ He held up his hand. ‘See any scars? Any red burns?’

I was getting worried. He fetched a file and plonked it into my lap. It consisted of a series of letters, typed and signed, and all addressed to the Prime Minister. I gulped. Each had been signed “*Magestic, The man in the middle*”.

‘The ... er ... man in the middle?’ I queried.

‘Someone in the middle ... sits between opposing parties,’ he enigmatically explained.

I scanned the first letter. It was warning the Prime Minister about an IRA terrorist attack, and suddenly this was all way

out of my league. The next letter itemised a train crash from a faulty signal, the third another terrorist attack by the IRA - this time in great detail, and naming names. The fourth outlined the election victory of Ronald Reagan and the capture of a British spy in Tehran. It got worse. Predictions of things to come in years ahead, ferries sinking, aircraft crashing and being hijacked. I finally looked up.

Jimmy casually asked, 'If you had the ability to predict the future, what would you do with such a skill? Trade the stock markets like me? Sure, got to make some money and oil the wheels. Bet the horse races, make a mint? Why not, you can always give some money to charity. But would you not, also, warn people about things like ... plane crashes? Terrorist attacks?' He eased back and waited.

'Well ... yeah, of course I would,' I firmly suggested.

'So you would use such an *ability* ... for the benefit of mankind?'

'Well ... of course.'

'Sounds laudable. And if you had this *ability*, and you were warning people and saving lives, then you'd be ... what ... one of the good guys, yeah?'

My head nodded itself.

'And if you knew that ... let's say ... your mum was due to get cancer in twenty years time ... then what?'

'My ... my mum will get cancer?' I was horrified.

Jimmy nodded, looking solemn. 'What would you do?'

'Get her to the doctors before that time, for a check-up,' I rushed to get out.

'Check-ups ... reveal things, they don't cure them.'

'She ... she'll die at sixty-seven?'

'Not if we don't let her.'

'What could you do?' I asked, almost sounding angry with him. Calmer, I said, 'You ... you'd help me pay for private medicine for her? Early treatment?'

'Something along those lines.'

This was now a different ball game, a very different ball game. When I came up in the lift I figured he was some sort of clairvoyant, and that he used his gift to trade the markets. I had completely missed the other uses of such foresight, such

as plane crashes. I felt very guilty all of sudden. We simply sat and stared for a moment.

Finally, Jimmy said, 'Of course, if you expose me ... I won't get to carry on preventing plane crashes. And I certainly could not help your mum and others.' He opened two cans and poured me a lager, which I needed. 'So', he finally said. 'You going to turn me in to the authorities?'

My mind was still on my mum, and plane crashes. 'No, of course not.' There was also the matter that he was the best friend I had ever had. In fact, just about the only decent friend I had ever had.

'Why *of course* not? I could be a dangerous alien for all you know,' he toyed.

'Are you ... you know?'

He laughed. 'No, I was born in Newport, South Wales. You'll meet my parents soon enough.'

'Then how...?'

'Time travel,' he carefully mouthed. 'In simple terms: I lived to be sixty-four years old, went to Canada after World War Three destroyed the planet. -' My eyes widened. '- Became Commissioner for British, European and Israeli Refugees, stepped into a time machine built by the United States Air Force and came back here knowing what I know. My body is full of genetically modified stem cells and other drugs, giving me greatly extended endurance and strength. I'm immune to all diseases known to man - and a few they haven't discovered yet. I heal quick, I don't sleep much, I eat a lot, but I can't jump tall buildings in single bounds and I most certainly *do not* wear my pants outside my trousers.'

'Wa ... World War Three?' I repeated, now wide-eyed and transfixed.

'Kicks off in about seventeen years time, give or take.' He raised a finger. 'Unless, of course...'

'You warn them. You stop it.'

'Tricky.' He shook his head. 'Would they listen? I'd need some ... credibility, built up over twenty years or more.'

I lowered my head to the letters, suddenly realising where this was going.

Jimmy added, 'Of course, it would be a difficult task all by myself.'

I scanned him from under my eyebrows, finally switching my brain on. 'You didn't need a room, did you?'

'No, I'm worth millions. And this place, dumb fuck, is mine. I bought it for two hundred grand. You'd make a lousy secret agent.'

'Why come to me? I'm no James Bond.'

'You have a destiny.'

'I do?' My expression made him laugh.

'Yes, you do. I'll guide you, so all you need to do ... is to think more about *others* than yourself for the next twenty or thirty years. Do you think you could do that?'

I nodded, although I had no idea what I was nodding about. 'What would happen –'

'If the authorities found out about me? We'd be locked up, tortured for information, dissected probably. So, you know, not a word to anyone. And I mean ... anyone. Your life ... depends on it.'

'Bloody hell,' I let out before setting about my lager.

'If you accidentally tell your parents, or some lady you're dating, you'll put everyone you know in danger. In time, in the years ahead, I'll be rich enough and powerful enough to stop any such action. But for now we have to be careful.'

'So, your plan –'

'Is to make some money, build up contacts and friends, build up credibility with the tip-off letters and, when the time is right, go public.'

'What?' I whispered.

'Years from now you'll be very rich, and have your face all over the TV and papers, so start thinking like a celeb' in the making. And now that you know what you need to know ... we'll be off on our travels.'

'Travels?'

'Starting with Kenya, then the States, Australia, everywhere. I need to educate you in the ways of the world.'

It sounded good. But I foolishly asked, 'What if the plane crashes?'

'It won't, dumb fuck –'

‘Because you know which ones crash,’ I said, feeling silly. ‘So what’s the weather going to be tomorrow?’

He laughed. ‘No idea, check the news weather. I only know what I need to know.’

‘So how come you don’t look like ... you know ... a wrinkly old guy?’

‘Stem cells, my lad. Everyone has stem cells, they’re what builds our bodies when we’re in the womb. After about eighteen-years-old the production of stems slows down - enough to keep us alive and to heal wounds - but not enough to keep us looking youthful forever. I’ve been genetically modified so that I produce an excess of them, something that doctors will be able to do in around ... oh ... twenty-five years time. When I *was* an old guy I was strapped to a bed and intravenously fed stems for ten weeks, stems taken from the wombs and umbilical cords of ten ladies I made pregnant for that very procedure. Because the stems were fifty-percent genetically my own, they worked well.

‘I was only given enough protein to survive, and so lost a hell of a lot of weight – appearing like the twenty-year-old me at thirteen stone. The genetically modified stems basically reverted me to a full adult at the youngest age, around twenty, which was what I needed for my parents to accept me as me.

‘*That* particular story ... is very secret, so we’ll discuss it at some point later. So is the exact mechanism of time travel – the people here can’t find out by accident. If you don’t know you can’t accidentally disclose it. As for my appearance... ten or twenty years will pass and I’ll age just a couple of years. Eventually I’ll grow old and die if I don’t get another injection ... from doctors that are in nursery school as we speak.’

‘Bloody hell.’ I sipped my beer. ‘So ... so what do I do... in the future?’

‘Mostly, you’re my assistant, helping me do what I need to do. There’s no one else I can trust with what you now know, and what you’re going to know.’ I felt honoured, then immediately concerned. He added, ‘And if, and when, I’m killed ... you take over.’

‘Killed?’ I repeated.

‘It’s always a possibility. Accidents ... or getting shot by irate husbands.’

‘And then what do I do?’

‘I’ll tell you what the future holds and you ... you fix what you can. But don’t worry, you’ve got ten or fifteen years before we get near a situation where the CIA will want to shoot me.’

‘CIA?’ I whispered.

‘In the future, the Americans are going to want to invade a few countries. I’m going to try and stop them, not least by tipping off those they aim to invade.’

‘Bloody hell.’ I sipped my beer as he fetched a large box.

‘Reading material.’ He took out each book in turn and made a pile on the floor that grew to a height of three feet: history of the world, UK history, first aid, advanced first aid, Pre-Hospital Trauma Life Support, expedition first aid, mountain rescue, UK politics, The Global Economy, principles of flight, piloting helicopters...

‘Helicopters?’ I queried.

‘How else are you going to impress a bird ... other than by flying her home the next day in your own helicopter?’

‘Bloody hell.’

‘Your language tutors will arrive in a few weeks.’

‘I’m like Luke-frigging-Skywalker being trained to use The Force.’

He eased back. ‘You know, in years to come they’ll make three prequels to Star Wars.’

‘What the fuck’s a *prequel*?’

He sipped his beer. With a deadly serious expression he answered, ‘My life.’

After a reflective beer I asked, ‘Well ... what exactly do I do now?’

‘Now you carry on trading the markets, you study, travel... get ready for the future. I’ll give you some money so that you can trade your own account, make you eventually look rich on your own, so you appear to be my business partner, not an employee.’

‘R ... rich?’ I repeated, making him smile.

‘Yes. By time we get to 2005 you’ll be one of the richest men in the UK.’

Wide-eyed I said, ‘I will?’

‘*You* will, I won’t.’

‘Huh?’ came out without any help from me.

‘I’m going to make a lot of money and give it all away. You, on the other hand, will hang onto a lot, so that we have a reserve.’

I suddenly considered that my future self was quite mean. ‘Don’t *I* ... give any away?’

‘Some, yes. Quite a lot in fact – compared to most; tens of millions. But I need you to act as banker. If someone sues me we’ll have a fall-back position.’

I pointed at myself. ‘I ... I’ll have more money than you?’

‘Lots more; nice cars, helicopter, lots of women chasing you.’

‘So ... so what’s the catch?’ I finally asked.

‘When you have a lot of money – a lot of people try and take it off you. You can’t just pop down to the corner shop... because someone will claim that you punched them – even though you never did. Girls will claim you attacked them, hoping to make some money from the story or from a settlement. If you’re in a car and some idiot nudges you from behind, they’ll tell the police you deliberately reversed into them and how bad their neck hurts and ... could they please have a million quid.’

‘Little fuckers,’ I quietly let out.

‘It’s no fun being a millionaire, you’ll have to watch your back. If someone asks you if you like your mum you’d say yes. Next day in the papers it would say you hate your mum.’

‘Little bastards. All because you got a few quid?’

Jimmy explained, ‘In the years ahead the tabloids will get more aggressive than they are now; they’ll print anything, till some privacy laws start to take effect after 2009. So anything you say or do now – that people will remember – will make it to the papers in years to come. Probably be an unauthorised biography about you as well.’

‘Biography? About me?’ I challenged.

‘Should think so.’

‘How can they write it ... you know ... without my say so?’

‘No law against it. If they say you hate your parents it’ll sell better.’

‘So anything I do –’

‘And anything *you did*,’ he emphasised.

‘Shit. I lost my virginity to a middle-aged hooker up the West End for forty quid.’

‘Who knows about it?’

I thought back. ‘I think I told a mate in school...’

‘Then make sure you look him up, buy him dinner, stay on his good side.’

‘I got arrested for nicking a cricket ball from a pavilion when I was sixteen.’

‘Fine, tell them you were a rebellious teenager. No one will give a shit about stuff like that. It’s what you do in the next ten years that matters.’

‘What about all the one-night stands?’ I asked.

‘Not a problem: man about town; money, cars, women. Papers love that sort of stuff.’

‘I haven’t even made any money yet and I’m worrying about it!’ I complained.

‘That, young man, we have in common.’

After two beers I said, ‘What the future like?’

‘Which part?’

‘I dunno ... girls.’

‘They shave off their pubes.’

‘They ... what?’

‘Nearly all girls shave off their pubes, or have them cut into patterns – like butterflies. And tattoos, they all have lots of tattoos.’

‘Girls ... have tattoos?’

‘Just about all of them; up their arms, on their boobs, sides of the hands - it starts in the 1990s. Around 2020 you see old women with stupid tattoos misshapen by their ageing skin. Singers like Robbie Williams have lots of tattoos.’

‘Who’s he?’

‘Wait and see.’

‘Christ. What’s music like?’

‘In the 90s it’s good, but by time we get to 2009 there’s a lot of Rap music in the charts.’

‘Rap? Like what those black kids do in America? Here?’

‘Top sellers.’

‘You’re fucking kidding me!’

Jimmy shook his head. ‘But after 2010 there’re lots of covers, not much original stuff. Guess everything has been done. I’ll commission a clever bit of software that’ll compare songs.’

‘Software?’

‘A computer program. And those mobile phones you see yuppies with, Motorolas, they’ll be small as a credit card.’

‘What?’

Jimmy lifted his eyebrows and nodded. ‘They end up as small as a playing card, and either touch screen or voice activated. You’ve seen Captain Kirk use his communicator? Well ... just like that.’

‘Cool.’

‘You can get a small device to put on your belt and wear around. It beeps if you’re going to have a heart attack.’

‘Strange ... but cool.’

‘Imagine this ... walking down a street, you take out your phone – size of a credit card - and say *where am I?* It tells you where you are, what direction you’re walking. You ask it *where’s the nearest curry house?* And it tells you.’

‘Fucking hell. They expensive?’

‘No, you get them free and pay a monthly charge of around fifteen quid.’

‘Jesus,’ I let out.

‘Everyone has one, kids as young as six. Everyone. If a parent wants to know where their brat is they ask their phone and it tells them.’

‘Bloody hell.’

‘Many cars go electric around 2015, I have a hand in that. Some things are great, some crap.’

I gave it all some careful thought. ‘What do *you* like the most... in the future?’

‘Probably the Internet.’

‘The what?’

‘*Our computer* is connected to the phone line, and in the future all computers are connected to central super-computers that hold information on *everything*. You can click a button and find out the news, the weather, everything. The best bit is the social networking by computer: it’s a gossip shop on the computer screen. You type in something... and lots of people see it, tell their mates. So when the CIA are about to do something naughty you tell people down the computer wire and it goes all around the world in minutes, soon on the news, so that the CIA can’t do what they want to.’

‘Better than letters warning people,’ I suggested.

‘Much,’ Jimmy carefully mouthed. ‘In the future people watch the TV news – about some idiot behaving like an idiot – go online and complain about it, and an hour later the idiot stops doing what he’s doing. *Real* democracy in action. But in the future jobs are still crap, the tube is still crap, British Rail is still crap, plane flights are the same, cars are the same, houses are expensive as fuck – ten times the average salary, and night life goes to shit.’

‘Whooa there, buddy. Nightlife does what?’

‘They relax the licensing laws, so anyplace can stay open and put some music on, dance floor in a corner at the back. No more nightclubs, no one going out in suits after ... say 1993. It’s all jeans and t-shirts.’

‘Jeans and t-shirts ... in a fucking nightclub?’ I was staggered.

Jimmy nodded reluctantly. ‘It’s why we’ll open our own.’

‘I knew there was a reason I hired you,’ I said loudly. We laughed. ‘Our own nightclub. Yes!’ I broached the subject of Jimmy’s fondness for the ladies. ‘If you’re, you know, so old – young looking with the wonder drugs and all – then mentally, you know, you’re old –’

‘Yes?’ Jimmy slowly let out, his brow pleated.

‘Then ... inside ... you’re old, yet you still like the young ladies –’

‘And ... so?’

‘Well, there’s ... you know ... quite an age gap,’ I delicately suggested.

‘And you’re wondering why an old man would go for the young ladies instead of ... what ... a fine fifty-year-old. How do you think I would look with a fifty-year-old woman?’

‘Well, a bit silly really.’

‘Exactly, dopey.’ He sipped his beer and took a reflective moment. ‘When I got to Canada I was fifty, knackered and despondent – women were the last thing on my mind. The conditions were harsh and I grew old quickly, you do in those circumstances. When I became the Commissioner for European Refugees, some five years later, I had some power... and better food and living conditions than most. After a year or so I entertained the odd young lady, paid for in food like the rest, but it was not a priority. It felt ... not right. So much death and starvation, it just doesn’t do anything for your libido. At least it didn’t for me at the age I was at.’

‘The young men raped regularly, punished when they were caught – typically a week in solitary. Others used prostitutes, although it was fair to say that *all* women there would lift their skirts for extra rations; when you’re starving, all other considerations go out the window. People here don’t understand that because they’ve never lived through it, but the Second World War generation would understand.’

‘There was one woman, a doctor under my command, Elizabeth her name was, who spent a lot of time with me. I suppose you could say that she was a girlfriend. But one day she went to an outlying region and never came back - that happened a lot. And now ... now I have to be very careful –’

‘Why?’ I stupidly asked.

‘Why do you think, Dumbo?’

I shrugged. ‘So you don’t slip up and say who you really are?’

‘And what else?’ he prompted.

‘Er ... you don’t like commitment?’ I toyed.

‘Never did when I was a mere mortal, stuck four years once. But what would happen if I did marry someone?’

‘You’d ... need to find a big-fitting tuxedo?’

He smiled. ‘What else? What would happen to the lady in twenty years time? And the kids?’

‘Ah, they’d grow old,’ I realised. ‘Your kids would grow up and go down the pub with you, looking more like brothers and sisters.’

‘And don’t you think that might be a bit ... odd?’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ I agreed. ‘You’re right. What you should do – to make up for the heavy heartache of not being able to marry – is to shag loads a pretty girls without commitment. Console yourself.’ We laughed, toasting each other with our drinks.

‘This job’s not all bad,’ he said with a glint in his eye.

We spoke till the small hours, made some plans, and ordered-in a curry like normal. When I woke the next day I was Dr Who’s assistant, but without the large breasts. After a coffee by myself I went to see my mum, and gave her a big hug. She was so surprised she thought I’d made some girl pregnant or lost my job. It took a whole hour to convince her I just missed her, and even then she was suspicious.

2035

I put down the keyboard, letting out a tired sigh. ‘Computer. Off.’ “*Closing down*”, came a pleasant voice, followed by a chime as I stretched out on my bunk. My back was aching from sitting hunched for so long. My eyes closed themselves, fatigued with concentrating on the screen.

The door burst open, the patter of small feet followed by a heavy four year old landing on my stomach, air bursting from my lungs. ‘God, you’re getting heavy,’ I whispered as my youngest granddaughter snuggled up. Reaching down I put an arm around her, finding her well-worn teddy; they were inseparable. Adult footsteps caused me to open an eye briefly, my youngest daughter stood with hands on hips, an expression of motherly disappointment and exasperation. She stepped closer, reached over and pulled a blanket up, covering her disobedient offspring. I heard the door click shut.

There would be gentle nagging in the morning about letting my granddaughters snuggle up, again, but I didn't care. I did not see that much of them, and they could snuggle up anytime they wanted. It took me back, back to when my own daughters slept in the bed with me and my wife. Ex-wife.

As I lay there, I thought back to the day Jimmy revealed who he was, well – part revealed the story. It seemed like a million years ago, it seemed like yesterday. Now Jimmy was gone, missing for almost four years now. The search had been extensive, large rewards offered. Some believed he had gone backwards or forwards through time, even some of the politicians firmly believed that, but I knew different, and I kept the secret. It was his wish, and I would honour that wish. The need for some sleep robbed me of further thought on the matter.

1986. First name terms

Jack Donohue was worried, being summoned to No. 10 early one morning. He adjusted his tie as he entered through the rear, ushered quickly to the COBRA meeting. Everyone was staring at him, especially Sykes. Gingerly, he sat as directed. 'Morning,' he offered, just before the Prime Minister entered.

The P.M. sat and studied Jack for a moment. 'First, the Americans have admitted, finally, that they also get letters. Those posted to their Ambassador, here in London, are just about identical to those that we receive. We could not say, at this juncture, that they get anything more than we do. They have had some specific warnings of mishaps in The States. Question is, do the Russians and Chinese get letters?'

The head of MI5 answered, 'We intercepted a letter to the Russian Ambassador, then sent it on its way the same day. It

was a warning about a fire at a chemical plant.’ He pulled a face and shrugged.

‘Then we received today’s letter,’ the Prime Minister announced, opening the file she had brought in. Paraphrasing, she read, ‘It was a good idea of Jack’s -’ Everyone focussed on Jack. The P.M. lowered her gaze. ‘-about the other letters. Just for the record, the international community receives warnings of disasters where I feel my tip-offs may do some good.’ She cleared her throat. ‘*Keep your panties on, luv.*’

She took a moment as people shifted uneasily in their seats. Continuing, she read, ‘I am British, and you can be assured of my loyalty of purpose to state and crown. Tell Jack that I do not bet the races.’

Jack tried, and failed, not to smile.

The Prime Minister continued reading, ‘If you wish to send me a message, use the personals in The Sun newspaper, messages to... Big Wobbly Bertha. We will not meet for many years to come, nor should you disclose these letters, since it would most certainly be unseemly for the Prime Minister of our great country to be seen to take seriously the advice of clairvoyants.

‘P.S. If the nice gentlemen -’ She glanced about the assembled men. ‘- intercept letters to foreign embassies I will know about it and re-direct such letters by alternate means. Kindly remember who you are dealing with. P.P.S. Jack will eventually figure out some more about me. How about an office with a window for the poor fella?’ She focused on Jack. ‘We carefully checked the signature, just in case it was *you* ... who sent the letter.’ Faces creased. ‘Fortunately, it stops short of suggesting a pay rise or promotion for you.’

That afternoon Jack got a visit from his departmental manager, Wilson, a sour-faced man with little hair, little patience and even less in the charm department. He scanned Jack’s office without a word then sat. ‘Despite your fondness for your new *pet* ... pen pal, I don’t share your views that this guy is a benefit to anyone.’

‘Sorry?’

‘He’s not just a clairvoyant, he’s a seer – someone capable of remote viewing.’

‘Remote viewing?’ Jack asked, despite the fact that he had recently read a dozen books in the subject.

Wilson flicked dust off his knee. ‘The CIA experimented with it, probably still do. People who can see into the USSR at some missile base and draw a picture of the layout. Uncanny, some of the stuff they could do but, overall, very inconsistent. Every time the Yanks used them for real missions they screwed up.’ He jabbed a finger towards Jack. ‘And so will your boy.’

‘Sir?’

‘He’s dangerous. He should be behind bars, in a psych’ ward where he belongs.’ Jack did not agree with that sentiment, but held his tongue. Wilson continued, ‘If he can see into this office, if he knows what we’re up to, he can also see into other areas. That kind of power cannot be left unchecked. So I want you to find him. Use the newspaper message system, arrange a meet, tell him you’re not well or something – since he seems to have an affinity for you. Just find him.’ He stood. ‘Or else!’

A knock at the door preceded two senior police officers stepping in. ‘Mr Wilson,’ the first stated. It was not a question.

Wilson was caught off guard. ‘Yes. Who the hell are you?’

‘We ... are the nice gentleman who’d like to talk about the death of a young lady you were seeing in college, 1958.’

Wilson stood rigidly shocked.

‘If you’ll come with us, please.’ They led him out, one officer remaining. Jack was on his feet, his mouth hanging open.

The officer neared. ‘Mr Magestic said to say hello.’

‘How ... how do you know about him, it’s top secret?’

‘I’ve been getting letters for years. Our clean-up rate is through the roof.’ He smiled and winked, letting himself out.

For ten minutes Jack stared at the door with a contended smirk. Despite Magestic’s suggestion, no new office had been forthcoming. Still, it was time for a little celebration. He opened a side drawer and took out a packet of Bourbons

biscuits. No, this was a special occasion. He replaced the packet and retrieved a Kitkat.

Kenya

Our first trip was to Kenya a month later, landing at Nairobi airport. My first impression was ... what a shit hole. And the heat was intense. The paint was cracking off the terminal walls, fans on worn bearings competing to see which could emit the most annoying sound - I guessed they were trying to attract mosquitoes, and the staff all stank. Unlike Jimmy, I was not in love with Kenya in particular, or Africa in general.

A local stood with a sign saying 'Silo' and directed us to a cab that had seen better days, a Ford Cortina like my dad used to have. He put our luggage into the boot, eventually getting it to close, and we settled in, Jimmy telling the man which hotel we wanted in the man's own regional dialect. To say the fella was surprised would be an understatement, and we were tooted from behind to get a move on.

Jimmy tipped the puzzled driver well, thanking him again in his own tongue. At least the hotel looked half decent. The staff, dressed in green waistcoats and funny hats, took our luggage and directed us into an air-conditioned interior with lots of white folk milling around; I guessed that it was the local tourist trap. Jimmy signed us in, talking in French to the dark skinned local, who questioned our nationality when the passports were handed over. Jimmy offered him a few words in another dialect, pleasing the man. The rooms were nice enough, good views of the city centre, but Jimmy nodded his head towards the door.

'Follow me,' he enigmatically stated.

We took the lift up to the top floor, opening to a roof garden with a small pool and a good sized bar. We sat, Jimmy ordering drinks in some weird dialect. He checked his watch, so I checked mine. 5.45pm.

‘Sunset over Nairobi,’ Jimmy let out with a contented sigh. ‘It’s been ... *many* years since I was here last.’

With cool beers we lay on sun beds by the pool, several nice ladies swimming lengths and clocking us, the sun going down to the west, the way we were facing. Fair enough, it was very pleasant, and two French ladies joined us, doctors with some agency linked to the Red Cross. Despite Jimmy’s strange knowledge of local dialects his French was limited, the two lady doctors conversing in near perfect English.

I was lost after ten minutes, Jimmy amazing them by knowing more about their mission in Africa than they did. He even told them when their project would end, something they had not yet been informed of. Hairy armpits aside, four hours of slow drinking resulted in Michelle dragging me to my room, thinking I was twenty-nine. Kenya was growing on me.

The next day we were up early, kicking out our guests and telling them we would be back in a week. We hadn’t even unpacked. We hired a taxi, making the driver very happy by booking him for three full days, expecting him to stay overnight with us. Jimmy negotiated a rate equal to a month’s pay for the fella, about a hundred pounds, with petrol on top. Off we set to some place with a long name. After two hours I was back to my original thought: what a shit hole. I made allowances because it was Africa, but God was it dusty and dirty, the roadsides littered with tatty shacks and naked kids.

We eventually left civilisation behind and hit the countryside proper, stopping to let a lion run across our path. An hour later and we arrived at the place with the long name, a small lodge of sorts that looked like cluster of Canadian log cabins, albeit dusty and dirty. Jimmy booked us in, speaking in German to the German owner, a room for the taxi driver arranged, then tipped his head for me to follow. On the veranda of a well-stocked bar we sat, cold beers placed down, and looked out across pure African countryside; a gentle slope down to a winding river, all sorts of animals milling about, forest in the distance and hills beyond, the sun setting. Whoever had positioned the bar had done so deliberately.

Jimmy pointed. Following his finger I could see my first herd of Elephants, lolling about at the river's edge. After saying something in German, a man brought Jimmy two pairs of binoculars and we peered through.

'David Attenborough, eat your bleeding heart out,' I said.

'Met him many times,' Jimmy idly commented. 'Great man.'

And for the next four hours we sat there. Sundown, sunset, afterglow and pitch black, roars of unseen animals echoing through the dark. Not to mention the million flying insects buzzing about the bar's lights.

The next morning we had an acceptable breakfast in a communal hall, some other German guests present, before hiring a private guide and two wardens to take us on a jeep trek. A dated and uncomfortable green Land Rover bounced us along, but we stopped many times, whenever Jimmy uttered some odd words to the driver. My first lion family was a joy; we could not have been more than twenty yards from mum and cubs at one point. We got up close to an Armadillo that seemed to just ignore us, then found a herd of Elephants the other side of a stream. We sat quietly, and they looked us over a few times, the youngsters frolicking in the water. Must have stayed there for an hour, but I was not complaining, I was starting to really enjoy the experience. Further on we spotted Cheetahs, Zebras in the distance, before pulling into what looked like a farm. And there started one of the great loves of my life.

It was not a farm, but an animal sanctuary, for injured or orphaned animals that the rangers and wardens found. The German staff greeted Jimmy, who offered them ten thousand in dollars towards their costs. Fair to say we got the run of the place after that. A teenage girl with a lopsided hat and cute smile took me to one side and sat me down against a wall, re-appearing with a bottle of milk and a bundle of blankets. She handed me the bottle and unwrapped the bundle; a lion cub with its eyes still closed. And for the next hour or so I fed numerous lion cubs, a Cheetah cub and a baby monkey with wrinkly pink skin and an improvised nappy. I was hooked. As she knelt next to me, making sure I was playing mum

correctly, her khaki green shirt fell forwards and revealed her small breasts. Then she began talking about nipples and teats. I got her back onto the subject several times.

They cooked us a meal, not least because of the ten grand they'd got, and we all got along like old friends. Jimmy's knowledge of animals and the country amazed them, so he explained it away by telling them he had visited many times before. Good job they didn't check his passport. During the meal Jimmy took a sandwich to the black driver, who seemed not to be allowed inside. When Jimmy returned, the family avoided eye contact for five minutes.

As we sat at their kitchen table, the sun going down, a variety of animals wandered in. A fully-grown Cheetah forcing its nose under my armpit and pinching my food was a shock. Not the table manners, but the fact that it was a grown Cheetah. Second time around I stroked its chin and head and it seemed to like that more than my meal. Guess he had tried the hostesses cooking before. A fully-grown lion caused me to stand and look worried, Jimmy grinning at my discomfort.

'Not to worry,' the teenage girl told me in her accented voice, sounding like the South Africans I had seen on the TV. 'It has a gammy leg and we file down its teeth and claws. It cannot hurt anyone.'

Jimmy got up and grabbed the beast around the neck. It struggled, but he held it firm. He got the animal to rise up and put its paws on his shoulders as he grabbed it by the mane, the lion seeming to enjoy the encounter. They moved outside and started rolling around on the floor like old friends, carefully observed by the bemused staff. Finally, Jimmy poured some water into the lion's mouth and hand fed it some meat.

'It is not normally so easy to control,' the surprised manager informed me. 'He is a strong man, your friend.'

'Either that ... or he smells like a lioness,' I suggested.

Jimmy returned to perplexed looks, letting out a sentence in some local dialect: *a lion knows another lion when he sees one*. That shocked the man even more, Jimmy taking off his ripped shirt and adding to their fixed gaze. Back at the lodge we nagged the staff to join us at the veranda bar and Jimmy bought everyone way too many drinks, soon a round of

German songs filling the night air, some quite rude, followed by the black driver singing a local lament about a boy who lost his goat. In fairness, the lament was quite good, and somehow very African.

I missed breakfast, sleeping in, and missed the big row with the owners. The previous night's activities had resulted in everyone being hung over, Jimmy paying the manger a thousand dollars for his troubles – principally a lack of available staff. I eased into the taxi with a squint, a water bottle and a hangover and we set off again. As we trundled along poorly maintained roads I tried to sleep, feeling guilty because I was supposed to be getting an appreciation of Africa in general and Kenya in particular. But when you're hung over everything is a chore.

River View Hotel

Another four hours and we were to the coast, although I slept some of the way and had no idea where we were. We were checked through some tall security gates with large holes, making me consider why they were there at all, and piled out at yet another reception desk.

‘What's this place?’ I asked.

‘A hotel we'll buy in years to come.’

‘Really. Looks a bit, you know...’

Jimmy grinned and nodded towards a path. ‘Walk down there, I'll check us in.’

So off I went; sunglasses, squint, parched throat and headache. I followed the path, winding past thatched huts, nicely decorated inside from what I could see, and onto a beach. ‘Oh, yeah,’ I let out, clanking along a wooden walkway over the sand and to the beach bar. I took a seat in the shade of a beach bar and accepted a fruit drink of some sort with ice-cubes in. It did the trick.

The horseshoe bay stretched around five hundred yards of turquoise ocean, the sand a brilliant white. The water was

shallow and inviting, some sort of net strung out across the mouth of the bay. At the back of the sand nestled two-dozen huts, all similar to those I had passed, some guests sat outside their hut doors and sunning themselves. I could see a few white families, but also a few black families. At least there was no segregation here, I noted. The edges of the bay were bracketed by rocky outcrops, perfectly symmetrical and opposite each other. And at one end of the bay a local man was showing a young elephant to some guests.

Jimmy plonked down and ordered a beer. 'Room twelve for you, for your drinks tab. So, what do you think?'

'Great location, fucking excellent beach. Better than Brighton beach! What'll this place cost?'

'We'll buy it next year, just over three hundred 'k' for all the land.'

'K? Is that the currency down here?'

'Sorry, *K* ... is computer talk; it means a grand. In the future everyone says *K*. *How much is that house? It's two hundred K.*'

I took in the layout, that which I could see. 'How far along does it go?'

'Long old way, almost half a mile in both directions. There're gardens here for growing food for the hotel, farms with chickens and pigs.'

'And an elephant,' I said, pointing. Checking that no one was in earshot I said, 'There're black families here. I figured the white folk here ... you know.'

Jimmy nodded. 'There's some de-facto segregation here, but that's money more than skin colour. The black families you can see are rich, and they don't want poor black families in here anymore than the white folk. You'll soon learn that African blacks are far more racist than their white counterparts. If you're not from the right tribe or region, they'd happily kill you. You see the staff here ... they're all from this region. If someone from another region came here with a different accent the locals would attack him.'

'It's something you have to learn about Africa, and quickly; it's all tribal, with fuck-all unity at national level or for the continent. If someone from Tanzania was in the UK

and he met someone from Kenya, then fair enough they'd probably chat. Here they wouldn't, even if they were neighbours. The locals can pick up an accent and see it in the faces. So if the new neighbours don't look and sound as they should ... it's war! One of the problems here, especially in years to come, is the Somalis. Their own country is about to implode into civil war and many refugees will stream south, taking land here as squatters and causing lots of problems. It's one of my tasks.'

'Tasks? What is?'

'Fixing Kenya.'

'Why?'

'In years to come a Muslim terrorist group called The Brotherhood will rise up, various places at various times. One of the first things they'll do is move south from Somali, attacking Kenya. Before that happens we need to fix the economy and politics of Kenya and get them ready.'

'Nice of us,' I grumbled.

'There's still a hell of a lot you don't know. We can stop The Brotherhood here ... or wait till they walk down the Richmond High Street.'

'Here,' I firmly suggested.

'Right, you've never been scuba diving.'

'Nope.'

'After lunch.'

And two hours later I lay in a few feet of crystal clear water, exhilarated by the curtain of orange fish darting about as the dive instructor, German again, cut up a dead fish and thrashed it about. I was now hooked on diving, and lion cubs the size of my hand. And I never did find out why they called that damn hotel 'River View'; the nearest river was miles away. Sea View, sure, or Mountain View, but we never did find out why it was called River View.

The music business

A few days after getting back from Kenya, suitably tanned and showing it off, we headed for a small office in Kentish Town. Jimmy was keeping the trip a secret to “see what a dull twat I was”. We jumped out of the taxi around 11am and pushed the buzzer on a purple door between two antique shops. I have to admit, I thought it might be some dingy brothel. A small card declared it to be Pineapple Records.

‘Yes?’ crackled a woman’s voice.

Jimmy leant in. ‘Here to see Oliver Standish.’

A buzz preceded a click and we pushed the door open, met immediately by a steep set of stairs whose carpet had seen better days. Our footfalls were heavy and echoing, announcing our approach. We opened into an office that seemed much larger on the inside than I would have expected.

‘Bigger on the inside,’ I noted.

‘We get that a lot,’ a pretty young girl stated. ‘This office is actually three houses knocked into one, at least their upstairs parts. You after Oliver?’

‘Please,’ Jimmy said.

The girl took a moment to study Jimmy. ‘Haven’t I seen you in Tosca down the Kings Rd?’

‘Probably,’ he replied. ‘Next time kick me in the shins and I’ll get you a drink.’ We edged towards a man striding towards us. ‘You must be Oliver,’ Jimmy said, a firm handshake initiated. The boss, Oliver, was average in every sense; height, weight and looks, easy on the eye with a friendly and welcoming face. To me he appeared to be in his early thirties.

‘Yes. And you are...?’

‘I’m Jimmy Silo, and this is Paul, and I want to buy your company.’

That caught the guy off guard, as well as the staff within earshot.

‘I didn’t know it was up for sale,’ Oliver quipped. ‘But still, nothing to lose by a coffee and a chat.’

We settled around a neat desk floating in a sea of untidy floor littered with files and tapes.

‘The reject pile,’ Jimmy told me.

‘Not all rejects,’ Oliver countered.

‘You sign up one in fifty-two, I’d guess,’ Jimmy told him.

‘That’s ... a good guess. I see you’ve done your homework.’

I picked up a music sheet with some lyrics in pencil.

Oliver asked me, ‘Do you have an eye, or indeed ear, for such things?’

‘He don’t, I do,’ Jimmy cut in.

Oliver raised an eyebrow. ‘Forgive my impertinence, but you don’t look the music type. More the ... nightclub doorman type.’

I said, ‘More the multi-millionaire type,’ still reading the lyrics, someone’s hard work. Either that or their drug crazed delusional ramblings.

Oliver smiled. ‘I see you gentlemen like the direct approach.’ He asked Jimmy, ‘Where are you from, I’m not picking up any accent?’

‘All over,’ Jimmy replied, easing back into his seat. ‘So, down to business. You ... are doing OK for a small record company, but going nowhere in particular. Last years accounts were the same as the years before, and will be same as this year.’

‘That’ll save money with your accountant,’ I helpfully suggested. ‘Just photocopy them.’

Oliver did not see the joke, Jimmy shooting me a look.

Jimmy continued, ‘So what I would like to do is this: I buy seventy percent of the shares for three hundred thousand pounds.’

I could see from Oliver’s expression that the numbers were exciting him.

Jimmy continued, ‘That would be spread over three years so that you don’t run away. You stay on as boss and draw a salary of ... what ... forty-grand a year? I give the company a director’s loan of half a million and you get some decent offices and some advertising going. You leave the selection of budding musicians to me.’

Oliver coughed out a laugh. ‘Well ... that’s er ... quite an offer.’

‘Given what this company makes, it’s above appropriate and generous, yet factors in your loyalty. And no staff would

have to leave.’ Jimmy took out a thick envelope and handed it over. ‘The details are all there, so that you can peruse them at your leisure.’

Tea and coffee finally arrived. We waited, Oliver now under the spotlight. At least he hadn’t thrown us out yet. And the pretty girl gave us biscuits, none for Oliver. Guess she didn’t like the boss.

Oliver scanned the document. ‘And how much ... input would you have into day-to-day running?’

‘Some, obviously,’ Jimmy answered. ‘My accountants and solicitors would breathe down your neck once in a while, I’ll pop-in twice a month or so and we’ll obviously link anyone you sign up to the nightclub I’ll be opening.’

‘Nightclub?’ Oliver repeated.

Jimmy forced a neutral smile. ‘One with a large room with a stage to showcase new bands, as well as to *select* new bands. You know ... talent contests.’

Oliver seemed to be nodding as he considered it. ‘You said... *you* would select new artists?’

‘Yes, get that chore out of your hair.’

‘You’ll be able to see your carpet again,’ I suggested. ‘What colour is it?’

Oliver smiled widely, but briefly. ‘I guess there follows some *hard sell*?’

Jimmy stood, so I followed him up. ‘No, take your time to think about it. No hurry. My contact details are on the proposal.’

Oliver followed us up, Jimmy shaking his hand. It was just a brief meeting, but I liked Oliver straight away.

Outside, Jimmy said, ‘Well?’

‘Nice bloke, I liked him.’

‘And what do you think I’m up to?’

‘Going to get your own record company so that you can shag nice lady singers?’

‘Partly right,’ Jimmy admitted. ‘What else?’

I was being thick again and shrugged my shoulders.

Jimmy said, ‘The future?’

I was still being thick.

Irate, Jimmy explained, 'I know every band that's going to be a success, dumb fuck.'

'Oh ... yeah.'

Jimmy shook his head. 'Fucking Batman never had this much trouble with Robin.'

Would you kill Hitler as a child?

Metropolitan Police Commander Harris waited in a nondescript café, a mug of tea cooling. His uniform was carefully covered by a trench coat.

With a 'ding' the door opened, a man sitting down opposite. 'Tea, love?' he shouted at the woman behind the counter. Facing Harris he said, 'So ... problem?'

'A ... dilemma.'

'Ah. Guess that's why you're paid more than me.'

They waited as a mug of tea was plonked down. Harris slid across a small slip of paper.

The newcomer read it. 'What's this guy done?'

'It's what he's *going* to do,' Harrison carefully mouthed.

'Ah. Another one of those.'

'This chap, when he grows up, will kidnap, rape and kill a string of twelve-year-old girls.'

The newcomer's features hardened. They stared at each other for several seconds till the newcomer lowered his head and re-read the note. In a low, husky voice he said, 'Be difficult for him, not being able to see and all.'

Students on planes

'Remind me again why we're here?' I asked, already knowing the answer.

'World peace.'

‘Yeah, thought so. Just checking.’

We stepped into a damp stairwell and up numerous flights of steps, this nondescript building off the Tottenham Court Rd, Central London. Finally we were to the Student’s Union Travel Department, what it was. Apparently, they advised long-haired students on getting cheap flights around the world. It reminded me of my own student days in Kingston Polytechnic. Jimmy knocked and entered, the two of us stepping into a cramped and untidy office.

‘Been burgled, have we?’ I asked a bored looking middle-aged woman, Jimmy shooting me a look.

She studied us over the rims of her bifocals. ‘Not students.’

‘Worse,’ I said. ‘Stockbrokers.’

She raised an eyebrow.

‘I’m looking for Mr Timms,’ Jimmy told her.

A young man stepped in at the mention of his name, looking like a student in a three-day-old shirt. ‘Yes?’

Jimmy got straight to the point. ‘We’d like to give you some money.’ That got their attention. ‘You handle student exchanges, in particular with Russia and China?’

Young Mister Timms nodded. Jimmy gestured the man back towards his own office, which turned out to be a corner of an even more cramped room that he shared with six others. There were just enough seats for the staff, none left over for guests, charitable donors or otherwise.

Jimmy asked him, ‘How much do you spend each year on exchanges to Russia and China?’

Timms shrugged. ‘About five grand, I think.’

‘And how many people does that allow to travel?’ Jimmy asked, the rest of the young staff now attentive to the two stuffed suits in their midst.

‘About ... twenty five.’

I made that two hundred quid a throw.

Jimmy presented a cheque in an envelope. ‘Now you can send an extra hundred each year. My address is in the envelope, and I want a list of names and places they visited. If I’m satisfied with your progress I’ll double the amount next year.’

Timms read the cheque with an expression, as if it might be a fake.

I closed in on pretty girl. 'I went to Kingston Polytechnic myself.'

'Errrr,' she let out with a pulled face.

Jimmy grinned. 'Should have told her you were a millionaire, might have worked better. Come on.'

We turned and left, my pride hurt. What the hell was wrong with Kingston Polytechnic? And we gave the fuckers money.

Our faces in the papers

Next day we got up early and hopped on the train at Paddington Station, bound for sunny Cardiff. I had not been in the First Class section of a train before and sat looking the place over.

'We're not in First Class,' Jimmy pointed out as he stood waiting.

'Oh, yeah, right. I knew that ... I was just, you know, checking it out.'

We squeezed past people in the queue at the buffet car and grabbed two seats on a table of four, suit jackets off and neatly folded, placed overhead. Jimmy started on his newspaper as we pulled out, the train almost empty.

'Empty,' I idly mentioned.

'Going the wrong way,' Jimmy quietly stated without taking his gaze off his paper. 'Workers come *in* to London in the mornings, students - and people visiting relatives - go out from London. Same with the motorways.'

Five minutes later we were slowly clanking over points and picking up speed.

'Grub?' I asked, sat in the isle seat.

Jimmy nodded. 'Burger, sandwich, tea. Something for you.'

I joined the queue.

Two hours, and several teas later, we pulled into Newport.

‘If you look left,’ Jimmy said without raising his head. ‘You’ll see where I was born. Parents now live off to the right.’

I scanned what detail I could, the track raised to the height of the tops of the terraced houses. I could see urban hills and then a river. ‘Low tide?’

‘It’s the River Usk, second highest tidal range in the world – about thirty feet.’

‘We close to the coast?’

‘Couple of miles to the Severn Estuary, off to the left.’

I clocked the town centre, what I could see, before we ground to a squeaky halt at the station. Jimmy looked up, issuing a sigh after studying the platform, alone with his own thoughts. He appeared saddened. Ten minutes later we were in Cardiff.

The first impression of any place is often from a train carriage. As I sat there I thought, *what a shit hole*. Why the fuck didn’t the council clean up those houses facing the track? It would make a better impression on visitors. Still, London was just as bad; rich people did not live in houses overlooking the train tracks. We walked out through the crowds, grabbing a taxi.

‘Heath Hospital,’ Jimmy told the driver.

As the streets blurred by I tried to take in as much detail as I could, clocking the old castle and the civic centre. The hospital was a giant white edifice, almost a single block that had been unimaginatively designed by the same guy who commissioned the rest of the high rises in 1960s Britain. If I ever met *that* guy... We stopped next to a park, Jimmy checking his watch. After paying the cabbie Jimmy approached a photographer.

‘You from The Echo?’ The guy nodded. ‘Follow us, then.’

Jimmy led us to a building next to the park, looking as if it had been designed after a trip to Japan and some Saki downed. This is where our taxes went, I considered as we stepped down a flight of steps and into a reception area. Medical Genetics it read, a brief flash in my mind of Jimmy

strapped to a chair and being drugged up by mad scientists. I was, however, reasonably sure that these guys had nothing to do with that. I could see parents with kids, toys on the floor. We ignored the lady receptionist and trailed up a flight of steps, turning right at the top.

‘Jill, Prof Harper,’ Jimmy offered.

The ‘Professor’ could not have looked more like an archetypal professor if he tried; wild grey hair and a tank top. He seemed confused, or in pain. I could not figure out which.

‘Sorry for the unannounced visit but I’m a rather busy man,’ Jimmy said. They shook as a peeved looking secretary peered around the door. Jimmy pulled an envelope from his jacket pocket. ‘I’d like to donate some money.’

‘Oh ... well ... that’s always appreciated,’ Prof Harper offered. He opened the envelope to a cheque for quarter of a million pounds. Poor bugger had to hold a finger to the digits to work them out.

‘That’s a quarter million quid,’ Jimmy casually noted. ‘Can we have a photo before we set off back for London?’

‘Um ... er, yes ... of course,’ the startled academic managed to get out. Jimmy and me stood either side of him, a photo quickly snapped. ‘My details are in the envelope if you want to put me on your Christmas card list,’ Jimmy told him before nudging me out the door.

With the snapper trailing behind, we walked the short distance around to the children’s building, some sort of new centre for kids and their parents to gather at. Jimmy went straight in, and straight to the office he wanted. With as much haste as previously, we stunned another academic medic. And I was getting confused by all the wall-signs and directions, not least because they were doubled-up into Welsh. What the hell was Obstetrics? It sounded painful. We got our pictures taken with someone who looked like he would need the Cardiac Department, wherever the hell that was. At least I could see the signs for X-Ray in case I broke a leg. Jimmy thanked the snapper and gave the man a twenty note. Soon we were in a taxi to Newport.

‘Parents,’ I figured.

Jimmy nodded, looking both concerned and saddened, no explanations forthcoming. We sped along the motorway into Newport's suburbs and to a bland semi. 'Mum' was surprised to see him.

'Oh, Jimmy.' The white-haired lady held the door open and let us in, Jimmy towering over her. 'You're smart.'

'This is Paul, he works with me at the stock brokers,' Jimmy lied.

We entered the lounge, a tanned, grey haired man easing up, somewhat reluctantly. I could see the family resemblance.

'Tea?' came an unseen voice.

'Two, milk and sugars,' Jimmy shouted back as he sat.

I said hello to his father, then clocked some of the family photos. As his mum returned I plonked down. 'So, you two are responsible for bringing the big guy into the world.'

'Getting bigger all the time,' his mum mock-complained. 'Are you seeing clients down here?'

'Came to see a brokers in Cardiff,' Jimmy lied. 'You well?'

'Yes, all OK. Your bother was down on the weekend,' his mum enthusiastically reported.

'Did you drive?' his dad enquired.

'No, train,' I put in. 'Read the papers on the way.'

We made small talk for twenty minutes, tea and scones downed, before Jimmy gave his father a wad of money. He had to spend ten minutes justifying how much he was on before his father would grudgingly accept it. Leaving the house, we walked back towards the train station, a twenty-minute stroll, Jimmy pointing out a few places of interest; it seemed to be somewhat of a trip down memory lane for him. Passing through a run down area he pointed out where he had been born.

'You know, when in Canada – and they were finishing off the time machine – one bright spark suggested that anyone going through would re-appear as a younger version of themselves, probably with no memory of the future; which would have achieved nothing. I had to consider that I might re-appear back here as a kid or teenager. Wasn't a pleasant thought, I could not have done my school years again. I

figured that, if I re-appeared here, I'd top myself rather than do my school years again.'

'That bad, were they?'

'No, not bad, but just imagine it: fifty pence pocket money and in bed at nine o'clock, bath on a Sunday, spelling homework! Could you do it ... with an adult brain in your head?'

'Be hard, but maybe fun.'

'It was hard enough going back to twenty years old, damn hard to pull off. And that was without re-possessing a younger body.'

'Then how...?'

'The other me, the original, went forwards. It was a swap.'

'So, what would have happened to –'

'An uncertain future. Probably would have been dead quickly, knowing where I came from. Conditions were harsh.'

On the trip back he was gloomy, but for reasons I could never have understood.

I said, 'Your folks ... they'll see us the in the local rag?'

'No, we'll be in the Cardiff Echo, they don't read it. But someone will tell them and ... and it'll be a big row.'

'Why?' I delicately broached.

He held his gaze on the countryside shooting by. 'Because I should keep my money for a rainy day, or give it to the family.'

'Your dad didn't seem too pleased to take *any* money?'

'Exactly. But that don't mean I should give it to strangers either.'

Pineapple records

I answered the phone to Oliver Standish from Pineapple Records on a wet Tuesday morning, two weeks after meeting with the guy at his offices. 'How you doing, mate?'

'Good, good. Is ... er ... James about?'

‘Sure is, and he don’t like *James* very much – Jimmy will do.’

Jimmy took the phone. ‘Home for fallen women. Are you dropping off or picking up?’

Oliver laughed. ‘Picking up, definitely. How are you?’

‘Keenly awaiting your next sentence, Oliver.’

‘Well, I’ve given it a great deal of thought and I like the proposal. So, where do we go from here?’

‘My accountants and solicitor will be around to you this afternoon with some papers ... *and* a big cheque. Can you join us for a meal this Friday, bring the whole gang?’

‘I should think so.’

‘In the meantime, could you send around every tape that was rejected or not yet screened, use a courier and I’ll pay this end.’

‘Will do, quite a few boxes full though!’

‘You’ll be able to Hoover after. I know you probably have things to do, but I’d appreciate that pile of tapes in a box in a matter of hours.’

‘Not a problem, I boxed them up on the weekend, kind of a clean sweep through the office. I’ll send them round c.o.d. right away.’

‘Thanks. We’ll pop in this week, dinner Friday – treats for the staff.’

‘Sounds like a plan. Your people –’

‘Will be with you around 2pm. Call me if you have any questions, anything at all. Bye.’ He put the phone down.

‘They got any sexy chicks on their books already?’ I keenly enquired, closing in.

Jimmy made a face. ‘Not really.’

An hour later we took delivery of three large cardboard boxes.

‘Right,’ Jimmy began. ‘Earn your bloody keep.’ He upturned a box, its contents spilling over the floor. ‘Call out the name, the stage name and the name of the song.’ He picked up a tape as I grabbed several.

‘David Wilson, Call me back baby.’

‘Nope. Back in the box.’

‘Susan Chasilton, a.k.a Sugar Sweetie, Blow my mind.’

‘Nope.’

An hour later we had selected just three artists from three big boxes.

‘Take that lot down to the garage, ask the doorman to bin it all and slip him a few quid.’

We put the tapes that we had selected - that Jimmy knew would be hits - into a big envelope and couriered them back to Pineapple. Our note said: *Sign them up pronto, please – bring them out Friday.*

‘They going to be big hits?’ I asked.

‘Two will be big, one will be a one hit wonder, like a lot of artists. Eighty percent of who we sign up will have just the one big hit.’

‘Why just one?’

‘After one hit they go a bit crazy, often hit the booze and the drugs, let it all go to their heads. A hit record makes you very arrogant, especially if you’re living in a bed-sit at the moment. From Hackney to a limo fucks with their heads, they lose it.’ He cracked a cheek into a smile. ‘One of the singers you’ll meet Friday will be big across twenty years, and she’s a babe.’

‘Which of us ... er ... dates her?’ I carefully nudged.

‘Neither, she likes girls.’

I took a moment to get my head around that. ‘Do you think...?’

‘Once or twice, her and mate when they’re drunk.’

‘Yes!’ I punched the air and did a little dance.

Rubber veins

A few months later we reached a financial target. Actually, we were ahead of schedule, and so headed back down to Cardiff. I figured we’d be donating some more money, but Jimmy said not. He had contacted the Professor at Medical Genetics and asked for an introduction to the head of Medical

Physics, which did not sound as painful as Obstetrics. This new fella must have been salivating at the prospect of some money.

The aforementioned department was down in the bowels of the hospital and it turned out they made things, weird bits of equipment for specialist use, all of the stuff they showed us turning my stomach. A new clamp for holding open a chest did nothing for my appetite. We finally sat in the Manager's office, not a professor, and the guy was called Dyke - pronounced 'dick'. I held my tongue.

Jimmy kicked off with, 'I would like to invest some money into designing and building a training aid for medics, both doctors in the hospital environment, as well as paramedics and ambulance staff. I'm looking for someone like yourself to design an artificial *sick person*. What I mean by that is an advanced dummy – not a robot or anything clever – but a dummy that lies down and looks and feels like an unconscious person.'

Dick was intrigued, but I could see a hint of disappointment that he had not got a fat cheque yet.

'What ... er ... what would it be used for?'

'Training, since there are many things that you cannot practice on a live person or simulate, such as rapid pulse, unless you inject the willing volunteer with adrenaline, or stop his heart.'

'Ah. I see,' Dick offered.

'Got a paper and pen?' Jimmy nudged.

Dick got himself ready.

'We need to find a rubber tube with the consistency of an artery. It stretches like an artery, it breaks like an artery and it can be cut like an artery. Then we map out all veins and arteries in the body and make a working model in rubber, or similar material. Then you find a suitable material to make an artificial bone, that breaks like a normal bone, weighs the same. Then you build an artificial muscle from strands of something else, so that it looks, feels and weighs the same as a muscle, and when you cut through it looks like muscle –'

'For training surgeons?' Dick said without looking up, scribbling away.

‘Yes, but also for a few other purposes. You then find a substance that looks and feels like skin, cuts like skin. The arteries are attached to an external pump that creates a pulse which can be varied –’

‘To simulate various medical conditions,’ Dick put in as he scribbled away.

‘Yes, and rubber lungs attached to external pipes so that they can inflate or deflate; in essence, a complete artificial person. The head should be realistic, with eyes that either dilate or weep.’

‘Complicated. And expensive,’ Dick let out as he eased back.

‘You get fifty thousand a year to start plus capital costs, plus the rights to a commission on sales when it’s sold around the world. Year by year, depending on your progress, I will increase the budget. If you can show that it works, to my satisfaction, we’ll accelerate the timescale and you’ll receive more money. I’ll even look at giving you a grant for a full time researcher or two to work on it.’

Despite the fact that he would not be getting a fat cheque, Dick seemed interested. It was done deal, a cheque for twenty thousand handed over on good faith.

Hong Kong’s Mr Wang Po

We landed at Hong Kong airport at a time when it was still under British control, and when 747s flew in at an angle designed to catch washing lines with their wing tips. Jimmy enjoyed my discomfort as we banked hard to line up with the runway. Peering out the cabin window I could see into people’s houses through their windows.

We had refused the recommended Drysdale Hotel when we booked the trip at the travel agents, a small firm around the corner from the flat that specialised in long haul. Being the excellent customers that we were they did not argue. When

we landed in Hong Kong Jimmy explained that the Drysdale would burn down, but he could not remember exactly when.

We booked into the posh Mandarin Oriental Hotel, Jimmy explaining that he needed to bump into someone there. We would not have normally spent so much money on a hotel, but this was business. As it turned out I really liked the Mandarin and would return many times in the future. Within an hour of hitting my room I had my first massage, two local ladies at the same time, with Chinese music playing in the background. I even had the James Bond style massage with a little lady walking on my back. Fortunately, the little lady weighed six stone soaking wet.

Later, Jimmy led me down to a large and empty function room, saying, 'What do you reckon to the acoustics?'

'Uh?' was all I offered as I scanned a large room with red curtains and red carpet. The door sign said it was called 'The Red Room.' Fair enough.

'Tomorrow, there's a convention on stock market trading, including technical trading and derivatives. We're going to crash.'

'To find the guy you want to bump into,' I surmised.

'He should be in the audience. Mr Wang Po.'

'Poor fucker,' I muttered. 'What does *he* do?'

'He's in property, shipping and food. At least he'll be in those industries in a bigger way in the years ahead.'

'Successful guy?' I asked as we took in the room.

'By time we get to 2009 he'll be one of the richest men in China – worth about twenty billion quid.'

'Shit...'

'Exactly. And you know how he made a lot of it?' Jimmy teased.

After a moment I said, 'You don't?'

'I do.'

'Why? He's Chinese, a communist rice nibbler!'

'In 1997 this place goes back to China and infects the whole country with capitalism. China rapidly becomes a very rich nation and ultimately catches up to the Yanks – becoming the second super-power. And Wang Po is going to help me

make a few quid ... as well as influence the Chinese Government.'

'Jesus,' I blew out. 'Don't tell the UK Government.'

Jimmy focused on me. And waited.

'I know,' I admitted. 'You're already a very secret squirrel.'

'And so should you be, underling.'

'Less of the *underling*, I went to Kingston Polytechnic.'

'Got your old McKinleys' pass?'

'Nope.'

He handed me my old pass. 'You do now, underling.'

That evening we dined at a restaurant that gave me vertigo, glass panels below our feet that viewed the street far below. At least the food was good. It was similar to that which I had sampled in the UK, but somehow better; I guess the ambience helped.

After the meal we sat on high stools at the bar, a huge glass front allowing an uninterrupted view over the brightly lit city. Numerous local girls made clumsy attempts to get a free drink and a new customer for a few hours, but we resisted. Jimmy surprised me with his fluent Mandarin, the brightly coloured little ladies in no doubt as to the firmness of the putdown.

'Not before the main event,' Jimmy suggested. 'Work comes first. Couple of beers, bed, get rid of your jet-lag, fresh in the morning. Sauna and swim, late breakfast and then crash the big show. You might recognise some of the faces.'

'Anyone from McKinleys?' I puzzled

'They're on the list, so our passes will get us in, dummy. Old Bob is here.'

'Old Bobby,' I repeated, fond memories of the rotund senior broker, something of a mentor to me in my first few weeks.

Jimmy tipped his head. I followed his gaze to a table with a colourfully dressed local girl facing a rotund man. With a smirk we eased up. Sneaking in quietly from behind, Jimmy slapped his hand onto Bob's shoulder. In a Chinese accent he said, 'What you do my wife?'

‘Wha ... what?’ Bob stumbled, suddenly horrified. He hurriedly wiped his mouth with his napkin and stood. ‘By God! Jimmy Silo!’ He clocked me. ‘Paul?’

‘In the flesh,’ I said, shaking his hand.

Jimmy shook Bob’s fat claw of a hand, then slipped the girl some currency and told to her leave quickly. There were seats for four at the table, so we plonked down.

‘What are you two doing here?’ Bob puzzled.

‘What are *you* ... doing here?’ Jimmy countered. ‘Besides shagging locals.’

‘I’m here for the seminar ... ah, you as well, eh?’ Bob surmised.

Jimmy lifted his eyebrows and nodded.

‘And I’m here for the booze,’ I put in. ‘So, anyone else from McKinleys here?’

‘Oh, yes,’ Bob replied. ‘Couple. Right now they’re down the local brothel. I decided to give it a miss.’

‘Really?’ Jimmy teased.

‘Well, the young lady sat down –’

‘If you don’t get rid of them quickly they see it as a contract,’ Jimmy warned.

‘Oh ... really,’ Bob mused. ‘Never mind, only here for three days. So, what you two been up to? I heard you had joined forces.’

‘Bit of trading,’ Jimmy nonchalantly stated.

‘Still doing well?’ Bob whispered.

‘Very well, of course,’ Jimmy responded.

Bob addressed me with, ‘You day trading, or client account, or what?’

‘Learning to fly helicopters,’ I said. ‘So that I can impress birds.’

Bob frowned his lack of understanding.

Jimmy explained, ‘He’s spending his pocket money on flying lessons. Something to impress the birds.’

Bob again focused on me. ‘You should get Jimmy to take you to some London clubs. Bit of a ladies man, our Jimbo.’

I resisted the temptation to respond to that. ‘Slave driver he is, I’m always too tired to go out. He’s got me on the Dow and the Hang Seng – twenty-four hour job.’

‘Bit of arbitrage, ay?’ Bob assumed.

Fresh drinks were placed down.

‘So,’ Jimmy began. ‘Got your speaker’s pass for tomorrow?’

Bob fetched it out. ‘They gave us these today.’

Jimmy took it off him and pocketed it. ‘I lost mine, so this’ll have to do.’ He gave Bob a wad of notes. ‘Tomorrow you’re going sight-seeing and shopping.’

‘Oh, er ... right you are, Jimmy.’ Bob pocketed the wad. ‘Hate public speaking anyway.’

And just in case Bob changed his mind about speaking at the seminar we got him right royally drunk, before making sure three ladies took him home. Jimmy removed his wallet first, paying the ladies well and telling them, in Chinese, which hotel to drop in at, no earlier than 2pm. On the way back Jimmy explained that the ladies were under contract to the restaurant *and* high class, so they would not abuse a customer – and no, I could not have one.

As we again approached the aptly named Red Room we encountered a throng of Chinese, most of who seemed pleased to see us. Jimmy explained that the Chinese were into their trading in a big way and that seminars like this were always well attended. Some of the Chinese were even from across the border.

We flashed our McKinleys passes, although they were not needed: we were Caucasians in suits and in the minority, being treated like honoured guests, and there could not have been more than ten westerners present. Jimmy approached Bob’s massage-parlour visiting colleagues, the men startled in their recognition.

‘Jimmy Silo!’ they questioned. ‘By God!’

We shook hands.

‘Bob’s not well, so I’m speaking,’ Jimmy told them.

‘Do my slot as well,’ one of the men grumbled, not wanting to speak.

‘I will, I need the time,’ Jimmy said. ‘Give me a good write up, lay on thick, then wait for us in the bar.’

The first representative of McKinleys spoke after two other Brits, boring talks about currency arbitrage and day trading. Then Jimmy took the podium. Unlike his countrymen, he gave a welcome in Chinese, then French, Russian and finally English. And the bugger could have warned me in advance about what was to come next. He gave a one-hour talk, complete with numerous diagrams on a white board, in Mandarin Chinese. At the end of it the other Brits waiting to speak looked peeved, but the locals loved it. And I was wondering just where, and when, he learnt to speak Chinese.

When Jimmy rejoined me he asked, 'How did I do? Clear enough?'

'Fuck off,' I whispered as numerous locals closed in on us. 'Is your boy here?'

Jimmy nodded. He answered questions from several locals as tea was served, then seemed to be heavily engaged with one particular gent, a round-faced local with dimples in his cheeks and a permanent smile. He introduced the man to me as Mr Wang Po and we shook.

Jimmy said, 'Mr Po speaks excellent English.'

'It OK,' our new friend suggested, his words accented.

Jimmy told him, 'I am happy to answer more questions, but not on an empty stomach.'

'We go, we, go. I have restaurant,' Po insisted.

'Not wanting to hear the rest?' I teased.

'No, no. Jimmy theory *very* good.'

We walked out through the crowds and to the taxi rank, but Po had a car waiting, a dark blue Rolls Royce. Chatting away like old friends, we got in and headed off, Jimmy trying to keep the conversation English for my benefit. But the big guy looked, and sounded, like a nerd in a suit when he spoke Chinese. 'Jimmy' could not seem to maintain the butch image as he contorted his face to form the Chinese words. It took half an hour to reach the restaurant, which turned out to be a staff canteen of sorts for executives of one of Po's companies, numerous security gates negotiated as we spiralled up a hill. But the place turned out to be posh enough.

Po was not the boss, but the boss's son, his father elderly and infirm, Po being the heir and de-facto managing director.

We settled down at a round table, many different offerings placed down, the idea being to sample a little of each and then order some more. I tucked in as numerous executives entered, bowing politely in our direction. Guess it was lunchtime around here.

I heard Po say, 'You can predict big crash in market.'

Jimmy suggested he could, and Jimmy did not get involved in guesswork. He and Po discussed 'bubbles' and 'saturation points', some of which I understood: if everyone was in the market, where would the new money come from? My ears pricked up when Po suggested Jimmy trade some money for him.

Jimmy replied, 'Mr Po, the fun of stock market trading ... is to do it yourself. I am happy to provide you with recommendations for a few years, for you to see how good I am. After that we can talk about commission.'

Po was stunned. 'A few years – no commission?'

'That's correct. I am in no hurry ... and a good friendship takes time.'

I decided to be helpful. 'If you visit London we will show you around.'

'I have UK passport as well,' Po explained. 'This Hong Kong, no China.'

Trying to be even more helpful I turned my head to Jimmy and said, 'What was that company we heard about, the secret takeover?'

'Ah, Anglo Oil,' Jimmy responded, the company we had bought shares in the day we left. He faced Po. 'Anglo Oil should be a good bet in the next few days, they'll be a bid by Shell.'

Po snapped his fingers at a lady and had a phone to his ear a few seconds later, a rapid exchange with his broker. Little more than a minute later Po had ordered a million shares at just about two quid.

Jimmy said, 'Hold them till they reach two-eighty at least.'

Po thanked us and we stuffed our faces. I did not know what work Po did, but we remained there till the sun went down, waited on by the nice ladies in traditional dress. Jimmy told Po that we had to meet the other Brits, which we didn't,

but offered to see him at the casino that night. It was a date, Po sending us back in the Rolls.

Back in the hotel I said, 'We meeting McKinleys?'

'No, just needed a break or he would have adopted us as family. Get some rest and be ready for 9pm, the car's coming back for us, could be a late night. Oh, and his daughters – not a finger on them nor innuendo spoken, you'd wash up in the harbour.'

'Nice, are they?'

'Very. And sixteen with it.'

We were almost half a day ahead of the UK, the FTSE opening as we were losing shed loads of money at the tables. At least I was, Jimmy was playing blackjack and doing OK. At some point someone must have handed Po a phone or given him a message, because the UK market had opened with the news of the takeover leaked, Po now a million quid or so better off. First I knew of it was a member of staff offering me a silver tray with bundles of dollar wads on it.

'For you, sir, from Mr Po.'

With quite an audience observing, I accepted the money, a stack the size of two house bricks, then decided to head to Jimmy instead of my first impulse, which was to put it all on black.

'Anglo oil?' I knowingly asked.

A smiling Po, sat next to Jimmy, nodded the answer: it was already at three quid ten. Jimmy also had a pile of cash, stacked up on the table, but he did not seem to be gambling it.

It was my turn to surprise Jimmy. 'Mr Po, can I ask a favour?'

'Of course, of course.'

'Can you hold this,' I said, handing him the bundle. I took out the flyer that I had found in the drawer of the bedside cabinet and held it for Po to see. 'I want you to take our money and give it to The Red Cross mission here in Hong Kong.' I handed him the flyer.

Jimmy was as cool as ever, stacking his money on top of mine without making eye contact with me.

Po was surprised, to say the least. ‘You want to give it all – to Red Cross.’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘And I trust you to deliver it, of course.’

With a quick tip of the head Po had two members of staff at hand, collecting the money with instructions on what to do with it.

A minute later Po’s two daughters arrived, introductions given, Jimmy turning and standing. He engaged them at length about their studies, before switching to English, asking a few more questions. Turned out nearly all of the educated locals spoke English. And the two girls were just nice enough to eat. I took them to the bar, and helped them practice their English.

When the girls had to leave, Jimmy explained that we were due to meet our friends from McKinleys in the morning, and we thanked Po. Jimmy got Po’s fax number and card and gave him our details before we left, the Rolls taking us back again. We flew out the following afternoon with a new friend in the colony. And the local branch of the Red Cross got a surprise, Po as trustworthy as the Pope. From now on I was to fax our new friend regular tips.

Kenya, Feb 1987

Staying at the hotel that we were due to buy, one day Jimmy ordered us a taxi and we set off through the dilapidated gates, a half-hearted salute from the fat old guard.

‘You’ll need to be good at improvising today,’ he said as we bumped along a road that I was determined to fix some day. ‘Don’t react to weird stuff, I’m going to frighten someone.’

‘Frighten them?’ I asked, a careful study of the sweaty taxi driver. But the man seemed ignorant of our discussion, concentrating hard on trying to run over chickens in the road.

‘There’s a woman ... you’ll see. She thinks I was in the Second World War.’

‘Were you?’ I testily asked.

‘No, but her belief serves my purpose. You see, the first time I met her she thought I looked familiar, told me a story about an English soldier who saved her during the war. I’ll adopt that persona so that she’ll assist us.’

‘Assist us how? If she was in the war then she’s gotta be fucking ancient!’

‘Seventy now.’

‘So...’

‘She runs an orphanage,’ he said with a smirk.

‘Oh,’ I muttered. ‘I got a few quid to give them.’

‘Me too.’

‘You Englishers?’ the taxi driver finally asked.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘From the Chicken Protection League.’

‘I like da chicken, man,’ I got back.

‘Get your wife to scrape some off the tyres later, be well cooked by time you get home!’

We had passed this orphanage before, on each trip to the hotel. It was a red brick building on a corner of the main road and resembled a school from the outside. It also looked a hundred years old and falling down, the outside dilapidated. I wondered what the inside might be like. I wondered too soon. The inside stank, a curtain of buzzing flies hanging in the air, the pungent odour of stale urine greeting any visitors – no need for a guard dog. I looked inside a hanging bell, but found no striker, so I tapped it with a coin. A local appeared, a face so black that I could not make out any features other than bloodshot eyes.

‘Sister woman,’ Jimmy told the man.

The man, dressed in a sweat-stained blue shirt, turned around and hobbled into the bright sunlight of an internal courtyard, the distant echoes of kids’ voices coming from somewhere. We followed him across the courtyard and into another building, to an office, finding the diminutive ‘Sister woman’ sat attending some paperwork. Her hair was grey and unkempt and she appeared as if she had neither had a good bath, nor a good meal, since the end of the aforementioned war. Maybe even the First World War.

‘God bless all here,’ Jimmy stated as we stepped inside, causing me to puzzle the line. Blocking the sunlight of the doorway, Jimmy towered over her. ‘Are you all alone under the rubble, Mary?’ He held out his hand.

She stood slowly, her wrinkled face contorted in confusion. For a full ten seconds she stared at him before holding a hand to her mouth and shrieking.

Jimmy took her frail arm, lifting her shirtsleeve and revealing a scar. He ran a finger along it. ‘I did good stitches, child.’ She collapsed back into her seat with another shriek, uttering some words in Dutch. Her assistant looked worried for her, pouring her a drink.

‘Are you not glad to see me?’ Jimmy asked. ‘It has been a while.’

‘You ... you,’ she struggled to get out, pointing a shaky finger. And I was starting to feel uncomfortable; poor woman looked like she had seen a ghost.

‘Yes, Mary. I have come to help.’ From his pocket, Jimmy handed over a thin wad, totalling ten thousand dollars, which out-trumped the ten dollars I was going to give them. She examined the wad. ‘I think some food for the children is in order, some more staff and new toilets in the boy’s building,’ Jimmy told her. He turned about and led me outside. ‘Give her a minute, I’ll show you around our new orphanage.’

‘Our ... our orphanage?’ I queried.

‘Our ... AIDS orphanage.’

I stopped dead, not least because some of the sickly looking kids were closing in; snot noses, a dozen personal flies each, tatty clothes, ribs showing. I swallowed. I was not ready for this and Jimmy, bastard, dropped me right in at the deep end. He began to chat to some of the kids in various local dialects as I tried hard not to touch them. I was walking through them with my arms up, as if negotiating a field of stinging nettles.

‘They will not bite you,’ came a weak and husky voice from behind as Mary joined us.

‘You can’t know that for sure,’ I told her. ‘They look hungry.’

‘You are not like him.’

‘No, I’m mortal,’ slipped out, immediately regretted. Now I was winding up the old lady as badly as Jimmy, and by accident.

She put a hand over her eyes and stared in his direction. ‘I had prayed for help...’

I gave it some thought, trying not to make a joke. ‘Some solutions come in *extra-large* size.’ We observed Jimmy pick-up two ten-year-old boys and swing them around. He straightened his arms level with his shoulders and spun around, the boys flying over the heads of the other children, the gathering staff amazed.

Finally he joined us, three members of staff now stood flanking the old woman. ‘I’ll be sending ten thousand dollars a month to start, more next year. We’ll be visiting regular, three times a year, and we will be taking over this orphanage, rebuilding it to hold more children. I will build a school and bring in teachers, also a permanent doctor based here.’

To say they were stunned was an understatement.

‘Going to get some fly traps as well,’ I put in, hoping it did not sound too sarcastic.

He closed in on the old lady. ‘Now, show me the children who are dying.’

I swallowed. If the rest of the orphanage was anything to go by, what the hell awaited me in the Terminal Ward? It was as bad as I thought; I was fighting not to be sick with the stench. The kids lay in their own excrement, many with limbs dressed in bandages that had been white at some point.

Mary saw my look. ‘No money, no care. When they die we burn them. One or two a day.’

In the space of an hour I had gone from a nice beachfront hotel and a cold beer ... to hell on earth. My guts were turning and my thoughts jumbled. What I would have paid to be out of there that instant.

Jimmy faced Mary squarely. ‘Do you trust me?’

‘Of course,’ she offered, seemingly shocked that he would ask.

‘Get a needle and syringe.’

My guts tightened some more as I stood as close as I could get to an open window. I could see out over some low brick

buildings toward a wooded area at the rear, smoke coming from a fire. I remembered what she said about the bodies, vomiting hard through the window and gripping onto the peeling paint frame. Turning around a minute later I saw Jimmy prepare a needle, hand it to Mary and offer her his straight, upturned forearm. After a moment's hesitation she drew dark red blood.

'Inject a quarter into the four children with the best chance of survival.'

What had she to lose, I thought as I observed; the beds held the living dead with no hope. These kids didn't even have the strength to move their eyes towards us. She carried out her task diligently, returning to Jimmy as I wretched again. My brain was fried and not working. As I stood there I realised he was immune to everything, future genetics, and now I understood. His blood, in them, would make them better.

He informed her, 'If it is not too late they will run a fever for a day, then start to recover. They must have protein and water, so use the money I gave you. You understand?'

She nodded, holding the needle reverently.

'We will be back in seven days, use the money, there will be more. And Mary, do not discuss me with anyone. Understand?'

I was very grateful when he grabbed me by the arm and led me out, delighted to be on the street again, but also a little angry at having been dragged in there in the first damn place. Still, what he had done had put me to shame and I felt it as badly as my stomach hurt. We made the short trip in silence and I plunged into the cool waves, several beers at the bar before I forgave him. And forgave myself.

'Better?' he asked without looking around, Abba playing from a badly tuned radio behind the bar.

'Yeah. Sorry about that.'

'It's part of my world, not yours. Not yet.' He faced me. 'There's something you need to know. If I inject you with a syringe full of my blood ... you'll change, be just like me.'

'Change?'

'You'll have extreme endurance ... and be immune to every disease known to man. You'll also live to be around one

hundred and twenty, at least. You won't be a hundred percent like me, maybe sixty percent, but you'll be able to break every Olympic record. And if you're going to piss about down here with me ... you'll need the immunity, or you'll die. And ... most of all, you'll be able to provide a very important backup to me, in case I'm killed.'

'Back up?'

'My blood has key antibodies to a variety of diseases, including cancer. Later on, decades from now, doctors will use it to reverse engineer cures for a lot of things, saving millions of lives. And, when the time comes, if I'm not around, you could inject your mother.'

'Your blood ... it will cure her,' I realised.

'My blood will cure more than just her, she's just one woman – but whatever it takes to motivate you to do the right thing.'

I walked off, not returning till sun down.

Jimmy greeted me with, 'For you the fun part is over. We start to get serious in the years ahead. Sit, there're some things about the future you need to know.'

I was as sick as the Terminal Ward, my head now filled with what the future held: disease, wars and financial crisis. Sat there I must have aged ten years. Ten cool beers later and I fell unconscious, unable to rid my guts of the feelings that gripped me.

The next day was a blur. I managed a quick swim, some bread for breakfast whilst Jimmy was off scuba diving, then a few beers and back to bed. By sun down I had a thick head and took some Anadin with my beer. I joined him for dinner, but we said little. I retired to my room and watched a black and white TV, mostly local Kenyan programmes. Seemed the Ford Capri had just arrived and was being shown off, and the in-crowd all had Sony Walkmans on their hips. I started to worry about what decade I was in.

Jimmy left me firm instructions to get my dive certificate sorted, PADI Open Water followed by Advanced Open Water, which seemed to just consist of looking at fish and filling in questions in a book that had the answers in the back. I went diving as he headed off to 'plan things'. A week later,

freshly qualified as an Advanced PADI diver, I joined Jimmy in a return to the orphanage from hell.

As we pulled up I noted numerous locals up ladders, some scraping the walls and others painting them a tacky bright blue. Hell, it beat the old natural brick surface, I considered. We stepped over upturned paint pots and ducked inside.

The man with the very black face and no features shrieked, running away as fast as his gammy leg would allow him. Guess he was a convert, and buying into the story of Jimmy being in the war. If he knew the truth, I considered, he'd do exactly the same thing and run off again. The courtyard enclosed happy playing kids, this time all dressed like school children in blue shorts and shirts; albeit dying from AIDS. I figured the guys painting the walls were trying to be consistent. There seemed to be more members of staff, now dressed in blue shirts, or maybe just the same ones had a bath and makeover. We ran an eye over more painting work, again blue, then entered Mary's office.

She jumped up as fast as she could and gripped his outstretched hand with both of hers. 'Welcome, welcome,' she said in an accent. 'Come.' She led us back towards the Terminal Ward.

'Hardware store had a sale on blue?' I asked, trying to take my mind off what awaited us.

'In Kenya ... it's the law for children and kindergarten,' she explained as we climbed the new blue stairs. Well, that explained it.

The ward had been metamorphosed into something closer to this decade; and fucking blue. The floor was covered in lino painted blue, the walls smoothed down and painted blue, the windowsills painted blue. The ceiling fans were still rusted, so I guessed they had not reached that far yet. The bed linen was clean, the kids alert and awake, their bandages white. At the far end of the ward, which now looked like a ward and not a death camp, a lady doctor from the Red Cross sat attending a child.

Mary stood proud. 'You see. You just need money.'

Jimmy half-turned his head towards me. 'You just need money.'

‘You just need money,’ I repeated, suddenly realising something. I stood nodding at my own understanding.

‘Come, come. Quick,’ Mary got out, squeezing between us and back down the stairs in a hurry. We trailed behind. In the courtyard she called four names, the children falling-in as if on parade. ‘They had the blood,’ she explained.

I halted. For many seconds I could not move as it dawned on me; these four kids, shiny faces and broad smiles in their neat blue uniforms, had been in the ones in the ward above, dying in their own filth.

‘They put on weight quick,’ she commended, adjusting their collars.

Jimmy stood proudly inspecting them, like soldiers before their commander, exchanging a few words in the local dialect again. He was contented and sent them off to play. Facing Mary he said, ‘The Red Cross doctor lady, she is Anna Pfunt?’

‘Anna, yes,’ Mary responded. ‘You know her?’

‘Let’s go and see.’ He led us back up the stairs. It was wind-up time again.

‘Anna?’ Mary called, no regard for sleeping kids, the doctor walking down to us. She stood dressed in a white overall with Red Cross flashes, an image that I would see a lot of in the future. A well-built woman, she looked like she could handle herself in a bar fight. Her face was reddened from the heat, no make-up, her blonde hair tied back.

‘Yah?’

‘This is the man who gave the money,’ Mary stated.

That did not seem to impress the big lady. She looked us over.

Jimmy said, ‘Have you forgiven yourself yet ... for your sister’s death?’ The Amazon warrior blinked. Jimmy continued, ‘It is why you came here, Anna. Do you still blame yourself for Lotti’s accident? It was not your fault, you were trying to get away from the old man ... the dirty old man in the big house at the end of Aust Strasse, but she could not ride her new bike well.’

I could not tell if Anna wanted to punch him, or keel over.

‘How ... how do you know this?’ she demanded in a whisper. ‘I tell no one this.’

‘You told me.’

‘When? When do I tell you this, I do not know you!’

‘When you were asleep.’

Mary smiled contentedly, seeming to enjoy it.

‘When I was ... asleep,’ Anna asked, her brow pleated to the point of pain.

‘When you were six,’ Jimmy began, ‘you asked God for a wish. You remember what it was?’

‘Yah ...’

‘You now have a big brother.’ He handed her a wad of dollars. ‘Buy a bus for the children, and take them to the ocean as you want to do. In the meantime, I want you to sit and watch us.’ He helped her down onto a bed without resistance before facing Mary. ‘Syringes bitte, schwester.’

With myself sat on a windowsill, blue of course, Anna on a bed, Mary ruthlessly and hurriedly extracted blood, Jimmy wincing one or twice at the haste. Soon ‘Sister woman’ was injecting the kids, Anna on her feet after the second kid and seemingly not in favour of injecting one person with another’s blood, or the sharing of needles. When she finally managed to open her mouth Mary snapped at her, told her to shut up and watch the miracle. I had to commend her, the old lady attended every kid, the whole room, in fifteen minutes or less, jabbing Jimmy in both of his arms, no antiseptic swaps applied or consideration for his human condition. Nothing was going to stop her.

When done, Jimmy told Anna that he wanted her to stay for seven days and to observe the children, but not to say anything to anyone; as a doctor it would go bad for her to be part of this. Now *that* was something of an understatement. Even I knew that, and all I was ... was PADI Advanced Open Water with a temporary paper certificate.

Back in the courtyard I noticed the stack of three grubby mattresses. Pointing, I said to Mary, ‘Throwing them out?’

‘No, no.’

‘No,’ I challenged. ‘They’re filthy!’

‘It is for the children, for the wall.’ She pointed, but I was lost. She clarified, ‘The painting work, people know we have money now. They come at night, here – this wall, and throw the kinder over the wall.’

My eyes widened. ‘People ... throw their kids over your wall?’ I was getting louder as well.

‘The kinder with disease, they put them over the wall. We put the mattress so that they are not so hurt. The staff, they sit here at night and wait for the kinder. But the kinder bounce off the mattress and onto the floor, so always some problems.’

I pointed. ‘That fucking wall is six feet high!’

‘Yah, they swing the kinder over the top.’

‘The locals? They throw the kids with AIDS *over* the wall?’

Sister Woman nodded, none too phased. I could not move. My face wanted to laugh out loud at the absurdity of it, my jaw stuck tight so that I would not appear to be laughing at anyone’s misfortune, my eyes watering.

I fought for a breath. ‘Why not ... why not lower the wall?’

‘Then they come and steal the food. It’s OK, the kinder bounce.’

Jimmy nudged me out the main entrance, kicking empty paint tins as we went. I had just had a crash course in the African’s sense of practicality: mattresses to catch the children. Still, it seemed to work.

Back in Nairobi we dined with death - we caught a taxi across town, and entered a nondescript office block. The guard on the door did not challenge us; white folk I guessed. Soon, we were seated before a perplexed looking Dutchman in a nice office, air conditioning and a mini-bar; this was the United Nations. And Dr Van Den something-I-could-not-pronounce was one of a very small team of people who organised the clearing of mines and ordinance after wars and conflicts. I figured Jimmy would give him some money and we’d leave for the hotel rooftop pool.

‘I’m Jimmy Silo, a wealthy British stock market trader. I will be buying a hotel or two in Kenya.’

Van Den Something was puzzled. ‘There is ordinance near the site of your hotel? It is near the border?’

‘No, that is not why I am here. I have taken charge of an orphanage ... and it is terrible to see the children with no limbs...’ Van Den was now following and looking very sympathetic. ‘So I wish to give some money for mine clearance. But, more than that, I wish to be actively involved in fund raising and awareness.’

Now we were talking Van Den’s language, not double Dutch, and he fetched us both cold drinks. But I could not remember seeing any kids with missing limbs at Smurf central.

‘What would you like to do, exactly?’ our host enquired.

‘It strikes me ... that the best people for mine clearance in any country are the locals themselves – suitably trained and supervised.’

Our host brightened. ‘Yah, yah. I have this idea also, but always the former mercenary with the bad attitude. And they want so much money for the work.’

Jimmy nodded sympathetically. ‘If you can find a training facility ... I can offer you ten or twenty thousand dollars a month.’

‘A month? Mein Gott.’ Our host gave it some thought. ‘There is a place, near the Somali border. There are former soldiers there, old grey men, but they do not want much money to help. They have an airfield – not used – that the government allows them to occupy. They have trained a handful of locals, and some Somalis, in mine clearance.’

Jimmy handed over a wad of dollars. ‘Please, give them this money. And, until I am back in a few months time, would you draw up some simple plans – something we can work to?’

‘Yah, yah, of course,’ our host excitedly got out.

And it turned out that our host would be leaving the service of the UN in six months time, but wanted to stay in Kenya with his family, his wife a local, his kid’s half-caste. Jimmy hinted at a job for the man and we left a very excited pen pusher behind.

In the taxi Jimmy said, ‘I first met that guy at the rooftop bar. He told me about the mine clearance efforts, his family, when he would stop working for the UN, the camp on the border. I just wanted it to appear to be his idea.’

‘And the orphanage gave you the credibility and the way in.’ I nodded to myself.

‘Step by step. I’m working to a very detailed plan with twenty thousand boxes to tick.’

‘How many so far?’

‘About a hundred.’

‘Long list,’ I grumbled. ‘Are the answers in the back of the book?’

Jimmy laughed. ‘No, but I have taken the test before.’

‘So why mine clearance?’

‘Mine clearance staff need medics on hand, in case they blow a limb off.’

‘Ah ... medics means those Rescue Force people you mentioned. Small acorns.’

‘Small acorns, my lad, are easy to move ... or to stop growing. The problem comes when they’re sixty feet tall!’

‘Too late to do anything,’ I concluded.

Colonel Pointer, US Marines. (Retd)

Colonel Thadius J. Pointer started his service life as a pilot in the Marines, serving with distinction in Vietnam, three tours. He progressed to be an instructor before becoming a test pilot for General Dynamics, Northrop and eventually NASA. He was accepted into the space programme by NASA in 1976 but never got the chance to fly into space, returning to test pilot work for a few years, in particular the stealth bomber programmes. In 1982 he hung up his wings and became a consultant to the CIA, advising on spy plane tactics and operations, and continued to act as consultant to the USAF on stealth matters. 1986 found Thadius working as a part-time consultant to the CIA on remote drone spying.

Today’s trip to Langley was different, an urgent summons, something he had not encountered before. Since his work was in research it was a tantalising intrigue that had kept him

awake the night before. He now knocked on the door of his principal contact at Langley, Air Force Colonel Summers.

‘Thad, come on in,’ Summers urged, waving him forwards.

‘Where’s the fire, Bob?’ Thad joked. ‘You need me for a mission that no young buck can handle?’

‘Nothing so dramatic,’ Summers said as he literally man-handled Thad by the shoulders and into his own chair. He took a breath, stood at Thad’s elbow. ‘This is classified Top Secret.’

‘Ain’t it all?’ Thad baulked, a quick glance up.

Summers tapped a blue file on his desk. ‘I got to be some where for two hours. While I’m gone I want you to read the letters in this file – they’ll explain themselves. At the end I want a conclusion, not least because you’re one of only a handful of men still serving who’ve touched upon a... *certain topic*.’ He grabbed his hat and left, his enigmatic smirk lingering in Thad’s mind.

Thad opened the file, finding a typed letter, an odd signature at the bottom. ‘Magestic, the man in the ... middle?’ With a heavy frown he read the first letter, the detail of a train derailment that would happen. ‘What in God’s name have they got me doing now?’

The second letter detailed a terrorist attack in the Mid East, a warning of a few months given. The third outlined the problems with a railway bridge that would collapse in a year or two.

‘What...?’

The third letter detailed an Israeli spy working for the CIA. ‘Jesus.’

He flicked pages, stopping at the collapse of communism after the fall of the Berlin wall. It held his attention for many minutes as he read and re-read it. Slowly, very slowly his face contorted in a surprised smile. ‘God damn ... they did it. They actually ... sons of bitches ... did it.’

Summers returned with an expectant look, sitting opposite a smug looking Thad.

Thad asked, ‘You got any whiskey in this place?’

With a huge smile Colonel Summers opened a cabinet and retrieved two glasses and a bottle. ‘Special occasions.’ He poured out two drinks.

Thad took his glass and raised it. ‘Project Magestic.’

‘To Magestic,’ Summers offered, the drinks downed. With his glass lowered Summers asked, ‘Any doubts?’

‘None.’ Thad was adamant. ‘There are key words and phrases in here that only those of us who worked on Magestic knew about. Hell, some of these phrases I made up myself! And the fact that he can predict the future.’ He tapped the file. ‘These letters were received *ahead* ... of the events mentioned in it?’ Summers nodded. Thad added, ‘This letter on the end of communism...’

‘Has already upset a few, who see it as a Russian trick.’

‘Yeah, that figures,’ Thad let out with a sigh.

‘There’s something you don’t know about the letters, old friend. They were posted in London, all of them. British Government has been getting letters.’

‘London?’ Thad repeated. He eased back and peered into his glass. ‘Would make sense, actually. We drew up scenarios of what would happen if someone just appeared out of time and knocked on the White House door. Best we could figure they’d lock the guy up ... forever!’

Summers suggested, ‘London is close enough, yet far enough away from us, and if the British Government where to hide him...?’

Thad found himself nodding as he reflected on the abandoned old project, a project to look at the possibilities of time travel. ‘You know how it got that name? Some secretary in the Pentagon spelt it wrong. We thought it was funny so we kept it. Because of the other Majestic project – the UFO misinformation project – we figured no one would ever find our project.’

They laughed in unison.

Thad explained, ‘We always figured that anyone going back in time would have to proceed carefully, or he’d upset the time line. We also knew that too much information – too soon – would be a problem to the government of the sixties, or earlier. They may not have listened.’

Summers put in, 'Imagine turning up in 1941 and warning of the Jap attack. You'd be shot as a loony!'

Thad lifted his eyebrows and nodded. 'So it makes perfect sense. This guy is hiding out and drip-feeding us what we need to know, Brits as well. Just hope he looks both ways when he crosses the damn road.'

'You sure *we* ... sent him back through time?'

'The evidence is all there, the manner of the warnings and the code phrases we thought up,' Thad insisted.

'But what if ... what if in fifty years or so time someone got access to those old files and used them for a ... grand deception?'

'Burn them! Today! If this is a deception based on those files then our friend would disappear in a puff, so too the letters, since they could never have been written in the first place.'

Summers smiled. 'They were accidentally burnt a while back. We can't find any record of them.'

'There you go then. No deception. And the end of communism? Hell, he ain't working for their side, for sure. And time will prove it so.'

'Would he be under orders to report in, do you think?'

'Being under orders was something we considered. If he wanted to he could just sit back and bet the World Series, make a fortune and live the life. Who'd know? Guy is probably alone, so who's going to stop him having a great life, eh? It was the one thing we considered a problem area. Whoever got sent back would be alone, no backup, no return ticket. He's an astronaut for sure, mental faculties strong enough to survive the trip and a moral compass big enough for the Titanic. No one else could be trusted. And I'm sure he will make contact in time.' Thad tapped the file. 'With one letter a month for a few years he's going to work up the credibility. Shouldn't be a problem after that?'

'You may even get the chance to debrief him,' Summers suggested.

'Be an honour.'

‘So these phrases and stuff ... that you put into the letters to the Americans, that’s to make them think you’re an astronaut... sent by the US Air Force?’ I queried with a worried frown.

Jimmy nodded. ‘When I was in Canada I got access to all sorts of info, spoke to some real old soldiers and CIA types. After a few beers they were more than happy to reminisce, and why not? Fucking world had come to an end, America gone, so who’d care?’

‘So why’d you want the Americans to think that?’

‘So they won’t want to shoot me. If they think I’m one of theirs it’ll keep them off my back for a while. Problem comes when I start telling them stuff that they won’t like – stuff about future American presidents and what they get up to.’

I shrugged. ‘What we doing tonight?’

Jimmy also shrugged. ‘Curry, lap-dancers, nightclub?’

We set our moral compasses in the right direction.

A pineapple office

The new offices for Pineapple were rented, Jimmy suggesting that they would stay two years and move on. It was a nice, glass fronted three storey building in Putney, a view of the river if you stood in a far corner.

‘Like the motif,’ I told Oliver. ‘Where did you get the idea for that?’

Oliver laughed as I prodded a giant plastic pineapple hung from the ceiling. We stepped across the new open-plan offices, a dozen waist high cubicles spread out, a large square of sofas in the middle for would-be artists to chill out. We settled in Oliver’s new office, closing a glass door but maintaining a view of the entire office through glass walls.

‘How’s it going?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Six hits in four months – all top ten – and one number two,’ Oliver enthused. ‘Making very good money. You certainly seem to have an ear for the hits.’

‘Staff OK?’ Jimmy enquired.

‘One left to go back to college, two new members, one off after a car wreck.’

‘Up the pay five percent,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘We can afford it now.’

‘Will do. On a side note, we had this arrive.’ Oliver handed Jimmy a letter. ‘It’s a formal offer to buy the business from an industry giant.’

Jimmy handed it back after barely glancing at it. ‘In years to come we’ll buy them. File it away.’

‘Not looking to get rid of us already?’ I asked Oliver, but jokingly.

‘No, no. But had to let you know about it.’

Jimmy said, ‘I think we should rent some recording studio space, get a good deal and get our people in there.’

‘I’ve got someone in mind,’ Oliver said, rifling through files. ‘A good price if we block book it.’ He handed us the advertising flyer.

‘Fine,’ Jimmy said. ‘Book a block and see how it goes. Then we need a marketing manager.’

‘Cathy is doing that with me –’

‘We need a big hitter,’ Jimmy cut in with. ‘Someone flamboyant... who can spend his time travelling around the distributors. And I’m sure that *you* don’t want to spend all day doing that.’

‘Well ... no.’

‘And Cathy can act as deputy, office backup and appointment setter,’ Jimmy added.

‘I’ll advertise the post, see what turns up.’ Oliver made a note on a pad.

‘And then we need a better relationship with a video company,’ Jimmy added. ‘As with the studios, get a good block deal for video shoots, start a good working relationship.’

Oliver made another note.

‘Don’t be afraid to spend money, or to ask for more. What we don’t want is to lose artists when they grow because *we* can’t support their growth.’

‘That has been on my mind,’ Oliver admitted. ‘The big producers have the clout to handle things like large concerts.’

‘And so will we in time,’ Jimmy confidently suggested. ‘I’m transferring another million into the account, so use it.’

Old dogs, new tricks

Two months after meeting Van Den Something, the U.N. man with the nice office, we were back in Nairobi with a purpose, Jimmy telexing him a good three weeks notice of our pending arrival.

That first night we chilled at the rooftop bar, all the staff remembering us, and I was starting to like the place; beer at sunset was becoming a tradition for us. We met the keen Dutchman the next day for lunch, around the corner from his offices, and presented a modest cheque towards any charity the man liked. As expected, Van Den had arranged a trip to see the airfield near the border, vehicles booked for the next morning.

We rose early, just about sunrise, and found a white UN jeep waiting outside the hotel, Van Den excited like a schoolboy on a fieldtrip. I was warned in advance not to take the piss out his forename, or his wife. Turned out that Van Den Something was actually Rudd Van Den Something, pronounced ‘rude’. His wife was called ‘Virgin’ and I had to work hard at keep my trap shut. We set off, my only comment being about the use of UN trucks.

Van Den explained, more for the benefit of the UN driver, that *such large benefactors* were always treated well. At a stop to use the bathroom he admitted that he had stretched the reason for the using vehicle in the paperwork, but was leaving in three months and didn’t give a crap. We got back in as the sky turned dark, the heavens opening for a quick downpour.

It took a good four hours to reach the airfield, what was left of it. The perimeter fence had just the lonely concrete poles remaining, a clothes’ line hung between two. I noticed what was left of a control tower, the glass missing, and a few single

story buildings reminiscent of films about Second World War prison camps. A modestly well-preserved hangar defied gravity and rust, stood proud in the distance, and some new low buildings formed the square into which we now parked up. We were expected, three men walking out to greet us, squinting against the bright midday sun. Two were silver haired, one bald, all appearing tanned and weather-beaten and in their late forties or early fifties.

‘How’s ya doon?’ the first asked, a Scotsman.

Rudd introduced us, unsure of how to describe our occupations.

Jimmy took charge, taking off his sunglasses and shaking their hands in turn. ‘Robin McPhearson - known as Mac, Booby Tanner – known as Darkie, and Micky Hutches – known as Rabbit.’ The men were surprised, as was our host. Jimmy explained, ‘I checked you all out thoroughly. I like to know who I’m dealing with.’

‘Ya get a letter from my mum?’ Mac testily enquired, glancing at his colleagues.

‘You never knew your parents, Mac. So no.’ Mac did not look pleased. ‘I got a note from The Regiment, which recommended all three of you – although I was warned that you never like to pay for a round.’

The men laughed, the ice broken.

‘Come on inside, out the heat,’ Mac urged, leading us into a hut. ‘We’s got us some cold ones ... courtesy of the UN.’

We cracked open cans of chilled lager, sat on threadbare chairs arranged in a circle.

The walls of this windowless hut were adorned with various badges, medals and unit emblems, a few pictures of aircraft, helicopters and weapons, a few technical posters in Chinese detailing mines and grenades. Other than the military décor there was little of anything else in the hut; a makeshift half-moon bar and a fridge that protested its lack of maintenance.

‘So,’ Mac began, the obvious group leader. ‘You’s some sort of city slicker with a few quid to spend.’

‘We’re very rich stockbrokers ... and yes, we have a few quid to spend,’ Jimmy explained. ‘We’ve taken over an

orphanage down here and I'll be buying a hotel on the coast.' The men glanced at each other, clearly unsure about us. 'At the orphanage there are a few kids with missing limbs –'

'Mines,' Mac cut in with.

'Yes. I understand there are a lot of kids in Africa like that.'

'Around here they don't clean up after a wee battle, they leave it for the kids ta find,' Mac stated, some anger in his voice. 'Have a few three legged cattle around here too.'

'And you guys teach mine clearance,' Jimmy prompted.

'When the funding is there,' Rabbit put in. 'Rude Boy here–' I tried not to smile. '- gets us what contracts he can. Man has three kids, but his wife's a Virgin!'

We laughed, the bastard stealing my joke.

'From now on you'll be fully funded,' Jimmy suggested.

The men straightened in their seats, glances exchanged.

'To do what ... exactly, big fella?' Mac delicately enquired.

'To set-up a training school right here, well equipped and well funded. To train Africans in mine clearance, as well as others I'll send down – medics and doctors.'

'Doctors?' Mac challenged, his surprise evident.

'I read an article about a doctor who had his leg blown off,' Jimmy explained. 'He was working in a remote village, didn't know what to look out for. Another was handed a grenade by a kid and blew himself up. If medics are going to work in remote locations they need awareness training, and they need to know what to do if they wander into the wrong field.'

The old dogs exchanged looks, nodding in approval.

'Well ... aye,' Mac conceded.

'And the UN –' Jimmy gestured towards a keenly attentive, yet quiet Rude Boy. '- will want medics close at hand when people are clearing mines, for when they make mistakes.'

Rude Boy nodded. 'Yah, yah.'

Jimmy put on his superior voice. 'So this is what I would like: new buildings, new fence, some classrooms, a nice big sand pit to put fake mines in and practice, plenty of mine clearing equipment – the latest kit.'

‘I can get that,’ Rude Boy keenly offered. ‘No cost.’

Jimmy gestured towards him, but addressed the Old Dogs. ‘And how will you gentlemen feel about having Rudd as your administrator?’

Rudd straightened.

‘Fine,’ Mac answered with a shrug. ‘Been working with the lad for years.’

‘I see a clear division of labour here,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Rudd does the managing, you get a tan outside – doing the training. He sharpens the pencils and keeps the lights on, you crawl around the sandbox.’

We waited. The men were in approval, not least because they could not have even afforded a plane ticket home. We wandered back out into the heat and flies, the existing sandbox pointed out, some dummy mines retrieved and keenly explained; if you stood on one it went bang, but you did not lose your leg. The runway was still operable, the odd aircraft making a forced landing from time to time, scattering the goats of the local farmers and scaring the odd camel. Water came from a well and food was either bought local or grown, Rabbit quite the gardener. No lettuce growing in his patch, wrong climate altogether. I asked.

The outlying areas, surrounding the base, were a contrast. Along the road we came down locals were living in huts, some trees for shade and the odd field of produce. The far side, across the runway, levelled off to a desert-like expanse of nothingness, hills in the distance. I put a hand over my eyes and peered through the shimmering heat to see if Lawrence of Arabia was heading towards us on a camel. I saw only a local woman balancing a large silver container on her head.

‘How far to the border?’ I asked Rabbit, conscious of what Jimmy had said about Somalia.

‘Not far, laddy. Thirty miles or so.’

‘Any trouble?’

‘With the Somalis? No, they’s a proud people.’

I figured I’d best not reveal the future. Away from the others I asked Jimmy if it was wise to be this close to the border.

He grinned. 'If there's trouble here, it'll justify a security detail under our control – paid and trained by us.' I waited. 'That group will be the forerunner to an army I'll raise.'

'Our own Army? Tidy. What'll the Kenyans say?'

'They'll be happy for the help to patrol this border. Ten years from now this'll be *war zone central*.'

We gave the three old dogs twenty thousand dollars, informing Rude Boy that he had a job any time he wanted it, although it would involve a lot of travel. He planned on coming out on a Monday and going back each Friday to start with. It sounded like a plan.

The Old Dogs, as they were now referred to openly, had three months to get ready, twenty thousand dollars going a long way in that part of Kenya in 1986. We had given Rudd another ten thousand towards a jeep for himself and start-up expenses, a computer and a fax line at home. Rudd would also have to tackle the Kenyan Government and the red tape, I figured, till Jimmy explained why not.

The Old Dogs held onto a license, had done for ten years or more, so we – as the new owners – did not need one. Rudd was also on good terms with all the relevant people and so a process that could have dragged on for years would require no further thought.

A sandbox in the desert

Two months later, as we arrived back at the airfield, originally called RAF Mawlini by the British in 1956, we noticed that the place was now a hive of activity. The fence and front gate had been fixed, at least the gate and ten sections of fence either side had been fixed. Anyone wanting to get inside would be surely disheartened by having to walk a hundred metres around the completed sections. I would sleep well at night knowing that.

We passed through the imposing front gate, a look exchanged with Jimmy, getting a salute from a local teen

manning his post. At least he had a military hat on. Scrub had been cleared and fires were still burning to reduce the dried shrubs. The old air traffic control building had a lick of paint and some new windows, some signs fixed to the wall: Ablutions, NAAFI, HQ Block. I guessed the old dogs were feeling nostalgic. That or they did it one night when drunk. Rabbit's cabbage patch was ten times larger, a rusted water truck parked at the edge and slowly dripping, a brown puddle being lapped at by goats. There were more camels than I had noted before, locals driving sheep across the dusty runway.

Mac stopped us with a hand. We jumped down as he said, 'Up the control tower, lads. You can see the lot from there.'

We followed him into the building, the cool interior being decorated by a local man, his young son asleep on the floor below him. On the roof of the control tower we caught a cooling breeze, stood now in the shade of the tower's overhanging structure.

'Gate's done,' I prompted.

'Aye, but only so much fencing. We's awaiting on the rest.'

'And a bigger vegetable patch,' I noted, peering down at it.

'Aye, food around here is limited, so you grow your own where you can.'

'That the sandbox?' Jimmy asked, pointing into the distance at a section of sand fifty yards square and taped into smaller quadrants.

'Aye, twelve inches deep and plenty a room for ten or so lads in there.' He pointed at the hangar. 'Side of the hangar - we's building classrooms, in the shade of the big bloody thing.'

'Those yours?' Jimmy enquired, pointing at two old Land Rovers.

'To fetch people from the nearest train stop, fetch supplies. They wus cheap.'

The convoy that had been following us now arrived, having stopped to cool a radiator or two.

'Who's that?' Mac asked.

'Help,' Jimmy informed him.

Rudd led the way in a UN jeep that he had borrowed, kind of permanently, another jeep and three lorries following him past the diligent teen at the gate, now saluting each truck.

Jimmy explained, 'Wood, wooden panels, pitch for the roof, wire, some chicken wire, generator, another fridge, tins of food, blackboards, chalk, hammers and nails, saws. And fifty chicks.'

'Chicks?' Mac repeated.

'They grow up into chickens,' I pointed out. 'Brought two cocks as well.'

Jimmy gave me a look.

'Fuck me, you don't hang about,' Mac let out, a hand over his eyes as we watched the convoy park up and start unloading, a wave from Rudd.

On the way down from the roof the painter's son was complaining of paint flecks on his head.

'Don't grumble,' I said. 'If you were in our orphanage we'd put you in a blue dress.'

The next day three self-assembly portakabins arrived as ordered, albeit a day late. For Kenya, that was ahead of schedule by a week. Packed onto the trucks were also several large tents, UN stencilled on the top and sides. Well, it gave the operation an air of authority and credibility.

When the circus-sized tents were up we walked inside, room enough for fifty people to live. Camp beds were laid out, twenty of them, for the recruits to sleep on; this was a residential course. The dirt was swept, weeds pulled up, snake holes blocked. The floor was ready, the goats grateful of the shade. With a flurry of activity over the next three days we got the place ready. In reality, we dragged it from 1956 to around 1970. It was basic, but functional.

With the money we gave Rudd he paid the government and they in turn paid twenty local recruits, as had been done previously when Rudd was official; about five dollars a day each for the men. And Rude Boy, he may have neglected to tell the government that he had stopped working for the UN – and nicked their tents. The recruits slept in the tents, not at all fussed by the conditions, and ate well, meals served in one of the portakabins. The classrooms in the shade of the hangar

were cool all day and the sandbox got plenty of use, a puff of sand followed a second later by an echo off the hangar scaring the camels every thirty minutes or so.

‘If those trainees were in a real mine field ... they’d be fucking mince meat by now,’ I told Jimmy.

The three Old Dogs now had new green khaki shorts and shirts and strode around with clipboards barking instructions. For much of the time, Jimmy and me sat on the control tower roof in deckchairs, sipping cold beers and watching the activity, till Friday morning came, time to drive back with Rudd to his Virgin wife. We left to dull echoes scaring the camels.

A hurricane, a Chinaman and a bubble

In the weeks leading up to October 1987 we sold all of our stock, ready for a big market crash. I had no doubt about Jimmy’s prediction, but I also had never seen such a crash, none of the current generation of traders had, and all the experts were predicting a good end to the year on the British FTSE index.

We had advised Wang Po to sell all his stocks and bet the down side, our man in Hong Kong trusting every detail we gave him and making a fortune in the process, and for the big show Jimmy invited him over. Wang Po booked into the Hilton up the road and we met for a meal at a Chinese restaurant that his family owned. He could have told us before. Still, he made it clear to the staff that we were always to get the best table – no waiting – and never to pay. Fair enough.

We ate, drank and laughed to the small hours, meeting at noon the next day at the apartment for a planning session. Wang Po had brought two bodyguards, not trusting London much. They were settled into the kitchen, given newspapers and left to their own devices.

Po understood the basics of buying index options, a bet on the market falling, but did not fully understand, nor trust, derivatives. Just as well that Jimmy had it all written down for him, the optimum series and price to select. Po rang his broker back in Hong Kong to place a few trades, but had also transferred a million pounds to HSBC London, opening a dozen accounts here as we had advised him. Soon he was carefully placing orders down our phone, reading the script Jimmy had prepared and given him. It took an hour. With the business taken care of from the comfort of our lounge, we sat behind the screens and watched coloured stocks ticking over, Po now keen to get a live link for his own office. Today was Tuesday, and Jimmy came out with strange suggestion.

‘Weather forecast says it’ll be very bad weather for Thursday and Friday, so there’ll probably be many stockbrokers not able to get into work. If this coincides with a crash on the American markets it’ll be all the worse here. I think Friday will be the day, British market makers deliberately crashing the stock to make themselves some money.’

Po was fascinated by how the market makers worked, how they set prices – and forced prices up and down artificially. I, on the other hand, was fascinated by the weather forecast, since the news had not indicated that there was particularly bad weather due to us. I figured Jimmy had a good memory, but to remember detail like that surprised me.

Po spent Wednesday shopping with his daughters, their first trip to London, and Jimmy was surprisingly quiet. Thursday at noon we met up as the weather worsened rapidly. Soon the tickers were all red on thin volume traded. It had begun.

Po was fascinated, quoting and re-quoting figures, and at 3.30pm Jimmy called McKinleys. Unknown to me he had made his feelings known to them about the crash and, for the most part, they had taken his advice. They had not, however, recommended to their clients that they sell their stocks. Instead, they had bet the down side in a modest way, enough to protect exposed positions and make a few quid on top. I was to learn later that Jimmy’s advice saved the firm from

certain bankruptcy, elevating Jimmy to Godlike status with them.

Placing the phone down Jimmy faced us. 'They can see it in the market, lots of rumours. Something big is up.'

By close of play the market was down, but not crashing, the DOW sliding modestly. We ordered in from Po's family restaurant, Po not wishing to miss a beat as he watched the DOW slide. We munched away, mostly without Po, as his fascination with our software grew. When our bellies were full the DOW was down over a hundred points, the move now significant. Po's Hong Kong broker called to say that the Asian markets were down significantly, following the DOW south. With the close of the DOW, Jimmy reconfigured the software and we gained a live feed of the Asian markets. The spare room was already made up, Po wanting to stay put. A bodyguard was sent back for some clothes and personal effects, the second offered Jimmy's bed.

Our explanation of Jimmy's lack of sleep worried Po greatly, who offered acupuncture, green tea and everything short of Tiger's Penis to cure it. Jimmy explained it away as a benefit, since he could read many financial reports overnight. Still, our guest was concerned for Jimmy's welfare.

I went to bed, being a mere mortal, Po catching an hour or two as Jimmy kept an eye of the Asian markets. At 7am the Hang Seng Index was down significantly, but not a crash by any means. He woke Po and me at nine o'clock, the UK market sliding from the start. The morning news was on, reporting the storm and the closed railway lines.

Jimmy pointed at the TV screen. 'Most people won't be at work in the city today, they can't get in.'

Po was amazed, but I was concerned. And even the bodyguards were watching the screens, discussing the moves, their boss explaining some of the detail. After all, the men turned out to be family. It was mesmerizing, especially when you remembered how much money you had placed to bet the down side. And the FTSE was already below the point where McKinleys made a few quid. Their head trader had walked in to work, he did not live far, and had called Jimmy – no doubt with a huge grin. When off the phone Jimmy explained that

McKinleys had left all their phones off the hook – no customers could sell.

By four o'clock we were the best part of a million pounds better off, Jimmy keeping the trades small so that the Regulators would not notice us on their radar. Po had bet over two million pounds, and on more leveraged positions than us, now sitting on a five million pound profit. Jimmy stopped him calling his broker, explaining that now the slide had begun it would be bigger on Monday. Well, Po was stunned into silence, his staff worried for him.

'Not sell?' he repeated many times. 'More big fall?'

Two people I had never heard of rang, sounding very pleased with themselves, asking for Jimmy.

'Hold till Wednesday,' Jimmy had told them. 'Besides, you won't get through to any UK broker till then. Relax.'

'Relax?' I repeated, Po so quiet that he worried me. The little Chinaman was sitting on around ten million quid in profit, not to mention what he saved from selling his stock portfolio in time. It was fair to say we'd never pay for a meal in that restaurant again.

With the close of the UK market we watched the DOW as it slid further, finishing well down. This was now officially a crash and creating news headlines. Jimmy told Po to have a relaxing weekend – not much chance of that – and sent him packing, politely but firmly, a place on our sofa booked in for him at 8am Monday morning. With big hugs and a million thanks issued we keenly pushed him out of the door.

'Fuck I'm knackered,' I let out, slouching down. 'Like being back at the firm.'

Jimmy eased down. 'Po will reward us well next week, so too some others I persuaded. So next month we can spend some money.'

'Medical Genetics?' I asked.

'No, need to make a start on a few other things in Kenya. We'll use the money quick enough.'

'We out tonight?' I asked with a yawn.

'Not in this weather. Besides, they'll be fuck all people about. Get some rest, watch the TV.' He stood. 'I'm going to change the sheets and get an hour or two.'

‘How long can you go? Without sleep?’

‘Five days at least, but then I get cranky and my coordination goes wobbly. I once did a whole month at one hour a night, but felt like shit and slept for twenty hours in a single stretch. Four hours is the optimum, more than that and I get a headache. Anyway, we just passed a significant milestone; now we have the money to start Rescue Force, or at least its predecessor.’

‘It’s as if you’re working to a plan,’ I joked as he headed for his bedroom.

Sat there alone, various odd feelings surfaced, something odd about the exactness of the plan and the storm outside. Hell, he’d always been mysterious. I cracked open a can and watched the news about today’s action.

After a lazy weekend, Po turned up early, the little bugger ringing the bell at 7am. Jimmy was already up and welcomed the gang in, the two daughters accompanying, and the commotion woke me.

‘For fuck’s sake,’ I yawned, still in my pants.

The two girls giggled as I slammed the door, needing another hour; I was not fully cooked.

I joined them at 8.30am; showered, awake and smartly dressed. The girls were still giggly, and looking even more gorgeous than the first time I had set eyes on them. ‘Morning all,’ I said with a bow, the bodyguards smirking, and headed to the kitchen for breakfast and several coffees. The girls joined me, sat staring with fixed grins. By time I joined Po and Jimmy the FTSE was again sliding heavily, as predicted. An hour later we had coffee and a conference around the aptly named coffee table.

‘No more trades for four weeks at least,’ Jimmy informed us. ‘No good short term trades for three months at least.’ We were both surprised. Jimmy explained, ‘The market will be volatile, staying low and then recovering in three months. Now is a good time for investments, one or two years.’ He offered to give Po a list, gratefully acknowledged. Problem was, Po liked to be active and to trade.

‘Discipline, like me,’ Jimmy firmly pressed. ‘Make money when the time is right.’

Po accepted the advice, planning on selling some options on Wednesday, some later. What we didn’t know at the time was that he had already sold some via the Asian exchanges and was sitting on a tidy profit. His extended family, having sold all of their stocks in advance of the crash, were now gleefully buying them back for a quarter of their former price. The name ‘Jimmy Silo’ was starting to spread.

When Po got around to promising Jimmy some money ‘Jimly’ stopped him dead.

‘There will be a charity that I wish to start in Hong Kong in a few years time,’ Jimmy explained. ‘I would like you to put any money that you would like to give us into that charity, so that when we are ready it is there to use.’

We were ‘vely’ strange men, but most respected, Po said, swearing that he would itemise it and send statements. Fair enough, we knew where it was. By end of play the FTSE had plummeted, Po and Jimmy far richer than the week before, a few stockbrokers biting the dust, but none of ours. Jimmy explained to Po that the excitement was over and now we could relax, dinner at the restaurant arranged.

Keeping my hands off his two daughters was the hardest thing I ever did, especially after a drink, but I also desperately wanted to keep my hands attached to my arms.

Stepping up a gear

Jack Donohue read the letter with a hidden grin.

Sorry for not warning you about the market crash, but it was necessary that I use the opportunity to tip off a few people I know, so that they could make some money. A good percentage of that money has now been earmarked for several charities, here and abroad.

Since the crash did not affect UK politics and no one was hurt - I hope you understand my reasoning.

And I hope you took my advice about the Fastnet Yacht Race.

When finished, he raised his head to the assembled COBRA meeting.

‘Opinion?’ the Prime Minister asked.

‘Like he says, nothing political or deadly about the market crash and, more importantly, would the Government have taken any action?’

‘It would have been nice to have the option, I suppose,’ the P.M. commented.

‘Is he drifting towards financial motivation?’ the MI5 representative asked.

Jack put in, ‘He could do so without letting us know, and by now would be the richest man in the UK.’

‘Fair point,’ the same man conceded.

The P.M. opened a file and handed the letter to Jack. ‘This... we have not shown you yet.’

Jack scanned the letter. ‘Bloody hell.’

‘Quite,’ the P.M. agreed.

PM, a Mid East terrorist group is well advanced in their planning of a spectacular hijacking in the years ahead. They have selected twenty young men, mostly for their clean passports, and are giving the selected men flying lessons. Their aim is simple in its audacity.

They aim to hijack several aircraft at the same time, ideally 747s with full manifests, and to fly these aircraft to Western capitals. There, they will kill the crew, take their places and crash the planes into built-up areas, principally city centres.

Try, if you will, to imagine half a dozen 747s crashing into London; Buckingham Palace, Westminster or Oxford Circus.

The solution comes in two parts. First, and quite straightforward, you must reinforce cockpit doors, provide inside locks only and perhaps a peephole.

Second, and more difficult, you must instruct pilots never to give up the cockpit, even if cabin crew are threatened or killed. Since giving up the cockpit will, most certainly, result in everyone in the aircraft being killed - and hundreds on the ground being killed - the pilots must sacrifice the passengers and cabin staff and land the aircraft, disabling it.

‘So,’ the P.M. began. ‘Opinions?’

‘It would be devastating -’

‘The biggest single loss of life -’

‘We must act -’

The P.M. nodded. ‘Set up a working group to review aircraft security procedures with this in mind. We do, apparently, have a few years at least.’

The next meeting, three weeks later, had a different tone altogether.

Jack read the letter quickly, but twice. ‘Dear God.’

The P.M. stated, ‘Given the nature of this ... I have decided to join forces with the Americans. Jack, you’ll get a liaison at some point. As to the subject matter of this latest letter... well, we can all hope it’s true.’

‘Ma’am, he’s never been wrong up to now,’ Jack pointed out.

‘That may be, but this is ... incredible. The end of communism?’

Sykes put in, ‘We are seeing a rapid increase in dissent right across the Warsaw Pack countries, particularly the GDR.’

‘Dissent in those countries is not the issue, it’s what Moscow would do in response,’ the P.M. pointed out. ‘That, has always been the issue. And a re-unification of Germany could seriously destabilise that country – and our bases within it. There’s also the consideration of a unified Germany – which way they would lean?’

Two weeks later Jack got his liaison, Colonel Thadius Pointer. He met the tough-looking white haired man in a hotel bar, all very ‘cloak and dagger’. Not to mention great fun being out of the office.

They shook. ‘Jack Donohue.’

‘Thad Pointer, Colonel. Retired.’ They sat.

‘Air Force?’ Jack enquired.

‘Marines.’

‘Vietnam?’

Thad nodded before ordering a drink from a waiter. 'You?'

'Just a pen pusher. Psychology. So, how did you go from an honest living ... to this?'

Thad laughed. 'Jets, NASA, spy planes, CIA, desk work. I even worked on the original Majestic project – that's why I got called back for this.'

'You think there is a link?' Jack broached.

'Not really. Your guy is the real thing, we never found anyone with any real powers. Sure, they drew pictures of places they'd never been, but not much else.'

'If I may be so bold ... does Uncle Sam think that Majestic is *on the level*, as you say?'

'Sure, everything pans out so far.'

'And the end of communism?'

Thad raised his eyebrows. 'What you have to keep in mind, is that some rich and powerful folks back home don't really want an end to communism, they're making a buck selling tanks to the Army, planes to the Air Force.'

'So, they *choose* not to believe it,' Jack stated with a disappointed tone.

Thad shrugged. 'Politics.'

'There's no need to swear.' They laughed. 'May I enquire,' Jack delicately began, 'if your side are trying to find him?'

'If they are, they haven't told me,' Thad suggested. 'Are *you* looking for him?'

'In a small way. They check for fingerprints, where the letters were posted – that sort of thing. But I don't think our friend is the sloppy type.'

'No, he sure isn't,' Thad agreed, Jack puzzling that statement.

'So, do you think he's British, or an American living here?' Jack asked.

'Oh, British for sure - linguists say so.'

An hour later Jack was stood before the Prime Minister.

'Well?' the P.M. asked.

'Lying through his teeth, Ma'am.'

The P.M. reflected on that statement. ‘Pity. Still, we must co-operate on NATO matters.’ She retrieved the latest Magestic letter. ‘Guess we’d better not show this to anyone.’

PM, you will soon have an American Liaison, a Colonel Thad Pointer, US Marines, Retired. He worked on the original 1960s Magestic project, no link other than the nature of the source of the information.

The Americans, having analysed the letters, fully believe me to be an astronaut, sent back through time to assist the US to dominate the world in the decades ahead. They believe this because it allows them their pride, and who else might build such a thing as a time machine but NASA? You might consider that the CIA have used this story to make it easier for them to present my story to the White House. A British clairvoyant would be mistrusted.

Your servant, Magestic.

P.S. I get vertigo if up too high. Still, as a child I liked the idea of being an astronaut. So, in some small way, I have achieved new heights in the eyes of some.

‘Astronaut,’ the P.M. repeated. ‘Where do the Americans get these ideas?’ She handed Jack the letter. ‘File that somewhere where no one else will see it.’

‘Yes, Prime Minister.’

The first medics

Back in Nairobi, in mid November, we met up with Rudd. As Jimmy had requested, Rudd had advertised for a Kenyan doctor to provide medical cover at the airfield and to teach first aid. At our lunch meeting Rudd handed over a shortlist of candidates that he had faxed us the week before. Jimmy ran an eye over the list and selected the man he wanted, named Adam, the perplexed Rudd delicately enquiring as to how he knew which man to employ.

‘I know people down here who can check backgrounds,’ Jimmy explained. ‘I want to meet him as soon as possible.’

‘He’s here in Nairobi, looking for work, staying with a brother. He has been doing UN rotating contracts – which, I guess, you know...’

Jimmy nodded. ‘Call him, please. Bring him here.’

Rudd interrupted his lunch to make a quick call. After lunch we retired to the bar area and waited, the dark-skinned medic appearing in little more than half a pint’s waiting time, recognising Rudd and striding over. We stood. Jimmy greeted the large man in his native dialect, shocking the medic. They clasped hands.

‘You know my region?’ Adam asked in a base baritone voice.

‘Yes,’ Jimmy acknowledged. ‘I am ... a well-travelled man. Please, have a seat.’

We sat back down, Jimmy ordering fresh drinks from a hovering waiter, a black tea purposefully selected for the medic – again surprising the man.

‘So, Adam, you have finished with your last contract?’ Jimmy began.

Adam nodded. ‘Yes, a month ago. I was in Zaire.’

‘And Rudd has indicated what type of work we need you for?’

Again Adam nodded. ‘Teaching the young men about medicine and being the base doctor for emergencies.’

‘It’s not much of a base at the moment, but will grow over the years,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Each year more and more recruits will attend training there. When there are no courses you can come back here to Nairobi, you’ll still be paid. Next year I want you to start a training programme for field medics, people who can – like you – go to Zaire and other places and provide basic medical help.’

Adam straightened. ‘This will be a permanent position?’

Jimmy nodded and smiled. ‘Yes, Adam. You were on eleven thousand dollars for the UN. We will pay fifteen thousand - and travel costs.’

I put in, ‘We’ll even give you your own allotment.’

‘Allot – ment?’

Jimmy explained, ‘At the base, at the airfield, the men grow their own food.’

‘Ah, yes. I like the gardening. I have the green fingers.’ He didn’t, I looked.

‘Can you start in a few days?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Yes, yes, I am available now.’

‘Then pack a bag and we’ll take you out to the base tomorrow,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘You can come back with Rudd every weekend.’

We stood again, shook, and arranged to meet at our hotel the next morning. Reclaiming our seats Jimmy handed over a document and chequebook to Rudd.

‘I’ve opened an account for our operations ... in a local bank. Later, we’ll pop along and they can meet you and get your signature for cheques.’

Rudd held a finger to the detail of the document with a heavy frown. ‘This says that there is ... two hundred and fifty thousand pounds in it?’

‘That’s correct,’ Jimmy casually explained. ‘From now on we’ll start to increase what we do. Once Adam has seen the base I want a small clinic built across the road from the base, for the locals. I want it well equipped, staffed with a local nurse – and a jeep for them to do house calls.’

The stunned Dutchman nodded. ‘With this much money you could build a hospital.’

‘There are other things I need you to do as well,’ Jimmy explained. He sipped his beer. ‘Find a local lawyer we can use, someone good. I’ll be buying a hotel on the coast and need a lawyer.’

The next morning we set-off early, before the day warmed up, and headed North. At the local town for the base we stopped, a dusty and dirty place, Jimmy dropping off Rudd with a shopping list and expecting him to get a taxi the remaining nine miles to the base. We continued on, passing one of the Old Dogs’ green Land Rovers as we progressed. The fence had grown another ten sections and I was surprised to find an armed police officer on the gate, another in a small watchtower.

Mac greeted us with, ‘Back again?’

‘Someone has to keep an eye on you,’ Jimmy retorted. He introduced Adam. ‘This is your new doctor.’ They shook hands. ‘He’s been in the Zaire doing field work for the UN.’

‘Got some of your tents over there,’ Mac said, pointing out the large UN tents.

Jimmy faced me and said, ‘Show Adam around, would you?’

I did my bit, leading Adam away as Mac and Jimmy chatted. After a meandering half-hour stroll of the base we climbed the stairs to the control tower roof, in need of a cool drink. Since the roof now had an outdoor fridge wired up, we were in the right spot. I fetched two cans, one each for me and Doc Adam, Jimmy and Mac already supping theirs as they sat in deckchairs.

I eased down. ‘What’s with the local police?’

Mac explained, ‘We pay the local chief, he takes his cut, pays them. They get a better deal than the town, better food and drink with us. They stop the locals nicking stuff, or they’d have the buildings away.’

‘Where’s the new clinic going to be?’ I idly enquired.

Jimmy pointed to an abandoned mud hut, over the road from the main gate. ‘Right there. Doc will be close enough to provide medical cover here.’ Adam took a keen interest, Jimmy facing him. ‘Before it’s built, your office will be below us. It’s the best room and we can lock it.’ Facing Mac he said, ‘Double the length of your courses, pad it out with comprehensive first aid from the Doc.’

‘Sure.’

‘And I’d like you to start to introduce an all-weapons course, get them making safe every kind of weapon and ordnance you can think off.’

‘Be a three month course,’ Mac cautioned.

‘That’s OK, it’ll keep you out the local bars. I’d like a tank or two, fifty cals – mounted, AKs, the works. When they leave here they should be able tackle any ordnance they find. Then you can start demolition school.’

‘Have to be way over there,’ Mac pointed. ‘But we’ve already a license for demolition.’

‘Build a few sunken bunkers for the plastic explosives, and get that fucking fence finished.’

‘I’ll have to drive down to the city and fetch some, locals are useless,’ Mac complained.

‘My brother, Seth, is in construction,’ Adam put in, swiping away flies. ‘He has fenced many football grounds.’

‘There you go,’ Jimmy told Mac. ‘Get Rudd to meet his brother and buy some - I’ve given Rudd a bank account.’

Two trucks trundled noisily closer, checked by the police at the gate and allowed in. Rudd had dragged the local merchant along with more supplies.

‘Looks like cement bags,’ I suggested. ‘Got any sand, Mac?’

‘I’ll check with Stores,’ Mac retorted.

Jimmy told Mac, ‘There’ll be a shit load of cement, so get the trainees doing a few hours a day, give them a few quid. Have a go at the airfield, fill in any small holes.’

Mac turned his head. ‘You planning on using it?’

‘Of course, be flying people in an out,’ Jimmy explained. ‘When we’ve got some recruits worth a damn we’ll hire them out to the UN, fly them into Mozambique and other places. Whenever *that* is ... is up to you. We need people who can disarm anything, medically trained and switched on.’

Mac carefully observed Jimmy. ‘You sure you’re not ex-military?’

As we sat there, relaxing, the lorry’s cargo was slowly unloaded by a local who needed a rest after each bag of cement.

‘C’mon,’ Jimmy called. ‘Let’s unload the trucks.’ He took off his shirt, surprising the locals and Mac alike, before grabbing two bags at a time, placing them in a pile. We all took one, trying to keep up with him.

‘Jimbo works out, eh?’ Mac puffed out as we progressed.

A man came running; a recruit in a uniform blue shirt. ‘Doctor man, doctor man!’

Adam reached for his bag and we all followed at the jog, into one of the smaller tents. What greeted us was a recruit sprawled out on a bed and appearing quite dead, his leg

swollen to twice the normal size, his skin splitting. It turned my stomach.

‘Snake bite,’ Adam said as he knelt down.

‘Serum?’ Jimmy asked Mac.

Mac shook his head.

‘In the town,’ Adam hurriedly suggested. ‘He may have an hour.’

Jimmy sent Mac, telling the recruits to fetch water and make a fire.

Adam checked the man’s vitals. ‘He will not live much longer.’

I made eye contact with Jimmy and pointed at the leg. ‘Could ... you?’

‘Yes,’ he softly admitted. ‘But it’s a risk, at this time.’

Adam was not following.

‘Well,’ I nudged, time passing.

‘It’s a risk,’ Jimmy repeated.

‘So was the orphanage,’ I reminded him.

He took a breath. ‘Watch the flaps, no one in. Adam, get a syringe.’

Adam fetched a syringe from his bag, looking puzzled. ‘You have serum?’

‘Yes, but not in the form you’re used to. Do what I ask, or you’ll have no job.’ He offered his upturned forearm. ‘Take a syringe full. Quickly, man.’

Adam glanced at me as I policed the door before drawing the blood.

Jimmy snatched the syringe off the doc. ‘Say nothing, do nothing, stand back.’ He injected the leg, above and below the obvious bite mark, finally injecting the remainder into the man’s arm.

When done, Adam closed in. ‘What do you do?’

‘I was born with a rare genetic condition,’ Jimmy lied. ‘My blood can ... cure many things.’ He faced Adam. ‘If you speak about this I’ll kill you.’

Making Adam stay with the patient, we stepped out as the other instructors arrived.

Jimmy told them, ‘It’s touch and go, see what happens when Mac gets back. In the hands of the Gods now.’ He

cleaned up without saying anything, put his shirt back on and returned to the tent without a word.

Adam jumped up. 'He is getting stronger.'

Jimmy did not respond. He just sat on a bed, his head lowered. I checked the leg over, and even I could see that the swelling was going down.

'Adam,' Jimmy softly called from a dark corner, the doc turning his head. 'I am sorry ... for threatening you.'

Adam swung his head around to me, not knowing what to say or do, clearly still terrified. We sat in silence, pestered by flies, the patient's vitals checked every five minutes; they were getting stronger. Mac re-appeared a full forty-five minutes later, serum thrust into Adam's face, quickly injected into the patient.

'I think he will make it,' Adam solemnly stated. 'We ... need to move him to the local clinic ... and inform his family.'

'Yes, of course,' Jimmy stated as he stood. He carried the man himself, out to a jeep, placing him in the rear. Adam jumped in and the jeep disappeared in a cloud of dust.

'You think he'll ... Adam ... he'll talk?' I delicately broached.

Jimmy sighed. 'No, he's a good man. Some day I'll inject *him*. Still, it was a risk.'

'C'mon, you look like you need a cold beer.'

Adam returned in the evening, Jimmy sat quiet.

'The man will be fine,' Adam enthused, avoiding eye contact with Jimmy.

After a minute, Jimmy eased up. 'Doc, walk with me, please.' They stepped out into the cooler night air.

Jimmy explained, 'If the world knew ... knew about my blood ... I would not have a life, I would be in a clinic being experimented on. I would be ... a freak. Everyone would want my blood, and I only have so much. Do you understand this?'

'Yes, I'm a doctor. If we knew of such a person he would not be left alone.'

‘So you can see my dilemma, Doc. If I try and help people, I end up helping no one because I would be locked up by the British or Americans, experimented upon.’

‘It is a dilemma, yes,’ Adam softly admitted.

‘And once again, Doc, I apologise for threatening you.’ He stopped and faced Adam. ‘But you must be aware that I can, very easily, make people disappear.’

Adam nodded his understanding through the moonlight.

‘There is something you need to know, Doc,’ Jimmy said as they progressed. ‘If I inject you ... your blood will be like mine.’

‘Like yours?’

Jimmy nodded. ‘The orphanage we have taken over is an AIDS orphanage. In a few years the people will notice something very odd.’

‘Odd?’

Jimmy stopped. ‘The children no longer have AIDS.’

‘They have your blood!’ he realised.

Jimmy confirmed with a quick nod.

‘How many ... how many can you cure?’

‘I am only one man, Doc. How many could you cure, if you were like me?’ They walked on.

‘This man, today –’ Adam began.

‘Will live a very long time ... and in very good health.’

‘Your friend –’

‘He’s not like me,’ Jimmy quickly cut in with.

Adam finally said, ‘If I take the blood, I will be like you?’

‘First, my friend, study the man who we helped today. Before taking a decision like that you must think about it, your life will not be the same.’

Adam took Jimmy firmly by the arm and halted him. ‘I was raised a Christian. What you have ... it is a miracle.’

‘You may believe ... in what you please, Koufi.’

Adam was shocked. ‘Koufi? My mother called me that ... when I was very young. How ... how can you know this? And how do you speak like you were born in my village?’

‘There are other things about me ... besides the blood, that you would not understand. You, Adam, sat on the riverbank

and fished with no bait on the hook – to be away from your father. But you did not like to hurt the fish.’

‘How can you know this?’ the doc asked. Finally, he said, ‘You were sent to us!’

‘Yes, but not for the reason you think. May I have your word that you will not betray me?’

‘Betray *you*? Never!’ Adam whispered.

‘Then we shall be friends a long time.’

I joined them, appearing through the dark. ‘All ... er ... OK?’

‘Yes,’ Adam confirmed, stood proudly tall. ‘All will be well.’ He headed back inside.

I watched his dark outline recede. ‘He OK?’

‘Yeah, I think so. I just had to bring my plans forwards by a year or so.’ He sighed. ‘No big deal.’ We headed back. ‘Tomorrow we’ll go buy a hotel.’

‘And change the name?’

‘Why?’

‘There’s no river!’

‘It’ll give the guests something to puzzle over.’

We plodded through the dark. I asked, ‘Would I be right in thinking that the Africans ... they take the *Christian name* thing a bit literally?’

‘Yep. Mary, Jesus, Virgin, Seth ... Mathew, Mark, Luke and John. Which is exactly what the British did in the middle ages. Hence ... Paul.’

‘Wasn’t he a betraying Roman twat?’

‘He ... wrote the bible, an unofficial biography that made it up the book charts.’

‘Pity he didn’t copyright it, would have made a few quid. Film rights and all!’

Where's the damn river?

'There's no fucking river!' I complained, a price of one hundred and fifty thousand pounds agreed, the staff staying on. 'How about Sea View?'

'Everyone knows it locally as River View, and some regulars return year after year. It would confuse them,' Jimmy insisted.

So 'River View' remained. Rudd had come with us, picking up the new lawyer in Nairobi on the way, a white guy of old English colonial stock and a bit of prat. Not to mention a bit of racist, referring to a waiter as 'boy'.

'Different countries, different customs,' Jimmy insisted.

We gave the manager a modest pay rise, a list of repairs and improvements and some money for the work. Unknown to me, Jimmy had faxed them an offer weeks ago, so the deal was done on the day we arrived. I headed off to break the news to the diving centre staff, Steffan and Lotti.

'Stand to attention when I walk in,' I joked.

'Back again?' Steffan asked. 'Rescue Diver course this time.'

'I wasn't joking about the ... *standing to attention*, guys. I just bought the hotel.'

'You did?' they puzzled.

'Haven't you heard?'

'We heard someone was interested...'

They looked worried, but my smile defused the situation.

'Don't worry, you still got a job – and we want to spend some money on this hut. So draw up a list of what you need to make this place better. Oh, and a boat.'

'A boat?' Steffan queried.

'You keep telling me there's a good reef out there. Too frigging far to swim to it.'

'Yah, yah. There is a boat for sale in the marina up the road, going cheap.'

'Tell the manager I said to buy it. There'll be more guests in future, so you won't be able to sleep all day like now!'

'More guests?' Lotti queried.

'Place has gotta make a few quid.'

Rudd stayed the night in the hotel, the next day the three of us sitting down with a list of suggestions on décor, amusements and facilities. Difference now was that we did not pay for beer and

lunch. We had met the staff in a group the night before, putting them all at ease. Jimmy had put on a badge that labelled him as 'Owner' and wandered about the dinner tables, conversing in numerous languages to the guests and getting to know some of the regulars. That evening everyone got free drinks at the bar from the new owners.

Since there was already a young orphan elephant, and a half-blind Lion with three legs somewhere in the grounds, we decided to create an animal centre, for the care of strays and orphans that we found. We dragged in a tame ostrich, the bird six feet tall, and offered kids rides on its back. The elephant and the lion benefited from a visit from the local vet, a few sores treated.

The front gate and surrounding fence were promptly fixed, the guard replaced by a man who could go a whole eight hours without a kip. A new sunshade came with the job. And I fixed that damn access road for next to nothing, wondering why the previous owner had not bothered. I walked as far as the first junction, paying keen local labourers to cut down trees, remove litter from the sides of the roads and to remove a few abandoned shacks. We got a new sign made up, placing it at the junction and pointing towards the hotel. We even paid for the houses near the junction to be painted and continued along towards the orphanage. The local police station got a make over, curbs painted white. Figuring that the road used to be tarmac, I got a water sprayer in and soaked it, the local kids splashing along behind the truck. Yep, under all the crap was a road, kids paid to scrub it hard with brushes. Soon an old centre line was revealed.

With Jimmy in Nairobi on some secretive mission with Rudd, I was left a free hand and so made use of the time. The allotments stretched back a long way, so I reclaimed some of the land that was visible to guests and cleared it. We drenched it, throwing grass seeds about. At the new edge of this area I erected a small wooden fence so that no one could see towards the allotments. With the extra space, I ordered four new huts built, one extra hut being built where one formerly presided before catching fire, and another three at the opposite end of the beach. The wooden beach bar was literally lifted-up and dragged back to the grass, giving the customers a beer garden to sit around in. New, and extra, chairs were laid out, many in the shade of trees, a few benches laid about.

We hung up netting around the bar, reducing the effect of the sun by around seventy percent.

I cut down two trees that looked out of place and employed an additional cleaner to go around the sand every morning with a large sieve we constructed, running sand through it to remove the hard spiky leaves that fell from the trees. All branches below seven foot were cut down, save people bending down or getting their hair combed as they walked about.

When the local council planner turned up, a day late, I told him what I wanted to do in the bay. He shrugged, not sure if we needed planning permission. I gave him a wad of dollars and asked him to check, the fella never returning. The shark net was taken down, not least because most of the sharks had been fished out of the water by the locals. Steffan had baulked at the idea of a shark attack. 'Sharks, you'd be lucky!' They had never seen one close to shore.

With the help of the manager, we dragged in a local construction company and I ordered up two rock groins, one further out than the other and calming any onshore waves, as well as creating a great area for diving students. We found three old and rusting pedal boats and cleaned them up good as new, placed onto the sand for the guests to use. Steffan and Lotti went into the bay in their diving gear and worked hard to remove all stones and broken coral in less than six feet of water. No one would step on a rock and cut a foot. The bar and restaurant now had fewer large rubber plants and more space, a few more chairs and tables, plus a new lick of paint and varnish where necessary. It was a good job the hotel was quiet, with all the building work going on. I gave the guests in residence free drinks and meals and apologised for the disruption.

I had worked hard for eight days, Jimmy returning with Rudd, Adam and even the three Old Dogs. Each had already been allocated a room and that night we ate together, Jimmy bringing down 'the staff' to give them a treat. In fairness, this hotel was the best bit of accommodation the Old Dogs had seen in ten years or so and they appreciated it. They also appreciated the free bar tab. Adam's family turned up the next day, followed quickly by Rudd's wife and three kids, creating something of a party atmosphere for a few days.

To one side, Jimmy commented, 'You see the effect this place has on people – people who could not normally visit somewhere

like this?' I did. Jimmy added, 'In future, anyone we recruit we send down here. It'll go a long way.'

'I've already told my parents *you* bought it, they're keen to visit. Would yours come down?'

'Parents no, brothers yes. Mum does not fly well and they'd hate the heat.'

'After, I'll show you the changes I've made,' I offered.

'No need, I'm sure they're fine.'

I was surprised by his lack of interest. It was almost as if he knew what I had done. 'Doc Adam ... OK?'

Jimmy nodded. 'Took him to meet Mary at the orphanage. He's a team player now, they both think God sent me.'

I felt guilty. 'Should *I* have gone to visit the old bat?'

'Nah. Not least because you called her that to her face.'

We sat at the beach bar, now a "grassy area" bar, Jimmy not even commenting on its relocation. He eased back with a cold beer and appeared tired, or perhaps relieved.

'You OK?'

He took in the view, issuing a sigh. 'A few more ticks in the boxes.' With a conscious pause for reflection he sipped his beer. 'Another milestone reached.'

'How many more on the list?' I asked as the elephant was led into the water, a kid on its back.

'Twenty years of hard work,' he let out in a reflective tone.

'And then?'

'Then there comes the real challenge. The hard bit.' I eased my head around and waited. Without making eye contact he said, 'Enjoy it while you can, especially these next few years – they'll be good years.'

'And ... then?'

Rudd's family waved and we waved back.

'Then you'll long for these years.'

Mercenaries

Being happy with our new hotel, we left the gang there and headed back to Nairobi for a 'secret' meeting. We reclaimed our rooms in

the same city centre hotel, heading up to the rooftop bar after a shower. Three men sat a table, standing out: tanned faces, big muscles, fixed stares. They were not the usual mix for this hotel. We strode straight over, ordering drinks from a familiar waiter, two chairs ready and waiting for us.

‘Gentlemen,’ Jimmy said as he sat. ‘Good trip up?’

‘Plane’s a plane,’ one grumbled.

Jimmy reached into his pocket and produced a wad of dollars, handing it over to the man sat closest to his left. ‘Air fare and subsistence costs.’

The man checked the wad below table height. Without looking up he said, ‘We flew up from Jo-burg, not round the fucking world twice.’

‘It’s something you need to learn about my good self,’ Jimmy began. ‘I’ll look after you so long as you do a good job. When you stop doing a good job ... I’ll bury you.’ The men focused on him. ‘That clear enough?’

They reluctantly nodded, not looking pleased at the threat.

‘Paul, this is – left to right – Robert Mark Staines, born in Cheltenham, known as Skids, Albert Hansworthy, born in Bristol and known as Handy, finally Peter John Trewick, born on a ferry across the English Channel in a storm, and known as Trev.’

The men had eased upright and taken off their sunglasses, looks exchanged.

Jimmy added, ‘I like to know who I’m dealing with.’

‘Where’d you get your intel?’ Skids asked.

‘Her Majesties Government.’

I said, ‘So, which one shagged the other one’s missus?’ After all, there was no way they could know.

Jimmy hid a smile as the men regarded each other with renewed interest.

Skids eventually asked, ‘You official, semi-official or private enterprise?’

‘If I was private ... would I get the quality intel?’ Jimmy posed. ‘Would I know ... about the people you just tapped in Angola?’

The men were not pleased, and I was worrying if they about to kill us as we sat there.

Jimmy said, ‘So, down to business. I’ve spoken to those *above*, and from now on you’re working exclusively for me, no discussion with anyone *anywhere* – even if they are Circus. This job is more

of a career posting, good money every month, no more lean periods. You won't get the same rate per job, but across the year it'll work out nicely. There'll also be perks, such as a stay at my hotel on the coast when you need to kick back. You can, if you wish, go back to grubbing around for work and taking the shit jobs, or you can get a yearly salary plus costs. You'll be paid down here, any currency you like, so fuck all tax – all beer money. And if you get an injury ... I'll sort all medical bills.'

He pointed at Trev. 'You're a diver, so when you want to you can work as dive instructor at my hotel, shag the birds and drink the beer. Skids, you're good at ordnance. I've taken over Mawlini mine base - Mac and the boys – who you already know. I'll ask you to help out there once in a while, you'd not recognise the place. And all of you can get involved with training locals for ... jobs across the border.'

Skids asked, 'Across the border ... north, west or south?'

'West in time, north sooner. But first, a job that comes with a big bonus.' The men eased closer. 'You'll get a file delivered to you tomorrow, if we're in agreement. The job will be a scattering of Islamic terrorists that the Yanks are interested in.'

Skids said, 'You know, I've been trying to place your accent. Any Canadian in there?'

Jimmy forced a false smile. 'Some; I spent many a happy year in Canada. And no, I don't work for the Yanks. So, the job: find the targets and assist them on their way to paradise. Simple, and no time limit. But a word of caution: they're getting geared up for a job – lobbing a few bombs at the Yanks – so they're switched on and nervous. One look at *your* faces and they'll either scatter or shoot. Oh, and as for their houses – they're packed full of explosives. Be careful what you hit.'

'And this job pays...?' Trev asked.

'This job pays an annual salary, and gets you in my good books if it's done quietly. Consider it ... *selection*.'

'You said a bonus?' Trev nudged.

'There are many people listed, many photos. If you manage to find and get the main man you get a million.'

'In pounds?' Skids queried, wide-eyed.

Jimmy gave him an exaggerated nod.

'What's with the kid?' Skids asked, a nod towards me.

‘He’s a stock market trader, he handles money for me,’ Jimmy told them.

‘You need any advice on pension plans?’ I asked them.

They laughed, dirty, guttural chortling.

‘I don’t think these gentlemen plan on living that long,’ Jimmy informed me, speaking out of the side of his mouth.

‘You’re a bit young yourself,’ Trev broached. ‘For this kinda work. Were you an officer? Regiment?’

‘I’m older than I look,’ Jimmy stated with menace. ‘And no, no ex anything.’

‘Can I ask a question?’ Handy finally peeped up with.

‘What’s that?’

‘What the fuck did your mum feed you on?’

Student ambassadors

It was just over a year after our first visit to the student’s ‘assisted travel’ company that we returned, again unannounced.

‘Still here?’ I asked the bored looking receptionist.

She did not recognise us. ‘Who are you here to see?’

‘Mr Timms,’ Jimmy informed her.

She waved a lazy fat hand and we stepped into the cramped office again. This time, however, young Mr Timms seemed mildly interested in our visit.

‘Hello again,’ Jimmy offered, handshake initiated.

‘It’s gone quite well,’ Timms informed him. ‘Popular with the students.’

‘I’ve been through the sheets you sent me,’ Jimmy stated. ‘All OK apart from the blind guy.’

‘Blind?’ I repeated.

‘He’s a student,’ Timms argued.

‘But not quite able to appreciate the sights,’ Jimmy nudged. ‘So no more blind people on these flights.’ He handed over a cheque, readily received.

‘Crikey!’ Timms let out. ‘We’ll be able to send a lot more next year.’

‘That’s your half-yearly budget, blind students aside,’ Jimmy informed him.

‘Half year?’ Timms repeated.

‘Yes, so ramp it up, especially Russia.’

‘Crickey,’ Timms repeated. At least he had a clean shirt on this time, I noted.

Jimmy firmly told him, ‘I want the criteria kept tight, no one who’s been to those countries before or is well-off. Understand?’

‘Yes, yes. No problem.’

I noticed the same pretty girl, but now avoided eye contact. Remembering Jimmy’s prior advice I put in, ‘If all goes well you can send some down to my hotel in Kenya.’

‘You have a hotel ... in Kenya?’ Timms repeated.

‘On the coast, but the odd lion wandering in. Got an ostrich and an elephant for the guests, and the scuba diving is good. They can visit the orphanage we took over. Anyway, Christmas is coming so you can all come out for a meal at my friend’s Chinese restaurant. You fix a date for a few weeks, call us.’ We shook and departed.

‘Smooth, young man. Smooth,’ Jimmy approved. ‘If the girl comes to the Chinese –’

‘We’ll get Po to call the restaurant and tell her its ours.’

‘Tell her it’s *yours* – you mean.’

‘If you like,’ I said.

‘Good man.’

‘Boss Man, why is it ... you know ... important to be the *lad about town*? You keep nudging me that way.’

Jimmy stopped dead in the street. ‘How would you react if you met a President or Prime Minister tomorrow?’

‘Probably shit myself,’ I replied.

‘Exactly. You need to develop the confidence to converse with anyone, but there’s no school or college for such things. Confidence with the ladies, and the travel we do, all help to get you to the point where you could meet a President – and treat the idiots with the lack of respect they deserve.’

‘My mum wouldn’t be happy about that.’

Mountain rescue

Without much explanation, as usual, we packed a bag and jumped into the Mercedes, heading for Scotland. Up the M40, across to the M6 and ever onwards, staying the night at an Express Inn, a meal in a local pub just shy of the Scottish border. Eight hours it had taken us to get this far.

The next day we crossed into Scotland and wound around hillsides in the rain near Dumfries, ending up in a small town. We booked into a quaint hotel that offered a salmon stream for guests, before heading for the annual town fair. Dressed smartly, we stood out from the crowd. The clouds had lifted and the sun broke through, the afternoon warming up nicely. Jimmy spotted what he was after and I trailed behind.

‘It’s a plastic rock face,’ I noted.

We stood and watched as men in coloured hats and harnesses climbed up a twenty-foot artificial wall, other men at the top belaying ropes in case the climbers fell a devastating ten feet or more onto the soft grass below.

‘Looks dangerous,’ I told Jimmy, getting back one of his looks.

We stood at the railings and observed, along with parents and kids. After five minutes a fit looking grey-haired man in a pack-a-mack shook a blue bucket below us, a subtle hint.

‘You gents want ta contribute ta the rescuers?’ he firmly nudged in a thick Scottish accent.

Jimmy produce a cheque and handed it over without a word; one hundred thousand pounds. The man with the stylish blue bucket stared at the cheque.

‘This ... er ... this on the level?’ he enquired.

‘It is if you buy us tea and scones,’ Jimmy suggested.

The man stared a while longer, called over another man and directed us around the railings and towards the nearby tourist trap. He showed his colleague the cheque as we progressed through the crowds, looks exchanged. We managed to find a table in a corner and ordered tea and scones, settling around a cramped and cosy table.

‘You’re James Silo-witch?’ the first man clarified, reading the cheque.

‘Jimmy Silo will do. And you’re Mackey Taylor.’

‘Aye. We met?’

‘No, but I take an interest in mountain rescue. You see, I was once on a school trip up here, got lost and needed rescuing. 1978.’

Mackey's eyes widened. 'Seventy-eight, when the kiddie was drowned?'

Jimmy nodded. 'I've never forgotten the help we got that day. Now ... now that I'm a very rich stock broker I thought I'd give something back.'

'Well, that's right good of ya,' Mackey and his colleague agreed. 'Right good.'

'I understand,' Jimmy began as we received our silver pots of tea, the teashop bustling with tourists, 'that you've been stirring up a hornet's nest of late.'

'About what?'

'About ... trying to get an all-Scotland co-ordinated Mountain Rescue effort going, not least when it comes to training standards.'

'Well ... aye,' Mackey admitted.

'Then, Mister Taylor, me and my money are behind you all the way. What I can do for you, is to offer money to the other rescue centres – on condition that they consider your proposals. I'll even pay for an all-UK conference on the subject, put everyone up in a hotel for a few days and let them talk it out. Even get the cave rescuers in there.'

Our hosts exchanged looks.

'We've been talking about it for some time. Way overdue, it is.'

'Ten different groups doing ten different things is never efficient,' Jimmy mentioned, music to the ears of our hosts.

'What'd ya have in mind?' Mackey keenly nudged.

'Well, you're the experts, not me. Why don't you put a conference plan together and send it to me.' He handed over a sheet of contact details. 'You can find a hotel and conference centre, check it out, price it up – somewhere central for everyone – and I'll find the cash. In the meantime, why don't you put together a mailing list of everyone concerned, including the RAF and Navy helicopter boys – anyone concerned.'

Mackey blew out. 'Be a big show.'

'I have deep pockets,' Jimmy insisted. 'And you've already got the money to get you started.'

We munched down our scones, cream squirting out the sides, tourists coming and going, the shop door annoyingly 'pinging' every minute.

The next day we got an invite to a mountain rescue centre, conveniently situated half way up a mountain, and the staff – nearly all part-timers – showed us all sorts of equipment. Many tales were told of brave rescues of stupid tourists. I got strapped into a stretcher and lugged around, taken up and over a rock without incident.

‘Your Land Rover’s seen better days,’ Jimmy told Mackey, kicking the vehicle’s tyres.

‘We’ll buy some new kit now, with the money.’

‘We see a lot of these in Kenya.’

‘Kenya?’

‘I have a hotel down there, some charities I support,’ Jimmy explained.

‘Doing alright then.’

‘Aye,’ Jimmy said with an accent. ‘And if any of your boys want to pop down for a safari it’ll just cost them the flight, rest I’ll chuck in.’

I could see Mackey’s grey matter firing up. ‘We could offer a trip up as a prize, for the fundraising.’

‘Offer up a couple of trips,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Six a year. But first, you should come out, check it all out so that you know what you’re into, take some pictures for people to look – help raise money. We’re back there in six weeks time if you can get away.’

‘Expensive ... the flights?’

Jimmy held up a hand. ‘Won’t cost you anything, it’ll be a working trip – we’ll sort it. Just bring a good camera.’

‘Oh ... er ... that’s good of you.’

‘No problem, Mackey.’

We said our goodbyes, Mackey threatening to have some plans together quickly. With mist descending we headed towards the M47 and the long trip back.

Letters can be dangerous

Jack Donohue read the letter in silence, the assembled warm bodies awaiting his comments. When finished, he took his time to consider what he might say, easing back in his seat. ‘Is anyone

here ... in any doubt as to why, in particular, our good friend sends us letters ... instead of identifying himself?' Not even the Prime Minister commented, Jack adding, 'This puts him in a very delicate position and, if you don't mind my saying so, you as well Prime Minister.'

The Prime Minister sighed. Softly, she said, 'If this letter had been the first Magestic letter, it would have probably been seen with less ... *importance* than it does now. I have started to gain an appreciation, Jack, for your reasons behind his thinking. Not to mention his desire for privacy.'

Jack glanced again at the letter.

PM, the end of this year will pose a dilemma for you that will begin a process which, once started, could not easily be stopped. By time the New Year is rung in we will have a different working relationship and strategic partnership.

On the 21st of December, 1988, PAN AM flight 103 - Malta to New York - will be blown from the skies over Scotland, a great loss of life on board as well as on the ground. It will be one of the worst terrorist atrocities to reach our shores.

A Libyan agent will carry the bomb onboard at Malta airport, his agency assisting the Iranians in the desire for revenge over the shooting down of their passenger plane over the Gulf in 1984. That agent, and those that have instigated the action, will be monitored by the CIA and a warning given about flights leading up to Christmas. The bomber will not, of course, continue onwards to America with the bomb - an altitude triggered device. Despite the warnings given within American diplomatic circles the aircraft will be destroyed.

Unfortunately, the CIA handlers most directly responsible for the monitoring of the event will allow the planned attack to go ahead, their aim being to turn public opinion against Libya and therefore help to sanction any planned future attacks against that nation. That puts us both in a difficult situation.

Due to the severity of the situation you will forgive me for taking the next step. I have placed a sealed envelope with a media solicitor, and others, detailing the attack. In the unlikely event that the attack goes ahead the media will be informed, the proof supplied in great detail. That may, unfortunately, give you a less-than-peaceful Christmas break.

Please note well. If you discuss this with the Americans then the date of the attack would be altered - but it will go ahead. Your only hope to save a great many lives will be to intercept the bomb in London on the 21st and to disarm it. I have every confidence. This letter has not been

numbered as per normal so that Jack can keep his sequence in the eyes of his counterpart.

P.S. Might I be so bold as to suggest that, after New Year, passenger baggage not be allowed onto flights without the attendant traveller.

‘Opinions, gentlemen?’ the P.M. asked.

Deputy Director Sykes leant forwards, resting his arms on the desk. ‘This is the first time that he has made a veiled threat. And let’s not gloss it over, that’s what it is – a threat. Do this... or else!’

‘We don’t know what’s in the sealed envelope,’ the SAS representative pointed out. ‘It could be more about the Americans than us.’

‘We won’t know till I meet with Pointer,’ Jack suggested. ‘And he wants to see me tomorrow – a Saturday!’

‘They’ve also had their letter,’ the P.M. suggested.

‘How do I play it?’ Jack asked.

‘No mention of this letter at all,’ the P.M. insisted.

The MI5 representative asked, ‘Are we really suggesting that the CIA would go ahead with such an atrocity?’

‘Not the CIA,’ Jack countered. ‘It says *those responsible*, so they’re field officers, European or Mid East sections.’

‘Quite,’ the P.M. put in. ‘There is no suggestion that anyone higher would be involved.’

‘Be hell to pay if there was,’ Sykes suggested.

‘Hence the unnumbered page,’ the P.M. mentioned. She took a breath. ‘For the moment we keep this under very tight wraps, and we work on the assumption that we stop the flight and search it thoroughly.’

The Cabinet Office Secretary knocked and entered. ‘Sorry, Prime Minister, but this seems to have been overlooked today.’ He handed over a Magestic letter. ‘Slipped between two files.’ He withdrew sharply.

The Prime Minister opened the letter. After reading it she made eye contact with Jack. ‘Seems that your counterpart is going to show you a fake letter sometime soon.’

‘A fake?’ Jack repeated, many shifting uneasily in their seats.

‘Yes, I’m afraid. It says that Pointer will present you a fake letter.’

Jack shook his head. 'Magesic did say that the relationship would alter. Seems that he anticipated some problems with the CIA.'

'Call me the minute you've finished your meeting,' the Prime Minister told Jack as she stood. 'But be very discreet.'

Jack greeted Pointer in the hotel bar that they now used, fixed monthly meetings for six months so far.

'Missing fast jets at all?' Jack asked as they shook.

'Oh, yeah. Give me some danger to this pen pushing – no offence.'

'None taken. Tea?' They sat, drinks ordered. 'So, meeting on a Saturday?' Jack teased. 'Something big up?'

'No, no, I just got a trip around Europe and the Middle East to do, so it was down to stopovers.'

'Do you fly well?' Jack lightly enquired, making Pointer laugh.

'No! When I'm in the back I get jet lag. Nothing to do, you see.'

'Perhaps you could pin the picture of a cockpit to the seat in front.'

'They'd throw me off as a kook! Anyway, how are you?'

'Fine, fine. But this month's letter is late.'

Pointer studied Jack briefly. 'Late?'

'Well, they are intermittent; sometimes two a month or more, sometimes none. Like yourself, I get withdrawal symptoms waiting.'

'We got one a few days back,' Pointer explained. 'I don't have a copy for you yet, this is the original.' He opened his case and handed over a letter in a plastic envelope, complete with a SECRET stamp and several sets of initials.

Mr Ambassador, I wish to bring to the attention of your compatriots that arms deals in progress between several bidders, all hoping to supply weapons packages to the Saudi Government, will find themselves under the unfortunate glare of unwelcome media attention in the months ahead.

Several of your negotiators will be secretly taped discussing the less-than-Western practices commonly required to appease the various Saudi Princes prior to any arms deal closing. The taped conversations, suitably transcribed, will appear in both printed media and on TV – a cause of great embarrassment for all involved.

One of the persons most directly responsible will be a senior aid to a Prince, his motives more religious than personal economics.

Please tread carefully.

‘Well, well. Guess our version of that got lost in the post,’ Jack quietly stated. ‘Didn’t happen to pick it up by mistake, did you?’

‘How could you think such a thing, Jack,’ Pointer said with a look of mock horror. ‘Besides, you guys probably got your Post Office sewn up tight.’

‘Prime Minister? Jack Donohue.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘They want us to accuse high ranking assistants of Saudi Princes of espionage against us during weapons trade negotiations —’

‘With the obvious consequences - we’d lose the deals, they’d get them. I can’t believe they’d even try that. Since when has Magestic been interested in commercial or domestic matters?’

‘Exactly.’

‘Well done. Have a good weekend, what’s left of it.’

A nice watering hole

Two months after purchasing River View we flew back into Nairobi, this time to go buy a safari lodge. We spent a day at the usual hotel, meeting Rudd in the rooftop bar and catching up on developments, our man in Nairobi now involved with River View as well – keeping an eye on the manager. We read through lists of bills, reports, looked at diagrams for proposed new buildings at the airfield and scanned recent photographs. Jimmy was happy with the progress, so Rudd would travel with us to Masai Mara country in the morning, West Kenya and close to the Tanzanian border.

We set off early, Rudd again driving us in the UN jeep. It made me smile, the softly spoken and mild mannered Dutchman quite the thief. On the way we spoke about many things, including his family and their first stay at our hotel. Now, when Rudd popped down to the hotel for a visit, he took them along when he could.

Half way to Masai country we stopped for lunch at a roadside diner of sorts, risking a cheese burger – of sorts, but were stopped by the police as we left, the patrol officers driving a dated Ford Granada. Rudd flashed his old UN identity, shrugged his shoulders and waved his hands a lot, the police letting us continue on. Overall we had no problems with the police, the odd traffic officer trying to justify his salary. The last twenty miles of the journey were made negotiating rough tracks, a few animals glimpsed through the dry brush.

‘Hard place to find,’ I grumbled as we bounced along.

‘Tourists don’t drive themselves here,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘They’re picked up at the airport in convoy.’

‘How much land has this place got?’ I asked.

‘Been on it for the last half an hour,’ Jimmy informed us.

‘Shit, how many square miles is that?’

‘About a thousand,’ Jimmy answered. ‘Thirty miles by thirty miles, dozen Masai villages, a small town on the edge, couple of working farms and the game reserve in the middle. Nice big river runs right through it, one small hill.’

‘Cool. What animals?’

‘Best game reserve in Kenya,’ Jimmy proudly announced. ‘At least it will be. It backs onto the Serengeti. And it’s going cheap, the owners just lost a court battle about back taxes.’

‘What was the problem?’ I asked.

‘They didn’t pay their taxes for ten years.’

‘Why not?’ I puzzled.

‘Because they’re idiots,’ Jimmy explained.

Rudd put in, ‘Many people here, westerns, don’t pay tax and just leave. When I paid yours on account it took an hour to explain it.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘I was about five years early,’ Rudd said with a smile.

‘We’ll keep the government sweet,’ Jimmy insisted.

Finally, we opened onto grassland and could see the lodge in the distance, perched on the crest of a rise. It’s thatched roof sagged down almost to the grass, giving the appearance of an enormous hat supported by a neck of dark brown wooden walls, and finished with whitewashed boulders strung around it like a pearl necklace. It was not a place to approach at night when very drunk. Several small outbuildings, a few yards away from the main

building, were not dissimilar to the huts at River View. We parked up next to a green Land Rover that had seen better days, the white UN truck a bit confusing for the staff who greeted us, Rudd explaining that he bought it second hand and had not painted it yet. We booked in, three quite expensive rooms for what they were, which was basic.

The owners were old English colonial stock, a middle-aged couple that I took a disliking to straight away; the husband carrying a small stick to beat his dog. He snarled at the local staff, not being too sweet with the paying guests either. The husband stood with fists on hips, khaki green shorts and short-sleeved shirt; I had to give it to him, he looked the part. Even the socks in his boots were khaki green.

With my bags in my hut I wandered into the cool interior of the main building, which seemed to have been built up around a tree, the trunk still erect and appearing hundreds of years old. There was no TV or radio, just a shelf of dated books being the central focal point, plenty of chairs to sit about it. I had images of a group of guests all sat around reading in silence; communal, yet solitarily passing of the long nights. Walking through to the far side I stepped out onto the grass and peered down the gentle slope, an obvious viewpoint.

A hundred yards below me ran a meandering river, well-used and muddy banks now attended by hundreds of animals milling about, all sorts. I could see elephants off to the left, zebras, wilder beast, hippos in the water and even lions in the distance. I was impressed with the array, then noted what appeared to be kitchen leftovers scattered around, now realising why so many animals were attending this party.

I noticed a small bar over my right shoulder and wandered in, finding it empty but for a lone local stood ready to serve. The bar top looked as if it had been hacked off a hundred year old tree, leaving me wondering if it was related to the one keeping the roof up. In fact, I could not see a piece of metal or plastic in the whole place, it was all natural wood. I ordered a beer and sat admiring the view in the sticky heat, the others finding me after five minutes. Rudd was not really one for animals, having already spent most of his adult life in Africa; he liked big cities and modern conveniences, and hated small bugs.

‘Lots of wildlife,’ I commented, flicking a flying insect of my knee.

‘That river runs tens miles either way,’ Jimmy informed me. He pointed off to the right. ‘See that rise in the distance? Great place for a bigger lodge.’

‘How many people can this hold?’ I asked.

‘Ten at most,’ Jimmy explained.

‘Which is probably why they’re skint,’ I whispered.

‘Economies of scale,’ Jimmy stated. ‘I would split the trip for the tourists; week here, week on the coast, day in Nairobi.’

‘That would be better,’ Rudd agreed with a nod.

The husband stepped out to us, managing a begrudging, ‘Rooms OK?’

‘Why don’t you join us for five minutes, Grant,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘I have some questions. It is Grant, isn’t it?’

The man sat, beating his loyal dog away with the pencil thin stick. Now I noticed his grey chest chair trying to escape the top of his shirt, and wished I hadn’t.

Jimmy began, ‘I hear that this place may be up for sale.’

Grant took a moment, eyeing Jimmy suspiciously. ‘It may be.’

‘What’s it worth, if you don’t mind me asking?’

I could see Grant’s brain getting into gear. His features turned dishonest.

‘One million, eight hundred thousand - with all the land, three working farms.’ He rested his hands on his stick.

‘Problem is, Grant, that the government has a claim against the property – unpaid tax of three hundred thousand.’ Jimmy made eye contact with me. ‘Which stays with the property and the new owner if they sell. So that makes it one and a half million.’

‘You’re well informed,’ our host grumbled. ‘What ... *business* are you in?’

‘Mercenaries,’ Jimmy nonchalantly informed our host. ‘I kill people for a living, Grant. Dirty business, but it pays very well.’

Rudd did not react. I watched our hosts features move rapidly towards concern. ‘Oh,’ was all he could manage.

‘So, Grant, do you want to sell?’ Jimmy nudged.

‘At what price?’ Grant wanted clarifying.

‘I’d guess one point three million. And ... I’ll pay the staff the wages they’ve not received - that’s another thirty thousand. Then there’re the unpaid bills of vets, wardens and the road upkeep.

That's another twenty five thousand. So really, Grant, you'd be doing well with one point three – very well.'

'You're no tourist,' Grant snarled.

'We are ... for a few days,' Jimmy softly insisted. 'We're here... at this lonely and dangerous place, miles from anywhere.'

Grant viewed the horizon with renewed interest, not knowing who might be out there, and I was enjoying his discomfort. As he went to beat the dog again I snatched his stick off him, broken it and threw it away. Our host sat frozen in controlled anger.

Jimmy produced an envelope. 'In here is a banker's draft and the details of my lawyer in Nairobi. If you present this tomorrow, and sign at the lawyers first, you can have your money transferred anywhere; Kenyan Government will be chasing me for the taxes. All you have to do to walk away from this place ... is take it and drive.'

Grant stared at the envelope for a full minute, then snatched and opened it. He recognised the Nairobi firm of lawyers. 'This draft will need a second signature.'

'Yes, my lawyer. He is *expecting you* around 2pm tomorrow.'

'And if I don't want to sell?' Grant snarled, his already ruddy complexion reddening even more.

'I'll wait for the government to throw you in jail, then buy this place cheap from them,' Jimmy said very matter of fact. 'Your call, money or prison.'

I focused on our host. 'Don't keep us waiting too long, old chap. Those lions down there are looking hungry.'

Our host got up, got into his jeep and drove off, his dear lady wife enquiring about his whereabouts hours later. In a story that I would tell over a few beers, Grant left everything behind, drove to Nairobi and signed over the place, got on a plane and headed to Cape Town, South Africa, with his money, his wife never seeing him again. We thought about taking pity on the wife, but she was even worse than him, barking at us at length when we informed her we had just bought the place. She packed up the next day and drove away, leaving much behind, not least three perplexed and unattended guests; a group of regulars. They were placated with a week's stay at the beach hotel.

After Grant's departure, Jimmy said to Rudd, 'I don't normally do business like that, but I don't like people like him – old colonialists.'

‘Me neither,’ Rudd agreed. ‘Fuck him. But *are* you two into mercenaries?’

‘No, not unless you count the old Dogs. Would it matter?’

‘Not really, just so that I know,’ Rudd answered with a shrug.

We wandered about the near empty lodge and grounds, basically a large patch of dry brown grass on a rise with the lodge in the centre, meeting and reassuring the staff whilst handing out bundles of dollars as back pay. We were now land gentry folk.

Rudd was given the task of finding a manager and overseeing the place, his time now split three ways. He didn’t mind, he was loving it, not least the tips from us for good work. In Rudd’s UN jeep we met the neighbours, letting all of them off their back rent, and I got my first glimpse of the tall Masai tribesmen in their distinctive red robes.

The second day, with the lodge free of guests, we drove to the hill in the distance, if you could call it a hill, and Jimmy made a sketch for Rudd, letting the Dutchman have a say in the layout of a new lodge and its proposed circle of huts. The view from the highest point improved upon that of the standing lodge and Jimmy suggested a two-storey affair with a roof-bar and viewpoint. It was a plan, Rudd still having plenty of money in our account to get the building work started.

Next day the three mercenaries I had met previously turned up, Jimmy only informing me that morning. I took a moment to consider if the three diplomatic types would have helped Grant make up his mind. We settled around the bar, Rudd doing an inventory of everything without prompting, to stop the staff from pinching it.

‘What news?’ Jimmy formerly asked.

‘Two down, one winged,’ Skids informed Jimmy.

‘The guy you winged is the most valuable,’ Jimmy explained.

‘You’re quick on the intel,’ Trev noted.

Jimmy lifted his eyebrows and nodded. ‘He’s fled to Sudan.’

‘Tricky place to follow,’ Trev noted.

‘Don’t. Not there,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘Work through the list. You get your money OK?’

They collectively nodded.

‘Right, your job for the next eight weeks – is right here.’ The men craned their heads around and took in the view. ‘The guests

have gone, I've bought the place, some staff still about. Raid the bar, kick back - *don't* damage anything. Got rifles?'

'In the jeep,' Skids answered.

'So now you're game wardens, of sorts,' Jimmy explained. 'Join up with the staff here, go right around the perimeter – two day drive – I want a detailed map of ways in and out. There're poachers about, so go tooled up. Put yourself in the poachers place, look to see where the game is – especially the elephant tracks – and mark them on the map. I want a plan of action for defeating the poachers; staff, kit, patrol routes.

'Go outside my area and talk with local police, local farms, get a feel for the poaching scene, get some intel.' He wagged a finger. 'But never forget – you work for me, posing as wardens here – so nice as fuck to everyone.

'Go see the Masai chief and give my respects, ask to employ a tracker or two, giving them territories. My man Rudd will sort wages for them, they'll work for fuck all. By time you leave here I want the poachers on the back foot, but a word of warning: no shots fired unless in self-defence, and then only if there's not another soul within ten miles. If you're out alone, and you're sure you've got poachers that no one will miss, bury them deep – no evidence! If the poacher is a Masai then take him back without damaging him and whinge to their headman. The locals around here also poach, but I'm not fussed on the odd cow going missing. Lions and elephants are a different matter; that we jump on hard. Any questions?'

'This be a regular gig?' Trev asked, seemingly pleased with the new assignment.

'Every time you need a break after a job you can chill out here or at the beach hotel. But the first time you get drunk and smack a guest you never get invited back. Simple enough for you?' They nodded. 'This is the same pay, but a bonus because it's fun. So when you're waiting intel' on a target it's somewhere to crash. If some good intel' does surface, go after the bad guys, then back here.'

'What rifles you got?' I asked.

'M16s,' Skids informed me. 'You shoot?'

'No, I drive a computer.'

'Give him some lessons,' Jimmy ordered. 'Come out on safari with us tomorrow, fun day.'

‘*You* need a shooting lesson?’ Trev asked Jimmy directly.
‘No, I could hit a playing card at six hundred yards.’
‘That’s what I figured,’ Trev began. ‘And yet you’re not *ex* anything?’
‘Use your brain for work, not on me. I pay the bills.’
Trev gave a mock salute.

Malaria

On the last day in Kenya I felt ill, shivers and a night sweat, feeling rough in the morning. We made plans to see the quack back in the UK rather than here.

I drank lots of fluids and slept when I could on the flight, British Airways as usual, Nairobi to Gatwick. Arriving back in the UK I felt very rough, Jimmy advising me to tough it through customs or face a quarantine. With determination I struggled through, getting into the car and almost fainting. Jimmy drove straight to central London and to a private clinic, virtually carrying me up the steps. The next day I woke to blue curtains and pastel colours, a brief inspection by a doctor in a white lab-coat before a large needle robbed me of further thought on the matter. On the third day I came around, finding my mum sat there looking worried.

‘You had us all worried,’ she informed me. ‘How are you feeling, dear?’

‘Still alive, I guess.’ I eased up and took in the room, remembering flashes of pastel blue. ‘How long ... how long have I been here?’ I croaked out.

‘Three days and nights,’ she answered. ‘Jimmy called us on the morning after you got back, second day you were terrible - delusional. We were worried sick.’

‘What ... what have the doctors said?’

‘Malaria, a bad bout.’

‘Oh. Has it gone?’

‘They say you’ll be weak for ten days, but should make a full recovery. You can come and stay with us for a while.’

‘Well ... er ... got work to do –’

‘Jimmy said he’d take care of everything, so you’ve got the time off,’ my mum insisted. And she was a force to be reckoned with when she wanted to be.

After two days of pastel blue I was ready to go, Jimmy popping in and dropping off supplies, food and drink, plus fresh clothes. Mum and Dad picked me up, driving me straight home the short distance to Richmond.

‘From Kenya to my old room,’ I muttered. ‘Fucking marvellous.’

I got three square meals a day, whether I wanted them or not, watched daytime television with Mum – many of her friends dropping in for coffee, and after a week I was ready for a large needle to put me under, anything was better than this. Jimmy popped around and I told him I had to get out of here. I convinced my parents I was feeling much better and we drove away, relieved at not being a sick ten-year-old off school any more.

‘Next time, I want a private nurse in the flat,’ I insisted, Jimmy laughing at my ordeal.

‘What’s wrong with your mum’s cooking and company?’ he joked. ‘You should be grateful.’

‘I love her to bits, but in small doses. Right now I need a curry, the lap dance bar and a nightclub.’

‘It’s Monday, so it’ll be quiet. Call that bird you like, Sarah. She rang the flat a couple of times.’

‘What did you tell her?’

‘That you had a nasty infectious disease.’

‘What!’

He laughed. ‘No, I told her you were in Kenya sorting some business. She thinks you’re back today. Tell her you’re jetlagged and you’ll get some sympathy. Anyway, you got the flat for a few days – I’ve got to do a family thing in Wales.’

Entering the apartment I was grateful to be back, checking quickly some stock prices and scanning faxes from Rudd; I had missed the job. I made a tea and sat with my usual mug in hand, reclaiming the peace.

Jimmy sat opposite and heaved a sigh. ‘Got some medical stuff to discuss.’

‘I’m better, no?’

‘Better for the moment, but Malaria reoccurs. In some people it’s not a problem, never coming back, in others they fall as sick as you were every three months or so.’

‘Every three months?’

He reluctantly nodded. ‘It’s too soon to tell, but it could come back every year. And, more importantly, if you go back down to Kenya you might get bitten again and make it worse.’

I stared across at him. This was not what I wanted. The last few years had been good, very good – more than anyone my age could have hoped for or achieved. This was a reality check.

‘I did warn you,’ Jimmy reminded me. ‘Africa is dangerous.’

We had not spoken about him injecting me with his blood since the first trip to the AIDS orphanage, and he had not pushed the idea. And it was not top of my priority list, the idea of it making my stomach turn. The very idea of someone injecting me with their blood – it made me shudder. What came next was a blow.

‘I can’t take the risk of taking you back down there, I’ll go alone.’

I felt like I had done at ten years old, when I was sick sat at home with mum and the rest of the class went off on a school trip to Longleat Safari Park. I did not like it then, and I most certainly did not like it now, that feeling of being left behind.

He added, ‘The rest of the trips are OK. Hong Kong, States, Europe. Just Africa is dodgy.’

With little more said, Jimmy headed off to Wales on the train, leaving me the apartment and the car, Sarah coming over after work. Somehow, I just couldn’t find joy in anything. Sarah turned up looking cute as usual, and I found myself making all sorts of excuses about jet lag or a bug. We watched TV, had a take-away delivered and she headed off late, with me apologising for being grumpy and tired.

What was wrong with me? I just made excuses not to have sex with a cute girl. Twenty-six years old, I was feeling like an old man. No, that wasn’t it, it was the prospect of losing all this, even though that was not what Jimmy was planning. I had no reason to believe that the team would break up, but still I had a bad feeling in my gut.

The next day I got back into my routine, but it felt different. It felt ... as if I did not belong any more. I checked the stock markets, closed out a trade, read faxes from Rudd and replied, read

Flight magazine and opened mail about flying courses. It was all normal - yet not. It was as before, yet somehow different. The apartment wall and me ending up playing stare down, the wall winning after several hours.

The next day was not much better, me and the wall renewing our silent conversation. Sarah called lunchtime and I made excuses, considering just how long it would be till she got the message. The message was: I don't know what's wrong with me, I just feel odd. That evening I gave it a great deal of thought, had a few beers and watched the TV. With the news just a dull blur in the background I thought about Kenya, and found myself thinking about the orphanage.

'I let him down,' I said to myself. Shaking my head I said, 'No, that's not true, it's just a bug, everyone gets sick. Well, he don't.'

Images of the orphanage flashed by, followed by images of World War Three. I suddenly felt like a coward. Buy why? What had I done? Another ten minutes passed by as I stared out of focus. 'No, I didn't let him down - I let *them* down.'

Jimmy had told me of the war that could break out next year, 1990. It was a turning point, and I was thinking of myself too much. My head nodded itself. 'I've been enjoying it all too much.'

It was amazing how I suddenly felt better, like a bolt out of the blue, like a revelation. I was a soldier on a mission, an important mission - and this was not about me, not any more. Standing, I went to the balcony for fresh air. Looking down on the traffic I muttered, 'I wonder if fucking Batman felt like this?' I was feeling better.

The next day Jimmy returned and I told him to sit.

'What's up? You better?' he enquired.

'I'm not happy to be left out of Kenya, or anything else.'

'Well, that's ... understandable.'

'You need me on this, it's too much work for one person, getting too much for the two of us. And next year is 1990, the start point.'

'You have been thinking.'

'I know I've got to be injected - but it freaks me out just thinking about it.'

He nodded sympathetically. 'I know.'

'But I'm not going to give up Kenya, so it's ... it's worth it for that. What ... what'll happen if I'm injected?'

‘Not much. You’ll sleep less, be fitter ... and you’ll be immune to all diseases known to man, including Malaria.’

‘It won’t come back?’ I pressed.

‘No, never,’ he replied.

‘If I have sex ... with a girl...?’

‘Yes...?’

‘Will she, you know?’

‘Get pregnant or disappointed?’ he teased.

‘Will she be ... affected?’

‘No,’ he carefully mouthed.

‘She won’t be like you?’

He fought hard not to smile, too much. ‘No.’

‘Can I still have kids?’

He rolled his eyes. ‘Yes.’

I eased back. ‘OK, I want to be injected.’

Jimmy turned serious. ‘Are you sure? There are *some* risks.’

‘Risks? Like what?’

‘You’ve just been in hospital and given blood. The next time you give blood they’ll notice a lot of odd stuff in it, call in the Government and they’ll lock you up in a lab and experiment on you.’

‘Not if I don’t get sick,’ I insisted.

‘If you’re in a car wreck you’ll be in hospital, blood taken,’ he pointed out.

‘It’s the same risk for you!’

‘True. Life is full of risks.’

‘Like getting fucking Malaria.’ I took a breath. Quietly, I stated, ‘I don’t want to be left out of anything, left on the sidelines.’

Jimmy slowly nodded. ‘We’ll sort it soon.’

‘No, now,’ I insisted. ‘I want to get it over with.’

‘You sure?’

My chest heaved itself. ‘Yeah, got my mind on World War Three at last.’

‘Took long enough,’ he carefully mouthed. He eased up, retrieving a medical pouch from his room.

Five minutes later and I was nursing a sore arm. ‘How long to take effect?’

‘You’ll run a temperature for twenty-four hours, have an aspirin and plenty of water – no more alcohol. Start eating protein: egg, fish, meat. On the third day you’ll start to need less sleep, then you

can exercise. Try and do nothing for the next day; sleep, sit and eat.'

Feeling much better I decided not to take his advice and called Sarah, taking her out and staying over at her place.

The next morning, back in the flat at 8am, I had a complaint. 'When I pee it looks odd and smells terrible.'

'Right know the stem cells are hunting around for old cells to attack and replace, the waste coming out. That will last a week, so drink plenty of water and stop whinging. Your metabolism will increase as well.'

On the third morning, a Sunday, I woke early and could not get back off to sleep. '5am?' I cursed. I found Jimmy sat reading.

'Can't sleep?' he asked without looking up.

'No, pigging wide awake.'

'From now on you'll only need four hours a night max, get used to it.'

'Should I exercise yet?'

'Sure, try and go for a run.'

I got my tracksuit on, running shoes, and headed out. 5am on a Sunday morning. Christ, we sometimes got back from the clubs at this time! Two hours later I limped back in. 'I hurt like hell!' I complained as I slumped down.

'Your muscles are full of energy and raring to go, your bones, joints and tendons are not there with them yet. Take it easy, gentle exercise.'

Removing my socks revealed huge blisters. 'Christ! Do *you* get blisters?'

'Sometimes. You're still mortal, so don't push it. Pop the blisters and they'll be gone in a day.' He went back to his book.

The blisters healed overnight, so I headed to the gym, running on the treadmills with a pen and paper tucked in. Day by day I improved, being their first customer each morning at 7am; 5k, 7k, 10k, 14k, 16k, 20k. I stopped at 20k and tried to improve on my time, the cute girl assistant often chatting to me and impressed by my performance. Well, I was the only one there bar the cleaner.

I was impressed by her fondness for sweaty men in running shorts and we had sex in many different hideaways, even the steam room and sauna, no one else around till at least 8.30am. Three or four times I week I had sex in the gym, also seeing Sarah in the

evenings a couple times a week. I was full of energy with a raging libido. But despite the running I put on a stone in three weeks.

Big Paul

With my training at the gym coming along, and my boxing improving rapidly, Jimmy said that it was time to recruit a bodyguard, something of a contradiction. I had to stop and wonder what the hell he needed a bodyguard for, and could we find someone big enough?

We advertised for 'driver/bodyguard' and offered a reasonable salary, indicating overseas travel. Fifty-two letters came via a PO Box number. Jimmy sifted through them till he found the name he wanted: Paul Baines. I called the man and invited him around for an informal interview. Opening the door to the guy I could see why he was in the security business. He was just about an inch shorter than Jimmy and solid with it. A hard face, he looked the part, appearing to me to be mid thirties. Stepping in he ran a professional eye around the apartment.

'Have a seat,' I offered. 'Tea?'

Jimmy appeared from the kitchen. 'Tea, no milk, half a sugar.' He placed down the mug for our guest.

'Good ... guess,' Baines noted with a pleated brow, sitting opposite Jimmy. I plonked down in one of the chairs.

'Still on the books at KMS?' Jimmy enquired.

'That wasn't in my CV,' Baines pointed out, carefully studying us as he sipped his tea. He spoke with a deep, resonating voice and a preciseness that suggested confidence.

'No,' Jimmy answered. 'But I know a great deal about you, Paul.'

'Such as?' Baines prompted.

'Such as ... Masterson asked you to apply for this job to spy on me.'

I was lost, confused, and now worried.

'So why drag me over here?' Baines finally asked, lowering his tea, but seemingly none too worried about being rumbled.

'To give you a job, of course,' Jimmy explained.

I was now more confused than our job applicant.

'Give me a job ... knowing that MI6 want me to keep an eye on you?' Baines questioned.

'Why not? You need the work, and I need a driver and bodyguard -'

'You don't look like you need a bodyguard, Guv.'

‘- and you can tell the nice people at MI6 that I am of no interest to them. That’ll help you to get back at Masterson.’

Baines’ eyes narrowed as he peered toward Jimmy. ‘First, you know I’m coming. Second, you know the history between me and Masterson. You must be connected to someone in his office.’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘Why do you think they’re interested in me, Paul?’

‘You got six ex-troopers on the payroll in Kenya, some of them with a bad record.’

‘Who does he mean?’ I asked. ‘The guys chasing poachers?’

‘Poachers?’ Baines queried.

‘Yes,’ Jimmy began. ‘We own a game reserve which is plagued by poachers, after the elephants. We hired some troopers to hunt them down, no more complicated than that.’

‘And the others?’ Baines firmly nudged.

‘The Old Dogs? They teach mine clearance to Africans, a charity I donate to. Nothing more.’

‘Guess Masterson got his intel’ wrong.’

‘No, he hit the jackpot with me, he just doesn’t realise it.’

Baines waited for an explanation.

‘The stuff he told you about Africa was true, but just a cover. No, he’s after people who have very similar profiles to myself; good on the stock markets, connections to Wales or the M4 corridor, and charitable donors.’

I was lost, not registering the government’s interest in the Magestic letters.

‘What the fuck for?’ Baines curtly asked.

‘They have a profile of someone they’re looking for. Only not.’

‘Huh?’ I put in.

Jimmy had not turned away from Baines. ‘How would you like to wreck Masterson’s career with a single phone call? So much so that he couldn’t strike back at you.’

‘Love to – *if* it can be done.’

Jimmy produced a piece of paper and handed it over. ‘Call that number, it’s a Jack Donohue at the MOD. Tell him what it says on the note.’ He reached under a file on the coffee table and handed Baines a thick wad of fifties. ‘That’ll cover the cost of the call.’ Our guest’s eyes widened. ‘Go outside and use a payphone well away from here, then come back when the dust settles. Oh, and I’d

appreciate you not saying anything about me. You were never here.'

Baines re-read the note. 'This'll bury Masterson? Finish him?'

'Most definitely. He's got you doing a job that the Prime Minister forbade him to do, and one that the CIA has nudged him towards. They'll bury him. Oh, and I was serious about the job. Don't forget to come back.'

Baines stood, checked the wad again before pocketing it, then let himself out. I thought I could see him shaking his head as he left.

With our guest departed I said, 'What the fuck was all that about?'

'Some people in MI6 and MI5 want to find whoever is sending the Magestic letters.'

'Ah...'

Jimmy shrugged and made a face. 'Even if they do find me the handwriting is different, the style of writing, there're no prints on them and no connection. But ... it would be a distraction.'

At five o'clock our job applicant returned unexpectedly.

'Tea, black, half a sugar,' I dryly commented as I held the door.

'Got anything stronger?' Baines firmly requested.

Jimmy lowered his book, marking the page. 'How did it go?'

'I almost didn't do it, then I figured that ... if there was chance to fuck over Masterson... well, I've been on the bloody phone for hours. They arrested Masterson, warned me off ever saying anything and even offered me a few quid to clam up. I pledged my loyalty and promised to be a good boy, Scouts honour.' He gave a mocking, two finger Scout salute.

'Well,' Jimmy sighed. 'That's one chapter closed. Fancy a beer and a curry later?'

'Sounds good. What about this job, now that I'm between employers. Again.'

'It pays well, you get an apartment, lots of foreign travel... and you help prevent World War Three.'

I almost choked, jerking upright in my chair.

'What?' Baines asked, looking back and forth between us.

'World War Three,' Jimmy casually explained. 'Kicks off around 2017.'

'Got a while then,' Baines commented. 'Get a curry in at least.'

‘Key event is next year. It sets in motion a chain of events that leads directly towards World War Three.’

‘You wanna start making some sense, Guv?’

‘The boys in intelligence are searching for someone – a very powerful clairvoyant – who’s been sending them letters for a few years, tip-offs concerning disasters about to happen, terrorist attacks, wars, that sort of thing.’

‘And Masterson thought ... that was you?’

‘No, he was going through a list of possible suspects. But he would have been right about me.’

‘He would?’ Baines queried, a glance at me.

‘He would,’ Jimmy repeated. ‘But what’s the point in trying to sneak up on a powerful clairvoyant? I mean, if the guy was genuine – he’d see you coming, Paul. How’s the knee, still hurting from getting hit by that taxi?’

Baines studied Jimmy carefully as he subconsciously rubbed his knee. ‘You ... are a clairvoyant? What, you give tips in the back of The Sun newspaper?’

Jimmy forced a false smile. ‘Pick a topic about your past life, something that I could not possibly know.’

Baines eased back, another glance my way. ‘When I was on selection for the SAS –’

‘You cheated.’

I could see the surprise in our guest’s face.

‘How ... did I?’ Baines pressed.

‘You cut out a corner when you saw the umpire’s Land Rover get stuck. Pick something else.’

Baines gave it some thought. ‘My first girlfriend.’

‘Not including your second cousin, who you lost your virginity to?’

‘Dirty bugger,’ I put in.

Baines had not taken his eyes off Jimmy, his mouth now open.

Jimmy added, ‘You once hid in a cupboard in your friends house, down the road from where you lived, and watched two grown-ups having sex, only realising later than one was your mum and that the gentleman – well, not your dad.’

Baines sat transfixed.

‘Pick something you’re sure about,’ Jimmy pushed.

After a few seconds Baines’ features turned sullen. He said, ‘The reason I did not marry Ellen and walked away.’

‘You suspected that your kid ... was not your kid.’

‘Is it?’ Baines asked with a curled lip, not making eye contact.

‘Yes.’

Baines raised his eyes briefly before again looking away. Turning back he said, ‘No wonder they want you so badly.’

‘I could tell them stuff about the Russians, Chinese, the works.’

‘So why don’t you?’ Baines challenged.

‘Simple fact is - I do, have done for years; I send them letters. But what do you think my life would be like with Masterson as a prison guard? Or someone like him?’

Baines tipped his head. ‘Not so hot.’

‘Do you think they’d let me walk the streets, visit my mum on her birthday? Go down the pub?’

Baines shook his head and lowered it. ‘They’d lock you up like a freak. No offence, Guv.’

‘So you can see why I need a bodyguard,’ Jimmy explained. ‘I need someone who knows what they’re really like, who’s not blinded by the bullshit.’

‘What’s all this World War Three stuff? That on the level?’

‘Yes, very much so. I can see way into the future. If I don’t stop a few things ... it all goes bang. That includes you and your family.’

After a moment Baines focused on me. ‘What do you do?’

‘I trade the stock markets ... with *one hundred percent* success.’

Baines eased upright, focusing on Jimmy. ‘Shit! You can see what the stocks do?’

Jimmy nodded. ‘And the horses, Eurovision, World Cup, elections. You name it.’

‘You’re taking a big risk telling me all this,’ Baines commented.

‘Not really, you forget who I am.’ Jimmy waited.

‘What? You can see that I work for you ... in the future?’

‘Yes. And I know when you and Ellen get back together, I help arrange it.’

‘We ... we get back together?’ That struck him more than World War Three.

Jimmy gave an affirmative nod. ‘I also know what illness your kid will suffer, and how to cure him.’

Baines stiffened. ‘Illness?’

‘That’s for the years to come, don’t dwell on it now. First, you have to find her.’

‘Do you ... know where she is?’ Baines softly asked.

‘Of course. You also have an illegitimate kid –’

‘Whoa, there.’ He offered Jimmy a flat palm. ‘I’ve got another kid?’

‘A girl: very pretty, very bright. You remember a girl in Bournemouth, that course with the SBS in Poole Harbour -’

‘Christ!’

‘Christchurch, actually. Lovely village.’

‘Dirty stop-out,’ I helpfully offered.

‘So,’ Jimmy said as he stood. ‘You want to work for us or not?’

Baines eased up. ‘You can really do all that shit, what you just said?’

‘And more,’ Jimmy strongly emphasised.

‘I’m in,’ Baines told us with a shrug.

‘Good, would have hated to move your stuff back to that dingy flat you’re in.’

‘What?’ Baines queried with heavy frown.

Jimmy produced a key. ‘One floor down, apartment twenty-three is yours. Your stuff is in there.’

‘My stuff? You moved my fucking stuff?’

‘Go and have a look, then pop back up.’

Baines took the key and let himself out, appearing angered. And he was too big to anger.

‘Fuck me, you got my heart going there,’ I let out, closing in on Jimmy. ‘Fucking warn me next time.’

‘I needed you to look surprised.’

‘Achieved that alright.’ I took a breath. ‘He’ll work for us?’

‘Oh, yeah. He’s a good man, he’ll be loyal as hell till the end, you’ll like him.’

Baines was back in five minutes, looking a little calmer. Guess he liked the apartment. ‘What about the flat I already rent?’

‘Paid off, back with the landlord,’ Jimmy explained. ‘And the place downstairs won’t cost you anything.’

I could see the big fella working hard not to smile.

‘And if I didn’t take the job?’ Baines pressed.

‘For fuck’s sake, I’m clairvoyant, dopey! Now: curry, lap dancing and a nightclub. You fit?’

Baines shrugged a big pair of shoulders. 'Why not. I need a drink.'

We headed out. In the lift Jimmy gave him a photograph of a girl, no more than five years old.

Baines pocketed it. 'In time. I still got to get my head around it all.'

'You have a forty-year-old half brother in Scotland,' Jimmy mentioned in passing as we stepped onto the street.

'Scotland?' Baines repeated as he thought. 'My father was stationed there a couple a times with RAF, 1959 to 1969. Bugger was married to my mum at the time.'

'And you know what she got up to when he wasn't around,' Jimmy reminded our new employee.

'I don't care about a half brother, not like I ever knew him.'

'I think my old man was unfaithful once,' I put in. 'Something my uncle said years ago. That side of the family don't talk to us.'

Jimmy turned his head towards me as we walked. 'Big Paul was always faithful to his girlfriend, never wandered, even when posted overseas.'

And 'Big Paul' became his nickname from then on.

Conference centre nametags

It was September 1989, and the Scottish rescuer Mackey Taylor was faxing us every day. The conference was on.

We settled on a castle hotel just outside Stirling, enabling visitors from Edinburgh and Glasgow to drive up for the day and the Aviemore rescuers could drive down for the day. Others would stay in hotels around the area or in tents. Well, they were hardy mountain types. Our rooms were booked early, the hotel soon full. Mackey arranged one giant marquee, two large marquees and some tents for visitors, sleeping bags to stay over. An area would also be set-aside for people pitching their own tents, a field at the rear of the hotel and next to a stream; it sounded nice.

Catering was arranged by the hotel for almost two hundred visitors spread over three days, Friday to Sunday. Mackey had

already sent the hotel a twenty-five thousand pound deposit from the cheque we had given him, covering most of the costs at the hotel and the hiring of the marquees. The event had been advertised to all the relevant people and the take-up rate had been good, not least by the promise of free food and drink.

With Big Paul driving, we set off on Thursday morning, aiming to stay the night in Cumbria and take it easy. Good job, traffic was terrible through the Midlands and we got to a small roadside Bed & Breakfast as night fell, little time but for a meal and a beer before bed – we were working on Big Paul's body-clock, not ours. I read in my room and I'm sure Jimmy did likewise.

Big Paul stirred early, surprised that Jimmy and I were already at breakfast, packed and ready to go. We set off through light rain and headed into Scotland, motorways and main roads all the way to Stirling, finding the castle without much difficulty – someone had signposted the event well. Through thick traffic we crawled into the grounds and parked up on the gravel forecourt, emerging now into bright sunshine.

'Tent dwellers got the weather,' I noted. Turning full circle, I could see three large tents in the grounds, a handful of smaller tents in a field, a multi-coloured patchwork of single person tents further behind. And the hill paths seemed to be well attended by numerous walkers. We booked in, glancing at a large board detailing the events of the three-day weekend, the start point being a noon briefing in the main tent.

The rooms were large and nicely decorated, but after a while a hotel room is a hotel room. We met back in the foyer and decided to find Mackey and his gang, so checked the bar and found them straight away, sat having coffee whilst hurriedly poring over speeches and plans.

'Jimmy, Jimmy,' they called, as if we'd been life-long friends.

'All ready for the big show?' Jimmy asked as chairs were arranged for us.

'A wee bit nervous,' Mackey admitted. 'Lot of controversy already.'

'Really?' Jimmy probed.

'Many kooks spoil the broth!' Mackey suggested. I wasn't sure if it was his accent, or a pun.

'Then I'll assist, since I don't cook. Or climb mountains.'

'Assist?' Mackey asked, needing clarification.

‘If you have a group that can’t agree on a plan, I’ll dangle some money, make a speech, act as arbiter. After all, I’m neutral – yet no one will want to upset me.’

‘Aye,’ Mackey agreed. ‘Yee can start today, already got a group threatening to walk out.’

‘Don’t tell me ... the Aviemore rescuers.’

Mackey and his colleagues exchanged looks. ‘Aye.’

‘My next call, leave it to me,’ Jimmy calmly insisted.

‘You wanna say a few wee words?’ Mackey asked Jimmy. After all, we were paying for the event.

‘Sure. I’ll help you out by kicking things off if you like, give you a good write-up, see if I can’t get everyone behind you.’

‘Not Christmas,’ one of Mackey’s colleagues grumbled. ‘Not the season of miracles.’

Jimmy offered the man a flat palm. ‘Leave it to me. Have faith.’

‘Good job yee got broad shoulders,’ Mackey warned.

After a coffee we toured the very pleasant grounds, the weather holding up, inspecting the food tent and the smaller conference tents. Those tents had many chairs laid out in front of a podium, the main tent big enough for a small rock concert. Someone had even cut the grass beneath our feet. Noon approached and everyone, including those that were sulking about the order of giving speeches, settled down. Jimmy had been meeting people and pressing the flesh and, when it looked like everyone was just about in, he took the podium and the microphone.

‘I hope you can all hear me,’ he began. ‘It’s not a large area, but I guess the canvas tent sides absorb more sound than they reflect. If those of you by the flaps can decide to come or go, that would save the rest from being distracted.’ He waited a few seconds as people settled. ‘OK, my name is Jimmy Silo, and what I know about mountain rescue you could write on the back of a matchbox.’

I noted some perplexed looks from the crowd.

‘But what I do know about ... is making money, lots of it, which is why I’m paying for this event.’

I actually noticed a few people sit upright. It made me smile.

‘To give you some background – I live in London, I’m a stock market trader and investor, and I own hotels and safari parks in Kenya. And it was Kenya that led me to this tent today. You see, in Kenya ... I stopped one day at an orphanage, figuring I’d give

the kids some money. What I noticed ... was a number of kids without legs or feet. You know how they lost their limbs ... land mines.'

Jimmy put one hand in a pocket. 'So, I spoke to a man down there who knew about land mines, offering him some money to help train the locals to do their own mine clearance, a project that I now run in a fairly large way at a disused airfield in the north of the country. There we have former British Army ordnance personnel training Africans from all over the continent.

'But if you were to fly around Africa, visiting each country, what you would find would be small pockets of very good people doing very good work, yet completely oblivious of what others are doing in a similar field. Time, effort and money is being spent by these groups, charities for the most part, on training, on developing techniques and equipment, and sending people out to clear mines. One of my aims is to co-ordinate that effort right across Africa, so that resources are not wasted.

'In some centres they have two doctors and no electricians. In others they have no doctors and ten electricians. In some they have willing volunteers, yet no experts to train them. He took a breath. 'On one flight back to the UK I met a gentleman, who shall remain anonymous for the moment, who was returning from a scuba-diving holiday in Kenya. It turned out that he was a part-time mountain rescuer, and he told me a lot about *your* industry.

'And I asked him what the training was like for his rescue work. The answer: you pick it up as you go along. What ... no formal exams, no overall governing body, just part-timers teaching themselves and mucking in? I couldn't believe it. After all, this is Britain, leader in so many areas. And yet here we sit, some of the people in this audience whinging like little girls about who's going to speak first and on what topics.'

Could have heard a pin drop, if it hadn't been for the grass floor.

'I don't have a lot of time for politics, or for whingers. I do, however, have a lot of money. So how I intend to spend that money will be along the following lines. I don't know which one of you is the most experienced, or has the biggest ego. But I have met Mackey Taylor and his team from Stirling, and they seem to have an idea of two about a national co-ordination of training standards ... and of co-operating. I can't say that he is the best

man for the job, only time will tell. What I do know, is that you need momentum to get anything done, and what Mackey has ... is a passion to cut through the crap and the red tape, and to make some small progress. I've already given his group a hundred grand, and if any other group wants some money then you're going to have to apply for it through him.'

I grinned from ear to ear.

'And the amount of money available is around a million pounds a year.'

Whispers broke out.

'It is my intention, if someone in Mackey's group is up to it, to pay for a small office, a permanent secretary and a permanent co-ordinator, perhaps a small magazine where everyone can send in stories of heroic rescues, new bits of kit, problems, legislation. And, after a few years, many good people doing good work should be able to do a lot more ... for a lot less.

'I will buy ropes in bulk and distribute them ... once the type and colour of rope has been agreed by a national council. I will buy custom Land Rovers ... once you're decided on a vehicle specification, and get a bulk order deal from the manufacturers. Because that, ladies and gentlemen, is what co-operation brings - it brings cost savings. I will also push for a national examination standard and training course for budding young rescuers, followed by a badge that can be sewn onto a jacket. Then everyone will know that the person with the badge has met a certain standard. I will help arrange a standardised first aid programme for new recruits, as well as fun aspects such as canoeing trips, map reading, orienteering ... and regular fun competitions that will pit man against man, team against team, in a spirit of co-operation.

'I'll pay for climbing trips to other countries such as America, and exchanges between rescuers in many countries. I can, even now, offer courses on a variety of subjects in Kenya, where I have a base. Who's to say that, in some distant future, rescuers here don't attend bush fire fighting courses, flood rescue courses, civil disaster courses or search and rescue of downed aircraft or missing kids.

'It will take time, and some money of course, but most importantly it will take a certain amount of co-operation from the good people sat in front of me - people who give up their spare time to risk their lives to help others. If you're prepared to give

your lives for strangers – can you give those who should be your friends some time and patience?’

Big Paul sat quietly amazed. I was impressed as well.

Jimmy finished with, ‘I now give the podium over to Mackey Taylor, who will call speeches and discussions in no particular order of merit, nor size of ego. If anyone has a problem then please stand up and say *my ego is bigger than his...* and we’ll slot you in first. The mountain to climb, ladies and gentlemen, is out there ... not in here.’

As he stepped down many started clapping, followed by people standing, and soon loud clapping from everyone. I hadn’t noticed at the start the RAF personnel at the back, or the Navy. We even had the Coastguard with us. It took a while for the assembled warm bodies to settle down again, Mackey having to call for them to hush down. He did his speech about co-operation, training standards, a magazine, about cave rescuers and mountain rescuers having cross-over training, about seasonal training and covering for each other, and even training for co-operation with the RAF and Navy helicopter crews.

At 3pm Jimmy broke the speeches and insisted everyone take a thirty minute break, the first day not ending till 6pm, the sun low on a pleasantly sunny day. It’s fair to say that the real work got done in the bar that night, the restaurant opened so that people could spill into it; it was needed as some two hundred people tried to cram into a bar for fifty. We even opened the French doors and stood outside under spotlights.

Inevitably some groups asked Jimmy for money for bits of kit, but he directed them towards Mackey – who was the belle of the ball and being courted by all sorts. Big Paul recognised some of the faces from his time in the Army and re-acquainted himself with them, many drinks downed. At 1am we were still going strong, the speeches due to re-start at 9am, Jimmy altering the blackboard to 11am. At 2am Jimmy asked the bar staff to close up and they threw everyone out, me and Jimmy dragging Big Paul’s heavy carcass to his room.

The next morning was not well attended as people nursed sore heads, a few speeches given in the afternoon. An RAF rescue helicopter landed and people crawled over it, but not much serious work got done. As Jimmy had suggested to me, the people broke into small groups and made plans over a few beers. The Saturday

was very hot, most everyone sipping beer all afternoon, in-depth discussions going on in the beer garden instead of the tents. Still, it had broken the ice and people were making friends, chatting over beers and swapping stories. Saturday night was a drunken sing-along for the most part, Sunday a washout as far as speeches went. People had lunch, sat about or started to disappear. Mackey looked rough.

‘Late night,’ I asked as he joined us in the beer garden.

‘Can’t remember going to bed, so a wee bit to drink, aye.’

Jimmy said, ‘I figured it would turn social, that’s why I liked this place – the booze. Would have been a bit stuffy at some conference centre without a bar. The ice has been broken, now you can get some work done.’

‘Hope so, hope so,’ Mackey reflected.

Magestic letter 35

Sir, I would like to bring to your attention, at this time, some detail that is so important I’d appreciate you acknowledging it through the personals.

There are a number of key world events which – if all are not prevented – will lead directly to a global nuclear conflict within a date period ranging from 2011 to 2017. If all key events are missed then the outcome is inevitable. If some are missed, the outcome is inevitable, but the date blurred. Our aim, of course, will be to deal with all key events. If such a sequential and transactional success is achieved it will prevent such a war from starting.

Jack Donohue glanced up at the familiar COBRA faces and took a breath. He read on.

Two of those key events have already been dealt with to a satisfactory outcome. The third key event will occur in June of next year. Saddam Hussein will put pressure on Kuwait for reparations that he thinks are deserved regarding the Iran-Iraq war, joined with complaints of Kuwaiti oil wells drilling down at an angle into Iraqi territory.

In consultations with the US Ambassador to Iraq he will, deliberately or otherwise, get the impression that the US will not get involved should there be a conflict, i.e. an invasion. In June he will invade, sacking the

small territory. It is fair to say that oil prices will become unstable and a tad higher.

The US, in response, will send the largest invasion force since D-Day to Saudi Arabia, ready to expel Iraq from Kuwait. Such an army will easily send the Iraqis packing, that is not in question. But a chain of events will be set in motion that will lead directly to a global conflict decades later.

You may argue that a decade or two is a long time, and certainly a lot can change in such a period. But I know what will happen, the chain of events that will progress through time like a cancer.

PM, a two-inch plant can be pulled from the ground, a sixty-foot Oak tree cannot, not with the best will in the world. Events are best influenced in their infancy.

Might I be so bold as to suggest that you arrange for the Kuwaitis to invite your deployment of an armoured brigade to its northern border. Unfortunately, Saddam will not give up and such a policy of prevention will be a long-term affair.

PS. Should the Iraqis invade and be expelled, their principal divisions reduced by superior US firepower, other interested parties in the region will be glad of the reduction in Iraq's offensive capability. One needs to read between the lines.

'Bloody hell,' Jack let out.

The Prime Minister said, 'I'm mindful of the fact that he could have told us that years ago, yet did not. Instead he dealt with matters as trivial as the Eurovision Song Contest.'

'Building up credibility,' Jack suggested. 'Proving his ability step by step.'

'And now a huge leap forwards ... into World War Three.'

'There's one way to be sure about this,' Jack firmly suggested.

'Yes,' the P.M. agreed. 'Keep an eye on Iraqi divisions moving south. Hopefully, not being too late.'

Sykes put in, 'If there is a conflict, with the US and us pushing the Iraqis out of Kuwait, then there's an excellent chance of other Arab nations supporting Iraq – widening the war.'

'Yes, a powder keg alright,' the P.M. agreed.

Sykes added, 'There are also the studies we've made about what would happen if Saddam was toppled. Our best guess is that the country would split into three. The Shia south might join forces with Iran, taking the oilfields with them. The central Sunis would

join Syria and the north would go back to being Kurdistan, at war with Turkey in a jiffy.'

'Not good if Saddam stays, not good if he goes,' the P.M. noted. 'I want a working group on it, tight monitoring of the situation, and a plan of action.'

Jack asked, 'Do I discuss this with the Americans?'

'Deny its arrival, delay it,' the P.M. suggested. 'When do you meet?'

'A week.'

'Sit on it till then.'

A week later Jack got a note to say that the American Magestic letter had not turned up and they would be in touch when, and if, it did.

Colonel Pointer's Magestic letter 35

Mr Ambassador,

This coming year will see the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein put pressure upon the tiny Gulf principality of Kuwait. They feel they are owed money for helping to protect Kuwait from Iranian aggression, potential or realised.

When threats fail they will seek your counterparts council regarding your reaction to an invasion of Kuwait. You may be tempted to allow the aggression, since it will give you the opportunity to send forces to the region, to expel the aggressors and liberate Kuwait and, more importantly, to strike a blow against the large Iraqi army and to diminish its principal divisions. Unfortunately, the weakening or removal of the Saddam regime will result in Iraq splitting into three.

The Shia south will join Iran, handing over the substantive oil fields to the Iranian regime and further threatening Kuwaiti oil fields.

The Sunis will join with Syria, helping to destabilise that country.

The Kurds will declare independence, drill their own oil and sell it, becoming a small rich state. Unfortunately, they will sponsor terrorism in Turkey, as they do now, and Turkey will invade and hold Northern Iraq, destabilising the region and Turkey itself.

If you allow the invasion to take place you will kick over a hornet's nest.

Please note. There are a number of key events that may lead us towards future global conflicts, this is one of them.

Thad slapped a hand on the desk. 'I knew it!' he told General Summers as they sat in Summer's Langley office. 'They sent him back through time to stop World War Three. Why else would they go to so much trouble! We estimated that building a time machine would be like putting a man on the moon – damned hard! Not to mention expensive. They must have done it for a very good reason!'

Summers nodded his agreement. 'You notice anything else about this letter?'

'Tone has changed, more hurried.'

'Analysts says it's less British and more American,' Summers reported.

'We also figured he was one of ours. Maybe the flowery English language was for some other reason, maybe to keep the Brits sweet for some reason.'

Summers eased back into his seat. 'And now we have to prevent the President from allowing this to happen.'

'Easy enough: explain the consequences of a break-up of Iraq.'

'Your input will help, we'll need a united front.'

Job offers

One Saturday morning at 11am I opened the door to our old boss from McKinleys, Joe Pearson, a bald sixty-year-old with red cheeks. Seeing him in casual dress did not seem to sit right, I was too used to seeing him as the old boss.

'Whatcha, boss?' I said.

'Not your boss anymore, unfortunately,' he said as he entered, a seat offered.

Jimmy walked in with a fresh tea for Joe. 'Milk, one sugar.'

'You remembered.' He took in the apartment. 'Very nice. Must be doing well, Jimmy.'

'Just enough to cover Paul's salary.'

‘Then Paul must be the highest paid individual in the country at the moment,’ Joe pointed out.

‘Ha!’ I let out. ‘I’m on a YOP scheme.’

‘So, Jimmy, I guess you know why I’m here.’

‘I never touched your wife!’ Jimmy said with a straight face.

‘Nor would you want to,’ Joe sullenly admitted. ‘No, it’s about work, a position with us as head of client investment strategies. I won’t insult you with a salary offer, instead, we’d like to offer you a commission based position, handling close to sixty million pounds of client money.’

It was a big number. If Jimmy traded that sum the way we traded ours then his commission would be tens of millions a year. Problem was, brokers and investment companies had rules. And mysterious large trades were not in the book.

Jimmy began, ‘Joe, if I was to work for anyone ... you know it would be you and the old firm. I didn’t leave because I was unhappy, I just wanted to be a lazy bastard ... as well as make my own money.’

‘He sleeps in late,’ I joked.

Jimmy continued, ‘But, since we’ve had a few other visits this week —’

‘From brokers and banks,’ I said.

Jimmy faced me. ‘You remember *the thing* ... the *thing* I asked you not to mention?’

‘Oh, that’s the thing,’ I realised, sounding none too bothered. ‘Shit.’

‘Banks after you, eh, Jimmy,’ Joe said. ‘Well, not surprising, you’ve got the touch.’

‘He turned them down,’ I said.

Jimmy again faced me. ‘The ... *thing!*’

‘Yeah, but it can’t be *the thing* if you turned them down, can it?’

Jimmy shook his head. Facing Joe he said, ‘I’ve given the offers some thought ... and I’ll make *you* this offer. I’ll provide you with occasional trades when I find a good one, Index direction or sharp movements if relevant, and you can trade the intel. If you make some money you pay me a ... consultancy fee ... as an external. There won’t be more than one or two a month, and I make no promises. That’s more than I’ve offered anyone else.’

‘Appreciate it, Jimmy, we all do.’

‘I’ll even throw in a few weeks stay at the hotel I bought in Kenya – you just pay your flights.’

‘Kenya?’

‘Nice hotel on the beach, four star, you’ll love it,’ Jimmy explained.

‘Wife’s been nagging for something like that for a while,’ Joe explained. ‘I can tell her it cost a fortune!’

We laughed.

‘Why not,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘We won’t tell. But one thing, Joe – not a word to anyone about trading – you haven’t seen me for a while. This is me and you, no friends, or friends of friends. If I give you a good trade and the price hikes ... there won’t be too many more trades.’

‘Not to worry, I’ll place the deals myself,’ Joe insisted. ‘I know how the rumour mill works.’

With Joe gone, I asked Jimmy, ‘Did I do it right?’

‘Yeah, you’re coming along as a liar.’

‘How many people is that now?’

‘Five, so far.’

‘Going to make a fortune!’ I gleefully stated.

‘Going to need it as well,’ Jimmy sullenly stated.

‘Who else you tipping?’

‘Po, an American, five or six here. Soon have a Russian on board as well.’

‘Price will work against us with all that lot buying at the same time,’ I suggested.

Jimmy stared at me. And waited.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘Will it?’

‘Work against us? Yeah, unless we get in there ... first.’ I rolled my eyes.

‘Dumb fuck. Even if the stock isn’t about to rise they’ll buy into it, start rumours, and it’ll go with its own momentum.’

‘We can’t lose, then,’ I realised.

‘You’re a bright kid, you know that,’ Jimmy sarcastically let out. ‘I knew there was a reason I kept you around.’

‘I’m starting to sign letters as Dumb Fuck.’

Anyone for tennis

Sheffield was cold and wet, the train full of idiots on the way up. We could have used Big Paul to squish them, but he was running secret jobs for Jimmy, so secret I was not allowed to know. We got a taxi from the station to a newly built tennis centre, dashing through the rain inside and looking odd in our suits as northern mums and dads in tracksuits nudged their budding tennis stars along. We wandered around, the sounds of racquets striking balls echoing off the corrugated steel roof, till Jimmy spotted the man he wanted to meet. At a brisk pace we caught up with him.

‘Peter Semanov?’ Jimmy called.

The accused turned about, looking startled. He was a tall and lithe man in a tracksuit, and I figured him to be around the forty mark. Jimmy put out a hand and they shook, Peter still looking surprised.

‘Names Peter Seaman now, don’t use Semanov. Didn’t know anyone around here knew that.’

I could pick up the northern accent, most likely Manchester.

‘I checked you out,’ Jimmy told him. ‘I’m Jimmy Silo and this is Paul.’

‘Checked me ... out?’

‘Don’t worry, you’re not in any trouble,’ Jimmy reassured him as parents and kids walked past. ‘It’s just that I need a Russian speaking tennis coach.’

‘What for? You’re British?’

‘Not for me,’ Jimmy began, gesturing the man away from the crowds. ‘I’m a sponsor of various international student exchanges.’

‘Ah.’ Peter’s features lightened a bit.

‘And I’d like you to arrange tennis swaps with Russian students.’

‘Well ... I’ve thought about it. Getting the grant money is the hard part.’

‘No need, I’ll be paying for everything. You’ll have a fifty-thousand a year budget to start and I’ll subsidise all the flights and accommodation.’

‘Shit,’ Peter slowly let out. ‘Who are you, exactly?’

‘Rich businessman, just giving some money back to society,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘You don’t look old enough.’

‘He is,’ I firmly suggested.

Jimmy handed him an envelope. ‘My contact details are in there. Pop down to London, I’ll put you in a hotel and we’ll chat – it won’t cost you anything; train or room. And if we can get this going in the way I’d like it there’s a full time job in it for you – a good wage.’

‘Doing what?’

‘Taking groups of kids to Russia to play against the kids there, bringing Russian groups over here. Simple.’

Peter inspected the contact details. ‘I’ll er ... I’ll pop down next week.’

‘Fine. See you then.’ They shook.

As we walked off I commented, ‘You never heard of a phone call?’

‘He doesn’t have a phone. At the moment he’s down on his luck, staying with his mum in a council flat in Bolton.’

‘So he’s ours for the taking,’ I realised.

‘Help a man when he’s down, get a friend for life.’

Our man in Texas

On a wet Monday morning we got a taxi around to the Astoria Hotel, Jimmy briefing me on the way. I was a bit shocked by today's risky venture, but Jimmy was as confident as ever. We sat waiting in the bar for our contact to descend from his room.

The guy appeared in a blue blazer, jeans and a shirt. I knew he was from Texas, I'd sent him some stock tips, but even if I hadn't known him I was sure I could have picked him out. He was well-built, just under six foot in his boots and topped-off with dyed black hair combed straight back. We closed in on him, making eye contact as he scanned the room.

'Mr Pederson,' Jimmy said, a handshake initiated.

'Mr Silovich. We meet at last. You're younger than I would have imagined. And bigger!'

We laughed, Jimmy gesturing towards an isolated table and ordering drinks from a hovering waiter as we settled.

'This is my number two, Paul,' Jimmy said, thumbing towards me.

'Paul? You're the fella who's been sending me faxes?' he asked in a Texas drawl.

'Yes,' I agreed.

'So which of you's the talent?' he joked, sitting back and crossing his legs.

'Team effort,' Jimmy responded. 'Anyway, how's the money making going.'

'You know exactly how it's going,' Pederson testily replied. 'I'm still waiting to find the catch.'

'Mr Pederson ... Charles -'

'Chuck'll do.'

'Chuck. I will always ask for a favour retrospectively. That means you make the money first,' Jimmy explained.

'So you must be due a hell of a favour.'

'Do you have any *desires* on public office, Chuck?'

'Straight to the point,' Chuck noted. 'Yeah, sure, I thought about it.'

'Then let me get straight to the point. No public office, no more kind assistance from us.'

Chuck leant forwards and stirred his coffee at length. ‘You’re nudging me towards something I was gunna do anyplace. Not much of a price tag?’

‘Various interested parties have asked me to ... trash a fellow Texan, and to help you beat him to the Governorship.’

‘Again, not much of a price tag. If I run against the fella – I guess my team would find a few holes in his boots.’

Jimmy handed over a photo.

‘Ah, I heard he might run. He’s an idiot! I met him many times. And he aint no Texan, that’s a put-on.’

‘Exactly. And we don’t want idiots in office now, do we?’

Chuck studied Jimmy carefully. ‘This aint some scheme by a foreign power, is it?’

‘Do you consider yourself, Chuck, a weak minded person?’

‘I’m a retired Marine, and I’m a Texan! They don’t come no tougher, son.’

‘So how could anyone influence you?’ Jimmy posed. ‘Besides, all the stock market trades you made were ... harmless in themselves. You were just lucky, and you’ve got the investment records to prove it. Even if I wanted to bribe you, all anyone could prove is that I supplied you stock trading tips. Since I’m a stockbroker ... not so unusual.’

‘So what’s the catch?’

‘I want you to trash our friend, and soon. And don’t stop trashing him just because you beat him to the Governorship. I want an unofficial biography of him and, if you can arrange it, some misdemeanours: cannabis, hookers.’

‘He’s the President’s son,’ Chuck quietly cautioned, a glance around the room.

‘He’s already got a few skeletons in the closet, so just go looking for them. If you do ... then you keep getting stock tips.’

‘I know some stuff about the guy that I bet no one else does!’

‘That sounds like a start point,’ Jimmy enthused.

It was done deal, sealed with a handshake. The US Marines were on board.

Small victories

Sat in the apartment Jimmy offered me the paper he had been reading. 'Have a look.'

I sat and took the paper.

'Top left,' Jimmy directed.

I read the headline. 'Airliner cabin doors to be locked.' I looked up. 'Took them long enough, you sent that letter a year ago.'

'At least it's done. They'll reinforce cabin doors, put in a spy hole, keep the terrorists out of the cockpit. It's a key trigger event, so off to Kenya in a few days, ramp things up now.' He tapped the paper. 'That's a whole six months ahead of when I expected it.'

'Small victories,' I said as a key turned in the lock.

Big Paul stepped in. 'We got company,' he softly stated, none too concerned

'Yes,' Jimmy agreed.

'We do?' I asked. It was just us, no one expected.

Big Paul explained, 'Two cars in the street.'

'We're being watched?' I questioned.

'Spooks,' Big Paul said as he sat.

'That's a term for ...?' I nudged.

'Spies. MI6 probably,' Big Paul explained.

I focused on Jimmy. 'We in trouble?'

'No, not really. They're genuinely interested in who I deal with in Kenya - Skids and company.'

'Not the other thing?' I queried.

'No. Still, we should deal with this before we fly off. Paul, go have some fun with those cars. '

With a smirk Paul eased up and stepped out.

An hour later I was in my room, the window open, when I heard what I thought was a car crash below. From the balcony I peered down. A chimney had fallen off the building opposite and onto a green car, smashing into its roof and windscreen. The car doors were open and two men stood inspecting the damage. I leant on the balcony and watched.

As I did I noticed Big Paul in a side street, walking towards the corner shop. He crossed the road and entered the shop, exiting with a paper and bottle of milk. He crossed the main road instead of taking the shortest route, then ambled along reading

the paper. Below me he stopped, along with others, to view the mess of the car. A minute later he was on the balcony with me.

‘Good aim,’ I said, not getting a reply.

As we stood there, peering down at an attending police car, a small bang preceded a puff of smoke at the end of the street. Now another two men were out of their car and inspecting their vehicle, the police car moving along to them. As we observed the scene the driver flashed some ID at the police, the second man lifting up what was left of his exhaust.

‘They going to be a tad ... pissed off at us?’ I delicately enquired.

‘Fuck ‘em.’

The next day we got a visit. I opened the door to two gentlemen, the others sat around the coffee table.

‘Foreign Office,’ the first man said, flashing an ID that meant nothing to me.

I held the door wide. ‘We’re not hiding any foreigners in here.’

The first man glanced at me as he entered.

‘Please, have a seat,’ Jimmy casually offered, not getting up.

They sat, IDs placed down. ‘Jimmy Silovich?’

‘Yes. And you’re not from the Foreign Office, so cut the crap.’

They glanced at each other, retrieved their IDs and sat back.

The first man said, ‘We’d like to talk to you about your connections to certain mercenaries working in Africa, Kenya in particular.’

‘Skids, Trev and Handy?’ Jimmy asked with a grin.

‘Those are the nicknames of three of the individuals we ... keep track of.’

‘Gentlemen,’ Jimmy began. ‘I know fully well that they’re a bunch of ex-SAS troopers hiring out their guns.’ The two men glanced at Big Paul. Jimmy continued, ‘I have a safari park, near the Serengeti – come visit if you like – and we have several decent herds of elephants. We also have well organised poachers who turn up in gangs of twenty or more, armed with Ak47s. They kill the elephants, which is barbaric, not to mention bad for my business. No elephants, no tourists.’

‘So I take the following approach. I hire them out and pay them to hunt down the bastards killing my fucking elephants, and to shoot them full of holes! And if Skids and company were not the kind of people that *you* are interested in, they’d be no good to me, would they. I need killers, not policemen.’

‘And the base at Mawlini?’ the first man asked. ‘It’s being geared up as a staging area.’

Jimmy and I both laughed, our visitors not appreciating our mirth.

‘Come visit, have a look,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘I’m sure that old Mac would love the attention you’d give him. And to label him as a dangerous mercenary would delight the old fart. He gets up three times a night for a pee.’

‘Then what’s happening at that base?’

‘Some day it will, hopefully, be the biggest base training Africans in mine clearance, a charity I’ve got involved with. I’ve also taken over the orphanage up the road from my hotel, River View.’

‘Orphanage?’ the first man repeated.

‘Phone them,’ Jimmy challenged. He found the number amongst the papers in front of him and handed it over. ‘Listen, guys, get your boss to send us a man, I’ll take him with us to Kenya in a few days, I’ll pay his ticket and expenses.’

They glanced at each other. The first man, the talker, said, ‘There is also the question of Mr Baines ... *situation* here.’

Big Paul eased forwards in his seat. ‘Next wrong word and I’ll put the both of you fuckers in hospital for a very long time.’ He stared at them. ‘And if I’m nicked I’ll talk about enough to bring down the fucking government. Got that, tossers?’

‘Paul, please,’ Jimmy said, waving Big Paul down.

Didn’t know about our visitors, but I was afraid.

Our guests stood. ‘We’ll be in touch.’

Jimmy stood. ‘I’m off to Kenya in a few days. Till then I’ll be here.’

With the visitors gone Big Paul pulled out the sofa’s seat covers, retrieving a small bug. He dropped it into a cold tea.

‘Fifty metres,’ Jimmy said to Big Paul, getting back a nod.

‘Fifty metres?’ I repeated.

‘Small bug, close range,’ Jimmy explained. ‘It would need a localised booster, or they’d need to be in the flat below. Go search your room for anything odd.’

Big Paul set about the lounge, soon on his back under the coffee table. We found nothing. Jimmy called down to the doorman and he popped up. Soon we knew we had a new neighbour, his flat under my bedroom. Close enough.

‘When we’re away I’ll arrange a baby-sitter for the apartment,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘I’ll check my room later,’ Big Paul added. ‘But if you don’t mind me asking –’

‘Why didn’t I *see* it?’ Jimmy said with a smile. ‘Things can change, the future is fluid. Small things can alter, sometimes bigger ones. And everything I do affects the time-line around me, giving it some chance of change. Like moving through a swimming pool; you move the water and cause ripples.’

An hour later we got a call, taking us up on our offer to take someone to Kenya. The man’s name was Cosuir, pronounced ‘cosy’. Big Paul did not know him, Jimmy did.

‘Who is he?’ I asked.

‘Freelancer, French colonial parents from Guinea, West Africa.’

‘How does it work out?’ I asked.

‘He’ll join the team,’ Jimmy replied.

Four days later we were back in Nairobi, the customs officer recognising us and chatting with Jimmy like old mates. Rudd met us again in the UN jeep, the quiet Dutchman always making me smile, and we all piled in, plenty of room for four or more. Cosy turned out to be a slender and tanned individual, same height as me and with similar black hair. He had tired eyes and permanently looked as if he wanted to be somewhere else, which was probably true in this case.

As we headed for the usual hotel Jimmy said, ‘Rudd, this is Big Paul, he’s a driver and bodyguard.’ Rudd said hello. ‘The other gentleman is from British Intelligence, checking up on my operations here. They’re concerned that I might be involved with certain mercenaries.’

‘Mercenaries? The old men at the airbase?’ he laughed.

‘And the ones hunting the poachers,’ Jimmy added.

‘Ah, yes. They look tough. They are former British soldiers, yes?’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy confirmed.

‘They caught some poachers this week,’ Rudd added.

‘And?’ Jimmy nudged after Rudd fell silent.

Rudd glanced at Cosy. ‘They brought back six sets of matching ears.’

‘Ears?’ I repeated. ‘Well, either they killed them ... or some poor bastards will have a hard time reading the papers – their glasses slipping off.’

We all laughed, even Cosy. Booked in, we met at the rooftop bar, Jimmy ordering drinks in a local dialect again.

It stirred a reaction in Cosy. ‘You speak Bantu?’

‘And reasonable Nilote, although there’s so many variations its hard to distinguish sometimes.’

‘You speak Maasi,’ Cosy noted. ‘Not bad after just three short visits here.’

‘I’m a quick study,’ Jimmy said with a grin.

Cosy sipped his drink, then stared into it. Making eye contact with Jimmy he asked, ‘You ordered this?’ Jimmy nodded. ‘How do *you* know what I like?’

‘When they told us you were coming along they gave a list of things about you – favourite foods, time you like to be in bed, stuff like that.’

Big Paul laughed quietly, Cosy not happy, Rudd not following. And I clocked a lovely girl in a bikini at the poolside.

‘What else did they say about me?’ Cosy demanded, none too happy.

‘That you’re just the distraction, keep us off the real spy,’ Jimmy explained. It seemed to ring a bell with Cosy. ‘While we’re all being careful what we say or do around you, the real spy will be snuggling up to Paul here.’

‘What?’ I asked, suddenly back in the conversation.

‘Clocked the tasty bird yet?’ Jimmy knowingly asked.

‘Shit. She’s a ... you know?’ I asked.

‘Marta Hari?’ Jimmy prompted. ‘Yes, a professional. Cosy here is someone they think is just a bit of a joke.’

Now Cosy was definitely not happy, but not at us.

Without taking his eyes of Cosy, Jimmy told me, ‘Paul, I need you take one for the team.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘I need you to leave us, to go chat-up that girl and shag her. Just... close your eyes and think of the team.’ Big Paul and Rudd laughed. ‘Oh, invite her along, keep her tight, boast a lot about money to her.’

I stood. There came a time when every man had to do what he had to do. I had a mission, and I was not going to let the side down. Off I went.

‘Who is she?’ Cosy asked.

‘You know Tasker?’

‘The American,’ Cosy unhappily clarified.

‘She works for him. Bob Telling called him, asked for a favour.’

‘You’re well informed,’ Cosy grumbled.

‘And you’re not,’ Jimmy countered. ‘Still, pleasant week or two, back to accepting handouts from Bob Telling. Unless of course...’ He finished by turning to Big Paul, making eye contact.

‘You won’t convert him, he’s too stupid,’ Big Paul suggested. ‘He’ll go back to Blighty and suck up.’

Cosy stood. ‘I’ll see you in the morning.’

Jimmy bade him a fond farewell in Flemish, Cosy’s childhood language. Cosy stopped and stared for a moment before heading to his room.

‘What language was that?’ Rudd asked. ‘It sounded like Flemish.’

‘West African Flemish,’ Jimmy explained. ‘His main language is French, then English, then his childhood Flemish, some Pigeon English Creole.’

‘Sounds like you know him well,’ Rudd suggested.

‘I do my homework. Anyway, what’s new in Kenya? Family alright?’

I joined Jimmy and Big Paul an hour later, Rudd off home to get some rest before a long drive in the morning. ‘Gentleman, this is Judy.’ They stood. ‘Judy’s an air hostess.’

‘Pleasure,’ Jimmy said as he shook her hand. Big Paul nodded, that actions particular meaning undetermined.

I told her, ‘This is my business partner Jimmy Silo, and this is Big Paul the driver.’

We all sat, Judy still in her bikini and showing some signs of the cooler night air.

‘So you guys own hotels down here?’ she prompted.

‘A beach hotel and a safari park,’ Jimmy explained. ‘You’re welcome to visit, bring a few friends if you’re on a stopover.’

‘The stopovers are never more than two days, be time to turn around when we got there,’ Judy explained.

‘You on a stopover now?’ Jimmy asked, beckoning a waiter for her to order a drink.

‘No, I had some holiday time due, had to use it up, so decided to stay here at the end of a flight.’

‘By yourself?’ Jimmy puzzled.

‘Not to start with, but my friend fell ill on the first day, she’s in Park Hospital.’

‘Poor dear, we’ll have to send her something,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘To be truthful I never really like her that much; she nagged to join me. So actually I’ve been getting some peace.’

‘I’ve invited her along with us,’ I told Jimmy.

‘More the merrier,’ Jimmy responded. ‘We’ll be up early in the morning mind you.’

‘Not a problem, a few Rums and I sleep like a baby,’ she suggested. ‘Anyway, Paul promised a nice meal downstairs.’

We stood.

‘7 am,’ I said.

‘7 am,’ Jimmy responded.

We headed down to her room, some warmer clothes thrown on, a quick flash of boob caught. This was for the team, I reminded myself.

The hotel had two restaurants, one decidedly better than the other and open to residents of Nairobi. If anything, we were the ones underdressed. We sat and ate, chatted and downed drinks, getting on famously. She asked a lot of questions, not about Jimmy, but the kind of “husband material” questions. She was good, real good. At bedtime she made her excuses, a kiss on the cheek, and I headed to my room.

‘Oh, yeah, she’s good, real good,’ I muttered. ‘Not on the first night.’

I sat in my room with the lights off and curtains open, watching the flickering lights of Nairobi, a huge stupid grin

across my face. The mini-bar slowly emptied and I felt good all over, trying to force some sleep around 1am and managing to nod off.

We were on the road at 7am, Rudd as punctual as ever, now six in the jeep. Since it was designed for six it was not a problem. We headed down towards Mombassa and River View first.

Booking in at around 2pm, Judy with her own hut, we mostly split and did our own thing, Rudd beavering away, Jimmy sat reading accounts and Big Paul scuba diving. I showed Judy around, pointing out the improvements I had made and even taking her opinion on a few things. I introduced her to Steffan and Lotti and she nervously agreed to some diving the next day, so long as it was shallow. Yeah, she was good.

Within an hour we were naturally holding hands and could have been mistaken for a honeymoon couple as we ambled along the shore. She got introduced to the young elephant, the beast growing rapidly, and we patted the disabled lion. Damn lion almost made her cry. We caught sight of Cosy wandering around and checking things out during the day. What was there to check out? It was a beach hotel, no secret base hidden in a hut. For the most part we noticed him sat at the beach bar with Jimmy, sipping beer.

In the evening we all met up and had a long dinner together, four courses with wine, Jimmy relaying interesting stories and facts about Kenya and Africa that none of us had known, not even Cosy. Afterwards, Judy dragged me for a long walk after the meal, both of us needing it. Beyond the headland we stepped down into a smaller bay.

‘You own this as well?’ she asked.

‘Yep. And another half a mile further.’

‘Cool.’ In the moonlight she stripped off whilst maintaining eye contact with me. ‘Come on then, bashful.’

She did not need to ask twice. Stood in the gentle surf up to my waist, she wrapped her legs around me. At the time I could think of nothing other than what a great advertisement this pose would make for the hotel – a couple in the surf in the moonlight.

‘Strange,’ I said.

‘What is?’ she whispered into my ear.

‘I’ve never felt like I was on holiday down here, till now. This is probably what honeymooners do.’

‘Well, hotel owner, *this* is your day off.’

Back on the beach we made love under the stars, using our clothes for a beach blanket.

Half way through she said, ‘What the hell is *that*?’

I was hurt, injured, my pride was dented. What had I done wrong?

She pointed. ‘What is *that*?’

Turning my head I focused on the slow moving lump getting closer. ‘It’s a fucking turtle!’ I whispered.

‘I love turtles,’ she whispered.

We interrupted ourselves and crawled on all fours towards it, giggling like teenagers. Next to the large beast we stopped in awe, our bums sticking up.

‘It must be laying eggs,’ she whispered.

‘No, there’s a beach for that miles away – up the coast I think.’

‘Then she’s lost, poor love.’

‘Best leave her to it, I’ll send staff to watch over her.’

We fumbled to get out clothes back on and headed back to reception. I reported the mother turtle and sent a guard to watch, and to keep guests away in the morning. After that I gave Judy a piggyback to my room and threw her into the shower fully clothed. The water was cold and refreshing, the wet clothes discarded on the bathroom floor. Someone had genetically modified stem cells coursing through his veins and he was not going to waste a second. And of all the girls I had dated, Marta Hari here was stimulating me the most.

At breakfast I found a note: Jimmy and the others at orphanage, not for honeymooners. So we stayed on the beach all day, frequent trips back to the hut, but I also noted how quiet it was. At 4pm we heard people asking if they had photographed the turtle yet and realised where everyone had gone. And it was our fault. We headed over and took charge, but could not see any harm in people watching. The guard had seen no egg laying or burrow digging, so we stood and scratched our heads; there was no other reason for the turtle to come ashore. A vet was summoned, arriving half an hour before dusk.

‘It’s a male,’ the vet reported.

‘A male?’ I queried. ‘What’s it doing crawling up the beach?’

He shrugged. ‘There’s a lot we don’t know about them. It could be sick, but looks OK.’

Steffan and Lotti were already in wetsuits and carried the hapless male into the surf. It turned around and crawled out again. They repeated the exercise, with as much success.

I paid the useless vet just as the gang arrived with torches at dusk. ‘Know anything about Turtles?’ I asked Jimmy.

‘More than most. It’s a poofter.’

‘A ... what?’ I queried.

‘Nature, like humans, throws up those who are born into the wrong body. It’s a male with a female instinct, hormone imbalance. It happens sometimes.’ He raised his voice. ‘Steffan, Lotti, hand feed it small fish, get some from the kitchen, or it’ll die.’

And so started the legend of the “poofter turtle” of River View Hotel, the lonesome soul of indeterminate sex carried over to the next bay for guests to enjoy. If it wasn’t sure if it wanted to lay eggs or not, we’d look after it till it made its mind up or swam off. Little did we know that the damn thing would still be there twenty years later, and still dependent upon us.

The orphanage conversion

As we honeymooners enjoyed ourselves, the others headed for the orphanage in the UN jeep. The orphanage walls had now been rendered and whitewashed, the wooden window and doorframes painted blue. Even the curbs had been painted. Rudd entered first, followed by Cosy.

Jimmy stopped Big Paul. ‘Café on the corner – eyes on.’

Jimmy entered the orphanage as Big Paul stepped across the road junction and took up station, scanning the streets as he sipped a beer. The orphanage’s courtyard buzzed with kids in neat blue uniforms thronging around Rudd and Cosy. And Jimmy caught our watcher smiling. The walls around the courtyard had also been rendered and painted, the whole place

now appearing a great deal better – on the surface at least. A wall at the rear of the courtyard was down, now a view through to scrubland that was being cleared, a few small fires burning.

Sister Woman appeared in a blue uniform and apron, waving towards Jimmy. She hurried across. ‘Come and see.’ She dragged Jimmy by the hand towards the rear and through the downed wall. Visible to left was an area the size of a football pitch, several sets of foundations being laid by locals.

‘You’ve been busy, Sister Woman,’ Jimmy noted. He reached into a pocket and produced wad; forty thousand dollars. ‘You’ll need this.’

She fell silent as she accepted it. Finally she said, ‘We had eighty children when you came – the first time. Now we have three hundred and fifty.’

‘I know,’ Jimmy softly let out. ‘Let me introduce you to some help, but you must watch what you say.’

‘I say nothing to anyone,’ she quietly affirmed as they re-entered the courtyard. ‘Only Anna.’

They approached the gang. ‘This is Rudd.’

‘Rudd?’ She exchanged words in Dutch, both pleased to find a fellow compatriot, soon chatting like old friends, Rudd explaining his role with Jimmy and the other charity.

With a pause in the chatting, Jimmy said, ‘And this is Cosy, he is a man without a heart seeking a cause.’

Cosy frowned his lack of understanding at that, greeting Mary in Flemish. She was just as pleased as she been with Rudd, the three of them chatting away.

‘Rudd,’ Jimmy called. ‘Draw up a list of what Mary needs, use her office.’ They headed off. He faced Cosy. ‘You ... come with me.’ They climbed the stairs to the terminal ward, a stark contrast to its original state, finding Anna in attendance. She beamed a huge smile. ‘Hello Anna.’

They shook, Cosy also shaking her hand.

‘Deutsch?’ he asked.

‘Yah? Sie?’

‘Nederlander.’

‘Anna studied in Amsterdam,’ Jimmy told Cosy. He chatted to a few sick children as Cosy and Anna chatted about Amsterdam. Returning he said, ‘A lot more sick children.’

She sighed. ‘Yah, they know we have money.’

Jimmy faced Cosy. 'The locals dump their sick kids here. We've gone from eighty to three hundred and fifty.'

'And now two or three a day,' Anna put in. 'We do not turn any away.'

'I'll buy the land behind, it's only swamp at the moment.'

Anna straightened. 'How much land?'

'Enough for three thousand children.'

'Drei tousand!'

'Was there a reason you remained here, Anna?' Jimmy knowingly asked. 'You've been here three months.' Cosy was not following.

'I gave up my work to stay here,' she softly explained. 'Mary gives me food and a room.'

'Not much of a living ... for a doctor?' Jimmy posed.

'What better use for a doctor ... than the edge of hell itself?' she countered.

'Well, then. We'd best make some sick children better. Get a needle.'

Jimmy hadn't finished the sentence before she had spun around and retrieved several syringes. He was already in a short-sleeve shirt and so simply raised his left arm, firm eye contact maintained with Cosy as Anna drew blood. When she injected the first child Cosy's eyes widened. He closed in on her. Four kids later Anna was back, a fresh needle selected.

With Anna at the far end of the long dormitory Cosy stood next to Jimmy, but focused on the keen medic. 'What the fuck is she doing?'

'I discovered long ago, that my blood has unusual properties,' Jimmy softly stated.

'Unusual ... properties?'

'Yes. My blood cures all diseases known to man – cancer, AIDS, everything. Strange, eh?'

Cosy stared, his mouth open. 'Strange? *Strange?*'

Anna jogged back and thrust another needle into Jimmy's right arm, Jimmy maintaining eye contact with Cosy.

Cosy stammered, 'You ... you...'

'Could cure everyone in Africa? Probably, but I'm only one man, and my blood cannot be reproduced in a lab.'

Anna returned and took off her jacket, just a bra on underneath. She held a fresh needle. 'If you inject me ... I will

not have any disease? I can stay here, in Africa, no risk of health problem?’

‘If I inject you, Anna, you’ll live to be around one hundred and fifty years old,’ Jimmy explained.

She slowly nodded. ‘And I will still be here.’

Jimmy leant towards her. ‘Let’s hope Africa is sorted before then.’ He offered her his right arm again, a syringe filled with dark blood a minute later. Without a word he injected her, a smug smile spread across her face. ‘For the next day you will run a fever, drink a lot of water and eat protein. After three days you will sleep less, only four hours a night and you will be strong, very strong – you can run a marathon for Kenya.’ She put her jacket back on. ‘Oh, and Anna ... after three months you can inject children with *your* blood.’

‘I can do it?’

‘It will not be strong like mine, but it *will* help.’

Mary appeared without Rudd, Anna beaming a smile and tapping her inner elbow. Mary clasped her hands together. ‘A miracle.’

‘A miracle?’ Cosy challenged, still stunned.

Mary grabbed him by the arm and, speaking in Flemish, dragging him down the stairs. In the courtyard Cosy met several very healthy looking kids, saved from death’s door.

When Jimmy reached him he said, ‘Get a taxi back when you’re ready.’ He collected Rudd, and his new lists, joining Big Paul in the corner café, sat at the pavement tables.

‘Nothing of interest,’ Big Paul casually stated.

‘Maybe nobody loves us,’ Jimmy stated.

Big Paul tapped Jimmy’s inner elbows. ‘Given blood?’

‘Yeah, they rope me in sometimes.’

Rudd was horrified. ‘I forgot to give blood.’

‘Next time, they got enough for emergencies,’ Jimmy insisted. He tapped the lists. ‘If you allow yourself to get too involved down here they’ll have you working for *them* only – and you’ll get nothing done. *Do not* ... let them take all your time.’

He shrugged. ‘OK, Boss.’

‘I want you to oversee the building work at the back, nothing more.’

Rudd raised a finger, ‘She said they get two or three kids a day dropped in.’

‘Is there space?’ Big Paul puzzled.

‘No, in a word,’ Jimmy answered. ‘So we’re building more dorms at the rear. Plan is for three thousand.’

Rudd almost choked. ‘Three thousand? Are you crazy? It’ll be the biggest orphanage in all Africa!’

Jimmy sipped his beer. ‘Got to be done. I’m going to buy a school in Nairobi as well. The kids from here who are bright will go there.’

‘Jesus,’ Big Paul let out. ‘Didn’t think you were into all this.’

‘Anyway, there is *apparently* an elephant sanctuary an hour away. We’ll pop and have a look.’

A joke with meaning

As we left the turtle and returned to the hotel’s main buildings Jimmy said, ‘Oh, Paul, we left a gift for you and your lady friend in your room.’

Big Paul’s guttural laugh suggested that something was amiss. I glanced at Judy and we quickened our pace. Opening the hut door we noticed something on the bed, partly covered in a blanket. Closing in we were unable to speak as a baby elephant stirred. Judy melted in an instant and I had a glimpse of what was behind the apparent joke. She lay on one side, me on the other, as the cub, as big as a large dog, stirred. It raised its trunk as a knock came from the open door. A guard stepped in with several plastic milk bottles, extra blankets and packs of tissues. With a huge grin he retreated, closing the door.

Thirty minutes later we were hand feeding the cub its milk, a hell of a mess created. Thirty minutes after that we were down to our pants in the shower cubicle, our feet warm with elephant pee. I don’t know what the neighbours thought, shrill elephant calls in the night, but we just didn’t give a shit. Hell, it was Africa, what did they expect.

We managed to get some sleep after towelling down the cub at length, but the damn thing snored and farted, not that we cared. At dawn we put on swimsuits and led our offspring, aptly named Jimmy, to the water’s edge. Nervous at first to follow us in, it eventually got wet, Judy trying to wash its arse end as the

hotel cleaners wandered past. I noticed Jimmy standing at the beach bar. The first few guests on the beach came over to us and stroked the cub, who was enjoying the attention. Every time we got it out of the water it rolled in the sand, so we shoved it back in; it was a never-ending process. We eventually coaxed it to the beach bar, where it flopped down in the shade, farted and fell asleep.

Jimmy joined us as we flopped down, exhausted. 'Vet will be here in an hour.'

'Where on earth did it come from?' Judy asked.

'We visited an elephant sanctuary yesterday and gave them some money, pinched the little fella 'cause they can't cope. They were going to put it down.'

'Ahhhh, no!' Judy protested. 'Can it stay here?'

'Sure. The guy with the larger elephant will look after it, it needs its own kind. Fuck all chance of re-introducing it to a herd.'

'Not going to take it to the lodge?' I questioned.

'Lions would get it at night,' Jimmy suggested. 'Safer here.' He glanced around as someone I could not see approached. 'There is *something* we'll take up there, though.'

A loud cry preceded a lion cub being placed onto my lap, the little fella the size of a fully-grown Spaniel. I grabbed its two front paws and held its head up, and Judy melted again, all sorts of funny noises emitted from the human female. Soon we had a crowd, every kid in the hotel holding the lion cub to be photographed.

'Where did that come from?' I asked as Rudd held it for guests.

'Same sanctuary, but they had fuck all idea how to treat a lion.'

'We taking it to the lodge?'

Jimmy nodded, swiping away flies, a glance over his shoulder at the snoring elephant. 'Can't re-introduce it, it can live in the lodge. Anyway, tomorrow we'll head there, so pack tonight.'

'Room's a mess,' I warned.

'That's what happens when newly-weds are left alone,' Jimmy noted.

That night we reclaimed a clean room.

'Right, no elephants?' she asked.

‘Nope.’

‘No lions?’

‘Nope.’

‘No bloody turtles?’

‘Nope, just me. And the smell of elephant pee.’

We stripped off and got into the shower cubicle, kicking the water with our feet to remove the lingering smell.

Our arrival at the lodge, now imaginatively and aptly renamed to River View, was marred with the discovery of the carcass of an elephant. Its demise was not down to poachers, just old age, the staff cutting its tusks off to remove the temptation from the locals. Nature would do the rest, little remaining of the once magnificent beast in a few days.

I carried the cub into the main hall, two couples in attendance. ‘Like lions?’ I asked the first startled couple. Wide eyed, they nodded, so I plonked it onto the man’s lap. ‘Found this outside, so watch out for its mum.’

Judy and I headed to the bar for some food, Jimmy reassuring the guests that they were in no danger. The resident pooch, however, looked to be in some danger of serious play fights that night. Judy stood on the low wooden wall that separated the bar from the attractions, hands on hips. ‘Beautiful,’ she let out. I agreed, but not just about the view. We sat and chatted over coffee and a sandwich, Jimmy appearing with the lion cub perched on a forearm, its paws gripped between his fingers. He showed it the savannah, the cub’s nose working overtime, its eyes focusing on nearby cattle.

Facing us Jimmy explained, ‘Got a few days, kick back. I booked you on a trip with the guests in the morning, 9am.’

There were now more staff, I noted, and now in neat uniforms, all very polite and efficient for the guests. Of the lodge itself some areas had been patched up, some painted. Old mosquito screens had been replaced, new iron grills placed over each window. Immediately below the bar rested several corrugated iron benches, a few wooden benches dotted about. Near them stood a metal stand with three sets of large binoculars fixed to the top. Two new chalets were under construction, looking sturdier than the others; plan was to make them two-

storey, a lounge downstairs and bedroom upstairs with a roof terrace. They sounded nice.

As we sat there eating, Jimmy had the cub on its back on his knees, its head falling back as he tickled it. With the cub subdued he clipped its nails with a small silver nail-clipper. Supporting the cub's head with a large hand he whispered to it, the cub tapping his face and clawing at his hair.

'He's a good man,' Judy said admiringly. I wondered if she might be a convert in the making.

A lion roar caused the cub to jump up. It climbed up onto Jimmy's shoulders and held on, staring into the distance as a lonesome male roared.

An hour later, with the sun setting, the three sets of couples were sat on the benches and admiring the view. Distant storm clouds split in two and a starburst of sunlight painted the sky, a red tinge to the fingers of light. So, this is what the marriage thing feels like, I considered. Well, the honeymoon bit at least.

We ate with the gang, Cosy now with a new attitude – although I had no idea why at the time. After the meal the couples settled around the big old tree keeping the roof up and chatted away; weddings and churches. And River View beach hotel; I should have figured that they had been there together, a few days ago, and just missing us. They each had interesting stories of wedding day mishaps, but we surprised when we explained that we had just met. They were then amazed by the tale of the turtle on the beach and the elephant in our room. We certainly trumped them on interesting stories.

The lion cub ran in twice, playfully chased by the dog, then less than playfully chasing the dog back out. When it fell asleep in the bar Jimmy brought it in without waking it, laying it on a blanket on a coffee table, everyone patting it gently, the dog asleep at my feet. With the couples heading off to bed around midnight we joined the gang in the bar, several staff in khaki green also in attendance.

'No sign of the terrible trio?' I asked as we plonked down.

'Off shooting poachers, I hope,' Jimmy explained.

'Shooting poachers?' Judy asked, seemingly horrified at the idea.

Jimmy faced her. 'You know how they kill elephants? Three or four of them get as close as they can to a herd, armed with

machineguns. They spray the herd, hoping to kill a few. None die straight away, so they follow the blood trails. Many survive for days or weeks, some live on with the wounds to show for it.'

'My God,' she gasped, a hand to her mouth. I had to admit it, she was a good spy.

'So we fight fire with fire,' Jimmy softly stated. 'And as for the terrible trio, they bunk with the staff down the road when there are paying guests here. Cosy can meet them tomorrow, sniff them out. Unless, of course, he'd like a job down here.'

'Here?' Cosy repeated.

'Kenya.'

'Doing...?' Cosy asked after a moment's reflection.

'Helping Rudd for a start, he's flat out busy. I could do with someone to build that orphanage, plus help out at the airfield as it grows – I don't want Rudd to spend his life in that jeep.'

Rudd nodded as he held his beer. 'It is a lot of kilometres.'

'Money would be OK, and regular. Plus I'd get you an apartment in Nairobi.'

'UK Government wouldn't be happy,' Cosy suggested.

'They don't care if you live or die,' Jimmy firmly suggested.

Judy was not followed. 'You work for the Government?'

'Civil Service,' Cosy stated for her benefit. 'But it's part-time work. An ... uncertain future.'

Judy put in, 'I thought civil servants had jobs for life.'

'Not in my department,' Cosy stated.

We chatted for another hour, the cool night air punctuated with animal noises and lion roar. Judy and I were so relaxed we didn't even have sex, just cuddled up and fell asleep; ten small Rums had helped to close my eyes. That, and the atmosphere. I was feeling things that I had never felt before.

I woke early, 5am, and slipped out quietly in a grey half-light, finding Jimmy at the bar feeding the lion cub and the dog. I stroked the cub, helping myself to a coffee; the staff were still asleep. 'Did you go to bed?'

'I got an hour. Sat here with Cosy till 3am.'

'Sounded last night like you converted him?'

'He'll worry about his old boss, but I have some dirt on the guy. After his handler is removed he can quit and come down here.'

'You trust him?'

Jimmy nodded. 'Yesterday he saw me give blood.'

'What?' I whispered.

Jimmy said, 'He'll fall for the big German doctor, Anna. They'll have kids.'

'Jesus, she's an inch taller barefoot!'

'He likes big girls. By the way, I injected her.'

'What?' I whisper again.

He took in the view. 'She'll start to use her own blood on the kids, that was always the plan; an army of people like her.'

'Christ. What about my blood...?'

'If you inject someone it'll have the effect of fifty-percent of my blood, still enough to cure most things. Anna is one of a dozen doctors I'll inject and send off.'

'Won't they get noticed?'

'Not for ten years or so. Besides, it's an important part of my mission. The more of the blood that gets spread, the better chance mankind has later.'

I didn't like the sound of that. 'Later...'

'We'll talk about it some other time, you enjoy yourself down here.'

The cub launched itself at my bare ankle. I screamed, Jimmy laughing. With teeth marks in my leg, I snuggled up to Judy.

She stirred, stretching out with a big smile. 'Hello stranger,' she croaked.

'Room service, madam?'

'Oh, yeah. Tea in bed.'

I curled a lip. 'After.' She screamed loudly as I tickled her.

We joined the day's jeep safari with the other couples, Skids riding shotgun with an M16. Stopping at a bend in the river, the staff set-up picnic tables, the guests warned not to go near the river. With everyone watching, Skids shot a young Gazelle on the waterside, the other animals scattering. We waited ten minutes before noting a giant log moving through the brown water.

'That's old Fred,' Skids announced. 'Twenty-two feet long, and about three tonnes. And he could be anything up to ninety years old.'

We were all amazed as we observed the monster crawl out and snatch up the Gazelle, retreating to the water.

Skids added, 'He could eat any of you whole. So no swimming, please – lots of forms to fill in if you get eaten. But we will nick your luggage at least.'

We stood around and chatted, peering through binoculars, the men folk getting some basic weapon instruction from Skids, a few shots fired at a can on a tree stump. By time we got back we were exhausted, the heat having an effect, even on me. Judy and I lay on the bed clothed, Judy soon asleep and snuggled up. I even closed my eyes for half an hour.

That evening's event was a barbeque, a wild boar roasting over an open fire on the grass below the lodge. A couple from a neighbouring farm joined us, tales told of the animals, and life down here. At one point Skids walked out, readied his rifle, took careful aim and fired into the dark a few times. Returning to the light from the fire he said, 'Sorry about that, but we got a curious pack of hyenas of late. They get close some times, barbeque hog will do that.'

'Did you kill them?' a woman asked.

'No, just hit the dirt near them. They won't be back tonight.' He went and sat in the dark, our unseen bodyguard.

The guests departed the next day, driven to Nairobi in a new minibus painted like a zebra and displaying our name. At least it could also be used at the beach hotel as well, I figured. Judy and I set off on our own private foot safari with the notorious trio, plenty of weapons instruction for us both. On the way back we literally tripped across two cheetah cubs hiding in the grass. The guys searched around, soon finding a carcass; mother cheetah.

Trev coldly stated, 'Lion.'

I picked up one cub, Judy another. The trio were not impressed, suggesting we leave them to nature, but I reminded them who paid their wages. I hiked back with a tickly cheetah cub wriggling under my shirt.

Jimmy took one look at the cubs and ordered the staff to hand rear them. We agreed to keep them away from the lion cub for now, it was already five times bigger. Now the lodge had a zoo of its own, Jimmy certain that it would please the guests. That evening was spent with the cubs in our hut, an old dog basket used for a bed. Unlike the elephant and lion cub, these little fellas spent most of the time sleeping. After a good feed they simply

collapsed into a ball of fur. At 1am, with Judy and our children asleep, I slipped out, finding Jimmy and Cosy at the bar.

‘How are the kids?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Asleep, thankfully.’ I settled down with a beer I pulled myself, the staff gone.

‘You seem to be getting along OK,’ Cosy noted.

‘Getting on great,’ I said, although I felt a shudder when I considered who she was, and what would happen in a few days. We’d go our separate ways.

‘She asked many questions?’ Cosy enquired with a professional interest, sounding as if his pride was still hurting.

‘Nope, cool as ice. A real professional – no offence.’

‘Cosy is a good man,’ Jimmy stated. ‘He just hasn’t found his niche yet. When he does he’ll know it.’

Cosy studied Jimmy. ‘You sound a lot older than you look.’

‘He gets that a lot,’ I put in. ‘So, what’ll you write about us when you get back.’

‘Nothing, I’ll give a verbal report.’

‘And...?’ I nudged.

He did not answer.

Jimmy said, ‘If he’s wise, he’ll tell them what they want to hear – that I just like to associate myself with hero types – and then he’ll use the info I’ll give him, dirt on Bob Telling. After Telling is kicked out his new handler will show little interest and Cosy will quit, flying to West Africa with the money I give him. After a month of doing nothing there he’ll fly over to Nairobi and join Rudd, maybe having the odd dinner date with Doctor Anna Pfunt.’

‘Sounds Cosy, no pun intended,’ I said, swiping away a large moth attracted to the bar’s lights.

Jimmy added, ‘Once an African, always an African. Cosy misses his roots and, I’d guess, would like to do something useful with his life – maybe even building a large orphanage.’

‘We’ll see,’ Cosy muttered.

The next day we thanked the staff and set-off again. I didn’t ask Judy how much time she had, I just couldn’t bring myself to put a timescale on things. This was starting to hurt a bit.

We took a leisurely four and a half hours to reach the airfield, the Old Dogs expecting us. We clocked the new foundations for

a building opposite the main gate as we were stopped at the guard post. The fence had also been extended beyond where I could see an end to it. The air traffic control tower looked good as new, a new brick building next to it finished except a roof. The internal roads had been repaired, the edges clearly marked with whitewashed boulders. A water tower had been erected and the place was starting to look like a camp. No wonder MI6 were interested.

I took Judy to the roof bar; an outdoor fridge and few deckchairs. With cool drinks in hands we took in the building work and I explained what everything did and what new areas would do some day. Now she did start to ask questions like a spy, and I was disappointed. Truthfully, I answered all her questions in great detail – after all, we had nothing to hide. She seemed impressed with our charitable intentions. Rudd and Jimmy did a quick inspection tour with the Old Dogs, Cosy in tow and trailing behind with his hands clasped behind his back. We met up with them in the NAAFI an hour later, not looking forward to our accommodation that night.

The Old Dogs spoke at length about plans and projects, trainees coming through. It went on and on, Jimmy changing plans and introducing new ideas. But he always managed to make it appear that it was either their idea, or inevitable. Doc Adam turned up and joined us, he and Rudd having a private chat outside about supplies.

With the Doc gone the Old Dogs vented their concern. ‘Have you seen what the Doc’s building?’ Mac asked.

‘What’s wrong, Mac?’ Jimmy knowingly asked.

‘He’s building fucking Buckingham Palace!’

‘How many rooms?’

‘Five at least in there, plans for more,’ they complained.

‘Gentlemen,’ I cut in, knowing a lot about the Doc’s plans. After all, I got his faxes every week. ‘The budget for that building is separate to this base. The funds for this base are ring-fenced, he can’t dip into them.’

‘Oh,’ Mac let out, easing back. ‘Well, OK then. But he nicks our labourers, some of our wood.’

‘Mac,’ I called. ‘You remember what this place used to be like?’ They glanced at each other. ‘If someone offers you ten sweets, you don’t fold your arms and ask for twelve.’

Jimmy hid a smile.

‘Aye, right you are, boss,’ Mac conceded.

I added, ‘We’re going to build this place up till you three are like directors of a big Plc in the city, a hundred staff. So stop whinging, eh?’

Judy faced Jimmy. ‘Got any cute young animals?’

‘What, you don’t find these three cute?’ Jimmy asked, thumbing towards the Old Dogs and getting a laugh out of them.

‘Got a pet if ya wants it,’ Mac said. He stepped out, bringing back in a tarantula bigger than his hand.

Judy wasn’t frightened at all. With both hands she took it, showing it to me. For the most part it seemed docile.

‘What do you feed it on?’ I asked Mac.

‘Grasshoppers. It crunches ‘em up something terrible, pulls their wings off.’

‘I don’t mind them this size,’ she said. ‘It’s the smaller ones I don’t like.’

‘A few of them around here too, love,’ Mac informed her with a grin.

Rudd and Doc returned, glances at the huge spider, neither keen of the furry crawler.

With Rudd and Doc settled, Jimmy called them all order. ‘OK, gentlemen –’

‘And lady,’ Judy put in.

Jimmy focused on her. ‘Are you planning on spending the next few years at this base, helping out?’

She glanced at the waiting faces. ‘Nope.’

‘OK, gentlemen,’ he started again. ‘In addition to the mine trainees undergoing first aid training I want some dedicated medics trained here. By that I mean a six month course with some ordnance training, in fact a good ordnance grounding comparatively, the aim being to send these medics into shit-holes like Eastern Zaire to help out.

‘In order to move that process along and to give it some focus, as well as more trained staff, we’ll start to get involved with the Flying Doctor Service. At the moment that service is just about two doctors and an old Cessna, but that will grow rapidly when I get involved. The runway here I want cleaned up and fixed, although as it stands a Cessna can land on it without a problem.’

‘We patched up the holes,’ Mac reported. ‘I’ll get some boys out there with sweeping brushes, get the wee stones off it.’

‘It may need a small fence on the eastern side, about fifty yards out, something to catch the sand,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘I’ll have a look before I go,’ Rudd put in.

‘I want a Cessna on the runway inside two months, a hut for two doctors, their kit, and someone who can refuel it. No need to drag an engineer out here yet, they can fly in if necessary. What you will need are some lights for nights if necessary. In essence, we need to be at the point where we can fly a Cessna up from Nairobi and onward to remote outposts.’

He faced Doc Adam. ‘I want a training program for medics, to go into Zaire. To start with they will be nurses and medics from hospitals, already qualified. The training they’ll need will be map reading, jeep driving, survival and cooking, ordnance disposal – that sort of thing. And Rudd, I want the UN and the Kenyan Government involved at each stage. Let them know what we’re doing, ask them for help and advice, offer to supply courses for medics with ordnance to the UN.’

Rudd made a careful note. ‘I know the man to talk to. What... what pay rates for the trainees?’

‘Whatever they would get elsewhere,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘They get very little during training, it’s often done on a voluntary basis, hope of a job at the end,’ Rudd explained.

‘Pick a figure that will keep them interested,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘And before we subject them to Mac’s cooking –’ The Old Dogs laughed. ‘- let’s see about a better canteen here, a two storey barrack room, basic but functional. I know we’re out of the way here, but let’s make it home from home, eh?’

‘Mac, work out a map reading course or two, a jeep driving course – off-road, vehicle maintenance, some survival skills. Take them on long trips to the greener areas, get them used to the following mission profile: long drive, tough terrain, map reading, do some first aid, drive back. If someone is going into the Congo, sorry *Zaire*, they should be as well equipped as possible. Do a geography course as well, so they know their way around this part of Africa; most of these kids have never been outside their home town.’

‘Quite a ramp-up, boss,’ Mac noted with a hint of reticence.

‘I have every faith in you Old Dogs,’ Jimmy stated. ‘Plus, Cosy here may be joining you, lending a hand. He’s from West Africa, speaks a few languages, good with planning and... dangerous situations.’

Cosy offered no comment.

‘So, enough to be going on with,’ Jimmy said. ‘I’m happy with the progress so far, but I *will* stretch you in the future. So next time I come I want a proper bar, and a full sized Olympic swimming pool, complete with diving boards.’

Everyone laughed.

‘Aye, boss. Have that in next week.’

Jimmy focused on me. ‘We arrived a week too soon. Bugger. OK, Doc with me, rest get some food and booze, guests quarters are *very* basic.’ He stepped out with Doc Adam as Mac arranged some dodgy meat and chips.

Two days later we were back in Nairobi at the rooftop bar, saying our goodbyes to Judy. I accompanied her to the airport, not wanting to say goodbye, but also being cool about it. For the whole time together I never once thought of her as the enemy, and technically she wasn’t. She had a job to do, so did I. We kissed at the check-in gate and I headed back in a taxi.

I found Jimmy sat at the bar alone, reading a local paper. ‘She get off alright?’ he asked without looking up.

‘Yeah,’ I said, heaving a great sigh.

‘Got her number in London?’

‘What for?’ I curtly asked.

‘To see her again, dumb fuck.’

I frowned, then turned to face him. ‘What, you think they’ll try and use her again – keep an eye on us at the flat?’

‘Who’s *they*?’ he asked without looking up.

‘They ... MI6 ... they.’

‘MI6 has no idea who she is. She’s an air hostess, dumb fuck.’

‘What? Will you start making some sense.’

‘I said she was a spy to piss off Cosy.’

‘She ... she ... I she.’ My head was spinning.

Jimmy laughed, now looking up. ‘Yes, dumb fuck, she’s a lovely girl. And not a spy at all.’

‘She’s ... she’s not?’

‘No. But there is something more you need to know.’

‘What?’ My head was filled with a range of emotions I had not encountered before.

‘I recognised her, that’s why I asked you to chat her up. You’ll spend the next year with her,’ he said with a huge grin. ‘Good few days, was it?’

I found myself pointing in a direction that seemed to represent where she was. ‘I’ll ... I’ll spend a year with her?’

‘More if you’re sensible.’

My face took control and I smiled so wide it hurt.

Jimmy added, ‘I couldn’t tell you before, I wanted it to pan out this way. Everything in its time and slot, step by step.’

I sat back and stared up at the sky. ‘A year.’

‘Next weekend, invite her over, her parents live in Potters Bar, she lives in Enfield at the moment. Oh, I got you a flat downstairs, number 21. Same floor as Big Paul, but a much better flat, same view as your room.’

‘For ... for me to see Judy?’

‘What else? I don’t smell.’

‘A year,’ I repeated, gazing up at the clouds.

Big Paul plonked down. ‘Told him?’

‘Yep, he’s gone all puppy dog on us.’

‘What about Cosy?’ Big Paul asked.

‘Some things are inevitable.’

Big Paul took a reflective moment. ‘When do I...?’

‘More than a year away, so enjoy your freedom a bit.’

‘Never did, really,’ he replied. ‘Always had a problem trusting a girl till I knew her a few months at least.’

‘I know,’ Jimmy responded. ‘But love is in the air.’

‘What about you?’ Big Paul asked.

‘There’s a girl I bump into when I get back, she’ll be around a while.’

I was still staring at the clouds.

First contact

Cosy arranged for the detail of Bob Telling’s misdemeanours to be handed in an hour before he himself arrived at the MOD

building. By time he was ushered in Telling was gone, Telling's superior issuing a curt, 'Report?'

'This guy Silo just likes to talk the talk with mercenaries, makes him look big in front of his mates. There's nothing to it, the ex-SAS boys are hunting poachers for his safari park. As for their *other work* – he don't have a clue.'

'What I figured. OK, we'll ... er ... contact you via the usual channels if we need you, you'll be paid in the usual way. Thank you.'

Cosy knew when he stepped out that day that he would never return. A smile took hold as he walked along damp grey streets under a damp grey sky, longing for African sunsets. Within a few hours he was at Heathrow, having packed up that morning; one suitcase, not much to show for a life.

Jack Donohue took receipt of Bob Telling's unauthorised Magestic files, immediately noting an active placement, an agent in place in an apartment in Belgravia. 'Who the hell is Jimmy Silo?' he muttered. He opened the file and started to skim through it. 'Born in Wales, lives in London, stock market trader, charitable donor. Interesting, very ... interesting. Six foot four? *Nineteen stone!* In his twenties! No way in hell. Kenya? Mercenaries? What the hell did Telling believe Magestic to be?'

He skimmed through the pages, stopping at a stock trading record. He ran a finger down the right hand column, frowning at the detail before grabbing a calculator. Slowly, very slowly, his cheek creased into a big smirk. He checked again the figures at length. Ten minutes later he interrupted Sykes. 'Sir.'

'Make it quick, please.'

'I found something. And I'll be needing a pay rise, a minor promotion and a much better office.' He sat and folded his arms. And waited.

Sykes eased back and carefully regarded Jack. 'Well, it must be good.' He forced up his eyebrows. 'Magestic?'

'Better.'

'Better?'

Jack explained, 'I've always believed that Magestic was sending letters to many people, and we know that he traded the '87 stock market crash and gave money to charity. What I have now ... is someone with a fifteen-thousand percent a year stock trading record.'

‘Fifteen-thousand percent!’ the deputy whispered, whipping off his glasses.

Jack smiled and nodded. ‘I figured that you’re always complaining about lack of funds...’

Sykes eased forwards. ‘Jack, you’re sneaky little shit, you know that.’ He wagged a finger. ‘You’re wasted in Research.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

‘So, how would *you* handle this?’

‘Plausible deniability, sir. You send me a memo telling me not to pursue such matters, P.M. does the same to you. I’ll go chat to our friend. If there is a problem it rests with me, a *junior* grade employee – at the moment.’

With a grin Sykes rummaged through his draws, handing over a sheet. ‘That account is empty, so if something ends up in there I’ll know why ... and who. Till then ... this is all speculation.’ He put his glasses back on.

‘I’ll ... *not* ... let you know how it goes, sir.’ With a smirk Jack stood and left.

I went to check out my new apartment, noticing on the way the word “spy” spray painted onto the door between Big Paul’s apartment and mine, fluorescent green letters. With a smirk I turned the key on number 21 and entered.

It was under my old bedroom, the same view over the street, and about a quarter of the size of the main apartment. Big Paul’s apartment, at the opposite end of the corridor, was the same size, yet more modestly decorated. This apartment had been done out like our penthouse, an almost identical style, the same furniture. I looked around, pulled a face, then went back upstairs. ‘It’s just like this place,’ I told Jimmy.

‘Home from home,’ Jimmy responded.

Big Paul appeared just as I settled with a fresh mug of tea. ‘Might have a spot of bother with Philby, Burgess and Maclean,’ he reported. ‘I met my new neighbour and offered to kick his teeth in.’

With seemingly little interest Jimmy said, ‘He’ll move out, he’s not stupid. An old couple will move in – *after* the door’s been cleaned up.’ He shot Big Paul a quick look.

The intercom buzzed, the doorman calling us. Visitors.

‘Guess I’m in trouble,’ Big Paul announced, sounding none too bothered.

I pressed the button. ‘Yes?’

‘There’s a Jack Donohue here to see Jimmy. Is he expected?’ crackled from the microphone.

‘Yes,’ Jimmy called without looking up.

‘Send him up,’ I said, releasing the button.

‘Paul, grab a Kitkat, some Bourbons and make tea, white no sugar, please.’ I got to it. Jimmy faced Big Paul. ‘Before this guy gets here disappear, please. Use the stairs.’

Big Paul disappeared out the door.

I placed down the tea and treats as the door buzzed, stepping across and opening it. ‘Come on in, your tea is fresh, milk no sugar, Kitkat and Bourbons.’

The man smiled, shaking his head as he entered. He appeared to me to be in his late thirties, now wearing a tweed jacket with leather elbow pads. Somehow, the jacket seemed to suit him. Either that, or he suited the Jacket.

‘Hello Jack,’ Jimmy offered as he stood, sounding like he was greeting a much loved old friend. They shook.

‘I guess you’ve been expecting me,’ Jack said with a smile. ‘Get a letter did you?’

‘No Jack.’ They settled, I slouched into a chair.

‘No ... letter?’ Jack puzzled.

‘No, Jack. Would you like to give me the bank account details now, get it over with?’

Jack stared across at Jimmy, glanced at me, then produced the sheet.

Jimmy glanced at it before handing it to me. ‘Ring the bank, transfer half a million from the principle account.’ I stepped into the office.

‘Just like that,’ Jack stated, still carefully eyeing Jimmy. ‘You know, you don’t fit the profile, you sound much older.’

‘How old do you think I am, Jack?’

‘Your file says twenty-six.’

‘Closer to a hundred, Jack.’

Jack stared back, frozen to his seat. ‘You’re not...’

‘No, I’m part of his team. And the reason that I have muscles, Jack, is down to genetic engineering. It’s necessary to survive the rigours of time travel.’

Jack's eyes widened. 'Time...'

'Yes, Jack. The Americans were *almost* correct, although I'm not an astronaut. I'm one of a team, headed by Magestic.'

'Wha ... what ... what for?'

'What's our purpose? Simple, and you already know: World War Three. It will kick-off at some point from 2011 to 2017.'

'Why ... why...'

'Why not a fixed date? Why do think, Jack, you're a smart man?'

Jack thought about it. 'Your ... your presence here alters things?'

'Correct. The more we fix, the later it gets. It doesn't go away, but does get more manageable, more ... planned for. Sorry to tell you, Jack, but between now and 2025 most of the people on the planet will be killed, a wasteland left behind.'

Jack sipped his tea, his throat dry.

'You know what the main cause will be, Jack?' Jack lifted his eyes. 'Future British and American Governments colluding to start a small war - to *assist* their economies. But a spark can cause a fire, and destroy a planet. The question that will shape and define the rest of your life, Jack, is ... do you trust Magestic more than your own government? Because if you hand me in ... well, you know what will happen. And between now and then there will be a few wars, a few plagues, a financial crisis, large scale terrorist attacks. If you upset our plans, Jack, millions will die. Not the kind of decision you want to make over just the one cup of tea.'

I returned and sat.

Jack said, 'If ... if you don't want to be caught, then why the money?'

'Best place to hide a big lie, Jack, is behind a smaller one,' Jimmy stated.

I put in, 'When they find the smaller lie ... they stop looking.'

Jack glanced my way, appearing quite unwell.

Jimmy continued, 'You came here fully believing that Magestic is sending me stock market tips. As far as the world is concerned ... he is, and I'll co-operate with your department and send you some money. That relationship will allow you to pop around here whenever you like, and you can get to know us.'

‘I’m Paul, Little Paul the stock trader,’ I said. ‘There’s also a Big Paul - the bruiser.’

Jimmy faced me, ‘Jack here works for MI6. He was assigned the task of making some sense of the Magestic letters.’

I nodded my understanding.

Our guest timidly asked me, ‘Are you...?’

‘No, just the hired help; I make the tea. The other team members are far and wide around the world,’ I lied. ‘Met one, nice enough.’ Jimmy had not reacted.

Jack sipped his tea, still appearing unwell. ‘Wow.’

‘What do you think you’ll do after you retire, Jack?’ Jimmy posed. ‘Perhaps ... join us, help us save the world.’

‘Join ... join you?’

‘Of course. We already know your pedigree, Jack. You’re a good man.’

‘Not sure I could resist interrogation if this gets out,’ Jack quietly mentioned.

‘It won’t,’ Jimmy assured him. ‘Tell them what they want to hear, I’ll do the rest. They’ll never believe who I am, not till many years into the future. And by then...’

‘By then they’ll have taken the money for many years,’ Jack finished off. ‘They won’t dare expose you.’

‘Symmetry, eh, Jack?’ Jimmy joked. ‘Try your Kitkat, keep the blood sugar levels up.’

I liked our new friend, even though he was in awe of us. Sometimes I didn’t know quite how to deal with him and I often frightened him with jokes that he took too seriously. But overall we got on very well.

New neighbours, an old issue

‘The doorman just told me we got new neighbours,’ I informed Jimmy. ‘The old couple that you suggested.’

He heaved a big sigh, inspecting the ceiling cornice.

‘Problems?’ I asked, sitting opposite.

He lowered his gaze. ‘They have a daughter.’

‘Nice, is she?’

He sighed again. 'Yeah, she's nice, and if I'm not careful I'll spend the next few years with her.'

'What's wrong with that?'

He shot me a look. 'Anyone close to me will eventually get suspicious. As she will.' He stretched his neck muscles.

'So ... how you going to play it?'

'She plays a role in the big game, unfortunately. If I don't... date her, two pieces of the puzzle will have to be ... re-worked.'

'*Can* they be re-worked?' I asked.

'Not very easily.'

'It's necessary then. Take one for the team.'

He shot me a look again as I grinned back. 'You seeing Judy this weekend?'

'Yep, it's her first day off since Kenya. She'll be over Friday night.'

He waved a hand, taking in the flat. 'You can use this place whenever you like, of course. And the car.'

'You might have your hands full yourself,' I teased.

'They get on very well, Judy and Liz,' he said without looking up.

'Liz? The daughter of the old couple? How old is she?'

'Thirty, birthday just gone. Right now she's in husband hunting mode, mid-life crisis.'

'What's she like?' I nudged.

'Perfect,' he softly responded. 'She works for a charity off Oxford Circus. Waste of her talent really, she's very bright.' He looked up. 'Oh, well.'

'That's the spirit, boss.' I thrust a fist forwards. 'Tackle the problem of dating beautiful women head on.'

'Shut up.'

'Yes, boss.'

With my invitation of a "welcome coffee morning" accepted, the old couple popped-up on Thursday, no sign of a daughter yet. Jimmy greeted them warmly, offering seats and tea. We settled down and exchanged basic lifestyle details, occupations past and present given. The old guy, Roger, had been in the Navy, then ship-broking, his wife, Heather, working at the same charity as their daughter, but part-time.

Jimmy got Roger onto sailing and they found a mutual love of small boats and ocean sailing. But when we said we owned a hotel in Kenya their faces lit up; they had both considered retiring down there and I had visions of where this could end up. I showed them pictures of River View on the coast and River View in the savannah, the couple accepting Jimmy's invitation to visit. He did not need to offer twice and I figured they'd go straight downstairs and pack.

They were quite well off, they'd have to be to be living in this block, and they had visited Kenya many times over the past twenty years; they promised to bring their photo-album up next time. Roger also liked the stock markets and was keen to pick our brains. I could see it all unfolding before my eyes.

Jimmy told Roger he wanted to hear about various naval campaigns that Roger had been in, an invitation for several days worth of chitchat. Jimmy did, however, suggest they do it alone, without boring Heather with the detail. They arranged a future date at the Chinese, Roger a great fan of spicy food.

Jimmy mentioned Po and it registered, today was the 14th, Po was here tomorrow. We invited them out with us, after all it was Po's birthday bash. Judy's first UK date with me would be loud. Roger and Heather then asked if they could bring along their daughters, a little match making going on. Two daughters, I puzzled. Twins? Jimmy said they were all welcome. It would be a big bash.

Friday came and Jimmy was apprehensive, yet reflective and resigned. In reality, I couldn't hope to figure him out. Po turned up early and we discussed stocks, warning him about the people tonight. His bodyguards were now more relaxed, more like old mates and on first name terms, chatting away to Big Paul about martial arts tournaments; his Special Forces pedigree impressed them no end.

At 8pm sharp the old couple knocked on our door, daughters in tow. And I could immediately see what the big man saw in the taller daughter. She was very good looking, but more than that she held herself with an almost regal elegance. Just a glimpse of her and a line of adjectives filled my head; smart, sophisticated, intelligent, a deep thinker. Posh totty! The second daughter was a frump and we endured a lengthy set of introductions.

Po had arranged three cars, all Rollers, and we filled the lift in two snug groups. The cars were a surprise for the couple, as were the presence of Po's bodyguards. Jimmy travelled with the old couple, I travelled with his daughters, Judy running late and meeting us there, hopefully in fifteen minutes. I had visions of entertaining the frump. I made small talk with the ladies, both older than me, questions answered about work. Liz asked about Kenya and I explained what we did out there, quietly stunning her as London streets flashed by.

The reception at the restaurant was extra-special. We were normally spoilt, best table and straight in and never paying, but they had the red carpet out tonight. Literally. We walked up it like movie stars, Po having arranged a private room for us. We entered a room that we had not seen before, sectioned off with huge fish tanks and big enough for twenty or more. All the tables had been pushed together to make one long one, a selection of drinks already laid out, waiters on hand. And so far Jimmy had not connected with Liz.

We stood with drinks in hands, waiting on Judy. Jimmy told Po that Roger had been stationed in Hong Kong and they got into the typical discussion of what used to be where and what's built on top of it now. Turned out Po demolished Roger's favourite club from the sixties and built an apartment block on it. It made me smile. Jack Donohue turned up, I wasn't expecting him, and Jimmy got him together with Heather; they both had rare cat breeds. The daughters spoke mainly to me, and Jimmy played host, making sure everyone had drinks and enquiring about particular likes and dislikes.

Then my leading lady was ushered in, tall in her heels, looking slim in a tight fitting evening gown. My face betrayed my feelings and we kissed in front of everyone, the frump a little deflated. I introduced Judy to Liz as "a secret agent", the comment not taken seriously. Soon everyone had set eyes on Judy's loveliness. Jimmy took Judy for a small waltz, asking her what she was doing with "the short guy". She thanked him for the holiday, the sisters not following.

With everyone in attendance we settled down, starters brought out, five staff assigned to us. Po and Roger were now inseparable, Jack chatted to Heather or the frump, I sat with Judy and Liz sat next to Jimmy. Finally, a connection. Big Paul and

the bodyguards disappeared to another room, their choice. I guess Big Paul wanted a few beers away from polite company. Two hours later we stood up and chatted in small groups. Jimmy spent time with everyone, making them feel welcome, always playing the dutiful host. But he did return to Liz.

‘I think he likes her,’ I whispered to Judy.

‘This their first meet?’ she asked.

‘He’s seen her from a distance.’

‘I don’t think he’s the shy type!’

‘No, but he thinks things through first,’ I suggested.

‘Unlike you. You see a bit of leg on a poolside and go straight for it.’

I laughed. ‘It was the beer, I’m shy really.’

‘Hah.’

‘Hey, you were the one who started the skinny dipping.’

‘Yeah, I suppose. Got bored of waiting for you.’

‘Hey, I was trying to be mister nice guy.’

‘Suggesting that you’re not normally?’ she teased.

I made strong eye contact. ‘Listen, woman, if you’re not doing anything for the next few years ... I’m available.’

She took a moment to study me. ‘If there are any bloody animals in the bed...’

I laughed loudly, squeezing her middle.

‘Who’s the Chinese guy?’ she asked.

‘We give him trading advice, he pays for the meals.’

‘And the other guy in the tweed?’

‘That’s Jack, and that’s not easy to explain. He works for the Foreign Office. We co-operate on stuff around Kenya.’

‘Oh. And the old couple?’

‘Neighbours from down stairs, or next door now, the girls are their daughters.’

‘Next door? You’re in a penthouse?’

‘I have a separate flat as well, floor below.’

‘For all your women?’ she teased.

‘I just got it yesterday, somewhere for us crash out alone.’

‘Oh. And what if I don’t like you?’ she posed, an arm around me.

‘I’ll get an elephant in.’

Jimmy managed to get the frump to smile, and moved around the room making sure everyone felt wanted, needed or loved. He

spent ten minutes with Jack and I made sure I spoke to Jack when I noticed him sat alone. When I did Liz got together with Judy, a well matched pair and instant friends. Po's daughters turned up late, they'd been to a show, but soon joined in. Jimmy greeted them by lifting them both up briefly, the girls eliciting shrill laughs. He introduced them to the faces they didn't know, time spent with the frump and Jack.

At midnight Jimmy called order. 'Ladies and Gentlemen, foreigners ... and Paul, neighbours and work colleagues. We are here today to celebrate Po's birthday, which, on Hong Kong time, was about twelve hours ago. We would never get enough candles on the cake -' We laughed at Po, Jimmy putting an arm around the short birthday boy. '- so we will have to celebrate his sixtieth -'

'No, no, forty-five only!' Po said through a smile.

'Are those dog years?' Jimmy asked.

'No, no, I vely young,' Po insisted.

Jimmy called towards Po's daughters in Cantonese, a long sentence. He repeated the toast in Chinese at length; we got the gist of it. Po's daughters then sang their equivalent of Happy Birthday to their father, Jimmy standing back. Their singing voices were very good, a lovely harmonious sound produced and quite a surprise for the Brits. A camera flashed, a member of staff, and we all lined up for several more snaps.

Po clambered up onto a chair and called order. 'I want make toast. To man I trust most in world. Big man, big heart, big brain. Jimly Silo.' He raised his glass and everyone else did likewise, although those meeting Jimmy for the first time must have felt odd at the salutation.

At one point it was me, Jack and Jimmy. Jack asked, 'Who's the guy from Hong Kong?'

Jimmy explained, 'Someday he will have a very rich son, who will build a spaceship.'

Jack was staggered. I figured it a lie, but was not a hundred percent sure.

With Big Paul and the bodyguards retrieved, our man a bit wobbly on his feet, we headed back, coffee in the penthouse for Judy and the old couple – the frump gone, and Liz. Roger and Heather tired quickly and made their excuses, Jimmy jokingly

offering them a taxi or to walk them home. That left just the four of us.

Liz said, 'This coffee table ... is right above my parents apartment?'

'Yes,' Jimmy answered. 'And beneath our kitchen is Big Paul's apartment, and below the far end of Paul's room ... is Paul's apartment.'

'Which he just got to impress me,' Judy announced.

'That's sweet,' Liz suggested. 'And how you met ... wow. I'm still waiting for that Mister Right.'

Jimmy lowered his gaze.

Judy said, 'Well, you'd have to search far and wide to find someone like the big guy here. He stuck a baby elephant in my bed.' We chuckled. 'We spent most of the night feeding and washing it – made Paul come over as all maternal and caring.'

'I am,' I insisted.

'Then we got a lion cub,' Judy added. 'And rescued some baby Cheetahs. It showed Pauly here in his true light – a big softy.'

'Hey, I can be tough,' I protested.

'Sure, sure,' she said, soothingly, yet mockingly. 'Anyway, I'm jetlagged and really can't be bother to go a whole flight of stairs down.' She eased up. 'Lead on, Tarzan.'

We left them to it, the new flat not yet christened.

'Another drink?' Jimmy offered Liz.

'No, I have to be up,' she softly replied, kicking off her heels and tucking her legs underneath herself. She turned side on to Jimmy, her eyelids heavy. 'You know, I can't figure you out ... *at all*. And that bothers me, because I'm normally such a good judge of people. And *Jimmy Silo* – what kind of name is that, you sound like a gangster. *Help, police, I owe money to Jimmy Silo.*'

Jimmy smiled at the image. 'Maybe I am a gangster, violin case behind the sofa.'

'A gangster who invites out elderly neighbours? Yuppies don't do that, no one does that, not your age,' she slurred.

'I was raised correctly.'

'Hmmm. And this stuff in Kenya. You have an orphanage and... and some charity that clears mines.' She shook her head. 'You are *such* an enigma. Tall, built like a doorman, you talk like

you're ... fifty years old, annoyingly polite and considerate to ... *everyone*. And how many languages do you speak?'

'A few, but none too well.'

'You speak Chinese well enough.'

'What I've picked up from studying the menus.'

'Hah. You are *so* ... not the marrying kind.'

Jimmy both frowned and smiled at the same time. 'That is true, although I don't know how we got onto *that* topic.'

'*And* ... I'm four years older than you.'

'That's true, you are getting on a bit.'

She nudged him with a stocking foot. Jimmy took hold of it and began massaging it.

'Don't do that,' she said.

'OK.' He continued to massage her foot.

She took in the large lounge. 'My parents love you bits already. And your close by, last boyfriend lived in Swindon.'

'I didn't realise I was a prospective suitor.'

'You're not, you're *Jimmy Silo* the gangster,' she giggled. She gave him her other foot, both now rested on his thigh.

'Your feet always hurt in heels.'

'Mmmm,' she agreed, picking up a leftover drink from the coffee table. 'Don't massage my feet, I don't know you.'

'I know.' He continued.

'And you're really rich, so you've got to be a world class *arse*.'

'World class,' Jimmy agreed. 'I could enter the Olympic arse-putting contest.'

'And you're too good looking. You're a womaniser-er.'

'That's true,' he agreed with a nod.

'You have a driver built like a ... like a doorman and ... and you're only twenty-six.'

'He keep's the irate husbands away.'

'What ... who has a bodyguard? *Jimmy Silo* the gangster. And your Chinese friend had bodyguards and Rollers. I mean, who drives in Rollers with bodyguards?'

'The Royal Family,' Jimmy muttered.

'Don't rub my feet, I don't know you,' Liz repeated, sipping the drink.

'I know.' He continued.

She let her head drop back. 'I'm in a ... penthouse with *Jimmy Silo* the gangster.' She pointed. 'Nice cornice work.'

'Thank you, but it *was* here when I bought the place.'

At 5m I headed to the kitchen in a robe, Jimmy sat reading. He marked his page and looked up.

'How'd ... you know?' I delicately broached.

'She's not good with booze, never was. She's in my bed sleeping it off, and no ... I didn't.'

I put my hands wide. A question.

'Probably,' he responded. 'Oh, we'll meet Po around 2pm, do the tourist stuff – he loves the old palaces.'

'Yeah, no problem.' I stuffed down a quick sandwich and padded barefoot back to my room. Before I got there Jimmy said, 'Oh, I almost forgot. Have a look in the spare room.'

I padded across the cool floor. Returning from our spare room I had a huge grin, and a four-foot tall stuffed grey elephant. 'Couldn't you find a bigger one?'

At 8am Jimmy woke Liz, fresh towels supplied. She appeared half an hour later in the same clothes, hair damp, joining us in the kitchen.

'Well?' Judy nudged with a huge smile, earning a glaring look from me.

'Well ... the gentleman of the house put me in his bed and crashed on the sofa,' Liz explained, a little self-conscious as she helped herself to coffee. 'Too much champagne for someone, I'm afraid.'

'Never mind,' Judy said with a glint in her eye. I slapped her arm.

Jimmy told Liz, 'If you're not busy around 2pm today ... our man in Hong Kong wants a tour of the palaces and, if I am to believe your parents, you're something of an expert.'

She pinched a piece of Jimmy's toast. 'Is that a ... date of sorts?'

'If you like, although I won't be rubbing your feet in public.'

'You got a foot rub?' Judy joked in a strong whisper, getting another slapped arm from me. 'Do tell.'

'Nothing to tell,' Liz insisted, a little embarrassed. 'We chatted.'

‘Actually, you did most of the talking,’ Jimmy said with slightest of grins evident.

‘Sorry about that, I get like that after a drink.’

‘Told me you hadn’t had sex for a year,’ Jimmy softly mentioned.

‘Oh, God, I didn’t did I?’

‘And *lots* more.’

‘Do tell?’ Judy nudged.

‘I don’t kiss and tell,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘Not that we kissed.’

‘I seem to remember you kissing me on the forehead when you put me to bed,’ Liz suggested, her head lowered.

‘Must have been a dream,’ Jimmy insisted, a wink towards me and Judy.

‘Don’t tell my parents I stayed,’ Liz requested. ‘They’ll ... go out and buy wedding hats and ... fuss.’

‘Our lips are sealed,’ Jimmy insisted.

Big Paul wandered in, slapping down the papers. ‘Jesus, must be something in the air.’ He turned on a heel and left.

‘God, even your driver knows now,’ Liz let out.

‘And our *communal* doorman,’ I dropped in.

‘I’d best pop down and see my parents before I go,’ Liz reluctantly suggested. ‘Save them finding out from the damn doorman.’

Judy put in, ‘You must feel cheated – all the blame, none of the fun, girl.’

Liz made no promises about the 2pm “date”, but turned up anyway, tour guide for Po and his extended family. And she was good, a real professional. She came back with us afterwards and out for an Indian meal that evening, her and Judy spending a lot of time chatting. The following morning we met both of them in robes in the kitchen. It was a done deal; we were a foursome. And, at twenty-six, I entered my first serious relationship, tights in the drawers and tampons in the bathroom cabinet.

A belated promotion

Jack Donohue was summoned to Sykes' office as soon as he arrived at work Monday morning, finding his immediate manager already in attendance.

'Jack, come on in,' his manager called.

Jack stepped in and sat as directed.

Sykes began, 'Your *friend* has transferred half a million pounds into that account.' He waited, carefully studying Jack.

'Yes, sir, he said he would,' Jack affirmed.

Sykes coolly regarded Jack. Finally he said, 'We've discussed it with the Prime Minister, of course, and it will be ciphened off for a particular overseas project. Have you any... *indication* about future money?'

'At least a million a year, sir,' Jack informed the expectant faces.

His superiors exchanged looks, faces pulled. They did not seem very impressed by the amount.

'There is something else, sir.' Jack pulled out a sheet. 'Some financial information from ... *our friend*.' He reached across the desk. 'He says that gold will rise steadily for the next two years, then a slump, and that stocks will be flat for the next two years.' Jack's superiors took careful notes. Jack added, 'There will be a pension deficit over the next ten or twenty years, quite a shortage as stocks under-perform.'

More notes were scribbled down.

Jack handed over a second sheet. 'That's the price of gold for the next twenty years, with Sterling overlaid against the dollar.'

'Crickey!' Sykes quietly let out. He displayed the crumpled page to Jack's manager. They mutually raised their eyebrows and exchanged looks. Facing Jack, Sykes said, 'Do you realise what this gives us?'

'A significant advantage of many other countries, sir,' Jack responded, no joy in his voice. 'And he said to remind you that the Berlin Wall comes down in a few weeks, communism at an end within two years.'

'Yes, well, we'll see,' Sykes said dismissively, studying the gold chart.

Back in his basement office, Jack was now a grade higher, a new office threatened. At some point. Thinking about a great many things, he sat and stared at the wall, swivelling aimlessly in his chair. A Kitkat was retrieved, its dimensions and texture

inspected before it was returned to the drawer. His tea developed a skin as it cooled.

An hour later he was knocking on our door.

‘Jack?’ I questioned as I held the door.

Jimmy put down the fax he was reading. ‘Come on in, Jack. Have a seat.’ Our visitor sat without a word. ‘I guess they’ve noticed the money,’ Jimmy said, getting back a nod. ‘And ... they were more interested in the gold chart than the Berlin Wall?’

With his head down Jack raised his eyes, a barely perceptible nod issued.

Jimmy continued, ‘The trick, Jack, is not to try and judge other people by your own standards, you’ll always be disappointed. Things are unfolding as I expect them to, most of my plans are on course, some even ahead of schedule. I *will*... stop the war. Your bosses are ... cats and dogs, Jack. The skill comes in relaxing and accepting that. They’ve been playing the great game a long time and they’re not about to change overnight. If they *were* capable of such a change then my job would be hard. As it stands ... we give the cat fish and the dog a bone. And it’s because they *are* cats and dogs that I can manipulate them so well.’

I placed a tea down for Jack and sat next to him.

Jimmy suggested, ‘Jack, get permission to go to Berlin. December 21st is the key day. Chisel a piece of wall off and watch the future take a step forwards.’

Jack sipped his tea, looking better.

Jimmy added, ‘We’ll be there, and if you’re sharp-eyed, Jack, you might catch sight of ... some others.’

That seemed to lift Jack’s spirit. We managed to evoke half a quick smile and an affirmative nod. And a few weeks later we took the girls to Berlin for the weekend, coming back with bits of wall and a few photographs for the album.

Lodgers

‘This is good,’ Jimmy said, holding up a fax from Rudd.

I plonked down next to him and skimmed the detail.

Jimmy continued, 'The UN has put a small office in Mawlini airfield, also Medicine Sans Frontiers and one other charity. Three charities on the base now, using it as a re-supply stop, the odd aircraft flying in.'

'It is growing.' I touched the paper. 'It says here that we're funding them.'

'We supply the huts, food and water, electricity.'

'And these groups ... we'll work a lot with them in the future?'

'Very much so, they'll be key allies. And we'll need all the help we can get.'

I swivelled my head to him, a question in my look.

'Somali refugees will pour across that border. The airfield becomes Dodge City.'

I finished reading the detail, unable to pass judgement or get excited because Jimmy's long terms plans were often secret. Lifting a second fax from the table I noticed the Pineapple logo.

'That's good as well,' Jimmy mentioned.

My eye navigated itself towards some big figures. 'Where did the dosh come from?'

'Twenty-five top ten hits, it soon adds up. Three top three, one number one hit. And these singers getting into the top ten now - they'll each have a couple number ones in the months ahead.'

A knock at the door and Judy stepped in with her travel suitcase, dressed in her smart blue inform.

'What you doing here?' I puzzled.

'Nice to see you too.' She plonked down, letting out a theatrical sigh. 'Flight was diverted, second leg cancelled.'

Jimmy lifted his head to me. 'Make this poor lady a tea, eh? C'mon, young man.'

When I placed down her tea she picked up the Pineapple fax.

'Pineapple records,' she recognised. 'They produce The Sisters, great trio. Number two this week.' She focused on the detail. Raising her head to Jimmy she said, 'You *own* ... Pineapple?'

'Didn't you know that?' I puzzled.

'No,' she said with emphasis, facing me. 'You're involved with them?'

‘I own fifty-percent,’ I answered with a dismissive shrug. ‘I thought I told you.’

‘No... you didn’t. You get to meet The Sisters?’

Jimmy lifted the phone and dialled. ‘Oliver, Jimmy. You well? Good. Listen, The Sisters, ask them to pop to the flat later, whatever time is good for them. Thanks.’ He replaced the receiver.

‘They’re coming here?’ Judy asked, Jimmy nodding very matter-of-fact. She faced me. ‘I knew there was some reason I liked you.’ She squeezed me quickly and headed off to bed for a few hours.

I asked Jimmy, ‘Does Liz know about Pineapple?’

Jimmy focused on the ceiling, then the wall, the floor and finally back on me. ‘I’ve ... no idea, I don’t remember discussing it with her.’

‘She over tonight?’

He nodded; there were not many evenings when she wasn’t staying over these days. He dialled Oliver again and invited him along. At eight o’clock we were distributing cocktails to the three coloured singers, two sisters and one a cousin, Judy and Liz giddy like schoolgirls. With Judy and Liz in the kitchen Jimmy asked the girls to sit. The three of them lined up opposite him, Oliver closing in.

‘Ladies, as you may already be aware I run a number of charities in Kenya, including an orphanage. I also have a beach front hotel and a safari park.’ They did not have a clue, why would they. Jimmy continued, ‘The reason I dragged you over here ... is to ask you to think about a small charity concert in Kenya, the proceeds going to the orphanage. You’ll get a bit of a holiday, staying at my places out there. Any thoughts?’

They glanced at each other, mostly in agreement. They had numerous gigs booked in the UK till January, after which they were free. They promised to try and sort a date, Oliver making a note. My grey matter fired up. This was the start of a pattern for the future, the tying together of all the things that we were involved with.

Mossad

I was apprehensive, not least because Jimmy had explained that very morning who we were going to meet.

As our taxi progressed, big Paul alert, Jimmy called, 'Mickey?'

The taxi driver responded with, 'Yeah, Jimmy?'

'There's a few gentlemen that would like to follow me to this meeting.'

'Gotcha, boss.'

We overtook a few other cabs, cut some lights and went around in circles for fifteen minutes.

'I think we're clear,' Paul suggested.

'When we go in, you eyeball the lobby,' Jimmy instructed Big Paul.

We pulled up at the Intercontinental Hotel, the taxi waiting, Paul scanning the street as we ducked quickly inside. We took the stairs up three floors and to room 303, a quick knock given. The door opened to a short and stocky man of Mediterranean appearance, Israeli I guessed, his hair greying. He held it open and we squeezed by, another man sat in the window. There were four chairs, a tight fit, but the bed had been pushed back. The second man stood as we neared, a slim fifty-year-old with a European appearance; glasses and thinning, unkempt black hair. Jimmy issued a long sentence in Hebrew, surprising the man.

'You're ... British?' he questioned as we sat.

'Yes.'

We eased down into rigid and uncomfortable chairs that appeared to have been designed for children, the first man joining us. His expression remained the same, a right misery-guts of a fella.

Gesturing toward the man who had already been seated, Jimmy said, 'Paul, this is Shlomo Demitry Artrov.'

The man bolted upright in his chair. 'How the hell do you know my name?' he demanded.

'I'm psychic,' Jimmy joked. I choked out a laugh.

Jimmy motioned towards the second man, the miserable bastard. 'And this is ... Ari, I believe.' Ari was now even more miserable, his face grizzled.

‘Watcha mate,’ I sarcastically offered. ‘Having a good trip, are we? Visited the Palace yet?’

Schlomo pointed towards Jimmy, looking him up and down. ‘You’re a field agent.’

‘No, my friend.’ Jimmy faced Ari. In Russian he said, ‘Why don’t you order us some drinks, we could be here a while.’

With a nod from Schlomo, Ari called down to reception in English, but with a bit of an accent.

Jimmy pointed at Schlomo’s knee. ‘How’s the knee?’

‘How the hell could know so much about me?’ our new friend demanded.

‘I told you, I’m psychic.’

Ari sat, and both of our new friends considered us carefully.

‘So,’ Jimmy began. ‘How’ve you been doing with my stock market tips?’

Eventually, Schlomo admitted, ‘They have been one hundred percent accurate.’

‘Must have made some money then,’ Jimmy suggested.

After a pause Schlomo admitted, ‘Yes.’

‘Must have made a ... lot of money,’ Jimmy firmly nudged. He got back a shrug. ‘Schlomo, if you want more tips you’re going to have to treat your new best buddies less like Palestinian proctologists.’ He eased back and waited.

Schlomo eventually said, ‘Why?’

‘Why is ... very hard to understand. But, like you, I get letters from Magestic.’

Our two new Jewish friends both suffered minor simultaneous heart attacks. I was starting to enjoy the visit.

‘How do you know about him?’ Schlomo demanded.

‘Who do you think recruited us,’ Jimmy posed. ‘Lovely fella, always buys the drinks.’

‘And the odd curry,’ I put in. ‘Nice fella.’

‘Magestic ... buys you drinks?’ Schlomo forced out. I wondered if the poor fella would need a doctor.

‘Well,’ I said, ‘sometimes we pay, of course.’

‘We pay our way, mostly,’ Jimmy said, the two of us nodding our agreement.

‘Who is Magestic?’ Schlomo asked.

‘We’re not allowed to say,’ Jimmy informed him in conspiratorial whisper. He ended by tapping his nose. ‘So, where

were we? Ah, yes, the stock trading. You've been making some money, yes?'

'Well ... yes,' Schlomo admitted.

'And we'll continue to send you tips, so you should be able to make a great deal more.'

'Why?' Schlomo persisted with.

'So that we can ask you favours, of course,' Jimmy explained. He retrieved a piece of paper and handed it over. 'The people on the list are budding Islamic terrorists. Mr Magestic would like for them not to grow up and graduate.'

Schlomo shrugged. 'This benefits us as much as anyone else?'

'No, the people on the list attack western interests around the world, they don't go near Israel.'

'So why don't the Americans have this list?' Schlomo challenged.

'They have ... other lists from Magestic.'

Trying to be helpful I put in, 'And they're not as good as you at shooting Arabs.' Somehow, it did not sound quite right.

With a quick glare at me, Jimmy added, 'Most of the people on that list are around the Horn of Africa. Be a love and make that a priority in the next eight years.'

Schlomo eyed the list. 'How will you know –'

'Magestic will know,' Jimmy confidently suggested.

'Is he...?'

'All seeing? Pretty much so. Oh, before I forget, send me a liaison, Ben Ares will do.'

'Ben Ares?' Schlomo challenged. 'He's –'

'I know exactly what position he holds, my friend.' Jimmy handed over a card and stood.

'Been nice talking to you,' I said directly toward Ari. 'Thanks for the tea.'

Grinning, Jimmy pointing me towards the door. 'Oh, while I think of it, anyone trying to get close to me will meet a proper field agent. Several of them in fact.' We collected Big Paul and jumped into the taxi.

'There's a watcher in reception,' Big Paul reported.

'I know,' Jimmy said. 'Mickey! Evasive techniques.'

'Right, Jimmy.'

'Why we trying to lose a tail, you gave them your fucking card?' I challenged.

‘Not them I’m worried about.’

January, 1990.

I was apprehensive about a holiday in Egypt, but Jimmy reassured me that Sharm-el-Sheik was just a bunch of hotels full of westerners in the middle of nowhere. We landed with the girls, both having five days off, and were met by a local with a sign held up: SILO. The place looked dusty, but the midday heat was very welcome compared to chilly old London.

We drove the short distance to Naama Bay along a main road with very high curbs painted blue and white, a view of desert and mountain off to the right. Turning off, we drove through a sort of bazaar, many Egyptian bars dotted about, and pulled up next to the hotel Lido. Booked in, and with our rooms checked, Jimmy led us to the rooftop bar and pool. From there I just melted as I glimpsed the turquoise water; shallow at the shore and deepening rapidly to a rich blue. With the girls intent on doing absolutely nothing all day but sunbath, me and Jimmy grabbed our masks and fins and walked around a horseshoe bay to a dive school. Thirty minutes later we hit the warm water with a British Divemaster. That first dive I glimpsed a turtle on the sea-grass and a giant Napoleon fish at twenty metres depth.

We ate lunch with the dive leader, ignoring the girls, before another dive in the afternoon, this time to the area immediately below our hotel, a sharp drop off populated with numerous prickly Lion fish. We finally joined the girls at 4pm, the day still warm.

‘Did you see us?’ I asked as we plonked down.

‘No, we’ve been sunning ourselves,’ Judy answered.

‘Gets very cold at night,’ Jimmy cautioned. ‘Wrap up later. As soon as the sun goes down it drops to ten degrees.’

‘Lovely now,’ Liz said. ‘For January.’

Jimmy was right about the sudden chill; when we stepped out that night the girls were cold. We strolled along the beach front, selecting a Pizza restaurant and ducking in, a modest meal dragged out over three hours. We ended the night with a few

drinks in the Camel bar, a rooftop bar with a view of the lively tourist drag.

On the second day both girls tried a dive off the beach with a British female instructor, the men folk heading towards the depths. We met back up in the warmer shallow water, a small rocky outcrop with numerous coloured fish darting about. Liz was a natural, taking the diving manual back to the hotel to read, Judy less sure of herself.

The next day we got up early and boarded a boat from the jetty right next to the hotel, an hour-long trip to a reef. With me and Jimmy acting as escorts, the girls had another trial dive inside a sheltered part of the reef, finding a turtle. At one point we swam along as two couples, holding hands under the water. The two male instructors held hands at the end, just to take the piss. Lunch, of sorts, was provided on the boat, before a second dive in the afternoon, the boat chugging slowly back as the sun sank quickly. On the third day we remained around the hotel to give the girls a break, the fourth day a quad bike expedition into the desert – wrapped up like Palestinian terrorists, ending with a sort of barbeque organised by the locals. We sat cross-legged on carpets and watched a show of traditional dancers, the girls again cold and complaining.

On Saturday we took the girls back to the airport, the two of us remaining for another five days “hard core” diving, as we had described it. Without the girls knowing, we immediately booked into the Hyatt Regency, a sprawling five star hotel with its own beach. On Sunday we dived off the beach with the hotel instructors, that evening waiting a contact in the bar.

‘Is he coming,’ I grumbled as we waited in the near empty bar.

‘He’s been here all day, I saw him twice,’ Jimmy informed me. ‘He’s just being careful.’

Ben Ares eventually entered the bar and sat. ‘Jimmy Silo.’

‘You could have come diving with us, Ben,’ Jimmy said as he gestured our guest to a chair. ‘I saw you this morning.’

‘And how would you know what I look like?’ Ben challenged as he sat. He was a tanned individual, in his forties at least, a slight belly evident under his shirt. But he had a kind face, not meeting my expectation of the deadly Mossad agent I had imagined.

‘This game would be no fun if I just told you everything, now would it?’ Our guest smiled. Jimmy asked, ‘First, what do *you* ... make of Magestic?’

Ben stared into his beer for a moment. ‘I’m not sure I believe in clairvoyants, but...’

‘But the evidence is conclusive,’ Jimmy finished off.

‘It’s astonishing,’ Ben admitted.

‘And I’m Paul,’ I eventually quipped.

‘Sorry. Ben, this is my partner, Paul Holton. Paul, this is Ben Ares, Junior Defence Minister.’

‘Deputy ... Defence Minister,’ Ben corrected.

‘In England, that would be a *junior* label,’ Jimmy pointed out, Ben shrugging. ‘So, you don’t believe in clairvoyants, Ben?’ Our guest did not answer. ‘Well, neither do we.’

Ben’s brow pleated. ‘You ... work for Magestic?’

‘He’s not a clairvoyant, Ben.’

‘No?’

‘No, he’s a member of a team, I’m another member.’

‘And you all work for...?’

‘Which government?’ You need to think a bit more ... globally than that, Ben. More ... consortium, federation, United Nations.’ Ben was not following, Jimmy adding, ‘In the future, Ben, America will not be the only super-power. China, Russia, India and Brazil all catch up to America.’

‘The Americans will not wish to hear that.’

‘And if the American economy were to decline, where would that leave Israel in the future?’ Jimmy posed.

‘Isolated,’ Ben finally admitted. He took a breath. ‘So what do you do for Magestic?’

‘Lots of things, such a trade the stock markets, give stock market tips to others, building up organisations and relationships. It’s all part of a grand master plan.’

‘With a final goal of...?’

‘Well, let’s leave the master plan aside and focus on Israel. Are you a believer, Ben?’

‘Religious?’ Ben puzzled.

‘No, a believer in ... what we tip you off about.’

He shrugged. ‘So far all the information has panned out. We know that the British and American Governments have great faith in Magestic.’

‘And you, Ben?’

‘I trust what I can see.’

‘And that’s why I asked for *you*.’

‘You don’t look twenty-six, nor sound British.’ He pointed toward me. ‘He does, you don’t.’

‘That’s because I’m well over a hundred years old, Ben.’ We let it sink in, our guest stiffening. Jimmy continued, ‘And I can outrun anyone you could put up against me, outfight anyone you could find. I’m immune to all diseases known to man and I get by on an hours sleep a night.’

‘Are you going to start making some sense soon?’ He glanced away, seeming uncomfortable.

‘We’re not clairvoyant, Ben, we’re time travellers.’

Ben focused on Jimmy, his mouth opening.

‘Magestic is play on words. The original CIA/NASA study of the potential of time travel was spelt with a ‘J’. Our little joke at them.’

‘CIA?’

‘No, Ben. As I said, in the future the Americans are not all powerful. By time we get to 2015 they’re struggling, in trouble by 2025. And that’s without the small problem of World War Three and the destruction of Israel.’ Now we had his attention. ‘In a few months the British Government will send tanks to Kuwait to stop Saddam Hussein from invading.’ Ben’s eyes widened. ‘If he does invade it will set in motion a series of events that leads directly to World War Three. And ... the destruction of Israel. If we stop that invasion, Pakistan destabilises around 2009, going to war with India around 2011. The refugees from Pakistan end up around the Middle East. From those refugee camps a group called The Brotherhood will rise up and start blowing up oilfields. In 2011 they smuggle a nuclear device into Tel Aviv. Boom!’

‘So all you have to do, is to sit back and watch it happen. Or... you do exactly what we tell you, step by step, for the next twenty years. Because, Ben, even if the next thousand incremental steps in our plan work perfectly we only push back the war a few years, we don’t prevent it. We travelled back through time to arm you with information - so you have a better chance of survival. But we can’t fix it, Ben. And in 2025 something *will* happen, something that no one but God can

prevent. For Israel to survive would take a miracle of biblical proportions. I can't offer you a solution to a problem, my friend, I can only get you to the last page in the quiz book.'

Ben stared back. Finally he asked, 'Time travellers?'

'Yes, Ben; electronics, circuits, big magnets, human scientists, and no magic or miracles - just technology moving along. We're here, at this hotel, long enough for you to arrange to take blood samples, samples that your scientists will find very interesting. And you, Ben, the man who likes to *see* things, will have a report from a trusted scientist telling you that he is amazed by what's floating around in my blood. You can then start looking at extracting some of the useful stuff, since I have advanced antibodies to every disease, even cancer. So, Ben, when you finally trust the science ... there is the matter of your father.'

'My ... father?'

'He'll be diagnosed with pancreatic cancer at the end of this year, dead six months later. Guess he never will finish that garden.'

'How the hell...?'

'How do you think?' I curtly asked, Ben turning his head a notch toward me.

'I can cure him,' Jimmy confidently suggested.

I put in, 'We have an AIDs orphanage in Kenya if you want to pop down. Just the one small problem.' Ben waited. 'The kids don't have AIDs anymore. Jimmy injects them directly.'

'You wanted conclusive evidence, Ben. Well, here's your chance, a quick flight to Kenya by some of your army doctors. You're facing the destruction of Israel, so you can spare a few medics speculatively for a week.'

Ben eased back, his grey matter fired up. 'Will you drive to the border tomorrow?'

'Of course, Ben. It's been a while since I was in Israel last. What, a drive to Moshe Diane Military Hospital north of Tel Aviv? Bit of a long drive. Your wife still there?'

Ben rubbed his face with both hands. 'I can't believe what I'm doing.'

'But you don't dare *not* do it,' Jimmy suggested. 'We'll be at the border around noon.'

'I have a driver here you can use.'

‘David Rosenberg?’ Jimmy asked with a frown.

Ben threw his hands into the air in exasperation. ‘You’ll recognise him. 7am.’ He stood. ‘I’ll see you in Eilat.’

With our Israeli minister gone I faced Jimmy. ‘I really hope you know what the fuck you’re doing.’

‘Me too, this next bit will be tricky. All I need you to do is to be sarcastic.’

‘They might just lock us up.’

‘No, I hold all the cards. Plus Jack Donohue knows we’re here. If we don’t get back the Prime Minister will get involved.’

‘Not one to whinge, but how would we explain *that* to the girls, our faces in the papers, a major international incident?’

‘We’d have to buy a lot of flowers.’

At 7am Jimmy recognised the waiting driver. We got in without a word, telling the puzzled reception staff that we were on a four-day trip and that we’d be back. We set off along a bland dusty road, four hours to the border, no more large curb stones *painted* blue and white. They did not let vehicles through the border, so we all walked through, overnight bags afforded a cursory search, passports glanced at. On the Israeli side our driver spoke to the officials and we jumped into a police jeep, soon at a helipad and onto an American built helicopter, headsets affixed.

With no music playing, we flew north over brown dirt and brown desert, a few farms with neat rows of crops, greenhouses and plants wrapped in plastic. I eventually saw the old walled city of Jerusalem in the distance, modern roads and houses, then the city of Tel Aviv towards the sea; it was much bigger than I had anticipated. We landed at a hospital helipad, Ben waiting for us with a small group. We clambered down, bent double, and jogged across.

‘Nice day for it,’ I offered.

The helicopter pulled off immediately with a roar.

Jimmy pointed towards two burly men. ‘They for me? You shouldn’t have.’

‘Start backing up what you claim,’ Ben said with some menace. A glance at the two men and they stepped over, soon sent flying through the air.

‘Got anyone better than that?’ Jimmy curtly asked.

Our host with odd manners stood looking down at the men, then beckoned us onwards. We followed him inside, along numerous corridors with coloured lines on the lino floor. In a side room Jimmy gave blood, waving them away from me and saying something in Hebrew. With blood taken we were hurried along to a small gym. I had packed gym kit the night before, as Jimmy had instructed, and now we both put on shorts and trainers. Sensors were tapped to our chests and we were invited to mount the treadmills. Two fit looking men stood either side, stopwatches around their necks.

‘Two hours,’ Jimmy told them. ‘Thirty miles.’

I stopped and considered at that point that I had never seen the big guy run. Never. I’d never been with him to his gym. I hoped he could keep up. I, on the other hand, ran this distance most every day. The fit men seemed to be debating about Jimmy’s size, to be running at all, let alone long distance, and I got the impression a bet was laid off. Two hours later Jimmy was two miles ahead of me, hitting the stop button. We dismounted, hardly puffing at all.

‘How was that?’ Jimmy enquired with a smile.

The fit young men were not happy. Ben appeared and asked for details as we wiped down. Yes, a new world record had been set. Ben offered us water, then beckoned us onwards. In a side room we found a Palestinian prisoner, an elderly doctor in a white lab coat stood over him.

‘He has a few days to live,’ the doctor curtly stated.

‘What disease?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Abdominal Cancer.’

Jimmy offered the doctor his upturned forearm. ‘One hundred millilitres.’

The doctor got to work, so much blood I thought Jimmy might pass out. It was certainly making me feel ill.

Jimmy told Ben, ‘If the Cancer is late stage then my blood will halt it and push it back, but won’t cure it. It needs to be earlier.’ He faced the doctor. ‘He will run a fever for a day, a high temperature. Give him plenty of water and after two days high protein foods for a week. You’ll see results in three days.’

After a lingering look at the Palestinian, Ben led us out, driving us in silence to a hotel. We booked in as if tourists, our passports handed over. Our Host waited as we put our bags in

our rooms and washed; after all, we were a bit sweaty. We settled into the bar for a well earned beer, our host waiting.

‘Ever see someone run like that?’ I asked Ben directly.

He made a face. ‘We’ll have the results soon. Tomorrow maybe.’ It sounded like a threat.

‘No hurry,’ Jimmy told him. ‘On another matter, there are a number of treasures buried around the world, they’ll be found in decades to come. I’d need some logistical support in retrieving them. After that it’s sixty-forty to you.’

‘What treasures?’ Ben curtly asked.

‘At today’s prices? About a billion dollars worth of gold. Part of which is a large pile of Nazi gold.’

‘You know where it is.’ It was a statement, not a question.

Jimmy nodded. ‘Need divers for a lot of it. Some in a hundred metres of water.’

Ben stood. ‘Tomorrow. I have work.’

‘More important than this?’ Jimmy teased.

Ben glanced over his shoulder then stepped out.

The next day we were driven back to the hospital, the one with the friendly staff. Three old doctors had some questions, our Deputy Defence Minister looking glum in a corner.

‘What drugs are in your system?’ the first doctor asked.

‘For the most part, my system has been modified to be overactive in the production of stem cells.’ They took notes. ‘Stem cells are the key to everything. They can be extracted, cultivated, stimulated and grown, then the cells from various organs can be introduced. The stem cells adopt the identity of the new cells, and can then be injected into that body part – such as a hip or kidneys. They then re-grow damaged parts. They could re-grow a finger, but nothing more complicated than that. You could not re-grow an arm.

‘In years to come scientists will learn how to tamper with a part of the Y-chromosome called “the clock”. It determines growth and the slowing down of growth. If stem cells are activated with modified clock chromosomes you start to look like you did at twenty.’

They keenly took notes, their sour expressions gradually changing. They advanced from hostile to just curt.

‘It’s no good asking me too many questions about the science, I’m not a medic or scientist,’ Jimmy suggested. He thumbed at me. ‘Paul here was a normal human. I injected him a year ago.’

‘And now he can break world records,’ a doctor mentioned. ‘Does the donor need to have a compatible blood type?’

‘No.’

A third doctor said, ‘We found antibodies for twenty diseases in your blood. Technically, you should be in quarantine, or dead.’

‘I’m way over a hundred years old,’ Jimmy informed them. That got a reaction. ‘Test my inner bone structure if you like, my bones betray my age.’

‘They are not replenished?’

‘Only to about twenty percent. And I have problems with my teeth, I still need the dentist.’

They discussed that amongst themselves.

‘And the Palestinian?’ Jimmy nudged.

‘He is up and walking about,’ they reluctantly admitted.

Jimmy made eye contact with Ben, who stared back. Facing the doctors again he said, ‘There is something you need to know. If I inject someone with my blood, they can go on to inject others. The effect is only fifty-percent, but it still helps a lot. Paul here is fifty percent, but can break world records.’

Ben piped up. ‘How far *could* you run?’

‘The most I’ve ever tried is two hundred miles.’

‘Two hundred!’ The medics were stunned.

Jimmy added, ‘My joints go long before my muscles do. The bones ache.’ They took more notes. ‘And another thing. It will take you ten years to synthesize out the antibodies in my blood, that’s a fact. There are also antibodies in there for several diseases you will have never heard of, they haven’t been categorised yet.’

Ben cut short the discussion and ushered us out. On a balcony in the bright sunlight he said, ‘You will write down what you know for us?’

‘No.’

Our host turned away from the pleasant view, awaiting an explanation.

Jimmy took in the view. 'You'll need to clamp down hard on this, Ben. If it gets out ... there will be unrest, particularly here. What will the religious extremists see in time travel?'

Ben turned away and held the railings. 'It would destabilise the coalition government.'

'So what this needs ... is a single point of contact, a careful use of the information, and a complete denial if discovered. I've taken risks here because it was necessary, I won't take so many risks in the future. You're the point of contact Ben, take it or leave it. But don't take too long, there's work to do and not much time to do it. And in case you're worried about my personal safety – if I'm killed you get letters at the right time from others. Conversely, if you screw with us you get nothing – and bombs go off, including a nuclear device.' Jimmy pointed towards the distant coastline, 'Thirty miles out there, off shore, is a crusader ship with fifty million dollars in gold on it. Get me an underwater topography map, you can make a start and make us both a few quid.'

I leant of the railings and took in the view of a small park, an engraved plaque set in white marble. 'There's no pleasing some people,' I wistfully let out.

Jimmy nodded, stood at my side. 'Pride, arrogance ... and the strong desire to stand on their own two feet.'

'I'll drive you back to the hotel,' Ben suggested as he turned.

We fell into step behind him.

'I want to be back in Sharm tomorrow morning,' Jimmy firmly stated. 'You can send us a liaison in London, your cousin David will do.'

Ben snapped his head around at that, before pressing onwards at a brisk pace. 'What sex will my daughter's baby be?' he sarcastically asked.

'She'll have a girl,' Jimmy replied, a distinct change in tone. 'When the kid is three a ... Palestinian will ram –' Ben stopped dead. '- her bus with a digger. They'll be killed. Unless...'

Jimmy walked on, I followed, Ben caught up, saying nothing as we drove to the hotel. The last thing we did in Israel was to mark a spot on a map, a sunken ship, flown by helicopter to the border that afternoon, back at the Hyatt Regency around 9pm.

I was glad when we exited our aircraft to the cold drizzle of Gatwick.

Three days after we got back, the nominated liaison, David, turned up and introduced himself. I liked him straight away. He had a pleasant round face, bald except hair above his ears, and a diplomatic air about him. Although he had spent some time with Mossad, more time had been put in with their diplomatic corps, his great love being pottering about in damp English gardens now that he had reached sixty.

‘They found an old wreck,’ he announced.

‘That’s no way to talk about Ariel Sharon,’ Jimmy joked, making David laugh.

Our new liaison liked the odd beer, a curry, Chinese food, and had a pragmatic view of the world. There was not a question nor political point of view he could not answer silently with a shrug or tip of his head. In the lounge that first day he asked Jimmy a few questions, nothing heavy.

‘What do you think about the peace process?’

I was lost already.

Jimmy answered, ‘Cats and dogs. There’ll never be a peace because you don’t want peace, you want a victory.’ David was surprised by Jimmy’s view, glancing toward me. Jimmy added, ‘Why would anyone, who outguns the opposition a hundred to one, stoop to make peace, when victory *should* be so close at hand? No, the Zionists only made one mistake.’

‘And what was that?’ David keenly enquired.

‘They tried to govern the Palestinians instead of pushing them across the Jordan. It was a big mistake, the Palestinians would have been better off in Diaspora than what they have now – and what they’ll endure for the next twenty years.’

‘Well...’ David was lost for words. ‘An unusual point of view for a British man.’

With a glint in his eye Jimmy said, ‘I’m a hundred year old time traveller, David. And I’ve spent a lot of time out of this ... country.’

‘Yes, well I’m still coming to terms with the time travelling and clairvoyant bit. I had a lengthy briefing, but you’ll forgive me if I don’t ... *grasp it* straight away.’

‘Don’t take too long, David,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘You’ll develop Alzheimer’s in six years. They’ll pension you off before then.’

‘Alzheimer’s?’ David repeated, none too happy with the advance diagnosis.

‘Your good lady wife, Sarah, will nurse you after you become a drooling idiot. You’ll sit in the lounge and look out over your garden.’ David eased back. Jimmy added, ‘Perhaps you should finish that novel, three chapters is not much to show for a life’s work.’

‘Dear God,’ David let out in a whisper. He slowly cranked his head around to me, suddenly looking tired. Facing Jimmy he asked, ‘What’s in the next chapter ... that I am thinking of writing?’

‘If I were to hazard a guess, I say you break with a simple linear history of Israel and focus on British and French political double-dealing over Suez.’

‘Dear God.’

‘Water?’ I offered.

David told me, ‘There is only one place that information exists, and that is in my head – I’ve told no one.’

‘He does that a lot,’ I explained. ‘Annoying, isn’t it.’

‘Alzheimer’s?’ David repeated, his head lowered as he considered it.

‘Not to worry, I can cure you,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘Cure me?’ David challenged.

‘I can’t rid your garden of slugs, David, but I can cure you of Alzheimer’s,’ Jimmy informed our guest. ‘Anyway, I have a gift for you.’ He lifted an old file from the coffee table. ‘My friend in MI6 got some extra information on Suez for you. Some stuff in there that you won’t find anywhere else.’

David reverently held the file and flicked through faded old pages that appeared typed by a drunk woman.

‘Don’t leave that on the tube, eh?’ I suggested.

‘It’s as if you knew I was coming,’ David noted. He closed the file, resting his hands on it. He took a reflective breath, his head lowered. ‘My daughter disappeared in 1976, here in London –’

‘Some questions ... produce unpalatable answers,’ Jimmy cut in with.

David puzzled that. ‘How could it? If you know where her body might be found...?’

Jimmy glanced at me, heaving a reluctant sigh. He reached under the coffee table and retrieved a file. From the file he produced a photograph, hesitating a moment before handing it over. From the angle I sat at I could that see it was a couple with two children.

David stared long and hard at the woman. After a few seconds he folded the picture, oddly ruining it, unfolded it before tearing it up. He threw it down. 'I ... I thank you for the Suez file,' he said as he stood. He let himself out, Jimmy staring at the floor.

'She isn't dead, is she?'

Jimmy shook his head. 'Living in Australia with a Gentile, and very happy.'

'Oops,' I carefully mouthed. 'Will he be alright?'

'He'll be back tomorrow, he's a tough old boot.'

A day later he returned, a lunch appointment in our kitchen. We invited Jack Donohue over, but that was a big mistake; it turned out that Jack was working on a novel about Suez. Well, he'd started it ten years ago, so it was dragging on a bit. He and David got into Suez, the rest of us slipping out without being noticed. Before Jack disappeared Jimmy explained the problem of an Israeli liaison, and listed what Jack should say to his superiors. When Jack returned to the MOD building voices were raised, concerns aired at this latest revelation.

Stood in front of Sykes like a naughty schoolboy, Jack explained, 'There is, apparently, an Israeli equivalent of Jimmy Silo in ... well, Israel of course. Magestic got the two of them together to co-operate.'

'Co-operate on what?' Sykes demanded, concerned over potential security breaches.

'On ... making money and supporting a strange long list of charities, many in Africa.'

'Africa?' Sykes puzzled.

'An orphanage in Kenya, a mine clearance charity, things like that.'

His superior pulled a face. Calmer, he said 'What the hell for, Jack?'

'I've no idea, sir. They just say that they like to support charities. Sixty percent of Silo's money goes to charity.'

Sykes puzzled that. 'Well ... well try and find out what you can, Jack. Do the Israelis get terrorist tip-offs?'

‘Yes, sir. There is also, apparently, a Silo equivalent in the States, sir.’

‘So, it is global,’ his superior let out in a resigned tone. Louder, he said, ‘OK, find out what you can, Jack.’ He flicked his wrist towards the door then put his glasses back on.

‘They’re quite open about everything they do, just not what motivates Magestic. And to tell the truth, sir, I don’t think they have a clue either. They get letters like us.’

‘But Magestic *is* in London.’

‘Not necessarily, sir.’

‘No?’ Sykes took his glasses off.

‘I have an idea that he is a long way off, sending letters to someone here to post on. They hinted at Southern Spain, sir, the Costa Del Sol.’

Sykes glanced out of the window as he thought. Softly, he said, ‘Place is packed with ex-pats on the run, or retired.’ He put his glasses back on. ‘Good work, Jack. Keep at it.’

Back in his office Jack slumped into his chair, taking out a Kitkat. With a grin he snapped it, unwrapping the foil with care.

“X” marks the spot

A week after first meeting Jewish David, known thereafter as Dave the Gardener, or just Dave Gardener, he was invited to the apartment. He arrived whilst Jimmy and Big Paul were out, an unpleasant task left to me.

David stepped in with a map rolled up in a cardboard tube. ‘I bring gifts from afar,’ he joked.

I took the map tube, waving David towards our dining table. A lone file lay there awaiting him. With a curious frown he closed in on it.

I told him, ‘Jimmy asks that you read *all* the file. He was pretty insistent about it, no matter how *distasteful* the contents.’

David was intrigued as he sat. I made him a tea, noticing some of the file’s contents when I placed his drink down; the thick file was the life story of his daughter, from a time period after she walked out on her family. I had expected him to get up

and leave, but he sat quietly for forty minutes as I read the papers.

A key turned in the door, Jimmy and Big Paul re-entering. Big Paul dumped down some shopping, just inside the door, and withdrew. Jimmy gave me an expectant look. I glanced at David and shrugged, Jimmy closing on our guest. He stood over David's shoulder and waited.

David said, 'I'm ... I'm not quite sure what your motivations are regarding this ... but I'm hopeful that they're good.'

'Last page,' Jimmy said. David eased loose pages over till the last page was revealed. Jimmy added, tapping the page, 'The two kids go to Temple and Torah studies.'

David lifted his head to Jimmy, but made no comment. Jimmy returned to me, grabbing the map. With David closing the file without further comment, Jimmy opened the map and weighted down the edges with coasters. With a ruler and pencil, Jimmy carefully drew a line from the first sunken wreck; nine miles north and two miles west. He marked the spot with an "x". Rolling up the map, he eased it back into the cardboard tube, handing it over.

David finally said, 'They owe you nine million pounds.'

'Nine?' I questioned, certain it was twelve.

David apologetically explained that the salvage operation had been expensive, making Jimmy laugh.

'Cheeky buggers,' I let out. 'Three million quid salvage!'

Jimmy told David, 'This next one is a little smaller, valued around twelve million in total. If that goes OK then the third one is much bigger. And tell Ben we'll be in Israel in two weeks to discuss Operation Liberation.'

'Operation Liberation?' David puzzled.

'Got a paper and pen?'

David took out a notepad and sat listening attentively.

Jimmy continued, 'For this operation we'll need twenty field agents familiar with Southern Germany and the area around Baden Baden. Get people in there training straight away. We'll need men who can dig and cave, cave equipment, lighting, cutting torches. We'll need cars and camper vans specially adapted to carry hidden treasure, in particular gold bars.'

'Gold? Nazi gold?' David queried.

‘Yes, and lots of it. Estimated value for the entire contents of the cave – two hundred million pounds.’

‘Wey hey!’ I let out with a smile.

‘Oh, and the entire contents goes to Israel, we don’t take a cut,’ Jimmy mentioned very matter of fact.

‘We don’t?’ I asked, closing in.

‘It’s ... Nazi treasure, I want nothing to do with it,’ Jimmy insisted.

I did not know who was more surprised, me or David. I focused on our liaison. ‘Tell your fucking mates to improve their salvage costs, eh. We make you tea when you come around, and it’s expensive fucking tea.’

Jack knocked on Sykes door the next day.

‘Be quick, Jack,’ Sykes curtly said, waving Jack in.

‘Something interesting, sir.’ Sykes waited. ‘An old German submarine, in sixty metres of water in a Norwegian fiord.’

Sykes puzzled over the detail. ‘This is something to do with Magestic?’

‘Yes, sir. A ... gift.’

‘A gift? A war relic?’

‘I guess it’s what’s inside the sub, sir.’

‘Ah.’ Sykes took off his glasses and eased back. ‘And do we know... what’s inside?’

‘Gold, sir.’

‘Gold?’ Sykes eased forwards. ‘How much ... gold?’

‘Four tonnes, sir.’

Sykes coolly regarded his junior, pursing his lips. ‘Would upset the Norwegians.’

‘Would be an interesting operation for the Navy or SBS.’

‘I’ll have to discuss this with the various interested parties, do a feasibility study without letting anyone know the details. You have the exact co-ordinates?’

‘They’ll be supplied in a few weeks, sir.’

With what almost passed for a smile, Sykes said, ‘Good work, Jack. Thank you.’

The next day David brought a visitor, the man who would head up Operation Liberation, a German Mossad member – if that was not a contradiction in terms. In a satchel he carried numerous

maps of the Baden Baden area, soon flattened onto our table and weighed down with coffee mugs. With Big Paul offering useful advice on logistics, we all debated the approach to recovering the gold around our dining table.

Big Paul said, 'If you wait till spring or early summer then there's no problem with camper vans by the dozen. This time of year they'll stand out.' We were all in agreement.

'There're paintings inside, in wooden frames,' Jimmy explained.

'Frames may be rotten,' Big Paul suggested, 'But the canvas should be OK, restored if necessary. They can be cut out and carried out, very light. One man could carry fifty paintings.'

'Which would be just about most of the valuable ones,' Jimmy suggested. He turned to the new man. 'Find an art expert, he'll need to go into the caves and make an assessment, sort out the good paintings. And to teach your boys how to cut out the paintings without ruining them.' Notes were taken. Jimmy added, 'You can drive due south the short distance to Zurich, put the treasures in a vault.' From the disgruntled look on the new guy's face I got the impression he was already planning on doing exactly that. 'Gold can be melted down then sold on the Swiss gold markets without anyone noticing.'

'What about the railway line?' I asked, a finger on the map.

'No, too public. Need camper vans,' Jimmy insisted.

As we poured over the map and made plans I was as giddy as a schoolboy. And I desperately wanted to be along on the mission; a boyhood dream - sneaking about in caves looking for treasure. It was a great disappointment to be on the sidelines. I also wanted to be diving for the sunken gold.

After an hour of discussion the new guy departed with David, the German hardly saying a word, the exact location of the cave given. I hoped he wouldn't leave the map on the tube.

'This is annoying,' I loudly told Jimmy and Paul. 'Why can't we go searching caves for gold?'

'Yeah?' Big Paul agreed.

'We will, just not there, and not now,' Jimmy said. 'In years to come we'll go pinch sunken treasure from a few places, dig up some stuff. This is politics, boys.'

Big Paul and I started discussing re-breathers and technical diving, deep diving. A trip to the bookstore was planned.

Jerusalem

Three weeks after meeting the German cave explorer we were on an El Al flight to Tel Aviv with the girls. David was on the flight, but pretending not to know us, Big Paul guarding the apartment.

The girls had wangled four days off work, basically a long weekend, so we planned to show them around Israel, not that I knew much of the place from my quick helicopter visit. Visas had been quickly arranged, but not affixed to the pages of our passports. That was possible for people who did business in Israel and other Middle East countries, many Arab countries not allowing someone in if their passports displayed an Israeli stamp. Judy had questioned it, she knew they were difficult and lengthy to obtain, Jimmy explaining that we worked with a large Israeli investment company who had pulled a few strings. Still, she was suspicious.

At the airport we got strange looks from the passport controllers, the paper slip scrawled over. We even had our bags checked for authenticity. I clocked several suspicious people near us as we headed for a taxi, not sure if they were watching us. A man held up a sign: Silo, James. Guess that was our man.

‘Mr Silovich?’ he asked. ‘Diamond Investments sent me, I’ll take your party to Jerusalem.’ And that was just about all he said. We clambered into a smart minibus, our luggage in its hold for the half-hour drive toward Jerusalem. At least it would have been half an hour without the traffic.

We were booked into the King David, a nice hotel except for the Israeli staff. Jimmy explained that they were always like this, it was nothing to do with us. The rooms were nice, near the top floor and south facing, so we got the sun during the day, and the sunsets. Judy was happy enough.

With ‘investment’ work planned for the next day, a Friday, the girls joined an organised trip for foreigners, a six-hour tour of the ancient walled city. They boarded a coach with cameras in hand, we jumped into a car driven by the same guy who had

picked us up in Sharm-el-Sheik, another man riding shotgun. He looked armed, a bulge under his jacket. North of Tel Aviv we pulled into a non-descript facility, several sets of guarded gates negotiated as we passed single or two storey concrete buildings, many with sloping roofs shaded by trees that needed a drop of water. Ben Ares greeted us, this time in Uniform.

‘Watcha, mate,’ I offered, a handshake accepted. ‘Progress,’ I muttered, wondering if this time they’d stretch to a cup of tea.

Jimmy exchanged pleasantries about the weather, in Hebrew, as Ben led us inside. After a long stroll down a dimly lit corridor we entered an office with a permanent guard, David Gardener already inside and waiting

‘Good flight?’ I asked him, eliciting a smile and shrug, the man true to form. The German was there as well, along with around twenty other men of all descriptions, a right mixed bag. A map was laid out on a large central desk, Southern Germany, many files and photographs scattered about. And a bloody great gold bar.

I lifted it. ‘Guess you didn’t want to wait till spring then,’ I said as I weighed the yellow bar. As I let it plonk down as Jimmy lifted a silver candleholder, examining the base.

‘1929,’ Jimmy stated.

Ben closed in. ‘We haven’t retrieved all of the gold and silver yet, we’re moving two loads a week, slow going. The paintings are all out.’

‘What condition?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Some will need work, others were well wrapped. The frames were rotten, as you suggested. The dusty old German staff car might be a problem.’ We all laughed.

‘Who’s the team leader?’ Jimmy asked of the group, a man stepping forwards. ‘Listen up. At the rear of the cave are two sealed rooms opposite each other –’

‘We know them.’

‘They’re full of munitions, nothing of value. If you blast your way in you’ll bring down the mountain on top of you.’ Men glanced at each other. ‘Beyond them is another room, with wooden boxes inside. In the boxes are a lot of documents, the kind that the world’s historians would love to get a look at. There are also twenty Hitler diaries; I want five of them. Get them, and everything else out, before you get curious about the other two

rooms. Now, take a look at the men around you. Which of them do you want to sacrifice ... to appease your curiosity?’

Men glanced at each other. Ben took a step forwards, an order barked. I guessed they would not be going into those rooms.

The group leader reached into his pocket and produced gold coins, handing us a few. As we examined them he said, ‘Crusader money.’

‘First or second wreck?’ I asked.

‘They are the same.’

We pocketed the coins, nice gifts for the girls, as Jimmy closed the gap to the group leader. He turned the man by the shoulders. With his face close to the man’s ear he said, ‘Take a good look at their faces, think about what you’ll put on their gravestones. Take the treasure and some papers, then move on.’

With the awkward silence lingering, Ben led us to a side room with David Gardener. We settled about a table, coffee supplied. Small miracles.

Ben began, his gaze lowered as he fiddled with his coffee cup, ‘You know I am Godfather to David’s daughter?’

‘Yes.’ Jimmy sipped his coffee. ‘She left when she fell pregnant,’ Jimmy responded. ‘By ship.’

‘Ah,’ Ben let out, David remaining silent. ‘There was no record of her anywhere. I know, we looked.’

‘The husband was a merchant seaman. He got her onto a boat to Australia,’ Jimmy explained. Ben exchanged a look with David. Jimmy added, ‘In recent years they’ve done well, winning a local lottery, fifty thousand Australian dollars.’

‘Lucky,’ I put in as David raised his head.

‘You’ve been watching over her,’ Ben stated.

‘Of course. I knew that David would be a great help to my cause, as well as your good self. Some people are born with family, others make family as they go.’ Ben and David exchanged looks. ‘But that don’t mean I’d suffer your wife’s cooking,’ Jimmy mentioned. Ben stiffened. ‘Or your cousin, Mosh.’

Ben made a face and shrugged. ‘There are no secrets from you.’

‘No. So, any ... Republican Guard Divisions moving south?’

‘Some, yes,’ Ben admitted. ‘Your Government has sent infantry, labelling it as an exercise. There are British tanks on the way.’

‘If he invades Kuwait then *you* ... will pay a very heavy price,’ Jimmy forcefully stated.

‘You’ve not been wrong up to now, so we are putting pressure on the Americans,’ Ben admitted. ‘But what would be the outcome of a war in Kuwait?’

‘Any event ... that causes a large gathering of refugees in the Middle East, will give rise to a group called The Brotherhood. They are ... if you like ... Arab socialists with a Wahabi leaning. They believe that money, and therefore oil, is the source of all evil, and will set about blowing up oilfields with suicide bombers keen to get to paradise and their thirty-seven virgins. The earliest that they could form up is 2013. Forming in 2025 is certain. The trick, is to let them form when *we’re* ready, not when *they’re* ready.’

‘2013 is a long way off,’ Ben suggested.

‘You’ll be Prime Minister,’ Jimmy softly stated. As Ben sat upright, Jimmy pointed a warning finger at David. ‘Not a word to anyone. Ever.’

‘I’ll ... be Prime Minister?’ Ben questioned.

‘Yes, so any problems you sweep under the carpet now will come back to haunt you later. And if I was you ... I’d not mention that little fact to the current generation of politicians.’

‘They’d bump you off,’ I suggested with a grin.

Ben finally asked, ‘Where do you want your share of the money sent?’

Jimmy retrieved a folded piece of paper from his wallet. ‘That bank account.’

It was my area, I controlled them. ‘Which account is that?’

‘Rudd’s.’

‘Rudd’s? He’ll freak. I like the guy, but can you trust him?’

‘He can only draw a maximum of twenty thousand a month,’ Jimmy explained.

‘Who is this Rudd?’ Ben asked.

‘Our manager in Kenya,’ I replied.

‘This money ... it will go to charity?’

‘A lot of it, yes,’ Jimmy answered. ‘Most of it will help secure Kenya’s northern border.’

‘Their border?’ Ben questioned with a heavy frown.

‘In years to come The Brotherhood will form up in Somali, attacking south. Before that happens I’ll need to secure the border.’

‘How? Ben challenged. ‘Private mercenaries?’

‘Watch and see,’ Jimmy said with a grin.

‘When they form up and attack, what the hell will the British and Americans be doing?’ Ben asked, waving a hand. ‘Sleeping?’

‘They’ll be busy with The Brotherhood attacking into Europe.’

‘Europe? A land invasion?’ Ben questioned.

‘Through Syria, Turkey and across the Bosphorous straights into Europe.’

‘They wouldn’t stand a chance!’ Ben dismissively challenged.

Jimmy took a moment. ‘A million suicide bombers throwing themselves at you ... will wear down your lines.’

‘And when this is going on?’ Ben asked. ‘What problems do we face?’

‘*Two million* suicide bombers on your borders, your people evacuating to America.’

‘Who’s behind them?’ Ben demanded.

‘No one, that’s the problem. They’re a loose group with no fixed leadership, just a cause ... and a shit load of explosives. By the second year they will have Pakistani nuclear weapons and Iranian missiles, and will have reached The Alps.’

David finally piped up, ‘You know ... *how* to defeat them?’

‘If you co-operate with me till 2025, I can get you that far,’ Jimmy solemnly stated. ‘I can’t fix the final problem, and I have resources that would stagger you.’

‘What happens in 2025?’ David whispered.

Jimmy shook his head. ‘If it slipped out ... the panic and chaos would be worse than if it happened now.’

I said, ‘Not even I know that bit.’

Jimmy made strong eye contact with Ben. ‘You, I’ve chosen as the information holder. I’ll tell you things that you need only keep in mind for the future, but you *don’t* tell anyone else. Not even what I’ve said today. Accidental disclosure could destroy you, and there’ll be enough others trying hard to do that for you.’ He took out another piece of paper. ‘Payback time.’ Ben

accepted a list of names. ‘None of these must get into a position of power, money or authority.’

‘Why?’ Ben asked as he read the names.

‘I’ll give you an example. One of them, a Jew, will defraud Jewish families of billions in the future. Another, a future New York mayor, will turn back your refugee ships. Put them all on your shit list, before it’s too late.’

‘Can I ask you a personal question?’ Ben asked, folding the paper.

‘You’re an Israeli, manners are not needed,’ Jimmy responded, David smiling.

‘Do you like Israelis?’ Ben asked directly.

‘Not especially,’ Jimmy answered, and I worried if we’d get out of there. ‘The answer to your question is this: I am not doing what I do – for you. Israel is a piece on a chessboard, an important piece at the centre. You, and The Brotherhood, are two queens battling it out, and when *you* lose Europe goes next. Your country sees American support as a good thing, I see it as supplying ammunition to the Alamo.’

No, we were not getting out of there.

Jimmy continued, ‘What you see as good fortune, in American help, will – in part – be your downfall. They’ll supply the ammo and you’ll stand and fight. The longer I can keep you up and fighting, the better chance the world has.’ Ben lifted his eyebrows. Jimmy continued, ‘What you see as your goal, the Zionist goal of claiming and holding this land, will be the undoing of your people. Hanging onto this piece of land from 2015 to 2025 will cost more than America can afford. Your only hope is that I can dance faster than my adversary.’

‘Your ... adversary?’ Ben questioned.

‘My other self,’ Jimmy suggested, and I was wondering what the hell he was talking about. ‘You see, I have all the answers, even to 2025. The problem is ... knowing when to be compassionate, and when to go to war. I have made, and will make, mistakes when I get the two mixed up.’

David put in, ‘It sounds as if you have been struggling with that... for some time.’

‘For ... some time,’ Jimmy repeated. He focused on Ben with tired eyes. ‘I watched you die, and I took in your granddaughter, to my house in Canada.’

‘You ... were at my death?’ Ben whispered.

Jimmy nodded. ‘You made it to Canada, but wounded.’ He took a big breath. ‘When the time comes, you will realise that you cannot hold onto this land, but you evacuate too late. Your ships are attacked in the Gibraltar Straights, few making it through. Those landing in Southern Italy are cut off by The Brotherhood landing in Northern Italy from Croatia.’

Ben glanced at me, then back to Jimmy. ‘And when this *theoretical battle* is happening, where are the NATO forces?’

‘By then you will have fallen out with American public opinion. Several Jewish fund managers steal a lot of money in The States, people lose their pensions, lots of scandals. In your darkest hour they’ll be no one to call upon, or to take in your refugees. But, unfortunately, I cannot reveal it all and leave you to ponder on a solution, because what I tell you will strike a spark too soon.’

David said, ‘Every time we prove the truth in something you say, I’ll be wishing you a liar. And so far, you’re a hundred percent right.’

Jimmy nodded to himself. ‘And will be step by step, and for the next twenty thousand steps. And even then you will not act, nor believe that which cannot be accepted.’

‘If there’s no solution to this problem, why are you even trying?’ Ben snapped out.

‘That, my friend, occupies my every waking minute.’

‘All problems, have solutions,’ David suggested.

Jimmy cranked his head around to David. ‘There is an obvious and immediate solution: you stand and fight your neighbours all out for ten years, till they are either all dead or give up. And without any outside help, no money from America, huge numbers of casualties each day.’

David said, ‘At the end of a ten year war there’d be nothing but dust left. Salladin would claim his pile of rocks.’

It was a heady meeting, and I was glad to be back in the car and heading for my woman and a nice pair of breasts. And I needed a few beers at the hotel bar.

Saturday was a nice day out, a lengthy trip in a taxi to the Dead Sea, photos taken of the four of us floating as a group. That evening we had a final supper, the Israeli military going on full alert Sunday morning. The Americans had threatened Saddam

and were sending aircraft carriers. Saddam had responded by reminding everyone that his missiles could hit Israel; our departure was made in haste. The girls were glad to be back in London, the news full of a looming war. And Monday morning brought a call from Rudd.

‘There is twelve million pounds in the account!’ They could hear him downstairs.

‘We’re going to ramp things up a bit,’ I said before holding the phone away from my ear, Jimmy shaking his head as he read the morning papers, now full of stories about Kuwait.

‘It is not a mistake?’ Rudd asked.

‘No, not a mistake. We’ll be down in a few days, relax.’

With Liz tagging along, her holiday time swapped with another woman and Judy working, the three of us headed to Nairobi, flying first class for a change.

In the rooftop bar Liz stood with hands on hips. ‘So, this is where you met.’

‘Yep. Like it?’

It started raining almost immediately, the first time in the bar, so we headed down. It was odd for me, not having Judy there; the bed now big and empty. I opened the briefcase I had brought with me, a lot of this trip’s management down to me, and got to work. I had a few million quid to distribute whilst Liz and Jimmy had a relaxing break, no missile attacks threatening.

Rudd met us in the UN jeep the next morning, all of us laughing, Liz briefed in advance. We set off for River View, Mombassa. At the junction beyond the orphanage, the road turning off to the hotel, Jimmy stopped the jeep and we piled out into the sticky heat. He and Rudd clambered up onto the roof, onto the baggage rack.

‘I want to buy the land from here to the hotel,’ Jimmy explained, pointing with a finger. ‘Both sides of the road.’

‘I know the man who owns it, he comes to the hotel bar sometimes. He’s from Zimbabwe, he was a white farmer.’

‘Is he still white?’ Jimmy teased.

Rudd felt silly. ‘Yes. He wants to go to Australia.’

‘Give him a nudge then, get a good price. Tell him you *might* be able to get me interested.’

‘He only wants a quarter million for the land,’ Rudd answered with a grin.

‘Back taxes?’

‘Some, twenty thousand.’

‘Try and buy it, then clear the land, I want a golf course here.’

‘Golf? Yes, what a good idea.’ Rudd stood with hands on hips and surveyed the area.

‘A clubhouse for guests and locals, a small hotel with two hundred rooms.’

‘That what you call a small hotel?’

‘Room for growth; I’m planning on using it for twenty years.’

We arrived at our hotel with the sun low on the horizon, delayed by an ostrich that would not budge. Rudd rammed it a few times. With Liz and Jimmy heading for a hut, I sat down with Rudd and the manager, a mountain of paperwork to go through. It was 8pm before we reached a natural break, finding Jimmy and Liz finishing their meal. It was just me and Rudd, and a few files. As we ate I opened the orphanage file.

‘Cosy has been there a few times,’ Rudd informed me.

‘He’s on the team,’ I replied. Easing back, with an elbow over the chair-back, I asked, ‘How do you find him?’

‘Nice enough, no problems. He likes Africa, he wants to be here instead of London. I think he’s religious, he says some strange things, and he likes to help at the orphanage. Have you given him money?’

‘Yes, why?’

‘He has a new jeep and brings presents for the children.’

‘You think you could work with him?’

‘Sure, no problem. He has an apartment not far from me. But up to now I don’t know what I must say to this man.’

‘From next week he’s your assistant.’

‘Yes?’

‘We want him to take over a lot of the work at Mawlini, save you driving up there. Maybe also the safari park, you’ll be busy down here.’

‘With this new golf course, very busy,’ Rudd complained.

‘So it works out then. You’ll be in overall charge. Call him and get him down here to chat to me.’ I scanned the building plans for the back fields of the orphanage, not happy with the

layout. 'Have the foundations been laid for these other buildings?'

'Only five buildings.' Rudd marked them in red.

'Right, think about this. A central square here, a playing area, overlooked by buildings around it. And let's make them three storeys; it will save on costs. And these buildings should have showers and toilets at the end of each floor. Next to them, classrooms with air conditioning -'

'Air conditioning? For AIDs orphans? You'll be treating them better than the local three star hotel.'

I wasn't happy with that comment, but held my tongue. 'The aim... is to educate them to a good standard, then get them into a school in Nairobi, then help them find jobs.'

Rudd shrugged. 'The oldest boy is eleven, the youngest just a baby. The average age is five, so many years before they could go to an upper school.'

'Then we'll build a nursery and junior school for now. I don't want them sitting around, they study hard all day.'

Rudd nodded and took notes. 'The inspector of orphanages visited. He wanted to know who you were, and would Mary hand some money over to him for other orphanages.'

'And?'

'She kicked him in the leg. Told him to bring the other children here.'

'How many now?'

'Three hundred and sixty two. One was run over outside.'

'Police involved?' I asked, now worried.

'No, they witnessed it. Orphans don't get a lot of paperwork. The police, and the locals, they think all the children will die anyway.'

'Charming.' I tapped the diagram. 'How long before these are ready?'

'The first two buildings are finished and in use, another two months for the next two – that will ease things, almost two hundred beds in each building.' He opened a map. 'I have been thinking about food for them. This land is shit, just swamps. I think we can get it for almost nothing, then a small farm.'

'Sounds like a good idea, try and get it. We'll want to expand the farm down here as well.'

‘It doesn’t need expanding, just improving. The farm hands are useless.’

I gave that some thought. ‘OK, find a farm manager, motivate the rest with money or kick them out. Let’s get productivity up, eh. How are the bookings?’

‘Almost full all the time now. I put small adverts in Nairobi and Mombassa papers.’

‘We need more huts,’ I suggested, Rudd nodding. ‘The ones here are nice enough for the guests, but a bit spread out.’

‘There is room to the left of here –’ He pointed. ‘- for a two storey building, a sea view. I priced it up, only twenty thousand with the local builders – all wood.’

‘Do it. How many rooms then?’

‘In total, twenty twin huts plus another twenty twins in the new building. Eighty people.’

‘Not much for a beach hotel.’

‘The new golf course hotel will hold a lot more, they’ll come down to the beach some days.’

‘Might get cosy down here. OK, we’ll see how it goes. Any other problems?’

‘We’ve started building shower areas for the divers and they now have a small boat.’

‘I want a small café at that end of the beach, for the divers and their families. And let’s get more wetsuits and tanks, groups will get bigger in future.’

Rudd made a note. ‘What about the old hotel next door?’

‘Which way?’ I puzzled. Rudd thumbed to the south, producing a photo. ‘Looks like it’s falling down.’

‘It is, they’ll be closed down soon. If it is, we can buy it for peanuts.’

I tapped the picture. ‘Tomorrow, 7am, you and me.’ I retired to my hut, just files for company, not even an elephant peeing on my feet.

At 7.30am we stood on a rise that separated the two hotels, our side of the fence recently repaired, their sorry looking fence rusted and drooping ten feet away. I took in the immediate topography.

‘With the trees and bushes trimmed we could put a road here, golf carts for the guests to go back and forth. A bit far to walk.’

‘See their pool?’

Gripping our fence, I got up on tip-toes, my nose in the air. ‘It’s a good size, nice grass area around it too. They got a bigger beach as well.’ I eased down. ‘But they’ve got bigger waves, we got the sheltered bay. How many rooms?’

‘Two hundred.’

‘You know what I think? I think there’s probably a local hotel inspector that needs a new car.’ As I finished the sentence I faced Rudd.

‘I see what I can find out,’ he said with a grin. ‘I know the man who comes here, he likes his beer.’

After breakfast we headed to the orphanage, Cosy meeting us there. From the road I could now view the new buildings, the previously unkempt bushes cut down and a wire fence erected. The size of the place struck me. In the courtyard we found Anna and Cosy walking towards us. Well, Jimmy did say they’d get it together. I found myself thinking about Cosy buying shoes with high heels.

‘You look familiar,’ I told Cosy as I shook his hand. Cosy nodded towards Rudd, a greeting. I asked, ‘Keeping busy?’

‘Waiting a job,’ Cosy responded.

‘Your old employers ... OK?’ I nudged.

‘No problems.’

‘You’re hired then, assistant to Rudd here. He’ll brief you, we want you handling the growth of the airfield.’

‘Pleasure.’

I caught Anna’s look from the corner of my eye. ‘And you’ll need to cover for Rudd and visit this place whilst the building work is going on. Where you living?’

‘Nairobi, a flat.’

‘Where would you *prefer* to live?’ I knowingly enquired.

‘Here.’

‘Here ... the playground?’

Cosy smiled. ‘Here, outskirts of Mombassa.’

‘Long drive to Mawlini.’

‘Not really, I have a pilot’s license – like you. There is an airfield a few miles away, a Cessna I can borrow if I drop off people and packages on the way.’

‘Sounds good,’ I approved. Handing Anna a wad of dollars I asked, ‘And how are you?’

‘Good, good. Come, we show you the roof.’

We climbed the stairs of the terminal ward, up onto its flat roof. From there we had a commanding view of the new building work, and I got a true appreciation of the size of the undertaking. With my hands on my hips, I told Anna she had a one million dollar budget, just before Sister Woman joined us.

Anna handed over the money. ‘They will give us one million for the building.’

‘A million?’ The old bat gave me a hug; she could have shaved first. Next time Jimmy could give her the good news.

‘We’ll make a building for staff,’ Mary explained.

I pointed into the distance, explaining, ‘This scrub land, we’ll buy it and make a farm, food for the children. And beyond these buildings we want to build schools. The children should be taught all day – that’s what Jimmy wants.’

Mary said, ‘Before now there is no school, they come to die.’

Noticing Rudd at my shoulder I said, ‘Well, we know that doctors can be wrong. I think many of the children will live.’

Mary glanced at Rudd. ‘Yes, sometimes they are wrong.’

Back on the beach, Rudd and I slumped with a beer, Jimmy wandering over. He was in his swimming trunks, earning a few odd glances from the guests.

‘All OK?’ he asked, sounding none too concerned.

‘Yeah, all OK, you relax,’ I responded. ‘Oh, Cosy’s been hired. He’s got a Cessna and a job delivering stuff, allows him to fly up to Mawlini.’

Jimmy nodded. ‘Family alright, Rudd?’

‘Yes, in good health, thanks.’

‘Safari lodge day after tomorrow,’ Jimmy stated before wandering off across the sand, back to Liz.

‘He works a lot?’ Rudd asked.

‘No, he thinks a lot, worries more, then does a little work.’

‘Seems to pay very well,’ Rudd commented.

The next morning I rose early, keen to tackle the paperwork for the safari lodge and the airfield before the day warmed up. After breakfast I took Steffan diving, inspecting the rock groins we had built, pursued relentlessly by the turtle expecting some food. Rudd went next door and had a look around, pretending he was bringing a party of guests down. They got an inspection that afternoon and, not surprisingly, they failed.

Lunchtime, I met a Zimbabwean, living in Kenya, who wanted to be an Aussie. It was not a difficult negotiation, the man wanted to be gone, and for cash he could be persuaded to drive to Nairobi, to our solicitors; he reminded me of Grant at the safari lodge. It turned out that all the water for our hotel came from a well on his land, which our hotel had been paying for. I informed Jimmy in front of Liz that the hotel was now eight times larger in acreage. She was more surprised than impressed, and I puzzled what her problem was. Still, I left them to it.

Dawn the next day saw us mount up and head for the safari lodge, Rudd not needed. Driving off in a hired jeep, Jimmy insisted that the orphanage had a lot of building work and that Liz would not like it. With me wondering about that odd move, we drove past the orphanage and towards the west, arriving in the heat of the afternoon at a place that Liz had heard a lot about. Jimmy's navigation was a surprise, taking side roads that got us there quicker, and from memory.

Within five minutes of yanking on the handbrake Jimmy was lying on the floor, the growing lion cub attacking him from all sides, jumping on him and rolling over. The scene put a smile on Liz's face, and I got an inkling as to what was wrong, not that anyone had said anything yet. She got handed a growing Cheetah cub and sat stroking it, putting it down to play with its sibling, the two cubs running around freely but avoiding the lion cub. With an acceleration of zero to thirty miles an hour in a second, the Cheetahs could easily avoid the lumbering lion.

The staff put tinned dog food into four dog bowls in the bar and the cubs fed quietly, the lodge's resident dog at the end, and we plonked down for a much needed cold beer. I informed the staff that the larger lodge building would now be finished off quickly, our paying guests pulling up in four jeeps as we sat there. This week we had ten paying guests, all British, a few kids. The kids ran over and sat next to the cubs, stroking them, but getting back growls; feeding animals did not like to be disturbed, no matter how cute.

Stepping out onto the grass, I greeted my guests, explaining who I was and enquiring if all was satisfactory. They all seemed happy enough, so I closed in on Skids and Trev. Our men were dressed in green khaki as usual, large sweat marks visible, M16s

slung as they leant against their jeeps, looking like a scene from a Vietnam war movie.

‘Boss brought a bird?’ Trev asked, a nod towards the bar.

‘Yeah, she just about lives with him,’ I responded.

‘Where’s your bird? You scared her off?’ Skids asked, wiping his moist brow with his forearm.

‘Working. So, all OK in the jungle?’

‘Yeah, no problems. Starting to like it here,’ Trev answered.

‘Well, you’ll have more guests in a few months, we’ll be ramping up the building of the new lodge.’

Skids suggested, turning and pointing into the distance, ‘Could do with a small lodge at the river bend. They can stay a night and drive back the next day. Doing in one day is a pain, they all asleep on the way back – fucking knackered.’

‘Mention it to Rudd, I’m happy enough.’

‘And some huts near the border,’ Trev complained, swiping away flies. ‘For when we do poacher stag down there. It’s a bugger when it rains.’

I nodded my approval. ‘We’ll get it sorted. Any poacher problems?’

‘Not for a while - we keep our ears to the ground,’ Trev suggested.

‘Do the poachers keep *their* ears on the ground?’

The men laughed. ‘No, they hand them over to us.’

Walking off I was shaking my head, nearly tripped by a darting Cheetah cub being chased by the playful dog.

At 1am that night Jimmy joined me in the bar. Up to that point it had been just me, a few large moths and a wandering guard patrolling the grounds. Jimmy pulled us both beers.

‘OK, boss?’ I delicately enquired.

‘Same as ever,’ he said as he placed down the two pints, sitting next to me.

‘What’s on Liz’s mind?’

He sipped his beer, taking a moment. ‘She wants what someone like me would give her, if I wasn’t someone like me.’ I waited with an expectant look in the dim moonlight. Without looking up he said, ‘She wants a cottage in the country with a white picket fence, two kids, a cat and dog and a nine-to-five husband that she’s smarter than.’

‘Ah.’

‘She doesn’t understand I lot of what I do, and why would she. Why would anyone.’

‘Judy gets a bit odd at it all, but I always blame you.’

‘Thanks.’

I laughed. ‘No, I tell her you’re the boss and it’s your decision if she gets inquisitive.’

‘I don’t have that exit. You wanna swap?’

‘No, I’d hate to lose her.’

‘Thanks again ... for that.’

‘Sorry, you know what I mean.’

‘Only too well.’

‘What’ll you do?’ I nudged after a moment’s silence.

‘I’ll be me, and she’ll fit around it till we break up. It’s not easy to enjoy it when there’s an ... inevitability to it; relationships *and* global conflict.’

‘I have confidence in you, so do most people we come across...’

He heaved a heavy sigh. ‘There are a great many things I can fix, but I can’t fix 2025.’

‘You sure?’

He took a moment. ‘Say, for example, that ... Yellowstone National Park’s dormant volcano exploded, destroying America. Would you consider that I might have a solution up my sleeve?’

‘Does it?’ I whispered. He shook his head as I gave it some thought. ‘You couldn’t fix it, but you could prepare the world for it.’

‘Same difference, isn’t it? Falling of a cliff ... you hit bottom, no matter how well prepared you are.’

‘At some point ... are you going to tell me what *it* is? I can’t offer suggestions otherwise.’

‘Closer to the date, yes. For now it’s my burden.’

‘I find it hard to believe that you came back through time... just to prepare us for hitting the wall. You must have an idea or two tucked away.’

‘I thought I did. But you know what, half of me thinks that it’s just ... well meaning stubbornness. A ... refusal to accept the inevitable.’

‘Nothing wrong with that,’ I commended. ‘Fight to the end.’

‘There may be a solution ... of sorts.’

‘There you go.’

‘I’d have to get America, Russia, Europe, China, India and South America ... all co-operating and in step.’

I took in the stars. ‘We’re fucked then.’

‘Pretty much.’

‘What’s the world like in 2025, before ... *it* ... happens?’

He stared into the night. ‘Not that different: politics, wars, terrorism, corruption, and some nasty plagues. British Rail is still crap.’ We laughed. ‘Some technology solving a few problems, some smart kids and smart computers. You know, I have a plan to get me to 2025, but I might just advance a few things, take a few risks.’

‘Sounds like Plan “A” gets us there, and no further?’

‘Ah, well, by then *you’ll* be up to speed and you might just come up with a Plan “B”.’

‘Don’t count in it, I went to Kingston Polytechnic. Told that girl Sarah I wanted just a *plutonic* relationship.’ He laughed. ‘Liz corrected me. *Pla- tonic*. The other ones fucking radioactive.’

The lion cub jumped up onto Jimmy’s lap. Jimmy dipped his finger into his beer and let the cub lick it. ‘What an easy life you have. You eat, you shit, you lay in the sun, and some day you’ll mate... and the nice lioness you mate with will even catch your supper for you.’

‘Ignorance *is* bliss,’ I let out.

Three days later I felt relaxed, all the paperwork done on the first day, and we headed toward Mawlini airfield, Liz warned ahead of time that it was no pleasure trip. On the approach to the airfield I noticed more mud huts strung along the roadside, plus a few ramshackle shelters surrounded by kids. They looked Somali. Doc Adam’s clinic seemed finished, white washed walls and a large red cross painted onto the roof. The big blue UN flag fluttering over the roof surprised me.

The airfield gate was now bracketed by two alert policemen - who were expecting us - salutes given. Driving towards the air traffic control tower I noticed more wooden buildings off the left and more brick buildings to the right; it was starting to look like a base. Another UN flag caught my attention, plus white faces that I didn’t recognise. I did, however, recognise Cosy stood near a Cessna and felt a little jealous. The rooms below the air traffic

control tower were now command central, and impressed me with their cleanliness and orderly appearance as we entered.

Mac greeted us in the cool interior. 'Come on in, it's air conditioned now.'

We took in the large office, its maps on the wall, its neat desks and sofa against the wall. It even had a water cooler and a fridge.

'All the creature comforts,' I thought out loud. 'Mac, this is Liz, the bosses bit of posh totty.'

Mac shook her hand, Liz scowling my way, before gesturing me and Jimmy towards a large wall diagram. Areas had been coloured red or blue and crosshatched. With a finger on the paper, Mac explained, 'These two wee buildings you would have seen coming in, they's Red cross and UN – a good bunch, they get us some kit.'

'And a UN flag over Doc Adam's clinic,' I questioned.

Mac explained, 'He's got a sponsorship from them – he gets a few quid and some supplies for everyone he sees, especially if they're a refugee.'

'I thought I saw some Somalis outside,' I mentioned.

'Aye, they're fucking nuisance already. They's already cut a hole in the fence.'

'Set-up patrols,' Jimmy softly suggested. 'Then recruit some of the Somali men, give them work – anything, just keep them occupied.'

'We already got one or two digging holes and doing some building work, but the language barrier is tough,' Mac explained. 'And they like to stop at noon and have a kip.'

'How many people you got under training?' I asked Mac, already with a rough idea.

'Steady forty on the mines, another twenty medics.'

Jimmy said, 'You've got an extra million quid to play with, so use it.'

'A million?' Mac whispered. 'Fuck.'

I said to Mac, 'Get a decent radio for aircraft, some landing lights, another hangar and a fuel tanker. What's upstairs these days?'

'Come and see.' He led us upstairs and into the glass tower, finding it clean and decorated, old dog Handy sat at a desk.

‘Right, boss,’ Handy greeted us, standing and shaking our hands.

‘Office with a view,’ Jimmy let out, taking in the airfield.

‘Gets a bit warm,’ Handy admitted. ‘But I can use the binoculars to see who’s doing what. I call the gate when I see the Somali kids cutting the fence.’

I told him, ‘At some point we’re going to want to use this for directing aircraft, so don’t get comfy.’

‘It’s got electricity and new glass ready,’ Handy replied. ‘Last week we had a ruddy great UN plane in here. It dropped off some people, jeeps driving out the back of the plane.’

‘I want maximum co-operation with the NGOs,’ Jimmy ordered.

Mac told Handy, ‘Wees got an extra million in the kitty.’

‘Shit. What you trying to do up here, boss?’ Handy delicately nudged.

‘Build a centre of excellence, a shining example of charitable assistance for Africa, but in a practical way. I don’t throw money at refugees, I don’t see that as effective. I’m more interested in training people who can help fix the problem, not just feeding someone for another day. I want you guys to be nice to the UN and the Red Cross, meet their superiors and let them see just what a bunch of helpful fuckers you can be. And my next project you’ll like. I’m going to pay the Kenyans to raise a small security detail around here. We’ll call them ... The Kenyan Rifles.’

‘Soldiers?’ Mac puzzled.

‘Yes, soldiers. Do either of you ... know anything about training soldiers?’

‘Aye, little bit,’ Mac proudly stated.

‘Put together a proposal for a small security detail, trained from scratch with a few regular Kenya NCOs. They would defend this place, and be available to the UN for convoy protection, etc. Maybe border patrol.’

‘And wees be paying the lads, and the kit and all?’ Mac clarified.

‘Yes,’ Jimmy responded.

‘Why not Mercs?’ Handy asked.

‘Because they’d be expensive, ill disciplined and easily bored. Besides, I’m sure that if you had some young lads here for a year

you could mould them into excellent fighting men.’ Mac and Handy exchanged looks as I hid a grin. Jimmy added, ‘While I think of it, I’m going to add a second million to your budget. A want a transit centre built, rooms like a hotel, hundred of them, with a couple of nice rooms for visitors. It should have a decent restaurant and a *well decent* bar. Separate fence around it with a guard.’

‘Fucking ‘ell, boss,’ Mac let out. ‘Where’d we stick it?’

‘Beyond Rabbit’s vegetable patch. Make it a three-storey affair. In fact, why don’t you put a bar on the roof ... a pool at the rear.’

‘A fucking swimming pool?’ Mac challenged.

‘Why not, cool down the guests,’ I said.

Liz climbed the stairs. ‘You lot ignoring me?’

We stepped out onto the roof, pointing out every building to her, what its function was.

‘And you paid for all this?’ she asked, a hand over her eyes as she scanned the airfield.

‘We sure did,’ I answered. ‘We always wanted a sandbox to play in.’

‘How much have you spent down here in total?’ she asked.

‘With the current round of spending ... four million,’ Jimmy responded.

She stared at him, but said nothing. Mac led us back down and we ambled through the heat towards the new clinic, crossing the dusty road. Doc Adam stood and raised his arms, letting out a sentence in some local dialect. His nurse stood smiling proudly, glad to see us, if not honoured to see us. The doc showed us around, very proud of the small clinic, the waiting room next door full, mostly of Somalis. The emergency room was occupied by a sorrowful looking local boy with a leg in plaster.

Jimmy exchanges a few sentences in a local dialect, surprising Liz. He explained, ‘He tried to ride a wild camel.’ Facing the doc, Jimmy asked, ‘How many per day?’

‘Ten ... maybe fifteen patients.’

‘Keeping you busy then,’ I said.

‘They come from up to twenty miles away,’ Doc Adam explained. ‘And they come across the border for help here, to birth the baby.’

‘Are there not doctors across the border?’ Liz asked.

Doc Adam answered, 'Not many, conditions are difficult in Somalia. Here, this part of the border is a desert region, some local fighting, some gun wounds.'

Jimmy told me, 'Take Liz back while I scan the paperwork here, I won't be long. Get a cold drink.'

With the gang withdrawing Jimmy gestured Doc Adam to his office, closing the door. 'What happened to the man I injected?'

'He is here, I have asked him to work with us at the clinic and he is happy to stay, already talk of a local wife,' the doc reported with a smile.

'Does he know anything?'

'Oh no, not a thing. But he is now very big, strong like the Ox!'

'Do you have everything you need here?'

'I have what I always wanted,' Doc Adam proudly explained, his chest out. 'My own practice, and now the help from the UN.'

'We all have our places in life,' Jimmy softly stated. Louder, he said, 'Do you have any questions for me?'

Doc Adam retrieved a syringe set. 'Only one, my friend. To do God's work.'

'Then who am I to stand in your way?' Jimmy held up a forearm, blood quickly extracted.

Doc held up the needle. 'This much is enough?'

Jimmy nodded as he took charge of the needle and injected our keen medic. 'For the next day you will run a fever, drink a lot of water. After that, eat a lot of protein. Exercise after three days, you will not need much sleep. After three months you can inject people with your blood, but make sure no one sees you. Get a small centrifuge and separate out the red blood cells, they're not needed. If you inject a clear liquid it will not cause suspicion.'

'I will be careful', Adam promised.

Jimmy soon joined us in what passed for a canteen, Cosy keenly awaiting some instructions. The new hotel was a mild shock, and the budgets, but he diligently made notes, indicating that Rudd knew a building firm, one we might use for the new golf complex. He was given the title of Facilities Manager and a desk next to Mac. The idea was simple: the Old Dogs spent time training the recruits, Cosy and Rudd did the paperwork.

Jimmy told the Old Dogs, ‘Cosy here spent several happy years in the French Foreign Legion. A paratrooper.’ That impressed them no end. ‘I’m sure that there are *many* things that Cosy can assist you with.’

Liz chatted with Cosy in French in a corner of the office, Jimmy and me chatting to the Old Dogs about progress, problems and plans. Leaving Liz with Cosy we stepped back out into the heat and met the UN staff before talking to the Red Cross at length, finally meeting some of the medical recruits. The medics were dressed in white jackets supplied by us, Rudd converting old UN jackets. At the time I didn’t know the huge significance of a small logo on the jacket, a small hand in the palm of a much larger hand.

At 7pm, with the sun down, Jimmy checked his watch. ‘I could do with meeting Rudd in the morning, so let’s drive back tonight. Be in Nairobi for midnight. Liz, you can catch a nap in the car.’

Since she wasn’t that keen on staying there was no argument, the Old Dogs faxing Rudd our intentions. We set off into the cool night, unloading at the hotel not long after midnight. On our last day Jimmy headed off to meet Rudd as I took Liz shopping around Nairobi for authentic gifts.

Jimmy instructed Rudd to meet with the Kenyan Government and petition them for the security detail. It would not be a difficult proposition to sell; we would be paying for everything. A budget was also given for the grass runway at the safari lodge to be improved and the purchase of a second-hand Cessna 172 four-seat aircraft for us to use. The next day we ducked our heads through aircraft doors in the heat and lifted them into the welcome drizzle of Heathrow.

Family

When we got back Big Paul was waiting, and apprehensive. ‘Bit of a problem.’

‘What’s that?’ I asked, checking the apartment. ‘You had a wild party and broke something?’

‘No, MI5 sent an electrician around to fix the faulty building. I tortured him.’

‘Charges a bit pricey, were they?’ I asked.

‘Any comeback?’ Jimmy softly asked.

‘None so far.’

‘I’ll deal with it,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Get the kettle on.’

After a quiet cuppa back in the apartment I felt better, always glad to be back, but also always looking forward to being in Kenya when I was in London. Odd. A knock on the door and Big Paul let David in.

‘You spying on us?’ Jimmy asked, none too concerned.

‘Yeah, how’d you know we were back?’ I asked.

‘Jimmy said you’d be back at 4pm today, precisely,’ David explained as he sat, his bag placed down.

‘Which means we’re jet-lagged,’ I told him.

‘I have it on good authority that neither of you suffers from jet lag,’ David quietly insisted. He unfolded a damp newspaper and flattened it out on the coffee table. ‘Two of our people got caught in the cave, the German authorities have charged them with removing treasure without permission.’

‘How much left in there?’ Big Paul asked.

‘Not much, all the gold and paintings out. This last pair were going through the papers at the back – quite valuable in themselves to collectors.’

Jimmy was not fazed by the news. Softly, he said, ‘When good advice is given, take it. I told them to move on.’

David shrugged. ‘I don’t think they could be held for long, they only had papers with them. But the original gold boxes are there, opened and smashed, so the authorities know there was more. The pair are maintaining that they heard about the gold and came looking, only to find it gone.’

‘Might just work,’ I suggested.

David opened his bag and handed over five Hitler diaries, each of us taking one and flicking through. ‘I’m afraid that The Fuhrers’ handwriting is a bit hard to read, especially towards the end.’

‘He was an addict,’ Jimmy softly stated, his nose in a diary.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘A drug addict, addicted to pain killers,’ Jimmy explained.

‘These worth a few quid?’ Big Paul asked, placing down his.

‘To the right people, a great deal,’ David answered him. ‘What will you do with them, if you don’t mind me asking?’

‘Stocking fillers at Christmas,’ Jimmy suggested without looking up.

I asked David, ‘Second wreck finished?’

‘Yes, but not much there, as Jimmy said, but still a nice haul. A golden Menorah was found, first century. Priceless.’

‘Haven’t got it in the bag with you, eh?’ I asked.

‘Eh ... no, I’m afraid. It’s destined for a museum.’

‘Got a map for me?’ Jimmy nudged, raising his head.

David retrieved a map and unfolded it onto the coffee table.

When Jimmy marked the spot I loudly said, ‘Oops.’

David commented, ‘That ... is rather close to Beirut.’

‘Can’t have everything,’ Jimmy responded. ‘It’s a big haul, five times more than the first ship.’

‘I’ll convey the good news to the appropriate people,’ David reluctantly offered.

‘Get a deep sea dive boat sorted, there’re many in deep waters,’ Jimmy instructed. ‘Some are two hundred metres down.’

‘Tricky,’ Big Paul suggested. ‘Need a diving belle with a grapple.’

Jimmy made eye contact with him and nodded.

‘How many more should I suggest to *our friends*?’ David asked.

‘About thirty,’ Jimmy mentioned, very matter of fact.

‘Oh ... I see,’ David commented, appearing quite shocked.

‘Any shallow ones, boss?’ Big Paul complained.

‘Yes, around the Caribbean, twenty-five metres.’

‘Were going diving then,’ Big Paul said to me.

David took a breath. ‘If I may detract from my main purpose, might I ask a question ... about my daughter?’

Jimmy was still flicking through the Hitler diary. Without looking up he said, ‘She’ll come back to the UK in five years and find you, only to lose you to Alzheimer’s. You’ll be beyond the point that you’ll recognise her, or anyone else come to that.’ He made eye contact. ‘Time ... flies.’ He got up and walked into our office, returning with a letter, the name hand written.

David held the letter, starting to tremble. Big Paul fixed him a whiskey and nudged it down his throat, pouring him a second when ready. We waited as David stared at the letter.

‘Some ... guidance here might help, if you don’t mind,’ David asked without making eye contact with Jimmy, a quiver in his voice.

‘Do you want to see the grandchildren?’ Jimmy asked.

David nodded, almost if ashamed of that action.

‘Your wife will reconcile with her?’ Jimmy posed.

‘I think ... *that* may take a little longer, but I did show her the photos. I know she took them out later and looked a second time.’

‘If you don’t do it now you’ll regret it for the rest of your life,’ Jimmy firmly stated.

David gripped the letter tightly. ‘Well...’

‘Well do you want her back or not?’ I loudly asked. ‘Don’t be stupid, man, see her and her kids.’

David focused on Jimmy. ‘You already know what happens?’

‘It must still be your decision.’

David forced a breath and downed the remaining whiskey in one, coughing. ‘I’m ... I’m going to see her.’

‘Good. Now open the letter,’ Jimmy firmly suggested.

David opened the letter and read, suddenly a heavy frown taking hold. ‘It says ... that she’ll be in Tel Aviv ... tomorrow... and thanks me for asking to see her.’

Jimmy reached under the coffee table and handed over six first class tickets to Tel Aviv, dated for the morning.

David accepted the tickets, wide eyed. ‘You ... you told her I wanted to see her.’

‘You just said you did,’ I pointed out.

‘Best go and pack, get the family ready,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘And tell Ben his God Daughter will be turning up tomorrow, grandchildren in tow.’

David slowly stood, reclaiming his bag. At the door he stopped, but was lost for words.

‘Go!’ Jimmy loudly suggested.

With the door closed Big Paul said, ‘Smooth, boss. Smooth. You’re a real fucking operator.’

‘So,’ Jimmy began, focused on our driver/bodyguard. ‘Who was the bird you had in Paul’s bed?’

Big Paul was up and to the door. ‘I can explain.’

‘My bed!’ I roared, on my feet.

Big Paul was out the door in an instant, hurried footsteps echoing.

I found myself stood pointing at the open door and facing Jimmy. 'Who'd he have in my bed?'

'An old flame he's seen on and off for years. Don't worry, I told the cleaner to bin the sheets.'

'You knew in advance?' I barked.

'Of course I knew, dumb fuck.' He stood. 'So, who scratched my car?'

'Ah ... well, that was Judy.'

'I know. But you claimed it was the guy below you reversing into it!'

'Well I couldn't say she did it.'

'Why not? Wouldn't you have got laid that night?'

'I got some unpacking to do, in my apartment, grumpy guts,' I told him, slamming the door on way out.

Jack Donohue knocked on Sykes' door and waited.

'Come in, Jack.'

Jack walked in and placed down a Hitler diary for Sykes.

'What's this?' Sykes puzzled, opening the old book. His eyes widened. 'This is a Hitler diary,' he whispered. Louder, he said, 'This is what was stolen from that cave in Germany! Along with a large pile of gold!'

'A gift from Silo.'

'A gift?' He whipped off his glasses.

'For you, sir.'

'For me? He mentioned me by name?'

'Yes, sir.'

Sykes put his glasses back on and read some of the detail. '1943, September. Christ, I know some people who'd kill for this.' He slammed it shut. 'There was gold in that cave, a lot of it, and the bloody Israelis got it!'

'I think *their* man was responsible for that, sir.'

'Yes, well...what about that sub?'

'Silo says we can't have it now.'

'Can't have it?'

'No, sir. He says that MI5 tried to bug his home when he was away, so he's pissed off with us.'

‘Why’s he pissed off with *us*, when he knows who’s behind it? And why the gift?’

‘A gentle nudge, sir. He asks if you could speak to the head of Five,’ Jack explained.

Sykes calmed himself. ‘Be a pleasure to give them some grief. They’re mad because we got the Magestic letters, and we only got involved because the first few letters involved the IRA or overseas problems.’ He went back to the diary. ‘OK, Jack, I’ll see what I can do. Oh, and thank ... whoever.’

Magestic

Geoff Wolak. October, 2009.

Part 2

Is this airfield for sale?

With Big Paul driving, we headed down the motorway to Swindon, coming off at Junction 15 and heading north towards a seldom-used airfield called Mapley. Little did I know at the time about how important this place would be in years to come. With Jimmy giving directions, as if he had been there a million times before, we weaved through the countryside; 'B' roads with hedges. The front gate had seen better days, now simply a sign saying Private Property. Another sign said Longdon Aeroclub, a third displaying Massie Aircraft Services Ltd. We drove straight in.

In some ways it reminded me of the airfield in Kenya in the early days, that *little-used* feel to it. At least the grass here seemed to have been recently cut. We drove parallel to the runway, and to a hangar with several light aircraft both inside, and in front of it. I recognised most of the aircraft, spotting several Cessna 152s and 172s, those I had flown to complete my pilots license. Pulling up in front of a sign saying "Office" we eased out, Big Paul remaining with the car. Just inside the large hangar we noticed our first warm body, a portly man in his fifties rubbing his hands with an oily rag.

'Can I help?' the man finally said, his words echoing.

'Mister Hobbs?' Jimmy asked.

'Yes.' The man stepped forwards with an unwelcome expression. 'And who might you be?'

Jimmy said, 'We're the gentlemen who've heard that the lease for this place is up ... and that you're thinking of selling it.'

'Can't keep any bloody secrets around here,' Hobbs grumbled.

'Since you are, apparently, at odds with your partners and keen to rid yourself of the place – it's good we heard about it.'

'Did Mark tell you that?' Hobbs angrily demanded.

Jimmy forced a smile. 'I hear no evil, see no evil, nor speak no evil.'

'Well ... now's not a good time,' Hobbs suggested.

'I could get a 172 and a Jet Ranger in here,' I mentioned to Jimmy.

'You a pilot?' Hobbs queried, looking me over.

‘Just for fun,’ I said. ‘I got a place in Kenya ... kind of essential down there.’

‘Oh, I got a cousin down there,’ Hobbs admitted.

‘Why don’t you pop down, stay at our hotel – won’t cost you anything, just get your flight,’ I suggested.

‘Oh, that’s good to know,’ he reluctantly let out. ‘You in hotels?’

‘Stock brokers,’ Jimmy told him, taking-in the large hangar. ‘Investment capital, that sort of thing.’

‘Oh, right. Well, I can’t really stop at the moment –’

‘Forty-five thousand pounds to take the lease off your hands,’ Jimmy told him. ‘Anyone with a plane can stay around for twelve months, Massie’s can stay longer if they want to. You, Mr Hobbs, can keep your office and store for two years. That, sir, is the deal on the table.’

‘You don’t mess about.’

Jimmy handed Hobbs an envelope with the deal outlined. ‘It’s all in there, and my contact details. Give it some thought, but the price won’t go up – I’ve done my homework.’

With Hobbs threatening to get back to us soon we left the hangar, Jimmy leading me across the grass and towards an old wartime Air Traffic Control tower, better condition than the one in Kenya had been. Big Paul followed in the car.

Stopping in front of the disused Air Traffic Control building Jimmy said, ‘Years from now this place will be buzzing – we’ll spend a lot of time here.’

‘Bit a drive from the flat,’ I commented.

‘Won’t be living there, be buying a new house end of next year. Keep the flat for trips to London, but after next year we’ll be country gents.’

‘Yeah?’ I keenly enquired. ‘Where?’

‘Wales.’

‘Wales!’

‘Don’t sound so disappointed, you’ll love the new place.’

‘But it’s ... it’s Wales for fucks sake. Full of ... Welsh people!’

‘I ... was born in Wales,’ Jimmy reminded me.

‘But you don’t sound like that.’

‘Neither do most of the people we’ll meet. People ... *sound like that*... in certain areas. And so do people in certain areas of London and Essex, and elsewhere.’

‘Yeah, but it’s Wales!’

He laughed. ‘C’mon, let’s make a day out of it. Next stop – your future home.’

We drove down the M4 and across the new motorway toll bridge, paying to get into Wales; what a cheek. Turning off the M4 and onto the A49 we headed north, soon in pleasant countryside.

‘Like it?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Nice enough,’ I commented.

We turned off at a place called Raglan and headed back South, soon finding the River Usk.

‘Doesn’t look anything like the shitty river downstream,’ I noted.

‘It’s not tidal here.’

We pulled up on a hillside and entered some sort of picnic area, clambering out. Ahead of me, across the valley, sat a large house that appeared to have been recently built, definitely new, but with a country-dated style to it. It was two-storey, and seemed to offer ten or more bedrooms. Fixed to the side of the house was a triple garage with an apartment above it, some other outbuildings, neat rows of pine trees following the access road as it snaked down towards the river.

I pointed at it, Jimmy nodding. ‘Nice enough, I guess.’

‘And secure. No one can sneak up too easily, break in or bug the place.’

‘That going to be a problem?’

‘In years to come, yes.’ He pointed. ‘That’s the first house, rights to a small part of the river, trout and salmon fishing.’

‘Tidy like,’ I said in my best attempt at a Welsh accent.

He pointed again. ‘Look behind the house, you’ll see a wood. Follow it back to the hill in the distance.’

‘Yeah?’

‘A few years after buying that house we’ll buy all that land.’

‘All *that*?’ I loudly queried. ‘Shit.’

‘And then build another house, forty bedrooms –’

‘Forty?’

‘To put in all the girls you’re going to date!’

‘I see a flaw in that plan, namely that they’ll bump into each other when they go in and out.’

‘And a helipad.’

I was surprised. ‘We’d get planning permission?’

‘Yes.’

‘Shit, got it all mapped out haven’t you.’ I took in the view. ‘How much river section would we get then?’

‘Close to a mile of it, both sides.’

‘My dad would have a go at that,’ I quietly mentioned.

‘Your parents would be able to visit often, get them out of London. Anyway, in the years ahead we’ll have a lot of work to do in Swindon and Cardiff, can’t be in London. And when the press are breathing down our necks we’ll appreciate this place – high fences and guard dogs!’

A few days later David returned from Israel when Jimmy was out, a better colour to his bald plate.

‘How’d it go, mate?’ I asked, offering him a seat.

David took a moment, composing himself. ‘My family are in Jimmy’s debt, for what he did. Greatly in his debt.’

‘Don’t worry about it,’ I encouraged. ‘So what happened?’

‘It was if she had never left. Neither my wife, nor I, said a word about her leaving for the first three days, neither did anyone else. Ben and his family put us all up in their house, a bit of a squeeze. We threw a party, in fact one long round of parties with all the cousins attending at various times. Exhausting. On the fourth day we went for a walk, just my daughter and myself, and spoke about what happened ... and why. Some of the blame is obviously mine, I ... I was the traditional Jewish father, unyielding, and I paid a price for that, losing fourteen years.’

‘Your daughter, she back in with all the Jewish stuff?’

‘To a degree, but she is raising the grandchildren with regular attendance at Temple. They’re here, they flew back with us.’

‘Oh, shit, almost forgot.’ I rifled through the files on the coffee table. I found a padded envelope and handed it over. ‘Plane tickets, you and the missus, return to Australia. You leave in two months.’

‘Really, this is too much...’

‘Don’t worry about it, surprise waiting for you in Oz.’

‘Surprise?’ David repeated. ‘We only had the one daughter!’

I laughed. 'I'm supposed to tell you anyway, just not for week or two. Your grandfather survived the Holocaust, just lost his memory a bit.' David stared back, his mouth open. 'Brits shipped him off to Oz with some soldiers who they couldn't identify, to a funny farm. Seems he was well enough because he got married and had some kids, two are still alive down there.'

'I have relatives ... from my grandfather? My father is still alive.'

'So he's got stepbrothers, you've got step-uncles I suppose. Photo's here somewhere.' I hunted around the computer room and found the file, handing it over.

David stared at the two faces, men in their sixties. 'They look like my father.' He turned his gaze toward me. 'And my daughter -'

'Has no idea about them, your turn to freak her out.'

David just sat and stared at the photos. 'Is there nothing he can't do?'

'Cant sort out his girlfriend.'

David lifted his gaze. 'No?'

'She wants babies and the home life,' I explained.

'Ah. I'd take a wild guess that he's not quite the sort.'

'Now that, my friend, is what I call an under-statement.'

Musical Wang Po

A few months later, Jimmy asked me to send Po a fax, telling him of a good investment opportunity and would he pop over. I was certain I could hear the plane taking off before the machined beeped. I welcomed him and his bodyguards into the apartment two days later.

Jimmy stepped out of the kitchen with Liz. 'Po, you remember Liz?'

'Yes, yes. Very pretty lady, know all about London.' They shook and chatted, Liz on her way out, a kiss for Jimmy at the door. Liz and Judy were going to an Opera, and no amount of nagging could get me and Jimmy to tag along. The three of us

settled around the coffee table, Big Paul leading the bodyguards into the kitchen for some food.

Jimmy handed Po a statement of the performance of Pineapple. 'I have a record company, here in London.'

'Record? Music record?' Po clarified.

'Yes.'

'Jimmy is better at picking good bands than he is at picking stocks,' I put in. Po was staggered.

Jimmy continued, 'And we need a contact in the Far East to help distribution there, and to make cassette tapes.'

'Tapes? Magnetic tape?' Po clarified again.

'Yes.'

'I have cousin who have factory for tape!'

'That would be very useful,' Jimmy suggested. 'And we would need a distributor ... to sell the tapes to the shops.'

'I ask, I think he do this,' Po offered.

'Even better,' Jimmy said with a smile. 'Now, I am looking to give you some shares in the company—'

'Give me? No, no, you always give, you no take. I buy share, I insist. It not good you always give.'

'If it will keep you happy,' Jimmy offered. 'The business is valued at two million pounds, so thirty percent is six hundred and fifty thousand pounds.'

'I give one million, it fair price for future business,' Po insisted, wagging a finger.

'OK,' Jimmy agreed with a nod. 'We then make directors loan to the business to grow it quickly. One million each.'

'Yes, yes.'

It was a quick deal. Still, with all the money he had made from us, not surprising at all.

'Tomorrow we'll go and look at the company,' Jimmy suggested.

Po looked at the company's track record. 'It grow very quick, many record number ten or smaller. Three number one.' He made eye contact. 'You pick song?'

'He sure does,' I said. 'He's very good at it.'

'I not know you music man,' Po said. 'You many good many things.'

'I try my best,' Jimmy joked. 'In this music business I have a partner with thirty-percent, I'll talk with him tonight.'

‘We make good offer,’ Po insisted.

With Po gone, meeting us later at the restaurant and the girls joining us there, Jimmy rang Oliver.

‘Oliver, how you doing, mate?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Good. Excellent in fact, wracking up a few hits.’

‘Listen, friend of mine, Hong Kong Chinese, he’s very keen to get into the British music scene and, to be blunt, wants twenty of your thirty percent.’

‘Well ... well I’m quite happy to hang onto them, Jimmy.’

‘He’s offering one million pounds for them.’

‘One ... million?’

‘And you’d still have ten percent and stay on forever as managing director. Listen, he’s not going to offer twice, and it won’t affect anything other than you dropping from thirty percent to ten. To make a million from dividends would take you the next twenty years probably. And any money you make from selling your shares are taxed at ten percent.’

‘Ten percent? What ... capital gains tax?’

‘Yes. So that’s nine hundred thousand pounds in your back pocket, and you stay on.’

‘Wow. Can I think about it?’

‘We’re over tomorrow, he insists on making you the offer. Think about it till then, but don’t take too long, this is a very good offer.’

‘Ill ... er ... see you tomorrow. Thanks, Jimmy.’

‘Bit sneaky,’ I thought I’d mention.

‘If he hangs onto thirty percent, then years from now he’ll be a pain. Not a problem, but a small wrinkle in my plans.’

The next day Oliver sold twenty shares for one million pounds, Jimmy handing Po ten more without the Chinaman noticing the origins of the shares. Pineapple was now global, and our cassettes would be made in bulk in Hong Kong, not saving us any money, but making money for Po in Hong Kong – which would come back around to us in cash when we wanted it.

Two million was injected as directors’ loans, the business now very cash rich, more staff hired and a better studio deal negotiated. We also hired a concert organising company. Once a week Jimmy and me would pop around to a small factory unit not far away from the apartment and pass tapes from one box to another. Each week we signed two or three new artists, each

having a hit song almost straight away; it was embarrassingly simple.

Two days after Po's departure we descended on a small company that produced an independent music magazine: Wrong Chord. I liked the name. The company was hidden away in a typical London mews, a non-descript yellow door. Jimmy pushed the buzzer.

'Yes?' came a girl's voice.

'I was hoping to see Jane O'Sullivan.'

'And who are you?'

'Were the owners of Pineapple Records.'

A silence preceded a buzz. We pushed the door and entered what looked like someone's kitchen. We walked though and to a lounge that had been converted into an office, numerous Apple Mac computers with flickering grey images, two women and a man sat working them, the curtains closed.

'I'm Jane,' said a woman in her thirties. She extended a hand to Jimmy.

'Jimmy Silo, Pineapple Records.'

'You've been doing very well of late,' she remarked. 'Tea?'

'No, thanks, just a quick visit,' Jimmy said.

'Oh. Then what can I do for Pineapple?'

'We'd like you to produce a magazine for us,' Jimmy said, getting straight to the point. 'Call it ... The Pineapple Slice, or similar.'

We laughed.

'What would this magazine be about?' she asked.

'Our bands, of course. Each one would give an exclusive interview on regular basis, let you photograph them back stage or at home, even the studio. Simple format, with an exclusive deal.'

She was mildly shocked. 'Oh. So ... you'd give us access to all your groups?' The employees were now listening attentively.

'Yes, an exclusive more or less, at least the best and first interviews.'

'You'd get them when they were sober,' I suggested. 'We'd *make them* talk to you.'

'Oh. And what basis —'

'A new limited company,' Jimmy explained. 'Pineapple has seventy percent of the shares, you thirty. We pick up all the costs

and overheads, give you some space in our offices, you manage it with a fixed monthly retainer. Risk is all ours.'

'With all your bands in there there'll be no risk,' she pointed out.

Jimmy gave her a card. 'Think about it, call me.'

I waved at the staff. 'Don't sit too close, bad for your eyes.'

Autumn 1990

Things seemed OK between Jimmy and Liz, but he indicated that their days were numbered, explaining that it was her choice, not his, because she had not managed to mould him into the man she wanted. I would have been surprised if she had influenced him in any way. All was going well in Kenya, at Pineapple Records and with the stock trading. Life was good and the days were ticking off the calendar. On a wet Monday I sat down opposite Jimmy and picked up a copy of the new magazine, Pineapple Music, now in its second month.

'Have a look, see what you think,' Jimmy said, his face hidden in a paper.

I flicked through the magazine, noticing now a music industry news review at the front, interviews with a few stars, then notices of upcoming releases, concert dates and venues. There were a handful of interviews, each covering four or more pages, and plenty of glossy colour photographs of the musicians.

'Have look at the advertising,' Jimmy suggested.

The back page was a concert advert, the rear inside cover River View safari lodge in Kenya. Then I noticed an advert for the Old Dogs mine clearance operation – an appeal for money, an advert for River View beach hotel, also an advert for the Chinese restaurant we used - making it appear as if stars favoured it. Virgin Airways had an advert, plus several musical instrument shops in London.

'What's the revenue?' I asked.

'About fifty percent of the cost of magazine at the moment,' he answered. 'Which is good, considering the main aim is to promote the groups. You see the inside front cover.'

I opened the page: Got talent, send us your demo tapes.

‘Should drum up some business,’ I approved. Weighing the magazine in my hand I said, ‘Chunky, too.’ As I placed it down I noticed several estate agent adverts for houses in Wales. ‘We moving?’

‘Yes, next year.’

‘Remind me again as to why?’

He put down his paper. ‘We’ll keep this place for when we’re up here, but we need a more ... defensive position. In the years ahead the intelligence services of several countries will take a great deal of interest in us, after that – further down the line – so will the public. We’ll spend more time in Swindon, and next year we’ll open a club in Cardiff.’

‘Yeah, well that don’t make much sense. I mean, it’s Cardiff, like.’

‘You’ll like it,’ he suggested. ‘And the new house. Besides, it has to be done in small steps. If we opened up a club in London, then first – it would be expensive, and second we’d not have a track record or plenty of clients, and third we’d not have the skills or the staff. You’d... not have the skills.’

‘So it’s a dry run?’

‘Of sorts. But if you want to be here you can be.’

‘You make it sound as if being here will be unsafe.’

‘It will be, to a degree. Got some people to piss off. Anyway, think about when you’re famous. How could you walk out that door in the mornings without a face full of paparazzi? In the new house we’ll have several access points and escape routes, here we don’t.’

I picked up the flyers, seeming to recognise one big house. ‘This is?’ I showed it to him.

‘Yes. And the land around it. We’ll go see it in a few days, after Mapley.’

‘Mapley?’

‘The old airfield in Swindon. We’re about to spend a lot of money on it.’

‘The Israelis are waiting to know where to transfer more money to.’

‘I’m going to make it look like an Israeli bank loaned me the money, paid back over thirty years.’

‘But then ... won’t we be losing it?’

‘No tax on a loan, for one. And two, I need a way of getting it into the UK without too many questions. It’s not like Kenya. Can you see the Kenyan Government demanding to know where all the charitable money came from?’

‘Hardly. Oh, while I remember, Rudd faxed to say that their Interior Minister went out to the airfield.’

‘And?’ Jimmy nudged.

‘He was surprised at all the money it was attracting, but pleased to fuck he was not paying for it. They’ve approved the Kenyan Rifles and sent an officer and some NCOs.’

‘Because *we’re* paying the wages for his staff,’ Jimmy commented.

‘Mac’s got adverts up in the nearest big town for recruits, lads aged seventeen to twenty-two,’ I mentioned.

Jimmy nodded approvingly. ‘In order to get anything done... you first need a small crack, then make it wider. But we’re two years ahead of where I thought we’d be. How much are *you* worth now?’

‘Three million, not including assets.’

‘Need more, take a few more risks on the trades.’

‘Fair enough, been quite risk averse,’ I commented. ‘Oh, I diverted the money from the traders we tip to Kenya, they’re all making it look like charitable donations. There are separate accounts for Mawlini and the orphanage, it goes there.’

‘Send most of it to Mawlini, the orphanage is getting embarrassing.’

‘Five hundred kids in there,’ I reported, lifting my eyebrows. ‘It’s been on Kenyan TV twice, had a minister visit it. No one over there can figure out why it gets so much money.’

Jimmy forced a breath, putting down his paper. ‘Let’s go to Swindon tomorrow, see if we can’t get three years ahead, eh.’ He lifted the phone and called David, asking for a visit.

When David arrived we explained about the loan and told him to get a move on. David could not see a problem, since they’d benefit greatly. He also could not understand it, which added to a long list of things about us he did not understand. I got a familiar shrug as he departed.

We arrived at Mapley at 9am, Big Paul driving us. Meeting us there was a local firm of architects and a council planning

officer, the council owning the land. The man from the council had been reluctant to meet us, but Jimmy assured him that we would be creating many local jobs. At 9.30am we met the architect, the council officer ten minutes late; he could not find his own airfield. With the rain easing off we climbed to the roof of the control tower.

‘Not quite Kenya,’ I said, avoiding the puddles.

Jimmy got straight to the point, stood in a cold breeze. ‘Gentlemen, I’ve taken over the lease of this airfield, and the lease allows for building upkeep. But I’m interested in more than just simple maintenance. We have a charity that we have adopted in Kenya, in fact several, but the one of interest trains Africans in first aid and mine clearance. We are also heavily involved with various mountain rescue groups here in the UK.

‘In the years to come we’re going to train British medics here before they go out to Africa. Things like first aid, jeep driving off-road, vehicle maintenance, flying, plus a range of other skills. For the mountain rescue groups we want a place where they can come and train for common skills. I know there are no mountains in sight, but they need training in first aid, jeeps, water rescue, stuff like that.

‘Our aim, Gentlemen, is to try and combine those training programmes here. For that we need an airfield, which we’ve got, some classrooms - which we can build, garages – which we can build, a small assault course to keep them fit, a running track, a swimming pool and an admin building for the managers.’

‘That’s quite ambitious,’ the man from the council suggested.

‘I’ve earmarked twenty million, and set it aside,’ Jimmy stated.

‘Twenty million?’ the young architect repeated. This could be his biggest account. Ever.

‘That’s for starters,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Now, we’re going to need council permission before we do anything.’ He focused on the man and waited.

‘So, these people being trained here, they’re being trained for African work?’

‘Not just Africa, a variety of places. We’d also teach mine clearance here.’

‘Mine clearance!’ The poor little fella was shocked.

‘All done in the classroom,’ Jimmy said with a smile. ‘Nothing goes bang. And we’d be creating many new jobs, from security staff on the gate to mechanics and teachers. I think around a hundred local jobs could be created eventually.’

I handed Jimmy a document, the outline proposal, and he presented it to the man from the council.

‘It’s all in there, the outline at least,’ Jimmy explained. ‘We won’t start repairing buildings or planning new ones till we get the go ahead, and unless that go ahead is comprehensive – there is no point in us being here, is there?’

‘Would there be more traffic?’ the man from the council asked.

‘I should hope a lot more, but I will offer to pay to widen the roads.’

‘You’ll pay?’

‘Yes. I’m also interested in building a leisure centre on the edge of the airfield, or just outside, so that locals can use it as well as the people based here.’ He pointed to some bushes in the distance. ‘It’s close enough for people to walk from the local village.’

The man from the council was now far more interested. ‘You’d pay for it?’

‘Yes, it would be my leisure centre, but open to the public. A gym, a full sized pool.’

‘A full sized pool?’

I did not know what this guy’s problem was, but he was keen about the frigging pool and lukewarm about rescuers.

‘I’ll discuss it with the council,’ he promised and we sent him on his way.

Jimmy faced the young architect. ‘We’re going to spend some money with your company whilst waiting for the council to give us permission. So, I want a complete survey of this place, maps drawn up accurate to an inch. I want sub-soil samples and foundations checked right across the airfield. Work on the assumption that building work *will* commence within a few months.

‘Right, the hangars need inspecting – you can handle that and bill us. Water, gas, electric – I need a detailed map of it all and its capacities. Then, draw some sketches of new buildings: a two-storey office block, a classroom block and basic living

accommodation – think soldiers, barrack rooms. I want some communal barracks, some single room blocks. Oh, and a new fence you can price up straight away. Do a good job and you get the whole twenty million quid project.’

It was fair to say that the lad was stunned. We led him back downstairs as it started to rain. From the car we gave him written authority to proceed and an outline document, details of our accountants and solicitors.

Two days later the local council leader wanted to meet. The man had appointments in London, so we met in a hotel and repeated the story. This man, however, bought us tea and scones. We had a provisional go ahead, paperwork would take longer. We received a quote from the architect to repair the fence and transferred the money immediately. It was a very long, and very expensive, fence.

Within a week the architect and his boss came up to London on the train, and we entertained them in the apartment. They presented several large drawings and spread them across the dining table. The maps of the area we kept; the sewer diagrams, the electrical cables and the water pipes. The individual sketches of buildings we stopped to discuss, drawing over them and making modifications since Jimmy had a firm idea of what he wanted. We marked on the maps where such buildings should sit, what direction they should face, where doors should be placed. Then we broke the buildings into phases, because we knew that we could erect buildings faster than we could find warm bodies to sit in them.

A gatehouse was sketched and positioned; it would be the first project. Second would be better drains and water, third would be extra electrical cables laid ready. It turned out the electrical company would do most of that free, so too the water company. The hangars were booked an inspection by men with ropes and climbing gear.

We signed and approved a number of sketches, which would now be turned into formal drawings to be used by builders. A half-million pound deposit was placed with our accountants, the architects to be paid when a bill was presented. They had a provisional sketch of the leisure centre, but Jimmy asked them to be more military and less crèche. They took notes, drawing a

quick sketch in front of us, more along the lines of what we needed.

With progress being made on the airfield we asked Mackey Tailor and his gang to fly down, paying their tickets and hotel. They came around to the apartment on a cold Wednesday morning, dressed in “rescue red” anoraks.

‘Flight down OK?’ I asked, taking their coats and noting their climbing boots.

‘Aye, Edinburgh to Heathrow, just the hour,’ Mackey responded, he and two colleagues in the group. We settled them and distributed teas and coffees, Big Paul helping.

‘So,’ Jimmy began. ‘What progress?’

Mackey read from his list. ‘Bought six second hand long axle Land Rovers, distributed them. Some boys already had Land Rovers, so we checked. We worked a deal with the climbing company Regus and got four hundred reels of rope, karabiners, that sort of stuff – all at a good price. We got a lot of kit off BCB Survival First Aid, and everybody has a pack, so nay grumbling there. We got a deal on a hundred helmets, a few different sizes as well, so distributed those. And twenty more stretchers.’

‘So, all kitted out, yes?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Made good use of the money, got a good deal,’ Mackey emphasized.

‘I’d expect nothing less from a Scotsman!’ Jimmy told him, making us all laugh. ‘So, how about training?’

Mackey produced a thick document. ‘Had many fingers in this pie, I can tell yee. But we got a standard outlined and some semblance of agreement. We’ve made a start on grouping courses and fixing dates.’

‘I’ve taken over an airfield near Swindon,’ Jimmy informed them. ‘In years to come it will grow quickly, nothing much doing there for a year. What *will* be there in a year’s time, will be classrooms, hotel style rooms and barrack rooms, a gym and a pool, some climbing walls. We can run residential courses on first aid, motor maintenance, off-road driving, map reading and navigation, casualty movement, a variety of things. And they all come free to you and your boys. So what you’ll be able to do is to send groups down for various courses, anything from a week to a month. And those courses will have the standards agreed and mapped out, proper exams in classrooms for some subjects.

‘Keep in mind, guys, that people will also come from Cumbria, Wales and Cornwall, so we need to be central. I’ll also be using it for training medics to go out to Africa, because a lot of the courses they need are similar to yours, and I’d hope that some of your instructors would be employed to teach them as well.’

‘Employed?’ Mackey puzzled. ‘They’s mostly part-time volunteers now.’

‘If they want a job then there’ll be some going in Swindon. If not, we’ll bring in professionals, maybe some of our people from Africa.’

We showed them the maps of Mapley, sketches of buildings not yet off the drawing board.

‘What I need from you next, Mac, is to talk with the Welsh, the Dartmoor group and the Cumbria groups.’

‘Going ta be a full time job,’ Mackey cautioned.

Jimmy held his hands wide. ‘Would you like to do it full time, if I gave you a wage?’

Mac glanced at his colleagues. ‘Well, aye.’

‘Think about a salary, I’ll give you a budget for a car and all petrol, overnight hotels, stuff like that.’

‘Aye, will do, Jimmy. What do we do about the people asking for more kit?’

‘Used up the budget?’ Jimmy asked with a grin.

‘Aye, all of it.’

‘You’ll get double for this next year,’ Jimmy informed them. ‘But that’s conditional on you getting them interested in courses in Swindon, the first course around twelve months from now.’

‘There’s another angle here, boss,’ Big Paul put in. ‘The place in Swindon can be used for merc’ first aid courses and some security staff first aid courses. They need an advanced first aid course cert’ before they can work in some places around the world. Plenty of business there.’

‘You know the people running these courses?’ Jimmy asked, Paul nodding. ‘Go talk with them. They’d get a free building, offices and kit if they co-operate and train others at good rates.’ He faced our guests again. ‘So, Mac, you got a year to get everyone talking and some training programmes sorted, ready for the first day at school.’

We spoke for another hour about points of issue, plus unrelated subjects such as Kenya and our hotels, invites extended.

With our boot-clad guests departed for a little sightseeing and shopping, Jimmy said to Paul, 'Contact your old buddies at AMO, take them to Mapley.'

'How'd you know I was thinking of AMO?' he complained.

'I'm psychic, Dumb Fuck.'

'I thought I was Dumb Fuck?' I complained.

'You've been promoted to Chief Dumb Fuck.'

Empire building

Jack was summoned by Sykes on Thursday, the interest his superiors took in him now something that he quite looked forward to. He knocked and turned the handle. 'Sir?'

'Have you seen this?' Sykes loudly complained, waving a page about.

'Sir?' Jack called as he closed in on the offending item.

'Silo has a record business, a very successful record business!'

'Oh, I ... er ... didn't know he was interested in music, he never mentioned it.'

'I showed these details to an industry expert. He says that this company's success rate is impossible!'

'You think he may get tips?' Jack softly enquired.

'Of course I think he gets tips! And he's making a fortune!'

'Well, I ... er ... guess Magestic has a plan for it,' Jack offered.

Calmer, Sykes said, 'Well the P.M. is concerned about this, so are we. This is commercial interference, Jack: empire building.'

'Silo has been quite open about everything, always happy to supply an answer, sir.'

'Well I have a few questions myself,' Sykes threatened. 'Fix a meeting with Silo, 10am tomorrow, his place. It's about time we got to the bottom of this.'

I opened the door to Jack at 10.05am. 'Alright, Jack, kettle's on.' As Jack stepped past me I focused on the second man; older, thinner in the face and with stern features. 'Cheer up, mate, it might never happen.' He did not look cheered as he stepped past me, eyeing me carefully. I took his coat as he took in the apartment, even the ceiling cornice.

'Very nice,' he commented, making it sound like a complaint.

Jimmy emerged from the kitchen with a tray of drinks, placing it down onto the coffee table. When he straightened he offered a hand to Sykes. 'Mr Sykes.' They shook. 'Please, have a seat.'

Everyone eased into the leather sofas, Jack and Sykes opposite me and Jimmy.

'So,' Jimmy began. 'You have some questions about my businesses?'

Sykes got straight to the point. 'Do you get Magestic tips for the music business?'

'Some, yes. And some of it's down to the staff there, some down to me. What particular interest does James Bond have with that?' As Jimmy spoke I could detect the change in accent and style. He was now younger and coarser.

'It's an unfair commercial advantage,' Sykes pointed out. 'If followed to the *nth degree*, you'd end up owning the whole damned country.'

Jimmy gave it some thought. 'Well, I see your point, mate, but I'm aware of at least one other person in the UK who I think is ... of a similar bent. He's in the mobile phone business.' I could see our visitor's grey matter working away. Jimmy held his hands wide and said, 'What would you like us to do?'

That caught Sykes off guard. 'Well ... obviously we'd like to know what *your* intentions are, and others, if they are going to impact large UK corporations.'

Jimmy glanced at me, looking a little embarrassed. 'Well, to tell you the truth, mate, I kinda got into the music business because I thought I could meet tasty birds through it.' Sykes eyes widened. 'And we're thinking of opening a nightclub, for a similar end.'

'And by "end" he means *us two* getting our ends away,' I helpfully put in.

Jimmy continued, 'We only got Magestic tips on pop groups *after* I got into that business.'

'And what *is* your financial arrangement with Magestic?'

'Fifty percent of net profits go to charities he nominates.'

Sykes gave that some thought. 'And these charities, is there an agenda with them?'

'Oh, very much so,' I responded.

'There is?' Sykes queried.

I added, 'Oh, yeah. The medical rescue group were building up is very focused.'

'On what, exactly?'

I continued, 'There're going to be some nasty natural disasters in the years to come, floods, earthquakes, famine – plague of frogs and the five horsemen of the apocalypse. We've got to get them ready to help, then get them in place just as these events occur.'

Sykes seemed putout at the innocence of it. 'Oh. And do you know when –'

'Not yet,' Jimmy cut in. 'But I guess you'll know when we do.'

'And your connection to the Israelis?' Sykes coldly asked.

'I co-operate with my opposite number over there,' Jimmy explained. 'Doesn't look like he's quite giving over the fifty percent, you know. So keep that bit quiet.'

'Oh. And what about a certain cave in Baden Baden?'

'You got the diary OK, did you?' I asked.

'Yes. Thank you for the ... stolen goods.'

I added, 'Well, you're a super spy, mate. If you can't avoid getting caught, who can?'

'Quite. So, what happened there?' Sykes pressed.

'They got a tip off about the cave, plus a few sunken treasure ships off their coast,' Jimmy explained.

'The Germans estimated the gold value by the boxes, a modest two hundred million pounds.' Sykes waited.

Jimmy shrugged. 'There's a big haul off the Scilly Isles.'

'How big?' Sykes nudged.

'Dunno, but tonnes of gold, eighteenth century. And there's that sub.'

'So why don't you let your fellow countrymen go after it?' Sykes testily enquired.

Jimmy shrugged. 'Because Magestic knows that the Israelis will send us his cut, more or less.'

'And if we made a similar deal?' Sykes asked.

'I guess we'd wait for a letter from Magestic telling us to do just that, probably get one soon since you're here.' We both laughed, quite convincingly.

'I'm surprised he did not foresee my arrival,' Sykes testily stated.

'He did,' Jimmy responded.

'He did?'

Jimmy reached under the coffee table and handed over a letter. 'For you, boss.'

Sykes read the envelope. 'For Reginald Arthur Sykes, the worst cricket player in the dorm.' He fixed Jimmy with a stare. We tried to look embarrassed for him, grinning.

Mr Sykes / Prime Minister,

Your concerns about any empire building on my part are unfounded, yet understandable. I need to acquire substantial funds for the future, to assist with things that are not only beyond your reach, but beyond the remit of your respective offices. Consider, if you will, the following example.

A train will crash in a part of India that hosts track of a poor maintenance standard. The resulting chemical spill will kill tens of thousands and injure many more. A simple warning may go unheeded, most definitely miss-understood by the local authorities, so I will interfere directly through proxy agents such as Silo & Co. They will pay for the track to be fixed, points to be checked at the right time. Such an undertaking I deem beyond your reach, and an unnecessary distraction for you when I can so simply deal with it myself.

Further, I will not allow my proxy agents to affect those areas that I do not wish affected. Everything is part of a grand plan. Likewise, I will only give the UK an advantage over other nations where it is necessary within my plans, a plan of global harmony. Where you have a specific question you may ask Messers Silo & Co. If they do not have an answer it is because I have not deemed it necessary. Forgive my air of authority, but I know what the future holds, what great promises it offers and what great dangers lurk near.

Your servant, Magestic.

'Well,' Sykes finally said. 'I'll discuss this with the Prime Minister.' He tucked the letter away. 'It seemed to suggest that

you get more information than just simple stock market and music tips.'

'I do,' Jimmy answered. 'Committed to memory.'

Sykes eased back. 'The outcome with Saddam Hussein?'

'Lots of bluster for ten years, then the Yanks drop a bomb on him, his location given away by a General Masoud, who takes over and slowly turns the place around.'

'Crickey,' Sykes let out. 'Well, I'm assuming you don't discuss *that* down the pub?'

'Who'd listen?' Jimmy suggested with a dismissive shrug.

'You have no objection to answering questions?' Sykes asked.

'We've been asked to,' I explained. 'Jimbo got a file like a phone directory and had to commit it all to memory before we burnt it. Took weeks.'

'Took two months,' Jimmy countered. 'A lot of it made no sense, just dates and names. Last page said it was some sort of backup.'

'Backup, in case Magestic is not around,' Sykes realised.

'Could be,' Jimmy said with a shrug.

'Obtrobosky,' Sykes said.

Jimmy wagged a finger. 'He defects to the Yanks when Greece wins Eurovision.'

Sykes crossed his legs. 'The *already-mentioned* fall of communism?'

'Next year. But they kidnap Gorbachov, fight it out with tanks, and Yeltsin becomes President or Prime Minister.'

'Jesus, *he's* Mayor of Moscow. You said tanks?'

'On the streets of Moscow, brief civil war.'

'How does it turn out?'

'They sell a lot of oil and gas, go democratic, make a lot of dosh, they buy up Chelsea Football Club –'

'Chelsea? Russians?'

'They all end up very rich and we end buying oil and gas from them, and they win Wimbledon. They buy houses here and around Spain.'

'Any future conflicts with Russia?'

'Couple of small wars when the Yanks try and turn the former Soviet states like Khasikstan and Georgia into NATO members. Russians get pissed off with the encirclement, I think. But that's not till 2009.'

I could see Sykes' grey matter working hard. 'And the main threat to the UK till then?'

I tried not to grin; Sykes was trying to get Jimmy to do his job for him.

'All Islamic. At one point India and Pakistan go to war and fire off nukes at each other. The nice Asian gentlemen here start fighting each other. Quarter of a million die.'

'Quarter of a million?' Sykes gasped. 'When?'

'Not till around 2011, but it's fluid apparently. Magestic is going to send you letters to help you stop a few things. Well, hopefully stop it all.'

'You said Islamic?'

'There's an unhappy chappy called Osama Bin Laden, a Saudi. He went to fight the Russians in Afghanistan a few years back, trained by the CIA to help out. After that he formed a Wahabi - is that right?'

'Wahabist, yes.'

'He formed a Wahabist style group of mostly Saudis who will eventually wreak havoc around the world, attacking the Yanks and us. Apparently, they're all rich university kids with rich uncles who give them money. They start fires in New York sky scrappers, kills fifty thousand.'

'Fifty thousand?' Sykes repeated. 'When?'

'Not till around ... 2000. They hijack planes and land them down Piccadilly Circus,' Jimmy lied.

'Well, we've taken actions against things like that,' Sykes insisted.

'Apparently not, they still do it,' Jimmy insisted.

Sykes was puzzled, yet looked determined. 'I guess we get a tip-off before then.'

'Hope so, be a mess otherwise,' I said. 'Traffic would be nasty for a while.'

'Yes, quite. I'd like to send someone down -'

'Nope,' I said.

'No? Sykes questioned.

Jimmy said, 'We've been told it's you and Jack only, nothing written down,' Jimmy insisted. 'And if you can sort the boys from MI5, keep them out the building opposite, Paul looks rough as hell in the mornings.'

Sykes stood. 'And if we strike a deal about the gold?'

‘Not my decision, mate,’ Jimmy said with a shrug as he stood. He offered a hand and shook. ‘Pop round for coffee whenever you want, or we’ll take you lap dancing.’

Sykes raised an eyebrow. ‘I’ll pass on that.’

‘My wife could kill me,’ Jack said.

‘Stay if you want Jack, pick his brains,’ Sykes suggested.

With Sykes gone we checked the sofa at length, Jack helping. Big Paul came up with hand held scanners, checking the room.

‘Clear,’ Big Paul told us.

We settled down with Jack, Jimmy suddenly solemn and quiet.

Jack said, ‘You’re quite the actor. Had me convinced.’

‘The truth is often subjective,’ Jimmy softly responded.

‘You take it all ... quite lightly,’ Jack delicately mentioned.

‘Hah,’ I said, also now serious. ‘He spends twelve hours a day worrying, staring at the wall.’

Jack regarded Jimmy carefully. ‘Those attacks you listed, you can stop them?’

‘Yes, they’re the easy part.’

‘And the hard part?’ Jack asked.

‘Future American Presidents who believe they have a God given right to rule the world.’

‘You sound ... a little cynical about our American cousins?’

‘Really? Well I’ll give you an example. A guy will invent an engine, a diesel, that uses half the normal fuel. An American oil company will buy the patent for a million and sit on it for twenty years.’

‘Ah.’

‘Why don’t *you* buy it?’ Big Paul loudly asked.

‘I will,’ Jimmy replied with a sigh. ‘And they’ll try and shoot me.’

‘Fucking hell,’ Big Paul let out. ‘It’s all about money, isn’t it.’

Jimmy said, ‘If two American businessmen were falling off a cliff, one would steal the other’s wallet before they hit bottom.’ He turned his head a notch towards me. ‘Plague of *frogs*? It was a plague of locusts. *Five* horsemen of the apocalypse?’

‘I was trying to sound thick,’ I explained.

‘You succeeded,’ Jimmy said.

‘You said *bent* instead of *leaning*,’ Jack pointed out.

Jimmy nodded. 'I know, it was deliberate. And Paul here used to have a *plutonic* relationship.'

'What's wrong with that?' Big Paul asked. 'So long as you and the girl both want the same thing.'

We all stared at him as Roger, Liz's father, knocked. Big Paul let him in. Roger said he needed a word. We made excuses for Jack and Big Paul, then settled down with Roger.

'Was just yourself, Jimmy, I was hoping to chat to,' Roger delicately explained.

'I have no secrets from Paul, not where your fine daughter is concerned.'

'Oh, well, OK then.'

'She not happy?' I asked.

'Well, no, and Heather and I are a bit concerned,' Roger explained.

I took the lead. 'Roger, she wants a cottage in the country with a white picket fence, two kids and a cat and dog, a husband with a nine to five job that she's smarter than. Take a look at the big guy and tell me if he fits the bill – now or when she met him.'

Roger lowered his head. I had cut short a long conversation.

Softer, I continued, 'Listen, Roger, she's a great girl and Jimmy loves her to bits, we get on great as a four some, but not she - nor any other girl - is going to mould the big guy into what *they* want.' Jimmy glanced at me. I continued, 'And let me say something that you won't get from Jimmy, because he's too polite to say it. She does not appreciate the charity work we do at all, and she works at a fucking charity! Every time we mentioned what millions we were spending in Africa she went quiet. Not a fucking *well done guys*, but a kinda – *you should be spending that on our little cottage in the country.*'

Jimmy held up a flat palm to me. Facing Roger he said, 'I'm a driven man, Roger, and my charitable work means everything to me.'

'I know that,' Roger conceded. 'And I have the utmost respect for you for doing it. I just wish she could see it that way.'

I said, 'Her biological clock is going crazy, but I don't think Jimmy's there yet. *Some* ... might see Jimmy as being selfish, but anyone taking him away from Africa is the selfish one.'

Roger nodded to himself.

Jimmy mentioned, 'Whatever happens between me and Liz *will not* affect my fondness for my neighbours.'

Roger lifted his head and forced a smile. 'You're not that kind of person, we know that.' He heaved a sigh. 'She's bad at taking break-ups, she tends to build an ideal world in her mind.' He stood, and we followed him up.

Jimmy said, 'I won't be telling her to go. If she wants to be here a year from now she can be.'

'Thanks, Jimmy,' Roger said as he left.

With the door closed Jimmy faced me. 'Where did all that come from?'

'I'm not stupid, I can see the look in her eye when we talk money.'

He took in the apartment, his hands in his pockets. 'Judy around later?'

'No, back in the morning, noon I think.'

'Let's go out. Curry, lap dance, a few beers,' Jimmy loudly implored.

'Haven't done that for a while.'

'But not here, I'll show you Cardiff. Forget the bags, we'll drive back in the early hours.'

'And Big Paul?' I asked as we grabbed our jackets.

'Grab him on the way, I know a great curry house in Newport.'

A new house

The new house had been very well decorated, but stood very empty. It had been built speculatively, by a builder who had considered that it would have been easier to rent-out. After almost a year, and with no willing takers, he had put it on the market, a hefty price tag that was not attracting buyers. The recession was not helping either. Jimmy put in an offer below the asking price and got the property, bought by one of our holding companies. That way we could borrow against it and trade the money more efficiently; we liked to have our cake and eat it.

The day we received the keys our very young and very busy architect friend from Swindon came over. I put some clothes into a room earmarked for me, the place ready to move in straight away. My bedroom had windows that gave me a view of both the river and the distant hills and I liked it straight away.

The bedrooms were decorated in a style similar to those in the apartment; the same designer's hand could have touched both. My room offered a walk-in shower and bathtub in a large bathroom, a sofa and TV. The landing displayed doors to ten bedrooms, six at the front and four at the rear bisected by a traditional curved stairway straight out of *Gone With the Wind*. The lounge was huge, split by a central stone fireplace, the study perfect for our computers and filing cabinets; it already possessed two desks. The kitchen was bigger than our favourite curry house and offered an American style diner atmosphere, stools at a counter, grey metallic cookers awaiting some action. Pancakes came to mind.

I stepped outside and turned left to the garage, opening the electric doors and finding plenty of space inside, tool benches at the rear. Big Paul would be happy. A door between two garages hung open and so I walked in, rather walked up a narrow flight of stairs, finding Jimmy and Big Paul.

'Marked your spot?' I asked.

'My place,' Big Paul proudly announced. He showed me around.

The three garages, and the windows above them, gave the impression of three small flats, but this was actually one long apartment, well lit with natural light. The lounge was larger than Big Paul's apartment in London, the bedroom about the same size as his old one. The kitchen was bigger, a breakfast bar opening onto the lounge, and that left one other room, bare at the moment.

'Home from home,' I said.

'I was born thirty miles away,' Big Paul reminded me.

'Be able to visit your old haunts,' I suggested.

'New motor below,' Big Paul informed me, a nod towards the stairs. We stepped down and opened the end garage, revealing a shiny black Range Rover. I jumped into the driver's seat, Big Paul tossing me the keys, and we sped around the grounds, frightening squirrels back up their trees.

Jimmy closed in on the waiting architect. 'Right, got a pen and paper?' The young man waved his pen. 'Fence around the gate is OK, ornate and difficult to climb, rest of it is just bushes and trees. I want a solid fence all around, hidden to the outside world by fir trees eight foot tall. Think – privacy. I want cameras in the roof eaves, covering all angles, then cameras in trees at the edges of the property. I want a bank of monitors in the spare room above the garage, second set in the study – tucked into a nice wooden cabinet. Think – small cameras, small monitors.

'All trees with branches below seven foot, cut the branches down. See the two buildings –' He pointed towards the west. '- They were built with no particular idea in mind. I want two small and cosy flats. Behind the house you'll find bushes and a small pond. I want it all gone, nice patch of grass. I want a landscape gardener to make the grass here nice enough to play golf on. At the rear, hundred yards up, is a wet patch that becomes a large wet patch in winter. I want you to dig down to the spring, fix a pipe and send it towards the river, nice and dry on top.

'See the grass next to the river? I want drainage put in and the grass flattened. In winter it gets a bit soggy, no need for it to be soggy in the summer. I want a small wooden fence against the river so that kids don't run straight into the water. And I want two fishing platforms, wooden. Think – fly fishing. The attic of this place is huge, but has been left as a bare room with wires coming out of the walls. I want three nice apartments in there, same style as the garage apartment. And I want all this done quickly, money is not an issue.'

The young architect pulled a face, suggesting it was a lot of work.

'Hire some help, spend some money,' Jimmy told him.

I pulled up next to them. Climbing down I said, 'Nice motor.'

Jimmy informed me, 'We've got one of Big Paul's mates house sitting for a few weeks, till the building work is done. Then ... then I'll be here some of the time, up in town some of the time.'

I lifted my eyebrows theatrically. 'And I'll ... explain it to Judy.'

Jimmy gestured me towards the grass. 'If you're wise you'll stick at it, use the apartment.'

'You make it sound as if I'm not happy.'

‘You’re not, you’d rather have her there when it suits you.’

‘Well...’ I began, not finishing.

Jimmy suggested, ‘You’d rather she could jet off around the world with us when it suits you. In reality, her not being around is keeping it fresh.’

‘We’ve had a few pissy words about Liz.’ Jimmy did not respond. ‘She don’t blame you, but thinks that family life would be good for you and ... there’s only so much I can say to her.’

‘My advice to you is to stick with her, you can meet me in Swindon when necessary, and we’d still do Kenya together most of the time.’

‘Most of the time?’ I queried, not liking the implication.

‘Going to be more to do, we’ll have to split and do more trips each. Be opening a record company in New York soon enough, buying a nice apartment over there.’

‘Nice view of Central Park?’

‘Definitely.’ We walked on.

‘There’s something I want to make clear,’ I said. ‘Just in case it’s not already: I love Judy to bits, but the job comes first.’

‘Why?’ Jimmy asked, surprising me.

‘Why? Because what’s the fuck’s the point of settling with her and having kids if the world goes to fuck?’

‘A good attitude. What else?’

‘What else?’ I gave it some thought as we slowly ambled along. ‘Well, I’m not that keen on the old family bit, not yet.’

‘And if you were, and she would not give up her job? Or even wanted to go back to it after kids?’

‘Me, a house husband?’

‘Perhaps you should think it through. What you have is a girlfriend, and not even a live-in one. If you did, you would have a different attitude. And if you were changing nappies when I was jetting off around the world?’

‘Yeah, well ... that might piss me off a bit.’

Jimmy stopped and faced me. ‘You know what the biggest problem would be? Being out of the loop. At the moment you’re at the centre of things with me. But what if you’re out of contact? What if you sat at home with the kids thinking ... does the tube blow up today? Will that aircraft crash if I take the kids on holiday? I’m afraid I’ve ruined you a bit, because you’ll always want to be on the inside.’ He carefully regarded me. ‘Think

about what you'll feel if I have meeting here, important decisions taken, you in London with Judy. Could you sit at a restaurant with her, not knowing what I'm up to?'

'Well ...' I sighed. 'Probably not.' We walked on.

'Bit of a curse, working for me. But, there is a ray of hope for you. Years from now I'll hire someone to work for me, and you'll both live happily ever after.'

I snapped my head around, a huge smiling talking hold. 'Yeah?'

'Yes, young man.'

Space cadets

A week later we dropped in on the airfield to see how things were progressing. The expensive green fence was up, replacing the previously forlorn offering. A gate had been installed, an overweight guard hired from a local firm, and the gatehouse was coming along. It turned out that the expensive fence extended simply around the parts of the airfield accessible by the public. The adjoining muddy fields had not yet been fenced off, so we were safe unless the burglars had wellies. Just inside the main gate, on the left, stood a wooden building with a badge on it.

'What's that?' I asked, pointing at it.

'Local air cadets,' Jimmy explained. 'Gave them a new hut and access to the airfield. I gave some of the local pilots a few quid for fuel, they take the teenagers up.'

'Nice of us. Very ... public spirited.'

'Cadets grow up.'

'Ah.'

We drove in, and to the air traffic control tower. It had received a lick of paint and new glass, metal bars over the windows at ground level. Our young architect was stood waiting. He had been faxing so many pictures I now called him Rolf, short for Rolf Harris.

'Right Rolf?' I greeted him.

Rolf smiled and shook our hands. He unlocked the door and led us upstairs, the building's inside reminiscent of Mawlini. In

the bare tower, walled with glass, he timidly pointed out various parts of the project, not much of a public speaker.

A long muddy trench was water and gas, soon to be ready. A fenced off area beyond the space cadets looked like a giant flattened hedgehog; the upright poles markers for the building of the leisure centre. West of the tower were muddy foundations for the first admin building. It would sink half a storey, then rise two storeys with a flat roof, and be below the eye level that we now stood at. The aircraft hangars had been inspected by men with ropes and helmets, no problems found. Part of the apron was now displaying signs of a facelift, cracks dug up and filled in with concrete. And so far that was just about it.

‘These things take time,’ Rolf timidly explained, being very apologetic.

Two RAF types in blue uniforms took me by surprise as they pulled up. Jimmy waved at them, gesturing them up to us.

‘Wing Commander,’ Jimmy said as he shook the hand of the first man, ‘Wing Commander,’ to the second man.

‘That keeps it simple,’ I commented, shaking their hands.

The first man said, ‘I’m a fake, he’s the real thing.’

‘A ... fake?’

‘Air cadets,’ the man explained. ‘Wing Commander Russell here is from Lyneham.’

‘Oh,’ I said, no idea where Lyneham was.

Jimmy took charge. ‘Gentlemen. Next week we’ll take delivery of a Toucano two seat trainer.’ An image of the plane came to mind. ‘One of the men here, an amateur pilot, is familiar with them, and the local aircraft mechanics will keep it flying. It can then be used twice a month for thirty-minute joy flights. You’ll have a budget, the guy looking after it will ration the fuel. As for the glorious RAF, you’ll have permission to use the airfield with one day’s notice to the gate security people.’

I was looking lost.

Jimmy explained, ‘I was ... long ago, an air cadet.’

‘Ah,’ I said. ‘They’d have a hard fucking time finding a uniform for you now!’

The men in blue laughed.

Jimmy continued, ‘The RAF Hercules pilots like to practice at small airfields that they’re not familiar with. They land, troops pour out shouting “bang”, they get back in and fly off. You can

cross-train onto the Toucano and take up some cadets if you like.'

'You fly?' the men asked.

I nodded. 'Cessna 172.'

The RAF officer asked, 'Can anyone else use the Toucano?'

Jimmy made a face. 'Sure. Pay half the fuel, don't crash it, and try and double up with a cadet if you can.' He slid his gaze across to me. 'Toucano is an aerobatic bird, you can throw it around a lot. I guess some of the Hercules pilots would like to let their hair down.'

We diligently inspected several muddy holes in the ground, getting our shoes wet on the damp grass, chatted to the aircraft owners, then discussed a few plans and building layouts before we left.

As we drove off, Jimmy explained, 'In years to come we'll have a need for friendly Hercules pilots. This gets my name known.'

On the radio we listened intently to news about Yugoslavia. The war had begun, Jimmy shaking his head a lot and cursing under his breath. 'When The Brotherhood rises, Serbia will be our greatest ally, holding the Balkans against the Muslims. And in the mean time we're going to liberate Bosnia and Kosovo, who turn against us. And *Kosovo* will take us to within an inch of Word War Three.'

Liz became less of a frequent visitor, not much in the smiley face department these days. There was no official break-up, but I guess the new house was a subtle hint; when the man in your life buys a house 160 miles away you get the message loud and clear. Judy had the odd sulk about Liz and they often met up for lunch, obviously gossiping about us, but we plodded onwards with our relationship.

I drove Judy down to the new house one Saturday and met Big Paul's mate, ending up staying the night. It was a bit chilly and we could not figure out the heating controls, and there was no food in the place. Big Paul's mate, Ricky, went out for a take-away and the three of us sat wrapped up in the lounge making a mess. Judy loved the house and the grounds, but the trip was a mistake, her mind now on country houses snuggled up with me. We soon had "that talk", the one where "the future" is brought

up. She mentioned nice houses and kids, I mentioned travelling the world. We left it up in the air, and I realised that I was being evasive. I also realised that Jimmy was correct; there was no way in hell I was giving this up, or being on the outside.

One day, with nothing much doing, I read The Economist, focusing on a “hold” recommendation from an eminently qualified chap; Norwich Union would go sideways with very little volatility for the next year. He described it as “dull”, but with a good dividend paid. I was feeling mischievous.

I called McKinleys and bought five thousand call options. It was not a huge trade, but I rarely traded options. When the guys there asked what I thought the stock would do I was deliberately evasive. As soon as the phone hit the receiver I hit a button in the computer, faxes sent to fifteen recipients of our tips: “buy Norwich Union in next few hours, news may break in morning.” With a wicked smile I sat there watching the NU ticker change colour from red to blue. It was 240pence when I bought the options, now it nudged 250pence, a nice little jump for a dull stock. I made a coffee, glanced out of the window, then settled back behind the computer. 275pence, 278pence, 279pence.

An hour later it was 310pence and my options had made me thirty thousand pounds. I sold them in two blocks, the second lot at 320pence. With a grin I called up Reuters on the screen, surprised to see a story about Norwich Union: “NU deny merger with Aviva, admit talks.” I was gob-smacked, I had no idea. I had simply picked the stock to piss off the journalist, I had no idea they were in talks. The phone rang.

‘Thanks Paul, owe you one. Aviva say they wont go above 280pence.’

‘Well, you know, this’ll drag on and on,’ I waffled.

‘Thanks again, mate.’ That call was repeated half a dozen times.

When Jimmy and Big Paul returned I relayed what I had done. Jimmy rolled up The Economist and beat me about the head with it at length. He was not mad at what I had done, but that I had made so little money out of it. It taught me a lesson. Not how chunky the Economist was when rolled up, but how much influence we had. And I was certain MI5 were listening in, they and their mates in the city copying our trades.

Oliver from Pineapple popped around the next day, a director's board meeting held in our lounge.

'I think we need a New York office,' Jimmy kicked off with. 'Just a small office, start small and work up.'

'Could give some of the artists an American exposure,' Oliver enthused.

'And I'd find budding American artists,' Jimmy casually mentioned.

'You've got a knack for it,' Oliver admitted. He handed over the latest figures, clearly showing that the company was cash rich, a surplus of five million, two million of which related to director's loans into the business.

Jimmy scanned the figures. Easing back he said to Oliver, 'How'd you feel about a few months stateside?'

'A few months? Wife might divorce me.'

'How about ... a week at a time? Three weeks here, one there till it's up and running?' Jimmy asked.

'Well, as you know we're growing and busy...'

'Your assistant seems good.'

'Yes, she can cover when I'm not about.'

'Oliver, let me put it this way. If *she* wants to go to New York, and that operation ends up making more money, a few years from now she may be MD of the group. Do you want to take that chance?'

I was surprised at Jimmy, he was not normally so ruthless. I put in, 'What would your wife say to a year in New York?'

'She'd probably love it, we did a weekend there.'

'She's an architect, yes?' Jimmy nudged, getting back a nod. 'Does her firm have an office there?'

'They do.'

Jimmy said, 'Then, Oliver, you have a conversation ... to have. If you go, you get pay and half, plus living costs. With the money you've already made you should be living the life out there.'

'I guess I'd better have that conversation, since you seem quite ... *certain* of things.'

'In the meantime I want you on a plane, find an office and a company that can hire people. My solicitors have a presence in The Big Apple, so no problems there. There's no particular

budget, and we'll be popping over soon to buy an apartment or two. Use company money to buy an apartment, budget six hundred thousand dollars – that's four hundred grand.'

Oliver made a note. We were going international.

MI5

It had been a while since Jimmy had offered to be helpful to Sykes. No senior staff had popped around, but Jack sometimes had a small list of questions. Now Jimmy said it was time to lock horns with the "nice gentlemen" at MI5. Jimmy rang Jack and was put through to Sykes, asking that a meeting be set-up as soon as possible. I found it odd that they had made no direct approach and left us to do our own thing, Jimmy suggesting that they would always be a pain in the arse.

We headed for the MOD building on a bright Tuesday morning, Jack meeting us outside and walking us in. He was still in the basement, but now by choice. We were led into a large room on the third floor, humming wands checking us for bugs, a quick frisk given.

'I had a shower,' I told the man checking me. 'I'm clean. Still wet behind the ears mind you, but clean.'

Five senior men and one woman sat around a half-circle table, Sykes off to one side with Jack, two chairs laid out for us in front.

When Jimmy saw them he laughed. 'For the condemned,' he told me. We moved the chairs forwards so that we were sat at their table, getting back indignant looks.

'No coffee?' I grumbled.

'No,' came back from the senior man.

Jimmy did the introductions, right to left. 'Louise Kennedy, Bob Smoot, Paul Anderson, Steve Richey, Kanalf Rasmusen and finally Biddy Tucker.'

Our new friends were most put out, glances made toward Sykes.

'I told you,' Sykes pointed out to them without even looking up.

Kanalf offered, in a posh English accent, 'You pronounce my name better than this lot.'

Jimmy gave him a long sentence in Danish, impressing the man.

'What is it, exactly, that you want, Mister Silo?' Smoat testily enquired.

'First, *your* resignation.'

We were off to a good start. I had images of prison, and I only asked for coffee.

'Why?' Sykes loudly asked, suddenly very keen.

'An MI6 officer was shot and badly wounded a few years back, Tower Bridge Hotel.'

'What?' Sykes barked, on his feet. He pointed at the accused. 'What was *his* connection?'

'His gave the wrong intel' to Hamster the hapless gunman,' Jimmy told Sykes. Smoat was screwed, his face betraying that. 'And Hamster is in Cape Town as we speak.'

Sykes closed on Smoat, his mobile phone out. 'Get out,' he whispered with venom towards Smoat, the others staring at their colleague. Smoat stormed out, a glance towards us, Sykes following him out with his phone to his ear.

'So, how about that coffee then?' I asked, wishing to break the tension. Drinks were ordered, but I could have done with something stronger than coffee.

When Sykes returned he confronted Jimmy, 'You could have told us that before!'

Calmly, Jimmy replied, 'And I told you that I would answer questions, which you have not really presented yet. Have you?'

'Now we will, including who's got my favourite stapler,' Sykes threatened as he sat. Our hosts composed themselves, uneasy looks exchanged.

'So,' Jimmy began. 'Any ... questions for me?'

Sykes piped up with, 'Any more of these dirty?'

'Not in a way you'd like,' Jimmy responded. 'Although someone here will be arrested by the Yanks in a few years, for what they did last year.' Our five hosts glanced at each other. 'Of course, I could stop that.'

'How ... would you stop it?' Sykes asked.

'The Americans trust Magestic, I could ask a favour.'

'You deal closely with the CIA?' Anderson asked.

‘I don’t, my counterparts do. So ... questions?’

‘Let’s start with the obvious one - why are you here?’ Anderson asked.

‘Quite simple really: to accelerate a process. Magestic wants things moved along. He feels ... that some *small acorns* are growing, and are best dealt with now.’

‘Such as?’ Anderson asked.

‘That’s not how this will work; Magestic himself will tip you the important stuff, I will answer specific questions. If I know the answer, then it’s because *you* ... are supposed to know the answer.’

Anderson eased back and glanced at his colleagues. He held his hands wide. ‘IRA boss Kelvin, can he be trusted?’

‘Yes, they want peace.’

‘Shamus Callum?’ he added.

‘No, he’ll break away and form his own group.’

The lady asked, ‘Would a future labour government scrap trident?’

‘No.’

That seemed to interest her. She eased forwards and rested on her elbows. ‘Michael James Stannah.’ Two of her colleagues seemed quite put out by the question.

‘He still cares about you, and *no* ... he did not tell the CIA about your op’ as was widely believed. You colleagues led you to believe that because *they* wanted to shag you.’

She lowered her head for a moment. I guessed some recriminations were in order.

Anderson cleared his throat and asked, ‘Islamic threat?’

‘When India and Pakistan go to war their various populations here will attack each other for ... oh, about a week, then turn on the police. Marshall law will be declared, reservists called up, economy fucked, quarter million dead.’

‘And all this happens...?’ Anderson nudged.

‘At a point when *small acorns* have grown into big fucking problems, one of the main ones being the uncontrolled immigration of Muslims into this country. When the crisis hits there will be two million Muslims living here, many calling for Sharia Law and their own mini societies. In the meantime, anything you can do to stem that tide will reduce the number of coppers eventually killed on the streets of Bradford.’

Anderson asked, 'Magestic mentioned a global conflict in one of his letters.'

'Cause and effect: small acorns, tall trees. If the acorns are nipped in the bud – no pun intended - no tall trees, no World War Three. The first, and principle trigger is Pakistan. As is the second, third, fourth ... and fifth.'

'Pakistan is the key?' Sykes asked.

'Yes. Everything comes back to Pakistan; nuclear armed, at odds with India, integrated into the UK, yet Islamic and with a lawless border with Afghanistan.'

'Afghanistan?' the lady puzzled.

'As we sit here and chat, the vacuum in Afghanistan is sucking in many and disparate Islamic groups, who will sit and plot around the camp fire before heading to the west to blow themselves up ... and thereby getting their place in paradise with their thirty-seven virgins.'

'I thought it was twenty-three,' Sykes put in.

'That was before the oil crisis in the seventies. It's gone up with inflation.'

I laughed. I liked that one. Even Sykes seemed to possess a reluctant smile.

'Masterson Biotec, Doctor Hedges,' Anderson asked after a measured pause.

'Working for a *friendly* country.'

'Israel?' Anderson nudged.

'You might think that, I could not possibly comment.'

'Practicality of bio-weapons?' Anderson asked.

'Very low, not used.'

'What has Saddam Hussein got?' Anderson asked.

'Anthrax, chemicals, crude bio-weapons, nothing nuclear.'

'Chemical launch capability?' Anderson pressed.

'Yes, tried and tested on his Scuds. Could hit Israel easily enough.'

'North Korea?' Anderson asked.

'What about it?' Jimmy countered.

'Will they attack south?' Sykes put in.

'No.'

'Will they develop nuclear weapons?' Sykes asked.

'Yes, beavering away as we speak. They'll have half a dozen by 2010.' That caused a reaction, Sykes taking notes.

‘Will the Iranians develop nuclear weapons?’ Anderson asked.

‘Yes, they’ll use them against Israel.’

Our hosts were momentarily shocked, but also looked sceptical.

‘When?’ Anderson asked.

‘Again, cause and effect. Most likely, 2013.’ They still looked sceptical.

‘Are the Israelis aware of that?’ the lady asked.

‘Yes, my counterpart informs them of everything they need to know to stop it.’

‘It?’ Sykes queried.

Jimmy turned his head toward Sykes. ‘Driven in, not fired on a missile. Sneak attack.’ They looked even more sceptical.

‘I have a question,’ I asked. ‘Why don’t this lot *really* want your help?’

Jimmy turned to me. ‘Like Mister Sykes, they fear becoming less valuable. They are also fearful of being used by some unscrupulous operator like myself, a wise defence mechanism for those employed to be suspicious.’

‘Oh,’ I let out. ‘I’d be tempted to tell them to fuck off, but then the world goes to shit, so I won’t. I’ll just sit here.’

Kanalf finally asked, ‘Any future Russian threat?’

‘Some, of a kind. You’ll end up hosting a lot of people in London that they don’t like, for no reason other than nostalgia for the cold war, and the FSB will send agents to London to kill some of them.’

‘F – S – B?’ Sykes asked.

‘The KGB becomes FSB in Russia. Very soon.’

‘You know each assassination attempt?’ Sykes asked.

‘Yes, of course. I’m quite the helpful little fucker.’

Sykes shot him a look.

‘What was your purpose in coming here?’ Kanalf asked.

‘To get you ... *fine people* on the right track.’

‘Which is?’ Kanalf pressed.

I piped up, ‘Something about gift horses comes to mind.’

‘We are ... employed to be suspicious people,’ Kanalf pointed out, repeating Jimmy’s phrase.

Jimmy explained, ‘My purpose will be served if you send someone with questions and I answer them. You do not need to

believe the answers, nor trust or like my good self, you need only investigate the possibilities of the answers ... and save a few lives.' We stood. 'You may discuss, argue, debate and chat about me, but you will *never* ... fucking ignore me. Because if I don't start to see the kind of results I desire, I'll start replacing each and every one of you. And for the record, Mister Sykes, I have dirt on them all – not to mention the world's most precious bargaining chip: Mister Magestic. If you don't co-operate in helping yourselves, he'll ask the Prime Minister as to why.'

I put in, 'And for super spies ... you don't even know what type of coffee I like. So there.' We left with Jack, and I considered our nations super spies to be just an ordinary bunch of people, working in an office with office politics, packed lunches and tubes home, the same problems as anyone else. I also considered that Jimmy spoke to them like children, that he was really the one in charge and somehow disappointed with them, and I knew that feeling of fatherly disappointment.

The next day the Inland Revenue turned up at our accountants and asked for a copy of our accounts, a special investigation initiated. The lead man found a box waiting for him at reception, his name clearly labelled, and found our accounts inside. They had already been scrutinized at length by experts in tax law and we had made sure that there was at least ten grand's worth of bits in them that we had not claimed for.

Right from the start we had created limited companies to handle many things, especially the hotels in Kenya. A management company then controlled the limited companies and tied them all together. Our stock trading was a taxman's nightmare because we only paid Capital Gains Tax on what we earned, and that was on what money came back to us once the initial investment had been deducted. I had received a half million pound loan from Jimmy, paid back at five percent over twenty-five years; there was no tax due until I had withdrawn at least that amount. Most of the cash remained in the trading accounts, only of interest to the accountants and taxmen when we took it out. I had fifty thousand in my private account and five million in my trading account, nothing the tax man could do till I paid myself the profits above my loan. Those profits filtered through my limited company, which made large, tax-free charitable donations.

The Revenue scanned our books at length and admitted that they did, in fact, owe us money, but that we would have to submit a claim for it, which we didn't. They asked to see the trading accounts and records, but our solicitors successfully argued the case: we were taxed on profits, not daily transactions or some theoretical potential tied up in stocks that could plummet tomorrow.

As the Revenue were busy trying to find fault with our accountants number crunching, we were also busy at work. By time the Revenue had given up, twelve amateur magicians had changed their names to Magestic, in addition to three amateur clairvoyants in Bournemouth, Brighton and Blackpool beachfronts. This trio also seemed to predict global events with some certainty and enjoyed some success, not just the future fortunes of girls on a hen weekend.

Jack came straight around to see us. 'It would appear that "Magestic" is becoming a popular name with amateur psychics, especially those living in caravans.'

'Really?' I made a face and shrugged. 'Can't think why.'

Jimmy made a face and shrugged. 'Nothing to do with us.'

'The net effect ... is a lot of wasted time by *those* who might wish to investigate these matters,' Jack noted.

'Really?' I asked. 'Bugger.'

'There also seems to be many in Europe and the States,' Jack added.

I said, 'When it becomes a popular boys name, then we'll worry.'

'Might I ask ... as to why the smoke screen?' Jack nudged.

'Why does anyone need a smoke screen?' Jimmy toyed.

I told Jack, 'I wouldn't spend too much time on it Jack, you might... waste a lot of time and end up looking like a pillock.'

'And we wouldn't want that,' Jimmy added. 'We don't mind *others* looking like pillocks, but not you.'

Jack gave it some thought. 'Anyone making any serious claims about Magestic now, would look quite foolish.' He turned to me. '*I'm Magestic, and so's my wife!*'

I pointed directly at him. 'Monty Python, Life of Brian!'

Jack smiled widely and nodded. 'I made that joke earlier to Sykes, he liked it. We'll see how it grows. Oh, and the joke

about the number of virgins waiting in paradise for an Islamic martyr? Sykes has adapted that one as his own.'

Jimmy said, 'Plagiarism is the greatest form of compliment.'

Kenyan Rifles, 1992

We landed back in Nairobi in January, 1992, into a rain storm. Still, it washed down the dusty streets. We set off toward the coast in a very nice hire car, a large jeep, the sun burning off the surface water as we progressed. On the access road to our hotel we pulled over and got out.

The land either side of the road had been stripped of scrub, old huts and any junk. There stretched out two huge brown fields, almost a mile square, on either side of the road. Despite the lack of green grass I could discern the layout of the golf course, numerous muddy ponds nestling next to gentle mounds. In the middle of the mud stood a half built hotel, its size quite a shock. I had seen its drawings, faxed to us, but they had not clearly illustrated its size in my mind. The opposite side of the road displayed little more than a fence under construction, but also now offered several muddy lakes. This would be a small zoo, for visitors to get close to animals, especially orphaned youngsters. We drove on.

The hotels' main gate, and its security, were now both imposing and proficient; smartly dressed guards that appeared alert, a welcome issued. Reception was buzzing with guests coming and going, a local woman in a red jacket sat at a desk and busily selling the guests local tours. We queued up and booked in as if paying customers, although our credit card details were not necessary. With the new two-storey block finished we had decided to try it, us and our luggage now driven there in a golf buggy. Our rooms were on the second floor, small but tastefully decorated, and offered a balcony. Both of us stepped out onto the balcony at the same time, taking in the view.

'Nice enough,' Jimmy commented. 'I've asked them to raise the prices a bit as well, we're over subscribed.'

'They don't do locals any more,' I mentioned. We exchanged looks, shrugs issued.

‘It’s here to make a few quid,’ Jimmy commented.

To the sound of kids screaming on the beach, we strolled down to the dive centre, finding it full of people sat around the café area.

‘Jimmy!’ came a shout, and we closed in on two men from McKinleys, sat now with their wives. They greeted us warmly. And why not, their stay here was free, two places given every month to McKinleys. We sat and chatted for ten minutes; the two couples had stayed at the safari lodge first and loved it to bits, everyone in earshot getting a nudge to visit it, a ringing endorsement issued.

With Jimmy chatting to Germans, I inspected the new showers and the kit assembly room. ‘Wake up ya lazy fuckers,’ I said, Steffan and Lotti greeting me like a friend, and not their boss. ‘Wie Geht’s?’

‘Gute, yah. Sie?’

‘Same old money making machine. How’s the turtle?’

‘Good for the tourists, but a pain in the arse,’ Steffan explained in his accented voice. ‘It comes ashore at night and people call reception, worried about the fucking thing.’

‘Paint a sign on it: return me to ocean!’

‘And the younger elephant thinks it’s a fucking fish, always swimming towards Australia; every week a rescue to get the damn thing back in. The guests, they worry for it. One man, he tried to sit on its back in the water, nearly drowned the damn thing. Oh, we have a friendly shark now.’

‘A shark?’

‘It comes in most days, just at the outer breakwater, not so big but good for the divers. We feed it.’

‘If you feed it, it’ll crawl up the beach and want feeding every day!’

‘You’ll play golf here when its finished?’ Lotti asked.

‘Never played golf, but probably give it a go,’ I replied. ‘How’s the boat?’

‘Too small; six, maybe eight people sometimes.’

‘Get a bigger one, I’ll authorise it. Have them build a wooden jetty, land the boat there. When it’s not being used for diving offer up some fishing trips on it.’

‘I’ll talk with Rudd, he’s here tonight I think.’

I gave them a regal wave. 'Carry on, underlings.' I re-joined Jimmy and we jumped onto a golf buggy, following a track under the trees, past reception and towards the second hotel. Our fence had been extended around it and their dividing fence torn down. Large gates gave us access to their side and we powered through doing at least six miles per hour, a wave from a guard. Their grounds were being ripped up something savage, but at least the work was out of view of guests from our side. Many local men hacked at bushes and tree stumps, overseen by a young white manager. We stopped by the pool, waving the man over.

'I'm the owner,' Jimmy told him.

'Ah, I'm from the construction company for the golf course, we are doing both projects.' He gestured towards the empty pool. 'We have drained the water to the sea, now we make good the tiles and a new filter.' To me he sounded South African, but many white locals sounded like that to me.

'Extend the grass,' Jimmy ordered. 'From the hotel right to the fence and the sea, everywhere nice grass to walk on.'

The man nodded. 'The building is hard work, old concrete. Some walls must come down and we start again.'

'Take your time, do it right. Now, show us the roof.'

The man led us through the hotel, wires hanging out everywhere, bags of concrete lying about. The lifts were still working, taking us to the top floor, finally taking the stairs to a flat roof. I could immediately see the potential.

Jimmy ordered, 'I want a bar here, good quality, with food served. And some toilets.'

'It makes for a good view,' the man agreed. We all stepped to the seaward side and peered down, the wall waist high.

I said, 'Put up a small wire fence, stop people falling over when they're drunk.'

'Definitely,' Jimmy agreed with emphasis.

We stepped across to the golf course side, a commanding view offered of our new project. Many trees had already been trimmed or cut down, the area backing the hotel previously overgrown and untended. Now there would be an almost uninterrupted area of grass to the golf hotel, tracks for golf buggies. And the golf hotel looked even bigger from our viewpoint. Two hundred rooms. Shit!

‘We ever going to fill that place?’ I asked, some concern in my voice.

‘With good marketing, yes,’ Jimmy confidently stated.

The works manager put in, ‘The other man, Rudd, he has begun an advance membership, already two hundred people in the list.’

That surprised me. ‘Locals?’

‘Yes,’ the manager answered. ‘Here, if you want to do business you must be a member of the best golf course. It’s how you meet people. This will be the biggest and the best around Mombassa, and you have the hotels and the beach, soon the zoo. Everyone will want to be here.’

I was upbeat about our large and expensive complex as we headed back, a late afternoon swim on the cards.

That evening I was surprised when I walked into the restaurant, the bustle was not something I was used to down here. It was not too busy, no fighting queues at the salad cart, but the place buzzed. I spotted Jimmy and Rudd sat at a table, but got waylaid by the McKinleys group. As I broke free from them a call came, ‘Paul?’ I closed in on a black singer from Pineapple. ‘How you doing, mate?’ I offered, shaking the man’s hand. ‘How long you been here?’ His two lady guests smiled up at me.

‘Third day here, we were up at the safari lodge,’ he said in strong London accent.

‘Like it?’

‘The girls loved the cubs, but I like the elephants; *massive* man! But lots of flying bugs, man.’

‘It’s Africa,’ I pointed out. ‘You know, jungle, animals. Bugs!’ I finally made it to Jimmy and Rudd. ‘Full house in here.’

‘Yah, fully booked,’ Rudd reported. ‘Most from London, your magazine advertises the hotel.’

‘Seems to be working,’ I approved, accepting a beer from a waiter. ‘And you’ve been busy with golf memberships.’

‘Yah, soon full - everyone here wants to show off. And it is not cheap. I have the picture, from the artist, of the hotel. I put it in many magazines for golf in Africa. A lot of politicians are on the list.’

I made eye contact with Jimmy, a sly grin curling one end of my lips.

‘It’s nice to be connected,’ Jimmy softly stated.

‘How’s the orphanage?’ I knowingly enquired.

Rudd lifted his eyebrows theatrically. ‘Six hundred children: more teachers, more classrooms. The schools minister has visited twice, and local TV. They want money to go to other orphanages, they don’t understand why people give money to this place. Now buildings for almost a thousand children, and the local officials scratch their heads and their arses. It is the largest employer for the town here.’

‘Wow?’ I let out.

‘Some people from here, they go to the orphanage when they hear about it, but they give no money. They say it’s so clean and so big, it’s not like they expect.’

I laughed. ‘We’ll have to buy some rags for the kids and sit them outside.’

Rudd explained, ‘That’s what other orphanages are like, so the problem with the politicians. Two local orphanages have closed down, all children moved here.’

The next morning we set off for a quick visit to the “orphanage on steroids”. The farmland looked busy, many neat rows of vegetables, numerous pens for animals, Rudd having explained that surplus food at the hotel was brought here, leftovers for the animals, and that the orphanage now sold some food back to the hotel.

We drove into a new parking area and jumped out into the oppressive heat. The courtyard bustled with kids stood in neat rows, walking in one direction or another with military precision, all in their neat blue uniforms. Anna greeted us in the office, the room now well decorated and air conditioned, and she keenly showed us the hospital ward, no longer the “terminal” ward. Sickly kids were greeted and waved at, a few words exchanged. Two new nurses stood ready to take questions and we made like Prince Charles at the opening of a new hospital wing in the UK. Finally we climbed the stairs to the roof and took in the small town that was once a swamp.

‘Fucking hell,’ I let out, an uneasy glance toward Jimmy. Stretching away in front of me were ten buildings, all looking like barrack blocks, the foundations for even more stretching out behind. The orphanage now covered an area the size of six football fields. I blew out and faced Anna. ‘So, see anything of Cosy?’

‘Yes,’ she smiled, holding up her hand and showing off a sparkler on her finger.

‘Fast mover, our Cosy,’ I quipped.

Jimmy said, ‘Wedding in the spring, at the hotel, we’re invited.’

‘Where’s the old bat?’ I enquired.

Anna stopped smiling. ‘She is not well.’ I held my gaze on Jimmy, Anna noticing. ‘No, she will not have the blood, she will die.’

‘Why?’ I puzzled, finally finding some concern for the old bat.

Anna shrugged. ‘She says that she wants to go now.’

Jimmy focused on me. ‘And we *always* respect others wishes, especially about the time of their death.’

‘Who’ll run this place?’ I asked.

‘I will,’ Anna said. ‘I have now the license from the government.’

‘Got any experience of large military bases?’ I asked with a smile. Then I stopped smiling and frowned down at the roof, slowly turning around. In front of me was a large military camp, stuffed full of loyal kids brought back from the dead. Something Jimmy had said to me suddenly registered, something about raising an army that would sweep across Africa.

‘Kids ... grow up,’ Jimmy enigmatically stated.

‘Shit...’

Jimmy called, ‘Anna, I want the older children taught first aid and biology. I want a running track and games field created so that all the children can compete and have fun.’

I glanced at them both. ‘Somehow ... I think the school will produce some very good athletes.’ For the first time I noticed the orphanages name on a sign: Ebede. Jimmy explained it was ancient pre-Egyptian for “creator”.

With the strong sun keeping the hotel guests in the shade, we hit the water that afternoon, diving off the beach and finding the shark, hand feeding the friendly six-footer. That evening the hotel organised its regular barbeque on the beach, our man singing for the guests with his two backing ladies. Damn turtle clambered up the sand to see what was up and guests fed it lettuce from their burgers.

In the morning Rudd followed us to the safari lodge, Jimmy leading the way and shaving some time off the normal journey. We navigated first toward the new lodge, now almost complete, a new sturdy wooden bridge spanning the river at a narrow point. Passing local workers, we climbed the stairs to the roof bar.

‘Coming along,’ I approved, taking in the view. The first lodge was just about visible a mile away, the river meandering towards it. Below us, two hundred yards away, the river splashed off giant smooth rocks. ‘Much better view,’ I agreed. Turning full circle I appreciated the panoramic effect; the guests would be happy, and I found myself wishing Judy was here to see it.

Skids climbed up and greeted us. ‘Don’t you two ever have any work to do?’

Rudd was not about, Jimmy beckoning Skids to a confidential distance. All of a sudden the big guy had his poker face on. ‘Mossad agents will meet you in Nairobi next week, they’ve got a full brief.’ I was surprised, not aware of the subject matter. ‘You’ll be going into Sudan as oil engineers, so read the book first.’ Skids nodded conspiratorially. ‘If you get the main man there’s a hundred grand each.’

‘Important fella, is he?’

‘He could well be. His name is Osama Bin Laden, a Saudi with a few quid. And I want a loud bang; no one near him survives. Spray it thick. Oh, and this is not sanctioned from above, so not a word to anyone outside the group. Ever.’

‘What’s this raghead do for a living?’ Skids asked.

‘Sets off bombs on buses and trains.’

‘Not for much longer,’ Skids promised, a glance at me as he left us.

‘You mentioned Bin Laden before, to the Israelis,’ I prompted.

‘He starts the organisation, Al-Qa’eda.’

‘Ah, forerunner to The Brotherhood,’ I realised. ‘Will they get him?’

‘Let’s hope so.’

An hour later Jimmy was wrestling a growing lion cub, now the size of a Labrador; it seemed to remember him. The Cheetahs roamed freely, coming back for food every day, the lion enclosed and limited to the lodge area, not least because it was a bit lacking on the smarts department; when let out, the hapless lion

tended to chase jeeps and run away from Antelope. Damn thing should have been at the beach hotel with the rest of the weird wildlife.

We spent a pleasant evening with the guests, four wealthy couples, one of which was now on honeymoon. The lion cub, named Simba after the cartoon film lion, had its nails clipped by Jimmy, the docile beast doing the rounds and getting patted by all of the guests in turn. It eventually settled on Jimmy's lap. The staff brought out a newborn Cheetah orphan, to be bottle fed by one of the women, Simba restrained when he sniffed it. The evening was all about couples and I missed Judy. I also remembered our last holiday here together; I had gotten a little bored with her, and she'd got a bit pissy with me. I couldn't live with her, nor live without her, it seemed.

The next day we organised our own private safari, Jimmy driving a jeep to an area I had not seen before, a small escarpment with cliffs on one side. It gave us a view towards the border, across a wide valley, and I spotted Giraffe for the first time, the tall beasts absent from our own land. Later, in the midday heat, we spent several hours trying to rescue an orphaned elephant, eventually nudging it back towards its herd. It's mum and dad did not seem pleased with our efforts and we sped away.

Driving along the dusty road that approached Mawlini, we slowed to observe a white UN plane taking off, giant swirls of dust rising in the vortices created by its wingtips.

'Antonov,' I stated.

'AN24,' Jimmy agreed.

Stopping first at Doc Adam's clinic, we knocked and entered, finding the Doc with his hands full. Literally. A new life was about to enter the world, so we left him to it. The gate guards greeted us, looking us over with a professional interest before waving us on.

'I booked us into the hotel,' Jimmy said as we negotiated single storey brick buildings.

'What hotel?' I asked. It loomed into view. 'Oh, yeah, *that* hotel.'

At the hotel's gate we were subjected to another check by another guard, parking next to a line of UN jeeps.

'Best keep those from Rudd,' I suggested as we stepped down. 'He'll have one away.'

The man in question stepped out from the reception of new this two-storey hotel, clipboard in hand, and we followed him into the cool interior, brass ceiling fans working furiously. The reception desk was small, but not unlike any other hotel, a local man handing us two keys.

'They are the best rooms,' Rudd informed us, leading us to the second floor.

We turned the keys on rooms that would have been considered basic in Europe, but for this dustbowl of a base seemed positively luxurious. They offered double beds, air conditioning, clean bathrooms, writing desks and a sofa, plus a small balcony with a view over the dusty airfield. I dumped my bags, scaring a small Gecko on the wall, and inspected Jimmy's room. His balcony viewed the blue and inviting pool below, the outer fence beyond, Rudd leading us to yet another rooftop bar. We found it well attended, a real mixed bag of all sorts sat around white plastic tables. The crowd included UN staff, Red Cross, pilots in flight suits and two Kenyan Army officers in uniform. When we stopped to survey the scene they all glanced our way.

Rudd loudly called, 'Gentlemen, this is Mister Silo.' The Army officers stood up. 'He runs the airfield, owns this hotel and pays for everything.'

'Please,' Jimmy said, waving people down. 'Only stand if you want a free drink.'

With people chuckling, we approached the Army officers first and shook hands.

'How's the training going?' Jimmy enquired.

'Good, good,' the senior man responded in a booming local accent. 'Now twenty recruits.'

'What month of training?' I asked.

'They are in month six,' came back.

'Can they shoot straight?' I teased.

'Oh, yes, they are good with the rifle,' the senior man proudly stated.

'We'll see tomorrow,' I playfully threatened.

We pressed the flesh with the UN staff, all of whom had heard of us - at least had heard of Jimmy, and the Red Cross thanked us for equipment and services that I had no idea we supplied. I chatted to the pilots, two Russians, and surprised them with my basic Russian. Jimmy had them convinced in two minutes that he was Russian, his accent so pure, before buying everyone a drink. The Old Dogs turned up in their khaki green and joined us, cold beers all around.

‘It’s a strange hotel, boss,’ Mac commented. ‘No fucker pays for their room, just food and booze!’

‘Not yet,’ Jimmy told them. ‘In time.’

Mac added, with a sly grin, ‘But the bar *is* the hottest spot for a hundred miles in any direction! Friday-Saturday here is jumping. Local dignitaries love the place, can’t move sometimes.’

Jimmy pointed at Mac’s shirt. ‘I hope you don’t dress like that when they come.’

‘Oh, no, wees got some nice clothes. Wees got some Hawaiian shirts.’ The Old Dogs giggled like teenage boys. ‘Other month there was six UN nurses and two lady doctors up here. The rooms below were well christened.’

‘So, number of recruits on the mines?’ Jimmy enquired.

‘Forty in this batch,’ Mac responded.

‘Medics?’

‘Forty as well in the current batch, but ... well, we do the medical training. Doc Adam is snowed under with damn Somalis.’ They all grumbled in unison.

‘Recruit another doctor or paramedic teacher, leave Doc Adam at the clinic.’

Disgruntled, Rudd put in, ‘He’s paid to be here.’

‘I don’t care, I’m happy with him where he is,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘Right, what about the Army?’

‘Twenty lads doing well, all fit as fuck,’ Mac keenly explained. I figured that he was, at heart, a military man and enjoying training the recruits.

‘Did Doc Adam inoculate them?’ Jimmy asked with a frown.

‘Aye, in the first week - made them all sick for a day,’ Mac confirmed.

Jimmy and I exchanged the briefest of looks. Jimmy asked, ‘Are they good technically?’

‘They take a while, but once they got it they’re sorted. They shoot straight, some real marksman. Fucking Somalis don’t cut the fence any more, that’s for sure.’

‘I want the soldiers pushed, trained in all weapons, especially the AK47. Push them to their limits, no spare time. They drive well?’

‘They all get lessons, pick it up eventually,’ Rabbit put in. ‘Couple are real good, so we got them running errands to the town.’

Jimmy asked, ‘Would you say ... they could be deployed, and trusted not to do more harm than good?’

The Old Dogs glanced at each other.

‘Aye,’ Mac responded. ‘We kicked out two for stealing, some have had a punch in the head. They know what’ll happen if they screw around.’

‘Fine. Recruit another hundred.’

‘A hundred?’ Mac loudly questioned, the Old Dogs sitting up. ‘Jesus. The government approved that?’

‘The document from the government says ... sufficient numbers to defend base and area. Well, it’s a big area.’

The Old Dogs glanced at each other again. Even Rudd was surprised, if not concerned.

Jimmy instructed, ‘Start work on designing a compound for the Army, other side of the field, fence it off. They’ll want a barrack room or two, mess hall, classrooms, motor pool, admin block for officers, a bar of their own and a games room, a running track and a decent assault course. There’s plenty of room over there, so use it.’

Rudd was taking detailed notes as the Old Dogs sat quietly stunned.

Jimmy continued, ‘Once the current batch are trained I want them sent on jungle training, a two week course, and I want a climbing wall made up of concrete so they can practice climbing and rappelling down. Use it for the medics as well, moving injured people over obstacles. Then I want a rotation of four or eight soldiers sent to the safari lodge to teach them all about the animals here, and how to track poachers. When we’re ready I want a permanent eight-man unit on the edge of my property near the border, patrols set-up for poachers. If we’re paying to

train these boys then they can earn their keep. Right, medics: any of them suitable to keep on as instructors?’

‘Aye, Ratchet and Spanner,’ Mac said with a grin.

‘Come again?’ I asked.

‘Bob Ratchet and Jimmy Spaniel. Wees call them Ratchet and Spanner,’ Mac explained. ‘They’re Brits, ex-Army medics. They’s done some work for the UN.’

‘Offer them a job at the end of the course if you think they’re up to it.’ Jimmy turned his head a notch to our overworked Dutchman. ‘I want another building just like this one, basic rooms, for instructors and officers. It’ll be for these three, for Army officers and any new instructors.’

‘How many rooms?’ Rudd queried.

‘Fifty. And move it along.’ He sipped his beer. ‘Right, border fence.’ He pointed into the distance. ‘Somewhere over there is a border fence which, as you know, has not been repaired since Moses wandered past it. I want the Kenyan Government to give us permission to fix it, the section closest to us.’

‘Keep the Somalis out,’ Mac approved.

‘It’ll need patrolling,’ I noted. ‘They’ll cut it down. That’s miles away, out of sight.’

Jimmy glanced at me. ‘Mac, got any soldiers that can drive a jeep and patrol a border?’

‘Aye, couple,’ he approved.

‘The minute you have permission, start a small patrol. Women and children cross, groups of men don’t, men with guns are shot dead on the spot, buried under the spot. You make it clear to the soldiers that anyone with an AK47 strapped across his chest is fair game.’

Rudd piped up, ‘The government may not be happy?’

‘*We* ... are not shooting anyone, the Kenyan Army is,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘If there is a problem, then first those officers over there will be brought to book, then their commander, then the Defence Minister. It’s their border, their men, their officers. We’re just paying them to do what they want to do, but can’t afford to do. Nothing more. And my reason for not wanting Somalis with AK47s near this base ... is to keep the Kenyan population safe from bandits.’

Rudd eventually nodded his reluctant agreement.

Jimmy eyed the Old Dogs carefully, as if assessing them. ‘Rudd, how much in the account for this place?’

Rudd took a breath and tipped his head. ‘Sixteen million pounds.’ The Old Dogs almost fainted, Rudd adding, ‘It comes in at more than two million a year.’

‘Fucking hell, Jimbo. What bank you robbing? And what yer got planned?’ Mac delicately broached.

I asked Rudd, ‘Have these three old wankers had a bonus lately?’

‘A bonus?’ Rudd queried. ‘No, just their pay.’

‘Give them each twenty thousand,’ I instructed. ‘As a *thank you* for their lack of whinging.’

Jimmy said with a grin, ‘I think that was a subtle hint to just shut up and get on with it.’

‘You just keep on telling us to shut up,’ Mac encouraged.

‘So, how’s Cosy working out?’ Jimmy asked Mac.

‘Aye, fine, he’s a hard worker. He’s good at talking with the UN and Red Cross, gets deals done and kit swapped well enough, flies us places to go get kit.’

‘You’re happy with him?’ Jimmy asked Rudd.

‘Very much so,’ Rudd responded.

‘OK, buy him a Cessna – second hand, then a second Cessna – also second hand, and paint it green, then stick Kenyan Rifles on the side.’

‘Border patrol!’ Mac enthused.

‘I don’t want Cosy doing it very often, just get him to take up the Army officers and show them the border, then ask for an Air Force pilot, pay his wages. Use the pilot for kit runs as well, dropping off UN docs about the place. Within a month we’ll have the Flying Doctor service up here, they’ll station just the one man to start with. So let’s make sure we can house and service three Cessna’s at least, and put a guard on them.’

‘We can use this doc for training?’ Rudd asked.

‘When he’s not busy,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘But with the refugees about ... he’ll probably be busy. Right, any problems?’

The Old Dogs glanced at each other, pulling faces.

‘Right, this meeting is adjourned till the morning. Get some more beers in.’

No sooner had the meeting adjourned than I noticed a UN official enter the rooftop. The greying man, dressed in a blue UN

waistcoat, greeted his own staff, but was clearly fixated with us. He walked over. Jimmy and Rudd stood first, the rest of us following them up and turning around.

‘You must be Mister Silo,’ the UN man stated. ‘Your size precedes you.’ They shook. ‘I’m Bob Davies, UN regional coordinator. I used to keep Rudd in check.’

We glanced at Rudd, the Dutchman now looking sheepish as we pulled up a chair for our guest.

‘Didn’t nick UN kit, did he?’ I teased.

‘We’re still awaiting the return of some items from 1983!’ Bob said with a smile. We all laughed, Rudd a little embarrassed. ‘Still, his heart was always in the right place. The *lost* items went to the poor.’

‘Very Robin Hood,’ I commented.

Bob carefully regarded me and Jimmy. ‘And you two young gentlemen you make millions on the stock markets and give most of it to charity.’ He waited a response.

‘We also live in penthouse apartments and shag lots of pretty girls,’ I mentioned, the Old Dogs laughing. ‘It’s not all hard work.’

‘No, I popped into the beach hotel and your safari park. Very nice.’

‘Not spying on us are you?’ I asked.

‘To a degree,’ Bob admitted with a confident smile, an air of authority about him. ‘Because I have plans for this place.’

‘You do?’ I asked.

‘Before *you* got involved I was busily trying to get the UN to take over this place and make it a forward operating base; it’s the only long runway for a hundred miles in any direction. Your involvement here nudged the UN into using it and finally approving my plan.’

‘*Your* plan?’ I asked, Jimmy none too concerned.

‘The UN has approved my request for a substantial spend here, next year,’ Bob explained.

‘Rabbit has planted next years’ runner beans, you ain’t digging them up!’ I warned, everyone laughing.

‘As you’re aware, this place is owned by the government,’ Bob pointed out, and I was worried. ‘So they’ve granted us permission to proceed. First, some repairs to the runway, landing lights, a fire truck.’

‘Sounds good so far,’ I cautiously approved, the Old Dogs listening intently.

Bob continued, ‘Then a group of warehouses at the far end, an admin office, a motor pool. We’ll use the far end of the runway, stay out of your hair. We’ll need our own gate at that end, get trucks in. And, the UN wants to rent this hotel from you, plus a few other buildings. Plus we’d pay you for food and water delivery.’

‘Sounds reasonable,’ I mentioned. ‘But keep Rudd away from your jeeps.’

Everyone except Rudd laughed, the Dutchman going red.

Jimmy finally spoke. ‘From next year we’ll be able to offer your new staff training courses: first aid, jeep driving, navigation, jungle training courses, and ordinance disposal.’

Bob responded, ‘I’ve already discussed it with the powers that be, and they’re keen. At the moment our staff training is spread far and wide. If it can be done in one place then it benefits us. And the UN would pay toward the courses.’

I was starting to see the benefits of our new symbiotic relationship.

Jimmy carefully stated, ‘We’re not looking to make a profit from you guys.’

‘Obviously, otherwise you would not have created all this,’ Bob pointed out. ‘I also popped into Ebeye orphanage. Quite... quite a lot of money you’ve spent there?’

‘If you have any staff who could help out there...’ Jimmy delicately nudged.

‘I’m sure we could find a nurse or teacher, or two,’ Bob agreed.

‘What’s this orphanage I heard about?’ Mac enquired.

Bob explained, ‘It was a run down AIDS orphanage with about sixty kids in it. Now it’s better decorated than most hotels in Kenya, with *six hundred* kids in it.’

‘Fucking hell, Jimbo,’ Mac let out.

Bob told us, ‘Prime Minister is due to pop down there next week.’

I was quietly concerned. ‘What’s all the fuss about? I thought they’d be happy with us?’

‘They are,’ Bob insisted. ‘But also confused at the rapid growth of it. It’s never been seen before.’

‘I don’t do things in half measures,’ Jimmy softly stated. No one at the table was in any doubt about that. ‘Where you *can* help me, is with a new group I’m going to set-up next year. A small group to start with, but growing rapidly – as you might expect from me. It’ll be called Rescue Force.’

A shiver went up my spine. This was the beginning.

Jimmy continued, ‘It’ll be a group of doctors and medics, but trained like commandos – self sufficient and tough, well kitted. When there’s a disaster somewhere around here, a flood, a famine, a small war, they go in to provide immediate medical assistance. But they need to be tough so that they don’t need rescuing themselves.’

I watched Bob’s curious reaction. There was plenty going on behind those eyes as he slowly started to nod to himself.

‘I’d be interested in seeing your plans on it,’ he said.

‘We’ve just taken over an airfield in the UK,’ I mentioned. ‘Near Swindon. We’re going to use it to train any Brits who want to come out and work in Africa.’

‘When are you in the cold and the rain next?’ Jimmy asked Bob.

‘A month.’

‘Contact us, we’ll meet and show it to you,’ Jimmy offered.

‘It could be used for our UK staff before they fly out?’ Bob asked.

‘Most definitely,’ Jimmy agreed. It was a date, and the start of something bigger than I could have imagined at the time.

The next day we inspected the troops, behaving like royalty, before joining them on the range. I tried the FN SLRs they were firing, a 7.62mm NATO cartridge, quite a kick compared to the American M16. I blasted a target with an AK47, a full magazine, making a sizeable hole in the wooden target. When finished firing we walked forwards, Mac inspecting Jimmy’s “smiley face” shot into the target. Bleeding show-off.

With a magnetic mine detector in hand and earphones on, I tried to find mines in the sandbox, stepping on one with a loud “puff”, a cloud of sand blowing up. Good job it was a dummy. We observed several controlled explosions, and followed by throwing grenades over a wall and ducking. I blew up an orange box.

In a surprising move, Jimmy took Rudd, me and Mac up in the Cessna that Cosy had just landed. I took right seat, confident that Jimmy knew what he was doing, despite the fact that he now told Rudd and Mac that he'd only had two lessons. Lined up on the runway, he started his take off run, and kept going, a gentle acceleration down the length of the runway. With the end of the runway looming, and me holding my breath, he gently eased back on the stick.

'When you have a heavy load, and want to conserve fuel, that's how you take off,' he told me as we climbed gently, turning right towards the border. 'Remember it.'

We reached the border quickly, turning north and following the track that represented the border with Somalia. Peering down at the brown desert we spotted camel herds, a few women walking with children, not much else of interest, returning to the base and circling, giving me an appreciation of the base from the air. Lining up with the runway Jimmy reached the end of the runway at five hundred feet, way too high.

'Let's practice an engine failure,' Jimmy innocently suggested. 'He knocked the engine off.' Silence. We nosed down, now halfway along the runway. The buildings loomed into view, along with the end of the runway. At a steep angle we dived, flaps finally selected. At 100 knots, a fast speed for a Cessna landing, he pulled back and slowed, running parallel to the tarmac in silence, touching down smoothly and halting quickly, a light touch on the breaks. We stopped ten yards from the end of the runway and the start of the sand, Mac and Rudd breathing again. Jimmy started the engine and taxied around to Cosy.

'Nice landing,' Cosy offered as we clambered out. 'How many hours do you have?'

'Years, not hours,' Jimmy corrected him.

And that was the first time I'd seen Jimmy fly. Rudd eventually recovered, Mac not too concerned. On the rooftop bar Rudd grabbed a beer, the Russian pilots complementing us on the landing; after all, they had a ringside seat and little else to do for a few days.

The Kenyan Defence Minister had heard that we were at the base, probably from his officers, and flew up specially to meet us. I was concerned, since this was our first contact with the

government, odd considering all the time we had spent in the country. Seeing the man from the rooftop I tried not to laugh at his uniform, or his baton, his minions trailing behind him. Idi Amin came to mind.

‘Rudd?’ Jimmy called without making eye contact, the three of us peering down at our unscheduled guest. ‘We both know you’re a good liar, and actor, so time to practice a bit.’

Standing, we greeted the Minister and his aides, his officers now tagging along with Mac, hands clasped behind backs. The Minister took in the view, his men pointing out things of interest. Settling about two tables pushed together, we ordered beers for us, and cold drinks for our guests.

‘I have heard much, Mister Silo,’ the Minister boomed. ‘Not least about the orphanage that you have taken under your wing.’

‘We do what little we can,’ Jimmy softly stated.

‘You, sir, are neither *little* in stature, nor generosity.’

I put in, ‘You should see his school pictures. In a line of kids he was as tall as the teacher!’

Everyone laughed, but I wasn’t joking; he was six foot at thirteen.

‘So, Minister, you made a special trip up here to meet us,’ Jimmy nudged. ‘A waste for time for someone as important as yourself to come and see little old me.’

‘You know, I am always weary ... of people who remind me how important I am,’ the Minister boomed. ‘It normally means they are doing something behind my back.’

‘We’re not politicians,’ Jimmy said with a grin.

‘No,’ the Minister agreed. ‘If you were, I would have felt the knife before now.’

‘That’s a cynical view of Kenyan politics,’ Jimmy lightly suggested. ‘I’m sure its all one big happy family.’

The Minister raised a pointed finger. ‘And you know what the police say about crime statistics - most murders are in the family.’

We all laughed.

‘So, *brother*, you must have some questions,’ Jimmy nudged.

‘We are obviously curious about someone who spends so much money in our country, and in such an odd manner. You see, the politicians here have very little to do other than to see

who will be first on your golf course. This leads to idle gossip and speculation.'

In fairness, the guy was coming across as far more intelligent than I first thought when I saw his colourful uniform. But he still reminded me of Idi Amin.

'What would you like to know?' Jimmy posed, seemingly amused by the banter.

'Why don't you tell me something about yourself, and how this all got started.'

'Quite simple, really. I had always fancied a safari lodge of my own, I'm an animal lover, so we came down here on holiday. When we drove past the orphanage we stopped to give some money, just a few dollars, but got talking to the staff. They complained about children with legs blown off from mines around Africa. I wanted to donate some money, and it seemed like a good cause. But I like to get involved with the charities I donate money to.'

I put in, 'That's why, in the UK, we give a lot to the home for fallen women.'

The visitors laughed loudly.

Jimmy continued, 'So I found Rudd here in the phone book and popped along to see him. He was very convincing about the need for Africans to be trained in mine clearance, and not to rely on outsiders. Rudd very kindly drove us up here and introduced us to Mac and his band of merry men, so we donated some money – but also gave some directions as to how we wanted it used. You see, I don't believe in simply handing over my money – I want to see results. When Rudd here stopped working for the UN we decided to give him a job - to make sure that the money that we donated would be properly used.'

The Minister said, 'There are not many people ... who need a full time employee to distribute their charitable donations.'

'As I said, I wanted to make sure the money was used effectively,' Jimmy responded. 'And since then Rudd has asked us to get involved with more and more projects, and we've been happy with the progress.'

'This building, sitting in this base, is quite a ... progression,' the Minister nudged.

'No good asking *me* about stuff like that, Mac here is the ideas man. He convinces us about what would help around here

and I sign the cheques. Personally, I think he and his men go unrecognised from the Kenyan Government over what they have achieved here.'

The Minister carefully regarded Mac. 'And now you help to fund our Army as well.'

Mac said, 'We need the armed men patrolling if we're going to bring in a lot of planes. The UN will move in next year, lots of expensive kit and we're close to the border. More and more Somalis coming over, be a town full of 'em soon.'

'Indeed.' The Minister again focused on Jimmy. 'You do not object to funding our military with charitable funds?'

'If this was any other African country ... I probably would. But your military does not go around starting wars or toppling governments, so I'm happy enough. If there is anything in this region that we could assist you with more?'

The Minister eased back and I could see the grey matter working away. 'We are a poor country, not a very big budget for the military. Less for border patrols, especially here.'

'Mac has asked your permission to fix the border fence near here,' Jimmy said.

'Yes, I have heard, and I am more than happy to see money spent in this area. It is just a little ... irregular for foreigners to repair our borders.'

'I respond to Mac's requests, and if there is a large base here training UN staff and others in mine clearance - then I want them safe. Very safe. Border repairs and patrols would also keep the locals safe - I've built a clinic just outside us here.'

'Yes, I have seen it. A fine building, a keen doctor who talks very highly of you.'

'That's just the money talking,' Jimmy suggested. 'So, anything more I can do to assist the Army in this region?'

'I liked the name, Kenyan Rifles. There was once a Kenyan Rifles, run by the British long ago. Perhaps you could become Colonel-in-Chief, taking them ... under your wing.'

'If you think it will help. How much funding would you like?'

'How much would you like to give?' the Minister countered.

It was like a tennis match, back and forth, the Minister not wanting to put a figure on it.

'I think in terms of men, rather than money. How many men are there, Mac?'

‘About twenty, won’t go far,’ Mac responded, quite the actor and an accomplished liar. ‘Just about protect the toilets.’

Jimmy gave it some thought. ‘Well ... I’ll fund the recruiting of a hundred a year, see how it goes.’ The Minister blinked. ‘What else would you need, Mac?’

‘Barrack rooms, classrooms, some jeeps. Could do with a helicopter or two for the border.’ That was cheeky, we hadn’t agreed any helicopters.

The Minister turned to Mac, but controlled his reaction.

‘Rudd, makes some plans, price it up, let me know the cost. Earmark two million for the first stage.’

The Minister commented, ‘You have deep pockets, Mister Silo.’

‘Long trousers, that’s why.’

The Minister and his men laughed.

Jimmy said, ‘So, Minister, if you provide some officers and instructors Mac can do the rest. But I would like it kept quiet. I don’t won’t to become known for someone funding the Army.’

‘Of course.’

‘There is one thing you can do for me. At the orphanage there are older boys with nothing to do after lessons, how about a Scout movement or Cadet movement for them?’

‘We have a rudimentary Scout movement,’ the Minister explained, seemingly pleased with the idea. ‘I will see what I can do. Now, I have a separate request.’ He eased forwards. ‘Would it be at all possible ... to be *first* to tee-off on the new golf course?’

Jimmy eased forwards as well. Whispering, he said, ‘I think, Minister, if I gave you that honour, your Prime Minister may think we’re planning a military coup together.’ The Minister laughed. Jimmy said, ‘If your boss does not want the first tee-off, it’s yours.’

With just Rudd and Mac remaining we sat back down.

‘Well done,’ Jimmy said. ‘You both get a medal for being sneaky shits.’

Rudd was concerned. ‘Might I know what the long term aim is here?’

Jimmy gave it some thought. ‘I see a lot of money going to African charities, and very little ever gets fixed. We also see a lot of harm caused by small groups of bandits who, for the sake just

a hundred well-trained men, could be swept aside. Then we could get medics into some inaccessible areas. I have my eye on the Congo, sorry ... *Zaire*, and you've both been there. You know as well as I do that we can't send in medics without military cover, and UN cover won't do it – they're not allowed to fire their weapons in anger. Some day, I hope, the Kenyan Rifles – trained, funded and modelled by us – will keep the bandits in the hills busy whilst we send in medics and mine clearance in the valleys below. I don't like mercenaries, they're too expensive, and there's not a single regiment in the whole of Africa that I either feel is trained well enough – or is disciplined enough - to assist us. So we build our own. Because I am not sending our people into places like Mozambique only to be kidnapped, raped and killed.'

'Fucking aye,' Mac approved.

Jimmy faced Rudd and waiting.

'Yah, I see your reasoning. The Army are normally are the ones doing the raping and stealing. And the UN drive shiny tanks with no ammunition.'

'It's no more complicated than that, but we have to proceed quietly.'

Back in the cold and frosty UK, two days later, David Gardener came to see us, hardly time to get the kettle on. He looked concerned.

'In an hour the ... *operation* begins,' he reminded Jimmy. He laid out a map on the coffee table, a street map of Khartoum, and I remember Skids joint mission with Mossad, the detail deliberately kept from me. We had the game on, Big Paul jealous at being left out if it.

A trill sound resulted in David reaching into a pocket, a bulky satellite phone retrieved. He answered it in Hebrew. 'Ten minutes.'

Jimmy pointed out the house in question. It backed onto the White Nile River, a mile north from the centre of town. 'Handy is across the river with a sniper rifle, he's been there all night.'

'Lying Up Position,' Big Paul noted.

The phone trilled again. 'Smoke canisters thrown into the main streets down town,' David reported.

‘Keep the cops busy,’ Big Paul stated, now clearly in combat mode. ‘Diversion.’

David kept the phone to his ear. ‘Smoke at the nearest road junction.’

‘Local diversion,’ Big Paul stated, Jimmy sat quietly.

‘Explosion ... front of house.’

‘Send them towards the sniper,’ Big Paul stated, studying the map intently.

‘Gunfire ... grenades ... building on fire,’ David reported. ‘Sniper at rear firing.’

‘Cut ‘em down,’ Big Paul whispered.

‘Children and women escaping house,’ David reported, Big Paul not commenting. ‘Machine gun fire, small explosion, sniper firing. House now well alight, crowd gathering nearby. Two men in canoe on river ... crossing river ... sniper firing at house –’

‘Covering fire,’ Big Paul stated. ‘And they can’t follow across the river, have to go the long way around.’

‘Canoe across, sniper withdrawing.’

We waited a long thirty minutes, everyone except Jimmy pacing up and down.

The phone went again, causing us to close in. David reported, ‘Team intact, no injuries, at withdrawal point Bravo.’

Jimmy touched the map, a point on the main road south of the city.

That night, close to midnight, we got a call; Cousin Bob had crossed into Hatty’s garden: Skids and company were now in Ethiopia.

The following day David returned. ‘Six male members removed from the charred remains, three identified as Saudis. Two more Saudis in hospital, burnt and critical, two teenage boys killed, plus one woman.’

It was a stark realisation for me; Jimmy would kill if he had to. And if this got out I’d be in prison till I was very old. With the stems inside me I’d live to one hundred and fifty, so it was not a pleasant prospect.

‘Get into that hospital, get names,’ Jimmy told David.

‘Local newspapers suggest that the Saudi King ordered the hit,’ David mentioned.

‘Given Bin Laden’s relationship with the king, not surprising,’ Jimmy responded. ‘Good.’

With David gone I said to Jimmy, 'Women and children?'

'When The Brotherhood gets going, hundreds of millions of women and children will die. Do the maths, and don't dwell on it.' I stared back for a moment. Jimmy added, 'If you could go back to when Hitler was a baby, could you reach into his cot and strangle him – as a cute baby? Well I could.'

It was an awakening for me; the war was getting closer to the front door. On top of that Jimmy suddenly suggested that we should not live at the flat, that he was moving to the new house the next day with Big Paul.

Judy knew about the new house, we'd spent the night there, but I had emphasized the flat below as being mine. Crunch time was looming and I had no idea which way I would turn as far as she was concerned. But that night I packed up a lot of stuff, helping Jimmy to pack up files. The computers would stay so that we could use them when up in London. The next morning we drove off early, two cars piled high with clothes and files. As we drove down the M4 motorway I felt like we were running away and hiding, that there might be a flashing blue light behind us at any second. I was in it now, in it up to my neck. I had supreme confidence in Jimmy, but there was still an odd feeling in my gut that morning.

Big Paul's mate, Ricky, was still in attendance and the new house was warm and welcoming. We made like a chain of ants and unloaded quickly, soon settled in. The smell of cooking dragged me towards the over-sized kitchen, a chef in attendance and the cookers working.

'I'm Cookie,' the chef said with a wave. Well, of course he was. I sat on a stool, soon joined by the others.

Jimmy explained, 'This is Cookie, he now lives here.'

'Live in cook?' I queried.

'And cleaner, with his dear lady wife, Sandra,' Jimmy explained. He faced Cookie. 'Pancakes, Cookie?'

'Sure, Jimmy, give me a minute.'

His wife wandered past with a bundle of clean sheets. At the apartment we had a cleaner that came in most days, and a cook that came when we called, but now there would be a natural progression: live in staff.

'Ricky?' Jimmy called. 'You after a job?'

'Doing what, Jimmy?'

‘Baby sitting this place, full time guard.’

‘Oh. Where’d I live?’

‘Where you are now, no cost, food thrown in,’ Jimmy explained.

‘Where are you now?’ I asked.

‘The outbuildings, up the back,’ Ricky explained. ‘The builders made a nice house out of ‘em.’

Jimmy said, ‘The pay is not what you could get overseas playing toy soldier, but you get a house with no bills - and all meals, so any pay is beer money. You get a car to use as well.’

‘C’mon, mate,’ Big Paul encouraged. ‘Easy number.’

‘Kinda got used to being here,’ Ricky admitted. ‘Wasn’t looking forward to moving out. Yeah, if you want me I’m in.’

‘First job,’ Jimmy began. ‘Go out tomorrow and get two Alsatian pups. You like dogs?’

‘I had Alsatis as a kid,’ Ricky responded. ‘Love them.’

‘Set aside a room for them, buy some wooden kennels,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Oh, there’ll be another Range Rover here in the morning. Apart from bringing the dogs back, no dogs in the cars ever, or this house.’

‘He means the kind of women you like,’ I suggested.

Ricky laughed. ‘You noticed that as well, eh?’

Pancakes were placed down, a large stack. Yes, I could get used to this. We stuffed our faces with pancakes, followed by warm apple pie and custard for afters, before settling around the fire in the lounge, the TV on in a corner. The sofas here were very similar to those at the apartment and were now laid out around a large coffee table; a new meeting point had been established. Jimmy lifted a map of the local area off the coffee table and told me to study it intently. I started memorising road numbers and street names, areas of Raglan, Monmouth, Chepstow, Newport and Cardiff.

The next day was spent trotting back and forth to a nearby garden centre, many things ordered for delivery. We returned to find two lively Alsatian pups, six months old, darting about the grounds. Rolf the architect turned up late in the day and took us through a few small details that were still outstanding. Big Paul switched the cameras on and checked them, zooming grey images in and out, Ricky and Big Paul setting up a rotor to monitor them when we were in attendance. They would then

alternate night shifts. Ricky had also bought a long brown wax coat and hat for patrolling the grounds. We said he looked like a “tit”, then all bought them, Wellington boots an all. The country gents had arrived.

Cookie and his wife lived in the re-worked attic and I got Sandra to show me around, surprised by how spacious and light the rooms were. They had a long lounge, three bedrooms – one en-suite, and a separate bathroom and kitchen.

‘Kitchen doesn’t look used?’ I noted.

‘Not much, we eat downstairs, saves cleaning two sets.’

It turned out that Cookie was ex-Army, an Army chef. The couple lived-in for free and had all their food covered, which made their modest pay seem a great wage. I liked Cookie and his wife straight away; they had a great sense of humour and were always keen to help.

By the weekend we were settled in and secure; high fences, cameras, two bodyguards and two Alsatians that could seriously pee on a burglar’s shoes and nip at their ankles. By time Judy arrived on Saturday I was settled, not looking forward to “the talk”. I explained to her that I would go back and forth, but she could see how much I liked the place as I showed her around. I guess I was a bit too enthusiastic in the tour, but I wanted her to like it.

‘You talk as if it’s your place,’ she had mentioned several times.

After a nice meal, but with an awkwardness to it, Jimmy sat us both down. ‘OK, let’s cut through the crap and get this sorted,’ he said. I did not particularly want him to interfere, but I was also doing a really crap job of figuring out what I wanted, and how to communicate that effectively. He faced Judy. ‘You know what Paul really wants from you? He wants you to give up your job and follow us around the world.’

Judy was insistent that she would not give up her job and become a kept woman.

‘What if you fell pregnant?’ Jimmy posed. That caught her off guard.

‘Well, that would be different,’ she replied. ‘We’d have to sit down and discuss the future.’

Jimmy faced me. 'And would you give up the travel?' The bugger put me on the spot. 'No, you've already said you won't, and now we have offices in New York.'

Judy got the message loud and clear; I'd not be around even if we had kids. It was an awkward chat, but nothing Jimmy said was untrue. In our room I told her firmly I wanted us to stay together, but as the words left my lips I did not fully believe them. We snuggled up that night, and she drove off in the morning saying she needed space.

That evening we went for a curry in Newport, a lap dance in Cardiff, then hit the clubs. Walking between bars, Jimmy pointed out the place he would buy. It was a run down club next to an equally run down hotel, both now under offer, and would be connected together. It did not look like much at the moment, but they did have a lot of passing trade from the main thoroughfare. On Monday morning we went back to see it, the estate agent showing us around the club. It was surprisingly large inside, and split over three floors. The downstairs even had an old kitchen that looked workable. With Judy not talking to me, and Jimmy busy in Swindon, I got to work; estate agents, solicitors, Rolf the architect and local builders and decorators. Plus a firm that specialised in outfitting bars that gave me a lot of great advice.

I dragged down the owner of our favourite curry house and offered him a franchise; we'd have a curry house inside the club. I offered the man a great deal and he accepted. Po's restaurant staff had relatives in Cardiff and they came around to see the club. They would be taking up residence on the second floor, an area for registered club members.

The top floor would be reserved for VIPs, a door knocked through to the hotel's third floor. The hotel's top floor had twelve rooms to be knocked into six, two turned into self-contained apartments; the four rooms remaining would be decorated to a high standard. The twelve rooms on the next floor down would also be redecorated to a good standard, a large storeroom at the top of the hotel being earmarked as an exclusive bar for guests. We'd even have a small rooftop bar, but I was not optimistic about the weather here. Or the pigeons.

With a focused determination I got everyone working hard, the builders paid time and a half to work at night, in addition to day shifts. Some days I was there at 6.30am and back at

midnight. The structural work took only two weeks, since there was not that much wrong with the place to start with; a few walls knocked through, some blocked up, a few extra doors, a new metal fire escape at the rear, both for the club and the hotel next door. With the heavy work, and the dirty work, done the shop fitters and decorators moved in and the club started to take shape. Soon we had a curry house and a nice Chinese restaurant, the builders scratching their heads as to what the place would be like when finished. It made sense to us: you go into the club, have a few beers, have a curry or Chinese, a dance and a drink. Or you have a curry at the end of the evening. Well, it was Wales, what did these hairy-arsed builders know.

The ground floor was to be the area set aside for non-members, a large dance floor backed by a long bar. Off that main room sat four other rooms: Retro Room would have golden oldies blasting out, Chill Out Room would have no music at all - just seats, The Disco would offer contemporary dance music - yet a few years older than that played in the main area, and finally the Ladies Only Room. That was not a lesbian thing, as Big Paul had asked, but somewhere for women to take a breather away from unwelcome suitors. It would also sell subsidised drinks, so that pretty girls would populate the club without breaking the bank. Jimmy had it all worked out.

The second floor would be the preserve of members only, or selected guests. It was nicely decorated, possessed several chill out rooms - mini wine bars aimed at the older generation, and a room with a dance floor offering older tunes. Its toilets had been decorated to a high standard and included a small shop for any necessities; combs, hair gel, mints, condoms. You could even buy a new shirt or tie if you needed one.

The top floor would be the VIP area, a scaled down version of the members area; a small dance floor plus four smaller rooms, each again resembling wine bars. These rooms offered comfortable sofas, free newspapers, high quality toilets with another shop, hair washing equipment and hair dryers in the ladies toilets. Even the corridors of the top floor had leather sofas. My favourite touch was the internal camera system. Members on the second floor could watch monitors of the lower dance floor, the VIPs on the top floor could glimpse both the

members and the ground floor. And we were ahead of time in making half the rooms Non Smoking.

The grand opening had been well advertised in advance, but we organised a “soft opening” to test everything out. Po came over with the family, everyone from McKinleys travelling down by train – booked into local hotels, and Pineapple played a key role, most of their staff and many of the bands coming down. We invited those hospital departments that we had given money to, swelling the numbers; it would be a well attended Friday night. Jimmy also invited the local press, almost fifty of them, offers of free meals and free drinks hard to turn down for the snappers and scribblers.

Jimmy had hired the door staff personally, saying he knew a lot of them; they did not, however, seem to know him. He selected twenty full-timers and a few part-timers, others made up from a local firm; they would police the crowds outside. Twenty-four hour guards sat inside the club’s control room, dozens of cameras sending images back to the control room staff. And Jimmy’s briefing of the door staff was interesting.

‘I don’t want any men below twenty-five, no girls that look sixteen. All men must be in suits, only exceptions would be celebs - and then with discretion. No jeans, no t-shirts, no trainers – ever. You let one in you go straight away. You will not ... let in mates and family, birds you’re shagging, unless they’re smart. If I see someone in here I don’t like the look of I’ll find out who let them in - and sack you. You can’t get sacked for keeping people out, you can for letting the wrong person in.

‘Now, I’m worth a few quid, and I don’t give a fuck if this place is empty; anyone who gets in deserves to be in. And don’t be shy about turning people away; I have very good solicitors. This is a *private members club*, as the sign says. That means we invite people in, they have no right to come in. You patrol the line and pick out people you like the look of, your main aim being good looking couples aged twenty-five to forty. If someone gets stropy then tell them they don’t fit the club’s ideal member profile, point to the signs. Again, I’d rather have the place half empty than have idiots in here. It’s not your job to worry about profits, you worry about the quality.’

The club’s radio advert made me smile:

What ya doing, Dave?

Trying to split the atom with these tweezers.

Looks hard.

Yeah, but not as difficult as getting into that new club, Silo's.

We had eventually settled on the name "Silo's" because that was what everyone involved with getting it ready already called the club: "Silo's place". It saved on signage I suppose.

With the hotel open on just the top two floors, the remainder still under renovation, the new club opened 8pm on a damp Friday night, people who had not been invited foolishly queuing up like sheep; they'd have a long wait in the drizzle. As dutiful hosts we stood greeting people as they entered, Big Paul acting as an extra bouncer and sticking close. When most of those that we expected had entered we sat and tried a starter in the curry house, sampling the food. An hour later we moved upstairs and found many of the Pineapple crew in the Chinese. We sat with some of the bands, trying the food for an hour, Po joining us.

We nudged the bands upstairs, explaining that it was the VIP area, despite the helpful signs to that effect, and we enjoyed the kind of evening that would become common in the future; celebs, musicians and reporters mingled. The girls from the hospital went all googly-eyed at the singers and groups of people wandered next door to the hotel to inspect a room left open for that very purpose.

Po wanted to buy-in, but we explained that it was a non-profit operation. He took some convincing. Oliver from Pineapple could see the potential, especially when we informed him that this was a dry run for a larger London club. The musicians all got themselves photographed and would make it to the local papers and some of the tabloids. I chatted to some senior staff from the University Hospital, offers of financial help extended before entertaining Po's daughters. They had just completed their Phds and it took my brain a while to work out how old they both were.

'How old are you?' I asked with a frown.

'Twenty two,' they answered.

'When I first met you...'

'We were nineteen.'

Jimmy had told me they were sixteen. Bastard. I danced with both sisters, very close, making those around me jealous. And the girls had eyes for no one but me. It had been four weeks

since Judy had sulked off and we had not seen each other since; I needed consoling.

I asked Ling, 'What will Po say if he see us dancing?'

'He vely happy, he say he want us to be together.'

'He does?' Jimmy, you bastard, I cursed. 'Ling, can I show you the hotel?' We walked off hand in hand, but Suni followed close. I suddenly had no idea how to play this. In the apartment, reserved for me for that night, I showed them around, opening a champagne bottle for the giggly girls. They downed their drinks quickly, more requested. And I still had no idea how to play it.

'Is it true ... Chinese girls know how to give a good massage?'

'We vely good. Come.' They started to undress me.

Forty minutes later and the three of us emerged from the shower, dressing quickly before anyone noticed our absence. And the sweet innocent little girls were about as innocent as a Hong Kong prostitute approaching retirement after a busy career on a popular street corner. We re-joined the party, taking a while to dry-off properly. Back in the VIP area, Jimmy walked past and noticed my damp hair. He glanced at the girls and smiled, saying nothing. And he was still a bastard.

At 1am Jimmy took Po and his gang back to the new house, despite rooms booked for them here, the girls remaining fixed to my side like limpets. I told the club manager to lock up and headed off for round two. Yes, it was a good opening night.

With the girls asleep I wandered back into the club, finding a night security guard on each floor sat reading paperbacks. With everyone gone I got a feel for the place, walking slowly around and thinking about the work I had put into it, running a hand over cool wallpaper. I eventually found myself thinking about Judy, but I didn't care any more, the hurt had gone; a lingering guilt remained, but the hurt had gone. This was the turning point. I was single, I realised. Either that or right royally cheating with two babes!

The next morning we got a taxi back to the house, leaving me wondering what to say, and how Po might react. Having my hands cut off came to mind, other bits sliced away. As we pulled up I noticed Liz's car and my heart leapt; Judy could be with her inside. Oh, shit. There was nothing I could do, so we simply walked in. We found everyone in the lounge, Liz sat snuggled up

to Jimmy and no immediate sign of Judy. I quickly directed the girls into the kitchen for some food.

‘Need to get your strength back?’ Cookie asked. ‘Full English breakfast?’

I nodded sheepishly, the girls asking for croissants and coffee.

Jimmy stepped in. ‘More tea all round, Cookie,’ he loudly ordered, before stooping dead in front of me. ‘Good night ... was it?’

I felt like hitting him. ‘Liz ... alone?’

He nodded. ‘But I dare she may *chat* with her friends.’

‘What she ... er ... doing here?’ I delicately enquired.

‘She’s curious about the new house, wondering if I’ve suddenly changed. Just turned up this morning.’ Quietly he said, ‘Good job I don’t take after you, dirty stop out.’

‘Yeah, well you’re a lying toad. Can’t add up, can you!’

‘I never was very good with girl’s ages.’

Po wandered in and grabbed a coffee. ‘Hey Paul, good night, yes?’

I decided to bite the bullet. ‘Mr Po, I would like your permission to date you daughter, Ling.’

He made a face and waved dismissively. ‘You do better.’ Off he went, the girls cursing at him under their breath.

Well, to say I was deflated would have been an understatement. All that worrying. I faced the girls. ‘Ladies, if he does not appreciate you, I will. You are both intelligent and beautiful.’ That cheered them up, and we sat and ate breakfast together, extra helpings and sly gins provided by Cookie. Liz told Judy and that was that, I was dumped by fax. Four weeks after she drove off, and with no contact, I was dumped by a fax page from her airline. And if I wanted to query my booking with her airline I had thirty days, and was ATOL protected.

Saturday night we headed back down to the club, its official opening, Ling and Suni stuck to my side and causing many glances my way. We dumped Po, Liz and the sisters in the VIP area and went patrolling. One idiot smoking in the wrong room was giving the doorman lip, so I ordered the man out. No nonsense was our policy. Several people introduced themselves to Jimmy, the big guy standing out a bit. Most were OK, but one guy opened by saying that he was richer than us, God knows why, so we threw him out and banned him. Another older man

said he did not rate us, whatever that meant, and he was thrown out.

The music in one room was turned down a bit, the lights turned up a bit in several rooms - we wanted women with polyfilla faces to stand out. The doorman got told off for too many people in corridors, they had to nudge them into rooms. Some bars were packed and others quiet, the doorman told to regulate the numbers in each and even it out. Bar staff were moved where they were needed so that people did not queue up too long. One man complained that the smell of the curry house was making him hungry. We stared at him till he realised it was deliberate. And that curry house was packed out all night, often a queue, so too the Chinese. We happened across one guy stood loudly lambasting his ex-girlfriend so Jimmy hit him in the ribs, the doorman dragging the spurned lover out, now badly winded; this was a zero tolerance club.

Having surveyed the lower floors to our satisfaction we returned to the VIP area, and I was certain that there were twice as many women as men in attendance, well impressed with the quality of the Welsh ladies. The "ladies only" room had been packed, possibly because rumours of cheaper drink had got around, or possibly they were avoiding local Welsh men.

It was odd to see Jimmy accepting Liz so readily; they even seem touchy-feely. I got disapproving glances from her with my two Chinese consorts in tow, but I didn't care. Eventually, I spoke to Po about the hotels in Kenya and he again wanted in. They were not moneymaking operations, but he was sure we were hiding something. I finally placated him with an invitation to the grand opening of the golf course.

Jimmy took Liz, and Po's group, back to the house around midnight; I was booked into the same apartment, with company. The lower level closed at 1am, the second level remaining open since it was a private members club and we had an extension. Some of the smarter dressed, and better looking guests, from the lower floor were invited up, or nagged the door staff for access, and the members section buzzed for another hour or so, the VIP area comfortably attended, not too busy.

I retired around 2am with the girls, returning to the club around 3am and finding it still going strong. The lower level was now being cleaned, the member's section still hosting around

five hundred, its dance floor packed. At 3.30am I turned all the music off, opening windows and fire doors to get a cool breeze going, a subtle hint for people to sod off home. The crawling, limping and drooping drunk were helped outside, many resisting, the remainder politely told to go home. Several were asleep in corners and were woken, some carried downstairs, and it surprised me the state some people allowed themselves to get into. The last few refused reasonable persuasion, so got thumped and dragged.

In a move that we would continue, we invited the cold patrolling police in for a curry and Chinese leftovers meal, the food going quickly. I told the police that they could come into the curry house in uniform at 1.15am, the Chinese at 3am, whether the other patrons liked it or not; free meal, free hot cuppa.

As I patrolled around in silence at 4am I realised that I was now a nightclub owner. I also realised that being sober at 3am made you intolerant of drunken twats behaving like drunken twats. Stopping to use the urinals in the members' area I read the signs Jimmy had fixed to the walls above each position:

Know anyone using drugs in here? Tell us and we'll give you £1,000 in cash where we take action.

Know anyone dealing drugs? Tell us and get £10,000 cash if we take action.

There are 65 video recording cameras in here. Misbehave and we will hand the tapes to the police.

Know any ladies soliciting in here? Tell us and earn £1,000 cash where we take action.

Know a member of staff dealing drugs? £25,000 cash reward where we prosecute.

One guy had objected to the tone of the signs, so we threw him out. No one else could complain, not unless they were planning on using or dealing drugs. We were tough on the rules, very tough. It had been an interesting weekend, in many ways, my hard work brought to fruition and some new experiences gained. I had a glimpse of a future as a leader and organiser of people.

In the weeks that followed Big Paul became very popular in Army circles; he could get people in, and free drinks. We had tickets printed up and numbered; basic, members or VIP area. They granted access and gave the bearer four free drinks, small tick-boxes for bar staff to mark off. Big Paul journeyed far to

visit old chums and new young bloods, issuing tickets; he was the most popular trooper the regiment had ever seen, past or present. And every time we went out in the local area we all carried tickets in pockets; handsome couples and pretty girls being offered passes. And the quality of the girls Ricky dated improved by several hundred percent. Oddly, Big Paul resisted the temptation; he had his mind on reconciliation with the estranged mother of his lad.

The club organised functions on a Wednesday or Thursday night from the second week onwards. First was "Over Forty's" night on a Thursday, well attended. Second was what became a monthly affair, The Emergency Services Ball: police, ambulance, medics, and the fire brigade. Everyone received their first drink free by ticket. We organised a Falkland Veterans night and a D-Day veterans night, well attended downstairs. We even laid on coaches from other cities. The Jewish Night was moderately attended in the members area on a Wednesday night each month, David Gardener popping down and staying at the hotel. The Spicy World night was very well attended and became a favourite. For that event we organised a dozen chefs from all over the Orient and they cooked appetisers from The East, all samples free. But it attracted more men than women, plenty of couples. Once or twice a month we dragged down a singer for a mini-concert, usually packed out, and all new sign-ups were obliged to do a few sets.

And the coppers came in after hours, yellow jackets and hungry bellies. It cost us, but we kept the local plod on our side, complaints against our door staff falling on deaf ears.

Golf house open day

Po had been invited, but it was a bad idea. The wealthy little Chinaman had been staggered at the size of the hotel and golf complex, walking from one corner to the other before viewing it all again from the rooftop bar of the refurbished block. He thought it was worth more than it really was, and wanted in.

For the opening day we all dressed smart, despite the heat, informing Po that just local golf fans would be popping along. So who was in the limo with the bodyguards, we both wondered. Po gave me a look as he read the list of guests posted on a stand, Presidents and Prime Ministers from all around Africa attending. Fucking Rudd had been working overtime, I had no idea.

Then things got worse. Sykes wandered past with Jack. ‘Mister Holton. I see that you have half of the most important men in Africa here.’

We could well have done, I had no idea. ‘Really, I hadn’t noticed.’ And that was a mistake as well, because I sounded like I was taking the piss. Now neither Sykes nor Po were not happy with me, only Jack offering a welcoming smile.

Jimmy appeared with the Defence Minister, chatting like old buddies. We caught the tail end of it, something about attack helicopters, Sykes turning and focusing on me. The Kenyan Prime Minister wandered past and was introduced to me by people that I didn’t know. I shook his hand.

Introducing Po I said, ‘We have brought our Chinese business partners along. They are interested in investing in your fine country.’ Well, it seemed to cheer up Po a little. I gestured towards Sykes and made another mistake, my mouth moving faster than my brain. ‘And this gentleman is from the British Government, the Ministry of Silly Walks.’

The Prime Minister shook Sykes hand without understanding what I had said, and shuffled along. Sykes shot me a look that suggested we would not be let back into the country, Jack fighting hard not to laugh. I led Po out to the ceremonial tee-off, that honour going to an orphan from Ebede. As I cleared the crowd I stepped onto the green, nametag clearly displayed, and straight into shot of ten TV cameras and a dozen photographers. Oh crap!

Jimmy strode forwards, cool as ever, Rudd in tow and suited now. He took up station behind a bank of microphones. ‘Ladies and Gentlemen, distinguished visitors, golf players – good and bad, and golf widows sat at home.’ Sedate chuckling broke out. ‘Although golf is a leisure pursuit, this complex represents fresh investment in Kenya, jobs for local people, and a bar where local business can both meet new clients – and stretch the truth about their score card.’ More laughter swept the crowd. ‘I would like to

dedicate this new course to the orphanage known as Ebede, and as such the first ball will be struck by a young boy from the orphanage – who, I believe, has been practising hard.’

The young lad, aged around twelve, lined up and struck the ball well enough, sending it into the first water hazard. Jimmy said, ‘We will not be trying to retrieve that ball ... crocodiles!’ He waffled on a bit more, the elderly Prime Minister asked to hit a ball, followed by the Defence Minister; I guessed we were trying to keep everyone happy. Spotting Cosy and Anna in the crowd I waved, figuring they had brought the lad down.

A government spokesman said a few words, welcoming visitors from afar and making it sound like it was their golf course, the cheeky bugger. The local golf associations chairman said a few words, and I realised now that we must be members of the local association. Everyone was then ushered inside. With the crowds thinning out, and a group of suitably dressed locals lining up to be the first to play, I closed in on Cosy and fiancé.

‘All ready for the big day?’ I asked, the event booked for the beach in two days time.

‘Just about,’ Cosy responded. ‘Still very busy with new projects.’

‘Where are you honeymooning?’

‘We’re not going far, here and the safari park,’ Cosy answered.

‘You’ll like the new lodge,’ I suggested.

As a group, we turned and followed the crowds inside. Drinks were accepted, nibbles sampled, and I tried to play the dutiful host, although Rudd had organised everything with the hotel’s new manager, an American. Seeing the Old Dogs in suits shocked me; they looked like dog turds squeezed into nice flannel. Their faces were tanned and grizzled, and they looked very out of place. Only their nametags and job descriptions stopped security from throwing them out.

‘You look pretty,’ I quipped.

‘Don’t feel it in these monkey suits,’ Mac complained, loosening his tie. ‘If it wasn’t for the booze we’d be out of here.’

‘Where you staying?’

‘Got a wee room in the new block with three beds in it.’

‘Bit of a squeeze.’

‘Only room left, this gig a wee big over-subscribed,’ Mac grumbled.

‘I’ll catch you later for a beer,’ I offered, a couple of hundred-dollar bills discreetly issued. I passed Sykes and Jack, stood talking with some spy-looking types, and found Jimmy and Rudd holding court with the hotel manager, fielding questions from reporters. Seeing Po looking a bit lost I gestured him towards the roof bar.

The entire roof had been given over to a bar and pool, the pool a shallow central feature that was as much decorative as functional. Many people stood around chatting, many more stood peering out over the course, a great panoramic view offered. We walked to the edge and peered out ourselves, Po standing on a ledge. I pointed out the general area of the orphanage, then the zoo – now almost finished but without many of its planned exhibits in residence. We soon got back onto the topic of a partnership.

‘This complex will make fifteen to twenty percent annually,’ I explained. As Po mulled that over I added, ‘How does that compare to stock tips?’

‘Many very important African here. My company want business here, we buy from Tanzania.’

‘Oh, I didn’t know that.’ And I didn’t. Po’s family had a dozen businesses, one buying ores from Africa and elsewhere. ‘I’ll talk with Jimmy.’

The man himself led a group of reporters and a TV crew up to us, pointing out many things in the distance, in the direction towards the beach hotel. After ten minutes he escaped the posse and joined us, Rudd now shouldering that burden. ‘Seems to have gone OK.’

‘Well attended,’ I commented. ‘Grass looks good. Listen, Po was just telling me he buys Ore from Tanzania, he’s interested in doing some business down here, wants to buy a stake.’

‘It won’t make much profit,’ Jimmy told him.

Po said, ‘It good for connection and talk. I bring Chinese here, they talk African.’

‘You are welcome here anytime, you know that, no cost,’ Jimmy insisted.

‘No, no, I want name on wood here.’

Jimmy made a face and shrugged. 'What percentage do you want?'

'Maybe ... thirty percent?' Po risked.

'That would be worth nine hundred thousand.'

'I give one million. It deal?' He held out a hand.

'It deal,' Jimmy repeated after a moments thought, selling one third of the complex for what we had spent on the entire thing, all three hotels. This new hotel may have looked vast and grand, but it was scrubland grassed over and a basic hotel made to look posh. We were the ones getting the best deal, but Po was now happy. His name would be on the wood.

I noticed Sykes lurking. 'We'd better talk with Sykes, I took the piss earlier.'

'What did you do?' Jimmy asked, adopting his fatherly look.

'I introduced him to the Kenyan Prime Minister as being from the Ministry of Silly Walks.'

Jimmy smiled. 'He's a great fan of Monty Python, so I doubt he was insulted that much. C'mon, let's go be loyal subjects. Excuse us please, Po.' We collected Sykes and Jack and directed them to a table, ordering them cold drinks.

'Buying attack helicopters?' Sykes testily nudged.

'Why don't I start at the beginning,' Jimmy suggested. 'The UN are going to take over the airfield from me.'

That surprised Sykes. 'They are?'

'Yes, we'll keep a quiet corner for the mine training boys, who are here ... somewhere. Mac and the boys were concerned about the growing number of Somalis setting up camp around the base, so they asked the Army to send a detachment. They refused, so they offered to pay and train a small detachment for protecting the base, a nudge that way from the UN.'

'You're funding ... the Kenyan Army?' Sykes clarified.

'Yes, all nineteen of them,' I said. If Sykes did not feel silly, he looked it.

'They'll protect the UN, it's going to be a big base,' Jimmy explained. 'And as for helicopters, the cheeky Defence Minister is trying hard to milk us for all he can get. We've offered them a second hand Cessna painted green for border patrol, when we can find a pilot.'

Sykes seem appeased, to a degree.

'Come up there with us if you like,' Jimmy offered.

‘We’ve been, a few days ago.’

‘What did you think of the training?’ Jimmy keenly asked.

‘Very ... philanthropic of your sponsor,’ Sykes replied.

‘I liked the dummy mines,’ Jack put in. ‘Had a go. I know they’re only fake, but it gets your heart going.’

‘I set one off,’ I admitted. ‘And sorry about the *silly walks* bit, Magestic told me to say it. What’s the joke anyway?’

‘I went to college with the Python boys,’ Sykes admitted. ‘That’s what Magestic was quipping about.’ He wasn’t, I made it up on the spot. Still, it worked out OK.

‘Seen the orphanage?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ Sykes admitted, but in a different tone. ‘Very impressive.’

‘Should have seen it when we got here,’ I said.

‘We saw pictures of it. Quite a transformation,’ Jack put in.

‘And this place is rather impressive,’ Sykes mentioned. ‘Your... *projects* are obviously doing well.’

Jimmy told him, ‘Magestic says yes to your question about this place.’

‘My ... question?’ Sykes puzzled.

‘Will we help you get one of you people in here to spy on the arms dealers and bug their rooms,’ Jimmy explained.

‘I ... wasn’t going to ask that,’ Sykes insisted.

We all stared at him, even Jack.

‘I might have thought it ... that’s all,’ Sykes insisted.

‘Magestic is never wrong, sir,’ Jack quietly mentioned, getting a look from his superior.

‘Well, the offer is there,’ Jimmy pressed.

Sykes took a moment. ‘How’s the new house?’

‘Great, close to my mum and the new nightclub,’ Jimmy replied. ‘I always wanted a nightclub in Cardiff, grew up around there.’

I considered that Jimmy’s response left Sykes with nowhere to go as far as further questioning.

Sykes sipped his beer slowly. ‘I’d like to pop to the safari lodge, if you don’t mind.’

‘Not at all, we’ll take you up there if you like. Fly, it’s quicker.’

‘Very well. And how are your ... poacher hunters?’

‘They got some cash from somewhere, because I just sold them a small farm on the edge of my property,’ Jimmy explained.

‘A farm?’

‘Not massive, but comes with a big stone house – big enough for the three of them. They said they’re going to retire to it in a year or so, but still do a bit of game work part-time. They like the game work; steady pay, outdoors.’

‘They’re going to, or have bought it?’ Sykes questioned.

‘Have done, week ago. Hired a few hands as well.’

Sykes seemed a bit put out, easing back and thinking. ‘I’ll let you know about the trip, have to check what crisis is back in the smog first.’ He seemed quite deflated and I almost felt sorry for him.

The revelry dragged on into the small hours and we finally walked down to the original hotel, booked into the two-storey block. We found Rudd and Big Paul in the bar and sat for a quick chat, Rudd’s wife wandering in, the kids in their hut. Big Paul and I promised to take their eldest diving off the beach to see the big shark. Two Pineapple staff said hello as they headed off to bed, Big Paul following soon after. The odd thing about our bodyguard was that we were always up later than him, and typically less drunk. And not in need of much protecting either, at least not yet.

‘Po has paid for this place,’ I mentioned as the bar emptied.

Jimmy nodded. ‘He’ll do some good business here. That’s what’ll make it worth much more for him.’

‘How much has he tucked away for us?’ I asked with a yawn.

‘Seven million.’

I took in the dark beach, the moonlight shimmering off the sea. ‘What’ll we earmark that for?’

‘Hong Kong medics. About two years time, but ahead of schedule.’

I nodded to myself. ‘Sykes was deflated.’

Now Jimmy nodded. ‘Won’t be a problem there for a while. He’s alright. And Jack spies on him.’

‘Rudd said the new hotel is fully booked for three months.’

‘Yep.’

I sipped my beer. ‘Might turn a profit.’

‘Pineapple have advertised it in the magazine a lot, should be fully booked and exclusive before long, we’ll keep putting the prices up.’

A man ducked into the bar from the beach and Jimmy moved quickly, straight for him. The man sidestepped, but Jimmy caught him around the throat, dragging him onto the sand. Startled, I stood up and checked the empty bar, the staff not facing us. With a dash I was on the dark sand in a second, to find Jimmy pounding the man so hard he would be killed, a sickening sound issued from the man’s body as his ribs broke. I wanted to stop it, but I was terrified. The final blow was to the throat, no way the man could have survived, and I was both terrified and horrified at what Jimmy had done.

‘Quick,’ Jimmy whispered. ‘Make out he’s drunk.’

I was in shock, and on autopilot. We lifted him up and walked down the dark beach, not noticing anyone watching. Stealthily, we crossed to the next cove, knowing exactly where the guard sat and avoiding him. Dragging our victim carefully along, Jimmy led us straight into the cool water, soon swimming clothed, both of us dragging the body. So far I had not even asked who he was. Or why Jimmy had killed him. At the breakwater we stopped, Jimmy smashing the man’s face against the rocks in a move that shocked me. I was operating on adrenaline.

‘Swim,’ Jimmy whispered. He led us out almost two hundred yards. ‘There’s a current out here, and with the blood our friend should be eaten before found.’ In blackness we let go of the body and started back in towards the pearl string of lights.

As the dark beach neared we spotted a couple strolling and halted, treating water silently till they passed. Swimming on, we checked the beach carefully before running up the sand. No one saw us enter our rooms. Jimmy changed quickly and towelled down the corridor floor and stairs, removing wet sandy footprints, not that they were uncommon.

‘C’mon,’ he called.

We wandered back down, saying hello to a couple, and onto the sand. Retracing our steps we discreetly kicked sand over the drag marks, doubling back again to the bar. In the bar Jimmy said, ‘OK, we go now,’ to the staff.

I finally asked, ‘Who was he?’

‘Truthfully, I’ll never know. But he would have tried to kill Rudd, attacking my infrastructure down here. Maybe even tonight. I soon as I saw his face I knew.’

‘Christ,’ I let out in a whisper. I blew out. ‘You sure he’s not a guest?’

‘If he is ... no I’m sure, I’ve been waiting for that bastard to turn up.’ We climbed the stairs again. ‘Get some rest, check the beach early.’

In the morning I found Jimmy on the beach at dawn. He reported, ‘No sign of the body, no tracks, no blood. And no one reporting a scuffle either. Relax, move on.’

‘Bit of a shock.’ That was an understatement.

He carefully regarded me. ‘And finding Rudd dead?’

‘More of a shock,’ I admitted, taking in the beautiful calm water. ‘Think I’ll go for a snorkel.’

‘If you find the body, drag it out or tuck it around the headland. I’ll check the registers.’

I never did spot the body; it was never recovered. And no one was listed as missing from the hotels. Watching Rudd with his family, and taking his boy diving, eased my conscience a little. But we had a problem; someone wanted us disrupted. Killing Rudd would not remove us, or give anyone an advantage, not that I could think of who might be behind it. Worrying thing was, neither could Jimmy, and he knew everything. It remained a mystery.

Cosy was told to watch out for strangers and keep an eye on Rudd, going armed where possible, which was right up his street anyway. Rudd was told that we noticed people watching, and to be cautious. He locked his doors when driving and installed extra security at his house, but no further problems surfaced. Po got his name up on the wood, and a photo, and an advert for his companies, planning on visiting often with the manager of a steel company that his family owned.

Apocalypse Now

One morning Jimmy threw a thick manual at me. ‘Study that. Quickly.’

It was the flight operations manual for a Bell 214, a Huey helicopter, as made famous by the Americans in Vietnam. When we got into the car I mockingly complained that I was not being given enough time. We drove to Mapley, just under an hour to get there, and found a Huey waiting, red with a white stripe. The brightly coloured helicopter was not quite *Apocalypse Now*. I headed over to it for my first lesson, Big Paul keenly tagging along.

Mapley was progressing, bit at a time. The expensive fence had now been finished and it encircled the airfield, the gatehouse ready and manned, regular patrols after hours by a local security firm, cameras set up – especially around the aircraft. And the leisure centre was growing skyward, albeit slowly. Even the Kenyans were faster than British workers.

The Air Cadets now had two gliders, winch launched, and we allowed them to be stowed in a hangar. Another hut appeared, this time Air Scouts, whoever the hell they were. The building closest to the control tower was ready, and rented out at a very modest fee to AMO Ltd, who Big Paul had dragged down. On the other side of the control tower a second building neared completion and would be used by Mackey Tailor and his rescuers. Two long-axle Land Rovers had been bought and were now stored at the back of a hangar, to be used for jeep training and off-road driving courses; Jimmy had spoken to a local farmer with a muddy patch of trees to rent to us. Extra holes had been dug and ridges put in place. It wasn't quite Mount Everest, but would do for beginners.

On either side of one of the hangars, which reached up forty-five feet, a concrete wall had been erected, purposefully sculpted by Mackey's group to simulate a rock face, small holes and ledges for sore fingers to grasp. It was split into four sections, each section progressively harder than the preceding. The top of the walls afforded plenty of metal loops to tie-off ropes, and a walkway for instructors to gaze down proudly at their student's progress. It was already in use by the scouts and the cadets, as well as their fellow cadets from the surrounding area. As I started the Huey, Jimmy met Mackey Tailor in a shell of a building.

'Two months,' Jimmy informed him.

'Be about right,' Mackey agreed.

'Accommodation block will be just over that.'

‘Wees had a good response to the wall, high enough for basic training and rope work. And we got the jeeps for basic driving, maintenance and off-road.’

‘And classrooms here,’ Jimmy finished off. ‘First available aid next door, all ready and waiting for you. How’d you like Kenya?’

‘Aye, lovely. A wee bit hot, but me and the wife loved the safari. That blinking lion slept on our bed the one night, silly thing. Bit of a tale to tell when we got back.’

‘And the beach?’

‘Lovely, aye. I tried diving, not so good with my head under the water. Blinking elephant took my lunch the one day, but a great trip all round.’

‘Good. What about kit distribution?’

‘I’m focusing on the Welsh lads, and down on Dartmoor. They’ve had a balance of kit and jeeps.’

‘Good. Budget will last?’

‘Oh, aye, no problem there.’

‘Natives friendly?’

‘They are when you offer some kit,’ Mackey replied with a grin. ‘Cave rescue boys from Chepstow came over here the other week, climbed the wall and liked it. Last section foxed ‘em, though.’

‘That’s because you’re a sneaky bastard,’ Jimmy emphasised. ‘Got to zig-zag, you old fox.’

‘Makes ‘em think. It makes ‘em think.’

‘What about the magazine? You think you could get enough for a monthly edition?’

‘Should be able to, lots a people with lots to whinge about. I got a lady in my village with an Apple Mac computer thingy, she does similar stuff, now be working three days a week on ours. Got a good price too, and she sends the disk thingy to the printer, he runs them out and off they go. Or at least they will next month.’

‘Advertisers?’

‘Couple, aye. Plus your lot, Pineapple and the Kenyan bunch. First edition has a big write-up about this place. But your lot, paying for the adverts, is covering the whole damn thing.’

‘That’s alright, it’s tax deductible. Right, let’s get some food in the village while Paul bends and brakes a helicopter.’

I thought I did very well, the Huey heavier than I was used to and twin engine, so more instrumentation to consider. It was also safer if one engine cut out. Big Paul sat in the back with headphones on, listening in and scanning the controls. When I landed the bird, two RAF pilots I recognised were waved over, jumping into the rear and fixing headsets. My second thirty minutes of tuition had been keenly observed by six pairs of eyes, and as I headed for lunch the RAF Hercules pilots had a go themselves. We met Jimmy and Mackey in the pub down the road, the only watering hole close by.

‘Sorted?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Yeah, no problem. More power, more kick, but heavier as well.’

‘Can we paint it green?’ Big Paul joked.

‘Yes,’ Jimmy replied.

‘Yes?’ I questioned, wide eyed. ‘We bought it?’

Jimmy nodded. ‘There’s one at Mawlini as well, so get familiar with it.’

‘Can I ... er ... have some lessons, boss?’ Big Paul risked.

‘Yes,’ was not the answer I had expected. ‘Right through to pilot’s license.’

‘Right through?’ Big Paul queried.

‘Extra heli pilots are always useful.’ He made eye contact with me. ‘Book him in for basics, give him the book.’

‘Fucking-A,’ Big Paul approved.

‘You familiar with them?’ I asked Jimmy.

He made a face. ‘Couple of thousand hours.’

Oh, was that all. Novice then.

New York, New York

We landed at JFK with business visas, Oliver over there already and picking us up in a hire car.

‘How you liking the Big Apple?’ Jimmy asked him as we drove towards the giant film set, Big Paul and me in the rear.

‘Like it a lot, wife loves it.’

‘How many times she been over?’ I asked.

‘Twice now, a week each time. And she’s got a placement here with her firm.’

‘Sounds like you’ve made up your mind?’ I noted.

‘You two firmly nudged me this way,’ he pointed out, a glance toward Jimmy.

‘It’ll be for the best,’ Jimmy said. ‘You’ll make a lot more money over here. Start advertising for tapes, ship them to me - air freight. How’s the company apartment?’

‘You’ll see now, we’re staying in a place her company let’s us use.’

We sank deeper into high-rise apartment blocks that became skyscrapers, easing into an underground car park off a very busy road. The lift took us to the twenty-second floor, pleasant music playing in the background, the four of us squeezed in with luggage. The apartment was certainly large enough, but smaller than the one in London, not as well decorated. It had views on two sides, one of Central Park. Big Paul would be sleeping on the sofa, Jimmy and myself each having a nice room with en-suite bathrooms. Many minutes were spent staring at the view and pointing things out, many films remembered.

The new office was reached after a ten-minute walk along crowded “sidewalks”, the red and green men telling us when to cross. They reminded me of the Superman movie. The new office was a rented suite, but as large as the offices in London.

‘Got enough space?’ I asked, noting just four cubicles with desks, a small oasis in a large sea of magnolia carpet. There was space for another twenty cubicles at least.

‘Next size down was too small, this gives room for growth,’ Oliver explained.

The staff were introduced to us; Human Resources and Advertising. They were handling the recruitment, after they themselves had been recruited, the plan for twelve warm bodies to start with, all with strong accents. We sat on sofas and made plans, Big Paul staring out of the window, peering down at the ant-like people below.

‘You going to open a club here?’ Oliver joked.

‘Yes,’ Jimmy responded.

‘Yes?’ Oliver repeated.

‘In time, it helps with the bands. Right, get a couple of the UK staff over here on three-month rotations - they’ll love it. Let’s get

this pushed along. And when you recruit people here send them to London for two weeks, *they'll* love it. It'll speed things up as well.'

Oliver nodded. 'If you wish.'

'You've got plenty of cash in the bank, so don't be afraid to use it,' Jimmy encouraged. 'Let's not worry about our UK bands making it big here, so much as US bands making it big globally, yeah?'

'Well, if you can pick them like UK bands –'

'I can. So let's get a relationship going with a recording studio and video company.'

'I've smoked out some already, priced them up.'

'Good. Right, we'll meet tomorrow night for food, someone else I'm meeting tonight.'

That evening we headed for an expensive restaurant, Big Paul warned about behaviour, and Jimmy scoped around for his mark, finally finding the man sat with another man. When the person in question finished his meal, and sat down at the bar, we sat nearby.

'Brits?' the mark asked, detecting our accent.

'Yes,' Jimmy responded. 'Over on business.'

'What business you guys in?' the man asked in a deep Texas drawl.

'Many. Hotels in Africa, game reserves, nightclubs in the UK, but principally we're stockbrokers. I guess over here you'd call them investment managers. This big guy is ex-Special Forces. Bodyguard.' Big Paul nodded, looking mean.

'Ain't so small yourself, fella,' they laughed. 'So what kinda investments you in?'

Jimmy produced a torn-out page from Investors Chronicle. It chronicled our successes.

'Most respected trader and guru,' the man read, he and his friend impressed.

'What business you guys in?' I asked.

'Oil.' I shiver went through me. 'I'm Ted, this is Chuck.'

Jimmy said, 'Tell me Ted, do you know any good lap dancing bars?'

'Heck, yes! And not far. Drink up, we'll get a private room and chat.'

With Big Paul holding a pile of cash for the girls, and being suitably entertained, we laid it on thick; Kenya, the nightclub, our man in Hong Kong. When they jokingly asked for some stock suggestions Jimmy offered them this:

‘I tell you what I’ll do. I’ll fax you stock tips for a year. If you like them, and make money, we’ll talk about a formal arrangement.’

‘A year?’ They were stunned.

‘I like to back-up what I say in advance,’ Jimmy told them. ‘Oh, you know a fella called Chuck Pederson, Governor of Texas?’

‘Hell, yes; I voted for him for the bum. He’s a member of my golf club.’

‘He’ll put you right about me.’

Ted pulled out a mobile phone and dialled, struggling to focus. After apologising for the hour, and being drunk, he asked about Jimmy. Putting his phone away, he said, ‘The good governor says you’re the best stock picker in the world, bar none. Have yourself another drink, buddy.’

Two days later we were on a ranch in the Republic of Texas, guests of Ted and his wife, the lady having big hair and a bigger accent. Jimmy saddled a horse and rode it around like he’d been doing it all his life, no way I was getting on one, and Big Paul keenly fired a variety of weapons. We had given Ted three stocks to watch whilst in the lap dancers, now they were rocketing north, our host a fistful of dollars richer. We did little other than get to know our host, eat a lot, drink a lot and listen to horrible jokes. I only detected one conversation that I thought was work related.

Jimmy said, ‘I got a buddy in the African section of British Intelligence – they’re big in Africa – and he gets to see who’s drilling oil, new discoveries before they get into the press. And my friend, he likes his vices.’

I could see Ted’s grey matter working, but he said little. We flew back to New York, since the other Texan we wanted to meet was there, a matter of bad timing. We called the Governor’s Texas office and got a message to him, a time arranged for a meet at a hotel with a political convention going on. We were ushered in, Big Paul waiting in the corridor and chatting to the

security detail. I let go of my red, white and blue balloon, its helium taking to the room's ceiling.

'Been a few years, boys,' the Governor let out, offering us seats and drinks. 'You shouldn't be such strangers.'

'I liked the autobiography you did,' Jimmy mentioned.

Chuck held up his hands and smiled. 'They sued that writer fella and won, and there's no proof I had a hand in it.'

'And now we can move on to the next project,' Jimmy stated. 'Got a paper and pen?'

The good Governor grabbed a pad, looking worried. 'Shoot.'

'I want you to find a small health insurance company in Texas, and buy it. Spend around twelve million dollars, get a loan if you like.' Our host was intrigued. 'Then I want you to buy a small community bank, in Texas, with an investment arm. Again, around twelve million. The medical insurance company will lodge its deposits with the bank, the bank will invest the deposits and ... make a good return.'

'A very good return,' Chuck confirmed. 'I'd be right in figuring they'd get some help?'

'You'd be right. And when they make this money, the premiums could be lowered, and the insurance company would grow fast, so too the bank. Then, the Governor of Texas, soon to be Senator, would be seen to care for all the people of Texas, not just those that can afford good healthcare.'

'Senator, huh?' Chuck considered. 'That's two years away. If... I was interested in it.'

'Chuck, the tips we've sent you are less than one twentieth of what we could have sent,' Jimmy explained, giving the Governor a moment to think about it.

'I was headed that way anyway. So what's your angle, Jimmy?'

'A friendly voice on the hill when I need it in years to come, nothing more complicated than that.'

Chuck carefully regarded us. 'I owe you fellas a big chunk of change, and I don't like that much, I'd rather we were square.'

'There'll be a number of investment opportunities in the years ahead; I'll be buying businesses here. When the time comes you can buy shares for more than they're worth, and they'll make you your money back in a few years.'

'Again, not much of a price tag,' Chuck complained.

‘I’ll be opening a charity here in a few years, you can contribute whatever will ease your burden and lighten your soul. In the meantime, I’d appreciate that bank and insurance company moving along. When I see that they’re open, you get a few more tips. Or, rather, the bank does.’

‘And a heck of a lot of voters get cheaper premiums. You ain’t dumb, Jimmy, you got it all worked out.’

‘Save your pennies for the future. Senator.’

We stood. ‘It was nice chatting,’ I said, getting a laugh from our host. ‘Keep the balloon.’

‘What’s your connection to my oil buddy, Ted?’

‘I get information about good places to drill,’ Jimmy answered, very matter of fact.

Our host’s eyes widened. ‘I know some people you should be in bed with.’

I said, ‘If your wife is anything like Ted’s, no thanks.’

Chuck roared with laughter, Jimmy giving me a look.

Jimmy said that he had done what he needed to do, the seed was sewn, so we flew back to London.

Every dark cloud

One Saturday at the club were stood as usual in the VIP area having a drink and chatting to girls. A frump of girl came bounding in and straight for Jimmy, grabbing his arm. His drink went flying.

‘What the fuck are you doing?’ Jimmy roared, bouncers and Big Paul closing in as Jimmy shook beer off his hand. ‘Throw her out!’

One of our female bouncers, hired for this very purpose, nudged the frump towards the door, but the frump was having none of it. *Get your hands off. That’s assault. I’ll sue you.*

The male bouncers joined in, edging the woman out, but she was not going, an elbow to the face of our lady bouncer that looked more accidental than anything. The men grabbed her arms and led her out, finally four people carrying her as she struggled, her fellow frump trying to stop them. Outside the club

the police closed in, the bouncers taking a step back. Frump wanted to press charges for assault. The police led her away to take a statement, other officers looking at the video footage, a slam dunk case. They told her to move on or she would be charged, eventually the lady moving off. And that was the start of it.

Next day she claimed assault again and her expensive solicitor insisted the police take the matter further. Senior officers, not having viewed the tape, started an investigation, enough for the local paper to run the story, complete with pictures of her bruised upper arms. Jimmy calmly called our extremely expensive London solicitors and slapped an injunction on the paper, as well as starting an action against the frump, the woman from a moderately rich family. The police reviewed the tapes and took statements, one of their own senior officers a witness against her, and dismissed the charges. Frump began suing us, taking time off work for “injuries and stress caused” and making it to the local TV channel. So we hit them with an injunction. They seemed to have an odd reaction, and ran the story again, defying the injunction. Our solicitors ramped up a gear and the police backed our side. We sued the TV station, placing one million pounds on deposit with our solicitors, a fact that made the local papers.

We invited in the editor of the local paper and showed him the tapes, informing him that our lady bouncer was now pressing charges and the police were taking them seriously. The frump was arrested, interviewed and released, but that just made her worse. The matter was now sub-judicial, which I read up on, taking a keen interest because Jimmy said it would be good training for the future.

As a matter of strange co-incidence, the BBC ran a documentary about the orphanage, an hour-long programme. Jimmy insisted that no money had changed hands, it was just a matter of odd timing. We all sat down and watched the programme on a Tuesday night, my good self absent from the programme. I didn't mind that, I was in the background when they filmed it and happy enough to keep a low profile.

The programme charted the nature of orphanages in Africa and then focused on what ours used to be like, they actually had film footage, then focused on how it had grown. The old bat was interviewed, and I was terrified what she might say. They had

older footage of her and ran that as well, showing the contrasts. I cringed when she said that she prayed for a miracle and got Jimmy Silo. Anna was seen nursing sick kids and organising games, the local staff filmed growing crops, followed by shots of Jimmy stepping down from a jeep in a short-sleeved shirt. The shot cut to the playground, Jimmy Swinging kids around, then a shot in the classroom, Jimmy teaching Maths in a local dialect. One girl did not understand, so he repeated it in French. They also got him talking German to Anna.

Next came an interview with the Kenyan Prime Minister, who harped on about how poor they were, but how grateful for Jimmy's help they were, mentioning a figure of twenty million. Even in dollars that was way too much. Jimmy was then interviewed sat on the roof, deckchairs and cold drinks.

'If you feed a hungry man today, he will be hungry tomorrow and no better off. But if you give a man a job, a skill or some tools, he can earn his food, grow his food or catch his food. I firmly believe that seventy-five percent of all money sent here is wasted, not going where it is needed. This orphanage has become a school, and that school will become a college and apprenticeships will be created. The children here came from the scrap heap, they won't be going back there. We teach them all day, discipline them hard, and they will leave with qualifications and a good attitude. They will not be a further burden to anyone.'

'It's a twelve hour day for them,' the interviewer nudged.

'We don't waste time here, because it's life or death. When they leave here they won't get the dole like in the UK. If they don't have a skill they starve, it's as simple as that. They were put here to die, to be forgotten about. That's not going to happen. If this orphanage closes tomorrow then the children here would have had an education on par with any in Kenya.'

'The schools Minister says that your upper class is ahead of local schools.'

'Lessons in Africa are normally just held in the morning - the kids go home and help in the fields after that. We push ours hard, with games in the evening that they are still learning from. We also have a scout movement and a cinema that shows educational films, plus a few Disney movies.'

'You've taken a very active role here?'

‘If I’m going to spend money then I want to see results, even if I have to stand over people.’

They interviewed Bob Davies from the UN, a glowing endorsement given, before following us up to Mawlini, where the mine clearing operations were filmed, African students filmed searching for dummy mines in the sandbox. Jimmy was filmed handing over certificates, the final shot from the hotel rooftop, taking in the whole base and two large UN planes, the commentary making it look like we paid for it all. I caught a shot of my hand, and that was all. Cookie and Sandra watched half of it and were amazed, Jimmy’s parents on the phone straight away, mine wanting to know where I was in the film.

Back in Cardiff the legal bill was mounting-up on both sides, but not a problem for us. Frump’s dad got involved, but his solicitors soon asked for money on account of a quarter million; we were insisting on a high court battle and our solicitors had dozens of experts and lots of expensive trips to Wales to pay for. When the other side’s solicitor told them they’d lose, and get a bill for half a million at least, they buckled; no money meant no solicitor. In an odd move, Jimmy offered to settle out of court, but through the solicitors. Frump was broke, having already paid their solicitors forty-five thousand, and daddy was in trouble. Jimmy accepted sixty-five percent of daddy’s business, a move I puzzled because the maths did not add up. We drove down to the factory we now had control of.

Stood outside, Jimmy said, ‘Timing is everything.’

I stared up at the sign, stunned into silence. ‘Johnson’s, making artificial limbs for Africa.’

Jimmy spent ten minutes talking with father and son, soon the best of buddies. Everyone would stay on in their current roles and we’d put in a one million pound director’s loan. We sent dad and son to Kenya, to see the orphanage and the airfield before they flew down to Mozambique to deliver a new batch of limbs. By time they returned they were members of our nightclub and regulars, not being able to praise Jimmy enough. Frump moved away.

It was a lesson in law, but also a lesson in how determined Jimmy could be, how almost ruthless he was at times. He told me that the scenario would repeat itself, that this was “my lesson” for the future.

Rescue Force

When Ratchet and Spanner completed their basic course they were asked to stay on. They politely refused, so Mac told them that Jimmy wanted to meet them personally, and they hung around. We flew out the next day, Cosy flying us up to Mawlini from Nairobi. Our take off slot had been between two lumbering 747s, and I was feeling inadequate. Jimmy was surprised that the men had refused, and I was very surprised that anything surprised Jimmy.

The rooftop bar was busy, now numerous Fanta sunshades over the white plastic tables. Mac sat waiting with Ratchet and Spanner, the target men in civilian clothes. They both appeared to be mid thirties, slim and tanned, and did not seem the military types, certainly a contrast to the ex-troopers I had met so far. They could have been desk clerks and pen pushers.

‘Warm day,’ I offered as we shook hands, ducking our heads under the sunshade.

Jimmy reached across and shook their hands. ‘Thanks for hanging around.’ We all settled. ‘So, gentlemen, what’s next in your career progression?’

‘We’ve got a UN contract,’ Ratchet explained, swiping away flies. ‘Zaire.’

‘Not the most pleasant spot on the planet,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘You must be dedicated.’ He waited.

They glanced at each other. ‘It was what we planned on doing after we left the Army. UN work,’ Spanner explained.

‘So, you like to help Africans?’ Jimmy posed. ‘Because you’re certainly not doing it for the money.’

‘Well, I suppose all medics are like that ... to some degree,’ Ratchet suggested, seemingly uncomfortable with being put on the spot.

‘And in the next ten years, how many people could you help?’ Jimmy asked, checking his nails. ‘Maybe ... couple a week, because a lot of your time in the Zaire will be sitting around behind safe walls, a lot of travelling, a lot of moving on when the

gunmen get close. So ... what? You'll help a couple of hundred a year, thousand or two in ten years?'

'Hadh't really thought about it like that, Mister Silo,' Spanner admitted.

Jimmy said, 'How about I show you a way to help ten times as many. I'll fund your trip to the Zaire, not through the UN, and not just the two of you. I'll give you jeeps, supplies, local guides, unlimited medical supplies and some military support ... so that you don't get yourselves killed over there.'

They again glanced at each other, surprised at the offer. 'Well, that's ... very generous of you, Mister Silo,' Spanner said, both men seemingly intimidated by us.

'You're going there to help, so better to do the job properly, yes?' They nodded, Jimmy adding, 'So you'd rather save ten ... than save one, yes?'

'Well, yes,' Ratchet admitted. 'Who wouldn't?'

'Problem is this, guys. Those areas where you're really needed, are the areas full of gunmen; warlords and rebels terrorising the population. The UN doesn't go into those areas, so you'd be nursing people weeks after the gunmen had moved on.' He waited.

'You'd want us to go into those areas?' Spanner puzzled.

'Not unless I was sure you'd come back ... safe and well.'

'Well, then how?' Ratchet asked with a shrug.

'First, we'd need you to draw up some plans, of what you'd need to mount such an expedition, including a suitable security detail; jeeps, supplies, staff, local guides, the works. Could you put together such a plan if I gave you an unlimited budget?'

They straightened. 'Well, yes,' they both agreed.

'How long would it take?' Jimmy asked.

'Well, couple of weeks,' Spanner said.

'Couple of months,' Ratchet suggested.

'And you'd be paid more than the UN would during that time,' I put in. 'You have contracts with the UN?'

'Yes,' Ratchet remembered. 'Don't know if they can be altered.'

'They could,' Jimmy firmly stated. 'Take a look around you. Do you think I have any influence with the UN?'

They laughed. 'Some.'

Mac said, 'Some of them call this Silo Field.'

‘So, guys,’ Jimmy began. ‘You think you could put together a team?’

‘Yes,’ they agreed.

‘What about safety? Who’d you use for protection?’

‘That wouldn’t be easy,’ Spanner admitted. ‘Not many soldiers around Africa I trust. They’re generally the ones doing the stealing and raping.’

Jimmy nodded. ‘It’s a problem. That’s why I created the Kenyan Rifles; we’re training them up for missions like this, making sure we have well trained men – and well disciplined. But the first batch won’t be ready for a while, and your chances of staying alive would be very limited without them.’

The men glanced at each other. ‘When will they be ready?’ Spanner enquired.

‘Six months, maybe less,’ Jimmy answered. ‘You in a big hurry to put on blue hats and waste your time on the sidelines?’

‘What would we do for six months?’ Ratchet posed.

Jimmy sipped his beer. ‘Get your team together, get them trained, buy the kit, plan the mission. It all takes time, and the more training and planning you do, the fewer casualties over there.’

‘Lot a wounded medics coming back from Zaire, boys,’ Mac put in. ‘Not a place to make a mistake.’

‘Six months is not long,’ I suggested. ‘You got the run of this place. Have a holiday at the beach and a safari if you like, live it up, it’s all on us.’

‘Very generous of you,’ Spanner said. ‘Thanks for the offer.’

‘He’s a good man to work for,’ Mac firmly nudged.

‘So, guys, what do think you’ll do?’ Jimmy finally asked.

‘Well, if we can get out of the UN contracts we’d have a go at it,’ Ratchet suggested.

‘I’ll talk with the UN next,’ Jimmy offered. ‘In the meantime, welcome to the team.’ He reached into his pocket and produced two round shoulder patches, a logo of a large hand grasping a small one. The wording said Rescue Force Kenya.

‘Rescue Force?’ they queried.

‘I have plans for the unit, rescues launched when needed, a kind of rapid reaction unit. You’d be the first two instructors, so this is an auspicious occasion, gentlemen. And, if it grows as I

would like it to, you'd have helicopters and planes at your disposal.'

'Helicopters?' they repeated.

'Of course, you'd fly into some places,' I said. 'Either of you fly?' They shook their heads. 'We'd fund you learning, get your license.'

'Get our licenses?' they repeated.

As a matter of strange luck our green Huey roared past, landing on the apron.

'One of those,' I said. 'About eight weeks to get to grips with it.'

'Love to,' Ratchet enthused.

Jimmy said, 'So don't be in a hurry guys. If you're going to go skulking about the jungle, be well prepared.' He turned to Mac. 'I want a small building for them, two Land Rovers painted white, Rescue Force Kenya written on them. They'll answer to you and Rudd, Rudd will do the money.' Jimmy faced the men. 'Where you living?'

'Below.'

'Stay there as long as you need, move to the new block when it's ready,' Jimmy suggested. He handed them twenty thousand dollars each. 'Your start capital, gentlemen. First job; custom long-axle Land Rovers kitted for the Zaire. Find them, adapt them, paint them white. My men Rudd or Cosy will pay for all kit like that.'

'We've met them many times,' Ratchet said.

'I'll send you my thoughts on what you need, you send me yours and we'll meet in the middle.'

It was a done deal, Bob Davies from the UN cancelling their contracts and asked to observe their progress as model for further medical rescuers. We flew back to Nairobi and boarded a night flight to London.

Memo

To: Ratchet & Spanner, Rescue Force

Subject: Training

Guys, for the staff training, and you own ongoing training, I would suggest the following topics be covered.

- 1) Land Rover off-road driving, maintenance
- 2) Long range off-road navigation, vehicle, foot and aircraft

- 3) Medical skills (assumed in advance)
- 4) Mine clearance, ordnance disposal
- 5) Weapons clearance, identification
- 6) Geography (Africa)
- 7) Political history of regions to travel to
- 8) Current disposition of UN and other agencies for region
- 9) Liaison and contact methods for these agencies
- 10) Liaison with government departments, permissions (lengthy)
- 11) Inoculations
- 12) Withdrawal, escape routes, plans
- 13) Fitness

Send me your thoughts.

Sykes

A few days after getting back Jimmy announced, 'Time to recruit Sykes.'

'Sykes?' I coughed out a small laugh. 'No fucking way.'

'He has a weakness,' Jimmy enigmatically suggested, although he seemed cautious. He called Jack and asked for a meeting with Sykes in the old apartment.

The next day Sykes turned up at noon. I took his damp coat and made him a tea.

'Something important?' Sykes asked as he sat.

'I had a note from Magestic,' Jimmy said, his features sullen.

'About?' our guest asked after Jimmy failed to add anything more.

Jimmy took a moment, appearing saddened. 'Your health.'

Sykes froze and stared back. 'My ... health?'

'Had any discomfort ... using the toilet?'

Sykes closed his eyes for a moment, the colour draining from his face. 'What ... what does it say?'

'Bowel cancer,' Jimmy carefully stated after a moments reflection.

Now I closed my eyes. Sykes was not a friend, but I had gotten used to him, and this was awful. I faced Jimmy. 'Operable?'

‘Yes, Mister Sykes will survive the surgery, no chemo needed. But that’s not what will spoil Mister Sykes’ time remaining.’

‘No?’ I asked.

‘No,’ Sykes quietly said without looking up. ‘They’ll pension me off as soon as it’s diagnosed.’ His voice was breaking. ‘I’m ... due a check-up in a few months. And if *you* wanted me gone ... all you have to do is mention that to the right people.’

‘We could have done that before now,’ Jimmy countered. ‘But that’s not what we’re about.’

Sykes rubbed his face. He loosened his tie.

‘Mister Sykes,’ Jimmy called. ‘Mister Magestic has been busy with various biotech companies for many years. There is a cure, and he’s offering it to you.’

‘A cure?’

‘A complete cure, full remission, no tests failed, an advance drug from the future, available now to ... select individuals. And don’t even think Magestic has an agenda here. He doesn’t. You get the drug, you carry on, and we ask no favours. It’s between you and him.’

‘What ... kind of cure?’

‘A simple injection, with one problem.’

‘Side effects?’

‘No. If it cures you, you might be tempted to ... discuss the wonder drug. After all, it’s a cure for cancer.’

‘Why does he not make it widely available?’ Sykes puzzled.

‘Side effects,’ I said.

Sykes glanced at me, then back to Jimmy. ‘Side effects?’

‘You’d be fit as fuck afterwards, and live a lot longer,’ I explained.

Sykes puzzled that. ‘How is that ... a side effect?’

‘You might get noticed,’ I suggested. ‘People would ask questions, you’d have to avoid running the London Marathon.’

Sykes shot me an incredulous look. With his mouth hanging open, he pointed a finger at me, then Jimmy. ‘You two.’

‘Fit as fuck,’ I said. ‘Drugged up to the hilt. I run thirty miles a day as a warm up.’

‘First things first, Mr Sykes,’ Jimmy began. ‘First, go to a private clinic, perhaps abroad, get yourself tested. Then, when

you're sure, come back, the drug will be waiting for you. Do it quickly, you have that medical in a few months.'

'It's here, isn't it?' Sykes asked.

Jimmy glanced toward me. He nodded at Sykes.

'So Magestic knows my decision in advance.'

'It's still your decision,' Jimmy insisted.

'Sat on a toilet and screamed in agony lately?' Sykes pointedly asked, some anger in his voice. 'They'll pension me off, tell me *well done*, now go fuck off and sit in the garden!' He forced a breath, composing himself. 'I've got nine years left, and I trust Magestic more than the shits around me. If it's available, I'd ... I'd like it, please.'

Jimmy stood. 'Take your jacket off, please.' He stepped to the kitchen and retrieved a medical kit and a small vial. Sykes stood, rolling up his sleeve. Jimmy carefully drew out clear fluid, tapped the needle and removed air bubbles before injecting someone I once considered our arch nemesis. Jimmy added, as Sykes dressed. 'You'll run a temperature for a day or so, drink a lot of water, eat protein. After a few days you'll be hungrier than normal, an increased metabolism. Eat carefully, or you will put on weight quickly. You'll need less sleep, just four hours.'

I said, 'For the next week your piss will smell terrible, I found that out the hard way.'

Jimmy cautioned, 'Your bowel will hurt for a few days more, maybe longer, fixed in a month. When you go to work, look in the mirror and try and make yourself look rough, less ... well. You may need make-up. Have a holiday after two weeks, some sun, people won't notice the change so much.'

'How much of a change?' Sykes puzzled.

I said, 'That injection will take ten years off you. Literally.'

With his coat back on Sykes stopped near the door. 'You have a hold over me know.'

'You ... were due to be retired off in a few months,' Jimmy reminded him. 'Not much of a key player, are you, unless your health improves? And, more importantly, who can prove anything?'

Sykes regarded us carefully. 'I'd say *thank Magestic*, but I guess he knows.'

'He knows,' Jimmy said. 'Go and rest.'

With Sykes gone I asked. 'He'll be OK?'

Jimmy nodded. 'A great ally in the years to come.'

'It's a hell of an edge you got – cure someone when they're sick.'

'And I'll use it many times, even on people who won't know about it.'

We flew off to Australia, a tour of several cities before dropping in on Singapore, Bali, and finally Hong Kong, Po and his family treating us like royalty. I spent a glorious three days with the sisters, reluctant to finally leave them and return. The day we got back Sykes came down to the new house, on the train, Big Paul picking him up at Newport station.

'Well,' he asked, holding his arms wide.

'You're no better looking,' I suggested.

'We'll see what you look like at fifty-six!'

'He'll look just like he does now,' Jimmy suggested. 'If you're injected young, you stay young.'

'Crikey,' Sykes said as he sat.

Jimmy cautioned, 'The people around me don't know about the wonder drug, so not a word, just us.'

Sykes nodded. 'I feel great. Had to go to Switzerland last week, had a test there, no sign ... *at all*. And the pain's gone. I took a holiday as you suggested, even went jogging a few times – wife couldn't believe it!'

'Yeah, well, we don't need to know about that,' I said, images of Sykes skinny arse going up and down.

He laughed. 'How was the grand tour?'

'Great,' I replied. 'Like Hong Kong a lot.'

'Got a money making offer, boys.' He handed over a sheet detailing a salvage team, ex-SBS and Navy divers.

Jimmy walked into the computer room and returned with a cardboard tube, a map holder. He handed it over. 'All in there, three way split.' Sykes unravelled the maps. 'Pay my money to the Mine Clearance charity in Kenya.'

'This is the Scilly Isles wreck, yes?'

'Yes, plus the sub in Norway and a wreck off Guernsey. Total should be around sixty million in trinkets.'

Sykes looked up. 'Nice haul. Anything on the scale of the Baden Baden cave?'

'There's no pleasing some people,' I grumbled.

‘Step at a time,’ Jimmy suggested to Sykes. ‘Anyway, there are some scientific developments that Magestic would like to give the Government, so ask the PM if he’d co-operate. I’ll then guide you as to a few areas to dedicate some research money, but we’re talking decades.’

‘I’m sure they’ll be keen.’

‘Start with Stem Cell research - before someone else beats you to it. Whoever does makes billions.’

‘That anything to with...?’

‘Yes. So press ahead,’ Jimmy encouraged. ‘And there is one favour I’d like to ask. We could do with some protection.’

‘Protection?’ Sykes puzzled.

‘An armed guard. Can you imagine what would happen if any of this got out?’

‘Quite,’ Sykes responded, raising his eyebrows theatrically. ‘Easy enough to send you a man, I’ll tell the director we’re raining you in; he’ll like that. P.M. won’t have an issue.’

‘You’ll need a cover story, in case the press gets hold of it,’ Jimmy insisted.

‘We’ll invent a specific threat, put it in the book,’ Sykes suggested, none too concerned. ‘Oh, Jack’s got a long list of questions about the Balkan conflict when you’re ready.’

‘Be up in town tomorrow if he can meet us at the apartment.’

‘Fine, fine,’ Sykes said, studying the maps.

The next day a man turned up with a suitcase and a car, Big Paul and Ricky taking the piss something terrible. The man, Karl, had been a paratrooper, who became a copper, then spent time in Protection; politicians, minor Royals, military chiefs. He came armed with a 9mm pistol and, more importantly, an ID card that should prove useful. He was thirty-five, almost six foot and looked the part, eyes always taking in the detail. And he spoke like Big Paul; the military preciseness.

Whispering, I asked Jimmy if he knew him? He did, and indicated that things would turn out OK. By bedtime Big Paul and Ricky had given up the banter and accepted the new member of the household, beers around the fireplace. Karl was given the apartment opposite Cookie and Sandra, told he may have to share since it offered three bedrooms. For now he had a lot of space to rattle around in.

The following day the local police came calling, a tip-off about illegal firearms on the premises. Karl showed his ID, his holstered pistol, before telling the local police to fuck right off. They did. And it was as if Jimmy had anticipated the police visit. We called Sykes and he called the local Chief Constable, who then popped down himself. He could not explain where the tip-off had come from, a note had just appeared, but that he was investigating. We gave him a bunch of tickets for the club, for his officers, and off he went, certain that we had friends in high places.

But I was concerned. We had the Revenue on our backs after meeting MI5, now this. Someone out there had a problem with us, which annoyed me greatly. After all, we were trying to save the planet. I started thinking of Batman again, and how ungrateful the citizens of Gotham City were being.

Setting foundations

With the leisure centre at Mapley taking shape, Jimmy set about designing and building other structures that we could make use of in the future for the fledgling Rescue Force. The second building had been completed, positioned close to the air traffic control tower, and the first training courses organised by Mackey Tailor and his group were underway. We had met the man from the council again and asked for a footpath from the leisure centre towards the village, but it was already in hand. So too a roundabout and a road widening for a stretch some four hundred yards long, and not costing us anything.

With Rolf the architect and a colleague in tow, Big Paul showing Karl “his” Huey, we surveyed the foundations for a large square trench covering a wide area. Jimmy said it was for water rescue training, but I could not see how, it was only six feet wide and four feet deep.

Jimmy stood at an offshoot of the trench. ‘There’ll be a large pump here, sending water around the course at up to twenty miles an hour.’

‘Ah, raging torrent water training,’ I realised.

The course stretched fifty yards across and varied in width, Jimmy indicating that the variations in size would cause variations in water speed. There would also be many concrete bumps at the base, causing swirls and eddies. We walked around it as the first concrete was being pumped in by puzzled builders. It would also offer a section roofed-off at water level, so that anyone not paying attention would be swept under for a few yards.

Wiping our feet, we climbed the stairs of the newly finished barrack block. The top floor was split into two large dorms, room for twenty beds and lockers in each, communal showers and toilets at each end. The lower floors were similar to a basic hotel, except the rooms did not possess individual toilets or showers, they were found at the ends of the corridor as above. The ground floor was the same except for an extra room stuffed full of washers and dryers. The decorators were finishing off, soon to hand it over to us, the first users likely to be cadets on a week long camp, soon to be followed by Mackey's trainees. The guards at the gatehouse had little to do, so upkeep and management was now down to them; they were the key-holders and co-ordinated with the various groups using the facility.

From the top floor of the barrack block I had noticed a large hole in the ground towards the perimeter fence, and Jimmy now led us towards it. The hole was fifty yards long, twenty yards wide and already very deep. The sides nearest the rim had already been concreted – for safe access, metal reinforcing rods sticking out.

‘Scuba training,’ Jimmy explained. ‘There’ll be a concrete wall going up twenty feet, so the total water depth will be a good twenty metres when finished.’ He pointed. ‘Down there we’ll have tunnels and air-pockets, a small cave winding around.’

‘Cave rescue boys can use it,’ I suggested.

‘And police divers, and anyone wanting some dive training before they hit the ocean. We’ll have a club here, open to locals. Come and see the cave.’

‘Cave?’ I queried as we drove around the airfield to a far corner. This was Swindon, as flat as the Fens. Getting down from the Range Rover, and thrusting my hands into my pockets, I said, ‘It’s another trench.’ Laid out before me was an area the size of a

football pitch, nothing but brown mud, with what looked like a maze being dug.

Jimmy explained, 'We'll line it all with concrete, a concrete roof, dirt on top, make use of the land above as well as below. The cave will vary in height and width – room for one or two people at a squeeze, winding around with a few dead ends, some water traps. It'll be around three hundred yards long when finished, quite a crawl on your belly in the water and the mud. They'll paint the concrete dark brown, no light reflection, be spooky in there.' He pointed. 'Over there it will rise up twenty feet – down thirty, so you'll have to climb up then rope back down.'

'Be good for the cave rescue boys,' I said.

'The water level can be varied as well, so cave divers can use it for training. Should have people from all over.'

I pointed to the left. 'More water stuff?'

'No,' Jimmy said as we walked towards another trench. Halting at the edge of an area recently concreted over, he explained, 'Concrete patch on both sides, small ravine in the middle. They build small bridges from wood or scaffolding, get a wounded man on a stretcher across, two teams at a time, competing against each other. A lot of rope work.'

The assault course I recognised. Walking alongside it I commented, 'Not much of a challenge.' The highest barrier was no more than five feet and most obstacles possessed angled ramps.

'They'll do it in teams of five, one man on a stretcher.'

'Ah, now that would hurt.' I pointed at the side of the nearest hangar, at a wall of scaffolding. 'Problems?'

'No, climbing frame. You go up one side and across. They'll be a net, but also areas blocked off, some rope crossings. And when we're feeling particularly sadistic -'

'Do it with a man in a stretcher,' I finished off. 'Ouch.'

With muddy shoes we mounted up and headed back to the control tower. In the glass tower we leant against walls and discussed outstanding work with Rolf and his colleague; the trenches and concrete were quick and simple, low cost as well, the Greenhouse would take longer.

'Greenhouse?' I queried. 'Tomatoes?'

With a smile, Jimmy said, 'No, African training – heat and bugs, a few animals.' Rolf pulled out a drawing for me.

The outer layers would be thick Perspex, two sets about a foot apart, so that any sunlight would heat-up the inhabitants. Under-floor heaters would do the rest. The sketch indicated animal pens, cages and water features, an area set aside for camping, complete with a chimney, sturdy wooden poles for hammocks to hang off. It also possessed a mist-sprinkler system to keep the unlucky inhabitants wet and miserable for their stay.

Jimmy explained, 'We'll stick people in there for a weekend and see how they cope. Hammock making, washing in the pond, cooking, bugs all over the place, heat overbearing. If they crap-out here they'll freak in Zaire. And all night they listen to randy tree frogs, we'll put just males in there.'

The final building that we inspected was destined to be a garage and motor pool, as well as a training centre for drivers and mechanics. At the moment it was a patch of grass with pegs and string. We ducked into the AMO building, the building rented to the first aid instructors very cheaply, and met some of the staff. With grins they told us they'd had a new delivery and led us to the largest classroom.

'Ah, Frankenstein's monster,' I realised, the dummy from Medical Physics, Cardiff. This was the advance prototype.

They switched it on, checked fluid pressures and then directed me towards the naked, yet life-like Eunuch. I felt the skin, not that convinced, poked and squeezed limbs. They seemed about right. I poked the stomach, which seemed quite human, then lifted a leg and bent the knee.

'Take a pulse,' a man said.

I took a radial pulse. 'Rapid and shallow.'

'You know your stuff. Now a femoral pulse.'

I jabbed my finger into the groin, finding a pulse on one side but not the other. 'Is it broken?'

'No. So what's your diagnosis?'

I made a face. 'Crushed pelvis, left side, going into shock.'

'He's not stupid,' the man said toward Jimmy. He closed in on me. 'We can practice intubation, giving injections, taking blood, all sorts of diagnosis scenarios. But we haven't stabbed or shot it yet, a bit pricey for that.'

‘Yes,’ Jimmy firmly agreed. ‘But when this is obsolete you can practise stitching.’

‘We’ve shown it to the local fire brigade, the ambulance staff and some doctors, they were amazed. Some want to use it.’

‘Let them,’ Jimmy ordered. ‘More the better, get our monies worth. Cadets as well, St. John’s Ambulance.’

‘We going to sell it worldwide?’ I asked.

‘Eventually. Next one goes out to Kenya.’

With a grin, the AMO man said, ‘Fucking officials at the airport will freak, especially if you leave the pump running.’

‘You’ll have to Pay First class for it!’ another man joked.

Walking down to the apron, Jimmy took over the Huey. I sat left seat, Big Paul and Ricky in the rear. Jimmy didn’t hold a current license, so this was a risk. I did hold a license, but was not allowed to teach; so all round, it was a naughty escapade. He started it without a problem, wound up the rotor speed and lifted off, skimming the ground and gaining altitude, turning around the hangars, finally executing a rolling stop on the grass.

‘You should formalise the paperwork,’ I said through the headsets.

‘Yes, dad.’

I nudged Jimmy to move it a few yards, onto the concrete, that way the aircrews could wheel it away. ‘Sloppy parking.’

Ratcheting things up

Keen to keep Ratchet and Spanner happy, and on board, we returned to Mawlini six weeks after offering to fund them. Jimmy explained to me that he wanted to keep them at the base for at least a year, so we would have to try and drag things out. We landed with Cosy, Jimmy right seat and me uncomfortable in the back. Not uncomfortable because of any lack of space, but because I was not at the controls.

Mac greeted us in a Land Rover on the apron, a Russian Mi2 helicopter parked nearby, white UN colours. ‘They’re out flying, be back soon.’ He took us to their new building, Cosy off delivering supplies. “Rescue Force Kenya” the sign said, the

letters wrapped around the logo, now with a red cross in the background. The lower letters were Latin: "FOSSOR QUOD VIR."

'What's that mean?' I asked Mac.

'Fools and heroes,' Jimmy replied as we stood on the sand waiting.

'Not that inspiring for beginners,' I complained, Mac agreeing with me.

'It's perfect,' Jimmy explained. 'Since we want neither fools, nor heroes, but both.'

'Uh?'

'A fireman is foolish to rush into a burning building, a hero when he comes out.'

'That's clever,' Mac agreed as the distinctive sound of a Huey caused us to turn our heads. Whoever was flying came in fast, flared up and around, landing quickly and smoothly. 'That'll be Ratchet. He's shit hot, a natural.'

Five minutes later the pair stepped down from a jeep, sunglasses and baseball caps, and looking cool. Flying lessons will do that to you, and I remembered my own transformation.

'Right, boss,' Spanner offered, a round of handshakes given.

They showed us inside, not that the door had been locked. The interior was cool, neat desks and neat paperwork squared off to the desk edges, a third man sat at a desk and dressed in a white uniform with the shoulder logo. The man, in his late twenties, stood as we entered.

'Beer, mate?' he asked me, clearly an Aussie.

'Never say no,' I responded.

He shook my hand. 'Clive Dunnnow.'

'Clive ... dunno your last name?' I puzzled.

'If I had a dollar,' he sighed. 'Naw, mate. Dunnnow, "w" on the end.'

Spanner said, 'Clive's a paramedic, was Army in Oz. He flies a Cessna and he's got thousands of miles of jeep driving under his belt.'

Jimmy closed in on the man, a hand extended.

'Fucking hell, mate. What'd your mother feed you on?' Dunnnow asked.

'Kiwis,' Jimmy responded, making Dunnnow smile. 'Oh, and welcome to the team, I guess.'

‘Thanks, boss. Two more of us around about someplace.’

‘The bar ... perhaps?’ Jimmy teased.

‘Naw, mate, not in the daytime. Least not before 3pm anyplace.’

‘If we’re going to have a board meeting, let’s do it in a breeze,’ Jimmy suggested, so we drove around to the hotel. Settling around a table we sat partly under a Fanta shade and accepted cold beers, Jimmy thanking the waiter in his local tongue.

‘Fellas said you spoke a few languages,’ Dunnow noted.

‘It would be rude not to,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘So, how’s progress?’

Ratchet began, ‘We hired the mad Aussie here, plus a Brit doctor and a Dutch lady nurse built like a tank.’

‘Not Anna?’ I asked.

‘No, she’s called Hildy,’ Ratchet replied with a grin. ‘And Cosy says Anna gone all slim and muscles, lost the pounds.’

‘And Anna is German,’ Jimmy corrected me. ‘Got any jeeps?’

‘Got two good ones, think there are two more near Nairobi, should get ‘em at a good price. We’re fixing air intake pipes up the roof, proper roof-racks, extra spare tyre.’

‘Good,’ Jimmy responded. ‘How’s the flying coming along?’

Mac put in, slapping Ratchet on the shoulder, ‘Ratchet will pass first go. There’s a chief instructor down in Nairobi when he’s ready.’

‘I’ll get there too,’ Spanner quietly insisted.

‘Then make sure you’ve both got a PPL and checked out on Cessna, they’re common around here,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘That Russian helo’s a bit of a beastly,’ Dunnow said. ‘I’ve had a look inside.’

‘But reliable when treated right,’ Jimmy put in. ‘Good Russian engineering. So, what’s this doc’ good at?’

Ratchet answered, swiping away flies, ‘He’s thirty-five, a specialist in tropical medicines, spent a lot of time down here. We found him finishing a charity contract in Tanzania. The nurse was with him, both out of work. They don’t need any Africa training, and they’re good with jeeps.’

‘Get the doc’ on a Cessna if he wants to have a go,’ Jimmy said.

‘He showed some interest,’ Mac put in.

‘They’re probably over Doc Adam’s place,’ Ratchet suggested. ‘They help out a few hours a day.’

‘So should you,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Keep your hand in, stay fresh.’

They nodded their agreement.

I asked, ‘What about navigation, you up on that?’

‘Better now,’ Ratchet admitted. ‘What with all the flying nav’ an all.’

Mac put in, smiling, ‘I design courses for them, test each of them. They only got lost a few times.’

‘Been teaching them ordnance?’ I asked.

‘Aye, they’re coming along, but just a few hours a week.’

Jimmy faced Mac. ‘Why not set up a one week trip for them, down to the village on the border of my land. Navigation, medical tent set-up, one day surgery, next village and back. Then the same for Tanzania. Let’s get them used to trips of that nature.’

‘Repeat it in a Cessna,’ I suggested. ‘Then the Huey.’

‘If we can get all *that* done, we’re almost there,’ Jimmy enthused. ‘But let’s make sure that everyone knows a Chinese pineapple grenade from an AK47, huh?’

‘We get some time at your hotels, boss?’ Dunnow risked.

‘Of course you can.’ Jimmy faced Mac again. ‘If they complete the test trips successfully, week at each place, but not together – groups of two.’

The doctor and his assistant stepped out and toward us. Yes, I considered, she was built like a tank. We stood and greeted them, Jimmy exchanging pleasantries with the nurse in Dutch before we pulled over chairs for them.

‘What’s up, doc?’ I said. The doctor, Doc Graham, was tall and thin, fair-haired, looking to me the public school type.

‘Just delivered a baby, actually,’ he replied in a posh accent.

‘Another frigging Somali?’ Mac nudged with some attitude, earning a glance from Jimmy.

‘Third this week; quite a camp building up.’

Jimmy faced Mac. Firmly, he said, ‘Mac, hire some labourers and put up a few buildings four hundred yards beyond Doc Adam’s, encourage the Somalis to use them, I don’t want them straddling the road or nestling against our fence. Then move those near our fence. Don’t be afraid to marshal them, get the

UN involved. If we're going to help them, then let's get them orderly. Get Cosy on it.'

'Aye,' Mac reluctantly agreed.

After sipping his beer, Jimmy asked Mac, 'Any progress on the border?'

'They started the fence, whole fucking half a mile of it.'

'Keep pushing them,' Jimmy encouraged. 'Spend some money. Get Rudd on it if you need to, he's got more time now.'

'Might I ask,' Doc Graham begin, 'why you spend so much money around here, yet have a problem with Somalis crossing the border?'

'I'll help Kenyans in Kenya, Somalis in Somalia. But when large populations start drifting to places with fuck all resources everyone suffers. How much water is there here for them?' He left the question floating. 'If there are gunmen terrorising villages ten miles inside their border, I'd rather deal with the problem over there, not refugees here.'

'How would you deal with the gunmen?' the Doc pressed.

'I've a feeling that Somali will disintegrate. When it does, no one will object to a buffer zone and refugee camp on their side of the border. I'll fix camps over there and send the Kenyan Rifles after the gunmen.' He sipped his beer. 'What you have to keep in mind about Africa, is that often a couple of hundred rebels cause a million refugees to flee their homes. I can pay for a million refugees, or I can shoot the fuck out of a few hundred idiots with AK47s instead of cocks – at a fraction of the price.'

'You have a strange way of looking at it,' Doc Graham noted.

'I have the correct way, the other way causes more misery and cost,' Jimmy insisted. 'In Zaire you have ten gunmen on a hillside terrorising a thousand people in the villages below. Ten gunmen are cheap to dispatch, helping a thousand displaced people is costly.'

'Seems fair enough,' Dunnnow suggested.

'Treat the cause, not the symptom,' Doc Graham agreed.

Jimmy continued, 'There are large areas of the Congo, sorry *Zaire*, that are like the Wild West, and we can't get in and help because of a dozen idiots with guns. My aim is to deal with the idiots and help the people at the same time. The UN will just help the people near them, whilst hoping the gunmen get bored and go home.'

‘They’re not much of a deterrent,’ Doc Graham admitted. ‘When do you think you’ll send us into Zaire?’

‘When I know you’ll come back out.’

‘I can’t argue with that,’ Doc Graham approved.

‘Fucking right,’ Dunnnow agreed.

Jimmy turned his head a notch to Mac. ‘Kenyan Rifles?’

‘First twenty are shit hot. We got some at your safari park. They got their own jeeps and they navigate OK.’

‘Fine. When this lot do a week’s trip - send four Rifles with them, one NCO. See how they work together.’

‘We get our own bodyguards,’ Dunnnow approved.

I asked Mac, ‘How many recruits in the Rifles?’

‘Thirty something. Bit tight till we finish their barracks.’

‘Send the existing lads out somewhere,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Get them used to border patrol and sleeping rough. So, anyone need anything?’

‘We’re still awaiting some decent medical kits,’ Doc Graham suggested. ‘Equipment for minor field surgery.’

‘Deal with Rudd directly,’ Jimmy told him. ‘He knows all the suppliers down here, he can get us a good deal – paid for or otherwise.’ We laughed. ‘If you want anything from the UK then fax Paul and we’ll send it via airfreight. Gentlemen, I don’t mind spending money, I do mind pissing about. There’s plenty of talent here, so let’s get organised.’ He faced Mac. ‘Kick Rudd’s cage; I don’t care about the golf complex, but I do care about this. Right, have a drink, we’ll eat together later. Mac, Paul.’ He stood.

Away from the gang, we stood and took in the view. ‘Mac, I don’t like Somalis any more than you do, perhaps even a bit less, and the way the fighting’s going over there ... they’ll be a million of them crossing the border. Hire some staff, delegate, move the refugees to where they can be helped best, corral them, and fix that fucking border before we’re knee deep in refugees and getting nothing else done.’

‘Fucking Somalis ain’t what I signed up for,’ Mac complained.

‘I know, and I want you back on training, so get Rudd and Cosy on it - it’s their problem. Hire a refugee co-ordinator for Doc Adam. Hell, stick the person in his office and get him involved. Then we can all do what we’re good at, yes?’

‘Aye, I’m no good as a fucking diplomat, nor babysitter.’

‘We appreciate you,’ I told Mac, handing him a few thousand dollars.

Jimmy told him, ‘Don’t be afraid to kick some arse, you’re taking too much on yourself. Keep overall control – you’re the boss – but delegate more, yeah.’

He pointed to the road. ‘You can see where the damn road is by the huts along the side. Never used to be able to make out where it was for all the sand.’

‘Get some barbed wire,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘How much?’

‘About three hundred miles worth,’ Jimmy coldly stated. ‘Ask Rudd for a shit load. And I mean ... a shit load of it.’

We walked across the camp and to the Flying Doctors’ hut. As we progressed, scuffling through the sand, I remembered being able to see right across the camp, the Old Dogs huts a small oasis in sea of sand. Now we had to stop and find our bearings amongst the huts. I knocked and we entered.

‘Jimmy!’ the man called as he stood. Slightly overweight, balding and red-cheeked, his tatty green flight suit said “Tubby”. They shook hands.

‘This is my business partner, Paul.’

I shook the man’s hand. ‘I knew a Tubby once, the Dorset Tubby’s.’

He laughed like a drunken Santa. ‘I like you - you’re rude. Come, sit, have a beer.’

‘Don’t drink and fly, I hope,’ I teased as we sat around a cluttered desk.

‘Only at night. Then it doesn’t matter if you hit the ground!’

I raised an eyebrow. This man was a *fly by the seat of your pants* cliché in the flesh.

Jimmy testily asked, ‘Getting any work done?’

‘We go with the UN team three times a week, or they get pissed off.’

‘Let them, recruit a few more flyers,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘I’ll increase your budget. Get another Cessna, but I want you helping out the Rescue Force staff.’

‘They have a nice budget, deep pockets,’ Tubby grumbled.

‘So could you, when you start proving your worth to me,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Start taking some of them with you on trips, get them some experience.’

‘As you see fit ... he with deep pockets.’

‘Where’s your better half?’ Jimmy asked.

‘She who must be obeyed ... is fixing a leaky Cessna in Nairobi.’

Jimmy faced me. ‘This drunken old twat may not look it, but he has more hours on Cessna’s than me. And he’s a doctor, although you’d want to check his license.’

Tubby laughed. ‘It was your charm that first attracted me to you!’

‘I thought Jimmy said it was the offer of a job for an out of work bum?’ I asked.

‘Well, that as well,’ Tubby said in a conspiratorial whisper.

Jimmy told me, ‘Tubby is old school, he can *hear* what’s wrong with a Cessna, and fix it better than most mechanics. He’s wasted as a doctor.’

A squeal caused me look over my shoulder, finding two pups in a basket. I lifted one out. ‘They look like Spaniels.’

‘More ... or less. The father’s pedigree is ... not known. Although Mac denies it.’

We laughed as I placed the pup down.

‘You knew Mac before?’ I asked.

‘Flew in a few times, although not by choice. Landed up the road once and taxied down here. Still, it gave the locals something to talk about, blew the dust out of their shacks. And now Mac is lord of all he surveys, thanks to you pair.’

‘We’re just getting warmed up,’ I told him.

He eyed me carefully, easing back. ‘We dropped in on the orphanage - me and the dear lady wife - to see what all the fuss was about. And may I say ... what ... *the fuck?*’

‘We don’t do things in half measures,’ I said.

‘Twenty million, on an orphanage?’

We did not correct him on the figures. I said, ‘It’s all tax deductible.’

‘So, anything you need?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Besides a cooler climate? No. For once I can say that we are over-supplied with what we need, and your man Cosy is painfully helpful. But ...’ He raised a finger. ‘But you might

consider a bigger plane, us and the UN whingers going out together, not following each other like Zeros attacking Corsairs.'

'Something like a Dash-7?' Jimmy suggested.

'Just like it,' Tubby enthused. 'There's a second hand one in Nairobi, they want a hundred and seventy-five grand.'

'Must have a lot on the hours for that price,' I scoffed.

'No, they're just a bit ... broke. Bit of a ... closing down sale.'

'Ask Cosy to buy it, get a certificate on it,' Jimmy ordered.

'But I want it available for my lot to do a few trips.'

'It'll be your plane,' Tubby emphasised.

'But I like to ... delegate,' Jimmy carefully pronounced. We stood. 'Join us for food later.'

'I never refuse a good meal.'

'Just don't start wearing a red flight suit and a white beard,' I suggested, Tubby laughing loudly.

Tubby became one of my favourite characters, a real flyer, and with a name like Winston Hiddcup we all stuck to Tubby. He took me up and taught me things that were not in the manual, and probably for good reason. He altered the engine beyond the manufacturer's guidelines, and the planes flew better. Winston was also the only person to approach Nairobi with a call sign instead of his aircraft's proper designation: 'Tubby to Nairobi tower, over.' And, most amusing of all, he had a dozen parking tickets from the Kenyan police for landing repeatedly on Highway 44 North, to visit his favourite café. His Cessna proudly displayed speeding and parking tickets, all unpaid of course.

That evening we entertained thirty people at the rooftop bar, someone having fixed up a sign saying "Sandy View Nightclub". The food was always on us when we visited, so everyone turned out, many new faces. We ate for two hours before the tables were moved back, seats placed around the edges like a high school disco. The barman's assistant became the resident DJ and played music from the sixties and seventies, a forlorn glitter ball hanging off a pole and a handmade laser lightshow sending fingers of light toward the stars. I had to laugh at the absurdity of it.

Doc Adam turned up with three nurses, and seemed to be in a relationship with at least two of them. That surprised me as well.

The Old Dogs were already merry and dancing like drunken fools, a bit strange for me to see them let their hair down, not that they had much hair. Doc Adam joined them, UN staff looking a little out of place dancing in their uniforms. The beer flowed freely as more UN staff turned up.

The UN staff normally ate downstairs, the hotel's restaurant now run by the UN, most of the rooms below taken by their staff, transient or otherwise. Some were now in civilian clothes, a few in uniform, UN baseball caps turned around. The staff brought out numerous punch bowls and I tried the concoction, figuring the glass I drank to be worth three vodkas. Like Jimmy, I did not get drunk, the stems prevented that; you had to pack away enough alcohol for it to be medically unwise to be truly drunk. By 10pm the bar was packed, over sixty people. At one point Cosy beckoned me to the wall. He was flying off early and so drank little, but now pointed down towards the pool. On the grass we could see an arse going up and down, two sets of legs.

Jimmy appeared at my shoulder, peering down with a grin. 'What you have to keep in mind, is that most of this lot have very stressful and unpleasant day jobs. They live in a desert, heat and flies all day, trying to help people they can't save, burying babies every day. If they didn't let off steam like this they'd go mad.'

I understood, but I had never experienced such revelry amongst doctors and senior staff. Even the Russian pilots were pissed and dancing. Bob Davies put in an appearance, sober, and chatted with us, retiring without having drunk too much. Two Kenyan Rifles, enlisted men, turned up and stood by the door, Cosy explaining that they were the bouncers, to stop people from hurting each other, too much, and to put people to bed; they were paid twenty dollars extra each.

A roar built up quickly over the sound of the Beatles and I looked up as a Cessna flew so low over the bar it lifted the UN flag. The crazy pilot banked hard, lining up with the runway - the landing lights now on, and touched down smoothly. Ten minutes later Tubby's wife joined us.

'Nice landing,' I quipped, my words drowned out by the Bay City Rollers.

‘This disco is bloody marvellous,’ he said, accepting a drink. ‘You can see it from ten miles out. Even the UN pilots line up on it.’

We all laughed, and I had to laugh at the absurdity of it.

Tubby said, ‘She lands with the lights off sometimes, she’s done it so often.’

By midnight a few patrons were sleeping in corners, picked up and taken below in a well-practised routine. The Old Dogs were still going, but wrecked and incoherent. Doc Adam was dancing with his ladies, stem induced endurance, and our Rescue Force staff were now in varying states of stupor, Doc Graham and the Dutch lady tank seemingly in a relationship. I had learnt a lot in a few short hours, speaking with everyone and getting to know something about them all. Still, I was never completely comfortable with the debauchery. By 1.30am the bar staff were ready to go home, the music turned off, the sleeping, crawling and wobbling patrons eased below by the bouncers. The Old Dogs were carried out, one UN man getting punchy with the Rifles. That was bad move; they were not just built, but as fast as lightning. They subdued the man and put him to bed as Jimmy cleaned up.

I joined him, picking up broken glass and bottles. ‘Well, that went well.’

‘Don’t judge them, they live in hell itself,’ Jimmy suggested.

With everyone gone, a night guard now on duty, we sat and finished the punch, finding someone’s watch at the bottom of the bowl.

‘This lot working tomorrow?’ I grumbled.

‘No, half day tomorrow, special occasion.’

‘You mean ... *we’re* visiting,’ I complained.

‘Yep, bit of an event around here, not that they need an excuse.’

‘A bit surprising,’ I admitted, glancing up at the stars, my ears still ringing from the music. ‘They’re mostly doctors.’

‘And still human. They deal with death every day, and for fuck all pay. You need to be more understanding with them.’

‘Doc Adam seemed to have his hands full?’

‘Yes, he’s a bit of lad now. Got an ex-wife and three kids in Nairobi as well. Still, he puts in fourteen hours a day minimum without grumbling, so can’t fault him.’

The next morning the base was quiet and we made good use of the peace to wander around and check things out. The Rifles were up and about early and we joined them for breakfast, making each man feel appreciated, Jimmy talking to most of them many in their native tongue. Most recognised him and greeted him like a relative. We inspected the foundations for their new camp, discussing the layout with the officers, before accepting an invitation to join a jeep patrol to the border.

Just under an hour of dusty road and burning heat brought us to the much talked about border, a solitary group of workmen in attendance, a line of Somalis walking down the road towards us. The Rifles NCO informed us that the refugees cut the fence as soon as it was repaired; not enough patrols yet. Seeing the state of the refugees I felt sorry for them, a little guilty about our efforts here. And I wondered how they made it to the airfield on foot, women and children walking in the heat, many of the women pregnant. If we wanted to slow the human tide here we'd have to spend some serious money. And putting down barbed wire to slow up pregnant women with kids did not sit well with me.

'Why don't we put a clinic over there?' I grumbled, pointing across to Somalia.

'OK. What else?' Jimmy nudged.

'A camp, some water?'

'And what will stop the gunmen from terrorising the refugees ... and our staff?'

'We'd need the Rifles over there,' I suggested.

'Doubt they'd get permission, not yet,' Jimmy suggested. He pointed to a flat area behind us. 'We'll stick a camp there, a fence around it, a border crossing here. The water table is not too bad for drilling wells.'

Back at camp I was dying for a beer, finding Bob Davies having lunch at the rooftop bar, the place cleaned and good as new.

'Good night?' Bob asked as we joined him.

'Didn't drink much,' I lied.

'No, you two were up early, rest are taking it easy.'

Jimmy told Bob Davies, 'I'm going to start doing something to help the Somalis here. A camp behind Doc Adams, another near the border.'

‘It is getting busy around here,’ Bob agreed. ‘But if you stick a camp on the border you’ll accelerate the process, encouraging them to head for somewhere safe.’

‘They’ll come eventually ... of their own accord,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘Better we plan for it ahead of time.’

‘The UN won’t help until after the camps are up, you know that,’ Bob cautioned.

Jimmy nodded. ‘Has to be done, or they’ll hang around the gate asking for handouts.’

A Cessna flew low over the bar, banked hard and landed.

‘Tubby’s wife?’ I asked.

‘No, Cosy,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘He went and fetched Rudd early, save Mac barking at him.’

With Bob’s lunch finished he headed off to do some work, Cosy and Rudd joining us ten minutes later.

‘Good flight?’ I asked Rudd, slapping an insect on the back of my neck and wiping my hand in my already grubby shirt.

‘Yah, no problems, clear skies,’ Rudd answered. ‘I take over sometimes when Cosy wants a sleep.’ Cosy shot him a look.

We settled them, ordering drinks and food, the Fanta shade cooling us.

‘Right,’ Jimmy began. ‘We need to tackle the Somali problem here, before it becomes a big problem. Rudd, I want half a million pounds worth of barbed wire.’

‘Jesus. I just ordered fifty thousand pounds worth, and I thought that would make you shout at me.’

‘We’ll use it, all of it.’ Jimmy produced a map of the area. With a pencil he marked a square behind Doc Adam’s clinic. ‘I want an area four hundred yards square made into a camp – tents and buildings, toilets and water wells. Enough tents for five thousand. Then I want you moving people from the huts along the road, into the tents and buildings. Oh, and recruit a refugee co-ordinator for Doc Adam. Tell the Kenyans *after* you’ve done it.’

‘They won’t be happy,’ Rudd suggested. ‘It may make the Somalis look like permanent residents.’

‘Don’t care,’ Jimmy carefully mouthed. ‘Next, as the road here touches the border I want another camp set-up, fenced off, tents for ten thousand to start.’

‘My God,’ Rudd let out. ‘You think that many will cross the border?’

‘Yep, trouble is heating up over there.’

‘What budget for this?’ Rudd asked.

‘Price it up step by step, then fax us. Start with drilling equipment, get water flowing at the border, then every twenty miles from there to here.’ Jimmy eased back and sipped his beer as Rudd and Cosy exchanged looks.

‘How’s the golf complex?’ I asked Rudd.

‘Making a profit,’ Rudd answered, as if that was a surprising fact.

Jimmy ordered, ‘Give the manager of the golf complex more responsibilities for the other hotels, let him earn his bloody keep, free yourself up. Cosy, handle the orphanage. Rudd, you take a step back on that. And the safari lodge manager can handle things there well enough. For the next month I want the Somali issue top of your list.’

‘Kenyan Government will need to be spoken to,’ Rudd cautioned.

Jimmy offered Rudd a flat palm. ‘If we do nothing ... what happens to the refugees here? They’ll drift across Kenya. I’ll deal with the Government when the time comes. We *do* first, we ask later.’

‘Tubby is going to buy a Dash-7 plane in Nairobi,’ I told Rudd. He made a note. ‘It’ll be used for everyone, make a more comfortable ride up here for you.’

‘Should I cross-train to it?’ Cosy asked. ‘I have a twin engine license.’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘When Tubby does *his* training. Double up, save on costs, we’ve got some barbed wire to buy.’

‘How many Rescue Force staff we aiming at?’ I asked.

‘Ten, to start,’ Jimmy answered. Facing Rudd he said, ‘Keep the recruitment going, we’ll send them off to do something useful soon. Get more uniform jackets made up.’

Mac stepped into the bar and over to us, appearing unwell, and looking a little sheepish. ‘Er ... need me for anything today?’ he croaked.

‘No, take it easy,’ Jimmy responded. ‘I’ve brought these two up to date on what we need, you kick back.’

The barman called for Mac, holding the phone. When he returned Mac said, 'There's some Yanks here to see you.'

'Shit,' Jimmy softly let out, his head lowered. 'They're ahead of schedule.' Lifting his head he said, 'Mac, go arm yourself, get the Rifles here with weapons.'

Cosy jumped up. 'I have two weapons in my room below.'

'Go,' Jimmy ordered.

'Problem?' Rudd nervously asked as Mac grabbed the phone.

'CIA,' Jimmy responded, a glance towards me. 'This does not involve you, nor should you worry. I own a salvage company that helped the British Government recover a wreck, without telling the Americans. Now they're pissed.'

I wondered what the hell he was talking about, but Rudd was deflected from the truth for the moment. And what truth was that, I found myself wondering. Did the CIA know about our supposed link to Magestic? And which version of the truth did they know?

Jimmy told Rudd, 'Go about your business, we'll talk later.' Rudd headed downstairs. When Mac returned Jimmy said, 'Depending on how this meeting goes, you may be out of a job. Sit in the corner and come over when I signal you.'

Cosy re-appeared with two pistols, one handed to Mac and tucked into a shirt, then directed to sit with Mac. When the Rifles appeared Jimmy told them to wait on the floor below, out of sight, and wait his signal via the barman, exchanging many words in a local dialect. Five minutes later, with just the two of us sat at a table, four men stepped into the bar. The first two were in their late forties and had an air of confidence about them, if not arrogance. The second two were clearly bodyguards, and all wore sunglasses and baseball caps. The bodyguards remained at the door whilst the other two stepped purposefully forwards.

The first man stopped at our table, taking off his sunglasses. 'Mind if we sit, Mister Silo?'

'Not at all, Mister Potomo. Beer?'

The two men sat, smiling widely. 'You guys are good, real good. You knew we were coming.'

The second man took off his glasses, offering us a smug grin. 'And what's my name?'

Jimmy eased back and studied the man, as if perhaps he did not know. 'What was it that Mister Potomo's ex-wife called you during sex? Bot Boy?'

The men stopped smiling for just a second.

'He's good,' the second man said. 'But we don't have any secrets.'

Drinks were placed down, Jimmy exchanging a lot of words in a local dialect.

'You speak the lingo,' Potomo approved. 'Must have been down here a long time. Passport don't say that, though.'

'I'm a quick study,' Jimmy said with a forced grin. He sipped his beer. 'Now, what can I do for you nice gentlemen?'

'We figured you'd already know. We figured you'd get a letter,' Bot Boy said, sneering. For the most part, I was trying to figure out what the nickname signified in sexual slang.

'They should never have sent amateurs to do a professional's job,' Jimmy said to himself, looking away.

'Probably short of staff,' I helpfully put in.

The men stopped smiling.

'Why don't you get to the point,' Jimmy finally nudged.

Potomo said, 'We know you get tips for the financial markets, so now you'll co-operate with us.'

Jimmy slowly nodded to himself. 'And when you signed out of the Embassy, you said you were ... what, heading to Tanzania for the day?' The men glanced at each other, concerned. 'They won't know where to search for you, boys.'

'You must think you're better connected than you are,' Potomo coldly stated.

'You should have brought bodyguards with you,' I lightly suggested. The men glanced over their shoulders, their two security men gone. 'Can't get the staff these days.'

'Look over the wall,' Jimmy suggested, thumbing towards the front wall.

After a few seconds hesitation, Potomo got up and stepped over to the wall, glancing down. Mac did likewise, laughing. The two guards were stripped naked and pegged out in the dirt, held at gunpoint by the Rifles. Potomo was not a happy bunny on his return. 'You're fucking with the wrong people.'

‘Funny,’ Jimmy began, ‘I was going to say the same to you.’ He glanced towards Mac, pistols in the necks of our visitors a second later.

‘Over the side?’ Mac asked.

‘That would be rude,’ Jimmy responded as four Rifles burst out, weapons cocked and pointed at our guests. Jimmy sipped his beer slowly. Calmly, he said, ‘Mac, remove the gentlemen’s clothes, put them in their jeep, remove any spare clothes from the jeep – as well as sunglasses and hats, any water, phones, then send them on their way.’

Mac dragged one man away, Cosy the other, the men of the Rifles following close behind.

‘We got a problem?’ I asked.

‘Smoat wants payback, he tipped them off.’ He took a breath. ‘Not to worry, they won’t reach Nairobi.’ With me watching, and now very concerned, Jimmy grabbed the bar phone and made a lengthy call. Returning, he said, ‘Sorry about that, I had expected that incident to happen in a few more months. I must be getting old.’

‘Does it turn out OK?’ I asked, still concerned.

Jimmy nodded, unconcerned.

Mac and Cosy returned ten minutes later. ‘What was all that about?’ Mac asked.

‘The nice gentlemen from the CIA wanted to put a small base here, planes for operations towards Yemen and Somali.’

‘Like fuck,’ Mac said. ‘I ain’t playing with those fuckers.’

‘My thoughts exactly, and I told them before.’

The Rifles officer appeared and stepped over. ‘Was there a security problem, Mister Silo?’ he asked, concerned for us.

Mac told him, ‘They’re American; CIA. They want to put a base here.’

‘Here? Americans? I have not heard of permission for this.’

‘They will not get permission,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘I will talk with your Government, do not worry about it. But I do not like rude men.’

‘We sent them packing,’ the officer approved.

With just us remaining, I said, ‘Different story for Rudd?’

‘He’s not stupid, and Cosy will read between the lines. Rudd needs a story that he can accept. Go see if you can find him.’

I went and fetched Rudd from reception. Sitting, Rudd said, 'You stripped them naked and sent them off. They'll be problems?'

'No, I'll talk with their bosses, strike a deal to keep the peace,' Jimmy suggested. 'The people here think that the CIA want a base here.'

'Do they?'

'If they did I would move out,' Jimmy insisted. 'No, that was just a story for people less experienced than your good self.'

'What is this salvage stuff?' Rudd asked, reclaiming his beer.

'I have a boat, a salvage crew, former British Navy divers.'

'We've had some successes,' I put in. 'Found a wreck of Cyprus with a lot of gold in it.'

'But we helped the British Government recover a wreck in the Caribbean, Americans wanted a cut. I told them to go talk to the UK Government, but they hassle me still.'

'We'll have to give them some gold,' I put helpfully in.

Jimmy nodded. 'We'll keep them quiet.'

Rudd seemed placated. 'Are there wrecks here?'

'Here? Africa?' Jimmy asked. 'Never heard of any. Most are in the Caribbean, Mexican gold heading for Spain.'

'Must be exciting to dive for it,' Rudd admitted, sounding jealous. 'And I think these men will have an interesting four hour journey to Nairobi, especially stopping for petrol.'

We laughed.

'They won't come back,' Jimmy suggested. 'I hope so, anyway. Don't worry about it.'

Late that night we got a call from Skids, Potomo's jeep now in Tanzania. Jimmy put in a call to Jack, a message for Sykes about Smoat. We packed our bags and headed to the runway at dawn, our jeep pulling up behind a UN plane, an Antonov with its blades turning, no sign of our Cessna, or of Cosy.

'Catching a lift, are we?' I puzzled, shouting over the noise of the engines, the backwash bathing us in an aviation fuel scented wind.

'Detour. Come on,' Jimmy shouted.

We bordered the plane, Bod Davies exchanging a few words with Jimmy before he got off.

I strapped in as the aircraft took off and turned northeast. 'Where we heading?'

‘Dohar.’

‘Oh. Where the fuck’s that?’

‘Gulf. It’s a stop over to Afghanistan.’

‘Afghanistan?’ I queried. ‘Where the Russians were?’

‘Yep.’

I sat back. ‘Oh.’

‘Got to be done on the quiet, can’t have people knowing our intentions.’

At altitude the Russian pilot came back and thanked us greatly for our hospitality. Remembering how much this guy liked to drink, and the state he got in, I was not confident about our chances of reaching Dohar. Many of the UN staff wandered up and greeted us, and we got plenty of cold food on the four-hour flight, but it was not British Airways, a constant vibration in my feet and bum. We got off for the refuelling at Dohar, the UN staff all disembarking and just a handful of fresh faces boarding. The pilots also changed, two Pakistanis taking over. We set off for Afghanistan, Jimmy sat reading a book on Pushtan, whatever that was. He could not brief me because of people sat near.

We landed in the dark at some place called Khandahar, Jimmy explaining that the area around the airfield was full of land mines, so no wandering about. He handed me papers that explained who were in the local language, a type of Arabic script, plus letters from the UN. I tucked them away securely. Stepping down with our luggage I noticed very few lights on at the terminal building, a line of three UN jeeps waiting. And a real chill in the air. Our jeep was the last one, a local driver and a man with an AK47 strapped across his chest. Jimmy greeted them in some local dialect, sounding similar to the Arabic I was learning, and we set off.

‘Be there in time for food,’ Jimmy assured me. ‘Our meeting is all set-up with the Taliban leaders.’

I remembered the name, something to do with The Brotherhood, and I seriously hoped he knew what the hell he was doing. We trundled along poorly maintained roads with no illumination other than the vehicle’s headlights, my mind on Russian landmines, twenty minutes to a city where the houses and shops were lit, but not the streetlamps. Slowing and turning, we negotiated a set of high gates, guards shining torches in our faces and inspecting us at length, followed by a second set of

gates before we pulled up in front of a civic building that had seen better days, many armed men milling around, all wearing long grey robes and cloth hats. There was much flapping of hands and shouting at our arrival. We left the luggage in the jeep and stepped forwards, frisked at length. Finally we were ushered inside, walking along a marbled floor towards an inner room.

‘Do as I do,’ Jimmy said.

Jimmy stepped inside when beckoned, slipping off his shoes. I copied. He took off his jacket, retrieving a bundle of papers first, and hung it up. I did likewise. He let out a long sentence, but I did not try and copy, my sweaty socks now chilling my feet on the marble floor. We stood at the edge of an oblong room with a blue carpet laid out in the centre, two dozen men sat crossed legged around it, and were directed forwards, my cold feet padding across cool marble. Sitting down, we both struggled to get crossed legged, and the rest of this would be out of my hands.

Jimmy opened with a few words, much gesturing with his arms before switching to English, a local translating for the elder men at the top of the carpet. ‘I come from England with greetings. I know that your people are suffering from the Russian invasion, and I can help.’ He passed forwards a brochure for Johnson’s factory in Cardiff, illustrating the artificial limbs. It caused a stir.

A question was passed along, finally translated for us. ‘How many can you send to us?’

‘How many do you want?’ Jimmy asked.

That caused a bit of confusion and much debate. Finally the translator said, ‘There are thousands of people with one leg.’

‘Then I will send thousands.’

That was re-translated, and again caused a stir. As the debate echoed around the room, Jimmy passed up the other sheets, photographs of Africans undergoing mine training.

‘I can send experts to clear the mines, the latest equipment.’

His words were translated, the sheets examined as food was placed down on silver plates. The bread looked similar to that which our local curry house served, they even seemed to have a type of popadom, many small cups of white or green paste. Jimmy had not touched the food yet, so I dutifully waited. When the headman gestured towards the bread I copied Jimmy in tearing bits off, dunking it into the paste and trying it. The bread

was OK, the white paste a yoghurt, the green paste not unlike the mint at our local curry house. A brown paste was spicy, but nice enough, and I tucked in. Questions went back and forth, slowly translated, a hot broth brought out, everyone having a small china bowl of it. Again we dipped the bread in.

At one point the translator asked a question, 'Why do you wish to help us?'

Jimmy answered, 'A young man cares for his family. An old man has learned to care for his tribe, not just his family. A great man cares for those he has not yet met.'

It again caused a stir and much debate, some faces smiling back at us. Ten minutes later the translator asked me if I was married. I said, 'I am still practising,' getting a quick glance from Jimmy.

It was translated, causing much amusement. Even the old boy at the top found it funny. A translation came back down, 'You Westerners make a very simple thing, very complicated.' And I wondered if they would marry me off at gunpoint to some local woman behind a veil, a sturdy woman with black pointy teeth and facial tattoos.

At the end of the meal we were thanked, and thanked them for seeing us, Jimmy saying that the first batch of limbs would be sent inside a month, and ten mine clearance staff would arrive with equipment, co-ordinated through the UN. My feet were chilled, the circulation gone as I tried to get my shoes back on. We bowed and waved, backing out and to our waiting jeep, soon back at the airport, then to our Antonov. The Pakistani pilots greeted us, the engines starting immediately. We greeted UN staff, those sat closest, but did not recognise any of the faces, soon rattling down the runway and heading for Dohar.

'Went well enough,' Jimmy suggested.

'Quick visit.'

'The overland route would take a week. This way we're back before our presence here is noticed. Someone to see in Nairobi, then off to Zurich.'

We landed in Nairobi as the sun set the following day, still in the clothes we started out in, and headed straight for our usual hotel. We had no reservation, but they found us rooms straight away. After a quick, and much needed shower, we were changed,

reclaiming our usual table at the rooftop bar, earnestly stuffing our faces. An hour later I felt back to normal.

‘I don’t think my bum will be same again,’ I complained. ‘Fucking vibrations on that plane. Dunno how the pilots cope for long distance.’

‘Before jet engines they were all like that, or worse.’

‘So, we send limbs to Afghanistan, plus some mine boys from here...?’

‘Yep, for several years, building up a relationship. That way I can have some influence.’

I nodded. ‘Who we meeting here? Rudd?’

‘No, the boss of the two idiots, Potomo and company.’

I noticed Cosy sat in a corner. ‘That Cosy?’

‘Yes, ignore his presence, he’s riding shotgun.’

‘Oh. We expecting trouble?’

‘Never can tell.’

‘Who’s the contact?’

‘Tasker.’

‘Ah, you mentioned him before down here. Alleged boss of Judy - that wasn’t.’

Jimmy nodded. ‘He has a part to play. I have to make the CIA think I’m just a pawn, and with a poor moral compass.’

I took in the quiet bar, not seeing anyone watching us. ‘He supposed to turn up tonight?’

‘Next few days, now that we’re booked in. Kick back and wait.’

The next morning we made like tourists and sat on the sun loungers, swam up and down, sunbathed, had lunch, then beers at sunset; no sign of our contact, Cosy close by. The next day we repeated the exercise, no ladies of interest around the pool.

We were sat at a table eating, around 4pm, when a waiter called Jimmy to the phone. Returning, Jimmy said, ‘He’ll be here in five minutes. Just called to ask for a polite chat ... meaning he thinks we might shoot him.’

‘Guess he’s noticed his boys overdue by now,’ I commented.

‘Four naked men were seen in a jeep, closer to here than the airfield, so no one can accuse our people at the airfield.’

Our man walked out, glancing around before spotting Jimmy and walking over. Tasker was silver haired, in his fifties and

stocky. 'Pleasant spot,' he said as he sat. 'Your local, I understand.'

Jimmy beckoned a waiter and ordered our guest a beer, finally adjusting his chair so that he faced Tasker. 'So, you're missing some men, I hear.'

'A very dangerous game ... for those involved,' Tasker responded in a strong whisper.

'Very dangerous,' Jimmy repeated. 'For those involved with unauthorised ops.'

'You're screwing with Uncle Sam, buddy. A bad move ... for anyone.'

'No, not Uncle Sam, just you and a few others,' Jimmy countered. 'And one letter from Magestic to US Ambassador in London and you're in jail, *old buddy*.'

'I got the evidence about you, that's my bargaining chip. *That* ... gives me a very strong hand.'

'You're working under a great misconception, Mister Tasker. So I will spell it out for you. First, look over your left shoulder.'

Tasker did so. 'Is that ... Cosuir?'

'Yes, he's working for the British, a gun trained on you. Downstairs are two Mossad agents, two more gentlemen in a car outside.' Tasker looked less sure about himself as Jimmy continued, 'You see, the British and Israelis are well aware that I get Magestic letters, not least about the locations of buried treasure. And the Mossad agents caught in Baden Baden? They were sent there by me, the gold recovered to Israel. And you may have read about the salvage operation off the Isles of Scilly, a large haul of gold. That will go to the British Government. So you can see, my friend, that the various governments would not want anything to happen to their golden boy. If protecting me, and my tip-offs, means silencing you...' He gave a large shrug.

Tasker remained quiet for many seconds. After all, he had no way left to play his hand.

Jimmy said, 'Right now your life is not worth a phone call, nor nod of my head. I hope you realise that. But I have a use for you, it's not all doom and gloom.' He adjusted his chair. 'Listen carefully, because this is what you *are* ... going to do. First, you quit working for Uncle Sam. Second, you find a good underwater salvage team in Florida. Third, you contact me directly and I tell you where to find a wreck. You fetch it up, launder the money

and pay me my part. If that goes well, you get a second wreck ... and so on. And these wrecks will net tens of millions in gold.'

'You don't need me for a salvage operation like that,' Tasker pointed out, a questioning his tone.

'Ah, but I do. First, I need someone to ... shall we say, plug the leak. Those that know about me must be silenced.' Tasker glanced at me. 'Second, I need to motivate the man who will *plug the leak* with a lot of money. Third, many of the wrecks are in the territorial waters of other countries, so a certain amount of skulduggery is required.'

Tasker slowly sipped his beer.

I helpfully put in, 'Being tied naked to a tree, in lion country, is no fun at all.'

Tasker fixed on me for many seconds as he considered his options, eventually lowering his gaze and sipping his beer again. 'And the value of the first wreck?'

'Twenty million in gold,' Jimmy responded.

'Tailor knows about this, but he's also an ex-Navy SEAL diver, I'd keep him in the loop. That would just leave one other.'

'It's your call,' Jimmy casually stated. 'You have a week, then I tell Mossad you threatened me.'

I helpfully put in, 'There are lots of old wrecks in the Caribbean, and not just in the bars!'

Tasker smiled, sadistically, and stood. He turned and left.

Jimmy beckoned Cosy over. 'He'll co-operate with me from now on.'

'And your ... *dealings* with him?' Cosy pressed.

'He's found out about my blood, wants to cash in on it.'

'I'd be happy to take him out into the bush,' Cosy offered.

'No, there are uses I can make of him in the States. He's a dog, but sometimes you need to use a dog to help keep the nice people safe.'

'It was his men at the airfield, no base needed,' Cosy stated.

Jimmy nodded. 'They wanted a few million out of the orphanage fund. I refused.'

'They'll make problems here?' Cosy asked.

'No, his men met some lions,' Jimmy explained.

That concerned me; the men could have had families. And the bodyguards were just doing their jobs.

‘You’re an odd man, Jimmy,’ Cosy said. ‘Ruthless in the pursuit to help others.’

‘That’s true,’ Jimmy admitted. ‘And some day I hope your faith in me will be justified.’

‘My faith in you is stronger than anything I have felt before in my life,’ Cosy stated with some conviction. ‘And you look very well for someone who saved lives in the Second World War.’

‘You should not believe everything you hear, mostly you should believe your eyes,’ Jimmy responded. He handed Cosy a wad of dollars. ‘Buy some gifts for the children, some ropes to teach rope work – I know you liked to sail as a teenager.’

Cosy pocketed the money. ‘I enjoy teaching the children. Odd really, what journey we take to find where we belong. I guess all we need is the right ... person, to get us on the right track.’

‘Is Mary dying?’ I asked. Cosy nodded, seeming saddened. ‘And she won’t accept Jimmy’s help?’ He shook his head.

Jimmy told him, ‘The next time you see Doc Adam, ask him for the special serum, tell him I sent you.’

‘I’ll live a long time?’ Cosy asked.

‘A very long time, hopefully,’ Jimmy responded. ‘With Anna.’

With Cosy gone, Jimmy said, ‘Pack up, gone at dawn. What’s the date? Fifteenth?’

‘Yep.’

‘Cold and chilly Zurich.’

‘Listen ... those four men –’

‘Are four men, out of a planet that may die.’ He walked off.

Two days later we were kitted out in black tuxedos and bow ties, walking into a casino and attracting the ladies. We sat and had a drink at the bar, walked around placing modest bets, then spotted our mark, apparently a Colonel in the Pakistani Army – but now dressed like us. It looked like he was losing.

‘Colonel Hassim?’ Jimmy asked.

The man looked up. ‘Yes?’ he asked with a frown.

‘We met at an embassy function, I’m Jimmy Silo. Can I get you a drink, I have a business proposal for you.’

Hassim eyed us suspiciously. ‘Come,’ he said, gesturing towards the bar. We started walking. ‘So, are you MI6, CIA or Mossad businessmen.’

‘Does it matter?’ Jimmy asked as we reached the bar. Drinks were ordered and we sat at a table.

‘Why don’t you tell me what you are really after?’ Hassim nudged.

‘Well, let’s do this in reverse order, shall we,’ Jimmy began. ‘First, I’d put half a million dollars a year into any Swiss bank you nominate.’

Hassim’s eyes widened. ‘Very generous. And what would I do to earn this generous sum?’

‘You would try and stop Arab gunmen from crossing into Afghanistan, you would pick up Arab gunmen in Pakistan and send them on their way, and you would satisfy those that require satisfying by the odd shootout with Arab gunmen making it into the newspapers.’

Hassim was puzzled. ‘That’s is part of my job anyway?’

‘Then you’ll be getting extra income ... for taking a keen interest in your job.’

‘You’ll be on double time,’ I helpfully put in.

Hassim was still puzzled. ‘That’s it?’

‘Yes, that’s it. But I would like a good working relationship with you, the odd bit of intel.’

‘Intel?’

‘Again, Arab fighters heading towards Afghanistan,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘That’s all.’ He took out a wad of dollars and placed it under a napkin. ‘Twenty thousand dollars to play on the tables.’

Hassim took the money, checking no one was looking. ‘And we would communicate ... how?’

Jimmy handed over a sheet with fax numbers here in Switzerland that bounced around to ours in the UK, set-up by us yesterday. ‘Send a cryptic message to those fax numbers, ask for a meet here – or somewhere else if you like.’

‘Does the West have intentions on Afghanistan?’ Hassim probed.

‘No idea, I’m just a pawn in the game. But I would guess not, it’s a barren rock, no resources.’ We stood. ‘Been a pleasure.’ Hassim followed us up, Jimmy taking out a cheque. ‘Oh, nearly forgot. Your first half million.’

With Hassim stood staring at the Swiss banker’s draft, we headed straight back to our hotel and packed, a late flight to London – just an hour, Big Paul and Karl picking us up. In the

rain we drove to the old Apartment, parking in the basement and soon getting the kettle on as Big Paul and Karl hunted for bugs. They stopped for tea and a chat with us, before a more thorough search. We were clean. With no one particularly tired we headed to the Chinese, treated like royalty as normal, a few Pineapple staff in the top room.

The next day I called Jack early, getting him and Sykes around at lunchtime.

‘How was Kenya?’ Sykes asked as he sat, tea being arranged.

‘Hot and dusty,’ I responded. ‘But we got in a trip to Zurich and Afghanistan.’

‘Afghanistan?’ Sykes repeated, shocked. ‘What the heck for?’

I explained, ‘We own most of a factory in Cardiff that makes artificial limbs, we’ll be shipping them out there, fucking shed loads of people standing on land mines. Be sending African mine clearance teams as well.’

‘Russians left a mess,’ Sykes grumbled.

‘More than a million mines,’ Jimmy commented. ‘One in five families has a amputee.’

‘Nasty business,’ Sykes condemned. ‘You said Zurich as well?’

‘Bribed a Pakistani officer,’ I explained. ‘Intel’ on Arab movements into Afghanistan.’

‘Ah, yes, I remember,’ Sykes said. ‘Years to come it’s a hot spot, you did say.’

Jimmy told him, ‘Any intel’ we get - you get.’

‘Good of you,’ Sykes acknowledged.

‘Right, problems,’ Jimmy began.

‘Smoat is in jail,’ Jack put in. ‘Facing a hefty sentence.’

‘Which should be a firm deterrent to others,’ Sykes commented.

‘He told Tasker, CIA, whose boys I have now bribed into silence – I think.’

‘You think?’ Sykes asked.

‘I’ve offered him some wrecks in the Caribbean,’ Jimmy explained. ‘If he does co-operate, which I think we will, then my aim is to make the CIA think I’m financially motivated. That way they leave me alone. Can you, Mister Sykes, let me know if Tasker quits the CIA.’

‘I’ll take an interest in him,’ Sykes threatened. ‘Oh, heard a rumour that Cosuir is in Kenya?’

‘Bribed ... and on the team,’ I responded. ‘Good man, hard worker. We got him helping out at the airfield.’

‘There may be ... questions?’ Sykes posed.

‘He’s working for a registered charity,’ Jimmy said, his hands wide.

‘Why hire him in the first place?’ Sykes puzzled.

‘Double-back,’ Jimmy stated.

‘He’s watching whoever is watching you over there,’ Sykes realised.

‘He spotted Tasker’s men,’ I helpfully lied.

‘I never knew Kenya had quiet so much intrigue,’ Sykes joked.

‘What happened at the Scilly Isle wreck?’ I asked.

Sykes explained, ‘Good haul, around twenty-four million in gold, but a lot of the items are worth a heck of a lot more as jewellery. They’ll be an auction for them.’

Jack put in, ‘Her Majesty’s Government made a charitable donation of just about seven million to the mine clearance charity.’

‘Nice of them,’ I quipped.

Jack continued, ‘Got the gold out of that sub in Norway as well, be ashore today or tomorrow.’

‘What’s down in the Guernsey wreck?’ Sykes asked.

‘Three times as much gold as your other wreck,’ Jimmy explained. ‘French warship, with trunks of gold coins to pay their troops; Napoleonic.’

‘Ah, should be interesting,’ Sykes enthused. ‘Is all your money to go to mine clearance?’ Jimmy explained about Rescue Force and Swindon, Sykes saying, ‘Hell, we can organise a Government grant for the building work there.’

‘It all helps,’ Jimmy responded. ‘But hang onto most of it till I tell you what we want to spend it on.’

We agreed to show Sykes and Jack around Swindon in a week’s time. Jimmy answered a quick list of questions about the Balkans conflict, our visitors heading off. Little more than ten minutes later Dave Gardener appeared, more tea organised.

Laying out a map of Malta he said, ‘Crusaders and The Order of St. John.’

‘Nope,’ Jimmy corrected him. ‘British Navy, Second World War, gold heading to the Far East.’

‘A bit cheeky,’ David acknowledged, a concerned glance my way.

‘And I need the divers to dump sand back inside afterwards, it’ll be discovered in years to come,’ Jimmy warned. He used a ruler to fix the position. ‘It’s in forty-five metres of water, in a depression, on its side. There’s a hole where it was torpedoed, go in and left, short distance to the gold.’

‘How much?’ David asked.

‘Close to sixty million at today’s prices,’ Jimmy answered.

‘When you off to Oz?’ I puzzled.

David straightened. ‘We’re off in two weeks time, Sarah and family meeting us at the airport. And ... er ... thanks once again for all you did.’

‘Got a favour,’ Jimmy asked. ‘Ask your employers to send some double agents, Arab gunmen, to Afghanistan. There are some fundamentalist schools popping up, some training camps. I want on-going passive missions, intel’ back out every six months.’

‘Do you wish to brief the relevant people?’

‘No, that brief will do. Just smoke the place out, take no action. Anything further from Khartoum?’

‘No problems that I’m aware of, but the wounded disappeared from the hospital. Was that you?’

Jimmy was immediately concerned. ‘No. Make it a priority to dig into that, it could be a serious problem for the future. And the names we were interested in, keep an eye out for them in Afghanistan.’

With David gone I asked, ‘Problem with the targets in Khartoum?’

‘I expected the main man to survive, but be badly hurt, blinded. It’s ... variable. If he has one good eye it could cost a lot of people their lives.’

‘Bin Laden?’

Jimmy nodded. ‘At least he’s mad at the Saudis. OK, let’s head back, pop into Mapley.’

As we approached Mapley we had to negotiate road works, road widening at our behest, the leisure centre finally starting to take

shape. The staff on the gate greeted us, informing us who was in attendance. We pulled up next to the AMO building, noticing two jeeps covered in mud passing us.

‘Mackey Tailor’s jeep training,’ I noted.

We headed for the second building, finding a first-aid class in progress, twelve warm bodies. Everyone recognised us and stopped immediately; this was, after all, our first official visit. Much handshaking was followed by chatting, tea in plastic cups from a machine. Mackey himself wandered in with three other men, many greetings exchanged.

Jimmy took in all the faces then stood at the front with his plastic cup. ‘Gentlemen.’ They settled. ‘There is a facility in Kenya similar to this, and it strikes me that some of you may wish to visit. The training out there would be jeep driving, mine clearance – which is not relevant for Ben Nevis, first aid, flying. It may offer some fresh experience for some of you, so if there are four who can get two weeks off work, let me know and we’ll send you out there. In the meantime, I’m pleased to see this place finally being used; it’s a good sign for the future. Anyone got any questions?’

I man raised his arm. ‘When will the cave be ready?’

‘Soon, couple of weeks at most.’

‘And the water feature?’

‘A bit longer, needs a ruddy great pump.’

‘Can we canoe in it?’ a man asked, getting a laugh.

‘When it’s not in use, yes.’

‘What’s the big hole for?’

‘Scuba diving; there’ll be a school here. But that will take two more months or so. Have you been up in the Tucano?’

‘What’s that?’ they asked.

‘Ask at the hangar for Richey, say I sent you, thirty minute flights – but not directly after lunch.’

‘It’s an aerobatic plane,’ I told them. ‘Anyone want a go in the Huey?’

They were all keen. ‘First six men,’ I said, and led them out.

Jimmy closed in on Mackey. ‘Anything you need?’

‘Was thinking about moving down here, do the classes myself.’

‘How would your dear lady wife view that?’

‘She’s got relatives not far, so if it’s regular work...’

‘You’d need to recruit someone to do the running around,’ Jimmy posed.

‘Aye, well Tim’s interested in a job doing that – if you like him for it.’

‘You’d sell your house?’

‘Aye, but that may take a while.’

‘No it won’t, I’ll buy it when you’re ready, sell it when I can. You can buy down here when you’re ready, rent to start with, I’ll find a nice place local and pay your rent.’

‘That’s very good of you, Jimmy.’

‘I want to see some work out of you,’ Jimmy joked. ‘Tell Tim he’s hired.’

I threw the Huey around the grey sky, giving the men in the back something to think about, Big Paul in left seat. His own training was coming along, some of the bookwork a bit of a struggle, but I was helping. With an oil warning light flashing we landed, a note in the logbook and something for the mechanics to look at.

‘Broke it, he did,’ Big Paul told Jimmy as we drove back.

I grabbed a tea and slouched into the sofa, glad to be back. Afghanistan, the four men killed – it was a bit of a shock. Sometimes I lost track of what this was all about, the fight ahead, and enjoyed the good life a bit too much. But the good life was all for show, a means to an ends, part of a great master plan carefully unfolding before my eyes. And the final goal was chilling to think about. I was getting used to things, but also getting comfortable in the lifestyle when I forgot about the end goal.

Jimmy picked up a wad of faxes as thick as a phone directory and handed them to me.

‘Oh, thanks a lot,’ I said. ‘We need a fucking secretary.’

‘Funny you should say that.’

I eased up, a curious frown taking hold. ‘Yeah?’

The next day Sharon turned up. Thirty-five, average build, pleasant to look at, married with two kids and living up the road, sister to the owner of our favourite watering hole down the road. She had a degree in English, had given up work eight years ago to have kids, and had been working part-time at an insurance

brokers. From now on she would work nine to four at the house, five days a week. And the first briefing was interesting.

I explained the stock market trading and it blew her mind, not least the sums involved. Over coffee Karl annoyed me by saying who he was, and that took a lot of explaining. Big Paul was introduced as a driver, that was straightforward enough, and then I tried to explain the charity work and all the money we gave over to it, Sharon amazed. We slowly went through the hotels in Kenya, the safari lodge and the airfield. The subject matter was not difficult, the reasons as to why not so easy to explain. By the end of the first day she was just about briefed on most of our operations, she knew where the files were and which fax numbers we used – and how we took our tea.

Jimmy took over on the second day, patiently going back through everything we were involved with for our new employee, whilst I tried to clear some of the backlog. The nightclub was my assigned project, so I now had to deal with any problems, in particular ongoing minor building work. Sharon's first job was to receive and check faxes, putting them in the correct piles, and to type the spending figures into spreadsheets split by project, spreadsheets that I had set-up and that were typically accessed by the accountants. They would send a junior member down to keep them up to date and to retrieve the figures. That job was now Sharon's, the accountants to check the figures sent to them. By the end of the second day she knew all she needed to know, but skilful implementation and time saving would take much longer. She began answering the phone on the third day, a chore that we shared and, when we were out, was shouldered by Cookie, Sandra or Ricky – Big Paul forbidden to answer it.

By the end of the week we were just about squared away, a mountain of papers filed, faxes responded to, calls and messages attended to. The spreadsheets were collated and the overall figures studied, blowing Sharon's mind again; she kept thinking she had put the decimal point in the wrong place. My area, the club, was doing very well. At this rate the club would not only have paid back the start-up costs, but also the capital spent on the buildings in less than five years; we were packed out three nights a week, special functions on a Wednesday bringing in even more revenue. A monthly poker tournament was well attended.

Jimmy arranged computer training for Sharon, two hours a day every day; Word, Supercalc, Foxpro. On the first Monday of proper work for her, two weeks into the job, she suggested that we needed more computers. Jimmy dialled a number and a man called Gareth drove up that afternoon, the man apparently known to Jimmy, and we settled around the coffee table. Gareth was a tad shorter than me, thirty-six, fit looking but with a pockmarked face, sat now in a suit that did not seem natural to him.

Jimmy began, 'You were recommended to us by a guy in the pub, can't remember his bleeding name for the moment. Anyway, we want a few new computers, printers – good spec, 386s.'

'How many?' Gareth asked.

'Two in the office, one in my bedroom, one in Paul's, one for Big Paul and ... may as well get one for Cookie to play with. That's six. We'll need two half decent laser printers in the office, plus two deskjets.'

'That's a lot of money,' Gareth cautioned. 'I'll price them up. Are you looking for finance?'

'No, cash,' Jimmy said. He produced a thick wad of fifties. 'There's five grand towards the spend, see what deal you can get us.'

Gareth was stunned, accepting the wad. 'You ... er ... want a receipt?'

'No, I trust you. And we'll need you once a week to maintain the computers, here and our other operations. Maybe send you out to Kenya to sort out our operations out there, they're a bit backward.'

'Kenya? Wow.'

Jimmy faced me. 'Remind me to ask Rudd about computers out there.'

With that Gareth headed off to either buy us some computers, or skip with the cash. He returned two day's later, two computers boxed up in the back of his car, and set them up in the office, the software packages and Windows 3.1 installed. The additional computers and printers turned up bit by bit, and soon I had a computer in my room with a built in fax card, some of the sensitive work handled from there. I deliberately spent time with Gareth, finding him easy going and not ruffled by anything, the three of us often sitting around the coffee table and chatting over

tea. Even though we did not need them, we bought more computers off Gareth and got him to drive them up to Pineapple. Even the club got several computers, Gareth doing very well out of it. He played football in a local Sunday league and our lads - Big Paul, Cookie, Ricky and Karl - often joined in. They typically returned with mud in their hair and blood on their lips and knuckles, Jimmy shaking his head.

Gareth, and his entire family, headed off to Kenya for two weeks, kindly paid for by us, and we set about organising the grand opening of the leisure centre and other facilities at Mapley. The local council leaders would cut the tape, the local Member of Parliament invited along with the local press. With everything set, we drove down early on a sunny Saturday morning.

Mackey Tailor's team and the AMO staff were dressed smart, and even the private flyers were attending. A Swindon recruitment agency had hired the gym's manager and his assistant, then they themselves interviewed and hired the staff in turn, all youngsters that had been issued with red t-shirts and shorts or tracksuits, Mapley Leisure Centre embossed on the clothing. We conducted our own tour an hour before the visiting dignitaries were due to turn up.

The gym's reception occupied a corner close to the main road, changing rooms for the pool immediately behind it; each patron would either be a member or pay for a day ticket, passing through turn-styles to a small café on the left and changing rooms on the right. We walked through the empty men's locker room, inspecting the finishing and the lockers, then through the shower area to the poolside. The pool was a rich blue, dead calm at the moment, a thirty-metre oblong with two lanes sectioned off. The signs indicated 1.5m at the shallow end, but warned of 4m at the far end, three diving boards in a line; 1m, 2m and 3m.

'Four metres is plenty for basic scuba training and rescue work,' Jimmy indicated. 'They'll have classes in the evenings, weekends as well.'

I said, 'Local schools want to use the pool for competitions.'

'Thirty metres, that's why,' Big Paul put in.

We followed a solid wall on the airfield side, past the diving boards, and peered through windows facing the car park, a row of bushes immediately outside the glass. At the top of the stairs we found a small rest area with comfortable chairs, a number of

small rooms set-up for chiropractors and beauticians, their first three months rent free. Double swing-doors opened to the gym floor, a vast expanse. At the front ran three rows of treadmills, behind them three rows of cross-trainers, a line of rowing machines, stair-climbers, then a resistance machine section, off to the left a free-weights area. The kit that we had bought was the very latest, imported from The States, lots of confusing multi-coloured buttons and dials. The gym's lateral walls were mostly glass, viewing the car park on the left and the airfield on the right.

'Capacity for two hundred in here,' Jimmy stated.

'Comfortably,' Big Paul said, trying some of the equipment.

Through the glass we could see people gathering below and wandered down, greeting those we knew. At least the weather was holding. We held interviews with the local press before the dignitaries pulled up in their odd, funeral-style black cars, welcoming them standing alongside our centre manager. The Town Mayor cut the tape, a sedate and polite cheer from the locals, and we showed the bigwigs around the gym as the first members and day users were allowed in, kids soon jumping into the pool off the boards.

Following the bigwigs onto the airfield, we stopped at the climbing wall, would-be rescuers under instruction from some of Mackey's group. The elderly dignitaries strained their necks to peer upward, none accepting an offer to try it themselves. Mounting up for a total journey distance of two hundred yards, we stopped at the AMO building and showed off Frankenstein's monster. It looked more alive than some of the stiff attendants. Certainly had a better pulse.

All in all the day went well, I felt, the leisure centre well advertised. I spent time with the manager, making sure he knew what figures to send me; in addition to the nightclub, this was now my project to oversee. That first day a kid cut his toe, a woman slapped another woman she thought might be having an affair with her husband, and someone strained their back – removed by ambulance. It was a good grounding in the running of a gym, for all of us involved.

David Gardener turned up the next day, a pleasant day out of London, and revealed that there was close to sixteen million

pounds waiting for us. All things considered, we had no idea what to spend it on; everything was over-funded as it was. Jimmy had taken the first Israeli bank loan, twenty million, and bought shares at the bottom of the market, now sitting on double that amount. And Pineapple was making an obscene amount of money.

‘This has happened,’ Jimmy explained, ‘because we’re ahead of schedule on some things. I’ll bring forwards a few plans and see if we can’t get back in synch.’

After a leisurely lunch with David we got hold of Rudd, having tried his home, then the golf complex and finally reaching him at the original beach hotel, River View.

On speakerphone, sat around the coffee table, Jimmy said, ‘Are we keeping you busy?’

‘Very busy. Oh, we are half way through the delivery of the barbed wire. They are making it specially, there was not enough unless we exported it at thirty percent over. This way we get it at twenty percent under.’

‘You’re a good man,’ I loudly offered.

‘Listen,’ Jimmy began. ‘Got a pen and paper?’

‘Yes, go ahead.’

‘Ask the Kenyan Defence Minister if he can arrange for more land next to the airfield.’

‘That land is shit, it’s desert – no one wants it.’

‘Ask him for five hundred yards south and the same east, a square. As soon as they say yes, fence it off and put Rescue force inside. I want a hotel, a barrack room, a command centre – offices, and a motor pool.’

‘How big the hotel?’

‘Same size as the UN hotel.’

‘And the barrack room?’

‘Room for one hundred people,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Office block should have twenty offices in it.’

‘OK. I found a man to co-ordinate refugees, hired him two week’s ago. He’s a Somali, living in Kenya, speaks good English. He did some UN work, he knows the job.’

‘Where’s he living?’

‘With Doc Adam, they are building extra rooms on the clinic, rooms for staff to live,’ Rudd explained.

‘OK, good,’ Jimmy approved. ‘What about the camps?’

‘We had no permission and the Government threatened to pull them down, so I bought the regional governor a new car. He can see that it’s better to have them in a camp than along the road.’

‘And now he can drive there and inspect it,’ I said.

‘What about the border camp?’ Jimmy pressed.

‘They liked that better, no problem there. The men I hired have drilled many wells, enough water. Small villages have grown up around the wells. I bought many old UN tents –’

‘Did you ... *buy* them?’ I asked.

‘Yes, of course. Some were old and being thrown away, so I got them. That first night there were only camels and a water pump, no people, one family the next day, now a few hundred. Bob Davies sends a food truck along, one a day, and there is a permanent jeep of Rifles there.’

‘OK, good,’ Jimmy approved. ‘Fence it off. Right, next, recruit a senior co-ordinator for Mac, another senior man for Rescue Force, both with African experience, ideally UN. They’ll do the paper work up there and be your new point of contact. Next, ask the Defence Minister if he wants some more money spent on the Rifles: recruits, jeeps. And ask him if he will accept former British Army training staff from the UK. While you’re at it, keep a look out for any good Land Rovers, put them in storage at the airfield for later.’

‘How many?’ Rudd queried.

‘Fifty or more. How many Rifles are there?’

‘Twenty in group Alpha, as Mac calls them, thirty-five in group Bravo, and now another twenty-five recruits.’

‘I know we have permission for a hundred, stretch that towards two hundred quickly. Tell the good Defence Minister that once they have enough well-trained men I’ll give them some helicopters.’

‘He’s already offered to send fifty regular Army up to the airfield -’

‘If we pay for them,’ I finished off.

‘Yah, of course.’

‘Accept his offer when we have the space for them. Get them one jeep between five men and put them through mine-clearance training, first aid, and jeep driving if they need it. And get new rifles for them. Oh, find out if the Kenyan Air Force want to put a small flight of aircraft at the airfield.’

‘You’re offering them sweets,’ Rudd suggested.

‘See what they say. How’s the golf complex?’

‘It runs smoothly, makes a good profit. The zoo is finished, looks OK, but does not make much money.’

‘That’s OK. What about the beach hotels?’

‘Both full all the time, many British singers there. Sometimes people are very excited by them – and I have no idea who they are.’

I laughed. ‘You need to get out more often!’

‘Rudd, find a nice office in Nairobi, room for maybe ten people, a desk for you and one for Cosy, two secretaries.’

‘Sounds good, my house is full of papers.’

‘And get yourself a mobile phone and a satellite phone, be easier to reach you,’ Jimmy ordered.

I said, ‘Get yourself a mobile phone, and a driver, then you can talk with people when driving.’

‘If you insist.’ We laughed at that.

‘All OK at the safari park?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Yah, fully booked, and the price has gone up. There are three new young lion cubs in the lodge; everyone feeds them in turn. Oh, they had a visit from a white Kenyan, man who owns a farm north of it –’

‘Schilling?’

‘Yes, you know him?’

‘Is he interested in selling his farm?’

‘Yes, I think so.’

‘Buy it, then convert his farm houses to quality hotel rooms. Keep all the staff on, get the safari manager on it. After we have it, people can spend a few days at each place. He has a good lake on his land.’

‘How much do I offer?’

‘Ten percent less than he is asking for,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Negotiate. And ask him to come down to you in Nairobi.’

‘How big is it?’ I asked Rudd.

‘Half as big as your land now. It has a tarmac runway, I think. And the medics from Mawlini, they are on your land, giving medical help to the villagers.’

‘Good, that’s what we wanted,’ Jimmy approved. ‘Oh, while I think of it, Schilling has family near Mombassa, some farmland that I would like to get hold off. Smoke them out.’

‘I know these people, very arrogant colonialists,’ Rudd explained. ‘They own half of Kenya.’

‘Then let’s see if we can’t buy some of it at a good price,’ Jimmy responded. ‘In particular where they have greenhouses.’

‘I know it, miles of it along the roadside. What budget are you thinking of?’

‘Five million.’

‘I’ll need two secretaries!’

‘We don’t mind that, Rudd,’ I put in.

Sharon wandered in with an urgent fax, so we said goodbye to the overworked Rudd. Jimmy read the fax. ‘Did you know these men?’ she asked.

‘Only by name,’ Jimmy responded, glancing at me from under his eyebrows. ‘OK, thank you.’

Sharon withdrew.

‘What is it?’ I quietly asked.

‘A fax from Cosy. Kenyan TV reports two Americans killed in a car crash, Tasker and his mate.’

‘Christ, you think ... Cosy?’

‘No, I doubt it. No, this is ... something unexpected.’

‘Might just have been a car crash, you know how they drive down there.’

‘That would be unfortunate, because it comes soon after the disappearance of the other four. Now there’ll be a big investigation.’

Sharon came back in. ‘A Mister Sykes for you.’

Jimmy lifted the phone. ‘Mister Sykes.’

‘New secretary?’

‘Yes, and ... out the loop,’ Jimmy delicately indicated.

‘Understood. Seen the news from Africa?’

‘Yes, just got a fax and ... disturbed at the timing.’

‘Any clues?’ Sykes nudged.

‘Right now, wish I did. This was ... unexpected.’

‘People acting on their own?’

‘No, I don’t believe so. For now, an accident, and they do happen without foresight.’

‘Does this leave you exposed?’

‘Could do, the next few days will tell. Any discreet enquiries by your good self would help.’

‘Understood. I’ll get back to you.’

Jimmy placed the phone down, and stared at it.

‘Sykes knows about Tasker?’ I nudged.

Jimmy nodded, still focused on the phone. He dialled the safari lodge, confirming the location of Skids and company; with guests. ‘It could be Tasker’s boss. If so, he’ll come and see us.’ He brightened, lifting his head. ‘Ah, well. Onwards.’

It’s a big pump

We stood at Mapley with the builders and engineers, the square watercourse now full of water, the pump ready to be tested.

‘Been trying to figure out what the heck this is for,’ the head builder said. ‘I reckon canoeing.’

Over his shoulder I saw Mackey and four men advancing towards us with ropes, and dressed like they were off canoeing; red lifejackets and helmets, ropes slung over shoulders.

The builder spotted them. ‘Where’re your canoes?’

‘OK, switch on,’ Jimmy ordered, an engineer stepping into a green hut and turning the pumps on.

Water gushed from the pumps and towards the square, many minutes taken for the water to begin circulating.

Jimmy pointed at the first man. ‘Jump in.’

The man knelt down and tested the water flow with a hand, hesitated, then jumped in, soon swept along at jogging pace. At the roofed over section he was sucked under, spat out five yards further on, a yelp issued. ‘Fucking hell!’ came from the far side as he came back around, struggling to get out. ‘I can’t get out!’

‘That the whole point,’ Jimmy said with a smile. ‘Rescuers?’

Mackey’s men threw a rope, which the swimmer missed, getting sucked under a second time. Third time they caught him, struggling to drag him out.

Dripping wet, he approached as. ‘Fucking hell that’s deadly.’

‘And for specialist use only,’ Jimmy cautioned. ‘So, realistic... is it?’

‘Fucking hell, aye,’ the wet man responded. ‘Bloody difficult to get out. And that tunnel? Scary as shit – you just get sucked under and spun around.’

Jimmy faced the engineer. ‘Quarter speed, please.’

The pumps eased down, but the water had its own momentum and took a few minutes to becalm. The same man jumped in beyond the tunnel and was rescued first time. Satisfied, we took Mackey to the cave. The local police divers stood waiting, all kitted out, behind them three cave rescue groups waited. A white board gave an indication of the layout of the cave, two emergency exits marked.

Jimmy took charge. 'OK, gentlemen. What we have here ... is a training aid, not a fun day out. The first time through you might find interesting, then you'll know the course and get bored. The aim of this cave complex ... is training, especially beginners. That's not to say it's easy, it isn't.

'At the moment there are a few puddles inside, but we can flood the cave to around three quarters of its height before water hits the drains. Now, to best illustrate how this facility should be used we have two volunteers.' The men stepped forwards. 'They will be inside, somewhere, one with a broken leg, his mate not wanting to leave him. You nice gentlemen have been notified that they are hurt and stuck, the water level not known.' He gestured the two men into the entrance. Down they went, helmet lights switched on. Jimmy checked his watch. 'Team leader, get your men assembled and briefed, you have six minutes to kick off.'

The senior police officer took charge of the white board, teams made up and equipment checked, the cave rescuers part of the search team. Two collapsible silver stretchers were made ready, first aid kits, lights, air tanks and scuba gear.

When they were ready, Jimmy stepped forwards. 'OK, gentlemen, let's not make victims of rescuers. And don't forget, some sections are tight, some are flooded, and you'll need rope in there.'

The first man roped himself to the second, placed a scuba mask around his neck and checked his air. He gave a 'thumbs up' as he disappeared, the second man entering after the rope was tugged, a third making ready at the hole and reeling out further rope. Fifteen minutes passed, the second man surfacing, damp and dirty.

'Two stuck inside, verbal communication, no eyes on, one broken leg, full team extrication by stretcher.' He ducked back in.

Two additional men stepped forwards, a plastic leg caste checked, air tanks hissing as they were checked. In they went. A full forty-five minutes passed before a grubby individual surfaced.

‘Ambulance ready?’

‘Ambulance standing by,’ the team leader responded. ‘Condition of victims?’

‘Two adult males, hypothermic, one broken leg,’ was reported, notes taken.

We closed in as a third man exited the tunnel, wet and muddy, a stretchered man painstakingly removed. Finally the second victim crawled out, followed by the final rescuer, the victim released from the stretcher.

‘OK,’ Jimmy called. ‘Victims, how did the rescuers do?’

‘They reassured us verbally, that was OK, one stayed behind, checked our vitals. The stretcher was handled OK, a bit difficult up and over.’

‘A bit difficult,’ a rescuer scoffed. ‘That section is a bitch. I’ve been doing this twenty years, and I struggled.’ The other rescuers agreed.

‘Good,’ Jimmy loudly enthused. ‘It’s there to make you think. So, how would a novice cope?’

‘No chance,’ came several opinions.

‘Until they’ve had the right training,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘There’s a way around that doesn’t involve the up and over, that’s where you start the beginners. How do you rate it as training aid?’

‘Excellent,’ was the consensus.

‘It would be good for fitness training as well,’ the senior rescuer suggested. ‘I’m fucking knackered.’

‘OK, police divers,’ Jimmy called. They stepped forwards. ‘We’ve stuck a dummy in there. Go rescue.’ He turned a large tap with a squeak, cold water gushing in, up to half the cave height. When ready they gave the “OK” dive sign and descended into the black water, torches held ahead of themselves.

Twenty minutes later, and the heavy plastic dummy was retrieved. The diver stood in the hole, his legs submerged, and took off his mask. ‘That mid section is a bitch. You have to squeeze left, then right, then under, then finally you got to ease your tank off and push it through. Nightmare.’

The senior men thanked us, hands shaken, and we left the damp muddy hole for grown men to play in. For five minutes we observed the climbing wall from the Range Rover before setting off.

Incident at Baardheere

Many months had passed since Tasker's car crash and nothing had happened. So far, all evidence pointed towards a simple crash. We flew back down, this time with Big Paul in tow, Karl and Rickey house-sitting. At our Nairobi hotel we spent a day lounging around, Jimmy waiting for a contact, Big Paul scanning the lobby. No one came to call.

Feeling a little apprehensive, even Jimmy tense, we drove down to the golf complex and spent a few hours with the manager; all was in order and ticking along nicely. The other hotels were briefly inspected, nothing much requiring our attention, so we went diving, feeding the persistent turtle. That evening we sat around drinking, still no approaches made, but I slept with a chair wedged under my door handle. The following morning Tubby picked us in the Dash-7 at Mombassa airfield, the aircraft a Canadian built, rugged four-engine turbo-prop with room for fifty passengers at maximum. This one had been fitted out for thirty seats and some kit space at the rear, the flight up to Mawlini just an hour and a half and comfortable. I spent half that time right seat, Tubby keen to teach me the eccentricities of the Dash-7, not least that it required a crew of two, a requirement that was ignored. We came in to land behind a UN plane, swirls of dust spreading outwards towards the buildings.

Rudd and Cosy met us in a jeep, driving us to the UN hotel, and from the roof they pointed out the new Rescue Force compound; five hundred yards square of sand and scrub fenced off and just the one lonely hut sat in it, picked up by crane and dropped over the fence, it's old foundations still visible.

'Building work will start soon,' Rudd assured us. 'We've given priority to the Rifles for now.'

‘That’s OK,’ Jimmy told him. We stepped across the café and peered out the other side, numerous half-built buildings for the Rifles just visible across the shimmering heat of the runway.

Rudd explained, ‘They sent fifty regular soldiers up and we have them in tents at the moment. They are nearly all on border patrol, or helping to police the camps. Mac has kitted them out.’

‘So they get training?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Yes, day or two a week,’ Rudd explained. ‘The two new British officers are busy.’

‘How are they working out?’ I asked, having met both of them at Swindon.

‘Mac says they are Ruperts, whatever that means.’

We laughed. Big Paul explained, ‘A Rupert is an officer, public school twats.’

‘Ah, I see,’ Rudd said. He didn’t.

Cosy put in, ‘I got a batch of ten Land Rovers off a safari park, going cheap. They were already green, so we gave them to the Rifles.’

I pointed to a new steel-fabricated hangar. ‘What’s that?’

‘Kenyan Air Force,’ Cosy answered. ‘Two small planes for border patrol and training. I think they are called *Tucano*.’

‘That’s lucky,’ I quipped. ‘I’m familiar with them. We got one in Swindon.’

‘Good plane,’ Big Paul approved, having notched up twenty hours in them.

‘We pay their fuel and costs,’ Rudd explained. ‘Not the salaries yet.’

‘How many soldiers in total now?’ Jimmy asked.

Rudd responded, ‘Total ninety-four Rifles, fifty regulars. But thirty of those soldiers are seventeen year old recruits.’

‘I want the regulars integrated,’ Jimmy told Rudd. ‘Ask the nice Defence Minister.’

Our Huey came in to land, three men and one woman clambering down, all in white uniforms, and all seemingly knackered from their trip.

‘That’s Rescue Force,’ Cosy said. ‘They’ve done a few trips by Huey: they fly out, stay the night, do a surgery, fly back. They’ve done one by Cessna and one by Dash-7.’

‘Coming along then,’ I approved.

Mac stepped out with the two new co-ordinators, both men in their late forties and now heavily tanned, white crows-feet around their eyes. We shook their hands for the first time, although we had spoken to them on the phone many times, exchanging many faxes with De Silva and Coup. Sitting, we ordered cold beers all around, two tables pulled together, Fanta shades adjusted.

‘Since this is our first time face to face, welcome to the team,’ Jimmy offered the newcomers. They thanked him. ‘Has Mac’s paperwork improved?’

‘Lots,’ Mac quipped, everyone laughing at him.

‘You got some boys in Afghanistan?’ I asked Mac.

‘Ten of them to start with, former trainees,’ Mac explained. ‘They go in under the UN remit, but we pay their way and kit ‘em out.’

‘It’s not a pleasant spot,’ Jimmy cautioned. ‘If they’re not careful we’ll lose some.’

Mac considered that for a moment. ‘Lost six old trainees in Mozambique. That place is no picnic either.’

‘Can procedures be tightened?’ I asked.

‘Out of our hands,’ Mac explained, sitting back. ‘We train them, they go off to other groups.’

‘Perhaps we should have our own,’ I suggested, a glance at Jimmy.

‘We’d be sending people off to die,’ Jimmy cautioned.

‘They’d have a better chance,’ Mac suggested.

‘Mac, draw up some plans, I’ll review it,’ Jimmy offered. ‘Anything else you need?’

‘No, working smoother now with Long John Silver sharpening the pencils,’ Mac joked.

‘And Rescue Force?’ Jimmy nudged.

Coup answered, ‘All seems to be progressing rapidly. We found another four suitable people, two doctors and two nurses.’

‘What the nurses built like?’ I asked.

Coup smiled. ‘Slimmer than ... the normal requirement, no Russian shot-putters. Some locals tried to rob our Hildy, she put them in hospital.’ The assembled men giggled like teenagers.

‘I’ll want self-defence on the training schedule in the future,’ Jimmy told Coup with a smile. ‘How’s their ordnance handling?’

‘Getting there slowly,’ Mac admitted.

‘Coups, *ground them*, get everyone shit-hot on ordnance,’ Jimmy ordered. ‘At the moment they’re not tripping over mines, they soon will be.’

‘Did you get the dummy?’ I asked Coup.

‘Yes,’ Coup enthused. ‘Marvellous what the darn thing can do. It’s in constant use somewhere, I think the Rifles have it today.’

‘Don’t break it,’ I said. ‘Expensive bit of kit. You get the other medical kit?’

‘Yes, fully kitted now, full resuscitation packs,’ Coup answered. ‘It goes out in the field, some to Doc Adam.’

‘Sounds like we’re making good progress,’ Jimmy enthused.

‘What’s this new fenced off area for?’ Mac questioned.

‘Behind us? Just Rescue Force, room for growth. Behind the Rifles will be all for the Army,’ Jimmy informed Mac. ‘More room for you in here.’

‘Got more thirsty bodies than water, boss,’ Mac cautioned.

‘Rudd, drill some more wells, or get a water tanker in each week. Tell people to shower with a friend, or take soap in the pool.’

‘They’re doing that already,’ Mac quipped.

Rudd showed Jimmy a picture of what appeared to be rows of greenhouses. ‘They want three million.’

‘Acreage?’

‘Five miles by three,’ Rudd replied.

‘Some of that is swamp,’ Jimmy complained. ‘What houses are included?’

‘The main houses are outside that area.’

‘Tell them I *was* interested, but would need houses. Be tough with them, play up the swamp.’

‘What you buying now?’ Mac asked.

‘A large farm,’ Rudd explained.

‘Food for the masses,’ I put in.

Rudd added, ‘Schilling keeps calling, just to see how I am – and *how are my kids*.’

Jimmy and I exchanged looks. ‘How much does he want for it?’

‘He started with one million,’ Rudd explained. ‘Now we are at seven hundred and fifty thousand.’

‘Does he have back taxes?’ I asked.

‘Yes, he’s poor,’ Rudd responded.

‘Offer him seven hundred grand,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Right, everyone, do what you need to do, back here at seven for food. Big Paul, go meet the Army. Cosy, stay please.’ With the others heading off, Jimmy asked Cosy, ‘Any rumours about Tasker?’

‘No.’ We waited. ‘They checked the car accident carefully - he was hit by a lorry that failed to stop, the driver arrested and jailed.’

Jimmy held his gaze on Cosy. ‘Anyone showing any interest in me?’ he pressed.

Cosy shook his head. ‘People gossip about you, you’re rich. Reporters sometimes ask, but no one from the community.’ He held his hands wide. ‘Was there something ... specific?’

‘No,’ Jimmy said after a moment’s thought.

‘Sorted an office in Nairobi?’ I asked.

‘Yes, me and Rudd are settled into it, two secretaries – saves a lot of time.’

‘How many kids at the orphanage now?’ I asked.

‘Just over six hundred. We have a few UN staff there; Bob Davies sent them. In total, thirty local staff.’

‘And the farm land feeds them all?’ I wondered out loud.

‘Oh, yes, and much more. We sell it at the market. And we sell it to your hotels.’

‘There’s probably some merit in teaching the kids how to grow crops,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘That skill will come in useful when they leave,’ Cosy admitted, a little saddened, if not concerned. ‘What are your plans about the older children?’

‘Give them jobs at the orphanage, the farm,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘When the time comes I’ll get a high school and put them through it. Some of the older boys I want for the Rifles, as soon as they’re sixteen.’

‘That’s a few years away,’ Cosy pointed out. ‘You’ll find them all jobs?’

Jimmy nodded. ‘Hope so. Hope many of them will join Rescue Force in time.’

Cosy took a moment. ‘So, it is not just a short-term project?’

‘Never was,’ Jimmy said.

A hundred miles away, UN Doctor Carol Nash desperately struggled to make her radio work. 'Mayday, mayday. This is Doctor Nash, UNHCR, northwest of Baardheere to anyone who can hear me. We're under attack by bandits, many dead and wounded...'

Bob Davies stepped into the bar and greeted us. 'Back again? You're here more often than I am.'

'Any word from Afghanistan?' Jimmy asked.

'Yeah, they got the limbs and we're distributing them over there, ten mine clearance boys working around the airfield – that'll take forever, they dig one up every six minutes!'

'So long as they're appreciated,' Jimmy said.

'They are, and we met to discuss that just last week. I reckon I could get you funding on twenty more.'

'When you're ready - we are,' Jimmy indicated.

A barman stepped over. 'Excuse, sir. Telephone.'

Jimmy took the call, rushing back. 'Our air patrol near the border just picked a UN distress call, Baardheere. A Doctor Nash?'

Bob Davies' faced dropped, Jimmy in the stairwell a second later as I nudged Bob to the stairwell. We rushed down, shouting at people in the corridors as we went, soon a tail of people following. More joined in as we sprinted to Air Traffic Control, Handy's office now equipped with two radios, long distance and short distance.

Handy hesitated, taking in the faces, then reported, 'Lady Doctor reports they're shot the fuck up, dead and dying.'

Bob Davies said, in a strong whisper, 'I was best man at her wedding.'

Jimmy took a moment, forcing a breath. 'There're a few laws, procedures and principals standing between us and them.' He turned to me. 'Get that Huey fuelled and ready to go. Move it!' I darted out, passing Mac outside.

'You'll go after them?' Bob Davies whispered, his voice going.

Mac appeared at his side, out of breath. 'What's up?'

'Mac, you and the old dogs, my bodyguard Paul, Cosy, and the best Rifles you can find – get kitted for an airborne rescue just across the border in Somalia. Go!'

Mac and Handy ran out, collecting Big Paul and Cosy, and heading towards the Rifles' armoury.

Jimmy grabbed Bob Davies by the shoulders. 'You should take a walk, this'll cost you your career.'

'I've got to do something.'

'It's a four hour drive - they'd be long dead. Leave it to us, we have the kit and the skills.' Jimmy straightened, taking in the airfield. 'We'll get arrested afterwards, but that we'll face that at the time.' He faced Bob again. 'By time I'm airborne I need a route and co-ordinates for them. Use the radio, maps over there.' Jimmy picked up the phone. 'Coup, I need everyone ready for an emergency mission immediately, surgical kits, get to the airfield. Move it!'

Jimmy ran downstairs, Rudd rushing over.

'What is it?' Rudd asked in a panic.

'UN patrol across the border has been ambushed – dead and wounded, we're going in.'

'We are?'

'Stay and co-ordinate. Get the Russian pilots of that Mi2, get them airborne.' Jimmy ran to the flying doctors hut. 'Tubby! Tubby stuck his head out the door. 'Get the Dash-7 ready for a combat rescue, we got UN stuck in Somalia.' Tubby jumped into his jeep as Jimmy headed towards the armoury, finding six of the Rifles, their former British officers keeping them in neat lines. Jimmy addressed them both. 'This is a volunteer only job, a rescue in Somali, lots of shooting. You got ten seconds.'

'I'm in,' the first man offered, the second agreeing with a little trepidation.

The Old Dogs emerged from the armoury with green waistcoats pocketed with magazines, M16s being checked, Big Paul and Cosy sporting waistcoats over their civilian clothes.

Jimmy accepted a weapon. 'Listen up. Rifles and Cosy in the Dash-7 with Rescue Force. Get water, med kits. Paul, Old Dogs, on me.' Jimmy ran off across the sand at a brisk pace, between the huts and to the Apron, where I sat with the Huey turning over. Jimmy jumped into left seat, his weapon stowed, the remainder of the men clambering into the rear. I pulled back on the cyclical control with a dry mouth, remembering my first few lessons. Now I was flying a Huey into combat, and it still hadn't dawned on me yet, everything was moving so quickly.

As we lifted off Jimmy got his headset on. 'Head southeast, fast as you can.' He depressed the transmit button. 'Silo for Davies. You on Bob?'

'Tower receiving,' came back. 'Heading one-three-five magnetic, one hundred ten miles.'

'Silo to tower, get that Mi2 up in fifteen minutes – make sure the back is empty. It's faster than we are, so is the Dash-7, so don't let them take off till a staggered time is worked out - we're the slowest. Try and fix a position on your people. Out.'

I set the heading and put the nose down, sand and bushes flashing by, trying to remember my drills. The horizon was a blur of sand, little in the way features or reference points.

Jimmy turned his head toward the rear, 'Get your headsets on.' He waited. 'Right, listen up. Bunch of UN medics in a vehicle convoy shot the fuck up, dead and dying, someone still working the radio. We'll all get there at the same time, but our job is to keep the Somalis busy while the Dash-7 and, hopefully, that Mi2 pick up people. It's a hundred ten miles, one hour or so, so kick back. We'll need to recon' the area, fix their location. And fellas, anyone you don't like the look of – you open fire. We don't need to touch down, we're top cover. All clear?'

'This breaking a few international laws?' Handy asked, sounding none too concerned.

'Lot's of them. If you survive, I'll buy you a beer.'

We crossed the border, our own barbed wire, and even one of our patrols below. They must have wondered where the hell we were heading. So did I. I concentrated on the heading, checking RPM and oil pressure, going through my drills, scanning the horizon for other aircraft.

After five minutes I tapped the near-full fuel gage, exchanging a look with Jimmy. 'I think it's enough. Just.'

'It's enough,' Jimmy reassured me.

Ten minutes later the radio came to life, but weak and distorted. 'Tower to Silo, over.'

'Silo, here. Go ahead.'

'Tower to Silo; four UN vehicles, twelve people, believed five miles northwest of Baardheere, over.'

'Silo to tower, roger that.'

'Tubby for Silo,' crackled out.

'Go ahead, Tubby.'

‘Tubby is airborne, lots of bodies on board, room for ten wounded, over.’

‘Silo for Tubby, what’s the state of the Mi2?’

‘Rotors were turning as we took off, over.’

‘Silo for Tubby, here’s the plan: we provide armed cover, you land and let the troops out, they secure the casualties, the Mi2 takes back the casualties. I don’t aim to be on the ground more than ten minutes, over.’

‘Best laid plans of mice and men. Tally-ho!’

I couldn’t help but smile at the crazy old bastard. And here I was, about to lose my license. Forever!

Fifteen minutes later Tubby was back. ‘Dash-7 at six thousand, little Huey low and left.’

I peered up. ‘There they are, much faster.’

Jimmy pressed the transmit button. ‘Tubby, go re-con, over.’

‘Roger.’

As we came up on the hour the radio crackled into life. ‘Tubby for Silo.’

‘Go ahead.’

‘Mi2 up your arse, two miles back. We’ve been over the target area, jeeps in a line on the side of the road, lots of bodies, can’t seen anyone else nearby.’

‘Anywhere to put down?’

‘Long road north of them, bit of a taxi around to them, but doable. Over.’

‘Wait my signal, circle at one thousand, flaps down, land on the fly.’

‘Silo, this is Yuri, over,’ came an accented voice.

‘Go ahead Yuri.’

‘We can now see you.’

‘Slow down and stay back, maintain five hundred feet.’ Jimmy turned his head to the rear. ‘Doors open, get ready!’ The doors opened with a blast of air, maps fluttering wildly, the smell of aviation fuel filling the cabin.

I pointed, ‘They gunmen?’

‘Yes. Starboard, fire as we pass!’

I banked the Huey as we passed two trucks packed with armed locals, Big Paul and Mac opening up. It was over in a second and I levelled out.

‘Slow down,’ Jimmy suggested and I eased the nose up, revs down. ‘That looks like them, go port ten degrees.’ We flew over the line of vehicles low and fast. ‘Two people sat up, they’re alive!’ Transmitting, he said, ‘All aircraft, survivors on the ground, land when ready, land when ready!’

‘Tally-ho!’ crackled over the radio.

I circled around, slowing as we all stared down at isolated mud-brown houses, kids running out and looking up, women dressed all in black. We swung left as the Mi2 came in and landed right next to the jeeps, a huge plume of dust blown up.

‘Contact! Dead ahead!’ Jimmy shouted. He opened his small window hatch, thrusting his weapon through, soon firing, hot brass shells bounding off me, and the instrumentation. ‘Back around, slower pass.’

I circled around to the left, coming in over houses and towards the crossroads we had seen the trucks. The front windscreen on Jimmy’s side cracked, my foot-well glass shattering. ‘Fucking hell!’

‘Steady!’ Jimmy opened up, followed by the guys in the back, the trucks turning around in small circles.

I flew back along the road at a steep angle of bank and focused on the Mi2. We passed him low on the our left side, a pilot out and dragging someone along, the Dash-7 blowing up a storm of sand two hundred yards away. We climbed and levelled out, that crazy bastard Tubby taxiing along the road and turning towards the Mi2. As we watched, he disappeared in a cloud of sand, emerging facing the way he came, people jumping out the side door and running back towards the UN trucks. I climbed another hundred feet for a better all round view. Beyond the trucks I could see the Rifles in green, the medics in white attending the bodies, soon two carried to the Dash-7, more carried to the Mi2.

‘They’re getting the bodies as well,’ I noted, communications limited with our doors open. It took little over four minutes to load up the bodies, no indication yet of any survivors. I pointed. ‘Are they firing at something?’ We banked left and dipped down, flying over the Rifles. They appeared to be firing towards a distant house, so we opened up, circling around it, no way to talk to the Rifles.

‘Yuri to Silo, we go.’

‘Roger, fly above one thousand Yuri,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘Tally-ho!’ crackled over our headsets.

We turned about and watched the Dash-7 head along the road, blowing up sand clouds. He turned the corner as if driving a car and went full power, a huge plume of dust rising up. For a few seconds he looked like the space shuttle launching. In seventeen seconds he was airborne, banking hard and climbing.’

Jimmy turned to me. ‘In case you hadn’t noticed, we are slow and alone, a long way from home.’

‘Fuck, yes,’ I said, nosing down and heading north, adjusting my course to a reciprocal heading.

‘We got the fuel?’ Mac asked.

‘Just about,’ I said.

Jimmy pressed transmit. ‘Tubby, contact tower. How many survivors?’

‘Don’t know about the survivors, two here being worked on by the docs, so at least two. I’ll call the tower at altitude. You OK down there?’

‘We’re low and slow, one hour to the border,’ I said.

‘Yuri for Silo,’ came an accented voice.

‘Go ahead.’

‘Silo, we have two alive, rest are dead, over.’

‘Roger that, fly safe. Out.’

Our radio crackled for the next forty minutes, but we could not make it out, a roar caused by our extra ventilation holes. I had a wicked breeze blowing up my right trouser leg, but not the left, and it got annoying. And we were alone, nothing but parched brown soil beneath us, the odd house, some trees. And now an oil warning light. I turned my head to Jimmy, he could see it as well.

Jimmy said, ‘Guys, we got an oil warning light. Might just be a bit warm, or we took a round somewhere important. We’ll keep going as far as we can, then ditch this. From here it’s a days walk to the border.’

‘With bandits for company,’ Rabbit put in.

Jimmy pressed transmit. ‘Silo to any call signs, over.’ We waited. ‘Silo to any call signs, over.’

‘Tubby to Silo, over.’

‘Go ahead Tubby!’ Jimmy shouted.

‘Jimmy, look up. Can you see me?’

‘There,’ I pointed. I pressed transmit. ‘Tubby, you’re ten o’clock high, three miles.’

‘Standby.’

The crazy bastard dived down towards us, turning around behind us. ‘Got you. You lot OK?’

‘A few holes, oil warning on for twenty minutes,’ I responded.

‘If you go down I’ll fix your position,’ Tubby offered.

We flew on, counting the minutes and counting down the miles, Tubby circling overhead. And it was comforting to know that he was up there. Big Paul practised with miles per hour ground speed, to distance to the border. At five minutes to the border he volunteered his mental arithmetic.

‘Border ahead,’ I shouted over the sound of the wind as a fuel warning light came on. Facing Jimmy I said, ‘We keep going?’

‘Yeah. If it catches fire we’ll jump.’

Mac passed forwards a canteen and I took several deep gulps, totally parched, my shirt soaking, my hair damp. Both my arms ached, not used to such lengthy flights. Beneath me I recognised the road, a wave of relief passing over me.

‘That camp is coming along,’ Jimmy mentioned in passing. I looked at him like he was crazy. An audible warning caused the guys in the back to peek at the instrumentation. ‘That warning is just to tell us a service is due, and that the windscreen wiper fluid is low,’ Jimmy suggested, getting back a few rude comments.

‘Jimmy, you smoking?’ crackled over the radio.

Jimmy turned his head, a nod to Big Paul. Big Paul grabbed a handle and leant out, looking behind us.

Back in he nodded. ‘We’re on fire boys.’

‘We’ll get there,’ Jimmy insisted. He pressed transmit. ‘Silo to tower, over.’

‘Tower here, go ahead.’

‘Silo for tower, have fire truck ready, we’re coming in on fire.’

‘Tower for Silo, land it now.’

‘Silo for tower, get the kettle on.’

I recognised the terrain, soon a glimpse of the hotel in the distance. ‘Two minutes. When I touch down, you go.’ I got all formal: ‘Romeo Foxtrot One to tower. Permission to land, over.’

‘Rome Foxtrot One, permission granted, over.’

Jimmy turned his head to me, an approving nod as more rude comments came from the back. We touched down within spitting distance of the fire truck, everyone out and running with their weapons, stopping and straightening as we looked back. A steady stream of smoke issued from the engine as the mechanic ran forwards, the housing uncoupled on one side, the plume increasing, but soon doused.

‘Any landing you can walk away from,’ Mac suggested as we turned.

‘Fucking ... hell,’ Big Paul let out, his shirt soaked in sweat.

In a line of six we walked forwards, Tubby landing behind us, the Mi2 now in front of its hangar. Sticking our noses in we soon wished we hadn’t, a thick layer of blood everywhere. We reached the start of the huts as Tubby shut down his engines, not many people about. An open-top Rifles jeep came out for us and we sat on the sides, soon to the hotel, and to the crowds. Leaving our weapons with the driver, we progressed slowly through the gates, exhausted and parched. Just inside the gates, on the grass, eight bodies were lined up, covered in blankets, many UN staff milling about, women crying.

It stopped us dead for several seconds. I didn’t even notice the pats on the back, they registered a few seconds later. People were saying things, but my brain was fogged. Inside the hotel I noticed the improvised medical centre in the restaurant, four people being worked on, intravenous drips set-up, our Rescue Force doctors and nurses knelt over them.

Bob Davies stepped out to us as we stood sweating in the heat. ‘Four alive, three should make it. We’ll ... fly them out when stable.’

‘Nash?’ Jimmy asked.

‘She’ll make it, round in the leg.’

Jimmy nodded. ‘Small victories.’

‘You took a hell of a risk, Jimmy.’

‘Fools and heroes, Bob. Fools and heroes.’

Mac softly said, ‘Fools to go out, heroes to make it back.’

Tubby appeared at my side. Whispering he said, ‘Good flying, lad.’

‘You too. That Dash-7 workable?’

‘Undercarriage may need some work. I won’t ... be filling in the logbook.’

Jimmy said, 'Hardware can be replaced.' Doc Graham stepped out, blood on his white tunic, Jimmy shaking his hand. 'Well done today.'

'You too.' He forced a big breath. 'That was a hell of jaunt.'

'That ... was what we are all about, my friend.'

Graham faced me. 'I never knew you were a combat pilot.'

'Me neither,' I agreed, as Rudd walked up.

We stood and watched the wounded get stretchered out, collecting our people and nudging them upstairs, cold beers ordered. Exhausted, soaked in sweat, we sat and sipped the cool beer, subdued, our staff's white tunics splashed with blood, the bar empty except for us.

Jimmy lifted his glass. 'Ladies and gentlemen, I give you ... Rescue Force: fools and heroes.'

'Fools and heroes,' echoed back, drinks raised.

'Fucking hell, Jimmy,' Rudd let out, shaking his head.

Cosy stepped out, walking over to us. He sat and stared at Jimmy.

'Good work today,' Jimmy offered him.

'I had faith.'

'Anyone hurt?'

'One of the soldiers took a round in the arm. He'll be OK.'

Jimmy looked about the bar. 'Where are those two officers?'

'With their men,' Cosy responded. 'Something of a celebration going on.'

'Good,' Jimmy enthused. 'They're bonding with their men.'

After a few moments silence Jimmy ordered food for everyone. The two Russian pilots appeared, raising their arms and shouting. Jimmy eased up and hugged them, getting them drinks, thanking them in Russian as I stepped to the wall, a welcome breeze found. Down below, the bodies were being removed. On the airfield I could see the wounded being loaded into a UN Antonov, soon to be in Nairobi. I closed my eyes and lifted my face to the sun for a moment, enjoying the heat on my face for a change.

'How does it feel?' came Jimmy's calm voice.

'The sun?' I asked, my eyes still closed.

'No, that feeling of ... risking it all to save a complete stranger.'

'Pretty good, I think, I not quite sure. My brain is frazzled.'

‘You flew well today, you should be proud of yourself.’

I lowered my head and turned around. ‘I don’t know how to... define it. Just kinda stunned.’

‘Get some drink in you, you’ll relax.’ He stepped towards the gang. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, I would like you all to know that I am proud of you - except Rudd.’ They laughed. ‘Proud of what you did today, not least going on such a reckless mission. Some of you ... are lazy fat bastards –’ They laughed at Tubby. ‘- yet heroes when the calling came, concerned for strangers.’

Tubby said, ‘I was concerned you’d stop buying me beers!’

They all laughed. Jimmy said, ‘I’m sure there were other reasons. Mac, Rabbit, Handy – that may well have been your last combat mission, you’re old enough to retire off now.’

‘Fuck off!’ came back.

‘And doctors, you did an excellent job today, the official christening of the new unit, the first test passed with flying colours.’

‘We get a pay rise?’ Dunnnow asked.

‘No, so fuck off,’ Jimmy said, making them laugh. ‘Got to buy another Huey, so that’s coming *out* of your pay.’

‘Pauley broke it!’ came a voice.

‘This’ll get in the papers?’ Dunnnow asked.

‘What, the invasion of Somalia? The breach of the border, the lack of a flight plan or permission, the major international incident, the shooting up of Somalis by Kenyan soldiers?’

‘We in trouble?’ Doc Graham asked.

‘Hope not,’ Jimmy said. ‘Might get some help from the UN to keep us out of jail.’

‘Should get a fucking medal,’ Mac complained.

‘Rudd, get a medal made up, a Rescue Force medal for ... operational valour under fire. We’ll award it with ... a ten grand bonus for everyone who went.’ They cheered. ‘Now, I know you’re all a bit stunned, but any good doctor will tell you that excessive alcohol always helps in these situations. So drink, that’s an order.’

In their filthy clothes they downed several beers as they ate, gradually relaxing, the Russian pilots soon hammered. UN staff came up and thanked us, Tubby’s wife scolding him at length, a drink poured down her blouse by Jimmy. The two new British officers turned up, already a bit drunk, congratulated at length by

Jimmy, more beers bought. The music was never turned on, but the staff behaved as if it had been, soon most of them hammered. The bouncers put people to bed, earlier than normal, leaving just me and Jimmy. And I had drunk a lot.

‘Get to bed early, and be smart in the morning,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Be a big fucking inquiry.’

‘You’ll handle it,’ I confidently suggested.

‘Today could have gone either way,’ Jimmy admitted. ‘But I was proud of you, young man.’

‘A few years back, well ... fuck, I would have never have believed what I’d be doing. And without you I’d be on the tube going to work.’

‘Sorry.’

It took my brain a while to catch up. ‘No, stupid, I don’t mean I want to be on the fucking tube.’

‘I know,’ he said with a grin. He lifted his head to the stars. ‘This’ll make the British papers, your mum will see it.’

‘That’ll be a talking at,’ I suggested.

‘Drink plenty of water, get some sleep, scrub up, meet me downstairs at 5am.’

We both eased up.

‘Spending tomorrow around the pool,’ I threatened.

Before dawn I went for a swim, the pool full of dead insects; I didn’t care, I needed a swim. I stood under the poolside shower long enough to rid myself of all the insect body parts, towelling down thoroughly, not a soul in sight, not a sound. With my cleanest-looking clothes on, short-sleeved shirt and slacks, I wandered down and found Jimmy, a few tins of meat pilfered from the empty kitchens, self-service tea. We ate and chatted for an hour in the dull dawn light, Rudd walking in and finding us as the sun put in an appearance on the horizon.

‘Press and Government on their way, it made the TV news yesterday.’ Rudd waited our reactions.

‘They need us more than we need them,’ Jimmy finally said, none too concerned.

‘Maybe they’ll be happy with us?’ Rudd asked.

‘Maybe,’ Jimmy acknowledged. ‘Oh, I wasn’t joking about the medal. Have it made out of gold and worth some money.’

Rudd nodded. 'I'm starting to appreciate what they can do, your rescuers.'

'This is just the beginning, Rudd. Just the beginning.'

Half an hour later the Rifles senior officer wandered in. I was concerned;; we probably got the poor guy fired for using his men. 'Do you have a minute?' he tentatively asked.

'Of course, have a seat. Tea?'

'No, thank you. I have a message from the Defence Minister. He says to tell you that *he* himself has admitted to approving the rescue mission, and that he ordered *myself* to assist you in any way. You will not be any trouble.'

Jimmy glanced at me without the officer noticing. 'That is very good of the Minister, and good of you to help me like that. If we survive this day, I will reward those that help me. How is your soldier?'

'He will be OK, Doctor Adam is looking after him.'

'Then he is in good hands. Later today I will thank your men. How do the men view these new English officers?'

'Ah, they like them a lot - quick and brave men. When they returned they only had concern for the men, buying many beers in the bar.'

'I'm sure that you would have done the same. I did not choose the English officers for the mission. In fact, I asked for you,' Jimmy lied.

'I would have been happy to serve,' the officer acknowledged, although I had my doubts about that. He left us to finish our tea. With the sun up fully we heard a plane land, soon followed by a second.

'Time to face the music. Rudd, go see everyone, tell them about the permission before any press get near them. Get everyone smartly dressed.'

Rudd headed off. I asked, 'Press be here?'

'The Press around here ... don't have much to do,' Jimmy emphasised.

'So we're story of the year. Great.'

'Get used to it. Start practising your supercilious smile.'

'I'll not pick my nose in front of a camera.'

We stepped out, placing on our sunglasses, and walked across to the apron, soon our field of view blocked by dozens of Government officials, followed by dozens of reporters. The

Rifles sent over a dozen jeeps and we led everyone to the rooftop bar, offering drinks ourselves because there were no waiters around. Standing, we began interviews with the Press, the photographers taking many snaps from the rooftop walls, a great vantage point, TV cameras now filming the airfield.

The Defence Minister, Mister Idi Amin look-a-like, thanked us, shaking our hands as cameras snapped. We thanked the Minister for providing us his permission, and his soldiers. Technical questions were asked; the route, the distance, the time, the aircraft involved, the fire on the Huey coming into land. I got the impression that they believed Big Paul was hanging out the back fighting the fire. The Old Dogs appeared, looking a little hung over and lacking coffee, which I organised quickly. Rudd appeared ahead of the Rescue Force staff, the best of them bright and coherent, the worst of them an embarrassment, Cosy avoiding the press. With the white jacket medics about we were largely ignored, the white uniforms making for good TV. The former British officers stepped out looking smart, so too their men, lined up for pictures against the backdrop of the airfield. An hour passed quickly, the Government officials heading back, the Press as well if they did not wish to walk back to Nairobi. The bar cleared of visitors, many coffees now ordered. We sat and took a break, Cosy joining us.

‘All over the breakfast news, all around Africa,’ Cosy informed us. ‘Oh, more press jeeps pulling up.’

‘Gawd, round two,’ I grumbled.

‘Round two ... is often the important one,’ Jimmy suggested. He stepped to the wall. Turning, he loudly said, ‘Look sharp people, it’s the BBC. Get the coffee and water down you, shoes shined, attitude sorted.’

Cosy disappeared, the BBC TV crew coming up to us. As background shots were filmed, the damaged Huey zoomed in on, the interviewer took names and details, the mission front to back. For the interview we stood against the wall, the backdrop a cameraman’s dream.

When it was my turn to speak, I repeated Jimmy’s earlier words, ‘We work closely with the UN, we eat and drink with them, share this base and share equipment, so we know a lot of them personally. When we heard their desperate cries for help over the radio we acted instinctively.’ A minute later I said, ‘We

took a lot of incoming fire over the UN vehicles, my helicopter damaged, and I had to nurse it back to the border.'

'On fire?'

'We were only on fire for the last fifteen minutes.'

Back in the UK, Jack relayed the story to Sykes, the Deputy Director staring up with his jaw hanging down.

With the BBC gone, I went back down to the pool, the man with the net having fished up the dead insects. I walked straight in clothed and floated on my back.

'Are you OK?' came a woman's voice, oddly distorted under the water. I turned my head, finding an attractive UN nurse kneeling at the pool edge.

I eased up and stood, the water to my waist. 'Just needed a dip, love, the Press a bit much. You coming in?'

'No costume,' she carefully mouthed.

'Who cares, I run the airfield.'

'Which one are you?'

'Paul, the crazy helicopter pilot.'

She glanced around, then stripped down to bra and panties, easing in. 'Oh, that's good. Who'd have a thought to put a pool in the desert.'

'I did.'

'And you gave twenty million to an orphanage?'

'I was overcompensating for not having any kids of my own.'

'I've heard a lot about you. And Silo, he's the big one, right?'

'Yep. He's muscles, I'm brains and looks.'

She laughed, but forced herself to stop. 'Yesterday was terrible, I knew some of the dead.'

'Somalia is disintegrating, best stay out of there, love.'

'Just got here. I was in Central America.'

'So what do you want to be when you grow up?' I asked.

She smiled. 'I quite like this work. The pay is not great, but the work is satisfying.'

'Have you thought about Rescue Force? They're recruiting,' I nudged.

'Never heard of them till I got here. They seem very good, whizzing about in helicopters.'

'We teach most of them to fly. And the pay is better than for the UN.'

'You making me an offer?' she toyed.

‘Oh, no. I only do that in my office, and in my swimming trunks.’

She giggled as a sandwich hit the water between us. I looked up, faces withdrawing from the wall as she threw it out of the pool. ‘Your fan base?’ she asked.

‘They’re jealous because I’m talking with you and they’re not.’

‘You’re fabulously wealthy, you can have your pick.’

Bob Davies walked out and straight around. I jumped up and out of the pool.

‘How’re your people?’ I asked, dripping wet.

He stopped and forced a breath. ‘Better than if they had been left over there.’ Despite my sodden state he hugged me. ‘I owe you one. The UN ... owes you one.’

I pointed at the nurse. ‘She’s got the day off.’

‘You’ve got the day off,’ Bob repeated to her. We shook hands and he headed off, damp on the front.

I jumped back into the pool. ‘So, what’ll you do on your day off? You ever flown in a Tucano?’

After I dried off and changed we had lunch, Sue’s first time in the rooftop bar. Jimmy and Rudd were handling things, not least some aircraft repairs. Jimmy went and spent many hours with the Rifles, money given to the heroes, more money placed behind their bar, everyone in the Rifles feeling wanted and needed. Mac and the Old Dogs had a new swagger about them, a youth recaptured, and Big Paul was teaching the Rifles some boys-own special forces stuff, efficient ways to despatch unwary local camels. Jimmy and Rudd joined us at the poolside around 3pm, taking a breather, a few UN staff now doing lengths.

‘That water is not hygienic,’ Rudd complained, stood with hands on hips, studying the pool. ‘We have a pump and some chlorine, but I don’t think they use it.’

‘It cools you down,’ I suggested. ‘Chill out.’

Jimmy introduced himself to Sue, sat the other side of her, soon a debate about Central American politics and the UN role there. Bob Davies walked out an hour later, grabbing a white plastic chair, Sue a little self-conscious.

‘You here tomorrow?’ he asked.

‘Could be, if you need us?’ Jimmy replied.

‘Got the investigation team coming down, they’ll want statements.’

‘We in trouble?’ I asked.

‘No, they’re focused on the deaths,’ Bob explained. ‘You saw the gunmen near our jeeps?’

I eased up, back into work mode. ‘Couple of open-back jeeps with half a dozen gunmen in each.’

‘Any markings, flags?’ Bob nudged.

I explained, ‘We flew in fast, us firing at them, them firing back - bit of a blur. Your wounded will have to help you there, Bob. How’s Doc Nash?’

He hesitated. ‘Stable, but ... won’t be walking well after.’

Jimmy asked, ‘Her old man in the UN?’

‘Desk job in Nairobi,’ Bob replied.

‘And probably nagged at her to do the same,’ Jimmy added. ‘Now he can say *I told you so*.’

‘I’d like to think that he’s ... bigger than that,’ Bob responded.

‘But...’ Jimmy added, leaving the word floating.

‘It’s between them,’ Bob stated.

‘And also the man who nagged her to do this posting,’ Jimmy added. He eased up. ‘Her leg will probably heal, and I plan on having a word with Mister Nash in Nairobi.’

‘Why?’ Bob delicately asked.

‘Because I understand what it is to send people into harms way,’ Jimmy softly stated.

Bob squinted back at us for several seconds. Turning away he said, ‘I’ve lost people before ... but it never gets easier. When I was a rank lower I didn’t have to handle the dead and wounded, now everyone comes to me. Two more were shot dead in Northern Somalia.’

‘Might want to re-think your strategy over there,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘And we’ll be here tomorrow. I’ll limit the booze tonight as well.’

‘That ... would be a good idea,’ Bob agreed before he left us.

Jimmy stripped off, down to his boxer shorts, and eased down into the water.

‘You two work out a lot?’ Sue asked.

‘Hey, stop looking at other men,’ I joked, following Jimmy into the water, unhygienic or not. After some nagging, Rudd

found trunks and joined us, Sue doing lengths. The three of us hung onto the poolside, chins on our arms, chatting away.

Sue joined us for food that evening, a quiet affair with all alcohol banned, Rudd and Cosy flying back down to Nairobi to do some work. Big Paul ate with the Rifles and “the Ruperts”, the Old Dogs drinking in their hut. Jimmy made his excuses early on and disappeared, leaving me with Sue, a romantic drink under the stars. She showed me her room on the third floor, which was tiny, so I showed her mine on the first floor, just about three times bigger. I explained about the pet Gecko on the wall – it ate the insects – then threw her onto the bed.

An hour later we elected to have a moonlight stroll, finding the base quiet, but soon gravitating back to the bar, a late snack and a few drinks, the bar almost empty thanks to our prohibition rules.

At 6am we showered together, Sue and the others normally having to share communal bathrooms, and she headed off to do UN work, the inspectors due early. I drove over to the Rifles and retrieved the slumbering Big Paul, crashed out in a barrack room after a lot of drinking. I dumped him into his own room and told him to shower, our hung-over bodyguard joining us downstairs later for self-service breakfast, the first UN staff stirring as the sun warmed up the morning. Bob Davies joined us for coffee before heading off to greet the UN plane as it landed.

We made our statements at length, trying to be as helpful as we could, the inspectors amazed by the tale. Big Paul wound them up with a tale of trying to hang out the Huey’s door and using a fire extinguisher on the engines. It made it to the investigators paperwork, and we did not correct them. They did not grasp the laws of physics that kept a helicopter in the air, the downdraft produced: a fire extinguisher would just result in the user getting it in the face. The Old Dogs made statements, a denial made of Cosy going on the mission. Tubby loudly explained how he valiantly landed and took off, more technical detail than was necessary, and the Russian pilots gave their account.

Our Rescue Force staff made statements of a different nature; a list of wounds and identifying clothing, action taken, medical treatment given - who was pronounced dead, and what time. Our doctors were all ex-UN, familiar with the procedures, and current

medical license holders. They signed statements about who was found dead or alive. It was all very sobering. The investigators thanked us and moved onto a wider investigation involving the UN staff, Jimmy telling everyone to go back to normal training. We thanked them again and pinched a Cessna from the flying doctors, soon heading southwest towards the safari park.

Landing on the improved grass runway, we surprised those of our local staff who lived next to the airfield, stepping down to a dull amber sky and the threat of distant rain clouds. We pinched a jeep, threw our luggage in the back, and drove twenty minutes to the new lodge, the staff at the airfield calling ahead. No more than ten steps of dried grass were crossed before a lumbering young male lion bounded towards us. Jimmy held his arms wide and ran at it, the young male turning and fleeing. It stopped to look back and check us out, soon sure that we were not a threat. It jogged up to us, now the size of an adult Labrador, rearing up and placing its paws on Jimmy's shoulders as he ruffled its main. At least he did not roll around the floor with it this time. It followed us inside, a younger cub nearly tripping me, the ball of fur around four months old and snipped at by its larger friend.

'Sorry, sir, we were not expecting you,' the deputy manager offered, looking worried.

'That's OK, we don't need rooms here,' Jimmy told him.

'We don't?' I asked.

'No, stop with Skids and Co at their new place.'

Stepping into the cooler interior we noted ten guests sat about. I checked my watch: 4pm, jeep treks would be over by now.

'Jimmy!' came a shout, our financial officer from Pineapple. He stepped briskly towards us, handshakes given. 'Christ, I saw it on the news. You guys OK?'

'Yeah, yeah,' Jimmy offered. 'Who you here with?'

'Wife and eldest.'

'How you finding it?'

'Great place, nice rooms. The rooftop bar is good, been having our meals up there. Did our first safari today, saw the elephants and plenty of lions.'

'Plenty of lions in here, mate,' I quipped, the younger cub darting about, the elder shooed out by the staff. We greeted the man's wife, many guests standing and walking over, shaking our hands for some reason that eluded me; we played dutiful hosts,

everyone welcomed, and stood posing for photographs for ten minutes before heading upstairs. The process was repeated, two singers from Pineapple making a fuss of us, Big Paul loving the attention, before we grabbed a table and ordered steaks and beer. More cameras flashed, but at least they asked nicely first.

Jimmy beckoned one man over, a rotund fifty year old. 'Don't I know your face?'

'Might have met in London, I work at the Independent - Jimmy Rosette.'

'Pull up a seat, and your wife.' They joined us, enough room on the large table, chairs dragged over. 'You eaten?'

'No, we'll eat around 7pm with the rest, you go ahead.'

'Bleeding starved,' I said. 'Spent all day yesterday talking to hacks – no offence.'

'Perhaps you'd better not let me spoil your meal then.'

'Not at all, you're a guest,' Jimmy insisted. 'And if you want a story that's fine.' Jimmy gestured towards Paul. 'This fella is ex-SAS, so no photos or names, he might not like it.'

'Oh, right you are.'

Big Paul tried to convince him about the fire extinguisher story.

'Wouldn't the downdraft disperse it?'

We all laughed, Jimmy explaining, 'He climbed out to see just how much we were on fire, no extinguisher.'

After that I went through the flight details at length, the warning lights, the shot-up glass, the drafty cabin. Big Paul added plenty of detail, the hack taking notes, Jimmy discussing the politics of the situation, the dead and wounded, the state of Somalia and the refugees.

'What day you leaving?' Jimmy asked his namesake.

'Day after tomorrow, we did a week in your beach hotel – very nice. Even played a round of golf.'

'If you want, I'll get you up to the airfield tomorrow, you can play hack.'

'Well, that's very good of you. Are you sure?'

'You should be asking your dear lady for permission,' I cut in.

'I'm used to it,' she said. 'Thirty years married to a reporter.'

'I'll arrange it for 8am in the morning,' Jimmy offered. 'Go get some snaps, talk with Bob Davies if he's there, then our Rescue Force boys.'

‘Rescue Force sounds almost ... paramilitary?’

‘It is: they’re trained to be tough, they get mine clearance and bomb disposal training, making them very self sufficient. We aim to send them into places that others would wisely avoid.’ Jimmy placed down his drink. ‘One of the greatest tragedies about Africa, is that a handful of rebels can terrorise thousands of villagers, yet everyone is trying to send money to help the villagers – no one is dealing with the rebels.’

‘An interesting viewpoint,’ Rosette commented as he took notes.

‘The taxpayers of the world can send ten dollars to feed the displaced, or spend one dollar on a company of soldiers to remove the rebels. That’s what it comes down to. Year after year we’re sending money to Africa when we should be sending soldiers, and not through the UN. We need soldiers that will be aggressive with the gunmen. Somalia is falling apart, Rwanda will be the next place to go. And what will the world do? Try and use a sticking plaster on a festering wound, one that needs lancing, not debating about.’

I was starting to see what Jimmy was up to, giving this guy an exclusive, but *our* exclusive. We spoke for another hour, Rosette and wife off for a nap and a cleanup before their evening meal, and we grabbed a jeep as the light started to fade, heading for Skids’ farm.

Jimmy found it in the pitch black, Skids coming out onto the porch with a rifle, unsure about who was visiting. ‘Get the kettle on for your employer.’

‘Right, boss. Come on in.’

We met the other two men in their huge lounge, a high cone of a ceiling, thatched just like the first lodge.

‘Very nice,’ I commented, doing the tour, three large bedrooms peeked into. Two local ladies, in their early twenties, walked out from the kitchen, placing down food. ‘All the creature comforts.’ With the ladies smiling and withdrawing I stared at Skids, hands on my hips.

‘What?’ he said with sheepish grin, turning away. We settled around an open fire, a dog asleep at our feet.

‘You met Big Paul, ex-Regiment?’ Jimmy asked.

‘No,’ they said, greetings exchanged, years served and squadrons attended swapped back and forth.

‘He’s my driver and bodyguard,’ Jimmy explained.

‘You don’t need a fucking bodyguard, Jimbo,’ Skids commented. ‘And what’s this we been hearing about a helicopter assault into fucking Somalia.’

We relayed the story for thirty minutes, making the men jealous.

‘Should have had us doing that,’ they grumbled.

‘What, you country gents?’ Jimmy said. ‘Colonial farming stock.’

‘We ain’t much of farmers,’ Trev suggested. ‘Live here, work over your place.’

‘You may have more land to cover soon,’ Jimmy informed them. ‘I’ll be getting Schilling’s land.’

‘That’s a good spread,’ Skids suggested. ‘A good ravine and river down towards the lake; make for a good camping spot.’

‘How the Rifles working out?’ I asked.

‘They’re good boys, we’re teaching them,’ Skids enthused. ‘All fit as fuck.’

‘Much poacher business?’ I asked.

‘Naw, not now. They know we’re here,’ Trev put in.

‘Any gossip ... about Tasker’s accident?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Why, did you have a hand in it?’ Skids quickly retorted.

‘No, hence the question,’ Jimmy carefully mouthed.

‘Black fella with one eye and some booze in him driving a fucking great lorry, simple accident,’ Skids explained.

Jimmy slowly nodded. ‘Seems that way.’

Skids and Trev exchanged glances. ‘Any gossip on the *other* matter.’

Jimmy shook his head. Softly he said, ‘I’d be happier if there was. It’s ... too quiet.’

‘Either that, or we’re all better than we think we are,’ Trev enigmatically suggested, making Jimmy smile.

Skids put in, ‘We figured we’d create a small sanctuary over here, orphaned animals, arrange tours from your place.’

‘Sounds good,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘And you’d want some money for the tours, of course.’

‘Gotta earn a crust,’ Trev said with a shrug.

‘I have no problem with that, you can do what days you want on my side, but plan ahead and let the manager know. He might want to recruit some proper guides, not lazy land owners.’

‘Planning on retiring here,’ Skids informed us.

‘Pipe and slippers on the porch?’ I asked. ‘Don’t seem to suit you.’

‘Better than cold old fucking UK, mate,’ Trev suggested.

‘And you can work part-time at my place when you need a few quid,’ Jimmy added.

‘You grow your own here?’ I asked, getting nods. ‘And the ladies?’

‘They tend the garden out there, some livestock,’ Skids explained. ‘Could easily be self sufficient, so don’t need to earn much.’

‘And no one shooting at you,’ Jimmy noted. ‘Seems like a plan. Oh, I’m going to do the main road with tarmac, might extend it down here.’

‘Be quicker and better access,’ Skids agreed.

‘If you’ve got cots or sofas, we’ll crash here,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Got any booze?’

We built up the fire, warming the high ceiling lounge, and swapped war stories for many hours. Trev headed off to bed, working in the morning, the final two staying and chatting a few hours more. Big Paul crashed on the sofa, Jimmy and me taking a stroll before sitting on the porch.

‘The incident in Somalia, you knew it would happen?’ I asked.

‘More or less.’

I took in the stars. ‘You ... could have taken right seat.’

‘You needed the experience. It will help in years to come and, for a lot of what we’ll need to do we’ll need the press - and the public - behind us. And for you to have credibility with people like Rescue Force, you needed to show what you can do.’

I sighed. ‘My brain was on autopilot. If I had been thinking straight I probably would have told you to fuck off. I should have, a stupid stunt like that.’

‘It was necessary,’ Jimmy quietly insisted.

‘Fucking fuel tank was empty when we landed, gears probably shot for lack of oil.’ I yawned.

‘That’s just the beginning. You’ll need to be much tougher in the future, more confident.’

‘What’s next on the agenda?’ I idly asked.

‘Chinese Government, via Po.’

‘Any burning helicopters involved?’

‘Oh no, it’ll be far more dangerous than that.’

We laughed quietly.

‘Could just retire down here, ignore the world,’ I joked.

Jimmy sighed. ‘That had crossed my mind.’

Back in Blighty we received a few requests for interviews, selecting those that we wished talk to, Rosette at The Independent given plenty of time. He produced a two page spread, the net effect being an awareness of Rescue Force and the problems in Somalia, not to mention the crazy pair of Silo and Holton. The staff at Pineapple Records were amazed, and our first visit back to the club quite odd, many handshakes and much congratulations. Some nice gentlemen from the Foreign Office popped along with a few questions about our incursion into someone else’s sovereign territory, but did little other than to confirm the details.

A month after our return a writer sent a letter to Pineapple, trying to track us down, since the address at the house was hidden from public records, we were not on the Electoral Roll. Pineapple passed on the letter, the writer having lost a brother-in-law at Baardheere. He wanted to write a book and Jimmy agreed immediately, inviting the man down, full access given, plane tickets supplied for several trips to Kenya, everyone told to co-operate with him. We’d be in print for Christmas.

The Chinese Government

As we sat at the bar of the Mandarin Orient Hotel, Po was confused and concerned.

Jimmy explained again, ‘I wish to do business in China in the future; there will be many good opportunities over there. This place will go back to China in ’97 – that will open up Chinese markets. Tomorrow I’ll go and talk with them, their embassy here.’

‘They expect you?’ Po puzzled.

‘Yes, I sent them a telex,’ Jimmy explained, but I didn’t remember any being sent.

We sat and chatted, work and pleasure discussed, Po’s cousin now a regular visitor to the golf complex in Kenya. And Po was sitting on a large pile of cash for us, a very large pile. Jimmy indicated that it would soon be needed. As we said goodnight to Po, planning on meeting the next evening, it registered that no one had discussed the mad helicopter rescue. I guessed they’d not heard about it here, and was quiet grateful for that, since it was starting to drag a bit; there are only so many ways you can re-tell the same damn story. We whiled away the time with lengthy massages downstairs, a sauna, then propped up stools in the bar till it closed, chatting to high class hookers, but not tempted to buy some trade.

The next day Po’s Rolls was waiting, at our disposal for the duration of our visit. We jumped in dressed smart, and asked the driver for the Chinese Embassy, setting off in thick traffic. We drove for fifteen minutes, pulling up in a street of old colonial-style buildings, next to a particular building with its windows covered in metal grills, a Chinese flag flying. I had been practising my Chinese language skills, but knew that I could not hold a conversation, certainly not one concerning the subject matter of today’s meet. My chest heaved an involuntary breath as we approached the door and its two uniformed guards.

‘I am expected by the Ambassador,’ Jimmy said in Chinese.

A door clicked open without the guards having done anything and we stepped in. A man held the door for us, bowing his head and gesturing us onwards, Jimmy striding forwards as if he knew the way. We walked along marble floors, many attractive Chinese vases displayed on antique wooden tables, pictures of Mao on the walls. At the end of the corridor we were met by two men in smart black suits, both wearing identical glasses. I could not judge their ages well, but guessed they were in their late forties, and could have been twins.

Jimmy extended a greeting, and we were shown into a side room, very posh but not very functional. It reminded me of my first visit to the old apartment in London. We sat on period chairs, a low coffee table between us and the hosts, whoever they were. Jimmy turned his head to me, ‘This is the Ambassador, and

this is Security Minister from the mainland.' The rest was mostly in Chinese.

'Welcome to the Embassy of the Peoples' Republic,' the Ambassador offered, tea poured into small cups.

'I thank you for your time in seeing us,' Jimmy responded.

'You are a most honoured guest, Mister Magestic.'

My heart skipped a beat, even without the full translation.

Jimmy asked, 'How have you found my stock market tips?'

'Very ... accurate,' the Ambassador responded. 'And may I compliment you on your Chinese. You seem to have a Beijing accent.'

'The accuracy of the tips was not the question ... I asked.'

The Ambassador glanced at his colleague. 'The tips were ... most profitable.'

'And the other information?'

'Of great benefit, and many lives were saved,' the Security Minister offered.

'Do you have a question for me, Mister Ambassador?' Jimmy asked.

'We are naturally curious as to ... your abilities.'

'Ambassador, please speak your mind. You are curious ... as to my motives.'

'As you can imagine,' the Ambassador politely agreed.

Jimmy smiled. 'Is Ho Sin upstairs, watching us?' Our guests blinked. 'My abilities, gentlemen, are a thousand times more than you realise. Before my arrival, did you not discuss that I may be a clairvoyant? Did you not discuss also, Ambassador, your daughter's wedding?'

The Ambassador seemed most put out.

'So, gentlemen, *do you* ... have a question?'

'Who are you please?' the Security Minister politely asked.

'I am a time traveller,' Jimmy bluntly stated. He let them think on it. 'Your future, is my past. I know everything that will happen in the next twenty-five years.'

'And who do you work for?' the stunned Ambassador asked.

'I work for myself, and there is no point my trying to explain my motives, since self-praise ... is no praise. Instead, as the years roll by, I will demonstrate my skill and help your country, as I help others. When, in time, you trust my motivation through ... observation of actions, then I will discuss my motives.'

‘And in the meantime...?’ the Ambassador asked.

‘I will answer questions that you have, that benefit your country, save lives, make some money, but do not compromise the security of any other nation. As I can see your future, so can I see the future of others. Now, if you have questions about your countries future, you may ask them.’ He waited, our hosts glancing at one another.

The Security Minister asked, ‘Will the British resist the handover of this colony?’

‘No, it will go smoothly, and everything will be fine here afterwards, a prosperous integration.’

The Ambassador glanced at his colleague. ‘Will there be any major wars that involve the People’s Republic in the future.’

‘In 2015 a Republican American President named Oliver Sanchez will attack China to ease deficit payments to your country.’

‘Attack us?’ the Ambassador questioned, clearly horrified.

‘Yes. He believes that by attacking you they will not have to repay their dollar debt, at a time when OPEC switches from the dollar as reserve currency.’

‘OPEC ... switches reserves?’ the Ambassador puzzled.

‘Yes, when the US economy suffers, and people wish not to be a part of bad dollar politics.’

They gave that some thought. ‘You know when major floods will occur in Yantze River?’ the Security Minister asked, an odd question.

‘Yes, and every earthquake, some very serious. Also outbreaks of infections that kill many people.’

‘You ask for nothing ... for this information?’ the Ambassador posed.

‘I will ask for many things, only one of which is compulsory for my continued assistance.’

‘And that is?’ the Security Minister asked.

‘You will, with my help, create a medical rescue body, a group of trained specialists that can fly quickly to a disaster area inside China and render medical and rescue assistance. In years to come, I will also ask that this force extends help to other nations in this region, extending the Chinese hand of friendship and diplomacy.’

‘This ... is a very odd price to pay for your continued assistance,’ the Ambassador pressed.

‘Many things that I do, well intentioned, will not be revealed until closer to the time. That way security is maintained.’

‘And when do you say that we should create this rescue body?’ the Security Minister asked.

‘You must have a representative ready for the day after tomorrow, to liaise with myself and my good friend Wang Po – who knows nothing of who I am. That is his car outside. I will tell the liaison everything that he must do, and I will show him my facilities in England and Kenya as examples. A diplomat would do, someone who can travel easily without suspicion.’

‘And what is your relationship with this Po?’ the Security Minister asked.

‘In the future, his children have a destiny in the success and future of China. I provide him stock market tips and assistance in other business ventures, so that his family will have the money they need to carry out certain tasks to the benefit of China. But gentlemen, there is one question that you have not asked about ... time travel.’

‘What is that?’ they puzzled.

‘Why go back in time?’ Jimmy posed.

They were still puzzled.

‘I travelled back to prevent World War Three and the destruction of this planet.’ That one woke them up. ‘If I fail, we all die. Soon, you will have to decide if you trust me, because failure in that belief may set in motion a series of events that are unstoppable. Now, do you have a medical kit here?’

‘Medical kit?’ they puzzled.

‘I wish to give you a sample of my blood.’

‘Your blood?’

‘My blood will cure all diseases known to man, including cancer and AIDS. And I am more than a hundred years old.’

They were stunned into inactivity for many seconds. After some debate they found a medical kit, a sample taken, Jimmy doing it himself, the vial placed in the fridge.

‘When your scientists have analysed the blood, we will meet again and I will describe to you how to get on the path to curing all diseases.’ He handed them a card. ‘Do remember that the British Government will be watching, so communication must be

private, face to face, and preferably on your soil – not by phone or fax. Oh, I'm staying at the Mandarin for the contact.'

We thanked them for the tea and headed out, leaving me wondering what the chitchat would be about after we left. I had a feeling it would not be the Ambassador's daughter's wedding plans.

In the Rolls Jimmy said, 'I've just woken up the biggest tiger on the planet.'

'Hope you know what the fuck you're doing.'

We had a restful afternoon shopping, exclusive stores with few shoppers and many helpful assistants, then back to the hotel for more relaxing massages. The Rolls took us to a restaurant we had not visited before, also owned by Po, and I re-acquainted myself with his daughters, Suni now in a relationship. That left Ling, my favourite. Unfortunately, a BBC correspondent was dining out with friends and colleagues and introduced himself, discussing the Somali incident, Po all ears. There was nothing for it but to ask them to join us, tables moved, one big party.

Po was amazed by the tale, but also concerned that his stock pickers might have got themselves killed. Jimmy chatted at length to the various correspondents about world politics, Africa and Rescue Force, Ling asking for the full story of what happened; she and Po did not even know that I flew. To placate the BBC Jimmy invited them down to the Cardiff club the following weekend, we'd all be back in the UK by then.

I enjoyed my time with Ling, I always had done, and we hit the shops the next morning, Jimmy off with Po on some dull tour inspecting offices and factories. We met up again at around 6pm, heading for a black-tie Gala, raising money for the local Red Cross. We were on the top table, and Po would be making a donation from us all. And I should have had some foreboding about the gala. As we arrived, the timing down to Po and his driver, only the function room staff idled about the entrance. I thought we were early and could have a drink first. We were ushered in, several posters advertising various UN projects around the world, and I still hadn't twigged.

At the entrance to the main hall, Jimmy said, 'Paul, stay close. Po, meet us at the table please.'

With a puzzled frown I let go of Ling and followed Jimmy, straight into applause, a standing ovation as we walked across

the room. And me, I wondered who they were applauding, looking towards the stage. When people started shaking Jimmy's hand, then mine – pats on the back issued – I realised this was a UN event. Cursing Jimmy under my breath, I tagged along behind, right up onto the podium. And the microphones.

Jimmy tapped a microphone, issuing greetings in more languages than I had fingers and toes. Finally, in English he said, 'This is just like my high school graduation, only I can't see the biology teacher I had sex with.'

I closed my eyes; statements like that were normally down to me. The audience laughed, then settled.

'Ladies and gentlemen. First, I would like to thank the organisers for inviting us, a free meal and some booze is always appreciated, since we've got some aircraft repairs to pay for.' He waited till they settled again. 'Second, I would like to introduce Mister Wang Po and his lovely daughter Ling, somewhere here at the back. They will be making a donation later. Mister Po is a generous benefactor of my charitable interests in Kenya, often staying at River View golf complex. He makes donations, we make the holes bigger for him.' Even I laughed at that one. Poor old Po. 'Third, I would like to point out that I *do not* have a pilot's license, and that Paul here passed his helicopter proficiency just six months before the incident in Somalia, making his flying skills all the more impressive.' He stood to one side and gestured towards me, a rapturous applause given.

Back at the microphone, a full thirty seconds later and now serious, Jimmy continued, 'In Kenya, the medical rescue team I have set-up is called Rescue Force, a tough bunch of doctors and medics being trained to go just about anywhere. Their motto, thought up by the medics themselves, is *fools and heroes*. You have to be a fool to risk your life for a complete stranger, a hero once the act has been completed – dead or alive. In the middle... in the middle sits a period of transition, a period where we stop and think for a moment – just a fraction of a second – where our mind weighs up the danger, the chances of survival, the merits of what we are doing, and why. We then have two ways of turning. We can rush in, or we can back off. A sane person should back off, a crazy person would jump in without knowing the reason behind why they jumped in. So what makes that transition, from ordinary person ... to hero?

‘For most it is a subconscious decision, a decision that risking your life, or giving your life for another, is part of a greater good. For those that I employ I hope it is more than that. I hope that when that transition point is reached, that they feel more in touch – more connected – to the rest of mankind. Unfortunately, the oldest and most primitive instinct ... is to look after our own kind, our own tribe, our own family. But look around you. How many nations, tribes and families are represented here today? Close to fifty I guess. And what I wish for, with my rescuers, is that in that moment of transition they are connected to the planet that they live on, connected to the people – all of the people, and that the moment of transition, from fool to hero, is a point where you lose your family, your tribe and your nation, and see those that need rescuing as ... as part of the whole, not as individuals. I hope, that when my rescuers take that first dangerous step, that they are trying to rescue mother Earth itself. And what cause is better to die for than that?’

Everyone stood and started clapping again, leaving me thinking what the hell I might say. At least there were no TV cameras around.

Jimmy added, ‘When the UN staff drove across the border to Somalia they made their decisions, in fact they made their decision when they put on the blue uniform and signed up. They signed up to something bigger than themselves – they signed up to help everyone, to help us all.’ He pointed at the nearest table. ‘Can I trouble you for two glasses please.’

I bent down as a lady offered me two champagne glasses.

With a glass in his hand, Jimmy said, ‘Could I ask you all to stand please.’ Every stood. ‘What we did was foolhardy, but we survived. We were fools to try it, heroes when we got back. But the real heroes were the ones that we went over there for. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you ... the United Nations.’

We sipped our drinks, soon people placing down their glasses and clapping politely. Jimmy turned to me, a gentle nod towards the microphone, in fact a question: did I want to speak or not. I stepped forwards.

‘My name is Paul, and when I grow up I want to fly helicopters.’ They laughed. ‘If the UN bosses are here – the day after the incident we had a few drinks and I met this UN nurse...’ They laughed more. ‘Sorry about that.’ From the corner

of my eye I caught Jimmy laughing. I took a moment. 'After the incident, Bob Davies – your Regional Co-ordinator - was badly shaken. And that surprised me, because up to that point I didn't equate people in blue uniforms to... real people with families, wives and children. But when I was flying that helicopter, and we were getting shot at, I was responsible – responsible for the people in the back of the helicopter. And to tell you the truth, it was not a feeling I liked, having their lives in my hands. If I made a mistake it would not just be my death, it would be a few people I liked as well. And it took a few days, and a few quiet moments, to realise just how big Bob Davies' helicopter is, how many people he carries around, and how he feels when he has to write that letter back home to someone's family. He doesn't ride around in combat helicopters, but Bob Davies makes me look like an amateur.' I raised my glass. 'To UN commanders everywhere.' They joined me in the toast, Jimmy leading me down, people greeted and hands shaken. It took almost ten minutes to reach our table and find Po and Ling.

As we sat, Jimmy whispered, 'Bob Davies' boss is over there.'

Po was moved to tears, a hand on Jimmy's arm. 'You big big man.'

The first speaker gave a breakdown of who could not attend and who was unwell, and we all switched off, booze downed. They ran into details of donors, upcoming functions, events and issues, thirty minutes of it. Then came new member donors, Jimmy sending up a startled Po.

Po was welcomed onto the podium, the mike adjusted down. He issued greetings in Chinese and English. 'On behalf of my family, my business and Jimmy Silo, we donate one million pounds.' He handed over a cheque to applause, soon back with us. And it was all his million, none of our money.

'Where's the speech?' I teased.

'No, no. I no good speak like you.'

Bob Davies' boss, a UN bigwig, wandered over and pulled up a chair.

'Mr Patterson,' Jimmy greeted him.

'How come we haven't spoken before? Patterson asked, clearly from Southern Ireland.

'We only go to the good lap dance bars,' Jimmy suggested.

Patterson laughed. ‘Shhhh, my wife’s over there. Thanks for what you did, Bob keeps me up to date with all the tales.’

I said, ‘Shouldn’t believe all you hear about us.’

‘Twenty million pounds on an orphanage? That’s a world record.’

‘It wasn’t twenty million,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Dollar conversion errors, more like ten.’

‘And that amount again at the airfield,’ Patterson noted, his figures way out.

‘We always wanted our own sandbox, ever since nursery,’ I suggested. ‘Now we got the biggest sandbox anywhere, and they throw in the flies for free.’

‘It’s not all hardship up there, my people request postings there – pools and bars,’ Patterson pointed out. ‘And more planned.’

‘They may as well be comfortable,’ I said. ‘Makes up for all the sand and heat.’

Jimmy asked Patterson, ‘You pulling back from Somalia?’

‘No, the US Marines are going in.’

‘That’s a mistake,’ Jimmy grumbled. ‘The Somalis need their own people taking charge.’

‘Your camp on the border caused a stir; there are fifty people a day joining it now. What gave you that idea?’

‘I figured that I would recruit and train some of them, send them back in. It’s their country.’

‘How ... exactly?’ Patterson pressed.

‘I’ll pick out the able bodied men and train them as medics, some as soldiers – a free Somali regiment, kit them out and send them back in.’

Patterson was concerned. ‘That’s not something we’d support, especially not a militia.’

‘Best get used to it, or work around me,’ Jimmy threatened. ‘I’ll do what I can, the way I think it’s going to work.’

‘I wouldn’t mind discussing that with you at length.’

Jimmy handed over a card. ‘Glad to meet, anytime. Come to the house in the UK, or stay at one of our places in London.’

‘Kind of you, I will.’ Patterson headed back to his wife.

A few others wandered past and said a few words as food was served, modest portions, so we decided to head for a restaurant, eating and chatting to the small hours. Back in our hotel I carried

a giggling Ling into the lift, many strange looks from the staff, and threw her onto the bed.

In the morning we met Jimmy at breakfast, Po having turned up early, and we all settled down to eat and chat again, just like family. We were still there at 9am, the restaurant clearing, when a smartly dressed Chinese gentleman with glasses approached us, a card placed down for Jimmy. He looked officious in his sombre black suit.

Without glancing at the card, Jimmy said, ‘Everyone, this is Mister Han, he will be my new liaison to the Chinese Government. Please, have a seat.’

Mr Han exchanged pleasantries with Po, then explained in English, ‘My Government will be interested in joint ventures with your shipping and ore business.’

I had no idea what that involved, or meant, but Po was shocked rigid, so too Ling.

Jimmy said, ‘I am sure that Po and his family will prove excellent business partners.’ He faced Han squarely. ‘Have you a bag packed?’ Han gave a polite head tip. ‘UK visa?’ Again a polite head tip. ‘And visa for Kenya?’ Finally a third head tip. ‘Excellent. We will pay for any necessary expenses. If your Government wishes them itemised we can do that.’

‘Thank you.’

‘We leave on the 4pm flight, I have reserved a seat – in the name of Han.’

Han was momentarily surprised, but controlled it. ‘I will meet you at check-in, 2pm.’ He stood and tipped his head, backing out.

Jimmy faced Po. ‘I asked them to give you some contracts.’

‘You ... ask them?’ Po was dumfounded. ‘Chinese Government contract... only very big, no small.’

‘I’m only just getting started,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Wait till I get you some very big contracts. Now, go home, we must pack. I’ll see you in London in one month.’

I kissed Ling goodbye, and she helped Po out, the poor fella mumbling to himself. ‘So how big a contract will the Chinese give Po?’

‘In their terms ... a tiny percentage of a small amount. In his terms, a contract a hundred times bigger than his last one.’

‘And we’d make a few quid, no doubt.’

‘No doubt. All we have to do now ... is sell Sykes on the idea of a Chinese Government official tagging along, without him shooting us.’

‘Yeah, that could be a problem. Let’s get him a stuffed animal at the airport.’

We met up with Mister Han at check-in, sitting next to each other on the flight; economy class. Jimmy and Han spoke quietly in Chinese and I read a book, a Wilbur Smith; the cover had a picture of an African savannah, so it had appealed to me on the bookstand. Karl and Big Paul met us at the airport the next morning around 11am, two vehicles, driving us to the house. When Jimmy explained to Karl who Han was he did a double take, insisting Jimmy explain it to the authorities. Han was also a little surprised by the armed Government officer riding shotgun for us.

Han had a room allocated, Jimmy showing him around the house, explaining things in Chinese, a stroll down to the river and a lengthy chat about fish as I tackled a mountain of faxes and letters. Sharon was keeping on top of things, but that often only meant that the right fax or letter ended up in the right pile, she could not action anything. The spreadsheets were up to date and I scanned them quickly, pleased with the ability to just read figures as net differences between last month and this month; up five percent, down six percent. It made life a lot easier. Later, Han came with us to our favourite curry house and sampled the Indian food, pleased with the meal.

With a call into Jack, he and Sykes came down the next day, unaware of our new houseguest. We welcomed them into the lounge like old buddies, food ordered. Han was already sat, but stood and bowed as Sykes entered.

Sykes shook his hand. ‘You work for Mister Po?’

‘No,’ Jimmy cut in with. ‘Please, sit before you have a heart attack.’

Sykes was concerned. ‘Jimmy?’

We all settled. Jimmy began, ‘As you are aware, Magestic has sent letters to the Russians, Chinese and others. This is not just about England, it never was. The Chinese Government has been receiving letters about natural disasters, mine accidents, internal crimes and terrorism, and things of that nature – no more. Mr Han is a diplomat of the People’s Republic.’

Sykes took a moment to compose himself. 'Well, on behalf of Her Majesties Government, we greet you ... and welcome you to our country.' He turned his head a notch to Jimmy. 'Might I enquire as to Mister Han's ... status and function here?'

'He'll be staying in a room upstairs,' Jimmy lightly explained, Sykes working hard to control his reaction. 'And that ... closeness of proximity will allow the smooth communication of information two ways. In particular, the Chinese Government will be creating their own small Rescue Force unit modelled on mine. Mr Han will be journeying with me to Kenya.'

'And is that ... to be listed as the primary function?' Sykes questioned.

'I would guess so, the rest is down to you,' Jimmy replied. 'I will await the Government's guidance on any ... status problems, and abide by them – of course.'

'I'll ... need to discuss this higher up,' Sykes warned.

'It is also my intention to assist ... in the smooth handover of Hong Kong, with a minimum of *mistrust* on both sides. And, I am sure, that the handover will go smoothly, to the benefit of all parties.'

'That's ... good of you,' Sykes offered. 'Might *we* talk in private?'

'Of course,' Han offered. 'I will visit again this beautiful river and very green land.' He bowed his head and left.

'Jesus, Jimmy,' Sykes let out, easing back and loosening his tie.

Jimmy offered Sykes a flat palm. 'Consider this. In 2015 America is on its arse, China the major player. Who ... do you want as your best buddy?'

'It reverses that much?' Sykes asked, clearly concerned.

'Yes, and by time we get to 2015 China is more American than America.'

'The communist government falls?'

'No, it transforms slowly, still socialist, but a MacDonalds on every corner, private finance, mortgages, you name it. And Hong Kong is the key. It acts like a giant cancer that infects China, turning them capitalist from the inside out, and quickly.'

Jack asked, 'And future military problems with China?'

'None. They react, they don't provoke.'

'And your agenda with them?' Sykes asked.

‘To influence them of course. And Magestic is already persona grata. Is that not a good position to be in?’

‘Of course,’ Sykes finally admitted.

‘Tell the powers that be that Karl is shadowing Han,’ I suggested. ‘Which he will be; he shadowed him down the curry house last night.’

‘I hope you know what you’re doing,’ Sykes softly let out.

‘I say that all the time, not least when in helicopters getting shot at,’ I put in.

‘I’m surprised you risked your necks like that,’ Sykes admitted.

‘We’re not indispensable,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘No. Quite,’ Sykes agreed. ‘How much do your staff know?’

‘Nothing,’ I said. ‘Nor families or friends, nor girlfriends.’

‘I should hope not,’ Sykes said with a fatherly look.

‘And we’ll give the Government a few more wrecks,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Besides, they got the gold index, what more do they want?’

‘And between us, they’ve been more active in the gold and currency area than admitted,’ Sykes offered. ‘An extra five billion tucked away.’

‘There’s no pleasing some people,’ I said.

‘Monty Python, Life of Brian,’ Sykes stated, and we laughed.

‘On a more serious note,’ Jimmy began. ‘A very much more serious note, next year Rwanda will disintegrate following the assassination of Juvénal Habyarimana, their long serving President.’

‘That’s left of Kenya, yes?’ Jack asked.

‘West ... of Kenya,’ Sykes corrected him.

‘Yes,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘A civil war will break out and a million will die within weeks, refugees fleeing.’

‘A threat to Kenya?’ Sykes asked.

‘No, but I’ll help the refugees. The problem ... is a million dead.’

‘What about UN peace keepers?’ Jack asked.

‘Already there, and ineffectual,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘It would require something more substantive, troops that will open fire and keep the peace.’

‘Can it be prevented?’ Jack asked.

‘No, it can only be ... dealt with at the time. Any show of force ahead of time would simply push back the start point. No, there is only one way of dealing with it, and that’s to get there just after it starts, after some bloodshed - but not too much, a combined effort with the UN.’

‘Why wait till they start fighting?’ Jack puzzled.

‘Sometimes, you need to let the two sides punch each other on the nose to clear the air,’ Jimmy explained. ‘There is no alternative. The Americans will be nudged along similar lines.’

‘I’ll chat to the relevant department, get more eyes on the ground,’ Sykes offered.

‘You may explain to Her Majesties Government, that failure to act will ... make me less available in the future.’ Jack and Sykes exchanged looks. Jimmy added, ‘And the US mission in Somalia is doomed. Someone, is not paying attention over there.’

‘The new President?’ Sykes asked.

‘I would assume so. I guess a cage needs rattling.’

Jack went through a list of questions, some very detailed questions regarding Bosnia, and we thanked our visitors for popping down.

Sitting back down I asked Jimmy, ‘Will Rwanda upset Kenya?’

‘Some tourists may stay away, there’ll be refugees. Most Hutu’s, those persecuted after *they* massacre Tutsis, they’ll head west or south, not east.’

‘We only got eleven in Rescue Force,’ I pointed out, some disappointment in my voice.

‘Rescue Force is for later. This is a UN problem. Still, it will keep them busy. And we’ll start to do something soon about the other refugee camps in Kenya.’

‘Going to be stretched, not got the manpower for it.’

‘It’s too soon,’ Jimmy sighed. ‘We’re not ready.’

When Han re-entered the house, having his own key now, he asked, ‘You do not tell your government the full story.’

‘They know what they need to know at this stage,’ Jimmy explained. ‘The full truth, told early, would not be appreciated, nor actions taken. They must learn to trust me step by step, to build up a confidence over many years.’

‘And the Americans?’

‘Get only letters, I will not make direct contact with them yet.’

‘May I ask why?’

‘I was waiting for this Democrat President, his second term. Timing has to be right.’

‘And if you are killed ... in crazy helicopter stunt?’

Jimmy smiled, then forced it away. ‘I won’t be, I know the future... remember.’

‘So why make a full disclosure to my government?’ Han posed.

‘Your lot are less complicated, and they don’t swap Presidents and policies every few years. If I make a deal with your government today, I can be sure that it will still be in place in ten years time.’

We showed Han around Mapley airfield at length; the water feature, the climbing frames, the cave, the off-road driving, the climbing wall and the first aid lessons. Photographs and notes were taken, flights then booked to Kenya.

Arriving at Nairobi airport a few days later, the officials did not understand Han’s reason for the visit, senior men called in – as well as ourselves. Han explained that he would view Rescue Force with a view to making a Chinese equivalent, and that seemed to do the trick. Rudd and Cosy were waiting outside, having sat around for an hour, and we set-off for the airfield by jeep, two vehicles in convoy. Arriving at sunset we were allocated rooms, meeting at the rooftop bar for food, the planned tour starting proper the next day. The next morning, dressed in a white shirt and beige trousers, sunglasses and hat, a camera carried, Han looked like a lost tourist. And he took some explaining.

‘Coup, this is Mister Han, a Chinese diplomat,’ Jimmy explained. ‘They’ve been impressed with what they’ve heard about our fledgling outfit and are interested in creating their own version of it.’

‘So soon?’ Coup puzzled.

‘You’re reputations ... precede you,’ Jimmy added.

Word of the visitor spread, so too his reason for being here. We showed Han our people undergoing various activities, our staff more earnest than normal, certainly swearing less. The half-

built buildings in the Rescue Force compound were photographed, a diagram handed over. Han puzzled the new swimming pool, but found the mine disposal fascinating, most of the ordnance being disarmed or blown up being of Chinese origins, a fact that Mac pointed out several times. Without wishing to show Han the Rifles, we jumped into the repaired Huey for the short trip to the border camp. I made sure to land away from the camp, but still blew up a storm of dust. With the rotors winding down, we stepped across the parched sand in oppressive heat, a family of camels in the distance staring at the loud monster that was our Huey.

I found the camp an odd place, since it had strong barbed wire fences surrounding and enclosing it, yet offered several open sections for easy access. Jimmy explained that it was to protect the women and children from men, but there were very few Somali men around, and the first group of males we came across were Ethiopians that we employed to maintain the water pumps. We plodded across hot sand and through the barbed wire, two Rifles jeeps parked up, their vigilant occupants waved at. We noticed four of our people under a large tent, Graham and Hildy, Ratchet and a new doctor, a long line of keen customers sweltering in the heat. We ducked our heads and stepped inside.

‘Having fun?’ I asked.

Doc Graham took a minute out, a welcome drink downed. ‘Mostly women and kids, malnutrition, foot sores from walking, the odd disease. Overall, they’re not the worst I’ve seen.’

‘Any security problems here?’ I asked. ‘Got a nice big fence.’

‘We heard that a woman was dragged off, and they found her body a few days later,’ Doc Graham explained. ‘The Rifles shot at a few armed men trying to cross the border a few days back. As far as African refugee camps go, quiet.’

‘I’d call that Dodge City,’ I suggested, a glance at the line of wailing kids, the women seemingly nervous of our presence.

Jimmy introduced Han, surprising our medics a little. They all shook Han’s hand, their own mucky hands wiped down jackets first, and all looking a little perplexed. Opening a backpack Jimmy had brought with him, Jimmy handed out tinned pears to the line of women. Opening one, he spooned out the liquid, feeding it to a child as others closed in, soon half pears being wolfed down and much appreciated.

We thanked our staff, telling them to carry on, before blowing up another dust storm and frightening the camels. Back at base we held a Rescue Force update meeting in the bar, cool drinks appreciated. And no sign of Sue the UN nurse, posted onwards somewhere I figured.

‘How many medics can we recruit at best?’ Jimmy asked Coup.

Coup replied, ‘We’re mostly word of mouth, people who know people around Africa. Little point in advertising the jobs in the papers, too few would notice the adverts.’

‘OK, then let’s get twenty Kenyan nurses ... who are under thirty and fit,’ Jimmy ordered. ‘Many will drop out, so we may get ten good ones. If you repeat that process four times a year, we’ll get forty good nurses. Advertise anyway, across Africa, modest budget, see who turns up. And I’ll do some advertising in the UK.’

‘We could pinch some Rifles,’ Coup suggested. ‘They drive well, good mechanics, they’ve studied ordnance disposal – so all they need is basic medical training to be an extra pair of hands.’

‘Fine, ask some if they want to move over – five or six, no more.’

‘We could recruit in Hong Kong,’ I suggested, Han keenly listening. ‘They speak English, got UK passports.’

‘Not a bad idea,’ Jimmy approved. ‘I think Po could help with that. Rudd, get some temporary tents set-up, good quality.’

Rudd said, ‘We have four new cabins coming, they are living accommodation cabins, not offices. A factory in Nairobi makes them; self-assembly homes. You can get six or eight people in them.’

‘Sounds workable, get ten more,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘How are we with the barbed wire?’

Rudd explained, ‘The Kenyans were surprised. We’ve gone thirty miles in each direction so far. Some is already fenced, so we are improving the old fence as we go.’

‘Keep going,’ Jimmy ordered. He faced Coup. ‘I think the refugee problem will only get worse, now talk of a civil war in Rwanda. I want as many bodies as we can get without watering down the skill level. I think, as far as refugee camps go, that one doctor to four nurses is probably about right.’

‘So prepare for lots of extra mouths to feed,’ I warned Coup. ‘Talking of which.’ I faced Rudd. ‘How’s that farm?’

‘A price has been fixed, houses included, two point five million,’ Rudd explained.

‘Use the excess money in the orphanage fund,’ Jimmy suggested, surprising me. And surprising Rudd.

‘How can we justify the spend, it is a nominated charity?’ Rudd queried.

‘First, the children will attend classes there on farming, and I’ll set-up a college of farming, which will recruit from the orphanage. And second, the produce will be sent to the refugee camps – so it’s all linked.’

Rudd nodded his acceptance. Cosy said, ‘I would like to be involved with the farming college.’

‘Fine,’ Jimmy offered. ‘I want the white managers let go, recruit blacks and make it a non-profit farm. A ... peoples collective.’ Han lifted his head. ‘But I want instructors from England, good people, a few months at a time, latest skills. And if you want you can offer residential scholarships to locals, one or two years, pay them a modest wage while studying. We can get some cheap fertilizer from my Hong Kong friend, Po, his family ship it.’

‘I’ll close the deal,’ Rudd suggested.

‘Right, it’s too damn hot to sit around here, so let’s meet again at sundown. Tell Mac I want a word.’

The staff wandered off, Han stood with his hands clasped behind his back, peering out at the various buildings and activities.

‘You want a big ramp up for Rwanda?’ I knowingly asked.

‘Yes, just wish I could do more. I also wish I could go back and fix the Second World War, but I am here ... and now.’

Mac turned up ten minutes later, a beer ordered and half downed quickly. It was a hot afternoon.

‘Mac, there are things I’d like you to do besides the sandbox.’

‘We got a pool cleaning boy!’ Mac stated.

‘And he’s probably younger and better looking,’ I put in.

‘What you after?’ Mac asked, easing back and relaxing.

‘In the future, most of the money - and therefore the good kit and people - will be focused around Rescue Force, not the

sandbox. I'd like you more involved with that, some foreign trips.'

'More pay,' I added.

'Doing what ... exactly?' Mac asked.

'You'd be temporary head of Rescue Force –'

'Temporary?' Mac challenged.

'Some day I'll recruit a doctor to do it, you'll not know the medical ins and outs.'

'No, I wouldn't,' Mac agreed.

'You won't be able to assess if a doctor is any good or not,' I helpfully suggested.

'Aye. So ... what'll it involve?'

'You'll be in overall charge of the base, as now, but not touching ordnance training hands on. Coup would be under you, De Silva would work for Handy or Rabbit, and you'd plan Rescue Force training and operations along military lines. You'd need to pop to other countries to recruit, oversee projects, etc.'

'Less booze, and more shined shoes,' I playfully warned.

'That's no joke,' Jimmy pointed out, but Mac was not put off.

'What about the Rifles?' Mac asked.

'You'd plan their training and deployment as now, but in general terms, leave the detail to their officers.'

Mac scratched his stubble.

'And you'd need to fucking shave,' I suggested.

'If you don't take it, I'd have no choice but to appoint someone from outside, and they'd eventually end up *your* boss,' Jimmy pointed out.

'And we wouldn't want that,' I pointed out.

'You two fuckers play poker together?' Mac asked.

'No, not nearly enough deception involved,' Jimmy stated.

'Well, it's more of the same, but more pay,' Mac said with a sigh. 'It is a promotion, of sorts. Aye, if you think it's best I'll do it.'

'It is,' Jimmy suggested. 'Get yourself a white uniform, and start thinking like a general. Your title is Director of Rescue Force Kenya. With a sub-title of Base Supervisor.'

'I thought sub-titles should be in a foreign language?' I queried.

'Mac can't speak any other languages, so I simplified it.'

Mac stood. 'I'd best tell the lads, they'll be gutted.'

‘Or glad to see the back of you!’ I said.

Han rejoined us. ‘May I ask, at what point would Chinese rescuers be needed here?’

‘Not for many years, it would cause more questions than is prudent. But in years to come China will need ore from Africa, and so will be heavily involved here. And I will assist in that process, since I’m already well known here.’

Han bowed a “thank you”.

The next day we set off for Mombassa, a long hot drive, stopping at the orphanage on the way. Mary was still hanging in there, now in a Mombassa hospital where she could be cared for properly, her life expectancy measured in months. Anna led us up to the roof, Han keenly taking pictures, even though this was not related to Rescue Force.

Jimmy explained to Han, ‘When I arrived here this was an AIDS orphanage, sixty children dying. Now six hundred, and no one is dying.’

Han stood taking in the vast spread of buildings and the neat rows of regimented children in blue uniforms. ‘The blood?’

‘Yes, the blood,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘I injected Anna, she injects the children.’

Han studied Anna carefully, the good doctor confused and concerned. To Jimmy he asked, ‘May we send doctors here ... to study?’

‘Yes, of course you can,’ Jimmy replied. ‘Anna, Mister Han is from the Chinese Government, and they are very private people, good with security.’ She lightened a little. ‘In the future they will be of great benefit to us, and to Africa.’

‘There were twenty new children yesterday, all dying,’ Anna informed us in her accented voice, an invitation in her tone.

Jimmy gestured her below and we entered the ward. She was not wrong about the kids, they were in a terrible state, still wearing the rags they must have come in with. Two local nurses were dismissed, Anna fetching needles. Jimmy gave blood as Han carefully observed, Anna injecting the children in turn, the big guy reassuring them in a local dialect.

Through the courtyard we walked slowly toward the new blocks, each teacher stopping their group and indicating who we were, a strange chant of thanks given, Jimmy shouting back a few words and waving. Beyond ten sets of parallel blocks, all

identical, we poked our heads into classrooms, the kids standing and issuing a loud and harmonious greeting. In one classroom, made up of older boys, Jimmy took over the lesson for a few minutes, part English, part local dialect, Han keenly observing. At the end of the brief interlude, Jimmy introduced Han, asking the boys to locate China on a globe. For the first time I saw Han's cheeks crease into a wide, but brief smile.

Cosy caught up with us at a jog and keenly showed us the farm, neat rows of vegetables being grown, some older boys and girls tending them. A farm classroom was now occupied and we listened in, a lesson on irrigation. And for the first time I felt oddly proud of myself for my part in all this, proud of the progress that was being made, the hope for the future that the kids now possessed.

In late afternoon sun we ambled back, more harmonious shouts of greetings offered, waves given back. We thanked Anna, big hugs exchanged, and made ready to leave, but Jimmy stopped and spun around, a curious frown as he again approached Anna. With Cosy stood close by, Jimmy placed a hand on Anna's abdomen, a glance at Cosy as joined us. Cosy stood staring at Anna as she smiled back at him. In the jeep Cosy sat and stared, a question for Jimmy.

As we pulled off, Jimmy said, 'A girl. Call her Mary.'

'Congratulations,' I quietly offered.

Rudd questioned that statement, Cosy saying, 'I think Anna is pregnant.'

'She's a doctor,' Rudd said, noting the caution in Cosy's voice. 'She'll be fine.'

'You'll have to book some time off,' I told Cosy. The father-to-be made no comment as we drove down to River View.

We booked-in, Han taking a good look around before joining us at the beach bar. The elephants caused him to stop and do the tourist bit, snaps taken. The next day was a chill-out day, diving trips organised, Han wandering around the golf complex and reading Po's advertising material.

Over drinks at the beach bar, around 4pm, Han noted, 'You have made a lot of money for yourself.'

Jimmy did not take his gaze off the ocean. 'The golf complex is a meeting point for African leaders, and men of importance. If you wish to influence Africa, you must influence those men.'

Without influence, you cannot change the course of Africa. And in answer to your question, yet to be asked, I give away eighty-percent of all I earn.'

Rudd did not know that. 'Eighty percent? Wow.'

Han considered Jimmy's words. 'African leaders, they like to talk business at a golf club?'

'Yes,' Jimmy answered.

Rudd put in, 'It's where all the business is done.'

Han appeared as if he had just learnt a valuable lesson, nodding his head gently as he thought about it. Obviously, golf hadn't reached the communist party hierarchy yet. As we sat there, the staff brought out a tiny lion cub, housed at the nearby zoo, and Jimmy handed it to Han, followed by a bottle. A little unsure of himself, Han fumbled to feed the cub, soon a loud munching and sucking noise created. And another smile came from our Chinese stiff.

Jimmy turned his head toward the path that lead down to the beach, Po's relatives now wandering down; mum, dad and two young girls. He called to them in Chinese, beckoning them over. I quickly moved chairs around, not disturbing Han, the two girls rushing to the cub then halting dead, awaiting permission. Han spoke softly, almost a whisper, addressing the girls in Chinese as they stroked the cub. The parents sat, warm greetings for Jimmy offered. In a whisper, Jimmy explained who Han was, shocking the couple, the daughters now chatting away and Han responding. It looked like the parents wanted the kids pulled back, but Jimmy reassured them, settling them and organising drinks.

Jimmy faced me, away from the rest. 'Timing ... is everything,' he whispered.

I glanced at the scene, the kids and Han, the lion cub, the staff bringing it over, and tried to piece together what he was up to. Nothing came to mind. I reached across and lifted Han's camera, wound it on and took several snaps, getting the girls in. In that instance I was tempted to snap a man sat with a woman at the end of the beach bar. For some reason he registered with me as being a little suspicious, but Jimmy had a clear view of the man and must have clocked him, so I ignored my feelings.

Jimmy asked the girls, in Chinese, what they wanted to be when they grew up. One said a doctor, the other a scientist.

Jimmy commented to Han, 'Scientists are very useful, since inventions can change the world.'

Han regarded Jimmy carefully, then the girls. In Chinese, Han asked the parents if the girls could hold the cub. They readily and nervously agreed, Han instructing the girls; one to hold, one to feed the cub. He lifted his camera and took several snaps, offering to send them on via Po in Hong Kong. Jimmy beckoned the father over, seats rearranged so that the girl's father now sat between himself and Han. A sedate three-way chat began.

With the family and Han off to clean up for evening meal, Rudd and Cosy off inspecting things, I asked Jimmy what he was up to.

'Convolutd,' Jimmy responded. 'We'll get the Chinese Government on board, Po involved, some money made, Chinese Rescue Force started. Han will bond with that family and Po, improving relations. Han ... lost a daughter, then a wife – it's just him in his flat, which is why they chose him for this.'

'So Han gets a ready made family and relaxes a bit,' I realised.

'And the daughter who wants to be a scientist makes a major breakthrough later on. He now suspects that, so the Chinese Government will give her a research grant, and I'll give her the idea, making it look like it was her idea all along.'

'What does she invent?'

'An electric car ... that gets its energy from the road surface.'

'How the fuck could you do that?' I puzzled.

'Wait and see.'

'And Cosy?' I asked.

'They'll have two girls and they'll stay together. Oh, there's a *very* ... tasty singer in the bar. You know her – Katie Joe?'

I was on my feet. 'She ... is here? She, fucking wonderfully beautiful ... she with the body?'

'Yep.'

I hesitated. 'Should I ... you know?'

Jimmy laughed. 'The frontal assault would put her off.' He stood. 'Let's go play managerial types. Don't stare into her eyes – or down her cleavage. It will take two days, take her to the orphanage tomorrow, don't seem too keen. On the beach tomorrow strip off, do the lion cubs and kids, ignore her. Take a kid for a trial dive.'

‘First time you gave me instructions like that I almost wrote them down.’

‘A word of warning,’ Jimmy said as we walked towards the restaurant. ‘If you do get together with her they’ll be tabloids in the bushes.’

‘Well ... what do you reckon?’

‘I reckon ... it’s your call.’

‘If I can fly into Somalia, I can do this,’ I confidently suggested, suddenly feeling less confident.

Playing at being the managerial types, we both pressed the flesh with the guests and I practised a few languages. I ordered a table moved – very managerial like, and chatted to the kids present, finally clocking her hidden behind a baseball cap, her hair up, no make-up on. At her table I greeted an older woman, asked if all was OK, smiling and nodding at Katie. As I was about to walk off she called my name, taking off the baseball cap.

I gave it a second. ‘Christ, Katie. Sorry, didn’t recognise you. How’s the record doing?’

‘Don’t you keep track of them?’

‘No, just monthly meetings, sorry. Abroad a lot.’ I sat. ‘Anything you ladies need?’

‘Mum wants to meet Jimmy,’ she toyed, grinning, and getting a slap on the hand from her mum.

I called over Jimmy, who said hello and sat. ‘Katie’s mum wanted to say hello.’

‘You don’t look old enough to be a mother,’ Jimmy began. ‘And I happen to know that “Joe” is short for Joslavich, yes?’ He exchanged a few sentences in Slovak with mum.

Han approached us. In my best Chinese I asked if all was OK. He nodded and responded, and I understood his sentence. In Chinese, Han asked if the family could join us, Jimmy uttering *of course*, Han withdrawing.

‘Sorry about that,’ Jimmy offered. ‘Working trip.’

With Jimmy chatting to mum I made my excuses, being cool, and went off to shower and change. Later that evening we ate with Po’s family, Katie still at her table, still hiding behind the baseball cap. I made a fuss of the kids in full view, even bouncing them on my knee. At one point I said hello to the Pineapple staff, the couple not noticing Katie till I pointed her

out. When I sat back down they said hello to the object of my desires, already having met her before. Han seemed far more relaxed, chatting away to Po's family, part in Chinese, part in English. He even encouraged the children to practise their English. It was all happy families, Katie just visible from the corner of my eye.

When Katie and her mum got up to leave they stopped, Katie heading over. 'Could I have a moment?'

'Sure,' I said, easing up and gesturing her outside. Mum headed back to their hut.

'There's some contractual stuff I'm not happy about, I was wondering if we can chat about it.'

I was prepared and ready. 'Katie, this is not the time and place, nor am I going to undermine the authority of Oliver Standish or anyone else at Pineapple, certainly not till I have all the facts and full briefing. If you want a drink, a chat about something other than work, a ride on the fucking elephant or a midnight swim I'm happy to oblige, because I hope to get some relaxation in. If you want to talk business, meet me back in London.' I gave her a card. 'I have guests, so you'll excuse me.' As I walked off I thought *midnight swim*? Where the fuck did that come from? Jimmy studied me as I sat, a question in his look. I said, 'On target.'

Katie appeared with her mum an hour and half later, this time looking far more feminine. We were still sat at the table, most guests having moved to the bar. Jimmy had been fetching fruit as the ladies entered, probably just passing through to the bar, and he invited them to join us. They accepted, chairs brought over, Katie the other side of Jimmy to me. The big bugger was in the way, but that was probably a good tactic.

Jimmy explained to the Chinese that Katie was a very famous singer in England, Katie probably relieved that the Chinese on the table had no idea who she was. We got onto the story of the mad helicopter dash, Jimmy relaying it, Po's family both amazed, and very concerned for us. Han told Katie and her mum, Jean, that he was an official of the Chinese Government, visiting to see how we run our refugee camps.

'Refugee camps?' Jean puzzled.

Jimmy explained about the camp that we had set up on the border, some about Rescue Force. I didn't know about Katie, but

mum now seemed very keen on us. Po's family eventually made their excuses, wanting to get the kids to bed early, and I insisted on a kiss on the cheek from both girls. Han retired, a moderate drinker, leaving just the four of us, the room now empty except for us, a sea of plain white tablecloths.

Jimmy asked Katie, 'Would you do a number for the guests?'

'Sing?' she queried.

'There's a microphone next door,' Jimmy explained. I knew there wasn't. She hesitated. Jimmy continued, 'Look at this way. You make the guests happy, they come back and spend more money, that money goes to the orphanage.' It was below the belt, Jean nagging her daughter on. She relented and we stepped next door to the bar, two-dozen people sat around, mostly couples. And there in the corner sat a brand new karaoke machine.

She switched it on. 'Hope you can hear me. I normally only sing in the shower, so you have been warned. But I do a good impersonation of that ... Katie something.' She pushed a button and started a slow number, everyone in the room recognising it, then slowly registering just who she was. Faces lit up, hands were held, loving looks exchanged. She performed four numbers, then a track that had not been released yet – no background music and an exclusive, cameras now snapping. And I was hooked. As she finished her last number I turned to find Jimmy with a larger lion cub, resting on his forearm and sniffing the guests. Katie got a round of applause, thanking everyone, signing a few autographs, and allowing herself to be photographed with couples.

When she approached I said, 'Thanks for that, adds a ... quality to the place. Drink?'

'Though you promised me a midnight swim?'

I smiled widely. 'Ah, yes, sorry about that. It just kind of popped into my head.'

'Come on then, promises are for keeping.'

Nervous now, I followed her out, Jimmy noticing and grinning as he introduced the cub to guests. At the water's edge she stripped to bra and panties in the dark, I stripped to my shorts, and we plunged into the black water.

After two strokes she issued a scream. 'There's something in the water. Something hard.'

I figured it was the damn turtle and got between her and it, lifting the damn heavy thing up. 'Leave us alone,' I told it as she laughed. Fat chance of that. I turned my back on it and lifted her up, holding her as if we were crossing the threshold after marriage. She clasped her fingers around my neck. I got the odd nudge from the turtle as we chatted, finally seeing it going ashore. 'OK, it's on the sand now. It comes ashore at night and breaks into huts. Very ... slowly.'

'My hero. Could have been a shark.'

'No, the friendly shark hangs around at the breakwater.'

'What?'

'Ever been scuba diving?'

'Tried it once.'

'Tomorrow,' I said. 'I'll take you out if you like.'

'We're driving up to your safari park.'

'I'll fly you up in the afternoon,' I insisted. 'Driving is a pain.'

'I've heard about your flying,' she gently chided.

'I only fly like that when my friends are in trouble,' I stated in serious tones.

'You're quite the James Bond; money, action –'

'Beautiful girls in the casino.'

'They say you like one girl at a time, for around a year or so.'

'You been checking up on me?' I teased.

'It was in Pineapple Music magazine.'

'What?' I asked, Katie laughing. 'Tease.' I tickled her, causing her to run ashore, flicking me with water.

She put her trousers back on. 'Is that roof bar still open?' she asked, pointing towards the second beach hotel.

'It is for me.'

I put my clothes on wet, sand everywhere, pinching a golf buggy and heading through the trees at a racy six miles per hour. I shouted a local greeting to the guard at the gate, the gate permanently open, and pulled up at the block's reception. Walking in I waved at the receptionist, getting back an 'evening sir.' The bar was still open, two sets of couples which I greeted and welcomed, practising my German on one older couple. As Katie leant on the wall, looking out over the black ocean in a cool breeze, I fetched two beers.

'Nice to get away from London for a while,' she quietly stated as I neared, not looking around. She lifted her gaze to the stars.

I placed down her beer and she took a sip, hugging it like a mug of hot chocolate. 'Does the pressure get to you?' I softly asked.

'Your guy at Pineapple was a great help at the beginning. That first briefing – I thought he was joking. Get a paper shredder, nothing in the bin, keep the curtains closed all the time, change your phone number.'

'Price you pay for the money.'

'Yeah, well it's affected mum a bit. She's happy for me...'

I took in the view towards the smaller hotel, the string of lights, and remembered something Jimmy had said. 'Katie, you have a wonderful opportunity ... to live the life and make a lot of money. And with that money come choices, choices that the people buying your records don't have. You could probably retire now on what you have.'

'Hardly,' she scoffed.

'Most people in the UK get by on fifteen grand a year. How many years could you keep going on what you've made?' She remained silent. 'And down here, fifteen grand would keep you going for ten years.'

She turned and faced me. 'Why do you two give so much to charity?'

I shrugged and made a face. 'What's the point in making money just for the sake of it? Stack it up in the bank and say *hey, my pile's bigger than your pile*. That's for people who like to measure their cocks.' She slowly lifted a teasing eyebrow. Hiding a smile I said, 'We like to do things with our money. That way, if the plane crashes on the way home, we'll have achieved something.'

Placing down her glass on a table she said, 'Drive me back, kind sir, it's chilly.'

I drove her back at six miles per hour, the wind in our damp hair. Pulling up at her hut, her mum opened the door. A peck on the cheek was my reward for being a kind sir. '8am at the dive centre I told her,' flooring it - and screeching off slowly and quietly.

At 5am I headed down for a snorkel in grey half-light, feeding the damn turtle, then seeing how long I could stay down. My watch said four minutes. Ashore, Jimmy was sat with a self-

service coffee at the dive centre café. 'I can hold my breath for four minutes?' I said as I ran up, my feet covered in sand.

'Maybe a bit more with practise; trick is to get the CO₂ out of your lungs, to keep forcing it out.'

After drying off in the chill dawn wind, we raided the kitchens for stale sandwiches and made ourselves scrambled eggs, the first staff arriving at 6am. At 7.30am we returned to the dive centre, a sleepy Steffan opening up.

'Don't you two know how to have a relaxing lie in?' he grumbled.

With little else to do, we made ready the kit for both us - and the day's guests - as Steffan sat watching, feet up and cradling a coffee mug.

'You want a job?' he asked.

Lotti turned up at 8am, and looking less than fresh, soon followed by a fresher looking Katie, her mum in tow.

'We just had some biscuits from yesterday,' Jean said. 'Have a late breakfast after.'

Jimmy made them both a coffee, sitting with Jean as I showed Katie the equipment, going through signals and procedures. She slipped a wetsuit on over her bikini and I carried her tank to the water's edge, the ocean dead calm this morning and very inviting.

She put a hand over her eyes and scanned the horizon. 'Beautiful. It's so calm today.'

I led her out to waist depth, the turtle closing in and circling as I helped her get her tank on. Air pressures were tested, several loud gushes disturbing the tranquil scene. With the water to our necks we placed in our mouthpieces and let air out of our buoyancy jackets, slipping below the surface and to the quiet underwater world. Kneeling, we watched the turtle circle for a few minutes before lowering into the press-up position, examining hermit crabs. Gripping the neck of her tank, I helped her out to the edge of the rocks, still only three metres of crystal clear water. We both pointed at a Moray Eel, observing small fish darting about till I noticed the dark grey shadow of our resident shark; it was attracted by the sound of our bubbles. From a pouch in my jacket I pulled out a plastic bag, fetching out a dead fish. Tucking the plastic away I held out the tempting fish. The shark darted past, eyeing us carefully. It made four passes,

getting closer each time, finally snatching at the fish and swimming off with a blur of speed. It would not be back for a while.

Again in the press-up position, we crawled slowly back towards shore, examining tiny creatures fixed to small rocks and shells. Jimmy and Steffan passed us, swimming quickly out towards the breakwater. In water shallow enough to feel the gentle waves above us we examined again hermit grabs and tiny jellyfish, brightly coloured shells and worms. Lifting to my knees I eased off my flippers, helping Katie take off hers. We stood up in water to our waist, regulators spat out.

‘Cold?’ I asked.

‘A little chilly, but I’m OK.’

I cleared matted hair from her eyes. ‘Now that’s a photo the tabloids would love.’

We trudged up the soft sand, Han stood observing us on the beach. He smiled and waved.

‘You want a go?’ I asked him. He glanced at the calm water, taking his time to think about it. ‘Come on,’ I encouraged, Han falling into step with us. At the dive centre Katie got into the warm showers, Han stood with hands clasped behind his back examining the equipment.

‘I saw your bubbles,’ Jean said.

‘You having a go?’

‘You wouldn’t get me with my head under the water,’ she scoffed.

‘I could teach you how to go down on an old wreck,’ I offered, getting a slapped wrist.

Katie appeared in damp jeans and sweatshirt. ‘I’ll shower properly in the chalet, catch you after breakfast.’ She led her mum away.

Han took a little persuading, but finally relented. I found a wetsuit his size and squeezed him in, carrying his tank to the beach. He breathed through the regulator a few times above water, then knelt down, getting used to this strange new world. I adjusted his equipment and his buoyancy, leading him off into the bay. Twenty minutes later we surfaced, Han smiling widely; it was ‘vely’ good. I got him warmed up in the showers, a hot coffee downed, and now I could not shut him up. He took a poster down with Lotti’s permission, a chart of the local fish and

their names, English and Latin, pointing at those we had glimpsed - and what they were called.

Shrill calls preceded Po's nieces bursting upon the scene, rushing to Han's knees. Han showed them the poster and keenly described in Chinese the fish he had seen, the parents looking on proudly as they approached. The Chinese wandered off as a group, chatting away. At noon we were all packed, a convoy of jeeps waiting, Rudd and Cosy driving us to the airfield. We paused briefly at the orphanage, a view from the road as we headed to the local airfield. I noticed our Dash-7 as we pulled in. Stepping down from the jeeps, Tubby walked around to us.

'I've cleaned the windscreen for you, sir. You taking her up, sir, or you want me to ferry you and your guests?'

With a false smile I said, 'You take it, it would be rude for me to ignore my guests sat in the back.'

'Right you are, sir.' Tubby boarded the Dash and I exchanged a quick look with Jimmy; this was his work. We boarded with Han and the ladies, Po's family dragged along without too much persuasion, everyone's luggage put into the hold.

After a short one-hour flight we bumped along the grass airfield, a smooth enough landing for grass. Leaving the Dash, I gave Tubby a dollar.

'That you very kindly, sir. I'll buy something for the orphans. You want me to carry your bags?'

Cursing under my breath, I jumped into a jeep, soon to the lodge. As we walked up the path to the lodge the lumbering young lion bound over, and I remembered what Jimmy had done to impress Liz. I stepped onto the grass and dropped down to my knees, the lion jumping on me without hesitation, the two of us rolling around. With the juvenile killer lion, the one afraid of Antelope, on top of me, I called for help. Katie walked over, taking a snap, kneeling and stroking the fearsome beast. For her the lion quietened down, sniffing and licking her hand. Still on my back I noticed many faces and cameras on the rooftop bar. I eased up and brushed off, the lion grabbing my leg playfully, Po's young nieces kept away from it. Inside the cool and dark interior of the lodge I found a younger cub and handed it to Han, the girls now excited.

With the current guests greeted we all gravitated to the large rooftop bar, Jimmy and me playing the dutiful hosts again and

making everyone feel welcome. Lunch was ordered, Han nursing the cub, the girls taking turns to hold it. I then did a double take as something moved past the wall. A few seconds later a giraffe's head came over the wall, a guest offering it some salad.

I walked over to it with Jimmy. 'Where the hell did that come from?'

'Skids nudged the herd closer and closer, week by week.'

'He pinched them?'

'There's no fence, they're free to go where they please. And we nudged the lion pride further out.'

Katie and Jean joined us, taking snaps of the giraffe whilst offering the animal salad. I peered over the side, two youngsters coming in closer, more adults nearby, our young fearsome lion terrified of the very tall visitors and keeping his distance.

Jean said, 'Should we not feed them, keep them wild?'

Jimmy replied, lying, 'We try and move them off, without any luck. Besides, animals like these die from disease or predator every day. Nature ... is not so wonderful.' He pointed towards Skids farm. 'Over there is our sanctuary, rescued animals, most of whom go back into the wild.'

Our party remained on the roof till the sun fell behind distant clouds, the bar offering many different views from many different angles, many guests simply sat staring into the distance for hours, some with binoculars that we provided. A call caught everyone's attention, people rushing to the eastern wall, fingers pointed. A bloody great crocodile lay on the bank of the river below, not normally glimpsed here. Cameras snapped away, binoculars were passed around, Han providing a chair for the girls to stand on.

'No midnight swimming,' I whispered into Katie's ear.

At sundown the staff organised a barbeque, a Maasi troupe walking over, soon a show of dancing and jumping, some spear throwing - a few of the guests having a go, followed by a Maasi sing along. Our daft lion seemed fascinated by it all and sat watching, now on a leash, getting many bits of meat tossed to him. With a full complement of guests in attendance the place bustled, thirty-six guests, plus six from the smaller lodge. When the Maasi headed off, a bus waiting for them out of sight of guests, everyone gravitated again to the roof.

I finally got Katie alone in my room around midnight. The mini-bar got raided and we sat talking for hours, eventually cuddling up fully clothed. She fell asleep quickly, leaving me staring at the ceiling fan for many hours before nodding off. At 5am I found her lying on her side, so I snuck out quietly, finding Jimmy playing with the lion, the armed night guards still on duty and stood nearby.

‘Well?’ he asked.

‘Snuggled up clothed.’ I shrugged, self-service tea fetched, a sandwich in plastic.

‘You’ll get there.’

As I sat I said, ‘Did you clock that guy at the beach bar? He’s here, sounds American.’

‘And?’

‘Anyone of *interest*?’

Jimmy took a moment. ‘No.’

I left it at that, returning to Katie around 7am and snuggling up. She stirred, stretching out. ‘Mum will be fussing now.’

‘Dirty stop out,’ I whispered, getting a gentle elbow.

‘Tabloids will link you to me, guests will talk,’ she said, her voice a little horse.

‘I have bigger concerns, love.’

‘Like...?’

‘Like a refugee crisis.’

She turned over. Finally, she said, ‘Odd, when you think of it like that. I stress over the latest picture of my arse, you stress over saving lives.’

‘It’s a size six arse.’

‘No, eight. You’re crap with girl’s clothes,’ she playfully scolded.

I laughed. ‘Want a cup of tea?’

‘Oh, yes please.’

I fetched a mug of tea from the kitchens, kicking the damn lion away to stop it tripping me. As I turned the key on the room I noticed again the man from the beach bar, having a lonely cigarette down towards the river. I hoped he did not like early morning swims. Katie sat up cross-legged and accepted the tea.

‘So, where do we go from here?’ she softly asked.

‘Safari at 9am.’ She gave me a look. I asked, ‘Where do you want to go from here?’

‘I thought you were more of the *take charge* type.’

‘Not when it comes to women; I tried that ... and lost one.’

‘Lost ... how?’

I sat against the headboard. ‘I wanted her to give up her job, live off my money, travel the world in style.’

‘Silly girl. Might be nice to be a kept woman.’

‘And your last boyfriend?’ I delicately pressed.

‘Don’t you read the tabloids?’

‘Not really.’ I waited.

‘He ... had a decent job, but worked a lot of hours, couldn’t come with me on trips and tours.’

‘Oh, dear,’ I theatrically let out, getting a quick look. ‘Where as I... can go where I want, want I want.’

‘You applying for the job?’

‘What’s the boss like to work for?’ I teased.

‘Moody, miserable sometimes, still trying to figure out what she wants.’

‘I’d want you to do a charity concert down here,’ I lightly suggested.

‘I want to see you shower,’ she said. I blinked. ‘Go on, strip off and shower while I watch.’

‘Yes, boss. But it’s time and a half.’

Now as lovers, now as a couple, we joined the 9am safari with our Chinese gang, three jeeps and a few other guests, including lone smoker and his wife. In the humid heat we bumped along to the river bend, a view of the old crocodile, then onward to elephant country, a large herd shadowed for an hour. A picnic lunch was laid out on trestle tables, Trev riding shotgun with his M16 slung as guests stood about nibbling snacks.

For some reason I found myself watching lone smoker as he stepped away from the group, a cigarette enjoyed at length as he took in the countryside, the man always tipping his head back when he exhaled. I saw the flash of movement, the reaction, and registered it a second later. ‘Snake bite!’

Rushing for the man I found Jimmy there first, kicking away the cobra. We grabbed the man and helped him back, his leg unable to prop up his weight. Trev had the first aid kit out in a flash, Jimmy tearing the man’s trouser leg and revealing the bite. We were an hour from anywhere, I realised. Jimmy grabbed a vial, then a needle, and extracted the pale liquid. It looked like an

official vial, as I was familiar with, but Jimmy injected the man above and below the wound, a glance at me from under his eyebrows, a final shot into the man's arm as his face contorted in agony. The man's wife was concerned, but not hysterical by any means.

Jimmy jumped into a jeep, started the engine and revved it, knocking the radio on. 'This is River View safari park to any Rescue Force mobile. Man down, snake bite, anyone able to respond, over.'

'River View, this is Romeo Foxtrot One,' crackled back, surprising me. I might have guessed a jeep somewhere on the land, and an outside chance of that.

'Romeo Foxtrot One, this is Silo, man down, extraction required. What's your location?'

'Jimmy, we're ten miles north of the lodge, passing the Maasi village, over.'

'We're ten miles west of the lodge, the usual picnic site.'

'Roger that. Inbound. Out.'

Jimmy knocked off the engine. 'Help's on its way,' he told the injured man's wife.

Little more than five minutes later we could hear the distinctive resonating drone of a Huey. As I watched, a Huey painted white, not green, approached at speed. It climbed steeply and I saw the large red cross on the side; the Rescue Force logo. It slowed as it climbed, its tail flipped around and a slide back down towards us. Ratchet! It was on the ground inside of thirty seconds, Doc Graham and Hildy bursting out. They grabbed lone smoker and carried him back to the Huey, easing him inside with his wife, quick instructions from Jimmy shouted. The door closed and they powered away, dried grass filling our field of view. It was soon all quiet again, the gang shocked.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' Jimmy called. 'Snake bites are rare, that is our first casualty, other than a member of staff – and *they* enjoy it. So please *do not* let it spoil your stay.' He repeated the reassurances in Chinese, encouraging people to finish the picnic. People grabbed food and drink, but sat back in the jeeps, wary now of the grass beneath their feet.

The tour continued on schedule and without further incident, people more interested in tales of Rescue Force than cute animals. We arrived back to a pile of paperwork for the

insurance company and lawyers, just in case. The manager phoned the hospital in Nairobi and they reported that lone smoker, in the register as Cramer Keely, was doing well.

High drama

Ratchet set a course for Nairobi, not the nearest hospital that could treat a snake bite, a minor debate as to where to set down. He had fuel for Nairobi hospital, just, arguing that if the guy was stable they should fly to Nairobi, because whatever small hospital they landed at would send him there anyway for further tests. With Keely stable and coherent, Doc Graham relented and agreed on Nairobi, less hassle for the patient overall.

They flew on, a forty minute flight, Keely monitored by Doc Graham and Hildy, his wife reassured. As they neared Nairobi they contacted the airport's tower, informing the tower of their flight path and altitude, requesting that the hospital to be notified, staff standing by. It was all straight forward enough. They landed on a patch of grass, powering down quickly, but with the fuel warning light now on. That warning gave them twenty miles at least. Keely was put on a trolley and wheeled away with Doc Graham, Mrs Keely in tow, as Ratchet went and phoned Rudd. And there began on opportunity.

Rudd called the press and talked up the dramatic rescue, the helicopter rushing the man to hospital just in time, out of fuel on landing. Money may have changed hands. A fuel truck was organised for the next morning, the Huey snapped at length as it sat on the grass, our team milling around in their white uniforms. Rudd offered the chief resident a donation to the hospital for a proper heli-pad, a cool twenty grand. There were soon pictures of the chief physician thanking our team in the local papers. Once the Huey was re-fuelled, it took off whilst being filmed by several local TV stations, making the evening news. And the hospital, they cut down a tree and painted a large "H" onto parched brown grass, a less than effective use of the money.

The next evening, Keely and spouse returned, flown out by Cosy. Jimmy met them downstairs, welcoming him back in front of quite a small audience.

‘On behalf of the company, we offer our deepest apologies, and will be refunding the cost of your holiday, flying you back to the States first class whenever you’re ready.’

Keely was on the spot. ‘That ... won’t be necessary, thanks.’

‘How’s the leg?’

‘They say ... that I did not get a full dose of venom. I was lucky.’

‘Can I get you a drink. I think the bar does Snakebite.’

People laughed, Keely on the spot again.

‘Thanks, but I’d like to just rest.’

‘Of course, anything you need you just let the staff know.’

Keely limped away with his wife. Jimmy found me, Katie and her mum upstairs, sunbathing on loungers.

‘Snake bite man is back, good as new,’ he announced as he sat down.

‘He alright?’ Jean asked without lifting her head.

‘Yeah, fine now.’

‘Lucky our chopper was near by,’ I mentioned, a quick glance at Jimmy.

‘This *is* their main training ground, because it’s our land,’ Jimmy pointed out to me, and those in earshot.

I went back to my sunbathing, holding hands with Katie. Later that night, around 1am, I snuck out for a few beers while Katie was asleep. Jimmy was sat in the bar, the dog asleep at his feet, a night guard patrolling outside.

‘All quiet?’ I asked as I pulled myself a pint.

‘Yeah,’ Jimmy let out, the dog raising its nose for a second as I sat. We chatted for ten minutes, before a shadow in the lodge stepped into the light. Keely.

‘Trouble sleeping?’ Jimmy asked our new companion.

‘Mind if I ... join you?’ Keely asked, sounding as if he wanted to do anything other than that.

‘No, please do,’ Jimmy offered. ‘Drink?’

‘No. Thanks.’ Keely stared across at us in the dim light. ‘You moved quickly yesterday. Probably saved my life.’

‘It did ... save your life.’ Jimmy emphasised. ‘Otherwise, people might think I had something to do with your death, Mister Bob Donnelly.’

‘Ah,’ I let out loud, tipping my head back.

‘You’re a great actor, I’ll give you that. So why the charade?’

‘What charade?’ Jimmy questioned. ‘I was behaving as I would to any guest, and for all I knew you just wanted a break down here. Would have been rude of me to break your cover, you might have been spying on someone.’

Keely stared back. ‘You know what my remit is?’

‘To find out what all this Magestic nonsense is all about. And before you ask, yes, Magestic made sure we had serum and a helicopter stood by for you.’

Keely stared back for several seconds. ‘I’ve had nothing but... malice towards that invisible guy since the start. Why save me?’

‘Magestic does not judge others by their own poor standards,’ Jimmy pointed out in a sombre tone.

Keely finally asked, ‘In high school I burnt my hand. How?’

Jimmy lifted his gaze to the stars. ‘You tried to set fire to your ex-girlfriend’s house, immediately regretting it and putting out the fire before anyone noticed.’

‘You little fire bug,’ I said. ‘Tut tut.’

‘That Somali rescue ... you knew you’d come back?’

‘There is always random chance, it’s not that clearly defined. I could trip in the shower and be killed. *We are not* immortal.’

I faced Jimmy. ‘Are you going to introduce me?’

‘Paul, this gentlemen works for the NSA. The President’s new National Security Advisor tasked him with checking out Magestic. Well, debunking him actually.’

‘There’s no pleasing some people,’ I said with a sigh.

‘But he *will* be very positive towards us in future.’

‘I will?’ Keely challenged.

‘You haven’t asked yet *what* I injected you with,’ Jimmy coldly stated.

‘Is your pee ... a bit dark and smelly?’ I delicately enquired.

Keely sat upright. ‘What did you inject me with? It had to be anti-venom to save me.’

‘I injected you with the same stuff that we were injected with many years ago. Paul here can run a marathon in under two hours.’

I said, pointing at Jimmy, ‘And he’s *much* faster.’

Keely waited, a look of horror on his face.

Jimmy explained, ‘It’s a drug that Magestic had designed in a lab, with his knowledge of future medicine. You, Mister Keely-Donnelly, will live to be very old, very fit ... and immune to all diseases known to man; cancer, AIDS, the works. You’ll be running marathons on your hundredth birthday. Just the one small problem.’

‘Indeed,’ I let out.

‘What ... what problem?’ Keely asked.

‘Well, Uncle Sam – having heard about the miracle drug in your system – might want to lock you away in a lab and experiment on you, extracting blood when necessary, some tissue samples, you know. Since you have a cure for cancer in your blood, they’d be keen to copy it, and to sell it.’

‘Make a buck,’ I said. ‘As well as not letting you *yourself* ... make a buck from it.’

We sat back and let him think on the implications.

Jimmy finally said, ‘All I need to do, is tell them to run a blood test. And all you need to do, to be sure that I am telling the truth, is wait a few days before getting on a treadmill.’

‘You hope to blackmail me?’ Keely asked in an angered whisper.

‘You’ve been a sceptic up to now, Bob. Now you’re living proof, which you’ll come to see. The best proof, is one that you can feel when you wake in the mornings. Oh, and the AIDS orphanage – it has a serious lack of...’

‘Kids with AIDS,’ I finished off.

‘If there’s a cure for these diseases, why keep it hidden?’ Keely demanded.

‘A minute ago you were doubting Magestic existed,’ I pointed out. ‘Now you want to know why a fictional character is not helping the world. Make your mind up, Bob.’

Keely eased back.

Jimmy said, ‘The answer that you are searching for ... is this. In a few years we’ll make it appear that a research lab found a cure with some success, then more success. An overnight cure

would cause questions, followed by exposure, followed by civil unrest.'

'Pointer believes that Magestic is an astronaut,' Keely stated.

'What do you believe?' Jimmy asked him.

'A clairvoyant; no way in hell an astronaut time traveller could know everything he does, certainly not my high school pranks. Or that helicopter yesterday. Too much random chance, as you said. How the hell would a time traveller know when I got bit by a snake, date and time and place.' It was a question I wanted to know as well, but would never ask.

'Historical records,' I suggested.

'I rolled a dice to decide when I'd be here, another dice on my choice of safari. I'm a hell of a sceptic.'

'So what will you do now, Bob?' Jimmy posed.

Keely glanced at the dark savannah. 'Certainly get on a treadmill, that's for sure.'

'And then?' Jimmy nudged.

'Then ...' He took a breath. 'Then ... if you're not lying, I'm in for a routine drugs test in a few weeks. Anything odd showing up would be investigated further. I'd ... be screwed.'

'I am not as heartless as you may think,' Jimmy suggested. 'There is a way out.'

Keely stared back. 'Which is?'

'I told you, there's an orphanage full of kids who've been injected. And I'll be happy to co-operate with your government, sceptics or not. I'd like to meet with your boss, ideally the Joint Chiefs, but without the President present.'

'Without him?'

'Yes, without him. President's come and go, the security of America remains constant. And politicians tend to do what's best for short-term popularity, not what's best for the long term.'

'You sound like me after a beer,' Keely admitted.

'Then maybe ... we are not so different.' Jimmy took a moment, a sip of his beer. 'In 2013 a future Republican President will invade Venezuela for its oil. You'll lose people in the jungle every day for five years, twenty thousand in total, and every country in South America will turn against you.'

'Be a fucking disaster to try and grab their oil,' Keely admitted.

‘But it will happen. On the other hand, I could show you where to drill in the gulf, a deposit bigger than anything found so far.’ He let Keely think on it. ‘In 2015, another Republican President will attack China –’

‘China?’

‘The aim being not to pay them what you owe them after OPEC stops using the dollar as reserve currency. Twenty million Americans will die, your economy screwed. And in 2025 the planet is struck by a natural disaster that wipes out just about everyone. Now, you can sit there and doubt, or you can make some plans – just in case. Oh, and your son in the Marines, he was due to be killed in a war, a war that *did not* happen in 2000.’

‘Iraq,’ Keely coldly stated.

‘Yes. And ... you’re welcome.’

‘Did you kill Tasker?’

‘No, I was planning on using him. I prefer to ... persuade, than to harm.’

‘We taped a conversation about the gold, Tasker and his buddy.’

‘I know.’

‘And Potomo?’

‘What you must keep in mind, is that the Israeli and British Governments get a great deal of assistance from me. They don’t like people threatening me, or trying to bribe me.’

Keely gave that some careful thought. ‘We tracked movement in a Mossad safe house in Djibouti, just before and just after the Khartoum job. The shooters, were they British?’

‘You might think that, I could not possibly comment.’

‘The Israelis get shipwreck tip-offs?’

‘Yes. And the British.’

‘Any pay us a cut,’ I put in.

‘A cut?’ Keely puzzled. ‘You take a cut?’

‘What do think pays for the orphanage?’ I testily asked.

‘And if you gave us that gulf location...’ Keely nudged.

‘Then the orphanages of Africa would be well funded for a long time,’ I finished off.

Keely let out a breath. ‘You’re an enigma wrapped in a puzzle.’

‘With a soft chocolate centre,’ I added. ‘Oh, and the Chinese guy we’re here with, Han, he’s from the People’s Republic.’

‘My boss will love that,’ Keely wistfully stated. ‘What’s their angle?’

‘This is a round planet, Bob; water spreads out evenly. You can’t fix one part without fixing the whole - it doesn’t work. And by the way, I’ve told them already the exact date and time of your future attack on them.’

Keely shot upright. ‘You did? What the hell for?’

‘To prevent it, of course,’ I said. ‘Why else?’

‘It’s a disaster,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘One that you *will not* make.’

‘You trying to set future security policy for America?’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy firmly stated, stares exchanged. ‘Magesic will tell the Chinese and Russians of any future threats well ahead of time, pieces on the chessboard will be moved. Stalemate. Because, what I have not revealed yet, is the final battle. In that final battle you, the Russians and the Chinese will be fighting side by side.’

‘Against?’

‘You’re a sceptic, Bob, you’re not allowed to know till you’ve *seen the light*,’ Jimmy pointed out.

Keely glanced at me. ‘And the outcome?’

‘We lose.’

‘We lose?’ Keely loudly questioned. ‘Even with the advance knowledge?’

‘Yes, Bob. We can get you to 2025 well prepared, that’s all. And even getting you that far will be a miracle of biblical proportions.’ Jimmy sipped his beer. ‘Consider the Second World War. Advance knowledge would have given the Allies an edge, shortening the war, but millions would still have died. It’s the same principle. Global war is tricky, no matter how well prepared you are, Bob.’

With Keely, or Donnelly, off to bed, I asked, ‘Why don’t we bring Big Paul down here for bodyguard stuff?’

‘Slight of hand,’ Jimmy replied. ‘We ... are here, those watching us know that we are here, so Big Paul can run errands for me in the UK.’

‘Ah.’

‘And we don’t need a bodyguard when I know what the threats are, Dumbo.’

The next day Mister Donnelly, acting now as a guest, asked for transport to the airport, reports of a sick relative back home, Cosy fetching him in a Cessna at no extra charge.

I took Katie on a long drive to the edge of Schilling's land, soon to be ours bar the signing, and enjoyed a peaceful picnic on an escarpment, mixed herds munching on the grass in the valley below us. The clouds kept their distance, a cooling breeze blew up the ridge, and we chatted away in peace for hours, Trev and the driver asleep in the jeep. It was a magical few hours.

Returning to the lodge, we found Rudd arriving; Cosy had flown him back up from Nairobi. Rudd said hello, not recognising Katie, and I tried to explain what he did for us. In the bar we joined Jimmy and Katie's mum, the dear lady a little sunburnt, aching, and feeling sorry for herself. Han and Po's family were off doing the tourist bit and, hopefully, bonding.

'Schilling has signed,' Rudd informed us.

Jimmy explained to the ladies, 'We just bought the next biggest park north west of here.'

'We saw it today,' Katie put in.

Jimmy told Rudd, 'I want a lodge on that escarpment, same design as this one. Then I want a traditional style hotel where the river nears the lake, a small lodge at the rise above the river bend – you'll see it on the map, and finally another small lodge where he has a swamp, built on stilts and high up, a view out over the trees.' Rudd took notes. Last, but not least, I want another two lodges here, ten rooms each; the river bend and the rise east of the plain, edge of our land.'

'How many people could we handle then?' I asked Rudd.

'Two hundred and fifty at a time,' Rudd answered, raising his eyebrows.

'That's a lot of building work,' Jean noted. 'Will that spoil the place?'

Jimmy explained, 'My priority, is to boost Kenyan tourism revenue. Jobs first. Besides, each of these lodges will be ten or twenty miles from the next building, small dots on the map.'

'I'll use the same people,' Rudd suggested. 'Same design, different scales.'

'Is Cosy still here?' Jimmy asked.

'Yes,' Rudd replied. 'You want him?'

Jimmy gave a nod. 'Tell him when you see him I have some business in Ghana for him. We'll be buying a hotel on the beach, backed by mountains and rain forest, best of both worlds.'

'Sounds nice,' Jean enthused.

Rudd announced, 'There's now an Oxfam hut at the airbase, talk of Medicine Sans Frontier.'

Jimmy nodded towards Rudd, then turned his head to Katie. 'Any areas here ... that you think could be improved?'

'A nice pool?'

'Would be out of place,' I said. 'I don't think the Kenyans would like it, this is national park land, we have to stick to their rules. This lodge is all wood, for instance.'

'Schilling's could have a pool, there's an old pool there already,' Rudd suggested.

'Fine, fix it up,' Jimmy agreed. 'Oh, and start on fixing the roads, fast access back and forth.'

We signed the documents Rudd had brought up, the paperwork done, the money allocated. At least Schilling did not run out on his wife, they'd be retiring to the coast, a penthouse apartment with all mod cons. Guess he'd had enough of the savannah, its heat and its bugs.

Skids stepped into the bar, a ball of fur in each hand; Cheetah cubs. 'Lions got mumsy, we'll raise these in the sanctuary,' he said, handing one to Katie, the second to her mum. 'Drop them in when ready.' He withdrew.

'Will they go back to the wild?' Rudd wondered.

'Tricky,' Jimmy said. 'The mother teaches them things we can't teach them. Only hope would be a mum that's just lost her cubs. She'll either adopt them, or kill them. But if you raise them, then keep them hungry – dropping in antelope kid - they'll kill and eat it, developing the skill. Even then they got a rats chance in hell.'

A member of staff brought out two small bottles of milk and the dried hide of a dead Cheetah. He put the teet through a hole in the hide, handing it to Katie. She placed the cub onto the hide and it dug its claws in, attacking the teet as I took a picture.

'Guess it was hungry,' Katie said. I took the second bottle and pushed the teet through a second hole, Jean handing over her cub, soon two noisily sucking cubs being observed by everyone.

'You used to do that,' Jean told Katie.

‘Mum!’

We tried, and failed, not to laugh.

Jimmy told me, ‘Day after tomorrow we’ve got some work to do, two days out.’ Katie was now listening in; we’d overlap on her final day. I figured Jimmy would not drag me off unless it was important, so did not argue, certainly not in front of Katie. ‘Rudd, I’ll need you Cosy and Mac, and the Dash.’

War preparations

We boarded our Dash on the estate’s grass airstrip, overnight bags in hand, the gang already on board and waiting. The paint job on the Dash was now as per the Huey, white with red crosses and our logo, Rescue Force in large letters on the tail; you couldn’t miss it against the backdrop of green savannah.

I took right seat. ‘Spent that dollar I gave you?’

‘No, sir, I’ll be cherishing it as a souvenir of your generosity.’

‘Cheeky bastard, I pay your wages.’

‘Who’s the bit of totty?’ Tubby asked as we taxied, bumping along the hard dirt.

‘British singer, famous over there.’

Jimmy asked Rudd, ‘Got us permission for Tanzania?’ Rudd displayed a fax page. ‘Flight plan?’ Rudd nodded.

‘What’s in Tanzania?’ Mac asked, sporting a new white Rescue Force jacket.

‘The future,’ Jimmy enigmatically stated.

Tubby lined up on the end of grass strip, nose facing south, and powered up with a roar, brakes off and bumping forwards. We pulled up sharply and banked, climbing to the west, the lodge soon visible a mile away in the two o’clock position, the original lodge under our nose. And somewhere down there was the girl of my dreams, a girl who even managed to be attractive and sexy when she sneezed. I felt a twinge of the heart strings, heading off to work with her down below, but I knew what Jimmy would say - after he had slapped me about the head at length. I sighed, the ground below getting further away as we climbed.

Tubby gave me a run down of the aircraft's instrumentation and technical data, and at altitude he handed over, checking the map and having a chocolate bar. I programmed the course and altitude into the autopilot, checked the instrumentation, then let the computer handle it. A GPS display caught my eye and I checked it against the map, scraping off melted chocolate flecks. With a giant, yet beautiful cumulonimbus cloud blocking our view north, we skirted south of it, soon a view of Lake Victoria on the horizon.

Two hours later I spotted Lake Tanganyika. I checked again the GPS and the map, and adjusted the course slightly. We were heading to Kigoma airfield, but it had no tower, so a radio announcement of our arrival was unnecessary. Jimmy tapped me on the shoulder, displaying three fingers and a slow circle of his index finger: circle at three thousand. I knocked off the autopilot, eased back the throttles and let the nose drop, descending to three thousand feet and circling the small town below us, the brown suburban sprawl perched on the eastern shore of the lake. It did not look inviting. The runway was visible in the centre of the town, with what looked like a white Antonov on the apron.

I tried the radio. 'Circling aircraft to Antonov aircraft on Kigoma airfield, receiving over?'

An accented voice came back. 'Circling aircraft, this is UN Antonov. Receiving, over.'

'Antonov, what is wind direction, over?'

'Circling aircraft, land from the north, cross wind is ten miles per hour from the lake, over.'

'Antonov, thanks, be with you soon. Rescue Force Two Out.'

'Two?' Tubby challenged. 'What's One?'

'The Huey, it was first.'

'That crappy old Cessna was first, and this is much bigger and better – *it* should be One.'

'You don't even work for Rescue Force,' I pointed out.

Still arguing, I took our Dash around and lined up on the runway, Tubby correcting my glide path. Over the internal tanoy I instructed, 'Please put your seat-back tables in the upright position, extinguish cigars and belt up.' I made contact with the runway smoothly, taxiing around to the UN Antonov and a waiting fuel truck. With the engines winding down we stepped out into the heat and stretched, the fuel truck pulling up and

demanding cash. Rudd paid the man, enough fuel to get us back the next day.

A UN jeep approached a minute later, Bob Davies at the wheel and his window wound down. 'What you lot doing here?'

'Any good restaurants?' I asked, a hand over my eyes and scanning the rubbish dump that was the town.

'Not really,' Bob answered. We clambered aboard, leaving Tubby with the Dash. 'This place is more basic than Mawlini.'

After just a hundred yards we stopped at the dilapidated old tower, not looking like it had seen any action since the Second World War. Stepping through glass and weeds, we climbed to the roof, a very familiar journey for us.

I put my hands on my hips and surveyed the field. The runway looked to be in reasonable shape, a few cracks with weeds, but the edges of the airfield were strewn with litter, a few burnt out cars. I even noticed a dead donkey, kids throwing stones at it. At least they weren't flogging it. 'Nice spot.'

'We going to use this dump?' Mac asked.

'Yes, I want to be closer to Central Africa.' Jimmy tapped Cosy on the shoulder and pointed to a building in the distance. 'That's a hotel, of sorts. Buy it. Advertise for a local Mister Fixit, an ex-pat who needs the money.'

'We're going to fix this airfield?' Cosy asked.

'We sure are,' Jimmy said. 'Gentlemen, what we did in Mawlini ... we shall do here, with a little help from Bob, who is looking forward to a nice hotel here with a pool and rooftop bar.'

'You'll have to keep the locals at bay,' Bob cautioned with a grin. 'They'll steal the props off your engines when they're turning.'

'This is the order of things,' Jimmy explained. 'Cosy will get that hotel, find a local man to use, arrange security for this place. Then we tackle the fence, making it like Colditz, more security men to stop them stealing the fence itself. We'll send those self-assembly cabins by truck when the place is secure, ten will do to start with. We'll fix up this tower and get a radio installed, and I'll ask the Tanzanian Government for a detachment of soldiers – paid for by us. Then we can think about a Rescue Force detachment here, recruiting local nurses and any wandering medics. We'll build a nice hotel with a pool and roof bar, making

it all available for the UN, who are up the road in a compound – but may be tempted to move down here. Any ... questions?’

‘We’ve done it all before,’ I said.

‘How much time do you want me down here?’ Rudd asked, Mac turning his head. He was interested in that as well.

‘Some at the start, to get it going, that’s all,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Mac, they’ll be under your control from Kenya till they’re big enough - and get their own boss. Bob, anything you want here?’

‘Sheds – secure ones, bigger apron, landing lights.’

‘OK, first things first,’ Jimmy said, leading us down.

We drove out of the airfield, a lone police officer at the gate sat resting on his rifle, off to see that man’s boss. The town was a mess, worse than most small towns that I had seen in Kenya, and felt much hotter. The ferry landing area bustled, something of a market in progress, and we tooted our way through, finally finding the police building. The Ford Granada outside did little to inspire me, a bored and warm looking guard welcoming us with a nod and a toothy grin. The door opened to a wide room with long benches, numerous ceiling fans out of kilter, locals sat fanning themselves. It looked like the waiting room doubled up as their court building. Bob pointed towards a corridor and we followed his finger. Jimmy knocked on a door labelled up as Commander and turned the handle, greeting the occupant in a local tongue. The police commander, dressed in a blue shirt and dark blue trousers with a stripe down the side, recognised the UN uniform.

Jimmy announced, ‘We ... are from Rescue Force medical charity, our aircraft is at the airfield.’

‘Welcome to Kigoma. How can I help you gentlemen?’

‘We’d like to hire some guards for the airfield, for two days, and more in the future,’ Jimmy explained.

‘For the aircraft,’ the Commander realised.

‘Yes,’ Jimmy replied. He handed over five one hundred dollar bills. ‘Will that be enough for now?’

‘Oh, yes, yes. I will send some good men straight away.’

‘Who will sleep in their cars, near the aircraft,’ Jimmy pressed.

‘Yes, yes.’

‘Then why don’t you join us for some food and drink,’ Jimmy offered.

The man lifted his hat with an enthusiastic smile. 'I know the best hotel.' I figured he meant the most expensive.

He led the way, his dusty police car soon leading us through dusty streets and to a better part of town. We parked in pleasant gardens and walked through to an open courtyard of well-maintained grass, even a fountain, a few white faces sat about, Bob Davies shaking hands with one of them. The waiters pulled two tables together for us and we settled, a pleasant spot, warm but shaded, beers ordered.

Jimmy explained some of our intentions for the airfield, the Commander having many "cousins" that could help, Jimmy breaking the conversation to practice his language skills on the waiter and ordering us all chicken. Easing back and relaxing, we chatted to each other or the commander as we ate, picking his brains on local facilities. It sounded like he would prove very useful. After lunch we again endured the heat and bustle of the town, before journeying along a lonely road through parched brown countryside, a slither of distant blue lake visible on the horizon, and to the existing UN compound for a quick visit. Heading further south later again, we kicked up dust along the lakeside road and progressed into scrubland. Dismounting at a dust bowl of a spot, we stretched our legs, a local boy whipping a donkey along and waving.

Jimmy said, 'I reckon Rwanda will implode within a year. When it does I want to be able to house some refugees here.'

'Sold that to the Tanzanians, have you?' Bob asked.

'If I make a compound, with no refugees, there's no problem. If, and when, refugees head this way I can house them ... and at that point the Tanzanians will be pleased to fuck that I'm paying for it, and not them.' He faced Bob squarely and thrust his face forwards. 'Would that not be the case?'

'If there is a civil war, then the Tanzanians will be glad of all the help they can get,' Bob admitted. 'The lake acts like a motorway, it's better than the roads around here.'

'You be wanting a mine school down here?' Mac asked.

'No, don't think so,' Jimmy answered. 'If we create external mine training detachments they'll be where they're needed, like Mozambique or Afghanistan.'

Away from the gang, and facing the lake, I stepped up to Jimmy, who seemed to be fixed on the shimmering blue line on the horizon that was lake Tanganyika.

‘I can hear their screams,’ he said without looking around. ‘I can see the skulls piled high.’

I took in the horizon. ‘It’ll be bad?’

He sighed. ‘It’ll be ... very bad. And people will write reports on what they *could* have done, what signs were missed. Bla ... bla ... bla.’

I took off my sunglasses and wiped my brow with my sleeve. ‘Will they listen?’

‘In some ways, but I’ll have to offer some inducements.’

‘Bribing people to save lives. Seems ... wrong somehow,’ I quipped.

‘They mean well, for the most part,’ Jimmy said. ‘I’ll give the UN some money, get some people in place, do what I can.’

‘Can’t be averted?’ I asked.

Jimmy took a while answering. ‘No. The egg needs to be cracked ... to repair it.’

Scanning the local terrain with interest from the jeep, we headed back to the hotel we had eaten at earlier, rooms already booked, some doubling-up required. Cosy headed out by himself to smoke out the town, Bob Davies flying off in the Antonov. With the local police at the Dash, three of them, Tubby got a taxi and joined us at the hotel. Actually, he asked for the best hotel and ended up with us, complaining of being abandoned, despite prior arrangements. We ate and drank to the small hours, Cosy returning and briefing Jimmy on who was who, and who could arrange what; the police commander and his brother, a local businessmen, captured most of the town’s action. We had the right man.

The next morning we took snaps of the airfield, sketches were made, plans discussed, input taken; everyone had their say. When everyone was satisfied, Tubby fired up the Dash. We taxied without permission from air traffic control, Tubby taking the piss and trying to contact the tower’s ghosts of the past. The Dash disturbed the kids playing with the dead donkey as it roared along the runway and lifted its nose, banking hard to the left, circling around and fixing a course to the east as we climbed.

Just over two hours later I landed the Dash on our grass airstrip, bumping along and reversing the engines with a roar, a short landing routine practised. Back at the lodge I found Katie and her mum sat having lunch, no safari today, Jean feeling a little unwell. I caught up with what they had done yesterday: an injured young elephant had been captured by the staff, now being housed over at Skids farm till it recovered; they had both hand fed it. With storm clouds looming we headed below with the rest of the guests, sitting in the bar and watching the rain, soon a rainbow visible in the distance, the bar floor now displaying several small puddles. With mum off for a sleep we retired to our hut for some 'I missed you' time. Following the downpour the humidity was up and we both shined with sweat, in and out of the shower many times.

With a scratch at the door I opened it naked, the lion pushing in. Laughing, we let the fearsome beast lay on the bed, muddy paws an all; bedding needed changing anyway. We lay back and chatted at length, our feet tickling the lion's belly.

A knock on the door was followed by Jimmy's voice. 'You in there?' I opened the door a crack, a well-worn newspaper thrust through. 'You've made the tabloids.'

Back on the bed I scanned the paper, finding us on page five. 'Katie and new love go wild on safari', a background of tiger stripes to the title. I curled a lip; wrong continent, no tigers. I laughed at the title, Katie not so amused. I read the detail with a finger, finding nothing that I objected to. They had me down as a rich stock market trader, hotel and nightclub owner. They detailed the helicopter rescue, giving me a good write up, listed my address as Belgravia and that I went to School in Richmond and Kingston Polytechnic.

'Bastards!' I cursed.

'What it is?' Katie puzzled.

'They found out I went to Kingston Polytechnic,' I said with a smile, getting an elbow.

They had her age wrong, she was not twenty five till next month, and her song had peaked at number two, not three as described. It left me wanting to give her a good talking to, but I resisted; I found it very odd the kind of things that she was sensitive to. Good job they did not have her down as a size ten, she would have killed herself.

‘It’s OK,’ I offered, heading for the shower. She re-read the detail many times.

‘Paul,’ she called from the bedroom. ‘There’s something I need to tell you.’ I stepped out and towelled down, waiting. She continued, ‘The man I was seeing, we ... only broke up before I came away. I ... needed a break.’

I stepped over, bent double and kissed her on the forehead. Whispering, I said, ‘A few miles west of here there’s a civil war, thousands killed each day. I don’t give a rat’s arse.’ I returned to the bathroom and cleaned up.

When I had uttered the words I was putting on a front, a defence mechanism, but as I gave it some thought, considering Rwanda, it put things into perspective. Remembering something Jimmy had said, I took a breath, focusing on my image in the mirror. ‘Live each day with her as if tomorrow you’ll die. You just might.’ She jumped into the shower without a word and I evicted the slumbering lion, a toe up its arse. Dressed, I shouted that I’d be in the lodge, and stepped out.

I found Jimmy sat with Han. ‘That story don’t bother me,’ I said with a shrug as I sat.

‘It’s just the beginning,’ Jimmy cautioned. ‘Everything you do with her will be scrutinized.’

Han was concerned. ‘The British newspapers will be a problem?’

‘No,’ Jimmy told him. ‘Always hide a big lie behind a smaller one. The more exposure we get, the less likely people are to consider who we really are, and the less likely they are to believe such a tale as time goes on. It’s easy to believe a complete stranger is a spy or a threat, not so easy to believe someone you have known a long time to be such a threat. And if people see that we have faults, they won’t believe us a threat, even when we’re accused directly.’

‘An interesting approach,’ Han noted.

Katie checked in on her mum, packing her own case and helping to pack her mum’s. She joined me in the bar, nodding towards the damp grass outside. We went for a stroll, and had an awkward chat.

I finally had it straight in my mind. ‘Katie, I like you a lot, I want to see you, but I won’t put up with any showbiz crap. I don’t mind reporters or stories, they can say I have a small dick –

I don't care. I care more about you fussing over it all. If you're that miserable in the limelight, then quit and get a job as a secretary and I'll still see you – I'm not after your money or a fucking trophy girlfriend.' When finished, I felt quiet proud of myself; there was a time when I could not have got a coherent sentence out to someone like her.

She said she needed time to think, and I was fine with that, I had a few other problems in the queue ahead of her. We strolled back, had a quiet meal with Jean, and she headed off to bed early, back in her own hut with her mum. I was up early as normal and drove them to the airstrip, Cosy flying them back to Nairobi. After a wave goodbye I thought that was that.

Landing back at Gatwick, two day's later, we found a sprinkling of reporters, but I was ready. Han slipped away unnoticed, Jimmy inviting the reporters and photographers to the bar upstairs. We bought them all drinks, sat and chatted at length about more than just Katie. I didn't try and deny anything, but played it down a little, handing over a reel of film that Jimmy had taken of the various locations, but without any shots of the happy couple. Jimmy offered a free two-weeks in Kenya for whoever ran the best story with the best pictures of the lodge. One reporter asked for a story about our stock market success and Jimmy readily agreed, a date and time fixed to visit the old apartment and the house, plus a trip to McKinleys. When we left the reporters, not a single one tried to follow us, all said goodbye like old buddies. And they all got invites to the club.

'Cats and dogs,' Jimmy said as we headed to the multi-storey car park. 'They are what they are, and we'll use them more than they use us.'

Karl was waiting with Big Paul, Han already in the car. Karl said, 'I clocked the press and left you to it.'

'A wise move,' Jimmy approved. He apologised to Han for the delay and we set off in two Range Rovers. It took a minute to realise that both vehicles now offered tinted glass.

Karl said to me, 'Picked up your bird two days ago, Paul. Dropped them home.'

I faced Jimmy.

'I arranged it; got them out the back way,' Jimmy explained. 'And Karl, dope, explained who he was.'

‘They were most impressed by the service,’ Karl offered with a grin. ‘Oh, and Big Paul broke that nice vase in your flat, not me.’

‘It’s a fake,’ I pointed out. ‘Twenty quid.’

‘Really, he’s been sweating it,’ Karl explained.

‘Tell him a grand is coming out of his pay,’ I said.

We got back to a mountain of waiting faxes, Sharon having put the press calls and messages in a pile. I binned the lot, made a cuppa and slouched into the sofa with a sigh, the rain hitting the windows. Jimmy copied my actions almost exactly, slouching down, but handing me a fax. I read the detail: Keely wanted a meeting.

‘Is he going to play ball?’ I softly asked, focusing again on the rain lashed windows, Kenya seeming a million miles away, a certain picnic coming to mind.

‘More ... or less. They’ll always be tricky, more so than the Russians and Chinese. They feel that they have a God given right to rule the world, and that’s the fault of Hollywood. Successive generations of Americans have grown up believing that no matter how severe the problem or disaster, there is always an eleventh hour solution by a small group of people.’

‘Superman to the rescue,’ I scoffed.

‘Superman can’t change the attitudes of several generations, and that’s the problem. They’re stuck in their ways, the politicians linked to big business, big business struggling to compete with Asia and starting to fail. It’s a slow moving train wreck. By 2012 there’ll be an obesity problem, a financial crisis, mass immigration of Hispanics, a massive deficit.’

‘And telling them that won’t fix it?’

‘No, because each President will do what’s popular, not what’s best for the long term. It’s a beauty contest, not a spelling quiz. Oh, Katie be around tomorrow.’

I frowned at him. ‘She will?’

‘She’ll call later, invite her down.’

Guess who’s coming to dinner

Two week's later, and with Katie and me in a steady relationship - steadily avoiding the press, Keely was due to visit. We were ready for him.

A uniformed police officer and two of Sykes boys were on the gate when Keely's vehicle arrived, leaving them in no doubt that the British Government were in residence. Karl met Keely and his two colleagues at the door, brief frisks given. Inside our porch they were scanned with hand wands at length, finally let through. Stepping into our lounge they were met with more faces than they had expected to meet. Ben Ares sat with David, Sykes sat with Jack, and I sat with Jimmy. As our three new guests stood there, Cookie came out with fresh tea, coffee and warm scones, retiring quickly.

Jimmy eased up, slowly followed by the rest of us. Gesturing around the room, he said, 'Mister Keely, this Ben Ares and his local liaison - I believe you've met Ben. Mister Sykes you know, this is his liaison to us, Jack. Everyone, this is Bob Donnelly, NSA, and with him today we have William Host, Bob's immediate boss and equal sceptic, and finally Hurst Adater - if I pronounce it correctly. Please have a seat.'

Glancing at each other, and appearing uneasy, our guests sat, jackets adjusted, legs crossed, unhappy stares adopted. Jimmy offered Host Columbian coffee, the brand he favoured, and Adater a green tea, before he himself sat.

'So,' Jimmy began. 'Four allies represented here today.'

'Four?' Keely questioned.

'I consider myself neutral - I certainly don't take direction from the UK Government. So four. And everyone in this room has a working knowledge of Magestic, and the role of Paul and myself, so no need to be shy. But more than that, all the nations represented here today work closely in many matters. All best buddies.' Pointing at Keely's leg, he asked, 'How's the leg?'

'Not so much as a scar,' Keely admitted.

Host said, 'Let me be clear about something. We *will* take exception to our staff being injected with unknown drugs.'

'It was necessary to save his life, basic anti-venom would not have worked,' Jimmy calmly explained. He carefully mouthed, 'You're welcome.'

'What have your big-brained scientists found?' I asked.

Keely glanced at Host, saying, 'So far, all they can agree on is that it's way beyond them. According to their studies ... I should be dead.'

'How's the running?' I asked.

'I did a marathon a few days ago, a good time, but I ached after.'

'The drug will boost your muscles, your bones and joints take longer,' Jimmy pointed out, Sykes remaining quiet. 'So, what can I help you gentlemen with today?'

Keely half turned his head to his boss. Host began, 'We've decided to adopt the approach of ... *co-operative scepticism*. What that means, in effect, is that we go through the motions and proceed as if this is all on the level.'

Ben asked, 'Do you think our people stupid?'

Sykes added, 'And *our* best minds. Do you think we are fools, perhaps?'

'We ... have are our own course to set,' Host suggested. 'We all take orders.'

'How true,' Sykes sarcastically noted. 'Of course, Magestic *has* boosted the UK economy considerably. So, you take your time, gentlemen.'

Host did not like that, and I hid a smile, a glance exchanged with Jack.

Jimmy said, 'You'll need at least a year to have any hope of analysing Bob's blood, so why not come back in a year.'

Host liked that even less, his surprise evident. 'Well ... we're here now, and want to get this sorted.'

'Sorted ... how?' Jimmy asked. 'Sorted ... to the point where you have everything you want? Sorted to the point ... where you have Magestic himself in a lab under the microscope, truth drugs applied, fingernails cut out.'

Sykes put in, 'Any attempt to interfere with Magestic, his staff or projects would be met with the stiffest resistance by my government.'

'And my government,' Ben added.

'Is that official?' Host challenged.

'I spoke to our Prime Minister yesterday,' Sykes stated. 'It is *very* official.'

'I speak for my government,' Ben added.

‘I see,’ Host said, giving it some thought. ‘Well, as I said, co-operative scepticism.’ He turned his head a notch to Jimmy. ‘We’d like to send a team to the orphanage.’

‘On condition,’ Jimmy stated.

‘Conditions?’ Host queried, not happy at the suggestion.

‘Yes. First, you must buy some toys for the kids, pushbikes, and games like chess or draughts – something educational. Then, I want two doctors based there for a year, helping out. And as they are *helping out* they can study the kids without worrying the staff. Fair enough?’

Host agreed, ‘Fair enough. When?’

‘I’ll fax them later,’ Jimmy offered. ‘So whatever day is good for you. And you’ll make a startling discovery early on.’

‘Which is?’ Host nudged.

‘If one person is injected, they can extract their own blood and inject others. It works. Not a hundred percent, but it still cures a lot.’

Host glanced at Keely. Keely asked, pointing at himself, ‘If I inject someone with my blood ... they get cured?’

‘Mostly, yes,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘You can inject a bunch of your soldiers and judge the effect, it’s quite safe.’

Host seemed very curious about that fact. ‘And if passed on and on –’

‘Would be watered down, still some benefit. Why don’t you experiment in controlled conditions.’

Host faced Ben. ‘You’ve experiment with it?’

‘Yes, on test subjects,’ Ben admitted. ‘It loses fifty percent of its potency each time, but even after three stages it can cure most things.’

Host faced Sykes. ‘And your lot?’

‘No. It was offered, and has been considered, no decision yet taken. Good old British red tape and politics, I’m afraid. But we’ve seen the orphanage.’

Host faced Jimmy. ‘And other nations, like the Chinese you told Keely about?’

‘They have samples, but they don’t have your scientific advantage. If you and they begin at the same time you’ll be there five years ahead of them.’

‘And they started...?’ Host nudged.

‘A year ago,’ Jimmy answered with a grin.

‘I haven’t mentioned the Chinese to the politicians yet,’ Host admitted. ‘They might want you shot.’

‘Why?’ Jimmy calmly asked. ‘I’m not American, no secrets were stolen, and it was not American technology that designed it in the first place. It’s the Chinese who should want me shot, it’s their future invention, part of their planned long distance space programme.’

‘The ... Chinese developed it?’ Host puzzled, a horrified look.

‘After 2015 the good old US of A is on its arse, financially ruined. Everyone looks to China then, British kids learn Chinese. You best get used to it, or...’

‘Or?’ Keely repeated.

‘Or you get a move on and become less of a sceptic,’ Jimmy toyed. ‘Then, maybe, I’ll help you out.’

Host faced Sykes, thumbing towards Jimmy. ‘And why does the Brit’ Government support his attitude?’

‘Something about *gift horses* ... comes to mind,’ I said. ‘Besides, you can only be worried ... if you believe the outcome.’

‘Exactly,’ Sykes smugly stated. ‘You cannot be affected by something that does not exist. Either Magestic has the power, and you’re doomed, or not. Make your mind up, old chap. Besides, our government has been offered a long term financial forecast.’

‘That’s interference,’ Host complained. ‘It’s taking sides!’

Ben sighed. ‘For God’s sake, you either believe or you don’t.’

I helpfully put in, ‘Take a dump or get off the potty.’ Jack and David hid their grins.

Sykes added, ‘There’s one thing very clear about what you’ve said, and that’s that you already take this seriously *and* believe. The rest is just posturing.’

‘I ... believe the accuracy of the letters,’ Host admitted. ‘What I don’t know ... is what the agenda is here. We’re not going to let down our guard.’

‘Mister Host. William,’ Jimmy began. ‘Magestic could tell the Chinese and Russians about every secret project you have. And you’d never know.’

‘If he knows,’ Host challenged.

‘He knows,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘Aurora Eclipse?’

‘Jesus,’ Host let out. ‘This is why I don’t like it! Some fucker out there knows all our secrets.’

‘And *their* secrets,’ Sykes pointed out. ‘It works both ways.’

‘And the Chinese know and respect that,’ Jimmy explained. ‘I shocked *them* as well. Right now they’re worrying we’ll tell you stuff about them.’

‘And will you?’ Keely asked.

‘That which is relevant, yes,’ Jimmy answered. ‘Which is why you get terrorist tip offs. Any threat to Europe or America will be flagged up straight away.’

Sykes put in, ‘We’ve decimated the IRA, they’re talking peace.’

Ben added, ‘And *we* have averted many terror attacks. And the money Silo has made from us, that goes to an orphanage in Africa, twenty million pounds! You judge the motivation.’

Jack put in, ‘We monitor Mister Silo’s finances. Eighty percent or more goes to charity.’

‘And he visits him mum often,’ I put in. ‘We could get her up here if you like.’

Host smiled, reluctantly. He eased back and sipped his coffee. ‘Pointer thinks Magestic is a fucking astronaut. But one of ours would never help the Chinese.’

‘You never know,’ Jimmy began. ‘Maybe Magestic *is* Chinese!’

‘That would upset the White House,’ Keely admitted. ‘How does our new President do, anyway?’

‘Not too bad, two terms, then gets impeached for shagging several young interns.’

The quiet guy on the end registered a pulse. ‘You know ... which interns?’

We all laughed at him, even Host.

Jimmy offered, ‘I’ll tell you if you promise to bring back disco.’

‘Now that ... I could back,’ Host agreed. ‘Hot pants and wide shirt collars!’

‘War in Vietnam!’ Sykes pointed out. ‘It was not all fun.’

Host pointed at Sykes. ‘Tell me you’re glad about the demise of communism and I’ll call you a liar!’

Jack turned his head to Sykes. ‘He’s got you there, sir.’

‘The good old days,’ Sykes reflected. ‘You knew where you stood. And no one ever made you prove your expenses.’

‘I hear that,’ Keely put in, earning a look from his boss.

Jimmy said, ‘Ben once accidentally set fire to his own tank —’

‘Hey!’ Ben objected.

Jimmy added, ‘You claimed it was hit by an enemy shell!’

Everyone laughed. ‘And Mister Host ... he once screeched away from an ambush with the guy he was protecting stood on the pavement. He didn’t realise till he’d gone a mile.’

Host smiled, shaking his head. ‘I was concentrating on the driving. The guy *was not* happy.’

Everyone tried the tasty treats that cookie brought in, chicken and lamb tikka, a ten minute break taken.

Host finally said, ‘So where do we go from here.’

Jimmy responded, ‘Well, since you’re American, we thought we’d make it look like you’re taking the lead.’

‘So long as we’re not paying for it,’ Adater stated.

Keely faced Jimmy. ‘You must already *know* what we do?’

‘You set-up a very secret Magestic working group, its aim being to get the most out of the information, and ask me nicely for help in financial areas, and others. And then, bit by bit, we try and fix things. Unfortunately, each new administration will have its own agenda, reversing policies.’

Host glanced at Adater. ‘There are ... groups that don’t share all they know. The Air Force is good at hiding stuff. We’ll create two groups, the political one, and the real one.’

Jimmy took a breath. ‘Let me be clear about something, gentlemen. Of all the problems that the world faces in the next twenty years, most result from American political choices; bad choices, for bad reasons. Future Presidents will enact what they think are good policies, without thinking through the consequences. I have already helped to stop Iraq invading Kuwait, but that is still a work in progress. The Bosnian conflict is a sideshow and a distraction; you’re supporting the wrong people. When you’ve set-up your Magestic group I’ll give you a briefing. Problem is, the people in that group won’t sleep much afterwards.’

Our guests adopted solemn stares. Jimmy continued, ‘Mankind has from now till 2025 to sort a long list of problems. If you knew what was on the cards between now and then you’d

vomit. If you knew what was going happen in 2025, you might just give up now.'

'And there's no solution to 2025?' Keely asked.

'There is no ... simple solution, even if you started planning yesterday. And with all the best planning, hundreds of millions will still die, the world economy ruined. 2025 can be approached with best preparation, it cannot be fixed.'

'A meteor strike?' Keely asked.

'No. But I suppose the effect might be similar. And NASA could do nothing. There is no fix, but for security – let's label it as a meteor strike.'

'Mankind survives?' Adater asked.

'Yes, but the world will not be a pleasant place. And I will not be revealing 2025 to you ... till closer to the date, there is no point, nothing would be achieved.'

Host said, 'Maybe the scientists could figure a solution? They should have the chance to try!'

'It's not a complex problem, and science will not help,' Jimmy explained. 'And don't take too long on the blood analysis, there'll be some nice diseases wiping out millions after 2012. In the meantime, we need a good smokescreen. We need more people called Magestic offering forecasts, some quite accurate.'

'There's already a lot of those,' Keely unhappily stated. 'We wasted a lot of time on them.'

Jimmy instructed, 'You need to plan ahead, for when this leaks out – and it will. If there is a clairvoyant in the States who is half decent in his predictions, it will act as a smoke screen should anyone see Magestic in a document. I'll provide the guy some tips.'

Host said, 'Pointer hid the original Magestic with a "g" behind Magestic with a "j".'

'Learn from it,' Jimmy suggested. 'Hide it from Congress. In the meantime, I'd appreciate some help on Rwanda. Next year it falls apart and a million will die, that's almost twenty percent of the population.'

'May I ask,' Host began, 'why the heck we're getting sidelined with something like Africa?'

'Because nothing I do is without cause and effect. And there is more oil in Africa than you realise.'

'Rwanda has oil?' Keely asked.

‘No. Remember, cause and effect. An unstable Africa is no good for pumping oil. Wars and refugees ... cause instability. Nothing I do ... is a distraction; quite the opposite. Even the orphanage is vital, and the golf complex. They are all small steps on a long path.’

We fed our American guests, then sent them off, further meetings promised. Sykes and Jack were thanked, a meeting arranged in London for a few days time. That left Ben and David.

Settling back around the sofa, Ben said, ‘You tell different groups different things.’

‘Yes, they don’t know who I really am.’

‘Why trust *us*?’ Ben challenged.

‘First, you keep tight security, and second you have the most to lose from disclosure. The Chinese also know the truth.’

‘The NSA seemed ... positive,’ David tentatively suggested.

‘Administrations come and go,’ Jimmy countered. ‘And the Yanks are crap at keeping secrets, especially one this big. So we’ll create a false Magestic, then another, and one they may even believe is the right one. And even then they’ll be a pain in years to come.’

‘And if they expose you?’ Ben pressed.

‘You lose Israel, I lose the planet,’ Jimmy carefully mouthed. ‘Even if I tell you what will happen, it needs me bringing together various factions. And I’m the only one they all trust. You don’t learn open heart surgery from a book, it takes practice and a bit of flare for it.’

‘So perhaps you should not take part in stupid helicopter stunts,’ Ben firmly suggested.

‘Unfortunately, without the reputation and credibility we can’t do some of the important stuff. I’m working to a plan of twenty thousand steps, that helicopter jaunt was one of them.’

‘So, Paul being a hero and having superstar girlfriends is part of it?’ Ben challenged.

With a smile, Jimmy said, ‘Very much so. Fame will allow us to talk to the right people at the right time, to influence them, to move them a few degrees left or right. You can’t influence the people on the top table ... unless you’re sat on the top table.’

‘I’m taking one for the team,’ I said with a straight face. Their looks did not suggest they agreed with that. With a grin, I said, ‘Anyway, how was Oz?’

‘A bit odd?’ David admitted. ‘It was interesting to find long lost relatives, and my grandfather’s grave. But they were not that friendly, I doubt we will keep in touch. Still, was good to see where Sarah lived.’

‘You all sorted with her now?’ I delicately asked.

‘Oh, yes. Like it never happened.’

‘We have some more money for you,’ Ben put in.

‘Make a charitable donation to Rescue Force, it’s a registered charity now,’ Jimmy told him. ‘We’ll pop over soon and give you some more blood, get that moved along for you.’

‘Why?’ Ben challenged. ‘If the Americans are researching it? We can’t compete with them?’

‘Do you want to be dependent on them?’ Jimmy asked. ‘Besides, you’ll have some injured people to help between now and then, it’s great for burns.’

Ben commented, ‘You seem to take this all ... very lightly?’

‘Couldn’t live, otherwise,’ Jimmy responded. ‘If we took this too seriously we’d blow our brains out. Besides, we have to play the roles, without the people around us being suspicious. Sticking our faces in front of TV cameras will be our greatest asset in years to come. Can’t do that whilst being a miserable git, we’re not Serbian politicians!’

You wouldn’t want to work for us

The book about the Haardheere incident, aptly titled “The Haardheere Incident”, was ready, having been carefully edited by Jimmy. The writer had been promised block sales, but in turn had to make a few changes. At the outset he was told that the part of the about the rescue had to cover no more than thirty percent of the book, and the rest had to be about the UN mission in question, backgrounds of the people killed or rescued, the nature of UN mission in Somalia and the wider civil war in

Somalia; a balanced view. Jimmy and I had scoured through many early versions, and things like ex-SAS became ex-Army.

The staff in Kenya had been spoken to, small changes to the story agreed to by all: Cosy was not on the mission, and Jimmy did not “order” the mission. The book made clear that Jimmy had asked about the mission’s possibilities, and Mac and the others had agreed to its practicality, Bob Davies warning of the legal status of such a trip. My part had been made a little more glamorous, the fact that I was terrified left out. We came across as caring, nervous, yet resolute.

It was ready for the shops for December 1st, a block of ten thousand purchased by us on pre-order from the distributor. Aside from that, it found an immediate audience, since it offered action, adventure, suspense, rescue, plus factual backgrounds. The middle of the book displayed twenty pages of black and white photographs, as well as a few maps. It started to sell well. We sent a hundred copies to Mawlini, a thousand to high schools in Kenya, had them stacked up for guests at the hotels and safari parks, and five thousand distributed by Mackey and his contacts. The UN itself got a few thousand copies, and everyone ended up reading what Jimmy wanted them to read.

The book sparked a TV programme in the UK, because no matter which way you looked at the UN patrol on that day, it seemed ill advised and doomed, a ghost of blame floating around at the loss of life. More than thirty additional UN staff had been killed in the meantime in Somalia and the brief US intervention had been a disaster.

Coinciding with the release, we ran a few adverts for Rescue Force staff, recruiting from the UK and Europe, one page adverts sent to all of Mackey’s contacts, as well as every hospital, police station and military base in the UK. We received twenty-five serious enquiries, and we made the work sound less than inviting: “Rescue Force Kenya. The pay is not great, the training is hard, the conditions are harsh, the danger is always present.” Seemed we were after crazy people.

A few doctors showed their interest in a year out in Africa, some nurses with a similar feeling. The advert attracted six ex-army medics keen to have a go, a few rescuers after adventure for a year or two, and several foreign doctors already familiar with Africa; Dutch, German and French. They all met up at

Mapley on December 15th, for a talk by Jimmy in the AMO building, Mac flying up with Doc Graham. The pay and conditions were described, not putting them off since the advert had made them clear. The chance to get a pilots license and helicopter license excited many, and Mac gave a slide show of the base and its activities. Questions were answered at length, yearly rotating contracts offered. At the end of the day only one dropped out, a nurse. We signed up twenty-four new bodies, five of which would be sent straight out, the rest would need training at Mapley, starting on January 5th. Some of the recruits would need jeep and off-road training, others would require first aid training despite being doctors: they were specialists and had not touched first aid for a long time. Doc Graham would handle the first aid. All would have to take fitness, geography, swimming lessons where necessary, and helicopter drills. A four -week course was planned, then off to Kenya for another four-week course at Mawlini. But it was not all hard work for our new recruits. After a five day acclimatisation at the beach came a five-day study safari; they would need to know a hyena from a lion, a mamba from a python.

New year

After planning on spending Christmas with the various family groups, we decided celebrate New Year in Hong Kong. Katie was keen, it would get her away from the press, and she would take her only family, her mum. Po booked us a block of fifty rooms and we invited most of the senior staff from Kenya, many from Pineapple, some staff from the club and others we knew. We would be there ten days, the staff from Kenya for five.

On the 28th we touched down, picked up in a convoy of three Rollers and taken to a hotel that had just been completed, part owned by Po. Of its twenty glass-fronted floors we had the first three reserved for just our group. Oddly, the better quality rooms were lower down, not the penthouse, and the room I shared with Katie was big enough for us all, complete with a Jacuzzi offering a view on two sides; as you sat in the tub, a hand held control opened or closed the blinds, offering a great view out over the

bay. After dumping our luggage, hanging a few things up in the bag labelled as 'Pressing', we went for walk to explore the large hotel. What we had missed, coming up in the lift, was the central core.

The centre of the hotel resembled a Roman amphitheatre, with two rows of guest rooms opening onto balconies at the top and offering strange internal views. Each balcony housed hanging plants creeping down the white walls, so too the walls of lower levels. Below us ran a walkway right around the courtyard, four doors off it plus lifts and stairs, so we wandered down. Chill-out Room was just that, a large room of sofas, tables, fish tanks and a long bar. Next came Retro Room and I smiled widely, Katie noticing the name. We ducked our heads in, the room empty at present, noting a large central dance floor – 70s style, multi-coloured squares surrounded by a brass railing. We walked on, finding The Disco, a similar layout to the previous room, but with a dance floor fashioned around a DJ booth, numerous large TV screens on the walls.

'He's copied your club,' Katie noted as we tried door number four. This was a traditional British pub, dark wood, a typical bar - even British signs on the walls. 'Christ, this could be my old local.'

On the next floor down we found four restaurants; a Chinese, a Thai, an Indian and an American diner, the central courtyard occupied by a café with many tables and chairs, a fountain in the middle above a small carp pond. A call preceded Po and his gang approaching.

'How you like?' Po keenly asked.

'Very good,' I said. 'Where did you get the idea?'

'You give me good idea. We open one week before Christmas, very full. Not only people for room, many people come for disco and food. For New Year we have hundred percent. You look down?'

'No, we're walking around now.' We left Po and tackled steps signposted for Gym, Sauna, Pool, Health. One floor down we discovered a large blue pool surrounded by many glass cubicles, sauna, steam rooms, as well as beauty therapy and massage. 'Right,' I said 'We've got time, let's get our trunks.'

Having retrieved our swimming costumes and towel bags, we took the lift directly down to the basement and into the massage

rooms. It appeared as if you had to book, but when the lady took my room number she ushered us straight in. Face down, side by side and fingers intertwined, we enjoyed a long and relaxing massage, chatting away as four ladies worked on us. In the sauna we found Cosy and Anna, her pregnancy visible and congratulations given, and sat chatting away for ten minutes. They both looked odd with their heavily tanned faces and arms, but pale white bodies.

In the pool we found Rudd, his coloured wife, and three half-caste kids. The kids were splashing about as if in an ordinary pool, not appreciating that this was supposed to be a five star hotel. I had only met his wife once before, and her accent was hard to follow, Kenyan Creole English. Ratchet and Spanner emerged from the steam room, spotted us and jumped in, wading across.

‘This going to be a regular thing then, boss?’ they nudged, and I introduced Katie.

‘What do you do, love?’ they asked, no idea about her.

‘Secretary, in Pineapple Music,’ she responded, and they believed her, swimming off and trying to drown Rudd’s kids.

Dry now, we headed for a drink in the British bar, finding Mac, Handy and Rabbit, dressed smart but casual in blue blazers. I put a thousand dollars on the bar for them.

Mac snatched it and pocketed it quickly. ‘It’s a free bar, idiot.’

‘It is?’

‘We pay with our room keys, and our rooms are all inclusive like,’ Mac explained.

‘That’s Handy.’

‘No, he’s Handy,’ Mac corrected me.

Following Jimmy’s example over the years, I made sure that they were feeling wanted, needed and welcome, then sat in the corner with Katie for a quick drink. Back in the room we stripped off and fired up the Jacuzzi, ignoring the blinds. Any paparazzi with a long lens could have taken a valuable picture. As we sat there, Katie’s legs across mine, I took in the view across the bay, the million twinkling lights, the neon signs of businesses below us and the brightly lit boats on the water; Hong Kong at night, one of my favourite places.

‘You like it here,’ Katie stated, noticing my gaze.

I smiled. 'Always did, right from the first trip. I like the lights at night.'

'It's a good hotel, be ... lively over New Year.' She sounded cautious.

'Be mostly Po's family and staff, a lot of ours,' I reassured her. 'A photographer wouldn't get in, and if they did they'd be roughed up and thrown in the bay. Relax, around here they don't know you.'

'Your staff don't know me either.'

I wasn't sure if she was happy with that or not. 'They live in a camp in the desert. And I should warn you, I had a fling with Po's daughter a year ago, she's bound to be here.'

'Was she over sixteen at the time?' Katie teased.

I tickled her feet. 'Ling, is twenty-three ... and a Phd graduate.'

'Why did you break up?' It was a typical girly question, and I half expected it.

'She has a life here, I have a life in the UK - nothing more complicated than that. If she was in the UK I would have stayed with her - I don't trade them in very often, remember.'

Katie became reflective. 'I felt bad that first night, at the beach hotel. My ex was calling a lot and I was in the sea with you.'

'You must have been unhappy with him ... to do that,' I ventured.

'No,' she sighed. 'I just wanted a stronger man. He ... let me lead him around,' she explained. 'When he had the time, that was. He couldn't have done a trip like this.' She took in the view as I massaged her feet. 'When we flew back I felt bad, then Jimmy's people were there, car with tinted glass, armed police officer driving. And I thought ... this is more of what I need, not an empty flat, and me fitting around when whoever I'm seeing is off work.'

'When I met Judy, Jimmy put a baby elephant in our bed,' I said with a smile as I remembered back. 'We fed it from milk bottles and it peed on our feet in the bathroom.'

'You ... think about her?'

'No, she probably has her own herd by now.' She slapped me. 'Oh, Judy? Not really, I had the same problem as you. Rich people should stick to other rich people.'

‘I’m worth three million, and I thought *that* was rich. You spend that a month in Africa.’

‘Po is very rich, him and his family, and more on the way,’ I said.

‘On the way?’

‘Jimmy won him some contracts from the Chinese Government. They’d pay for this hotel ten times over – and *you* wanted to pay for the damn room!’

‘I still don’t know exactly what Jimmy does, you know, the private stuff. It all sounds dodgy.’

‘He brokers secret deals between governments and corporations - they know they can trust him to act as honest broker,’ I lied. ‘And a small percentage of a large amount is a lot. But most income still comes from stock market trading - he’s the best there is. He gives tips to people like Po, and they trade them and make a fortune, paying Jimmy a cut. First time we gave a tip to Po we thought he might put ten grand on it. He stuck a million on it.’

‘Wow.’

‘And the hotels make a good profit, so too the club in Cardiff, and Pineapple is doing very well – Jimmy has a good ear, he picked you out from a box of fifty tapes.’

She glanced at the distant lights. ‘I almost didn’t send the tape in, I was thinking of going back to college.’

‘And now look at you; rich, in Hong Kong with a real catch of a guy...’

She eased up and straddled me. ‘Prove it.’

Dressed smart in our eveningwear, and arm in arm, we took the lift down to the third floor, opening to the disco area. We stopped first at the Chill-out room, finding the Pineapple gang meeting up before their meal, two Americans in the group. Kate greeted many, soon chatting away, and I fetched drinks, sitting with Oliver and his wife.

‘So how’s New York?’ I asked.

‘Great, so is this place,’ she answered. ‘Anywhere is better than dreary old London.’

‘Nairobi isn’t, love. You settled over there?’

‘We’ll stay there as long as you like,’ Oliver emphasized. ‘Got a good circle of friends, good social life.’

‘How’s the office?’

‘Growing rapidly, and we’ve had twelve top ten hits in three months. Some of the Brits starting to do well over there as well.’

‘You’ve done alright as well,’ Oliver’s wife said, a nod towards Katie.

‘Really, I thought that *she’d* done alright. And it’s your fault, Oliver, for encouraging her to go out to Kenya.’

‘Where’s Jimmy, haven’t seen him yet?’ Oliver asked.

‘Probably talking dull business with the Chinese.’

‘He’s fluent,’ Oliver stated. ‘How many languages does he speak?’

‘More than I have fingers and toes, but I’m getting there as well. My Chinese and Russian is not bad, some local Kenyan.’

‘No more helicopter stunts?’ his wife asked with a disapproving frown.

‘No, no more since.’

‘We read the book on the way over, amazing tale,’ Oliver said. ‘Can I visit that place?’

‘Of course you can, you know that. Just let us know.’

‘We’ve done one safari, a year ago or more, fancy another,’ Oliver suggested.

‘You wouldn’t recognise the hotels, especially not the beach hotel,’ I told them. ‘The golf complex is great. Oh, and we’ve bought some more land in the north. If it’s ready, stay there, different scenery and a few different animals, nice escarpment.’

‘We got friends in New York that want to visit, we’ve whetted their appetites,’ Oliver indicated.

Katie kissed and hugged Oliver and his wife before sitting on my knee. We chatted for ten minutes, the Pineapple gang going for a Thai tonight. In the British bar we found the Old Dogs again, but now in black tuxedos.

‘Mutton dressed as lamb,’ I said loudly.

‘Like ‘em, they wuz in the room,’ Rabbit said, adjusting his sleeves. ‘Jimbo fixed ‘em for us.’

‘The gang is in the Chinese –’ I began.

‘We’re off for a curry first,’ they insisted. ‘Casino after.’

‘Casino?’ I questioned.

‘Yeah, Jimbo gave us some chips,’ Mac explained. ‘He’s more generous than you!’

‘You pinched a thousand dollars earlier!’

‘Had to, you don’t dish ‘em out often,’ Mac playfully grumbled.

Big Paul wandered in with two of Po’s bodyguards.

‘Should have known,’ I said. ‘War stories over a curry.’

‘Can’t fucking relax with the bosses about, can you,’ Big Paul complained, leading off the Old Dogs.

We left them to it. In the Chinese restaurant we found many familiar faces, the two young girls that visited Kenya racing forwards. I knelt and hugged them, getting kisses on the cheek.

Katie bent double and said hello, and the girls sprinted off. ‘They were in Kenya?’ she whispered.

The girls’ parents said hello, bowing and shaking our hands before introducing some of the extended family. I practised my Chinese. We waved at Rudd’s family, sat with Cosy and Anna, then greeted Doc Graham, Dunnnow, Ratchet and Spanner, all stood with drinks in hands.

Dunnnow stepped forwards. ‘Hey, love, didn’t bring a friend with you, did you?’

‘He suffers from memory loss. Ask him his name,’ I nudged.

‘What’s your name?’ she finally asked.

‘Dunnnow.’

She looked at me and I explained his name, Ratchet pulling him away in a headlock. I greeted the manager of our Cardiff club and his wife, laughing about the design of the hotel, wondering if it might catch on. Han stepped forwards, done out in a black tuxedo. He took Katie’s hand, bowed and kissed it.

‘Han was in Kenya as well.’

‘I remember,’ she said, telling me off with a look. ‘Do you work here, in Hong Kong?’

‘No, Beijing.’

‘Han is a secret agent for the Chinese Government,’ I suggested. ‘He didn’t walk into the hotel, he scaled the walls.’

Han smiled. ‘Your expectations of me ... flatter me.’ Facing Katie, he said, ‘I am but a humble diplomat.’

The two girls appeared at his trouser legs, a pile of photographs handed over. He offered them to us, pictures of the lion cubs, the hotels, and the safari lodge.

‘Your take good pictures,’ Katie politely told Han.

‘I told you, super spy. That top button ... a microphone.’

She shot me another look, the photographs returned as Katie's mum appeared with Jimmy. Jean appeared a little nervous of the group, a little out of place.

'The Old Dogs are in the curry house,' I told Jimmy.

'Old ... Dogs?' Jean queried, wide eyed, a surprised stare from Katie.

Jimmy explained, 'The old army instructors, it's their army name.' Now *he* shot me a look.

Hiding a grin, I took Jean by the arm and found a seat, Katie the other side of her mum. Jimmy took an age chatting to people so we ordered starters, a variety brought out and placed down, samples taken. I explained the system to the ladies. With many smartly dressed children running between tables, I grabbed one of the girls I knew and lifted her to my knee, asking her to speak some English to Katie's mum, the adorable little girl keen to practice. Then she tried to teach us chopsticks, at length and quite patient, also quite loud, Jean now enjoying herself. A flash caused me to turn, Han taking snaps. When the girls' mother came over, Jean asked if she could take her home to England.

Easing up, I asked Han to sit at my place, and when returning slipped down next to Katie. In a whisper, I asked Katie what Han and her mother were talking about. Seemed they both had a passion for roses, even competitions. I suspected Jimmy's hand in this somewhere.

A well-known BBC correspondent walked in, a small gang in tow, Katie recognising the man. She stepped over to them, introduced by Jimmy, and chatted for ten minutes as I discussed the hotel layout with Po. For someone who did not like the attention of the press, she had a funny way of showing it. I considered that what she really wanted was publicity that suited her, to write her own story. It would always be a source of annoyance.

The evening went well, but both of us ate too much, a trip to the disco put off in favour of crashing out on the bed and cuddling up. Dozing, we eased up around 3am, ordering room service. After a tea we fired up the Jacuzzi, sat watching the lights till our skin was wrinkly, Katie back to bed. I read a book.

Katie was a bit groggy for the tour the next morning; interesting things to see and do around Hong Kong. We tagged along, many viewpoints visited, shopping centres with lifts that

were not for the faint hearted. At one point Jimmy led Katie and me to a jewellery shop, the move making me immediately nervous. The staff greeted us, Jimmy pointing them toward a wall poster of Katie, then back to Katie. The staff, and shoppers, twiggged at the same time, the manager fussing over her, snaps taken. Katie loved it; selective popularity when it suited her. On the spot, I bought her an expensive necklace and something for her mum.

After lunch we suffered a boat trip around the bay, the usual tourist lectures given, ending up on a wharf housing Po's family yacht, a monster of a boat some hundred and fifty feet long. Today's tour had been split into three groups for manageable size, and now all three groups joined up again and boarded the yacht. With the late afternoon air warm enough we stood drinking on the quarterdeck.

Han and Jean turned up late. 'Where've they been?' I asked, now intrigued. We closed in.

'Mister Han showed me around a private garden,' Jean keenly explained. 'Fabulous gardens, ponds, vines. Could have spent forever there. Then on to another one full of the most amazing roses.' She took my arm. 'When we got there they were closed, so Mister Han told them I was Jimmy Silo's sister.' She shot Han a playfully scolding look. 'And they opened up in a panic.'

Katie gave me a concerned look. I explained, 'He does a lot of business down here.'

That night we repeated the previous evening's format, this time trying the Thai restaurant. I sighed when I noticed the wall poster advertising jewellery, but it took the guests an hour to recognise Katie. When they finally twiggged she allowed herself to be photographed, some autographs given. We left just as Mac put a moustache on the poster. If he hadn't, I might have. I made my excuses and found Jimmy, needing a chat.

'Need some advice,' I said, sitting in the chill-out bar.

'Women problems, are no problems,' he firmly stated.

'She fucking whinges about the paparazzi, then courts publicity when it suits her.'

Jimmy sipped his beer. 'You member that first house, in Richmond?' I smiled as I thought back. 'And the first time we went for a proper drink, met those two girls?'

'Yes, Sarah.'

‘Sophie,’ he corrected. ‘How times have changed. Back then you would have been glad for any bit of skirt. And now look at you: you’ve got the UK’s best looking girl crazy about you, and you don’t appreciate her.’

‘It’s not that I don’t appreciate her, it’s...’

‘That you don’t appreciate her.’

‘Well...’ I sighed and sipped my beer.

‘Offer a man half a million, and he’ll be happy. Give him a million and take back half a million and he’ll be very unhappy. It’s all relative, and you need to take a good look at what you have, compared to a flat in Richmond – where you may have stayed for ten years.’

In a quiet, and reflective tone, staring into my beer, I said, ‘There’s no pleasing some people, is there?’

‘This is a learning curve for you, a valuable one. Try and understand the mind set ... of the glamorous – it’s something we’ll touch upon many times in the future. We won’t be hounded in quite the same way – no up-skirt shots, but we will be hounded. She wants, and needs, people to tell her she is beautiful and successful, and singers like her measure success partly on the charts and the money, but also in what the tabloids say about them. Harsh comments hurt them. And no, they never learn to deal with it. You need to try and find out how she ticks, how someone *like her* ticks, and use it as a very pleasant training exercise, or I’ll beat the crap out of you at length.’

By time New Year reached us we had all had enough food and booze; belts were loosen. We took it easy New Year’s Eve daytime, ready for the big show; we’d be on Po’s yacht, a prime location for the fireworks and a view of the colony. Most were tipsy well before midnight, but it went off well, a spectacular fireworks display that went on and on, the children staying up. With a palatial cabin reserved for us we stayed aboard, the rest put ashore around 1.30am. We enjoyed breakfast in the room, Jimmy knocking around 11am.

‘You decent?’ he called. I answered the door in a robe. Jimmy said, ‘Be flying off in a few hours, pack your bags.’

‘Where we off?’ I puzzled as Jimmy stepped in.

‘Beijing of course, surprise visit.’ He addressed Katie, ‘You want to see Beijing, your mum is keen – see some of the palaces?’

‘What ... today?’

‘Yep. But don’t worry, the plane will wait till we’re ready.’

‘Oh ... well ... yes, if mum’s keen.’

‘See you at the hotel when you’re ready.’ He closed the door.

‘The plane ... will wait for us?’ Katie repeated.

My stomach turned. I had faith in Jimmy, but we were risking them grabbing us, making up any story they liked. And I was taking Katie there as well, putting her in harms way. I was reasonably sure that the UK Government would get us out if necessary, but the butterflies persisted.

At the airport Han gave us all paper passes, a red and blue stamp, and we boarded a small China Airlines 737. The cabin crew asked us to sit in the middle, over the wing - an odd request to my mind, and closed the doors. Then it dawned on me that it was just the four of us, and Han.

With Katie’s mum asking questions, Jimmy said, ‘They laid on the plane for me; try and show how much they appreciate me. I’m negotiating mining contracts in Africa, worth a lot to them.’ I swallowed, but smiled reassuringly at Katie.

Three and bit hours later we touched down into a foggy Beijing, not seeing the runway till six feet above it, a bit of a bump. At least there would be no rush to queue for the exits. Han got up first, politely waiting for us, and we stepped out in single file, the terminal just visible through the fog. A blast of freezing air caught us off guard as we stepped across to the walkway, soon into the terminal, but no other travellers visible in the section we occupied. Han lead us down a flight of stairs, an official checking passes and handing them back, and out into the freezing cold and to a dated black Mercedes. Jimmy had insisted we bring warm clothing, the ladies now chilly.

As we drove off I soon realising that we were part of a four-vehicle convoy, traffic stopping for us at various junctions as we rushed through. Not much of Beijing was glimpsed, the fog getting worse as we drove. I think we crossed a bridge a one point, and we certainly passed through some security gates. Pulling up, Han opened the doors and we braved the chill wind for a few steps before entering a building, a government residence. Our luggage clattering along the floor behind us caused us to turn, sombre officials following us in with it. With no lift apparent, we climbed stairs panelled with dark wood, the

air getting warmer as we progressed, and to a series of apartments around an internal courtyard. Jean had her own room, but with twin beds, Jimmy had a suite and Katie and I had a large apartment with a double bed; a small double bed.

‘Dinner in one hour, downstairs,’ was the last thing Han told me.

After a good look around at the dated furniture and décor we unpacked a few things, Katie turning the radiators up fully.

Five minutes later Jimmy knocked. ‘Warm enough?’ he asked Katie as he entered.

‘Just about,’ she offered. ‘What is this place?’

‘It’s a government residence inside the Forbidden City - a place that very few ever get to see, certainly not tourists. We’ll get you a tour in the morning, fog permitting, a tour that you can be sure none of your friends have ever taken, or ever will. Now, cup of tea?’

‘Oh, yes please,’ Katie urged.

‘Follow me, then.’

Jimmy collected Jean and led us downstairs, along a Spartan corridor and to a large lounge, a woman with a white lace apron stood waiting under a painting of Mao. He gave her a sentence in Chinese and she trotted off as we sat around a low central coffee table. ‘This place is normally used for senior officials from other provinces when they come to visit, some foreign diplomats.’

I took in the room, Spartan décor of dark wood panels, a row of bookshelves, several sideboards, and not much else. Seeing my look, Jimmy fetched a large dusty book, placing it down and opening it to a page near the front. Swivelling the book around to us he held a finger at a scrawled signature. Addressing Jean, he asked, ‘Know who used your room once?’ We all peered at the scrawl. ‘Khrushchev.’

‘Khrushchev?’ she repeated. ‘In my bed?’

‘They changed the sheets,’ I offered.

‘And the bed, probably,’ Jimmy added. ‘It was 1962.’

‘I remember him on the telly: the Cuban missile crisis,’ Jean put in, studying the page as a tray of tea was brought out.

Jimmy directed our little helper, and she placed down three small cups for everyone, tealeaves placed in each, but from different silver pots, hot water added. With the lady standing

back, jimmy stirred the teas, adding a little cold water. 'Now, from left to right, try it.' We did as asked.

The first was sweet, a bit of an after taste. The second tasted a little like mint to me, and the third a little more traditional.

'Well?' he asked. 'What's the first one?'

'It's fruity,' Katie said.

'Jasmine, and you won't find that in the UK. Next?'

'Mint,' Jean suggested, getting a nod.

'And finally?' Jimmy posed, trying his again.

'A bit like normal tea,' I suggested.

'Normal tea, is either Indian or Sri Lankan,' Jimmy explained. 'This is from the far west of China, north of Delhi across the Himalayas. None of these you'll find in the UK.'

With small cups in hand we eased back and tried more, chatting about our favourites.

Jimmy said, 'This place may not look like much, but not even a British Prime Minister has ever been here, this is living history. It's a bit old and creepy, but we're honoured.'

Han appeared after we had downed several cups of tea. 'I hope you are all well.'

Jean said, 'I signed your visitors book, under Khrushchev.'

Han was horrified, stepping closer to look as Jimmy laughed. The book was untouched. 'I will never quite understand the Western humour. We may eat now if you are ready.'

'Lead on,' I said.

Our dining hall was oddly long and thin, a sturdy table in the middle, more of the same dark wood panelling on the walls, pictures of Mao and other leaders. Two ladies attended us, and they now wheeled trolleys from some unseen kitchen, soon a starter of crab soup, nice enough, everyone chatting away and Han keeping Jean occupied and engaged. Our main courses were like nothing I'd ever sampled in a Chinese restaurant, Han pleased to describe the detail and make-up of each dish. But they were tasty enough, especially the duck, the rice palatable and the noodles very tasty, almost spicy. After four courses we were all stuffed, warm and contented. We retired to the lounge, noticing some furniture moved around, a group of musicians sat tucked into a corner. Two traditional dancers appeared wearing facemasks, and the guys in the corner started up, our own private show.

Han gave a quiet commentary, the meaning and origins of five separate acts unfolding like a storybook: the king wanted a shag, but got killed by his son, was the short version. When finished, Jimmy clapped, followed by the rest of us, Jimmy stepping up to the performers and thanked them in Chinese, asking questions of instruments and costume. A very pleased troupe scampered off backwards, bowing. We chatted for thirty minutes before Han retired, offering to pick us up around 8am, breakfast at 7am. I took Katie up to bed around 11pm, but she was right off the idea of sex in these rooms. Khrushchev did not do it for either of us.

We rose early, a knock from Jimmy at 6.15am to make sure we were awake, and fumbled to make the bath run hot, sharing the water and dressing quickly in the chill room. Breakfast was basic, but enough of it, more teas sampled. Han would be taking the ladies on a tour, Jimmy and I would be talking business with the Chinese Government. My butterflies came back.

Jimmy emphasised, 'Ladies, this tour you'll be getting, no one from the UK has had it before, ever, nor probably will again. I've arranged it specially.' They were impressed, and intrigued. Han picked up the ladies and bade us farewell, a separate car waiting for us; the condemned. As I got in I wondered if we'd ever leave China.

A five-minute drive brought us to a dull grey office building, armed guards stood outside like gnomes, more armed guards opening the car doors. I followed Jimmy inside, sticking close. He greeted the first man by name, surprising him, then repeated that exercise three times more as we progressed along Spartan corridors of grey walls, the odd picture of Mao, picking up people as we went. We descended to a basement, strong doors opened by soldiers, an echoing clatter of shoes on stone behind us. Inside we found a low ceiling room, low for us at least, and several men sat around a large table. Jimmy pissed them all off by shaking hands and naming each one in turn. With our hosts not looking happy, he faced me.

'This is Lee Wen, the Chinese Security Minister.'

I practised my Chinese greetings, hoping I had not called him something rude. He gestured us to seats and everyone settled, the door finally closed. The rest was in Chinese.

'You must have many questions, Minister,' Jimmy began.

Wen composed himself. 'First, my government thanks you for the hospitality shown to our representative, and for the continued advice that you provide.'

'You are most welcome.'

'May I ask, if you are in contact with the British Security Services?'

'Every day, sometimes twice a day.'

Wen glanced at his colleagues. 'And the American Security Services?'

'When they lower themselves to talk to me. The NSA visited recently, but remain ... wary.'

'Wary?' Wen repeated.

'They do not like that which they cannot control, especially when it comes to security matters.'

'A prudent approach.'

'Indeed.'

'May I ask an obvious question? Why, do you say, that you were sent back through time?'

'To prepare the world for the disaster of 2025.'

'And that disaster ... is what?'

Jimmy took a moment. 'An old man ... begins as a baby. Through his life many things will affect him, choices he makes, and choices that are made from him. His journey is a long one, a simple decision taken in his youth possibly affecting the rest of his life. For me to teach you, we need the life story, not the conclusion at the deathbed. Have you white boards and interpreter as I requested?'

Wen shouted an order, and four white boards were brought forwards, placed near the table. Jimmy stood, taking off his jacket. On the first board he put a diagonal time line, from 1989 to 2025. On the second he put a vertical line and a series of marks in blue. The third board went green, a financial chart, and the final was a crude map with continents as squares. The Chinese assembled around the table got their paper and pens ready.

Some of the words Jimmy used had to be in English, not much of a translation into Chinese, certainly not one he knew of. Even the translator struggled with some of the financial terms used. An hour later and Jimmy was almost finished, a sombre conclusion of parts given in English for my benefit: any

gathering of refugees in the Middle East after 2010 would give rise to a terrorist group called the Brotherhood, who would start by blowing up all the oil wells, then go on to blow up just about anything, and anyone else they could get hold of, eventually reaching Europe.

A conflict in Afghanistan was certain, the destabilisation of Pakistan was certain afterwards as a consequence, followed by an increase in terror attacks against India and a subsequent nuclear war with India. That war would create refugees en mass, hence the Brotherhood. The task force sent to re-take the oil fields would lead to a wider war in the Middle East, eventually involving China and Russia and a global conflict.

If all that was avoided, the American economy would suffer and they would invade Venezuela, attacking China in 2015. If that was averted, plagues would sweep the earth, global warming would be debunked after a cold snap killing many, financial disasters would cripple the world's banking systems and large scale fraud would reduce confidence; people would go back to gold coins. If that lot was averted, 2025 would kill hundreds of millions, and the Brotherhood would rise in force.

I could read the charts and understand some of the detail, and even that small detail made me feel ill. This was the first instance that I had seen a complete timeline; Jimmy had kept it from me for security reasons. Now I was starting to understand why - I wasn't ready before. And this lot were not ready either. Ties were loosened, throats were dry, and Jimmy firmly told our hosts to have a tea and toilet break. Many stepped out, others debating detail in whispers, papers tapped, the boards attacked with pointed fingers, lines were drawn on charts.

When everyone returned, Jimmy grabbed a large map of China and hung it over a white board. He drew a line down the middle of China. 'After 2025, you can only hold the land to the east of that line.' It did not please the audience. 'I came back to prepare you, I cannot offer you a solution. And I will only entrust the information, of what happens in 2025, to your Prime Minister.'

They fired a barrage of questions, Jimmy going back over the charts. Seemed like they figured they could find a solution to some or all of the points listed. Each point was answered with a

counterpoint, each verbal volley shot down, the firer silenced. It dragged on for almost an hour, till they were exhausted.

‘Does China survive after 2025?’ Wen asked.

‘Yes, it fairs better than most’. That cheered them a little. ‘But reduced in size, constant Muslim terrorism, very little global trade, outbreaks of disease. And gentlemen, just getting you there will be extremely difficult. After 2020, global climate change has an effect, floods and droughts. Let me suggest to you now that you invest in submarine technology, nuclear submarines – but not military; research vessels, submarines that small groups of people can live in.’

Wen finally said, ‘May I ask ... *who* sent you through time?’

‘Not yet. In time I will answer.’

‘And your ... motivation?’ Wen posed.

Jimmy took a breath. ‘A ... difficult question. Do you nurse an elderly relative close to death? Or do you ask ... why bother? Do you tackle a difficult mathematical problem because it must be solved, or because of stubbornness, or an arrogant belief that you can solve it – once started afraid to give up and face your own failure? I think, a little of each.’

‘Your colleague, he is an understudy?’ Wen asked.

‘Of sorts, but he has a destiny, so I keep him close.’

‘You take many risks,’ Wen noted, wagging a finger.

‘Take a look at the board, and find me a time when there are no risks.’

Wen adjusted his suit. ‘You ask for nothing for yourself ... in return for all this information?’ he challenged.

‘I ask you ... to help yourselves, to help me save the planet. You will survive 2025, and so will the world. What remains, is how well prepared we all are for the challenges that come before, to better be able to handle that which comes after. That preparation should have started ten years ago to be effective. You, gentlemen, are on the clock.’ He put his jacket on. ‘We will meet again the day after tomorrow, please draw up accurate charts and a list of questions. In the meantime, I have guests to attend to.’

Wen followed Jimmy up. ‘Han has noticed that you do not let this *burden* affect you?’ Jimmy gestured Wen to a corner, whispering in his ear. Back at the table Wen, took time to consider whatever it was Jimmy had said, idly adjusting the

papers in front of him. Lifting his head, Wen finally said, 'We will have the questions ready. Please enjoy your time in our fine city.'

I was glad to be out in the fresh air, the day clear and the sun out, and very glad to see Katie again, practically carrying her up the stairs. Ghosts of Khrushchev or not, I tore her clothes off. At midnight I slipped out, finding Jimmy sat reading in the lounge.

'Can't sleep?' I asked as I sat. The tea was fresh, so I poured myself one. Mint.

'She warm enough?' he asked as he closed his book.

'Got one of my t-shirts on in bed, socks. Very ... glamorous.' I eased back. 'Did today ... go as planned?'

'Yes. But this meeting *is* a whole year ahead of schedule.'

'Now that I know the timeline, should we discuss it more...?'

'And you have some input?' he toyed. 'If only.'

'I may have some ideas,' I said defensively.

Jimmy regarded me coolly. Looking away he said, 'The past fifty years, plus other historical factors, have given many in the Middle East a certain mindset. They suffer repression at the hands of their own governments, yet their own governments deflect that blame well ... and towards The West. You then have the Israeli-Palestinian conflict causing even more resentment towards The West. All you need is the right spark to set-off large parts of the Middle East, where the rich get richer and the poor stay poor. That will eventually manifest itself as The Brotherhood, who will raise an army of a million suicide bombers, a very difficult thing to fight against, since you can't use tanks or planes ... or even nukes. They sneak up, and blow up; very effective in urban areas.'

'What if The West and China and Russia unite, like you said?'

'The Brotherhood will still surge across Europe and wreck the economy. What you have to keep in mind, about the modern western economy and banking system, is that it's very finely balanced – and everyone max's out their credit cards. You only need a small dip in the economy to be in real trouble, and over the next fifteen years the UK, and many other countries, borrow their way into growth, hit a crisis, then try and borrow their way out. The one thing politicians are good at is leaving a mess behind for the next lot; boom and bust.' He sighed. 'We live in a

fragile modern society, no stomach for long wars, no resources for it either. And there is the problem of Middle East oil.'

'The Brotherhood blow it up.'

'Causing an immediate financial crash, which will last decades. No, young man, there is no simple solution. And even if there was, it would mean getting many groups together to co-operate, and at the moment they hate each other.'

'What'll you do?'

'Well, unless I get a bolt from the blue, I'll get the world to 2025 in as best a shape as they can be in.'

'Should we put pressure on the Israelis to find a peace?'

'It's too late for that. Besides, such a peace would help by maybe five percent. No, the Brotherhood is not about the Palestinians, it's more complicated than that.'

'So when do *I* do something useful?' I asked.

'You already are, don't sell yourself short. You're making a difference.' With a grin he said, 'A small one, but a difference.'

I let out a long sigh. 'I'm sure you'll pull a rabbit out the hat.'

'Oh, I have a very big rabbit in the hat, would make a hell of a difference to the world, but ... not to the Middle East. And we don't dare reveal that the Muslims take over the world, because they'd take comfort from that idea and rise up now.'

The next day we made like tourists, visiting the sights, six plainclothes officers in tow. The ladies did not mind, they had felt quite honoured on their exclusive trip around the Forbidden City, and private close-ups of new Panda cubs at the zoo. Don't know why, but Katie liked being treated like a princess. We ate out that night, a restaurant that Jimmy picked, surprising Han with his local knowledge. We chose our fish and lobsters whilst the creatures were still alive, watched them cut-up and cooked, then ate them. It was a good job no one ordered beef. The next day the ladies were in for a coach trip to the Great Wall, we'd be going back into the lion's den.

After a gruelling three hours of questions and answers in the bunker, Jimmy ordered a break and some food. Over noodles, our host, Wen, asked about the interaction of Chinese and American economies.

In English, Jimmy explained, 'You will build up a trillion dollar reserve by 2008, and will thereafter influence American fiscal policy by becoming a principal lender back to the US

financial markets. That feedback will cause a housing bubble, then a financial bubble. Wide-scale fraud will cost you billions, and the devaluation of the dollar will cause you to lose thirty percent of your dollar reserves.'

'And the solution?' Wen nudged.

'You must be a cautious lender, to ease the peaks and troughs of the bubbles into gentle hills. Instead of making three hundred percent on property over five years, make one hundred percent – after building a lot of properties and slowing down the property market. If property grows by ten or fifteen percent a year people will still be happy. If it grows by thirty percent there will be a bubble and crash. What you must keep in mind is that if people make ten percent a year, every year, they are happy – and so are the politicians. If they make a hundred percent, then lose five percent, they're very unhappy at what they've lost and the politicians get the blame.'

'An interesting phenomena,' Wen admitted.

'I'll tell you when to buy western property, when to build, and when to sell. Not for the maximum profit, but to avoid a global financial crash. You will become too dependent on the US; when they crash, you follow them down.'

'And the solution to that?' Wen asked.

'Internalisation and diversification; build you own internal consumer markets and property ownership market, then align yourself with India, Brazil and Russia – less association with the US. You need more hydroelectric dams, more nuclear power stations and a move away from oil by 2015, electric cars and buses and trains. By then oil will be \$140 a barrel, unless I change it.'

'You ... will change it?' Wen puzzled.

'I know where all the future oil will be found, including large oilfields in China that you don't know about.'

Wen's eyes widened. 'Here? Large oil fields?'

'Yes,' Jimmy said with a thin smile. 'Unfortunately, it will be unwise for you to tap them yet. Timing ... is everything. Oh, do you have a map of the coastal area of Hong Kong?'

Wen barked an order, a map brought out.

With a pen Jimmy marked eight places. 'There are sunken ships with a lot of gold at each location. My cut is twenty percent.'

‘How much gold?’ Wen asked, studying the map.

‘At today’s prices, three of four hundred million.’

Wen grabbed a man and ordered underwater surveys, pronto!

Jimmy grabbed a map of China and searched for several locations, marking them. For each a local map was procured and marked. ‘Buried treasure and significant archaeological sites.’ He tapped a particular site, carefully mouthing, ‘Very valuable.’ More men were assigned to the map’s hidden goodies.

Wen admitted, ‘You are a very useful person to know.’

With Jimmy again standing, more questions were fired at him, diagrams were drawn over, and I noticed a difference from the first meeting; they no longer looked like they wanted to kill and eat us, they were treating us like allies. They were still despondent at not finding solutions, but they very happy that they had the tools to give them a chance at navigating their way through the problem. They certainly did not lack commitment. Time and again they would attack a problem, working and re-working it till a best position was found.

At 4pm Jimmy called a halt, reminding them that we had guests, and offering another meet in the future, giving them time too formulate strategies in depth, and a lot more questions. They would also have time to fetch up the treasure from the ocean’s depths, and those on land.

We returned to the ghostly mansion and began packing, the ladies arriving with Han around 6pm, stories of the Great Wall and photographs they had taken, a few moans about the traffic and the coach. Jimmy settled them with a tea, listening to the tales. He then asked them to pack quickly, since the plane would leave in two hours. At midnight we landed in Hong Kong, the air considerably warmer than Beijing, Han saying goodbye at the airport; he had made the trip with us just to be polite. The ladies went straight to bed as we met Po, who had come back to the hotel especially.

‘Good visit Beijing?’ he expectantly asked as we sat in the Indian restaurant. Big Paul was now sat with the bodyguards, looking a bit sheepish. I made a mental note to find out why later.

‘Yes, good visit,’ Jimmy acknowledged. ‘I am sure you will get some additional contracts.’

‘We negotiate now, for two weeks,’ Po explained. ‘Good contract, ship Tanzania ore and Sudan.’

‘We’ll be doing a lot of work in Tanzania in the next year,’ Jimmy told Po. ‘Charity work.’

‘You want money for it?’

Jimmy offered him a flat palm. ‘When the time is right, you hang onto it for now.’

‘Is Ling ... OK?’ I ventured.

‘Yes, yes, she no worry about your pretty girl,’ Po explained, a dismissive wave of his hand. ‘This girl, she make many hits for us, I look. Pin-apple make good money.’ We did not correct his pronunciation.

‘Everyone fly back OK?’ I asked.

‘Yes, yes, all go to airport with my car, all very happy – I give gifts.’

‘What gifts?’ I asked.

‘Chinese jade, very nice.’

‘I’m sure Mac will appreciate it,’ I offered.

Po pointed at us. ‘Your people, they take many thing from room, I must say all is OK in hotel.’

‘What things?’ I asked. ‘Like ... beds?’

‘They take towel, robe, pillow case,’ Po listed off. He shrugged. ‘It small money, but hotel manager much paper form.’

We tried not to laugh, too much, and I wondered if the light fittings were still there in Rudd’s room.

Jimmy told Po, ‘In the month of May there will be African leaders conference at the golf club. You should be there.’

‘Yes, yes. You say when, we make stand of information,’ Po keenly insisted. ‘You friend, Han, he make good friend my family.’

Jimmy nodded. ‘I hope so. You’ll be seeing more of him in the future.’

After the meal we cornered Big Paul in the British bar. ‘So what did you do?’ I asked, assuming he must have done something.

‘He spent the night in the cells,’ Jimmy explained, although I didn’t know who had told him. ‘Apparently, the posh lobster restaurant does not allow guests to swim down to the bottom of the tank for the lobster they want. Union rules I guess.’

‘Sorry, boss. Had a bit to drink.’

‘Po got him out, and wangled the charges dropped,’ Jimmy calmly explained. It could have been worse, and neither of us cared much. We left the next day with bulging cases, towels and robes pinched.

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Magestic

Geoff Wolak. October, 2009.

Part 3

Tropical snakes in Swindon

The car park at the leisure centre was quiet as we passed, a sprinkling of cars, probably just a few families swimming. It was midday on a Wednesday, so I hadn't expected the car park to be well attended. I received the centre's attendance figures every week, knowing already that the weekends here were popular, if not bustling. Monday and Tuesday nights were full in the gym, the rest of the week easing off as the days progressed, Friday night quiet. I moved the scuba clubs to Thursday and Sunday nights to even things out.

The gate security staff greeted us, and we picked up Mackey, now acting as full time airfield co-ordinator, his name often causing confusion with the other Mac. We drove the short distance to the rescuers training building and parked, Mackey showing us around a new permanent admin room, now with a young secretary, and two computers from our IT guy, Gareth.

'Can you understand his accent?' I teased her.

'His accent is hard sometimes, his handwriting is the problem.'

'I'm learning to type stuff into the computer directly,' Mackey said defensively. He led us next door, coffee in plastic cups sipped around the latest dummy; this one made breath sounds as it "died" slowly, liquid or blood squeezed out of two new lower orifices.

'The dummy had a write-up in a medical journal,' one of the AMO lads explained. 'Now every fucker wants one.'

'Not at twelve grand a piece, they don't,' I put in.

'Army was here the other week, they want one,' the AMO staff told us.

'I'm going to donate two to them,' Jimmy mentioned. Facing Mackey, he asked, 'Where's our gang?'

'Spread around,' Mackey answered. 'Some out driving. We send them out on a hundred mile round trip, nay motorways nor dual carriageways allowed, so they're all back roads and maps.' Finishing our coffees, we thanked the AMO lads, ambling out of the building and to the finished greenhouse, six unlucky trainees now in residence.

'How's this working out?' I asked as we approached.

‘Good,’ Mackey enthused. ‘Wees stick ‘em in for a week, but no one’s quit yet.’

The door of a brick building opened to a changing room on the left and small training room on the right, wall posters of bugs, a few plastic bugs scattered about a tabletop.

Mackey explained, ‘They change clothes on the left, putting on khaki green lightweights, taking in just what we let ‘em, backpack with enough supplies.’ Taking off his coat, he turned the handle on the next door, leading us into a warmer room, the misted glass of the greenhouse now visible. With a grin he said, ‘There’s a wee steam generator under the floor, keeps it moist and uncomfortable in there.’

Jimmy hung up his jacket, so I copied, Mackey ducking his head and opening the door to an escaping pawl of mist. We ducked in quickly and closed the door, the air as warm as anything I had felt in Africa. But it was also moist, almost like a sauna, and a strong odour registered on your tongue. It was not something I recognised, but an unpleasant earthy smell. A shrill call shocked me, a small monkey the other side of fine wire mesh on the left, a large zoo style cage. On the right ran a long line of glass exhibits, numerous snakes visible, and again reminiscent of a zoo. As we advanced across compacted brown dirt we stepped around a tree, Jimmy pointing out a tree frog and a Stick Insect. I picked another Stick Insect up off the floor and placed in on the next tree, saving squishing it. Five yards in and the room widened, a lazy wave issued from a lady trainee in a green hammock strung between two trees.

‘Having fun?’ I asked.

‘Getting used to it,’ she said. ‘Haven’t had a bath or shower for five days.’

Stepping around a large bush, we found the rest of the trainees sat about a central fire, cooking pots hung from branches. Smoke rose to a fan in the roof apex, some natural light entering. Their green khaki shirts all displayed large sweat marks around their armpits, and I noticed that they all appeared very tired, almost downbeat.

‘Getting much sleep?’ I asked.

‘Got the tree frogs for company,’ one said. ‘But *they* don’t keep you awake. It’s the crawlies that wake you, something trying to crawl up your nose!’

‘Even in the hammocks?’ I queried.

‘They crawl along the ropes,’ a man explained.

I pointed at a man in grey khakis and a hat. ‘You the vet guy?’

‘Bristol Zoo,’ the man answered with a smile. ‘I pop in two hours a day. *I* ... get to go home!’

‘He teaches us what’s deadly, and what is just plain fucking dangerous,’ a trainee said. ‘Get ‘em wrong - and we get a rain shower.’

‘Rain shower?’ I asked.

They pointed at the sprinkler system running along the room above head height. ‘It rains every day,’ they glumly explained. ‘Then, just for fun, the security staff hit the button in the night. You wake up wet.’

‘Good practise,’ Jimmy told them. ‘But you’ll be heading to a desert to start with.’

I pointed at a yellow snake crawling towards us. ‘Lunch?’

‘It’s our pet python, Monty. Harmless, unless you’re a mouse,’ they explained. ‘Mackey drops us in a live chicken or piglet for lunch. Or a rat, just to freak us.’

A man asked, ‘That helicopter rescue, stuff like that common out there?’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy answered. ‘There’re a few civil wars brewing, you’ll see some action. And we’re opening a base in Tanzania.’

‘Didn’t bring Katie Joe in with you, did you?’ another man asked.

‘No, but you’ll meet her at the graduation party, she’ll be here,’ I explained. ‘So don’t fail the course.’

With our faces now moist we left them to it, bracing the cold outer room and the relatively freezing outside world of Swindon, a long way from the Amazon. Big Paul brought up the car and we drove the short distance to the climbing wall. Six of our trainees were lowering an injured man in a stretcher, two people abseiling down either end of the stretcher. As they neared ground level the stretcher dipped on the left, a whistle blown.

‘Head lower than feet. Start again!’

To curses and expletives we stepped inside the hangar, four trainees sat in the Huey, my old instructor pointing out things of interest to them.

‘Take five,’ I told our people, closing in on my instructor and shaking his hand, greeting him warmly. With Jimmy chatting to

the trainees, I jumped into left seat and closed the door. 'Seems like a lifetime ago I first sat here.'

'You've done well though.'

Scanning the instrumentation, I said, 'I took off without permission, no external checks, no flight plan, and flew at low and dangerous speeds, flying on with a fuel warning light, a temperature warning and a fire.'

'I read the book twice. I think the fire was oil on the hot engine, not a fuel fire.'

'I think so too. It was dosed too quickly.'

'You're my most famous student. And I get some work from it!'

We laughed. 'Good, you milk it.'

'Stuck a picture of you up in the briefing room, some pictures from the book. All the cadets around here want to meet you, you're their local hero.'

'How's Big Paul doing?' I knowingly asked.

'Failed the first three attempts. He can fly OK, but he's not good on checklists. Ask him a question and he knows, it's just that coherent forethought.'

'Keep him at it,' I said. 'He'll get there.'

'One of this batch has a lapsed PPL. He's good, he could pass on this.'

'Yes?' I queried, giving it some thought. 'Do what you can, push him through, extra pilots are needed down there. Pop around the house at some point, don't be a stranger.'

We moved on to the cave, not knowing if there was anyone booked in, but finding a cave rescue team, two men on the surface.

Shaking their hands, a man reported, 'Fucking family of rats have moved in – very realistic!'

'They'll keep you on your toes down there,' I suggested. 'How many in the hole?'

'Four down there; two seniors and two new lads that wanted a go. We come midweek, no chance at the weekend, busy as fuck. One of your girls freaked out down there?'

'Yes?' I questioned, concerned.

'She went back in the next day, completed it.' He shrugged and made a face.

‘This isn’t compulsory for them,’ I stated, staring into the muddy entrance. ‘Just extra toughener and sickener stuff. They’re more likely to be in a helicopter than a cave.’ Turning, I said, ‘You have fun.’

Stood on the side of the leisure centre pool, shoes covered in blue plastic over-socks, we observed five minutes of basic water rescue, trainees towing each other with floats and lifting people out of the water, kids splashing about on the other side of a rope.

In the café we settled with Mackey. Jimmy told him, ‘When this course is complete, do a review and assessment, then we’ll advertise again. Any group more than ten and we’ll put them through. And the next batch will include non-medics, but trained up to the AMO standard of patrol medic.’

‘That’s at least a week’s basic first aid, then three weeks with AMO,’ Mackey noted.

Jimmy nodded, supping his coffee. ‘I think a course of ... sixteen weeks at least would be needed. Why don’t you work one out and send it over to me. But add two weeks for tropical medicine training at the end, and some basic patient care, at least a week. If someone doesn’t have a medical qualification, they must be shit hot at driving and navigating.’

‘What about the mine clearance school?’ Mackey asked.

‘A year away,’ Jimmy answered.

Driving away, I asked Jimmy, ‘Why don’t we spend more on this, get more people?’

‘It takes time, not money. First we have to find the people, then they need training, then a few years experience, then they can be useful instructors. Most of it they’ll learn on the job in Africa, and you can’t teach that here. A good instructor is a five year process from the get go.’

Kigoma, February, 1994

The Dash touched down smoothly at Kigoma airfield at noon, taxied around and halted. Stepping out into the heat I gazed skyward with a pilot’s interest; one half of the sky threatened a

hell of a downpour, the other half clear. Stepping away from the Dash, with my bag over my shoulder, the first thing I noticed was the background noise; drilling, hammering, banging, metal on metal clanking. It was the sound of earnest labouring.

The rubbish had gone, that inside the airfield, so too the poor dead donkey, and the remaining rubbish outside the perimeter was being picked up by locals and thrown onto a truck. The fence was up, enough barbed wire to deter all but the most determined of locals. I noted soldiers in jeeps, some on foot. A half built hangar was reaching skyward with its metal frame, a dozen huts now lining the western fence, and the concrete foundations for something large and rectangular were being attended my numerous local builders.

The toot of a horn caused me to turn, finding Rudd in a jeep. Jimmy, Mac and I jumped in, Tubby refuelling the Dash. We made the short trip to the tower, jumping out and admiring the wondrous transformation. It even had a radio mast. Inside, we noted local workmen drilling and hammering in downstairs rooms, before climbing the newly painted stairs up to the tower, Rudd politely asking the workmen to leave.

‘Not bad for two months,’ I said, staring out at the busy airfield. The runway cracks had been repaired, the edges had been flattened, grass now being seeded and watered, a mischievous flock of sparrows hoping along behind.

‘It’s good progress, Rudd,’ Jimmy offered. ‘That new year break did you good.’

‘I had the practise at Mawlini,’ Rudd modestly suggested. He pointed through the glass. ‘The fence is done, patrols set-up. We have the huts with water piped in, no gas or electric yet, but soon. It’s not far, the nearest connection, but they’re slow. The hotel foundations are laid, the hangar foundations as well.’

‘Don’t forget the pool,’ I said.

‘No room, I’m afraid,’ Rudd said. ‘Not much space.’

‘Put it on the roof,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Bar *and* pool then.’

‘You are serious?’ Rudd challenged, Jimmy nodding. He shrugged. ‘OK. You want to see the hotel outside?’

Mounting up, we drove though the impressive new gates, three hundred yards in a straight line along a road lined with tatty houses, and to a period colonial hotel on the left, local workmen

attacking it in force. Cables and tools were carefully negotiated as we entered, things being ripped out and replaced in earnest.

‘Twenty rooms,’ Rudd explained, shouting to be heard. ‘They’ll be nice enough when finished. All the downstairs windows will have bars, the doors secure, a guard at the front.’

‘Good work,’ Jimmy approved. ‘Let’s go see the camp before meeting the politicians.’

Rudd navigated us through the bustling town streets, tooting his way through quite aggressively, and south along a dusty road. We passed the UN camp and kept going for another ten minutes, soon to flat scrubland, the lake visible to the west. High gates were opened for us by a solitary police officer, letting us through to a large expanse of not very much, but very secure. Pulling up next to a lone hut we jumped down.

Rudd said, pointing, ‘Five hundred yards square, one water well, one hut, an expensive fence and a guard, resident Meerkats – but they don’t pay us rent.’

Jimmy scuffed the soil with his foot, testing it. ‘Get some large UN tents, then some family size; store them at the airfield. That’s all for now.’

‘How many tents?’ Rudd queried.

‘Enough for fifty thousand people.’

Rudd stopped dead, a glance at me. ‘You think that many refugees will come?’

‘I make money ... by being able to see trends,’ Jimmy explained, scanning the horizon. ‘It’s a skill I can apply to more than just the stock markets. If I’m wrong, the tents will be used elsewhere - Africa is not short of refugees.’ He faced Mac. ‘How many Rifles now?’

‘Just shy of two hundred, and the fucking regulars apply to join it now. Better pay, better kit, better training.’

‘Better leadership,’ I said, making Mac smile.

‘Aye, if you insist. We’re getting the pick of their best lads.’

‘Good,’ Jimmy offered him. ‘And the Somali helpers?’

‘Right fucking bunch; we find one good one out of ten. They kill each other, rape the women, and beat the kids. We got twenty-five half decent lads, rest I wouldn’t trust.’

‘Form them into a unit,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘First aid training, weapons training away from the base, mine training in the base. Feed and clothe them, chuck them a small wage. Motivate them.’

‘Kenyans don’t like ‘em much,’ Mac cautioned.

‘Educate the Rifles ... to care about everyone. Get them on some simple refugee work, other than pointing their weapons at women and children, and keep the discipline tight.’ He faced Rudd. ‘Ask the nice Defence Minister if he would like a squadron of Hueys for the Rifles.’

‘They don’t have the pilots,’ Mac put in.

Jimmy nodded reflectively. ‘We’ll have to get contractors to start with, maybe advertise overseas. Some of the regular Kenyan officers could be trained up.’ He faced Rudd again. ‘Make the offer anyway, we’ll worry about the pilots later.’ Turning back to Mac he asked, ‘Rescue Force progress?’

‘Got eleven originals, your new five plus nineteen in training, thirty something Kenyan nurses and four lads from the Rifles.’

‘How they making out?’ I asked, already knowing the answer. This chat was not about facts and figures, we got the faxes; it was about connecting to our people and getting their input.

‘The five you sent over know the job anyway, just a matter of getting the mine training in. The second nineteen are progressing slowly but surely, some good at one thing, others good at another.’

‘Make up teams of four people,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Aim for a doctor, a nurse, a basic medic and a driver or mine specialist. That way we cover everything.’

‘Aye, was thinking along those lines.’

‘And a helicopter mobile team would have two more, pilot and navigator, or just two in the back and stick to four,’ Jimmy added. ‘Jeep teams should be four, plus overnight kit.’

‘The Kenyan nurses are OK,’ Mac added. ‘But slow on the jeep training, the mines ... and no fucking way they want to fly anything.’

‘That’s OK, but keep pushing them,’ Jimmy said. ‘Everyone has to pass ordnance and jeep.’

‘Dunnow got his Huey license the other week,’ Mac added. ‘And I dunno how he did it.’

‘And there is Oxfam and Medicine Sans Frontier at the base, interested in this place as well,’ Rudd put in.

‘Fine, provide them with huts,’ Jimmy ordered, checking his watch. ‘Best go meet the Tanzanians.’

Forty minutes later we pulled into the best hotel Kigoma had to offer, the car park now quiet full. Ambling through the pleasant gardens we took in the bloom, finding our hosts sat in the courtyard restaurant. They stood, Jimmy greeting them and shaking their hands, introductions made. I had no idea how I might pronounce their names a second time, should I have to, and couldn't remember who was who either. The waiters pulled tables closer and we sat facing each other, two groups of four.

'Your reputation precedes you, Mister Silo,' the Minister said in a deep baritone voice.

'Have you played golf at River View?'

'Indeed I have,' the Minister enthused.

'Then I shall arrange a free stay for you and ... any guests you wish to take, wives or girlfriends.'

Our hosts laughed at length. 'You are too kind, Mister Silo.'

'Have you reviewed my proposals?' Jimmy asked.

'Very much so. And the airfield here is quite new and different, many jobs of employment for the local people.'

'I hope it helps the local economy,' Jimmy offered. 'And there will be permanent jobs as well. Now, for the airfield – is there anything that you are not happy with?'

'No, no, nothing at the airfield is a problem, don't worry.'

'And the refugee camp?' Jimmy nudged.

'Well, how can we make a decision about refugees ... when there are no refugees? You see?'

'I think there will be problems in Rwanda, so I am planning ahead. If nothing happens, we have a big fence around a nice family of Meerkats.'

The Tanzanians laughed. 'A well protected wildlife project!' the Minister joked. 'If you wish to have an expensive fence around some dirt we do not have an issue with that.'

'And if there are refugees?' Jimmy pressed.

The Minister stopped smiling. 'Then my government would meet to decide at the time, but we would not be happy to see refugees here at this place – it is a poor area, there would be trouble.'

'Indeed. But if there *was* trouble, then having a good fence around them, and outside of town ... may be wise.'

'In that case ... perhaps some wisdom to it, yes.'

‘I ask only for an agreement in principle, that if there were refugees causing problems here, I could house them outside of town. Could your government see any problem with that?’

‘I do not think so, but it is a strange request.’

Jimmy eased back. ‘Would your Air Force like a small aeroplane from me, a gift, so that they can patrol the lake?’

‘That would be very generous,’ the Minister offered.

‘When you have a pilot or two, I will get the plane for you straight away. And we’ll pay the fuel.’

‘Most generous. You live up to your reputation, Mister Silo.’

‘I am generous ... to those who help me, Minister.’

The minister nodded slowly, and I wondered if a bribe was about to be offered. ‘I will look forward to visiting the golf club again.’

‘You and your friends will be my guests, all costs paid, and your airfare.’

‘Most generous,’ the Minister repeated.

I guessed that was the bribe, or part of it. We enjoyed a cold drink, a chat about the lake traffic, and about Tanzania, the minister and his group heading back for their flight thirty minutes later. We were not far behind them.

We flew directly to Mawlini, the limit of our fuel, landing in the dark and testing the improved runway lights. Tubby’s wife was right about the rooftop bar, you could see it ten miles out. We dropped bags in rooms and headed up, a lengthy process of greeting our staff and being introduced to those who knew us either by reputation, or distorted story. It was thirty minutes before we sat and ordered food, Tubby stepping out with his wife.

Jimmy called him over. ‘Tubby, how would you like to switch to Rescue Force?’

Tubby glanced at his wife and they sat. ‘What’s brought this on, you’re bursting at the seams with new warm bodies?’ I was taken by surprise as well.

‘We need experienced people, not keen beginners. We need people who are ... seasoned.’

‘What, both of us?’ Tubby asked.

‘If you’re both interested.’

‘Oh. Doing what?’

‘General duties, the same as everyone else. You’d have to do the mine clearance course, we know you can handle a jeep, some crossover time on Huey – which you should fly through – no pun intended.’

Tubby and his wife glanced at each other.

‘OK,’ Jimmy began, let me make it easy for you. ‘You’re sacked from the flying doctors, effective immediately.’ They blinked.

I faced Tubby. ‘So, what do you think you’ll do next?’

‘I think, squeezing into a white uniform,’ Tubby said, sat wide-eyed.

Jimmy handed over a wad of dollars. ‘Have one tailored. And... welcome to the team, you start in the morning. Pay is twenty percent above that which you were on, because you fly the Dash. Sue, we’ll pay for your crossover to the Dash and Huey.’

‘Sounds bloody good,’ she offered.

Jimmy explained, ‘Rescue Force is being re-organised into teams of four, with a doctor in charge of each. You’ll both have teams under you, a nurse and a driver, one other.’

Tubby made a face, looking pleased with the idea.

‘OK, employee, you may go now,’ Jimmy dryly commented.

With Tubby standing, and bowing theatrically, Mac walked in with Rudd. They joined us.

‘Tubby and Sue have joined Rescue Force,’ I told Mac.

‘They have?’ Mac puzzled.

‘Just hired them,’ Jimmy explained. ‘They’ll train on the Huey, and Sue will fly the Dash as well.’

‘More pilots than planes,’ Mac pointed out.

‘Oh, three more Huey’s arriving in the morning,’ Jimmy told Mac with a wink.

‘I’ve paid for them today,’ Rudd mentioned, accepting a beer from a waiter.

‘Four Hueys,’ Mac thought aloud. ‘A squadron!’

‘Best think up some squadron manoeuvres then,’ I told Mac.

‘Oh,’ Jimmy added. ‘Three RAF Hercules here in the morning.’

‘RAF?’ Mac repeated. ‘Passing through?’

‘No, dropping off a MASH unit. They’ll set-up in the Rescue Force compound for four weeks, practice their skills on the

refugees at the border - a joint exercise - so play nice with them. Your opposite number is a Colonel.'

'A fucking ponsy Colonel?' Mac grumbled.

I studied Jimmy carefully for several seconds. 'If these Army medics see Rescue Force close up, then when they leave the Army...'

'May be tempted to come our way,' Jimmy finished off. 'Mac, you may want to organise a few competitions; driving, map reading, a joint exercise or two by Huey.'

Rudd asked, 'This new small building, it's a clinic for Doc Adam inside the base?'

'No,' Jimmy corrected him. 'I want a surgical bay here and a few beds for injured people, in case we get some of our people hurt. I want a base ambulance as well. And Mac, let's practise for a worst case scenario, like a Huey dropping onto a hut – mass casualties.'

Mac nodded. 'Lot's more planes and bodies these days. Some fucker's going to clip a Huey one day!'

At dawn, the tower received contact from the RAF - they were inbound, the sleepy drivers of the fuel truck and the fire truck made ready. The Hercules aircraft circled ten minutes later, as I stood in the rooftop bar with Jimmy and Rudd, the Dutchman up early.

'We should send jeeps?' Rudd asked.

'They're supposed to be completely mobile and self-sufficient,' Jimmy pointed out. 'They have their own jeeps in the back, tents, the works.'

With mugs of tea in hand, we stood watching, a few early-bird UN staffers interested in what was up. The first Hercules landed in what looked like a hundred yards, its tailgate down, its momentum halted with powerful reverse thrust, four jeeps soon driving out of the rear. With the jeeps halted on the apron, the Hercules powered up fully and took off on a dime, climbing steeply. If the people on the base were not already awake, they were now. The second and third Hercules repeated the process before disappearing to wherever they were going, the fuel truck and its sleepy driver not needed. Twelve jeeps sat on the apron, packed high with kit. They drove, steadily, around to the Rescue Force compound as we observed them, being allocated their own

patch of sand. With the Rifles keenly watching through the fence, the jeeps unloaded, soon a few tents set-up, one large tent at the centre. Thirty minutes later and they had their own small camp, jeeps parked in a neat line. One jeep drove off, straight around to us. We soon had three guests.

‘Colonel,’ Jimmy offered, shaking the man’s hand.

‘This is Major Dunn, Captain Susan Fleet,’ he introduced.

‘Grab a seat, we’ll get you a coffee,’ Jimmy offered. With a waiter closing in, we settled.

‘You’re Paul,’ the Colonel said towards me.

I nodded. ‘And this is Rudd, our administrator in Kenya.’

‘Good flight?’ Jimmy enquired.

‘Long ... flight,’ the lady corrected. ‘Hercules are not built for comfort.’

‘Where did you refuel?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Cyprus and Djibouti,’ the Colonel answered. ‘That’s where they’re off to now.’

‘We heard this place was comfortable,’ the Major noted. ‘Is that a swimming pool behind the hotel?’

‘Yes, but you’re not allowed any creature comforts,’ Jimmy explained, a glint in his eye. ‘Your bosses called ahead.’

‘It’s every soldier’s duty ... to try and break the rules,’ the Colonel playfully suggested.

‘Then Friday night is *get falling down drunk* night,’ I told him. ‘And believe me, these UN doctors could drink you under the table.’

‘We’ll organise some competitions for you,’ Jimmy informed them. ‘Against our lot. Your soldiers can shoot with the Kenyan Rifles, on their range, if they want.’

‘How far is the refugee camp?’ the lady asked.

‘Thirty miles,’ I said. ‘Ten minutes in a Huey.’

‘But you won’t be able to go there in uniform,’ Jimmy told them.

‘No?’ they queried.

‘No, some of the Somali women freak out and run away when they see uniforms,’ Jimmy explained. ‘You won’t be able to treat many of them in uniform. But we have jackets you can borrow when you go.’

‘We had a go on your dummy the other week,’ the Colonel mentioned. ‘Marvellous training aid. The staff gave me a simulated heart attack.’

‘And how did you do?’ I nudged.

‘Not that well, was waiting like an amateur for damn thing to give up agonal breaths and its dying pulse.’

‘A common mistake,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘The varying stages of shock are good if you stab it in the leg. Bit of a mess with the fluid, but the stages are accurate.’

‘We only have the two of them, so we won’t be stabbing them,’ the Major told us.

‘We’re working on a repair kit so that you can stab and shoot them,’ Jimmy explained. ‘For now it’s *return to the shop*. There’s an early version here, still in use somewhere.’

‘There’s a lot more here than we realised,’ the Colonel noted. ‘Quite a small town. I dug out an old picture of this place before coming out.’

Rudd keenly put in, ‘Now we have Red Cross, Medicine Sans Frontier, Oxfam and UNHCR. Oh, and the flying doctor service. And of course the mine training school.’

‘We’d like a go at the mines,’ the Colonel asked. ‘Hear you have good dummy mines?’

‘They make a bang if you miss them,’ Jimmy emphasised. ‘Keeps you focused. We’ll get your people in the sandbox when you’re ready.’

Rudd said, ‘There is a water tap on the side of the hut nearest you, toilets next to it. And the main buildings have water and electricity if you need it.’

‘But really,’ Jimmy began, ‘you should be digging latrines in the sand, you know, practising being tough soldiers an all.’

‘Like I said,’ the Colonel responded, his nose in the air. ‘Every soldiers duty to break the rules.’

At 1pm we were sat having lunch with Tubby and his wife, when the distant drone of Hueys caused us to lift our heads. From the south, a line of three Hueys came into view, already painted white and sporting red crosses and Rescue Force logos. The drone grew as they neared, causing other people to stand and watch, our new helicopters flaring and slowing before landing on the apron next to our lonesome resident Huey. I walked to the

wall and stared down, four white Hueys now sat in a neat line on the apron. Slowly, my head nodded itself, a smile taking hold. Rescue Force was now indeed a force.

I made my excuses, and drove around to meet the transit pilots, some I already knew from Nairobi airfield, accepting the aircrafts log books and maintenance schedules. From the rear of the Hueys we unloaded spare avionics and fabric sand covers, all stored in the hangar. There were now four Hueys, but just three resident team members who could fly them; Rachet, Spanner and Dunnow – and they lacked experience. Tubby and his wife would have to convert quickly. When a phone in the hangar went I was called over, summoned back.

‘Pack up, we’re heading down to Mombassa,’ Jimmy explained in the hotel reception. ‘Mary passed away a few hours ago.’ He lifted his head and sighed. ‘Before I spoke to her.’

Tubby fired up the Dash half an hour later and we boarded, a little subdued for the two-hour flight. Cosy met us at Mombassa field and we headed over to the hospital to meet Anna, and to make arrangements. Mary’s last six months had not been pleasant, but that was her wish; Jimmy would not inject her. Anna had respected that wish as well. Still, we’d paid her private medical bills, so she got the best care, but Jimmy chided himself for not seeing her earlier. It was four months since we had popped in to see her last, and we both felt a little guilty.

In Mary’s empty hospital room, Anna stood weeping, her pregnancy now clearly visible. ‘She would not let me help her.’

We took in the empty bed, and I felt bad for having taken the Mickey out of her when we first met; and for the next few years. Facing Rudd, I said, ‘The newspapers should give her a good write up.’ Rudd nodded.

Jimmy added, now holding Anna’s hand, ‘Contact the government - I want some official representation at the funeral. And I want a nice plot inside Ebeye grounds for her, nice big headstone. We’ll do the service there, so have all our people drive down; I want all the white jeeps. Day after tomorrow, 9am sharp.’

Anna softly said, ‘The people you arranged are at the orphanage, two American doctors and two nurses. I’ve said nothing to them.’

‘I’ll speak to them later, but let them help out.’

With Rudd and Cosy busy making arrangements, we drove to the beach hotel, just the two of us in a hired jeep, passing the extensive orphanage on the way but not stopping.

‘You feel bad about her?’ I asked.

‘Would have been proper for me to have spoken to her again, but I think Anna helped Mary ... go.’

I turned my head. ‘Yes?’

Jimmy nodded. ‘Mary was in pain, probably asked for a release.’

‘I wouldn’t want to hang around like that.’

‘We all say that, till we get like that,’ Jimmy wistfully noted. We booked in to our hotel - just a few spare huts available, and then for just a few days – before meeting up at the beach bar. The afternoon was hot, the sky clear, the ocean calm inside our breakwaters, two elephants at the water’s edge entertaining the guests.

‘Eight years we’ve been coming to Kenya,’ Jimmy noted, staring at the inviting ocean.

‘Doesn’t seem that long.’

‘It was two years ago you were here with Judy.’

‘Christ, two years,’ I realised.

With a sigh, he lifted up and used the bar phone. Sitting again, he said, ‘I’ll have to chat to the American doctors down here, I’m not going up there, not today.’ He glanced at the guests enjoying themselves on the beach. ‘Her death ... is a milestone in my plans. With the arrival of those Hueys, we’re a full two years ahead of schedule. And I wasn’t going to make use of Kigoma for another three years.’

I considered his words. ‘Does that mean ... that the sequence of events is altered somehow? Improved somehow?’

‘Partly, but cause and effect is a tricky thing. If I do too much too soon I alter my own predictions ... and start tripping over things I can’t plan for.’

‘Might be a good thing,’ I offered.

He swiped away a fly. ‘Or a bad thing.’

I glanced around, making sure no one was close by. ‘Given what you said about 2025, I can’t see how it could be any fucking worse!’

‘No,’ he slowly let out. ‘No, it can’t alter that.’

Half an hour later the doctors appeared; civilian clothes, but with white utility waistcoats. They recognised us straight way, walking over and sitting, drinks ordered.

‘I’m Rick Telling, this is Don Koblinkski,’ the first man offered. ‘And we’re ... well briefed.’

‘Where’re you staying?’ I asked.

‘Mombassa, we drive in.’ They took in the beach. ‘Nice here, very nice.’ Facing Jimmy, Rick said, ‘The orphanage was quite a surprise; almost eight hundred kids. You ... trying to adopt every damn stray kid in Kenya?’

‘More or less,’ Jimmy replied, still facing the ocean. ‘More the better.’

‘Some of the relatives of the kids have reclaimed them,’ Rick pointed out.

‘That’s the law,’ Jimmy softly stated. ‘And maybe good for the kids too.’

‘Locals now send a few kids to study there. Day school.’

‘Yeah?’ I asked. I hadn’t known that.

Jimmy turned his head to me. ‘The new farm - it sends food out for free school lunches to the local schools.’

‘Cool.’

Rick said, ‘You’re a bit of a puzzle, Mister Silo. You’re built like a pro-ball player, you got more money than God, and you spend most of your time doing charity work.’

Without turning his head, Jimmy asked, ‘Did you get into medicine to help people, to ... make a difference?’

‘Not really, it was a career choice. Money. I got a military sponsorship and stayed on working for Uncle Sam; biochemistry and immunology.’

‘Don’t waste too much time thinking about the blood,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘You won’t crack it.’

‘No?’

‘No. Just test the cause and effect, do the epidemiological studies. Cracking the blood will take till 2015 at least.’

‘If someone made it, they could ... just tell us.’

‘And would you understand it?’ Jimmy asked. ‘If you can’t demonstrate the science, you’ll never get FDA approval.’

‘Well ... true. But there are other uses,’ Rick pressed.

‘As and when you convince me of them, I’ll assist,’ Jimmy stated.

‘You know the science behind the blood?’

‘No, but I know some about its uses. And potential *abuses*.’

Don eased forwards. ‘You must know, that if the world gets hold of this, the population growth would be unsustainable.’

‘Finally, an intelligent comment. Yes, I realise that, so does the creator of it. Which is why it was not released to the world many years ago, and won’t be ready till 2015 - and then expensive.’ Jimmy took a sip of his beer. ‘Gentlemen, I have no intention of flooding Africa with it, because the food crisis would lead to war, death and destruction. Selective groups will get it at selective times, that’s all. And around 2016 fifty million people worldwide will be lost to strains of flu, thereby trimming the population a bit. And the one drawback with the blood ... is increased appetite.’

‘To replace all the damaged cells every day you need more protein,’ Rick noted.

Jimmy nodded, still a little subdued. ‘Your purpose at the orphanage, gentlemen, is to record the effects of direct injection. And to let Uncle Sam know about side effects on older kids – which are nil. Oh, you can make use of this place on the weekends, and the golf club if you like.’

‘Wouldn’t mind having a look over Rescue Force,’ Don told us. ‘We both read the book the other week.’

‘We’ll be flying back up in four days if you want a lift. Now, any questions?’

‘Are there variations of serum?’ Don asked. Jimmy shook his head. ‘You, Keely, the kids ... all the same?’ Jimmy nodded. ‘And it reduces fifty percent if passed on.’

‘Yes.’

‘Are top-ups needed?’ Rick asked.

‘No, it works like an infection, self-replicating in the marrow. At heart, it’s a retrovirus that invades the marrow cells and makes a core change to its DNA. The active element changes the design of your body.’

‘Clever,’ Don noted. ‘What about weaknesses?’

‘You have to pack away a lot of beer to get drunk!’ I said.

They laughed.

Jimmy said, ‘Here’s an interesting side effect for you: drug addicts... don’t get high, or enjoy the drugs.’

They glanced at each other. Don realised, 'You inject a drug addict, they're cured.'

'Nope. You inject a drug addict, *they* inject themselves with so much dope to get high it kills them off.'

'It removes ... the ability to enjoy drugs,' Don thought out loud.

'Is it passed on to offspring?' Rick asked.

'No. Only in rare cases.'

'So, even if the Africans were injected, the next generation would need more of it,' Don realised, Jimmy confirming with a nod. 'It wouldn't alter the development of mankind's gene pool. Anything else?'

'I understand, that cigarettes are not as addictive.'

'We'll be keeping it from the tobacco companies then,' Don joked.

'And it *does not* cure obesity, quite the opposite,' Jimmy explained to a backdrop of screaming kids. 'Inject a fat American woman and she'll go to thirty stone quickly, but won't die from pressure on the cardiovascular system - a significant burden on your health services!'

'That's a drawback,' Don unhappily noted. 'And someone like you... in later life?'

'Fit and healthy, so long as I look after myself, fat and healthy otherwise. And with a life expectancy of an additional fifty years. Now, good doctors, can you imagine your own population getting hold of it. Because if widely used, it would destroy America.' They sat up and took note. Jimmy added, 'In a single generation, ninety-five percent of your population would be fat, and over forty. What would that do for you? Health insurance would have to extend beyond normal percentiles. You'd ... be bankrupt.'

I faced Don. 'So I guess you'll be keeping it under wraps, huh?' From their looks, I figured that would be the case. When they had left us I said, 'You know, I had figured they'd pinch it, use it and sell it. They don't dare.'

'They'll try and cut out the disease curing properties, but the increased appetite and extra protein is essential to replace damaged cells.'

'Why was it developed in the first place?'

‘No special reason, just science advancing as time went on. When the war came it was mass produced for soldiers, and used on the wounded; there was no great plan to make a wonder drug.’ He stood. ‘I’m going for a walk, catch you later.’

The morning of the funeral we wore ill-fitting suits hired from Mombassa. The Rescue Force senior staff had driven down overnight and now stood in their whites, Jimmy having directed the twelve jeeps inside and onto the grass. Our staff stood lined up in front of their vehicles, Tubby out of the way at the back. The managers and senior staff of the hotels were lined up, many from the UN attending – including Bob Davies, the Red Cross and other NGOs represented, thirty orphanage staff, workers from the orphanage farm and fifty staff from the new farm. Added to them were thirty police officers and twenty government officials, including the Schools Minister and, quite oddly, the Defence Minister. I doubted Mary would have approved of him at her funeral. The local TV station stood perched atop a dated van, and filming.

The coffin was slowly driven in, a local undertaker leading the way on foot, a choir of some two hundred children singing in a local tongue, another three hundred of the older children lined up in the distance. To the echoes of the children’s singing, the cortège crawled around the main square and to the prepared plot, a large marble headstone freshly engraved. Her small coffin was eased out by four undertakers, carried slowly to the plot, and lowered down.

Jimmy advanced to a small podium with a microphone, Anna and Cosy nearby. He made a lengthy speech in a local tongue before switching to English. ‘Ladies and gentlemen. We are here today ... to say goodbye to Mary Van Der Schull, born in Rotterdam in 1937. Mary survived the war, her father bringing her family to Africa to escape the ravages of a wasteland ... that was Europe in 1946. From South Africa the family moved to Angola, Mary’s father working as an engineer in the mines for many years. Mary trained as a nurse, and worked for the Red Cross for nearly thirty years, retiring to Kenya. But when she came here, she soon realised that she could not sit still when there was work to be done. She founded this orphanage in 1976, calling it Ebede, using what little money she had. She worked

part-time to make money for the sick children, and asked for handouts from anyone who would listen. It is remarkable that she kept the orphanage going as long as she did, with so little.

‘Mary was one of the first people I met when I first visited Kenya, and I wanted to help. I felt ... drawn to this place. It is just a pity I could not have arrived sooner, and given Mary more help. Today, she would be proud of what the orphanage has become, and the way Anna runs it. It has grown from sixty children, to over six hundred, and more arrive all the time. The children are taught each day, they are even taught how to farm, and we now have a link to a farming college for students to study at. Mary’s legacy ... will be a happy and successful one. You need only look at the children, to realise what success she made of this place. They are her living legacy.

‘Some day, one of these children may go on to great things: to be a great businessman, a politician, or a leader of the Kenyan people. From small acorns ... mighty oaks grow. Some day, one of these children may have an aptitude for science, and make a breakthrough to benefit the world.’

I noticed the two American doctors, their grey matter firing up.

Jimmy continued, ‘There is no difference between an African child and a western child when they are born. The difference comes from an education, followed by an opportunity. I will give every child here an education, and guarantee a job for them at the end of it. Any child that passes a university entrance exam will receive a sponsorship from me. And any child that graduates as a teacher will be welcomed back here to work. It is my intention to prove to the world that the children of Kenya have as much potential as the children of any other nation; they just need a helping hand. When this service is over, I invite the members of the government and the press to look around at length. Thank you.’ He made way for a local priest who gave the sermon and concluded the funeral.

Through the bustling crowds I found Rescue Force. ‘Long drive?’ I asked Tubby.

‘We rotated it,’ he said. ‘Set off midnight.’

Doc Graham closed in. ‘Guaranteed jobs? For seven hundred?’

Tubby turned his head. 'They spent twenty million on this place.'

'Twenty million?' Doc Graham questioned.

'It's not all been spent,' I explained. 'Sat in the account ready for later. Anyway, when some of this lot are older they can join you lot, we already teach them first aid and biology.'

'What's this farm?' Tubby's wife asked.

'Fifty miles up the road, large greenhouses.'

'Oh, I know them, flown over them many times.'

'We bought it, made a farming college,' I explained. 'Now every school kid for miles gets a free lunch.'

'You do a lot for Kenya,' Sue noted.

'We also make a few quid from it; the hotels are booming. Besides, got more money than we could spend. Better to do something useful with it, might crash a Huey next week.' I winked at her.

It took Jimmy an hour to get around everyone, plenty of time allocated to the Kenyan Government, an interview given to the local TV station, more questions answered for the press. I chatted to Anna and Cosy, Rudd and his wife, the teachers, and even the American doctors. People finally began leaving, the children marched off in neat lines. Jimmy joined me, and we thanked the Rescue Force staff, the vehicles leaving in a long column. After our farewells to Anna and Cosy we drove out, down to the hotel and a welcome change of clothes. I hit the cool water five minutes later with mask and snorkel.

The next day we collected the two American doctors, the Dash picking us up, Doc Graham and Hildy being let off; they were on their way to the beach hotel for a four day romantic break. Five UN staff, plus two Red Cross workers, joined us for the trip, the Dash being quite the ferry now. Our rooms at the airfield were waiting, some of my clothes still there. In late afternoon sun I sat down to eat, no sign of Jimmy.

At the sandbox Jimmy pointed out the mine training area to Doctors Rick and Don. 'It's got a few training mines in it, try walking across.' They were not keen. 'That's the thing about the unknown, it's frightening, even when we're told that it's safe to proceed.' They glanced at each other. 'I know you gentlemen were asked to sniff around up here, to see if there is anything interesting to uncover, anything ... *buried* in the sand. Problem

is, will it be a gold nugget, or a landmine?’ They again glanced at each other. Jimmy turned back to the sandbox. ‘Given your chosen professions, I would stick to your original remit and leave the spy work to the professionals. *They* ... can find their way across that sandbox without getting themselves killed.’

‘You ... warning us off about something?’ Rick asked.

‘You fine gentlemen are in no danger from me, you never were. Neither was your countryman, Mister Potomo. Problem is, there are three governments and two private bodies represented at this base, all spying earnestly on little old me - and my activities. If only they’d just ask, it would save time and money for them. Still, they like their games, not least because they all have a great deal invested in me, and hope to make a lot from me in the future. They are ... naturally protective towards me. And gentlemen, just a short distance away there are some real mines, a real border and some wide open lonely spaces where just camels dare. Tread carefully, gentlemen.’

Don and Rick glanced at the outer fence, clearly unsure of themselves, as Jimmy walked off.

I was halfway through a dodgy steak when Jimmy stepped out. ‘What’s on the agenda?’ I asked as he sat and beckoned a waiter.

‘Preparations. Rwanda is just a short month away.’

A man in his sixties stood up and walked over. Jimmy stood to greet him. ‘You made it, Hal.’ They shook.

‘Been here all day, had a quick look over the place,’ Hal said in a deep American drawl. I reached across and shook his hand as he sat. Hal asked, ‘You the lad in the book?’

‘The Baardheere Incident, or playgirl?’

Hal laughed. ‘Good attitude. Never take life seriously if you’re a pilot, especially not the way *you* fly.’

‘What’s wrong with my flying?’ I toyed, feigning hurt.

‘You shoulda set down at the border, you could a damaged the bird, ya bum!’

‘Hal was in Vietnam,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘A young Huey pilot.’

‘Ah, I’d love to pick your brains,’ I said.

‘What d’ya think I’m here for, sonny?’

I faced Jimmy, he explained, ‘Hal will be adding some *experience* to the inexperienced.’

Two new faces stepped out, hardened men in their fifties. Jimmy pointed them toward a free table. 'Get yourselves some food and drink.' They nodded and sat. Facing Hal, he said, 'We got four young bloods here who need an edge, and they got four weeks to shape up.'

'How many hours a day d'ya want me at them?' Hal asked.

'They have other training duties, but aim for four hours a day, three days a week. And two hours each weekend. Set some exercises, but don't bend the choppers - we'll need them soon.'

'Gotchya.'

Ratchet stepped out. 'You after me, boss?'

'Hal, go kick this guy's arse around the sky for two hours.' Hal stood up and led a perplexed Ratchet out.

Mac stepped in, a glance at the two new faces before sitting down. 'You want me, boss?'

Jimmy pointed. 'Those two refugees are ex-trooper instructors, and they'll be joining the Rifles. Go bond.'

Mac stepped over. 'What you two sorry looking fuckers doing cluttering up *my* airfield?' he loudly asked, making me smile.

Jimmy's food arrived quickly, his order probably put ahead of someone else. 'Is this ... camel steak?'

'Yep, fucking good as well.'

He tucked in. 'Not bad. Been a while since I had some.'

'They added it to the menu because the chef likes it, so do most people around here. So, that guy Hal will train up the lads? Combat manoeuvres?'

'Things like ... how high you need to be to avoid damage from an Ak47, rolling stop, heavy takeoff, landing at an angle, the works. He's been flying since 1967. Oh, got some winches coming, be fitted soon. They can then practice winching. Around here it's flat and sandy, Congo is full of trees *sixty feet* tall!'

'He can teach me *the salute*; in and turn to a podium, nose bow, turn and out.'

'And *the funnel*. Down between trees with twelve inches to spare. He can convert Tubby and Sue, then they can get signed off in Nairobi. He's qualified to sign them off, but they need a Kenyan license.'

Thirty minutes later Jimmy called Mac and the two new guys over. 'You bonded yet?' he asked as they sat.

‘They’ll do,’ Mac grumbled. ‘Might have to kick ‘em out of bed in the morning, though.’ They shot him a look.

‘So, gentlemen – the three of you – this is what I want done. I want you to make the best use we can of the Rifles. They’re fit as fuck, no problem there, they can run and walk – they’d put *you* to shame. But they also need to be able to fight, to shoot and skirmish in small teams, and to go into the bush quietly – not sounding like a herd of elephants. This ... is your scenario:

‘We send fifty medics into the Congo, to a small village. Up in the hills are two hundred rebels, who’ve each had an hour’s intensive training on how to point and shoot. They’ve got a size ten on one foot, a size eight on the other, a belt keeping up trousers five sizes too big. But they do know how to skilfully rape and kill the village women below. The job of the Rifles - of the *best elements* of the Rifles - is to go up into the hills and kill every last fucker they can find. If someone has an AK strapped around their chest, they die. I want a group of twenty professionals who will think nothing of taking on two hundred idiots. Your budget ... is excellent. There are now sniper rifles, even M82 fifty calibre, M4s, night sights, you name it. If there is something you need, ask for it. And make use of the medical Huey’s for practising insert and extraction, be some winches on them soon.’

‘Timescale?’ one of the men asked.

‘Probably six months to a year. If anything, the medics are waiting on them to provide cover. I want you to sit down with Mac and the two Ruperts already there, draw up a training plan. Pinch the best forty and whittle them down to the best twenty, then give them better kit and a ten percent pay rise – motivate them.’

‘Do you fly?’ I asked the men. They shook their heads, so I made eye contact with Jimmy and shrugged.

‘Gentlemen,’ Jimmy began. ‘Would you like to learn how to fly a Huey?’

‘Aye,’ they both keenly agreed.

‘Mac, get them up a few times a week. And I have a ... *bit of kit* heading this way for the Rifles, to give them an ... edge. You guys familiar with an Mi24?’

‘An Mi24!’ Mac whispered. ‘How the fuck we get permission for that?’

‘It’s the Kenyan Army,’ Jimmy said with a shrug, hiding a grin.

‘I *got* to have a go at that,’ I told Jimmy. ‘It fully armed?’ Jimmy raised his eyebrows theatrically and nodded. ‘Would have been useful on that raid.’

‘We read the book,’ the guys acknowledged.

‘It’ll put the shits up any bandits on the border!’ Mac said. ‘Where’d it come from?’

‘Angola, it was going cheap,’ Jimmy said very matter of fact. ‘There’s an Mi2 in Tanzania going cheap as well, might grab that. But I prefer Hueys; small and nimble.’ He faced Mac. ‘Oh, see if those Ruperts want to qualify on the Huey’s. When we’ve got four Huey pilots I’ll buy the Rifles some Huey’s, M60s in the doors, or GPMGs.’

‘You planning on invading some small countries?’ Mac asked.

Jimmy turned to him. ‘I’m not sending medics into the Congo, or other places, till I know they’re going to come out safe. If the bad guys are in the hills, harassing the medics below, then we do some of our own harassing. And starting soon we’ll send Rescue Force into Somalia. If they scream for help, we go in hard, not like Haardheere. This aint the UN, *we* ... shoot back.’

‘Damn right,’ I put in.

Jimmy sipped his beer. Facing the two newcomers, he said, ‘When you go over to meet the Rifles, don’t forget that the officers have been here longer, and *you will* respect them and the Kenyan officers - lazy gits or not. When making plans, let them think it was their idea, always ask for opinions before doing your own thing anyway – keeps everyone happy. This bar is available to you, getting falling down drunk is fine, but if you clobber someone I’ll clobber you. If you settle down, this is a permanent position, you stay as long as you like. Mac here is seventy-two.’

‘Fuck off!’ Mac playfully snarled as everyone laughed.

‘Oh, I’ve got a million rounds of Russian 7.62mm coming, use it up. I want everyone over there firing at least a hundred rounds a day.’

‘We could make up a live-fire course in the desert,’ one of the newcomers suggested.

Jimmy nodded. 'Mac, stay, you guys ... have a wander around, then report to the Ruperts.' With just Mac remaining, Jimmy said, 'Things are hotting up in Rwanda, I think we have a month before they simmer over. So I want intensive training in all areas, tire them out, but motivate them. All beginners in Rescue Force I want up to speed; assume you have a month and plan around that timescale. Do what you can with them.'

'The Kenyan nurses are fit as fuck, keen with it,' Mac put in.

'Push their driving, give them some self defence training.'

With Mac heading off, I questioned, 'Charitable money ... for a fucking Mi24?'

'Rudd put it through a few accounts, so no one will find it. And when we're ready, the Chinese have a few old ones we can pinch.'

The MASH officers stepped out, Jimmy waving them over. 'How you guys getting along?'

'Spent all day in the border camp,' the Colonel said. 'Hot as hell.'

'Any interesting medical conundrums?' I asked.

'Some Ethiopians fell out with some Somali men and hacked each other up before the Kenyan Army stepped in, so we had two emergency surgical procedures, some serious wounds. We got two in our unit now, one might not make it.'

'Don't make a habit of taking them back with you, use the clinic over the road,' Jimmy cautioned.

'Why?' the Major queried.

'When you leave ... where do they go?' Jimmy posed, his hands wide.

'See what you mean,' the Colonel offered.

'There's fuck all around here for long term care,' Jimmy explained. 'A refugee needing ten weeks in intensive care ... is fucked.'

'The hospitals in Nairobi wouldn't take them?' the Major asked.

'They might, if you could get them down there. But conditions down there are not great unless you got the money.'

'What happens in that clinic – to the seriously wounded?' the Major asked.

'Stuck in a tent around the back, fed twice a day from a local nurse with two hours training. And no, I'm not building a

hospital here. It would fill up quick, empty out slowly. Once you've taken someone onboard it's very difficult to turf them out. This is Africa, guys, get used to it.'

'Then what's the main purpose of Rescue Force?' the Colonel asked.

'Minor wounds, refugees on the move, disasters, basic refugee camp medicine – that's all we can tackle. No open-heart surgery I'm afraid. The team are being trained up as a fast and mobile unit, airborne; go in, help for six weeks, get out. In time I'll make it global, fly people to disasters, earthquakes, floods. The residential part of our work, that which you can see here in the camp, is about what they do when not heading for a war zone or disaster. Same for you guys – it's training.'

'We rarely train on live people,' the Major said. 'But most of our staff get placements in UK hospitals. That's their *on-the-job* training.'

'You can train your people down here anytime you like. We've got the clinic, the border camp, and always someone wounded at the border.'

'Yes, all the right ingredients to build up experience,' the Colonel noted. 'What's this new base?'

'Kigoma, Tanzania,' Jimmy explained. 'We wanted to be closer to Zaire, and there's a civil war hotting up in Rwanda, so we might get a flood of refugees.'

We sat and chatted for an hour before the officers joined some of our doctors to talk shop. The next morning Hal was up early and I grabbed him, an hour spent throwing a Huey around. I screwed up the first few attempts at a rolling stop, but got the heavy take off down. Hal furnished me with a great many useful tips, like a plastic bag or bottle always – for peeing in while flying, a small towel to wipe away the sweat. They were small things, but all helped to make long flights more comfortable in hot climates, because if you were not comfortable you were a danger to yourself and your crew. He even showed me how to get a temporary hover so that I could jump out if necessary, something he once did for real; he'd written off ten Hueys in his time.

April, 1994. War in Rwanda

The Dash landed us at Kigoma the day before the assassination of the Rwandan President, something we did not prevent. We were sat eating in our refurbished hotel, just outside the main gate, when the news came through; wide scale fighting had broken out. We drove back to the airfield, the base's concrete hotel just about finished, the large hangar up, another ten huts placed ready for the UN, a row of tents laid out in a corner, one large UN tent erected. The airfield's perimeter was now crammed, a large white Antonov sat on the apron.

Doc Graham and Hildy were walking across towards the tower, so Jimmy pulled up next to them. 'War's broken out, get the staff here ready.' In the tower Jimmy dialled Mawlini. 'Mac, I want a full mobilisation, all Rescue Force staff to Kigoma. I want jeeps driven, Huey's flown, rest of the staff in the Dash. Tell De Silva to execute dispersal plan Kigoma Alpha.'

Jimmy rang the UN camp. 'This is Jimmy Silo, Rescue Force. Let your staff know war has broken out in Rwanda. Thanks.'

I stood taking in the airfield, feeling a little useless, so I figured I'd grab the Russian pilots and move the Antonov; we'd be busy in the morning. I explained to them that the Dash and four helicopters were coming in, so they fired up the engines and moved forwards a hundred yards, ready to taxi around and take off the next day. Returning to the tower, Bob Davies pulled up. 'You ready?' I asked him.

'Kind of relieved,' he admitted. 'I stuck my neck out for Jimmy and moved people around, ordered extra *everything*.' We climbed the stairs together, Jimmy sat staring at a map of the lake area.

Jimmy shook Bob's hand. 'Glad you could make it. You ready?'

'Pulled lots of strings for you, so I hope you're right about this.'

'I predict trends for a living. Besides, you got money for the kit and supplies.' He faced me. 'Drive to the camp, check if they're ready.'

I grabbed one of the Rescue Force jeeps and set off out the gate, left at the crossroads in the town and south towards the

lake. With the lake in view I followed the lakeside road, past the UN camp and to our well-guarded patch of dust, Meerkats now evicted. Two police officers stood manning the gate and let me through, five huts in a row and three large tents laid out, behind them a hundred smaller tents. All it lacked was people. As I pulled up and jumped down I noted a solitary family in a tent; guess we were open for business. In a hut with a large red cross I found four UN staff.

‘Warm enough?’ I asked as I entered.

‘Finally got some customers,’ a man said.

‘Yeah, well war broke out a few hours ago.’ They stood and closed in. ‘But let’s hope you don’t get a camp full.’

‘There is fighting in Rwanda?’ a woman asked, concerned.

‘Yep. You staying here or heading up there?’

‘I’m supposed to move to Rwanda in a week,’ she explained in an accent, possibly French.

‘It’s a bloodbath at the moment, love,’ I warned her. ‘Anyway, what do we need to make this place ready?’

‘The supplies are up the road,’ a British man pointed out. ‘Give them a nudge, get them down here in a day or so. Guess nothing will happen for a while.’ I left the warm hut and stepped into the bright sunlight, noting immediately a second family wandering in. I had a jeep full of water bottles so offered them two, the simple drinks much appreciated.

‘Thank you,’ the young father offered.

‘Your English is good.’

‘I’m a doctor,’ he said as he led his family to a tent.

I blinked, stood staring for many seconds. Reaching the jeep I stopped and turned around, walking back over to him as his tired family sat in the shade of a tent. ‘You want a job here?’

‘A job?’

‘You’re a doctor, and we need medics. What was your pay in Rwanda?’

‘Five hundred dollars a month.’

‘You’ll get the same here. You’re now deputised by Rescue Force Kenya.’ I gave him five hundred dollars. ‘Come with me.’

Glancing at his family, and staring at the money in disbelief, he followed me. At the jeep I fetched a white cap with a red cross on it, placing it on his head. There was a small medical kit in the back of the jeep, so I handed him that, plus two more water

bottles. 'Look after your family, then introduce yourself to the UN staff, then stand at the gate. Tell the police you work for us. OK?'

'Yes, yes. I will do it.'

'I'll be back later, don't go anywhere.' Driving back to the tower I relayed the story to Jimmy.

'Grab some kit and supplies from here, take them back.'

I loaded the jeep with food, medical supplies, some soft plastic mats, a foldable camp bed, a block of water bottles and a Red Cross flag. Back at the dustbowl I placed the flag over a tent near the family, observed by the curious UN staff; the flag would be visible to people entering. Unloading the supplies I placed them into the new medical tent, setting up the camp bed.

I told the man, 'Our people will arrive tomorrow, lots of them. Then we'll have a proper medical tent. In the meantime, why don't go see that other family.' As I stood there, the doctor wandered off towards the only other inhabitants, but something caught my eye. I turned and found a bus at the entrance, a single deck coach. The gates opened and it trundled in, stopping next to my jeep. A man stepped nervously down.

'Sorry to ask, this ... is place for Rwanda refugee?'

'Yes, and you're welcome.' I shook his hand, startling the man. 'Don't be afraid,' I shouted, waving them off the bus.

The nervous families stepped out as I tackled the water bottles, finding them tightly encased in plastic. I offered one to each family as they milled around in a daze, leaving me puzzling what was wrong with them. In ten minutes they were sat under the smaller tents, flaps closed in some for privacy, the UN staff taking names. As I watched, the bus driver parked the coach in a corner before grabbing a tent for himself; not even the driver was going anywhere soon. I mounted up and sped back.

'Graham, Hildy!' I called, a toot of the horn. 'Get you medical kits, your jeep, and get to the camp – they're coming in by bus load!'

'Wounded?' Doc Graham asked.

'They looked just tired and dehydrated, that I could see. Oh, a Rwandan doctor there, I hired him.' As they drove off I climbed the tower stairs. 'Fucking bus loads pulling up at the camp.'

'Just the start,' Jimmy softly stated, sat glancing at a supplies list. 'The local authorities have been told to direct them here.'

At nine o'clock I returned to the camp. Parking next to the medical tent in the dark I stepped down. 'Fuck ... me,' I muttered, ten coaches stood end to end. Whoever they were, they had not just hopped onto a bus today; this exodus was pre-planned. I ducked into the medical tent, illuminated now by dull paraffin lamps, some extra illumination coming from the electric lights on the huts.

Doc Graham eased up and stretched his back. 'Couple of beatings, one gunshot wound. This lot are the better off; they bribed their way out today. Got some babies due within the week.'

'The gang will be here in the morning,' I informed him as I took in the dark shadows of people lying on camp beds.

'Who's coming down?'

'All of them to start with. Eight weeks. Huey's will be going over the lake.'

'And into Rwanda itself?'

'Dunno, yet. Depends on the conditions. You got everything you need here?'

'We'll sort it in the daylight, nothing urgent at the moment. We'll sleep in the jeep since they're coming in steady. And this lot will move on, they're well off. They won't stay.'

'No?'

'No, they'll drive south. The poor people will be across the lake in Zaire. I grew up there, not far from here. I visited this lake a few times.'

'Might get the chance to fly back in.'

'It's a dangerous corner of the world these days,' Doc Graham reflected as another coach arrived. 'Some of these buses will go tomorrow, some families across to Zaire. I don't think we'll get genuine refugees for a week or two this far down. By then they'll be healed – or dead.'

I patted him on the shoulder, said hello again to the new recruit – wondering if he'd stay, and drove back. At the airfield, the Dash sat on the apron, twelve of our staff now here and settled into two huts, the stoves fired up and the tea on.

'Any news?' they asked me.

'At the moment it's just coach loads of the better off, a gunshot wound and some minor stuff.'

A tanoy sounded. I didn't even know we had one. 'Wounded coming in by UN plane, ten minutes. Triage in the main tent.'

People got up and grabbed their kit bags, tea downed quickly, and filed out. I found Jimmy in the tower.

'Wounded?' I puzzled, UN staff manning the radio and landing lights.

'UN planes landed in Rwanda, around Goma, fetched them out as I requested through Bob. I've offered the UN our medics here. We'll set-up a forward base south west of Goma in a day or so, another over the lake.'

'It's happening quickly,' I noted.

'Was on the boil already. A lot of Tutsis were rounded up and killed in the past weeks, many crossing over to the Congo – sorry, Zaire.'

Tubby climbed the stairs. 'You after me?'

'Move the Dash onto the grass, Antonov coming in with wounded,' Jimmy ordered.

Tubby fired up the Dash, landing lights blazing, turned ninety degrees and moved forwards ten yards onto the grass. It would need a push back in the morning. The large Antonov appeared in the dark night sky, its own landing lights on, and touched down a minute later. On the apron it lowered its rear ramp, our staff moving forwards with stretchers. I wandered down to the triage tent, soon wishing I hadn't. I had felt naively sorry for the coach parties, but compared to this new batch the coach parties had it easy; there wasn't anyone being attended without a gunshot wound, many with horrific machete cuts, some with hands cut off. I knew we had given the local hospital a lot of money, I just hoped now that the buggers would earn their keep.

With the wounded out, the Antonov took off with a roar. I asked Jimmy about fetching Doc Graham, but he said no. Feeling useless again, I went and fetched supplies as and when our doctors asked for them, some of these medics fresh from completing the basic course; it was a long way from the greenhouse in Swindon. After an hour I made teas and handed them out, the drinks most appreciated, along with fresh hand wipes and water bottles. One patient was covered over, obviously dead, and one would need an arm amputated at the local hospital, so I drove him there with a nurse attending the sedated man.

The hospital was basic, a single storey building from what I could see in the dark, a few UN staff hanging about with the extra doctors we had employed, brought in from other towns. Two more wounded turned up while I was there. By midnight the triage tent was empty, the floor blood stained, twenty wounded now convalescing in smaller tents and attended by Kenyan nurses. In our hut I was surprised by the upbeat mood.

‘All OK?’

‘There’s no roof top bar!’ they complained.

‘It’s not quite finished,’ I explained. ‘But it’ll have a pool up there.’ They cheered. ‘Get some rest, don’t know when the next plane is due. Oh, someone relieve Doc Graham at the camp tomorrow.’

With no flights due I drove Jimmy and Tubby to the hotel down the road, the place now nicely decorated. We found Bob Davies in the bar with a cup of tea and a sandwich, his head in a file.

‘Your people moving up here?’ I asked him as we sat and ordered drinks.

‘Some of them, yes, but we’ll keep the storerooms down the road. Who was on that last plane?’

‘Thirty wounded,’ I reported. ‘One dead, a few amputees, rest will make it.’

‘We have a thirty-forty minute flight from the war zone here,’ Bob noted. ‘Not a bad compromise.’

‘Compromise?’ I asked.

Jimmy said, ‘I have some help coming in, but they won’t go near the war zone, or Zaire. This is the closest safe spot, except Burundi or Uganda, and they won’t play ball.’

‘You’ve caused a stir,’ Bob told Jimmy. ‘First time for the Chinese here, or ... anywhere for that matter.’

‘Some other surprises tomorrow,’ Jimmy said with a glint in his eye. I knew who he was referring to, but said nothing.

‘We’ve secured the forward base in Zaire, south west of Goma, thirty miles, half decent airstrip,’ Bob informed us.

‘Less than an hour in the Dash,’ Tubby said. ‘Two in a Huey.’

‘Hueys won’t fetch wounded to here,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Mi2s, or fixed wing. Huey’s will go snatch inside Rwanda.’

Tubby seemed concerned. ‘Unarmed?’

Jimmy shook his head. ‘Protected. *Well* protected.’

I got a few hours of restless sleep, up early and keen to help out. Jimmy had returned to the airfield without telling me and caught an hour in a chair, many calls made and received overnight. With the sun threatening to put in an appearance the radio crackled to life.

‘Kigoma tower, receiving over.’

I picked up the handset. ‘Kigoma tower receiving.’

‘Kigoma tower, UN flight 104 inbound. Wind and traffic update, over.’

‘104, pattern is clear, wind is nil. Land from the north. Out.’

The UN Hercules touched down smoothly five minutes later, the runway lights left on in the dawn half-light. With no space on the apron it offloaded whilst on the taxiway, a long line of Chinese military medics dressed in white emerging, all lugging large rucksacks that looked bigger than they were. We drove out, directing them to three huts ready for their arrival. Jimmy called them together, greetings extended in Chinese, instructions given; toilets, showers, food hut, triage tent, tower. In orderly groups they occupied the huts, ten in each, the Hercules taking off as the sun warmed distant clouds to a welcoming amber dawn. I grabbed blocks of water bottles from the jeep and handed them out, practising my Chinese, but this lot all spoke at least some basic English, a requirement for this trip, some proficient with their English. Jimmy instructed them to sleep for three hours, and we left them alone.

Back at the tower we sat and made tea, watching the sun come up. When the radio crackled into life it was the Royal Air Force.

‘Kigoma tower, British Air Force, permission to land, three aircraft.’

‘Kigoma tower, negative on three aircraft, apron full, one aircraft at a time only. Wind is nil, land from north to south.’

‘Kigoma tower, roger. Out.’

The lead Hercules came in from the north, a short landing and taxi around to the apron. It’s ramp soon lowered, four familiar jeeps driving out and halting ten yards in front of the tower. With the second and third aircraft circling at two thousand feet, the first Hercules lifted off and banked to the west. We soon had twelve jeeps parked waiting and I walked out to them.

‘Don’t I know you from somewhere?’ I toyed with the Colonel.

‘We had a whole week back in the UK, then this. Still, it’s a bit of action and experience I suppose.’

I sat on the front of his jeep and waved him forwards, directing them to a corner of the airfield. ‘That’s your corner.’ Pointing across the airfield I listed, ‘Mess hut, water, toilets, are all back over the other side. That big tent is the triage tent, already knee deep in blood.’

‘Yes?’ they queried.

‘Thirty dead and dying were brought in last night.’ I pointed. ‘That line of tents are for the recovering. Over there, you’ll see twelve huts in a row. First two are Rescue Force, next two are UN, last three are Chinese.’

‘Chinese!’

‘Yes, so play nicely. Few other foreigners turning up today. If you want a hut, grab the fifth one from the right.’

I left them to put up their tents and play soldiers, walking slowly around the taxiway and back to the tower as the sun broke through the clouds. Through the fence I could see the tin-roofed shacks of our neighbours, mostly rusted, and thought about the poverty here. The Dash was being pushed back so I jogged over and helped out, Tubby off for supplies from Mawlini, one UN worker catching a lift. To the sound of the Dash starting up I entered the tower, Bob Davies now awake, but cradling a coffee mug lovingly with both hands.

‘The Army has its corner of England in a far off land,’ I said as I made a fresh tea. Five minutes later Bob dragged us to the food hut and we became the first customers of the day; egg and bacon.

The British Army officers joined us there fifteen minutes later. ‘Most important place on the base,’ the Colonel said as he sat, five other officers with him. He ordered six breakfasts, mugs of tea.

I looked over my shoulder at him. ‘Are you here ... while the lower ranks are fixing the tents and kit?’ I toyed.

‘We’re scouting the area and having a command meeting,’ the Colonel lightly replied. ‘And never a good idea to think about anything on an empty stomach!’

Ten minutes later, the five most senior Chinese officers stepped in, welcomed by Jimmy. He directed them to seats behind the British and ordered food for them. Sitting with them,

he chatted away at length in Chinese, surprised glances coming from the Brits. The first of our lot crawled in looking rough, ordering food and sitting where there were spare seats, soon happily chatting away to either the Brits or the Chinese and taking the piss in equal measure. Returning to the tower with Bob Davies, we sat and glanced at phone messages from Rudd in Nairobi and Coup at Mawlini. It was an hour before the first UN flight made contact.

Jimmy grabbed the tanoy microphone. 'British Army medics to standby, wounded coming in. British Army medics to standby. Senior Rescue Force staff to assist.' He grabbed the radio. 'UN flight, offload your wounded at the top of the runway, not the apron.'

The white Antonov touched down with a puff of burnt rubber. It slowed toward the end of the runway, turning slowly to the right and halting, its rear door lowering as the British Army stood ready to attend, two of our jeeps driving around to them as we observed the action from the tower using binoculars, many of the Chinese curious. The wounded were carried off the plane, some walking themselves out, and disappeared into the drab green Army tents. The Antonov powered up with a roar and crept slowly around the taxiway, halting at the apron for refuelling, a line of blue UN bodies let off.

'The Brits have surgeons,' Jimmy idly pointed out. 'Those officers at breakfast – all top surgeons. We only have people with basic surgery. Chinese have five surgeons, five assistant surgeons.'

'What about blood?'

'Got some here, some coming in. But the local hospital is supposed to be covering it, a blood donation drive. The donors get a few quid, so they should get enough.' He straightened. 'Take a good look out there - this is an excellent learning opportunity for you. In the future we'll do this in a large way; this is just the warm up, the first step.'

'Considering how far away we are, and the fucking fuel costs, is it the most efficient way to deploy?' I asked.

Jimmy explained, 'This is not just about saving lives in Rwanda, this is about saving the planet. And if we can get the nice British soldiers down there to play nice with the Chinese, and get themselves photographed, then those snaps will be worth

more than all the lives in Rwanda put together. Think about the big picture, young man.'

'Good job I brought some cameras then, isn't it!' I said, Jimmy tipping his head and saluting me with his tea mug.

An hour later another planeload arrived, allocated to the Chinese, the tanoy message given in Chinese. The triage tent filled up quickly, thirty white uniformed medics of the Peoples Republic attending thirty wounded, soon joined by the remainder of Rescue Force. I reversed a jeep close, opened the rear and waited for movements to the local hospital, ferrying three there, six taken to the camp to convalesce. Making myself useful, I spent two hours ferrying yesterdays' wounded from the smaller tents and to the camp. On the way back I stopped at a junction as a beautiful sight came into view, ten of our white jeeps in a line, two white lorries snaking along. When they neared I pulled out, waving for them to follow me, locals stood puzzling all the activity.

At the airfield I directed the jeeps and lorries to a quiet corner and parked them tightly together, soon greeting familiar faces and new staff, thirty in total. Only then did I notice the Kenyan flag on the jeeps, a new feature. I called everyone together, Jimmy walking over. He mounted a jeep bonnet and welcomed everyone, pointing out the base facilities. The first floor of the hotel was operable and the new group were told to make best use of the rooms. The first ten, all nurses or basic medics, were told to grab three jeeps and follow me to the camp straight away.

Returning from the camp, now housing an estimated one thousand, I climbed the tower. 'Camp's busy.'

'I've put Doc Graham in charge of the camp,' Jimmy informed me.

The radio crackled to life, a familiar voice. 'Rescue Force Hueys to Kigoma tower.'

I picked up the handset. 'What kept you, Ratchet?'

'Three refuelling stops. Permission to land, over?'

'Pattern is clear, wind light, land in the north east corner against the fence, over.'

'Get the kettle on. Out.'

We stepped out onto the roof, gazing to the northeast, a distant rumble growing. Jimmy pointed, soon a Huey visible, then its companions; four in a line. With a dull resonating drone

they circled the field, rudely announcing their arrival to the towns folk, landing in sequence on the parched brown grass in the corner.

I waved down at Rescue Force staff. 'Send two jeeps over!' As we observed, more people climbed out of the Hueys than I had anticipated. 'Is that ... Hal?'

'Looks like it.'

'What the fuck's he doing here?' I thought out loud.

'Helping out, I guess. Three pilots, four Huey's.'

We met them on the grass in front of the huts. I shook Hal's hand. 'What you doing here, *old man*?'

'Ya need a first rate mechanic to keep these flying, and I'm the best there is.'

I glanced at Jimmy.

'Fine,' Jimmy offered.

We settled them into a fresh hut, all the flyers and mechanics together, the men quite boisterous considering their tiring journey. They were given till the morning to rest and recover from the long flight, and I discovered that the first night of their trip had been spent on the grass airfield at our safari lodge. I sat on a bed and chatted to Dunnaw about the rigorous flight. A subject of much mirth was Hal, peeing into a bottle and throwing it out of the window. Problem was, they were over a town at the time. To the sound of an aircraft landing, I left them to rest.

The Dash taxied around to me, straight onto the grass and scaring a local solidier from his post, missing the fence by four feet. Mac stepped down first, then Sue, followed by ten more staff.

'Welcome back to sunny Tanzania,' I offered Mac with a handshake, leading them towards the huts.

'Mawlini is empty,' he emphasized. 'Just the mine lads left. Frigging ghost town up there.'

'Mac!' Jimmy called from the tower roof. We stopped and turned. 'You, Tubby and Sue: second floor of the hotel. Dump your kit and come up.'

Mac joined us in the tower five minutes later, files under his arm, a tea offered.

Jimmy began, 'We're a bit disorganised at the moment, so this is the plan.' Mac readied a pen. 'Doctors mostly here, nurses mostly at the camp for after care. We've got the British and

Chinese surgeons here, so this is first base for seriously wounded. If someone turns up at the camp needing surgery they're driven here. The small tents here are for twenty-four hours observation of the seriously wounded, then they ship out to the camp. This place is principle food hall, showers and bogs, but that hotel rooftop won't be ready for weeks. Right, 8am and 8pm every day – on the dot, commanders meeting in the hotel restaurant, which isn't working yet. British, Chinese, our lot, anyone else like the UN, Red Cross. When I'm here I'll help, but it's your meeting. Tell them what the stats and plans are, ask what they need and what their gripes are. First commanders meeting in thirty minutes, for our lot it's all team leaders and above, Ratchet is in charge of the flight detail. But for now, quick shower, bit to eat.'

We rang the camp and got the team leaders up to us, soon many warm bodies in the spacious hotel restaurant, tables moved together and people sat around it. With water bottles laid out, fresh tea and coffee being made, Jimmy called the group together.

'OK, let's just say welcome to anyone we've missed before, and get down to business. Like first day at school, please stand and state your name, skill area, and where you live on the base.'

He gestured first to Bob Davies; UN co-ordinator, in the hotel up the road. Bob's assistants introduced themselves, names and functions given, followed by the British Army officers, the Chinese officers, ten Rescue Force team leaders plus Mac, finally myself.

'OK. Let's start with the simple, but important stuff: showers. There's a shower and toilet hut, and we have no rules as to who can use it and when, but try and spread your people out during the day and night, don't all try and shower in the morning. But let's say that from 9am to 10am is *ladies only*. Those of you in this hotel, give your key to your staff in turn and let them shower here – there're plenty of rooms.

'As for this hotel, any senior officers from the British or Chinese may take a room here, or share a room here, there are enough. There are also very comfortable rooms down the road at our hotel, but just about ten left. Those huts outside get very warm in the day, not great for people to sleep in if they are on night duty. Since we don't anticipate flights after 10pm we can

have most people sleeping at night, but some cover for the patients here – mostly nurses.

‘Five days from now Rescue Force moves to Zaire, or part of it does, and our helicopters will be deployed there, a little more space for people here. This base is the first port of call for the seriously wounded, they will then be moved to the camp, and we can make use of the local hospital; they have extra supplies and doctors that we’ve donated. Right, for those that don’t know, the offices below the air traffic control tower is where I, Mac and Bob Davies work out of – and Mac is in overall charge of the airfield. If you need any supplies, problems fixed, come and find us.

‘Now, as you will have seen, we split the arrival of the wounded into countries and gave each of you a batch to look after. In the long term, that will not be practical, so I would like each of you to create a first and second team – your best surgeons and doctors, so that we can rotate the duties. If a plane comes in, the duty “A” team takes it, rotating to the next “A” team, then the “B” teams. That way everyone gets some rest. If too many wounded turn up, the other teams step forwards *as a team*, step down *as a team*. Now, Rescue Force cannot offer surgeons, but we have forty nurses. Those nurses will be split into groups of eight or ten, covering the night shifts here and at the camp, and supporting the other groups. Typically, a night shift may be eight nurses and one doctor on call, that position rotated. We have two specialists in tropical diseases, so make use of them if you need to. We also have six nurses trained as midwives, so they’ll handle the births at the camp.

‘Now, there are several nationalities here, a few more arriving, so by all means wander around and talk to other nationalities, chat about procedures. Treat it like an international medical symposium, but without the boring lectures.’ Jimmy lifted a map of the local area. ‘This is Kigoma.’ He listed everything of interest, then hung the map on a wall, giving the floor over to Bob Davies for a thorough briefing on the situation in Rwanda and surrounding countries.

When Bob was finished, a white board was brought forwards and specialities listed; tropical medicines, orthopaedics, obstetrics – I knew what that meant know, surgeons, burns specialists, etc. Everyone had an idea of what the skill base was,

and where they were housed. The British had three surgeons capable of amputations, one assigned to Rescue Force, one of our doctors - expert in African medicine - attached to the Chinese.

A box of satellite phones was brought in, each Rescue Force team leader given one, the phones already programmed with a few numbers, mainly Mac and Coup. Warnings were given about miss-use; the calls would be itemised.

Jimmy gave everyone a chance to ask questions of facilities and supplies, answers supplied. I was nominated as dog's body, to fetch supplies from the town when needed. First job was a hundred cans of coke and fanta, more toilet paper. I would also act as official photographer and started with the group. This first meeting had taken an hour, the next operational meeting set for 8pm. The group was thanked and dismissed as the local police chief appeared.

'How is everything with you?' he asked in a deep and accented voice.

'We need more space,' Jimmy told him. 'The houses near are squatters?'

'You want them moved?' the commander offered.

'No, I will give them money to move, I don't want anyone forced out,' Jimmy emphasised. 'Go around and tell them all that they can get money to move out. If a few days we will go around with a lorry and workmen and clear the empty shacks, yes?'

'OK, OK, good. What money for the people?'

'Five hundred dollars each, and a basket of food and water.'

'OK, OK, I tell them.'

Jimmy handed him ten thousand dollars. 'No one ... is to be forced out, or I will not be happy.'

'Yes, yes, I will make everything good.' He left us.

'Fucker's going to shove them out and keep the money!' I said.

'No he won't, because you'll be there.'

'Oh, right.'

'We want the area to the south and east, fifty yards in each direction. That'll give us access to that main road over there.'

Through the window I could see soldiers with blue UN helmets. 'Our trusty UN peacekeepers are here.'

'The Rifles drove down, we'll need their jeeps and trucks,' Jimmy explained as we walked out.

The Rifles parked in a line near the tower, their lorries on the grass. We greeted the two British officers, the two ex-SAS instructors and six Kenyan officers.

‘Keep them on the trucks,’ Jimmy shouted. He gathered the officers. ‘We only need a detachment of ten men and an NCO here, rest to the camp down the road for now. Officers will be billeted here, this hotel, the detachment in one of the huts.’ They selected a squad to remain, then turned about and followed us down to the camp, another monstrous line of vehicles upsetting the locals. Inside the camp we drove to a far corner, at least two hundred yards from any tent, and halted, stepping down. Jimmy directed the thirty vehicles to park up against the fence, the officers and NCOs called forwards, an area marked out for tents.

We stayed and helped out, Jimmy greeting almost every soldier in the Kenyan dialect, a tented city up after an hour, being observed by a hundred refugee kids. Barbed wire was taken off a truck and laid around the tents on two sides, making an enclave.

Jimmy told the British officers, ‘Patrol outside can be armed – watch out for looters, patrol inside unarmed, do a night watch. Amongst these refugees there’ll be some desperate people, so a bit of robbing and raping going on. A week from now we start operations in Zaire for your best lads. 8am and 8pm every day there’s a command meeting in the hotel at the airfield for officers, you’ll find me at the tower. Phone in the hut by the gate. Settle in, get some rest, send a jeep to the airfield twice a day for supplies.’

I took their pictures, some of the tents and some the Rifles before heading back. An hour later I stood with a coffee mug in the tower as an Antonov landed, disgorging thirty seriously wounded. I was still there after sundown when the last flight arrived, an Israeli Hercules. With Jimmy off somewhere, I drove out and greeted them, fifteen medics, a mixture of doctors and nurses. They threw their packs into the jeep, then followed me to the huts as their plane took to the sky. I offered them hotel rooms, but they were happy enough with two huts for now, so I performed the well-practised speech on areas and facilities; who was in which hut, supplies and meetings. Their senior staff attended the 8pm meeting and were welcomed to the gang, only the British managing to look surprised. The Rifles’ British

officers bonded straight away with their counterparts, stories and histories swapped, bases visited and people known discussed.

The only gripe at the meeting was a need for more beds and tents for the wounded here, a few extra tents brought up, more jeep shuttles organised. As we broke the meeting, a heavy helicopter caught everyone's attention, the mighty Mi24 landing on the apron, it's lights blazing, the British Army keenly interested in the "enemy" attack helicopter.

With its rotors winding down, I walked over and greeted its two pilots, a British ex-SAS trooper, and a Ukrainian national. 'Got planning permission to park that thing there?'

'You look like the infamous Paul Holton. I'm Mickey, this is Yuri.' We shook. Mickey was stocky and fifty, Yuri slender and with sunken cheeks.

'How did you end up flying this thing?'

'Was a merc, and one day this *fell* into my possession. I sold it to a warlord, but stayed on piloting it for him for a decent wage. Yuri was looking for work, and had been an engineer on these back in the Soviet day. Kinda got stuck with each other. When the warlord copped it I ... borrowed it back.'

Jimmy pulled up in a jeep, two Rifles jumping down. He ordered them to watch the helicopter, asking our two new recruits to hop in. At the hotel up the road he found them rooms, then bought them a drink at the bar. 'Our head man, Mac, is ex-Regiment, you may know him.'

'I do,' Mickey replied. 'He's been doing the mines around Africa for a long time.'

'You can meet him tomorrow, kick back for now. Oh, money in your UK account as requested.'

Mickey slowly nodded. 'When we off causing trouble?'

'Five days or so, need a work up period. And your munitions coming in by plane in a day or two.'

'What's the range?' I asked.

'Book says five hundred with extra tanks, but if we're heavy - little more than three hundred miles.'

'So you'll be based near Goma,' I said, getting a nod from Jimmy.

Jimmy began, addressing Mickey, 'We'll be sending our Hueys in to pickup wounded and get UN staff out. You're top

cover. We'll also want you to disrupt the Hutu Army as they happily massacre Tutsis.'

'Disrupt?'

'Fly-bys, shoot up the road. Don't need to engage them unless absolutely necessary. Besides, there'll be American copters about, they may be tempted to shoot at you.'

I sarcastically said, 'We could always paint it white and put a big red cross on it.'

They stared at me, wide-eyed, then roared with laughter. 'I'd love to see the look on their faces, especially when we open up on them. A medical Mi24!'

The next day I ran errands, and the following day, soon into a routine. I got through to Katie on the phone each evening, asking her about her day; shopping, lunch with her mum, recorded a new hit single. She had seen the news and worried about me, but I explained that I was nowhere near the fighting.

I spent my evenings in the huts typically, the previously clearly defined national groups starting to melt at the edges a bit, and now some decent gossip. We had a young British officer dating one of our lady doctors, Dunnow was dating a British nurse, two British NCOs had adopted two Kenyan nurses, and one of ours was dating a UN worker. Only the Chinese had had yet to mix it up a bit, but we were not hopeful. Booze had found its way in, in quantity, and the place started to resemble Mawlini. The senior officers had their own club in the hotel down the road and often played poker for money. A basketball hoop had been erected next to the hangar and a court marked out, a small football pitch marked out between the apron and the runway, games annoyingly interrupted by planes trying to land. The Chinese fielded a team, and won every game easily. Pissed off with that, we got a Rifles team down and thrashed them – only to be accused of bringing in the Tanzanian national team. I fetched fanta and coke often, I even did the beer run on occasion.

The Mi24 got its ammunition, and shot up the middle of the lake for practise. The Hueys went out with Hal everyday and all the pilots got some serious practice time in, including night flying. The Rifles put two men on each Huey, strapped into open doorways, and they practiced hot landings and hot extractions away from the town. We then found a deserted island down the lake about ten miles, so built a small hut on it, placing ten Rifles

on it to simulate wounded. Wooden targets were placed about to simulate the enemy.

So one fine morning the four Hueys and the Mi24 took off, the senior staff on a boat off the island with binoculars. The Mi24 flew in first, a fast assessment made and radioed back to the Hueys. The first Huey came in fast, hoping to blind the bad guys with a dust cloud, the Rifles opening up on the wooden targets as they approached. Rescue Force staff burst out, grabbed several simulated wounded and left in a hurry, the remaining Hueys repeating that manoeuvre. With the last man away, the Mi24 reduced the hut to shreds. We were ready.

The next morning, around half the Rifles and ten of our jeeps crossed the lake by ferry in turn, the Hueys and the Mi24 setting off – full of Rescue Force staff and kit, and the Dash flew the command staff over to a place called Kigeli, south west of Goma and not far from the border. The remaining staff boarded a UN Antonov, leaving just twenty nurses behind; huts were given up to whoever wanted them. Two hours later we landed at the new airfield, plenty of space to set-up camp on lush green grass, just two UN Antonovs in attendance, a few UN jeeps.

The airfield offered a central concrete runway, weeds growing out of cracks, but no tower, and little in the way of facilities other than tents. I wondered what the hell Bob Davies had meant by “secured” it. It turned out that the local police and army were on the perimeter, supplies were brought in by locals and “sold” to anyone who wanted to buy them, water raised from a well.

The Dash off-loaded its passengers, those passengers with little to do till the vehicles arrived. We waited for the Antonov, helping to off-load large tents, and set about raising them at the edge of the field, the kit from the Hueys placed inside. Two lorries trundling in caught our attention and they pulled up to us as we stood catching our breath: barbed wire, courtesy of Rudd. With gloves on, we offloaded the reels, carefully, before making a nice secure barrier between the tents and the perimeter, an enclave five hundred yards long.

The Dash returned with more people and kit, including five Rifles – blue helmets and M16s. We stuck them on the perimeter straight away.

At 3pm, with the sun low, the vehicles arrived in convoy, both Rescue Force and the Rifles. Four-man tents were set-up quickly,

holes dug and fires started, pots hung, jobs delegated. At sundown we were ready for the night; tents, wire, armed patrols, food and drink. The Antonovs came and went, wounded loaded and sent back to Kigoma, nothing we could do till we saw sight of the fuel trucks.

In the morning a local fuel truck turned up, paid in cash by Jimmy, and provided the jeeps with plenty of diesel. The first patrol was sent out to scout the local area and buy food, a second patrol sent to the nearest UN refugee camp, some five miles north. One patrol returned with vegetables and live chickens, the other with horrendous news of the camp. Three jeeps were loaded up, a few tents, and sent to the camp, finding plenty of business straight away, some wounded sent back to us to be shipped out. Doc Graham felt it unsafe to stay after dark and pulled back our people, to return in the morning.

The next day two aviation fuel trucks arrived, a day late, and we launched the first aerial patrol, a flyover of the camp and quick trip to the border and its lake, a flight past Goma before circling back. The news was of blocked roads, people trying to leave but being stopped by the Rwandan Army – who had pointed their weapons into the air and fired at the helicopters. We held a meeting as a UN tent sprung up, followed by a second tent across the airfield, more UN jeeps arriving all the time. We had more barbed wire than we needed, so ran a line around the rear of their tents, now fifty percent of the ill-defined perimeter covered.

A call came in around 3pm to the UN, and they rushed over to us; some of their staff were cut-off and being threatened. It was quite surreal, like someone reading the detail of a training exercise for us. With twenty staff to extract we fired up the four Hueys – I'd have to take one, the Mi24 readied. Each Huey had a single member of the Rifles in a blue hat, leaving space for seven or eight wounded, more at a push. With doors open, we lifted off in a line, everyone on the ground keenly observing.

En-route I was focused, checking my heading as I took point, occasional radio contact made, scanning the instrumentation, checking fuel and distance. Crossing the lake was reassuring; it meant my navigation was OK. I focused on a ferry stop across the lake and adjusted my heading, radioing the correction to the others, checking Mickey was still with us and relieved at the

sound of his voice. Using a small towel I wiped my face, then drank from my bottle.

A small town in the two o'clock position was a navigational marker, causing me to transmit, 'Five miles!' We climbed steadily over gentle, lush green hills, their serene image so far away from what I knew was happening on the ground. Over a rise I could see a tight valley and my target. 'Mickey, two miles dead ahead of me. Smoke it out.'

The Mi24 dived down in front of me, its image shrinking into the distance. 'Compound, white people ... maybe twenty, some locals, some wounded, soldiers on the road outside, three jeeps.'

'Be a love ... and move the jeeps,' I ordered. 'Rescue Force, holding pattern, high right and circle.' As I lifted the nose and eased right, off the original heading, I could see the Mi24 turn and slow, lining up on the jeeps. A flash, and a field threw up brown mud, a twenty-yard wide pawl of dirt and grass. Passing the compound, a half-mile to my left, I could see the Army heading off to harass someone else. 'Mickey, go high and circle. Rescue Force, follow me in, touch down in sequence.'

With a heaved breath I licked my lips and slid sideways down into the compound. The way this thing was painted, they could be in no doubt as to what we were. With Hal as a ghost in the left seat I checked the crosswind, the obstacles, the camber of the soil, and eased down with a bump, waving people forwards straight away. Over my shoulder I could see four UN workers and four locals clambering in, my maximum load. Pointing at a girl I indicated the left seat. A UN lady worker picked up the kid, opened the door and placed her into the seat. The instant the door was closed I pulled back, immediately feeling the extra weight: a heavy take-off scenario. Nudging slowly forwards, towards an open field and with just a few feet of clearance and the benefit of ground effect, I picked up speed. The field afforded me a good hundred yards to play with, and I lifted the nose before the trees worried my passengers. 'Use the field for heavy take-off, circle till everyone is full,' I transmitted.

Mickey was high above and circling like an angry bird of prey. I circled at two hundred feet, low enough to take a round, so I kept a careful eye on the terrain below. Ratchet was soon up and behind me, Dunnow next, Spanner last. As soon I saw him

skim the grass I headed off. 'Heading back, any problems?' They all reported in, no dramas. 'Mickey, two miles up front, please.'

'Bank right!' came back almost immediately. 'Crossroads full of soldiers.' We skirted around them.

The lake came into view five miles out, and I was now navigating by the setting sun: due west. I passed Goma, north of the town, turning southwest beyond it at the border. With the ghost of Hal in the left seat, disguised as a terrified little girl with a snot nose, I felt confident; fuel, heading, warning lights. Yes, I felt oddly confident, I just wanted to reach across and wipe her damn nose.

'Rescue Force Hueys to forward base?'

'Forward base?' came Jimmy's reassuring voice.

'Inbound, five minutes, no details of casualties, but I think we have some.'

'Jimmy, it's Ratchet. Got two critical.'

'Roger that, we're ready. Land in usual place. Out.'

I touched down smoothly, knocking off the engine as helpers rushed forwards bent double. None of my group seemed injured, but some were helped out. I walked around to my co-pilot and lifted her out, getting a smile.

'We wuz in da air.'

'We wuz,' I repeated, handing her to a nurse; someone else would wipe her nose. I stretched my back and took in the beautiful cloud formations in the distance, amber turning red, as the other pilots stepped up, the Mi24 winding down a hundred yards away.

'No worries, mate,' Dunnnow offered with a huge smile.

'No worries with an Mi24,' Ratchet pointed out. 'Otherwise, those soldiers would have put holes in us on the ground.'

We waited for Mickey and Yuri, then ambled along chatting, over to the command tent and Jimmy.

'Well?' he asked, looking us over as we lined up.

'Worked like we planned it,' I said, glancing at the guys.

'Mickey?' Jimmy asked our Mi24 pilot.

'Stuck a missile in a field, scared off the soldiers, no one hurt,' Mickey reported.

'Good. Get some food, some rest, 6am start.'

As a group we wandered to the mess tent, discussing the heavy take-off. We found Hal sat there, he had just arrived, and

recanted the story at length, picking his brains on maximum loading and heavy take-offs. I hadn't even noticed the TV crew, or the reporters.

The next morning we were ready at 6am, radios monitored at the command tent. Jimmy took a message, then called for me and Ratchet, Mickey and Yuri. He placed a finger on a crossroads next to the border. Facing Mickey he said, 'There's a company of regulars here, stopping traffic and killing at random. Drop 'em. Paul, Ratchet: fly at one thousand behind them, and pick them up if they get a mechanical fault. Oh, there's supposed to be a gunboat on the lake, shooting up people crossing the lake. It's the bonus prize. Go!'

Thirty minutes later I observed puffs of smoke from the Mi24, flashes on the ground at the crossroads, an exchange lasting five minutes. When Mickey banked away I followed, heading northwest towards the lake. After two passes to identify the gunboat, it was sunk, and we touched down within the hour.

As Ratchet and I walked away from the Huey, the sounds of other helicopters caught our attention, a line of Huey Cobras coming into view, followed by a few Hueys - but green, and some Bell 500s; the US Army had arrived. Don't know what they thought an Mi24 was doing on the airfield, but I'm sure they spotted it. Now I noticed a line of green trucks across the airfield, twelve of them, soldiers milling around and setting up tents. And the truck near our mess tent had a French flag on it. We ducked in, grabbing coffee and free bench space, French and American accents present, green clad soldiers.

Hal waved us over to him. 'This bum thinks he can fly,' he said, thumbing towards a US Captain, and not me. We sat, greetings exchanged.

'I read the book,' the Captain offered. If I had a dollar.

'Yesterday's trip was interesting,' I emphasised. 'Got more in the back than I bargained for, heavy lift off - but fortunately a flat field for a hundred yards.'

'Lucky.'

'Classic heavy take off,' I said 'As taught to me by the very excellent Hal here.'

Hal tipped his head in salute. 'Be invaded by GIs soon, some of whom think they can fly.'

'Was that an Mi24 I saw?' the Captain asked.

I nodded. 'It's Kenyan Army, we use it to ... ease the extractions. It does have a certain ... deterrent effect.'

'Our boys will be all over it.'

'Ten dollars a tour, ask for Mickey.'

Jimmy walked in, people stopping and looking up. 'Rescue Force pilots, from tomorrow you should have top cover from US Huey Cobras.' The pilots glanced at each other, Jimmy calling me. 'Paul?'

'Excuse me.' I stepped out.

'There's a TV crew and some journalists. The staff have already exaggerated yesterday's trip, so go be modest – at length. Oh, casualty figures are ten thousand wounded a week, twenty thousand a week crossing over.' He left me to it, so I headed off to find the press.

The TV crews already had footage of yesterday's landing, and today's return, so I sat in the Huey and answered questions, reliving yesterday's trip, playing up the Mi24 – Kenyan Army – fighting off the soldiers as we picked up the wounded under fire, dodging ground fire on the way back. I just hoped no one was about to start a new frigging book. The one line I gave that I thought was a bit naff in reflection, was "I don't ask my staff to do things that I wouldn't do". Christ, I didn't even want to clean a snot nose, let alone amputate an arm. I hoped it would be used in the correct context.

Walking back to the command tent I noticed Mac stepping off the Dash. When he reached me he fell into line. I said, 'I thought you were here already?'

'Nah, keeping the base at Kigoma going, sorting the supplies for here. But they're settled now, Bob Davies is running things smooth enough for now, Coup's over there.'

'Doc Graham OK?'

'Busy as fuck, six thousand in the camp - Tanzanians rounding them all up.'

'How many will it take?'

'Oh, good twenty thousand at least. Bit of a queue at the bogs!'

Reaching the command tent we ducked in. Mac updated Jimmy at length, then Jimmy updated Mac on the situation here, namely that we were staying permanently, a small outpost. Jimmy had put a call into Rudd and Cosy, so more barbed wire

was on the way, Cosy would pop over and find local builders. With Zaire's capital, Kinshasa, a very long way away, and little local representation, no one cared what the authorities thought about it. We were in Zaire, and staying put. And I was now grounded.

The next day I tackled some of the paperwork, made and received calls, and attended a clever UN fax-computer-laptop thing that was powered by wiring it to a jeep with its engine running. Faxes went out to Rudd, and poured back in to the constant sound of helicopters taking off or landing. At mealtimes I listened to tales of daring rescues, the US Army providing cover, Ratchet proudly picking up a few bullet holes. Our jeep patrols ventured out, the Antonovs streamed in and out, the Dash dropped in once a day with supplies, and I manned the fax machine.

More barbed wire turned up from Kigoma, needed because of local pilfering, and we finished the perimeter, a crude gate installed. A builder from Burundi came to see me and I gave him enough work to last the rest of his life. He came back the next day with twenty men and ten trucks, another twenty men the day after and more trucks. Foundations sprung up, not least for a tower and command centre building, a toilet block and a barrack room. By the end of the week he had sixty men working, at night sleeping in tents nearby. We paid in cash each day, and moaned at the slow progress. Actually, by African standards, their progress was miraculous.

Then we got our first casualty, a nurse at the camp up the road hit by a stray round aimed at someone else. She was evacuated to Kigoma, her prognosis not good. A medic was stabbed in the hand, by a refugee not happy at waiting, and so the Rifles had to go out with each patrol; I had to fax Coup, he had to call families.

At the end of the second week, Mac was sent back to run Kigoma, Coup sent back to Mawlini to handle things there, and Doc Graham was given command of Forward Base as far as Rescue Force was concerned; few Huey flights were being made now, no more heroic tales emerging. A large French-African peacekeeping force was sent in to the west of Rwanda, the killing slowed down and Jimmy told me to pack my stuff. Our work was done for the moment.

Flying out by Dash, we took six staff back to Kigoma with us, creating a permanent detachment there. They were called Rescue Force Tanzania and told to recruit locally. The hotel was finished, the rooftop bar and pool well attended. With a great many photographs of Chinese, British and Israelis working together hitting the newspapers, and TV footage shown around the world, we gave the visiting medics a timescale of two more weeks before pulling out; they would have been at Kigoma for just over four weeks, many hundreds treated. Jimmy invited up the Tanzanian Government and press, making a big thing of how helpful the Chinese were. The politicians thanked everyone, and got themselves photographed.

The next day we fired up the Dash and flew a few UN staff with us to Nairobi. After a four hour briefing with Cosy and Rudd we jumped on a 747 bound for Heathrow. We joined tanned tourists ducking our heads into the plane, emerging into the damp chill of London. Two cars were waiting, Jimmy insisting Big Paul went with me as I headed for the apartment to meet Katie, Jimmy heading off home.

I had been gone just over three weeks, and standing on the balcony in a chill wind it did not seem real. I found myself considering just which was my real life, that of my life here in damp old England, or flying around Africa in helicopters. I certainly knew which one I preferred. The TV news of Rwanda held my attention for ten minutes before I went out and bought several broadsheets, scouring every detail of the war; places I knew, organisations and people I knew.

Katie turned up that evening, mad as hell at me for performing helicopter rescues under fire; I had made the news, she had seen the news, and I wished I was back in Zaire.

Back at the house, two days later, I reclaimed my room; bags thrown down in a heap, pancakes ordered from Cookie. Karl sat with me and we played catch-up, tales of helicopter rescues, refugees, the Mi24. Sharon stepped in with a scrapbook full of newspaper cut-outs for me, then gently mentioned that there was so much paperwork I wouldn't be able to see my desk. Ten minutes later I found Jimmy and Sharon in our office. I placed down my mug of tea, sighed, and set about the paperwork. At

4pm Sharon said goodbye, Jimmy and me working on till 1am, food brought in at regular intervals.

Many of the faxes were confirmations of things done or bought, and needed only a quick eyeball to see that it looked in order, my initials in the corner. Sharon would enter the summary to a spreadsheet and I would review it again, the accountants going back over it a third time. The nightclub was my responsibility, so too Pineapple at the moment, and even the Kenyan hotels, Jimmy busy with the war.

At 1am, Jimmy said, 'Beer.' We raided the kitchen, beer and microwave burgers, settling around the coffee table. 'How's Katie?'

'OK. Bit of a whinge at the helicopter stunts.'

'The writer of the first book has started on the second.'

'What? Just for that one mission?' I challenged.

Jimmy smiled. 'No, it'll be called Rescue Force: Mission Rwanda, and will cover the whole deployment, which I'll scale back in two weeks, we'll go back down. The book will make the deployment look less smooth and more troublesome, more of a... struggle. It'll follow Doctor Jane Hicks, from when she signed up, through Swindon and Mawlini training, and on to her deployment. A human interest story – she's a rising star down there.'

'And my flight?'

He made a face and shrugged. 'Glammed it up a bit. Book will be ready quickly, that writer is out there now at Kigoma, taking snaps. Oh, we picked up three more casualties.'

'Who?' I asked, immediately concerned.

'Dunno wrote off a Huey –'

'He what!'

'Not his fault. French chopper came in one way, American choppers the other, he was caught in the middle, so slammed it into the deck. He picked up a back injury, this Jane Hicks was thrown out, nearly sliced by the rotors, two nurses with broken arms.'

'Shit,' I slowly let out. 'It's a write off?'

'Hal is chopping it to bits for spares, which was necessary anyway. Rotors are salvageable, so is most of it, just the frame busted up. Even the gearbox will come out.'

‘That’s something, I suppose. The cost can be offset against the spares.’

‘Dunnow is back flying, stupid sod,’ Jimmy mentioned.

‘What are the daily operations now?’ I asked.

‘Mostly jeeps to the camps, more wounded than anyone could cope with, still flying the worst to Kigoma. Some rescues inside Rwanda, but that’s mostly down to the French and Americans now. Battalion of British peacekeepers in there as well, it’s slowing down a bit. So far and estimated fifty thousand dead, way under what I thought there’d be.’

‘Yanks get a Magestic nudge?’ I knowingly asked.

Jimmy nodded. ‘And Sykes got the Foreign Office to nudge some African leaders, get the peacekeepers ready early on. I got Kenyan and Tanzanian peacekeepers ready in the first week, they entered from the east. We’ll pull back our people in two weeks, make a big fuss of them, a parade in Nairobi. Rudd’s already on it, we’re flying Kenyan press to Kigoma and Forward Base, plus any foreign press that want a look. Some days there’s more fucking press than white uniforms!’

‘Any new recruits?’ I idly enquired before sipping my beer.

‘A few in Kenya, four I think, eleven here – but mostly Europeans. Mackey has been advertising for us around Europe; French, Dutch, Belgians. We’ll start a course at Swindon in a few weeks. The detachment at Kigoma is permanent, they’ll do their own local recruiting, and the Forward Base – under Doc Graham – will recruit locally, but not Hutus.’

‘Not ... Hutus?’ I puzzled.

‘It’s complicated. The Hutus pushed out of Rwanda will kick up a rebel army, attacking Rwanda and Tutsis indigenous to Zaire. The Tutsis will fight back, their leader going on to become future president of the then DRC, so we have to switch sides and stay in his good books; we have to walk a fine line. A year from now we’ll meet the good General, helping him along against the Hutus, who will – through no fault of their own – go on to be rebels and a right pain.’

‘And after we pull back?’

‘Steady build-up and training, we’re split three ways now, a strain on resources, but lots of real work being done, experience being accrued. And *that* ... is the important bit. We’ll have to start tackling Somalia soon as well.’ He sipped his beer, then

reached across and dug out a newspaper, passing it over. 'Chinese have been busy. Three wrecks dredged up ... and I mean *dredged* up. They took a great big barge that normally clears shipping channels and dug up the area around the wrecks, no divers. The boats timbers were smashed to pieces, the gold and silver sieved out.'

'Does the trick,' I said as I scanned the paper. 'Archaeologists happy with this stuff on land.'

'Very big haul: chariot of gold, lots of emeralds. It's all heading to a Beijing museum.'

'Says here it's priceless,' I queried.

'It's *ten million* priceless, since they can't sell it. The gold from the wrecks they can. They've given ten million to Tanzania towards the refugees there -'

'Making themselves look good with *our* fucking money!'

Jimmy laughed. 'It serves our purposes just as well. They chucked Rescue Force Kenya another ten million. With the money in Tanzania I'll buy an Mi2 helicopter and get some *out-of-work* Russian pilots, stick it in Kigoma. Anyway, how's the club?'

'Down a little on takings, it's settled after the initial buzz of opening, but still a great profit,' I reported. 'Pay for itself in a few years.'

'The singers keep it full,' Jimmy noted.

'When do we tackle one in London?'

'When we can get the property. The ideal one won't be available for another ... three years at least. Although...'

'Although?' I repeated after a moment.

'They eventually sell the hotel because of poor business and poor maintenance, so...'

'We could help them to ... suffer less business, a flood, some cockroaches...'

'I don't feel bad about doing something like that, because the owners will do nothing but suffer hardship for the next three years, then go bust and lose a lot of money. If they sell to us now ... then they're much better off.'

'Get Hotel Inspector Big Paul up there,' I said, and we laughed.

'Pineapple figures OK?' Jimmy idly enquired.

‘Obscenely profitable, States doing well,’ I reported. ‘Oh, Johnsons in Cardiff is costing us a bit.’

Jimmy shrugged. ‘Limbs to Afghanistan and Africa. It’s a tax write off. And the Students Union wants more money.’

‘They what?’ I challenged. ‘Cheeky fucks.’

‘It’s a good thing, lots of Russians and Chinese students seeing London. I’m going to start Russians going to New York soon, then a round the world 747 carousel ride.’

‘Round the world?’

‘London, Moscow, Beijing, San Francisco, New York, London. Students can stop off for a week at each place, or miss one out. We’ll start on Russia in a few years, still a mess over there at the moment.’

Faulty Towers

At the two hundred room, five storey Madson’s Hotel, Chelsea, Big Paul ripped a pipe out of the wall on the top floor, water gushing out. ‘Help!’ whispered. ‘Anyone? No, best leave then.’ He returned to his own room unseen.

A knock on the door came half an hour later. ‘Sorry, sir, we need to evacuate the hotel,’ the maid informed him, the corridor full of flustered guests.

‘What? What for?’

‘We’ve got a burst water pipe. Sorry.’ He packed and left, picking up a letter at reception; a free stay in the future.

Three days later he was back, dressed smartly. At 2am he slipped into the storeroom behind the kitchens, a sandwich box full of cockroaches scattered behind fridges, a few dead mice and a two dead sparrows. In the loft he stepped carefully across rafters, opening a plastic bag and dropping four dead pigeons into the main water tank; the hotel inspection was due the next day, the inspector ten grand better off. For some strange reason the large hotel was closed down for seven days, another inspection fixed for that date. It made the London papers.

The day before the inspection, Paul and Ricky climbed over the roof from a nearby building, entering the near empty hotel from a skylight. Only night clerks and cleaners were about on the

lower levels, no guests. All was quiet. In the roof space they planted numerous dead pigeons, a few in the water tank, lifting the new netting. Dropping to the floor below quietly, they entered an open room, a few cockroaches sprinkled into the bath. With most of the doors left open they repeated the exercise in several rooms, a few towels stuffed around toilet bends. On the back stairs they disabled cameras as they went, no one in attendance to monitor the screens in the hotel's main office. In the kitchen storeroom they again scattered cockroaches, a few dead mice placed strategically. On the way out they stopped, glanced at a pack of milk cartons, glanced at each other, then grabbed numerous milk containers. They reversed their path back up, cameras enabled, milk spread into the carpets of each floor, plus many rooms, the cartons removed. Back over the roof, they slipped quietly into the next building.

The hotel failed the inspection, shut down for thirty days, all guests contacted or turned away. It was a disaster, the hotel again making the papers. The next day an estate agent, a young lady, contacted the owners; a buyer from Kenya was interested in a London hotel in Chelsea, and were they interested. The owners vowed to fight on stoically, but suggested a price none the less. The cheeky estate agent returned the next day, having asked for the offer price plus a hundred grand, and could she have a bigger cut if they sold. The owners had now warmed up to the idea and they walked around to the estate agent's office as she faxed River View golf complex. Ten minutes later an agreement in principle came back, depending on timescale. The owners sat in a coffee shop and weighed their options, returning to the estate agents and sending an agreement for an immediate sale. They got back a fax detailing our expensive solicitors in London, the money sat waiting. All they had to do was to walk around with their own solicitors and sign, which they did the next day. We now had a large, but run down and closed hotel in Chelsea, owned through the proxy company that controlled the Kenyan hotels. The hotel's junior staff were let go, the senior staff offered positions, then given indefinite paid leave.

Jimmy stood in the empty hotel with a removals company, a builder, a cleaning company and Rolf the young architect. 'Beds, bedding and fittings go to Kenya. Desks, tables and chairs as well. All of it. Carpets in the bin, wallpaper off, roof fixed, loft

converted. When I return I want a very empty, yet very clean hotel. Rolf, you're in charge.'

Withdrawing

We landed back in Nairobi just twelve days after leaving. Rudd picked us up in his jeep and drove us straight up to Mawlini, giving us a chance to catch-up as we went; the back of the jeep became a mobile office. By time we reached Mawlini Rudd was dosing, Jimmy driving, but we had covered all the paper work. We grabbed rooms in the quiet UN hotel, the Rescue Force hotel bar closed for now, not least for a lack of thirsty patrons. It was 2am and dead quiet, so we simply went to bed.

At 6am I found Jimmy in the quiet restaurant, a few UN staff about, mostly on stopovers. At 7.00am we drove around to the Rifles, taking time with many of the men as they ate breakfast or exercised. They had all been injected by Doc Adam – without knowing – and so went for a long run at 5.30am every morning, something of a regimental tradition now. We spoke to the senior officer about deployments and training, finding one man shot and wounded in Zaire, but recovering well. They had thirty men deployed at Forward Base, forty at Kigoma on rotation to Forward Base, and plenty of bodies left here. Their new base was impressive and growing, six long barrack rooms, three storeys high, classrooms and lecture halls, a motor pool with large garages for jeeps, an officers quarters and command centre, a bar and two very busy restaurants. New recruits were coming in thick and fast from around Kenya - a good job a precious commodity down here. A new selection process had been set-up near Nairobi to pick the best men; we wanted intelligent men, more than fit, since we could cheat on the fitness. At 8am we dropped in on Coup, Rudd already in the office and going through paperwork. We sat and stretched out.

'Right,' Jimmy began. 'Let's talk about an orderly withdrawal and re-organisation. We want to leave a decent group in Zaire, a detachment in Kigoma, but *all of them* back here for ... a quick rest.'

‘Got four new bodies, but no fucker to train them,’ Coup pointed out.

‘Put them on the ordnance for now, the Rifles instructors can take them driving.’ Coup took notes. ‘Doc Graham will eventually stay in Zaire, so let him have his pick of twenty nurses, four doctors when ready. The Rifles stay in Zaire, the Huey’s withdraw for now.’

‘And the scrapped one?’ Rudd asked.

‘That stays there, we’ll cover it over. At Kigoma we’ll have two doctors and ten nurses to cover the camp after the break. But make sure that everyone comes back the day after tomorrow for a parade in Nairobi, then a small holiday before getting back to it. Contact Forward Base and get the Hueys back to Kigoma today with the Mi24.’ Coup took notes. ‘Tell Mac we’ll be with him tonight, get the Dash up here.’

‘It’s here,’ Coup pointed out.

‘Grab it, don’t let it leave.’ Tubby opened the door. ‘Talk of the devil.’ We stood and greeted him, handshakes exchanged. ‘We’ll fly back down with you.’ Tubby sat in the corner. Jimmy continued, addressing Coup, ‘You’ll need to get started on recruiting locals in Zaire, especially nurses, some local doctors. Same for Tanzania, looking to get administrators for both.’

‘I know someone,’ Tubby put in. ‘Former diplomat, knows the region very well. He’s got to be ... mid fifties, has a small plane at Nairobi aero club, beastly wife.’

We laughed. Jimmy said, ‘His name?’

‘Mitchell Lawson-Smythe,’ Tubby said, putting on an accent.

‘I know him, tell him he’s hired.’

I asked Tubby, ‘Will he re-locate to a shit hole like Kigoma?’

‘If it gets him away from *her*...’ Tubby suggested.

‘That just leaves Zaire, and we need a local facilitator, black market.’

‘I know a man down there,’ Rudd put in. ‘UN warehouse manager in Bakuva.’

‘Be busy at the moment then,’ I suggested.

Rudd shook his head. ‘No, the UN are re-organising, two warehouses into one. I think I could get him, he asked about a job before. He’s from Zaire, a black.’

‘Fine,’ Jimmy said. ‘Oh, Rudd, grab that Mi2 helicopter in Tanzania, beat them up on price.’

‘I have some Hueys lined up, former South African Army,’ Rudd informed us. ‘The Kenya Army, they’ve offered some Air Force pilots that don’t have much fuel to fly and nothing to do. They already fly helicopters.’

‘Good,’ Jimmy approved. ‘Get the Rifles five Hueys, plus spares, grab their pilots when we have the aircraft. Oh, and the Mi24 is now official Rifles property.’

‘Mickey and Yuri stay on?’ I keenly asked.

Jimmy nodded. ‘They can train others.’

‘Replacement Huey for us?’ I asked.

‘Not till we have more qualified staff.’ Jimmy turned his head to Tubby. ‘You made a start, lazy git?’

‘An hour here or there, o’ exalted one. Been *busy*! But read the book.’

‘Zaire will be scaled back, so you’ll have the time,’ Jimmy told him. Facing Coup, he asked, ‘All building work here finished?’

‘Finished, but no bodies to put in them,’ Coup replied. ‘The four new guys are rattling around in that hotel. They eat over at the UN. Oh, you seen the new ranges?’

‘No?’

‘The SAS lads built a small village outside the perimeter, couple of miles up the road; houses, ditches, targets. It’s a live fire range, used every day just about.’

‘That’s OK, I asked for something like it,’ Jimmy acknowledged. ‘How many Rifles in total?’

‘Two hundred and fifty,’ Rudd answered. ‘You want recruitment slowed up?’

‘No, not at all, keep it going,’ Jimmy quietly urged. ‘Soon we’ll split them by tasks.’ He faced Tubby. ‘Had any experience of flying paratroopers?’

‘Can’t say so,’ Tubby responded. ‘Will they be jumping out of the Dash?’

‘Yes, but that’s six months away. I’m going to give the Kenyan Parachute Brigade some money for fuel and practice. We’ll put the Rifles through para’ school, then they can go onto the Dash for small group insertion.’

‘They did a good job in Zaire,’ Tubby admitted. ‘I had my doubts, but without them our lily white colonial arses would have been exposed.’

‘I think Somalia will only get worse,’ Jimmy informed everyone, still grinning at Tubby. ‘And we’re exposed here.’

‘Hardly,’ Tubby scoffed. ‘The reputation of the Rifles has reached Somalia, they avoid our stretch of sand now.’

‘Good,’ I said. ‘How many in our camp at the border?’

‘Five thousand, and growing,’ Coup reported.

‘How many Somali men have we recruited?’ Jimmy asked.

‘About fifty,’ Coup answered. ‘But not much training going on with everyone away.’

‘Get the Rifles teaching them, driving and shooting,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Any trouble at the camp?’

‘The Rifles shot some Ethiopians,’ Coup answered. ‘Armed with machetes and robbing the women.’

‘We’ll recruit more Somalis inside their borders,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘I’m going to make contact with their government, what it is, and the local warlord, get some relief work going over there.’

‘UN has just about pulled out,’ Coup cautioned.

‘Which is exactly why *we* should go in,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘We can set a perimeter, then the UN can return.’

‘You out to bring peace to the region, Jimmy?’ Tubby asked.

‘I’ll do what I can,’ Jimmy told Tubby with a fixed stare. ‘Right, Coup, Rudd, advertise around Africa for more doctors, we’ve got eleven in England about to start a four week course. Once they’re here, find another forty Kenyan nurses.’

‘The profit from the beach hotels is coming here now?’ Rudd queried.

‘Yes, then the profit from the safari lodges when completed; all funnelled into Rescue Force.’

‘There is a lot of money left in the mine operation, not being used,’ Rudd noted. ‘Millions.’

‘Siphon it off for the Rifles. You got the Chinese money?’

‘Yes, ten million pounds.’

‘Chinese?’ Tubby questioned. ‘Ten million quid ... from the Chinese?’

Rudd explained, ‘The Chinese Government donated the money to us.’

‘The ... red Chinese Communist Government?’ Tubby loudly queried.

‘Fine upstanding people,’ I said.

‘You two ... are into some strange stuff,’ Tubby suggested. ‘Someday, you’ll have to explain it to me.’

‘Someday,’ Jimmy repeated with a smile. ‘Right, make plans to bring the gang back, all of them. Ask the nice people at UN for a plane.’ We stood. ‘Rudd, with us.’

We walked out into the morning heat, sunglasses placed on, and towards the mine school.

Jimmy began, ‘Rudd, talk to the politicians, and Bob Davies when you get a chance, about us operating in Somalia – similar mandate as Zaire. Then make contact with the Somali Government about permission, for what that’s worth. But get it anyway.’

Rabbit was greeted in his office, asking about Zaire and sounding a little jealous at being left out. His operations here were now running smoothly, three courses a year with forty people on each course, a hundred and twenty new mine clearance workers a year. We now had forty deployed into Afghanistan, working hard at clearing Russian mines; but two killed, and two maimed. Jimmy had resisted creating our own mine clearance group, since we’d have the added burden of many injuries and deaths – and the insurance, red tape and payments associated with it; it would be down to the UN and others to operate the staff we trained.

We packed small bags and boarded the Dash an hour later, ferrying twelve UN workers down to Kigoma. I took right seat and handled the take off, getting used to the tricky flap settings; there were so many of them. Remembering my first flight on this runway with Jimmy, the old Cessna, I decided to practice a heavy takeoff. I eased forwards the four throttles on the apron and taxied around at speed, not pausing, and slowly gaining momentum. We passed take-off speed just over a hundred yards along the runway, this aircraft designed specifically for short take-offs, but I did not pull back on the stick, I kept going. With the end of the runway looming large - our high speed now dangerous on the ground, Tubby glanced at me, and I eased her gently up and over the UN sheds, a gentle climb angle as I banked to the west.

‘Heavy take-off practice,’ I said, catching his look.

‘You’re not in Huey now, boy, and we’re not overloaded.’

I set the autopilot at altitude, a heading for River View safari lodge. Easing out of my co-pilot's chair and joining the passengers, I chatted to the staff - who had all read the book. At least now I had some new tales to tell. We refuelled at our grass strip before setting off for the longest leg of the five-hour flight, arriving over Kigoma as the sun touched the horizon. Tubby landed us smoothly, space on the apron to park for a change. The Hueys, three of them, were sat on the grass against the fence, the Mi24 nestled into a corner and looking menacing in the half-light. We disembarked with the UN staff, walking to the hotel, an hour before the next command meeting was due, assuming they were still being held. Rooms were allocated to us on the top floor, so we dumped our bags, had a quick wash, grabbed a leisurely tea, then walked around to the tower, finding Mac and Bob Davies attending paperwork.

'Jimbo!' Mac greeted, standing. 'Heard you were on your way. We pulling out?'

'Most are, some nurses will stay.' Jimmy leant across the desk and shook Bob's hand.

'Why you moving them back, only been here four weeks?' Bob playfully criticised.

We sat. 'First, for a rest. Second, a parade in Nairobi.'

'A parade?' Mac repeated.

'For everyone in Kenya to see what a great job you're doing, Mac,' I said.

'You're pulling back for that?' Bob questioned.

'Publicity ... is our life blood,' Jimmy emphasised. 'We need the people on our side and backing us, or we're nothing in the future.'

'Your writer guy has been around,' Bob informed us.

'Not *my* writer guy, we allow him access. He's going to do a book on the deployment - you'll both be in it.'

Bob and Mac exchanged looks. Mac asked, 'Rest of the gang driving over tomorrow?'

'Yes,' Jimmy replied. 'Four jeeps left over there, two left here - and about twenty collecting dust in storage at Mawlini. After we re-group we'll need to decide on rotations. Doc Graham wants the command job in Zaire, so that's his, and we've got two administrators coming; one for here, a local for Zaire. But I don't

intend to keep more than eight here in the short term. Those jeeps that drive back ... will stay back.'

I checked my watch. 'You still do command meetings at 8pm?'

'Yep, they's twice a day regular,' Mac responded. 'Although we do sometimes have a wee drinky at the evening session.'

'How're the national groups doing? They playing nice?' I asked.

'Very much so,' Bob answered. He eased back, 'When Jimmy said that he would get them here I was doubtful, even more doubtful about them working together, but they're inseparable.'

'Got a few romances on the go as well,' Mac put in with a smile. 'But no Chinese. And the China boys, they fetches some food from the market twice a week and cook us all a meal. Bloody good grub, considering the local supplies. And your hotel up the road - wees call it the honeymoon suite. The couples book rooms when off duty, get away from here.'

'Even got an Israeli guy with a English doctor!' Bob put in.

Jimmy checked his watch. 'Let's go meet and greet then. Mac, pack afterwards, out in the morning.'

'Bugger, gunna miss Chinese Night tomorrow,' he said, shaking his head.

The restaurant now housed numerous notice boards, maps and even personal messages for people passing through. Even though finished, it had not yet been used for any meals, the focus still being the cosy mess hut. A handful of people sat chatting, but jumped up and issued greetings when they recognised us, loud welcomes offered. The British Army officers now sported beards, as did some of our lads, a few items of uniform having been customised. The Chinese officers wandered in on time and greeted us warmly, so I practised my Chinese on them.

The senior officer stopped dead and loudly proclaimed, 'No, no, my sister is not a goat!' Everyone focused on me, I must have looked horrified, then they burst out laughing. The man added, 'Your words are correct, I make the small English joke.'

We greeted our staff as they crawled in, the flyers loudly proclaiming their welcomes, hands in the air. The Israelis looked neat and tidy, the best of the groups, but took the piss none the less; we were "part-time workers".

‘When we heard someone wrecked a helicopter we thought it was you!’ they offered.

With the UN staff now ambling in Jimmy called everyone to order. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, bearded layabouts, fools and heroes. On behalf on myself, and those around the world who have yet to appreciate you, I thank you all.’ They clapped each other, rude comments exchanged. ‘As most of you know, day after tomorrow is exit day; four weeks comes around quickly. From tomorrow morning there will be no more UN flights bringing wounded here, and the situation in Rwanda is getting better by the day. There is an American field hospital -’ They booed at length. ‘- at Forward Base, so the wounded will get some proper treatment for a change.’ They booed again. ‘So long as they can afford the bills!’ They laughed.

‘You’ll be happy to know that photographs of your hard work, and international co-operation, have gone all around the world.’ They glanced at each other, a few approving nods exchanged. ‘You will have also seen a writer skulking about taking snaps. He’s the guy who wrote *Incident at Baardheere*, and he’ll write another book about this mission – so I hope he got all your names down right. I will send each of your units a draft – just to check. And yes, Dunnow, your ... *mishap* will be in it.’

They laughed at him, scrunched up papers thrown at our Australian Huey pilot.

‘For Rescue Force staff, because they are *volunteers* – no *governments* nudging them along – there will be a parade in Nairobi.’ The Rescue Force staff cheered. ‘And ... a fly by. So Dunnow, you’ll be in a jeep that day.’ He protested his innocence.

‘So, I want all Rescue Force staff packed up tomorrow afternoon, ten nurses will remain at the camp. The rest fly out tomorrow, so Huey pilots – *and* Dunnow – you can leave in the morning when it suits you, Mi24 back to Mawlini. International military groups: your planes should fetch you day after tomorrow, and once again *thank you* ... for all you have done here, for the lives saved, but more than that ... thank you for showing the world that your governments may not get along, but the medics of the world do.’

They applauded.

‘And let us not forget the people who made it all possible, the United Nations.’

Bob gave a regal bow, getting a few rude comments.

Jimmy concluded with, ‘If you have any operational matters, please carry on, I need to stuff my face.’

We climbed to the rooftop bar, our first time, and found it just about full, many greetings shouted, people waved back at. The pool was empty, but lights illuminated it from below, the blue water now inviting. We grabbed a free table and sat, ordering food and beer. Our flyers appeared at the door, Dunnow diving into the pool and exiting the other side, sitting down at a table with the nurse he was seeing and creating his own puddle.

‘I thought he had a bad back,’ I quipped.

‘They say ... swimming is good for the back.’

Tubby’s wife, Sue, appeared with the soon to be famous Doctor Jane Hicks. Jimmy beckoned them over.

‘Please, have a seat, ladies,’ Jimmy requested. Addressing Jane, he said, ‘Have you met the writer?’

‘Writer?’ she puzzled.

‘The guy who wrote *The Baardheere Incident*.’

‘He’s here?’

‘Yes, was a day ago. He was after you.’

‘Me? But I wasn’t there.’

‘No, he was after you for a story on this mission, a *human interest story*, someone who had just joined, got caught up in a bit of action, you know.’

‘Well, why me?’ Jane puzzled.

‘They went through the files and picked you out, not sure why. So he’s going to want some background, and an opinion of someone like yourself – looking through the eyes of a new recruit; books like that should be good for recruitment in the future. So at some point in the next few months you’ll be sent to the UK for a week to go through it with him. In the meantime, when you’re back at Mawlini, I want you to create a timeline of what you’ve done since seeing the advert for us.’

‘Oh. Well, I keep a diary,’ Jane offered.

‘Excellent place to start. And he’ll want some career history from university.’

‘You’re going to be famous,’ Sue approved. ‘Not just for falling out of a chopper.’

‘I didn’t fall, it was *his* fault,’ Jane said, an accusing finger pointed at the back of the soaking wet Dunnnow. ‘Bloody Wombat fly-boy there.’

Over the meal we got to know Jane, innocuous questions asked. It turned out that she had been involved in a bad accident after medical school and had spent six months in hospital – the wrong side of the medical chart, lost her mum to cancer two years later and that her dad died in a road accident a year before joining us. And now I quietly realised why Jane had been *picked out* by someone; this was a genuine human interest story.

For many hours we chatted to the staff, getting around a great many of them, still at the bar when people checked watches and headed off in a semi-disciplined manner. By midnight it was just about empty, two of the Rifles taking up station; not to secure the bar or even the hotel, and certainly not to remove drunken revellers, but because the rooftop bar gave a commanding view of the base. Jimmy chatted to them both at length, and I stared up at the stars, thinking about a great many things, including Katie. And why I missed her down here, yet often longed to get away from her in the UK. It was one of those puzzles of the human condition that I would never solve.

At 6am I said good luck to Hal and the flyers, jealously watching them lift off in sequence, the Mi24 following. I’d bet we were not popular with the towns folk, their shacks must have been shaking. The Dash was made ready at 9am, Tubby and Sue at the controls, twenty-two of our staff to be taken back, plus Mac and us. We said goodbye to the national groups, who had come out to see us, then headed off into the sun, this time a genuine heavy take-off with all the kit on board. An hour and a bit later we over-flew our Hueys en-route, Tubby informing us, and people peering down. Three hours, and we landed at the grass strip.

After a toilet break, time to stretch legs and for people to smoke, we re-boarded the flight, now fuelled, and continued on up to Mawlini, landing in the late afternoon sun, my favourite time of day up here; the sand adopted an amber glow, so too the sky, and a calmness descended. Off-loading on the apron, our staff dumped their kit in their rooms and headed straight to the bar, some to the pool. Mac reclaimed his office, and we helped him and Coup tackle the paperwork for an hour, satisfied that the

major problems had been dealt with. Coup pointed us towards the garage and we inspected ten old jeeps that had been enlivened with a good wash, and a coat of paint by the Rifles. They all worked, so we would have plenty of jeeps for the parade the next day. But since Nairobi was a four hour drive, we sent down two Rifles in each jeep that evening. The men were in on the parade, and had spent the past few weeks practising their marching. From what I could see, their display team was definitely ready.

Making ourselves unpopular, we stopped alcohol sales, reminding people that they were up at dawn for the flight down. Our second batch of staff would fly direct to Nairobi, staying in a hotel for the night, the jeeps hopefully arriving tonight at the same hotel. There would just be time for a quick carwash in the morning and, hopefully, a shave for some. Coup and De Silva had been furnished with white jackets, so too Rudd and Cosy, to swell the numbers. The twenty remaining Kenyan nurses would take pride of place, and Rudd had made up thousands of small Rescue Force flags to give to children, large Kenyan flags to be draped over jeeps. Since the President would be there, I was nervous about the discipline of our lot. But at least they would all be tired.

At Dawn we lifted off, thirty in the Dash with us, some lying on kitbags at the back, a short hour and half flight to Nairobi. A bus waited with Rudd and Cosy and we headed over to the hotel, finding the street almost blocked by white jeeps double parked, twenty-three that I could see. The staff were still having breakfast, the restaurant packed, just a few surprised looking guests wondering what the heck was going on. Our lot were not only clean, but clean-shaven thankfully, and the hotel had cleaned their jackets overnight.

Jimmy called them to order as our busload stepped inside, the hotels other guests inconvenienced. 'We'll be leaving here in thirty-five minutes, please use the bathroom first, have a cold drink and keep a bottle in the jeeps.'

'Where are we going?' an elderly guest asked, making me smile.

'We'll drive around to the rear of the Government buildings, then driving around the city centre *very slowly*, not least because I want two Kenyan nurses with Kenyan flags sat on the top of

each jeep. A convoy of Rifles will be behind us. Back at the Government buildings we'll halt and park up, getting out and being welcomed back by the President, lots of photographers and TV cameras. He will ask you questions of why you joined, what happened in Zaire, etc. The Rifles will then march past. There will then be a reception inside for us, and the officers of the Rifles. The men of the Rifles will be inspected at the rear of the Government buildings. Oh, when we halt there should be a flyby. Dunnow is up there, so keep low. At least we won't be presenting him to the President. Any questions?'

Everyone was happy enough. On the dot we mounted up and drove in convoy to the Government buildings, two nurses in the back of each jeep, Rudd supplying the flags, and already signs of crowds gathering. At the prescribed minute we helped the nurses onto the sturdy roof racks, flags held across knees, and set-off at a snails pace, police outriders stopping traffic ahead of us. At the end of the first road we turned onto a main avenue, finding the pavements jammed with spectators, many children stood waving flags.

At a crawl, we advanced as a long white snake, twenty-three gleaming jeeps, the windows wound down and the crowds cheering more enthusiastically than I would have guessed. We reached the front of the Government building, a red carpet and podium set out, thousands of people stood on the gently sloping grass and steps. The first vehicle pulled up ten yards past the podium, causing the rest to halt in sequence, jeep number twelve pulling around and remainder double parking. The nurses were helped down, not that the fit ladies needed any help, and we formed up, Jimmy insisting that the staff went up and around first. Each got a handshake and a thank you, a few words exchanged, before waiting below the podium in a line. Half way through that process the Huey's flew over, circling twice. When they came back around slowly I puzzled just what the hell they were doing. They flew in slowly over the vehicle free avenue at a hundred feet, turned and performed the podium bow flawlessly, then flew on. Bastards. Hal had taught it to them in Zaire. As I stood there, teeth clenched, I thought, fuckers!

The President gave his speech, welcoming us all back, the Rifles marching along in style and to great applause. The government officials led us inside and to the reception, drinks

offered. Hundreds mingled in the large room, many Kenyan officers in uniform, dignitaries, the Defence Minister I recognised. The Zimbabwean President came as a bit of a shock, and I avoided him, finding Jimmy.

Whispering, I said, 'The Zimbabweans are here?'

'Yes, and the next African Union meeting will be held at the golf course. He, will be an honoured guest.'

'Are you *trying* to upset Sykes?'

The Kenyan President approached us, his aides whispering in his ear. 'Hello again, and thank you for all you have done.'

'It was an honour to help,' Jimmy said with a bow as he shook the President's hand.

Out of the corner of my eye I caught the Zimbabweans closing in, and held my breath. The Kenyan President introduced Jimmy to the Zimbabwean delegation.

Jimmy said, 'It is an honour to meet you, Mister President.'

'Not many of your countrymen feel that way,' the man said in a slow and deliberate voice.

'Since they have *unfairly* imposed sanctions, I will lift some of my own, and welcome you and your government to stay at my golf lodge any time you like, free of charge.' I blinked.

'That is most gracious. I have heard about it, and about you, Mister Silo. Today we looked at the farming college you have set-up. I note, that you dismissed all the whites there.'

'Africa, is for the Africans, sir.'

'But you own much land here.'

'All profits stay in Kenya, they go back to the people,' Jimmy explained.

'An interesting approach, for a British white man.'

'May I suggest, Mister President, that if I were to ship medical supplies to South Africa, through your fine country, that they be ... borrowed along the way.'

'That would not please the United Nations, who see fit to impose sanctions upon us.'

'I would not be breaking any sanctions, since your countrymen would be stealing the convoy, sir.'

'You make thieves of us, for a good cause,' the President said with a chuckle. 'Another interesting approach. We will visit the golf hotel soon, maybe to talk again.'

'I will make myself available, sir.'

They wandered off, leaving me wondering just what the hell Jimmy was up to. Sykes would be fuming.

The function went on for half an hour before Jimmy started nudging white uniforms out. Everyone's kit was already stowed in the jeeps, so they could drive off immediately. We left Rudd, Coup and De Silva to bond with the politicians and spread the good word of what we did, and grouped-up outside. Jimmy called them together.

'We have one more function to perform in Mombassa –' They groaned. '- where we'll stay the night, then you have six days off.' They cheered sedately, still a big crowd around us. 'It's a three hour drive, so let's get started people.'

Half an hour into the trip I could see our Hueys in a line, a mile or so north of us and heading in the same direction. I knew Jimmy had a surprise arranged, but he would not give me all the details. We drove past Mombassa, on the road to the hotels, people now asking about the golf complex – was the presentation going to be there? We pulled into the old River View hotel at 2pm, the day hot, and I noticed the car park empty, enough room for all of us with some jeeps on the grass. Jimmy assembled the puzzled faces, leading them through to the beach bar. For a moment, I oddly thought that I recognised some of the faces in the water.

Jimmy stood on a bench. 'Ladies and gentlemen, fools and heroes. The next presentation – has been cancelled.' They glanced at each other. 'This hotel is empty except for a few people you might know. You are booked in for six days, the bar is free.' They cheered. 'Oh, and last one in the water is back on duty tomorrow!'

The Kenyan nurses stood around looking puzzled as our men rushed to the water fully clothed and jumped in. I considered what the paying guests might say, Jimmy informing me that they were none down here, as the British Army Colonel and his Israeli counterpart walked out.

I shook his hand. 'You look familiar.'

'Thanks for all this, very kind of you,' he offered. 'Top notch spot for the team.'

The Israeli major shook my hand. 'My family have flown down, Jimmy paid for it.'

'I'll take you diving if you like, it's better than Eilat!'

‘I’d like that.’

Dunnow, Ratchet and Spanner walked out. ‘This where the party is?’

‘Get yourself a cold one, mate,’ I said in an accent. ‘It’s all free!’

Jimmy tapped me on the shoulder, then pointed. I recognised the figure in the bikini coming towards us; Katie. Oddly enough, I was very happy to see her and rushed across, picking her up to whooping calls and rude comments from the guys; *get a room!*

‘When did you get here?’ I asked with a huge smile.

‘Got here late last night. Jimmy organised the surprise, mum’s over there under a tree.’ As she said it I recognised some UN staff.

‘Best say hello then.’ I lead her off to the trees.

I emerged from our hut with Katie around 7pm, joining Jimmy and Jean in the crowded restaurant, the Kenyan nurses still looking a little bewildered and out of place, most people now in civilian clothes. ‘The children playing nice?’ I asked as we sat, Katie getting many glances from the gang, especially the British soldiers.

‘Yes, all happy enough,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Got some excursions organised as well; a day shopping in Mombassa, some boat fishing, a little diving.’

‘No Chinese?’

‘No, they’d not appreciate it much – they don’t drink, and their bosses wouldn’t appreciate it either if we drove them from the straight and narrow path of good communist values.’

I noticed Cosy and Anna and waved. ‘Rudd not down?’

‘He’s holding the fort,’ Jimmy said as a waiter closed in, the man soon taking our orders for drinks and starters.

‘You’re looking a bit pink, Jean?’ I noted.

‘Caught the sun today, was only out for an hour or so,’ Jean said as she examined her arms.

We ate with a boisterous background, half the gang over at the second beach hotel. Two hours later, with just a few late arrivals finishing up, we discussed what to do, the karaoke already in full swing next door and the soldiers murdering songs with terrible, yet high-spirited renditions. I dared not ask Katie, so Jimmy eventually asked her. My good woman surprised me by readily agreeing, and we stepped next door.

Jimmy grabbed the microphone, firmly nudging soldiers to the rear. 'Sit down, shut up and settle down ... or I'll sing.'

'No!' they shouted.

'Ladies and gentlemen, Rescue Force staff, British and Israeli medics ... I give you Katie Joe.'

She got a rapturous applause, many wolf whistles, and seemed to be loving the attention, leaving me shaking my head. She chose one of her songs, the machine deliberately hosting all of them, and enthralled the crowd, many people coming in and standing at the back, more standing near the restaurant entrance. After each song she got enthusiastic applause and shouts, then selected the Bay Watch theme song, Rescue Me. Within a minute everyone was joining in; I figured we had a new theme tune. She performed another six of her songs, a few others artists she liked being selected. After the last song she said, 'OK, if anyone wants a photo...'

People grabbed cameras and moved forwards. Just about everyone got snapped with her, some soldiers snapped with her on their knee. And yes, I did mind, I minded a lot, but I could not figure out why.

For the next few days I took her away from the hotel, drives down the coast with Jean and Jimmy, sometimes just us. We found isolated beaches where no one knew us, small fishing villages, and cafes where a dollar got you a good meal. At one beach, a popular spot north of Mombassa, a UN worker recognised us and said hello. I didn't mind, it made a change from autograph hunters after Katie. We sat and had a meal with the man and his wife, a "couple" chat, not just about work or music. It was nice to be normal for a change. One day we took out the senior Israeli officer, his wife and two teenage daughters, the girls in awe of Katie. Happening across a small animal sanctuary, they said they were closed to visitors. I told them I was the owner of the golf complex and they opened up sharply, the manager taking time to show us around.

The last day of the "enforced rest" consisted of a conference in the morning, followed by a dispersal meeting, after which groups would set off to their given, or chosen, assignments. We all walked around to the golf hotel at 10am, to find a large marquee behind the hotel, waiters in neat red waistcoats stood ready to

serve us cold drinks. Tables and chairs had been laid out under the shade of the tent, enough for everyone, plus a podium and a few white boards. But the difference between this, and a stuffy old conference in the UK, was a grass floor, a view of trees through open flaps, and a lazy old three legged lion sat in the sun and getting patted as people walked past. Apart from that, I considered it was just like a conference in the UK.

People settled themselves, grabbing the fizzy water already provided on the tables, and sat looking very pink and sore for the most part. There were only six Kenyan nurses present, the remainder had been sent off already, and all now wore white Rescue Force floppy hats and t-shirts. Mac sat at the front with Rudd, Cosy and Coup in a line, and I sat off to one side.

When everyone finally settled, with a little nudging along, Jimmy took the podium, but without the use of a microphone for the thirty-five people present. 'I hope you can all hear me.' He rested his elbows on the podium. Right, we're having this meeting *here* so that some people can head off straight away to their assignments, chosen and imposed, and without having to trek up to Mawlini and back. And this is – just about – the first time we've all been together, I think.' He straightened and put a hand in his pocket.

'First, I would like to make it clear, to old members and new recruits, that Rescue Force is not just about Africa. The group got started here, and is working and training here, but I hope that in the future, not too far away into the future, that the mission we ran to Zaire could be duplicated into missions for other countries. My aim is to add people and skills in the future that help missions to other parts of the world.' He stepped forwards. 'I want us to be able to send rescue teams to the Pacific region after an earthquake, to flood areas, to large scale forest fires, to civil disasters where we could help. Now, the first item on that list was earthquakes. When there's a quake, buildings collapse, people get trapped and injured, the local authorities cannot cope, and there is a serious lack of after care, not least because the local hospital is just a pile of rubble.

'Such a mission would involve a rapid reaction, air transport of jeeps, travel to remote locations – possibly on foot, and rendering what assistance we could to the wounded and the displaced, co-operating with other NGOs and the UN as we do

now. The additional skills required for such a mission would be climbing skills: to climb up and over collapsed buildings, caving skills: to go under collapsed buildings, and the use of specialist equipment such as thermal cameras to see if we can find people buried under rubble. At the airfield in England that we run, we have both climbing and caving facilities, and will offer courses there at some point in the future.’ He pointed at the four new recruits who had driven down from Mawlini. ‘These new recruits have been through those basic courses, they did so before arriving here. So, all in all, we already have many of the skills needed to perform other tasks and missions, we just need to improve upon them.

‘I want everyone here to know that if they wish to work *just in Africa* - that they can do so. But I also want to emphasise to everyone that there will be many opportunities in the future to work in areas that are not just hot and dusty, not just Africa, and that there will many on-going courses in the UK and other places. I would hope, that a year from now, we could send teams to an earthquake disaster zone.’ He grabbed a sheet of paper and scanned it.

‘OK, training standards. After we return to Mawlini, Mac and Coup will be working out training and re-training standards so that no one loses their edge. The doctors will prepare tests for the nurses, both written and practical, and all non-doctors will get a test twice a year - *at least*. Within a year, those tests will be necessary for staff to remain with us. I have computers arriving in Mawlini as we speak, many of them, and we have devised a computer programme that’ll run the tests. You can load a question and an answer, then sit someone down and get them to go through it; the answers they get wrong come back up at the end.

‘In order to keep our doctor’s skills fresh I have arranged for senior registrars from London to come down on occasion to discuss the latest techniques, and to run lectures and exams. Coup will help to make copies of medical magazines and papers that are of interest, and get them to you. My aim is this: if a doctor spends a year with us, and then applies for a job in a hospital, that doctor should be completely up to date in all areas – especially new drugs – and their time with us should be no reason for anyone to turn them away, or judge them less than a

hospital doctor applying for the same position. Quite the opposite. I would hope that, in years to come, hiring a former Rescue Force doctor would be an advantage. To that end, you'll be going back to school at regular intervals, except Tubby -' They laughed. '- since we recognise that he's a better flyer than a doctor.

'I will, on a regular basis, run courses for all staff to learn basic field surgery. Unlike your counterparts in London, you may have to amputate a limb in the jungle to save a life. To that end, I have some experienced combat surgeons lined up, people who learnt how to make do with very little. We will also be arranging a number of other courses designed to make you more self-reliant should something go wrong, i.e. flying across Africa with Dunnnow -' They laughed. '- and crashing into dense jungle, ten days to walk out and be rescued. We'll be running jungle training courses, survival courses, and also *escape and evasion* courses. What that all means, is that if you crash in a jungle, surrounded by hostile warlords, you have a good chance of surviving and making it back. Since we are now running airborne missions over isolated areas, those courses will start soon, and they *will* ... be compulsory.' He glanced again at the sheet.

'Right, communications. The jeeps will all be fitted with CB radios soon, decent radios with a range of around ten miles or better. Team leaders will keep satellite phones for *emergencies only*; they're about a pound a second to use. I have some short-wave radios coming, good enough to link Mawlini with Forward Base. Just remember that they're not secure, anyone can listen in. Kigoma will be known as Rescue Force Tanzania, because I aim to develop a Tanzanian version of you, and a Tanzania version of Mac.'

The group laughed. 'He's unique!' came a voice.

Jimmy continued, 'A year from now Kigoma will not be run from Mawlini, but we are all part of the same group. Zaire will go a similar route on a national level. Now, we've bought an Mi2 helicopter in Tanzania, where it will stay for the most part, used in the short term for runs into Zaire. It can hold twenty at a push, ten or twelve with kit. Zaire *will not* ... have the Hueys for a while, except Dunnnow's old one. I hope that in six months we'll have more trained pilots and a few more Hueys. The Mi2 will be assigned to Zaire support and re-supply in the meantime.

‘Fitness tests. *No one* ... who joined before the last four recruits, will be required to pass a fitness test ... for one year.’ They nudged Tubby on the shoulder. ‘But we will start to look at fitness in general, and exercising at base. Remember, you are training for more than just Africa, you may need that fitness in the future.

‘OK, new staff. We have hired two new versions of Coup, but better looking; one for Kigoma, and one for Zaire. Their roles will be administrators and facilitators – they buy the beer. They will be starting very soon, and are already experienced in the region and with UN movements. The new guy in Zaire is a local, and well connected – he’ll be needed over there. In the UK we have eleven new staff lined up for the start of training, including some non-medics. Those guys will have to pass a first aid course to a very high standard, as well as intubation, drugs, trauma, and minor surgical techniques. With that in mind, new white jackets are being designed with job descriptions and skills printed onto them.’

Dunnnow raised his arm. ‘What’s mine say?’

Jimmy smiled. ‘The principal trade will be on the back; doctor, nurse, driver, medic, director, administrator. On the arm will be two flags, Kenya and your original country, plus any specialist skills. Helicopter wings will be fixed to both arms if you fly helicopters, normal wings if you fly fixed wing.’

‘Mine’ll say nurse then,’ Dunnnow winged.

‘That’s better than *fucking Wombat fly boy* -’ The tent reverberated with laughter. ‘- which is what they call you now. Would you prefer... combat pilot, perhaps?’

‘Well ... yeah.’

‘Well ... *fuck off*. First and foremost, you’re a nurse. If you become a full-time flyer you can change it. And the first time you’ve got a tasty bird in your left seat – I’ll ground you permanently. Clear?’

Dunnnow sulked, but did so with a grin.

‘OK, Zaire: Doc Graham has expressed a desire to head up that detachment. Anyone else *wishing* to go there?’

One of the new recruits raised an arm. ‘I’m half Belgian, I have lived there, near Goma.’

‘You got the job, but first you’ve got to pass ordnance and jeep. After that, three-month rotations as long as you want to

stay. Anyone else?’ Six more raised their hands. ‘Doc Graham, choose one more doctor.’ He pointed at Jane Hicks. ‘It’s a done deal, but everyone will get a chance at a month there, to see some action. OK, which doctor wants Kigoma?’ Five raised their. ‘Anyone with a local interest?’

One man said, ‘I was stationed there for five years with the UN, I know the area.’

Jimmy pointed at him. ‘You’re hired – for now. Pick one other doctor for the first tour.’ The man nominated a second doctor. ‘OK, that covers detachments. When we’re back at Mawlini we’ll need a rotation set-up for the border camp, in your teams; doctor, nurse, driver and medic. We will, in future, have one or two Rifles driving for each team. When they’re not driving they provide security.

‘OK, structures. Nurses will be graded as nurse, senior nurse or team leader. In some cases, like refugee camps, a team leader can be a nurse. To that end, we are promoting the six nurses at the rear to team leaders. Ladies, please come forwards.’

Mac stood up and met the line of nurses, shoulder flashes issued, handshakes given, applause started.

‘Ratchet, front and centre,’ Mac called, Ratchet easing between seats. ‘You’re team leader for the flyers, those two refugees behind you.’

‘More pay?’

‘No, now fuck off and sit,’ Mac told him. ‘The rest of the team leaders, get your shoulder flashes after, new jackets up at the base.’

Jimmy said, ‘All doctors who *do not* have a pilot’s license - we’d like you to think about it, so that you can fly back and forth. Huey pilots, do your Cessna licenses very soon. Cosy, finish converting to the Dash when you can.’ Cosy nodded. ‘OK, Coup has some admin, Mac, Hal and Paul, a word please.’

We stepped out into the brilliant sunshine, the lion rolling over for a good tickle, but not getting one. We bunched up.

Jimmy began, ‘Hal, we’re all very grateful for what you did training the lads and helping out, you’ve been invaluable. I know you had just a short contract with us, but I was wondering if we could persuade you to hang around a bit longer.’

‘Doing what?’ Hal asked.

‘There’ll be five new Hueys for the Rifles, ten pilots to train – and these will be combat pilots, the Hueys armed, so right up your street.’

‘Well ... how long?’ Hal asked.

‘Could be six months of work,’ Jimmy warned him.

‘Come on, Hal,’ I encouraged. ‘Where we going to find someone like you around here?’

‘I gotta place going stale in Arizona,’ Hal mentioned. ‘Neighbours gunna think I bought it over here!’

‘I know you’re retired,’ Jimmy said. ‘So you can work your own hours.’

‘I’ll buy ya a drink on a Friday,’ Mac put in. ‘Let you win at poker.’

‘*Let me* ... win. I cleaned ya out, ya bum!’

‘Come on, Hal,’ I nudged. ‘Or we’ll feed you to the fucking lion.’ We all glanced at the dopey lion. ‘Not *that* one, obviously.’

‘Well, I could sign on for another three months, I guess,’ Hal finally agreed.

‘That’s more like it,’ I said. With a threatening finger, I said, ‘And if you teach those three arseholes in there to fly better manoeuvres than me again...’

Hal raised his hands in surrender as we laughed.

‘We need you, Hal,’ Jimmy emphasised. ‘And what’s more ... you make Mac feel younger when he’s around you.’

‘Ya bunch a rude fuckers,’ Hal said as he walked back inside, Mac following.

Jimmy said, ‘He was terrified.’

‘Of what?’ I puzzled.

‘Of going home to an empty apartment in a small town, and playing cards with old men. He’ll stay as long as we want.’

‘So why the nagging?’

‘My words ... cost nothing to utter, but will make him feel wanted and needed for a long time.’

The lion farted, rolling onto its back and studied by us for a few seconds. Shaking our heads, we ducked back inside.

Within an hour our jeeps started to pull away, the parking area freeing up vehicle by vehicle. Those bound for Kigoma or Zaire headed to Mobassa field and the Dash, the rest drove to Mawlini in small groups, some people with holiday leave heading up to Nairobi airport for trips back to Europe. Many of the nurses had

spent a day on the beach, got bored with that and headed for home in Mombassa or Nairobi, returning a day or so later. One even lived up the road and knew the hotel bar staff. Now they boarded an air-conditioned coach for the journey back to base.

Jimmy and I played dutiful hosts and drove Katie and Jean to Nairobi the next morning, arranging to see them again in a week in the UK. In our hire jeep we drove around to the hotel we used to stay at in Nairobi and picked up Big Paul, recently qualified on the Huey; he had flown down from the UK the previous evening. With me taking the piss out of him and his flying, we began the long but familiar drive up to Mawlini.

The next morning Jimmy put Big Paul with Hal for two hours, the other Huey pilots switched to Cessna training, something else that Hal was good at. All in all, we had eight people on Cessna training, our poor old plane getting plenty of use. We cut corners, and costs, by putting people up with Hal, Tubby or even Jimmy, none of them qualified or licensed to instruct. Back in the UK we would not have dared.

Rotas were set-up for deployments, people put into courses for re-training, and new equipment delivered and installed, short-wave radios tested. We got a fella in Oslo a few times, but mostly we made contact with Kigoma and Forward Base. The CB radios worked fine on the jeeps, the Rifles getting them fitted at the same time, although they already had the kit that the Kenyan Army used, the same specification as the British Army and old enough to be hand-me-downs. And each time that one of our jeeps now left the base for the border, a member of the Rifles tagged along, armed.

The paperwork was attacked, procedures re-worked and adjusted at length, plenty of input from the staff taken on board. The Rescue Force hotel was occupied in strength, people moving over from old rooms elsewhere, and the hotel's bar and restaurant brought into use, its pool filled with water from a tanker and made ready – dead lizards fished out. By the third day we had re-organised, caught our breath and recovered from the Rwanda deployment.

As arranged, Po and Han flew into Nairobi that afternoon, flown up by Tubby in the Dash on a supply run. Po had his family bodyguards with him as normal, men we already knew, but he also brought along two men he had hired to start Rescue

Force Hong Kong; Hou and Lou. They looked Chinese, but spoke with a bit of an American accent and were very westernised. I greeted Han in the new rooftop bar, practising my Chinese.

Han responded, 'Your Chinese is improving, at least it would be if my sister were a goat.'

Jimmy, and Po's group, burst out laughing as I curled a lip at Han.

I told him, 'I preferred you as you were. Don't go changing on my account.'

Two tables were dragged together, plastic seats brought over, Mac and Coup joining us with paper and pen as orders for drinks were taken.

After the group had taken a few sips of cool beer, Jimmy addressed Han. 'How did your government like the publicity you got?'

'Very much so,' Han responded. 'The pictures were in all the papers for many days, all China proud of our people's contribution.'

'It's amazing what a small group of people can achieve,' Jimmy noted, Han bowing an agreement. 'So, Rescue Force Hong Kong. Po, have you found a building?'

'Yes, yes, old building, small money, some land near, but only small.'

'How many floors?' Jimmy asked.

'Only ten,' Po responded.

'More than enough,' Jimmy suggested. 'We'll construct a climbing wall up one side, it'll become world famous. One floor should be for offices, one for classrooms, one for a gym, and one floor can have a sandbox.'

'Sand box?' Po repeated.

'Like here. An area of sand floor, twelve inches deep, with practice mines in the sand.'

'Ah, yes, yes.'

'And some apartments on the top two floors,' Jimmy added. 'But the majority of training would be done on the mainland.' He turned his head a notch to Han, who nodded a signal back. 'So all staff must be checked by the mainland police before you hire them. They'll also train here, and in England, so all staff must speak reasonable English. Since this is where most of the

advanced training will take place, Mac and Coup will show around our two new administrators ... at length.'

'What money you want transfer?' Po asked.

'All of it.'

'All?' Po questioned. 'It twenty million!'

Mac and Coup exchanged looks.

'Rescue Force is one big family, and the money will be used in many countries, not just Hong Kong. Most of the money will be held in reserve for future years. OK, Lou and Hou, I don't think you should try and administer anyone unless you have tried some of the tasks yourself. So we'll put you in the sandbox, get you on a jeep trip to the border, a flight in a Huey – where you can take control, and a go on the dummy.'

'Dummy?' Lou queried.

'First aid training dummy,' Jimmy explained. 'Not a rubber doll.' They laughed. 'But keep in mind that the temporary director of RFHK will be a doctor from here, before one is hired. That person, we'll need in around six months, ideally someone who has worked for the UN or Red Cross overseas. You can advertise in three months time, and your first batch can train here whilst the building is made ready.'

'We advertise job, many hundred ask,' Po put in.

'Aim for twenty doctors, thirty nurses to start, some drivers and mechanics,' Jimmy suggested to Lou. 'Here we organise our people into teams of four; a doctor team leader, a nurse or two, a driver mechanic, sometimes a basic medic. One doctor to four nurses works well in the refugee camps, sometimes a nurse team leader of just other nurses.'

Lou asked, 'You split primary care and aftercare?'

'Yes, the aftercare is often one doctor to ten or twenty nurses in the camps. But the primary role of Rescue Force in the future will be rapid reaction assistance, not long term care. If there's an earthquake somewhere then we go in for ... what, two weeks. After that you won't pull anyone out alive. It's about ... the initial help. Here, we get involved with camps because we don't have any earthquakes ... and the medical staff need to keep practising. So, Mac, Coup, show our guests around please, then get them trying a bit of everything.'

'I want look too,' Po insisted.

With just Han remaining, I asked, 'Dredged up the wrecks?'

‘Yes, all wrecks recovered, some on land we are not finding.’

‘Get me a better scale map,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘I have with me. But what do you desire we do with our rescue medics?’

‘Nothing for now, just watch the Hong Kong branch grow and learn from it. When you take over Hong Kong in ’97 they’ll operate independently, but be interchangeable with your teams. And never forget, that to send teams to other countries they must *appear* to be independent of government or political interest; many countries will not allow Chinese medics in. Ever. Fortunately, most countries that suffer earthquakes are poor, and in the future your government will be an important economic partner for them, making things easier.’

‘We have learnt well the lesson of Kigoma,’ Han stated. ‘The political gain of just thirty medical staff for four weeks. My government now understands the benefit of your ... wisdom, in this area.’

‘Then suggest to your government that if your medics train here on a regular basis, alongside other nations, I shall do the... *flag waving*.’

Coup brought a fax out and handed it over, withdrawing immediately, Jimmy thanking him and glancing at the detail.

Facing me, Jimmy said, ‘The Somali Government in exile, in Italy, have granted us permission to run relief operations into Somalia. So have the Kenyan Government, and the UN. There’s a provision from the exiled government and the Kenyans, that we can take all reasonable steps to protect ourselves over there.’

‘Mi24 ... protect ourselves?’ I knowingly asked.

‘Most definitely. And Rifles helicopter borne assault ... protect ourselves.’

Han asked, ‘You wish ... an incursion in Somalia? The Americans did not fair well.’

‘Never fight an insurgency in the towns, you lose the advantage. In the desert you can see them coming, and our weapons can hit the enemy a mile away, they cannot.’

‘What happens in Somali ... in the future?’ Han enquired.

‘Nothing but fighting, terrorism, poverty and famine - which is why I’m getting involved. If I don’t, then The Brotherhood will rise up there in the years ahead.’

‘Will you request our assistance?’ Han asked.

‘Not for many years, and then not soldiers.’ Jimmy turned his head to me. ‘Go ask Mac to start patrols ten miles inside their border, jeep and airborne. There’s a village thirty miles in, we want a clinic built here – Doc Adam involved.’

I headed off and found Mac and Coup, giving them the good news: we were invading Somalia, certain that it would be the talk of the base that evening.

Mac said, ‘Rudd bought more fucking barbed wire than would stretch around the world. Wees gone sixty miles in both directions already, probably more. The section of the border here – not a fucking gerbil could get across! And we aint used up a quarter of the wire yet.’

‘Good job you reminded me – get a report of the *miles per week* they’re doing,’ I said. ‘And I think the Rifles get their Hueys tomorrow.’ No sooner had I uttered the words I was made a liar, a line of five green Huey’s circling and landing on the apron next to the Mi24, and our three Hueys. We stood and watched them landing, the problem immediately obvious.

‘Need some more space,’ Coup said. ‘I’ll extend the concrete, a second hangar.’

‘We’ll need an office over there, and a weapons store – these Hueys will be armed,’ I told him. To Mac I asked, ‘What we got that we can stick on Huey?’

‘There’s plenty of GPMGs, they’ll sit nicely on the side.’

Jimmy appeared with Han, walking and chatting.

‘Jimmy!’ I called. He looked over. ‘What we sticking on the Army Hueys?’

‘Just GPMGs,’ Jimmy shouted back. ‘Got the Mi24 for rockets.’

I faced Mac and waited, a question in my look. Mac said, ‘I’ll check the mountings, get boxes for the ammo.’

That afternoon, a patrol went ten miles inside the Somali border, the area mostly barren and void of towns or villages. The patrol was made up of one of our jeeps plus two open-top Rifles’ jeeps, the Rifles’ vehicles now fitted with GPMGs either side. No gunmen were spotted, a few surprised Somalis offered water and medical check-ups. The Army Tucanos ventured fifty miles inside the border, one lone jeep of gunmen noted. With the sun low on the horizon a dozen trucks trundled into base, spares and

supplies for the Hueys, interchangeable with ours, and a squad of Air Force mechanics familiar with helicopters, but not Hueys.

Over a beer I said to Jimmy, 'Why did the Yanks still go into Mogadishu, you warned them?'

'I warned them ... half-heartedly, knowing they'd go in. Now I know they won't return, which is what I want for the region.'

'How much land are we going to patrol across?'

'All of it.' Wide-eyed, I stared back over the rims of my sunglasses. Jimmy added, 'Why do you think I created the Rifles. Look, over there it's a mess - it's a country for the taking, the largest group just five hundred men strong. There's also oil if you know where to look, and some minerals that the Chinese will want.'

'We're going to fight?'

'Yep, step by step, inch by inch. And we'll have some help along the way. Don't worry.'

'Won't people ... *puzzle* our involvement?' I cautioned.

'*We're* ... not involved, the Rifles and Rescue Force are. We're sending in Rescue Force to help people, and we need protection to do that. A lot ... of protection.'

At dawn the next day the two unarmed Kenyan Air Force Tucanos went up, flying into the rising sun and spotting a three jeep convoy of gunmen west of Baardheere. Jimmy sent the Mi24 up on a "live-firing" training exercise. The assault helicopter bore down on the convoy and left no one alive, the vehicles left burning, returning from the exercise without mention of the border, but all of the helicopter's ordnance expended. We had started operation "Somali Freedom".

The next day we made contact with the warlord most responsible for the Baardheere area, through the UN, arranging to meet west of Baardheere to discuss building a clinic on his turf. Rescue Force jeeps drove out, waited, but there was no sign of our would-be host. They returned without contact, a UN official present in the convoy. What I discovered later was that the warlord's convoy had met up with another warlord's convoy from the south east of his patch, tipped off the day before. When the two groups met they exchanged fire, a Rescue Force jeep just happening to be near by, reportedly in the wrong place at the wrong time. Our people called for backup when they heard

gunfire, the Rifles' jeeps escorting them out. From the confrontation between the two Somali groups, no one would emerge alive, our ex-SAS instructors and a chosen platoon of Rifles making sure of that, but using just AK47s and RPGs. Men from both tribes swore revenge and would go on to make several trips towards each others territory, none to return. Baardheere would become bandit free very quickly.

On the fifth day we flew with Po's group down to Nairobi and said goodbye, heading in opposite directions. Eighteen hours later I lifted a mug of tea in the house, rain pelting against the cold window glass. As I stood there, staring at the dark green grass, I remembered childhood trips to the cinema on a Saturday morning, films of adventure in far off lands, then coming out to the rainy reality of London. Stewart Granger came to mind, King Solomon's Mines, and Sheba: she who must be obeyed.

The next day Sykes and Jack came down, keen to talk. And to whinge. And to complain. Sat opposite us across the coffee table, Sykes testily noted that the Chinese Army's presence at Kigoma was "overlooked".

'Did you not get the memo?' Jimmy asked.

Sykes stared back. 'Did you send one?'

'Er ... no.'

Sykes brow pleaded. 'Then that will be why Her Majesties Government were reading about in the morning papers!' he unhappily noted.

'And the net effect?' Jimmy asked.

'Was a lot questions.'

'Well, since the Red Army is not about to convert any of *our lot*, the influence *our lot* must have been good on the Chinese. Certainly broke down some barriers amongst the general population's perception of the Chinese. And what's more, the Chinese had a UN remit.'

'We found *that* out a day ago,' Sykes unhappily reported. 'I suggested as much to stop too much wailing in the corridors of power. And rumour has it you stayed inside the Beijing diplomatic area.'

'We did,' I said. 'A bit chilly, a bit old, but it did have a book signed by Khrushchev.'

'Khrushchev?' Sykes repeated, his interest piqued.

‘Yeah, some sort of guest register,’ I added. ‘Bit of a problem with the Chinese when Katie’s mum put her coffee mug on it –’

‘She what?’ Sykes whispered.

Jimmy laughed, Sykes shooting me a look. Jack tried to hide his grin.

‘The book is intact,’ Jimmy told him. ‘And I have a photo of the page, you can have it.’

Sykes forced a breath. ‘Well, Chinese aside, that just leaves the small, but considerable problem, of the Zimbabwean President.’

‘Next year ... the African Union meet will be at my golf complex.’

‘Yes?’

‘Yes. And you can slip some people in if you like. As for Zimbabwe, I will become best of friends with their government, much to the *organised* consternation of the British Government-’

‘Organised?’

‘And will, at a future date, when I am the last person they will suspect, assist our good friend with meeting his maker.’

‘You’ll ... what?’ Sykes whispered, Jack now appearing worried.

‘I think you heard it right the first time.’

‘Jesus, Jimmy. If you got caught –’

‘I won’t. And yes, you – the British Government – will probably get the blame.’

‘We’d better not!’

‘Only by those back in Zimbabwe who would lament their late leader, which won’t be many, and only for a day or so.’

‘Jesus,’ Sykes let out, a glance toward Jack. ‘When?’

‘Couple of years. So ... no discussing it higher up.’

‘And ... after?’ Sykes nudged.

‘A quick return to democratic normality, whites reclaiming farms, western mining companies returning to *fuck over* the blacks and take their ores for next to nothing.’

Sykes glanced at me. ‘The mines lost out, so too the farmers.’

‘Which brings us to Zaire. As we speak, not a million miles from our Forward Base the future President of what will be The Democratic Republic of Congo is living. I *will* ... be making friends with him soon enough, offering assistance and asking – eventually - for some mining rights.’

‘Mining rights? In Zaire?’ Sykes puzzled.

‘Yes. And all the profits go back to the locals, not rich western corporations.’

‘That will put those ... *rich western corporations* on a collision course with your good self!’ Sykes noted.

‘I know you’ve got my back, Mister Sykes, which is why I sleep well at night.’

Sykes eased back, glanced at me, then back to Jimmy. ‘And the reasoning behind this?’

‘Two fold. First, if the sub-Saharan green belt is poor and war-torn in future years, then Muslim terrorists will move south. Second, there’s a shit load of oil and ore – as yet undiscovered – in the Congo. The West will need it, and I’ll have a hand in its control. If not, it goes to China. And if those western mining companies have control they’ll put in on the open market, so it’ll end up everywhere apart from where *we* need it to go.’

‘Can I tell the powers that?’

‘Any story you like.’

I put in, ‘And we’ve just invaded Somalia.’

‘Did another rescue?’ Jack keenly asked.

‘No,’ Jimmy cut in. ‘We’re going to take it. All of it.’

Sykes exchanged a worried look with Jack. ‘How, when not even the Americans could hold a position there?’ Sykes challenged.

‘Kenyan Rifles and Rescue Force,’ Jimmy responded. ‘Watch this space for ... oh ... the next three years. And we’ll have a shopping list and some assistance nagged for.’

‘And why, in particular, would we help? It’s a dangerous bowl of dust!’

‘First, because World War Three kicks off after a group of terrorists form up in ... oh, let me see ... Somalia. And second, because there’s oil to be discovered. Third, if nothing is done, the pirates operating out of Somalia will choke up the trade routes for decades, making Suez an expensive route for shipping.’

Sykes carefully regarded Jimmy for several seconds. ‘You’re in Kenya, now Tanzania and Zaire, entering Somalia. You’ve got that region sewn up. Why all the effort there?’

‘In years to come it’s a very important area. First, need to move a few chess pieces to see the field of play. It’s about small acorns ... and giant oaks. Trust me, and be there with me.’

‘If I mention oil, then that’s all I need to do. I’ll suggest it’ll be discovered in what ... ten years?’

‘That’ll do nicely,’ Jimmy sarcastically offered.

The next day I was sat reading a helicopter magazine when I noticed an article on police helicopters and aero-med rescue helicopters in the UK. A thought struck me. With Jimmy out somewhere, I dialled Swindon police and got through, eventually, to the Chief Constable, mentioning Mapley airfield.

‘I see, from a magazine I just read, that you don’t have a force aero-med helicopter?’

‘No, not yet,’ the man responded, still not sure why I was calling.

‘How about I buy you one?’ I offered.

‘But us one? They cost half million a piece!’

‘Really? In that case, I’ll buy two, but on condition you station them at Mapley. There’ll be no cost for the base, and we’ll throw in some fuel for you.’

‘And you are ... the owner of the airfield?’

‘No, I’m the silly sod who flies crazy helicopter rescues into Somalia.’

‘Ah ... you’re that one. I read the book.’

If I had a dollar. ‘So, what do you think?’

‘I’d ... I’d say thank you. We’d need to get the paperwork sorted, licenses, etc, and then some pilots.’

‘You can contact me through the airfield, so as soon as you’re ready we’ll hand them over. In the meantime, pop down to the airfield and pick yourself a corner, we’ll get the ball rolling.’

I rang Jack at the MOD, and he found out where police helicopters were procured from; BO105 helicopters came from Germany and through a civil servant. So I spoke to that guy, and he knew exactly what I was talking about, since some helicopters had been bought through charitable donations. I ordered two, and asked if he wanted the money upfront. He refused, saying my credit is good, and would order up two straight away, each conversion to UK police standards taking around six weeks.

When Jimmy returned I told him what I have done. He just said, ‘Northeast corner for them,’ and sat with a tea.

‘Well...?’ I asked. ‘Good idea?’

‘Yes. You should have had that idea ... a year from now.’

‘Oh. Well, I guess I’m ahead of myself,’ I proudly noted. ‘Oh, fax from Rudd about motorbikes?’

‘Good. Thirty off-road bikes for the Rifles, ten for Rescue Force.’

As he sipped his tea I asked, ‘Border patrols?’

He nodded. ‘And further in. Bikes can go where the warlords Toyota pickups can’t easily follow.’

‘So, anyway, aero-med helicopters in the UK - something we should be involved with?’

‘Very much so, but not for two years. When we have a substantive Rescue Force base at Mapley we’ll stick our doctors in their choppers, cover the motorways in some areas. First, we need Mapley ready.’

‘I read in some paper that there’s loads of medical students without work, they could work for us for a year?’

‘If they haven’t yet done a placement – at a teaching hospital – then they’re not licensed to practice medicine. They would have to be treated as nurses. If they have done two years on a ward, and between jobs, then different matter – then their junior doctors.’

‘Yeah?’ I gave that some thought. ‘Still, it’s better than doing fuck all for a year.’

‘Definitely. Ask Mackey to advertise to the universities, like Cardiff. Good thinking, Boy Wonder.’

A new nightclub

I stood in the Red Room at the Madsons Hotel, now renamed to Silo’s Club. ‘Fuck me it’s a barn!’

‘It can hold three thousand or more,’ Jimmy suggested, Rolf the architect taking in the room’s dimensions, Big Paul and Karl examining an old bar area.

I scanned the balcony that ran around two sides of the vast room, then stood taking in the stage. ‘We keep a stage for bands?’

‘Oh, yes. Get all the groups in here, plus newcomers.’

‘Stage is a bit crap,’ Rolf put in.

‘Rip it out and replace it,’ Jimmy ordered. ‘I want a modern sound system, speakers in all the corners. And while I think of it, two new fire escapes against the north wall.’ He pointed at the old bar. ‘Keep that, but improve it, then I want a long bar right down the middle of the room, where we’re standing. If someone is stood at the bar chatting, they should still be able to see the stage – more or less. I want a door through to the kitchens, then a hundred tables in here; this room is not for people stood about, they book tables.’

We walked around to the main entrance. Jimmy said, ‘This will be the members and VIP entrance, so reception stays as a reception, for hotel guests as well obviously. All rooms from the third floor up stay, rest will be knocked through into bars and rooms as in Cardiff, average capacity two hundred per room.’

In the old restaurant Jimmy said, ‘This all goes, so does the smaller function room behind. This will become the main public room - with bars and rooms off it – just like in Cardiff.’ We stepped inside. ‘In here I want the roof taken down over the area that matches the second floor function room, a balcony so that people can look down. So, try and imagine this:

‘You walk in through the public entrance, cloakrooms on the right, then the main room. Off the main room are individual rooms – with dance floors - and a chill-out room. Back of the main room: two sets of stairs going to the balcony. Off the balcony will sit a Chinese franchise, and an Indian, plus two more wine bars. To the left of the main room will be the member’s area, the Red Room plus the rooms off the balcony, plus eight smaller rooms. On the third floor we’ll position the VIP area, eight interconnecting rooms, two dance rooms. On the right of the members area, above the Chinese restaurant, will be poker tables for members, a reading room with papers, cloakroom. The toilets must be large and well decorated, the member’s toilets better than the downstairs, the VIP area better again. Each toilet must have a small shop selling essentials, as in Cardiff. Now, just like Cardiff, the hotel only takes room bookings for members and VIPs on a Friday and Saturday.’

Rolf scribbled notes. ‘Same format as Cardiff.’

‘But a greater emphasis on members,’ Jimmy said. ‘And more VIPs. So, draw some pictures, do what you’re good at, come down to us with them.’

Footsteps behind us preceded the arrival of the man hired to manager the place, Anosh Yogu, a tall and olive skinned man. I called him Yogi from the outset.

We shook. 'Find it all right?'

'I don't live far, walked past this place many times,' he said in a London accent.

Jimmy told him, 'Your contract starts today, so go straight down to Cardiff and spend the next three nights there. Then contact Rolf here and go through some of the designs, get a feel for the place, come back up here and walk around. We'll meet at the house once Rolf's drawn his pictures.'

Rolf handed over a card to Yogi.

'You're not called Rolf?' Yogi queried.

'No, they call me that because I draw pictures – Rolf Harris, the TV painter. But everyone in the office calls me Rolf now; Paul's faxes to me are always addressed to Rolf. I have two new customers that call me Rolf as well.'

We laughed, leaving them to it.

“M” Group

Keely and Host, NSA, requested a meeting in the States, but Jimmy refused, so they arrived in the UK on a fine day in June. We welcomed them into the lounge, Sykes and Jack sat waiting with David.

Host said to Sykes, 'Am I to assume that you and Jack are the UK's "M" Group representatives?'

'You are ... for now,' Sykes responded.

'And David for Israel?'

'Yes,' David answered.

Everyone settled themselves.

Host added, facing Jimmy, 'I'm surprised that you haven't got any Chinese or Russians in here.'

'I would, if you were man enough to see the big picture.' He held his gaze on Host. 'They'll join this group in future years, once you have ... matured some.'

Host glanced from Sykes to Keely, back to Jimmy. 'Meaning what ... exactly?'

‘First things first: you mucky gentlemen picked up a few bugs at the airport; CIA bugs. Jackets outside, check the pockets. Keely, your nice big pen - snap it.’

Keely glanced at Host then snapped his pen. ‘Son of a bitch.’ Looking deflated, they placed their jackets outside, checking themselves carefully. When they returned they both apologised, and cursed the CIA at length.

Jimmy said, ‘Gentlemen, if what we discuss gets out, there would be wide scale panic and economic collapse. Everyone, must take great care in the future.’

David snapped his pen. ‘Bugger! Waste of a good pen.’ He put his jacket and briefcase outside, Jack and Sykes checking each other carefully. I even checked myself. Big Paul placed a “white noise” device on the coffee table and turned on the radio, Abba now playing in the background for the meeting whether the participants liked it or not.

Jimmy began, ‘As you can see, gentlemen, all is not well in the Land of The Free. A more ... serious approach will be needed before details are divulged and discussed.’ He handed Host a page. ‘There are three spies inside the CIA that the FBI would love to arrest, I’m sure. There are also details there of several CIA operations that are either illegal, misrepresented or complete screw ups that were hidden from the White House. Make their eyes water, Mister Host, then explain that they face more of the same if they persist in any showing interest in us.’

‘With pleasure,’ Host answered.

‘One more thing, regarding the CIA, and the late Mr Potomo. Should anyone investigate that matter in earnest, all evidence points back to you, Mister Keely.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes, it was ... unfortunately necessary. Photographs, documents, fingerprints. So I suggest that you paint Potomo as *dirty* – which he was - ahead of such an investigation. Pre-empt it, so the CIA don’t dare dig it up.’

‘Thanks a lot, *buddy*,’ Keely let out with a snarl.

‘Motivation is everything,’ Jimmy said with a grin. ‘Now, once you’ve selected a secret “M” Group, I’ll brief them on the next ten years or so, then you can make a start on fixing the evil empire. I *will not* ... brief the group fully till the group is fully ready. And secure. And that will need Presidential assistance.’

‘Talking of politicians, what’s your relationship with Chuck Pedersen, soon to be Senator Pederson?’ Host asked.

‘I’m courting a number of your politicians, so that they help us in the future,’ Jimmy explained.

‘He’ll be President some day?’ Keely asked.

‘No, Senate Majority Leader when the time is right – and when we need their votes.’

‘Any British politicians like that?’ Sykes asked.

‘No. I treat the American system differently because it’s fractious; President, Congress, Senate, lobby groups. The Chinese are great to make a deal with because it’s one big octopus. American politics is four separate octopi, five if you count the Pentagon, which often does its own thing.’

‘And what exactly is Pederson doing for you at the moment?’ Host nudged.

‘Healthcare.’

‘Healthcare?’ Host repeated, his brow pleaded. ‘What would that have to do with the grand scheme of things?’

‘It eases tension, and the pressure on a certain future President, at a time of economic crisis – and when he should be focused elsewhere. Pedersen has his own healthcare company, its funds invested in a bank -’

‘And the bank gets tips from you or Magestic,’ Keely finished off. ‘So the premiums will be subsidised?’

‘Yes. It’ll grow to be a large company, and Pedersen will get the political benefit, so I have him by the balls. *We* ... have him by the balls.’

‘Let’s talk oil,’ Host said, crossing his legs. ‘Strategic oil.’

‘A good topic. Middle East oil will last to 2025, but consumption obviously rises. By 2008 it’s seventy dollars a barrel –’

‘Seventy!’ Keely let out.

‘It touches one-forty at one point. By time we hit 2015 its one-twenty, unless...’

‘Unless what?’ Keely asked.

‘Unless we manage it, of course. I can selectively release oil discoveries that will keep supply steady and prices stable. What’s needed is a plan of action that you’re all happy with. Unfortunately, should I reveal them all now, the world economy

will be boosted, oil prices will fall – and so too the dollar economy – then the boom and bust cycle will *bust* big time.’

‘It must be managed then,’ Host agreed.

Jimmy explained, ‘We’re just leaving a recession, the next one is due in 2007. Unfortunately, the next British and American Government will do quite well and the economy will boom, followed by a bust that screws this country for a long time – or at least it would have done if I had not got in there first. It will still need... managing.’

‘When does oil become a problem?’ Sykes asked.

‘Around 2015, notwithstanding war in the Middle East, which would have an immediate effect. Between 2010 and 2015 I’ll go head to head with the oil companies. On the one hand we’ll bribe them with new oil discoveries, on the other hand they’ll do what they can to screw up the development of electric cars. So I’ll help China develop electric cars, and they sell them all round the world.’

‘Whoa there buddy,’ Host said, a hand held up. ‘China dominates that market?’

‘Yes, because you fine gentlemen will be ineffectual in releasing electric cars to the US market. By 2017 two thirds of all electric cars driving – very quietly - around the states ... are Chinese made. Unless...’

‘Unless we can alter that,’ Keely unhappily noted.

‘And good luck with that,’ I helpfully offered, getting a look from Keely.

Sykes asked, ‘Is there enough oil to even things out to 2025?’

‘Just. But it’ll be peaks and troughs screwing up the plans, and oil will be so expensive that the economies *will* take a battering. Well, those economies that don’t switch. France goes all nuclear and electric, so they’re fine. Japan is fine, they go all electric way ahead of anyone else. China does well, it’s just the States that lags behind.’

‘So, any directions that you think we should be moving in politically, regarding future oil?’ Host asked.

‘An intelligent question,’ Jimmy noted. ‘Well, there’s plenty of oil in the Amazon. Just the one small problem.’

‘Just the one?’ Host repeated, wide-eyed. ‘We don’t dare push for oil exploration of the Amazon! Every green nut and tree hugger will be on us.’

‘There’s plenty in the Gulf,’ Jimmy added. ‘But the largest source outside of the Middle East is Africa, that much neglected patch of dirt.’

‘But not by you,’ Sykes put in.

‘No,’ Jimmy admitted with a smile. ‘But in order to drill for African oil you need to remove the gunmen, the corrupt politicians ... and then just deal with the harsh conditions, the malaria and the snakes. And, when an oil pipeline is finished, it will be blown up more than a nymphomaniacs rubber doll.’

‘Should the US be thinking about military options in Africa?’ Host asked.

‘Yes ... and no,’ Jimmy responded. ‘Leave Africa to me, just assist when I ask. I’ll achieve more with fifty men than you ever will with a division. And if you’re feeling generous, a few old Huey Cobras for the Kenyans would be nice.’

‘An oilfield would be *nice*,’ Keely nudged.

‘You show me yours, and I’ll show you mine,’ I quipped.

‘As I said,’ Jimmy began, grinnig, ‘extra oil now would cause economic expansion at the wrong time. But I’ll swap you the Hueys for a small one.’ He fetched a map and marked the spot and depth, handing it over. ‘Keep in mind that most future oil finds are deep, very deep. So work on the technology.’

‘Any oil in the Artic or Antarctic?’ Jack asked.

‘No,’ Jimmy answered him. ‘But a great deal of time and money will be wasted looking for it.’

‘Falklands?’ Sykes asked.

‘Some, but difficult to extract, not least with Argentina and the South Americans complaining about it.’

‘So when the time is right,’ Host began, ‘we get new oil fields to keep things going.’

Jimmy nodded. ‘But should your future President know about the oil, at a time of economic crisis, he’ll want to torture me for the information – which would be unfortunate, for him. You gentlemen, need to learn to lie to your political paymasters.’

Keely glanced at his nails, Host making a face and saying, ‘We would never do such a thing.’ The rest of us smiled widely, except Sykes, who shook his head.

‘Let’s talk bio-fuels,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘What’s one of those?’ I asked.

Jimmy explained, addressing the group, 'Some crops can be turned into a vegetable oil, and a fuel. When oil gets expensive, scientists improve the process, and it finally becomes economically viable. So mid-western farmers switch from wheat, so too the Brazilians, and before you know it food prices are soaring. You need to begin the science now, ahead of time, it *will* be relevant in the future.'

'How does Brazil do in the future?' Jack asked.

'A super-power of the South Americas,' Jimmy answered. 'They do *very* well. When the world goes to shit they're in one of the best positions of *any* country. Anyway, I want some money from the two rich countries represented here, in proportion. Consider this a formal request.'

'For what?' Sykes asked.

'Afghanistan. As we speak Islamic fighters are building small training camps in the political vacuum; a small acorn. Uncle Sam will eventually have to go in and deal with them, which pushes them across the border to Pakistan, which destabilises Pakistan causing a war with India, which goes nuclear, followed by refugees heading to Basra in Iraq, followed by the rise of The Brotherhood, which go on to blow up all the oil fields before invading Europe and... destroying Europe, the world economy taking a few knocks towards ... zero.'

'What will money do?' Host queried.

'Bribe the Afghanis to kick out the Arabs, nothing more complicated than that. And no, there is no military solution. If you go in you make it worse. So, some bribe money over the next five years. Call it ... *international development aid*, but only released when and where I say, and to whom I say. And I want the three of you to create a new and combined Pakistani intelligence unit, to monitor who is going in and out of Afghanistan. But let me be clear about one thing, gentlemen - very clear. If the Afghan situation is left to itself, we lose the Middle East and Europe.'

'And America?' David asked.

'Has a great big ocean and a strong navy,' Jimmy replied. 'If they can live without Middle East oil and the European economy, they'll do just fine.'

'Hah!' Host let out. 'Can't survive without either, and you know it.'

‘That’s not correct,’ Jimmy told him. ‘You could survive. You’re economy would be screwed, but you could survive with extended Martial Law.’

‘And what kind of existence would that be?’ Keely scoffed. ‘If the economy dropped five points people would starve! What you’re suggesting is that the economy reduces to zero and starts again from scratch.’

‘Might not have a choice,’ I told him, getting back a cold stare.

David asked, ‘What’s the most pressing *short-term* matter?’

‘Afghanistan,’ Jimmy responded. ‘The small acorn *must not* be allowed to grow.’

‘And the Balkans?’ Sykes asked.

‘A huge distraction, as I’ve said before. But by 2010 Serbia is getting ready to join the EU and NATO, so all’s well that ends well.’

‘And Iran?’ David put forward.

‘Will have several secret nuclear facilities by 2009, a crude bomb by 2013.’

‘Which they try and sneak into Israel,’ David said.

‘No.’

‘No?’ David queried.

‘I’ll discuss that alone with you at some point.’

‘Should you keep separate interests in this group?’ Host complained.

‘You came in bugged!’ I firmly pointed out. ‘So ... yeah!’

‘For now,’ Jimmy told Host. ‘When your house is in order I’ll know. Before that ... we risk disclosure. Come back to me when your “M” Group is secure, sanctioned and respected.’

Kandahar

Under the pretext of a trip to Kenya, we slipped onto a UN flight to Dohar, arranged by Bob Davies, soon heading back towards Afghanistan. I was nervous. Everything I had heard about this place from Jimmy suggested that it was trouble, but that was the future. This was like Germany in 1938.

We touched down at Kandahar Airfield, this time in daylight, and I wished the lights were out. It was a mess, parts of old Soviet jets scattered about; it reminded me of Kigoma. Stepping down and walking towards what passed for a terminal, I could see someone had used it for target practice. A row of jeeps met us, now honoured guests – of sorts. We waved goodbye to the UN staff we had travelled with and mounted up, leaving me wondering if we'd ever get out again. We drove down a long straight road from the airport, and I noticed a team of our mine clearance students, stood working in blue body armour. I pointed, Jimmy focusing on them.

The short trip to the city centre was a duel between our drivers and unwary cyclists, a game of chicken as people dodged the traffic, woman dressed in full length blue Burkhas. Our convoy pulled through tall gates, which I remembered from the last trip, then around a few dilapidated buildings and to a civic building. With the vehicle doors opened for us we stepped out, soon led up steps and across marble floors to a similar room to last visit. For all I knew it could have been the same room. After a small exchange from our escorts we were ushered in, shoes kicked off, and led onto the carpet, a row of five old men sat at the head of the carpet.

Jimmy issued a welcome in Pushtan, getting a smile back and a gesture towards the carpet. This time, however, food was brought straight out, an interpreter joining us.

'Welcome,' the headman offered. 'We find you in good health?'

'You do, and we thank you for your interest,' Jimmy responded. 'How does the mine clearance progress?'

'Your people find ten or more a day, but still more each new day. They will be old men before all Soviet mines are removed.'

'I may be able to send more people, and I would like to create a school here to teach mine clearance.'

'We would be most grateful of that. When can you begin?'

'There are many things I wished to talk of today,' Jimmy explained. 'I wish to make a hospital here, and in other cities. We will send doctors, supplies and money.'

'That is most generous.'

'What of the false legs?'

‘They are in desperate need, your shipments go in a few short days.’

‘I can send more, but first let us talk of some ... problems. My friends in the English and American Governments are not happy with my help here.’

The old men discussed that, finally asking, ‘Why are they not happy, they send us money and food?’

‘They hear that Arab gunmen come here, and they take pictures with the aeroplane that flies very high. These Arab gunmen, they make war against the West. Why should the west send you money if you welcome these Arabs?’

‘These are most disturbing and surprising words, since we do not help these Arabs.’

‘But you do not remove them. They sit here making plans, training at camps, then go to The West to put bombs on buses full of women and children.’

The old men again discussed what Jimmy had said. Finally, they asked, ‘You will not help us with the Arabs here?’

‘I will always help you, even if my government is not happy. But if the Arabs were not here, I could get you a thousand times more help.’

That woke them up a bit, a heated debate going on. ‘You say we will receive more aid? What aid?’

‘More food, more supplies, hospitals, doctors, and money, hundreds of millions of pounds.’

That got their interest, and as I sat there dipping my broken bread into the green sauce, the debate raged. I tried the lamb stew, Jimmy joining me.

Finally they seemed to be in agreement. ‘We will be happy for your assistance in hospitals here and more men to clear the mines. On the matter of the Arabs will we meet to discuss it and send word through the mine clearing men.’

‘I will send men to create a hospital, then put in the supplies and find doctors. And I will ask the people who make the false legs to work faster.’

‘We thank you for your assistance.’

With my last mouthful shoved in we reclaimed our shoes, soon heading back through the traffic as our plane was refuelled. A blast in the distance caught my attention, and I hoped it was safe disposal of ordnance and not one of our guys stepping on a

mine. We boarded without incident, soon heading south as the sun set on the horizon.

A long thirty-six hours later we landed back in London, Han and Sykes asked to meet us at the apartment. The lads swept for bugs at length, a full hour before Han arrived. With the radio on, Jimmy laid out a map of Afghanistan on the kitchen table, everyone closing in. On the map, Jimmy detailed the Taliban advance in future weeks and months, arrows drawn alongside dates, Jimmy asking Sykes to tip off The Northern Alliance in detail. Next came the tricky bit.

‘Han, I want you to supply weapons to The Northern Alliance.’ Han was a little shocked, as was Sykes. Jimmy continued, ‘I want ten thousand AK47, twenty DSK, a great deal of ammunition, thousands of RPGs, mortars and rockets, hand held radios.

‘Why?’ Sykes demanded.

‘If my plans in Afghanistan don’t work out, The West will need to invade. If we invade, Pakistan destabilises, goes to War with India ... and it’s all over. Trust me ... when I say that *nothing* is more important than Afghanistan in the next twenty years. If this is not done right, we lose the planet, gentlemen.’

Sykes forced a breath. ‘Well, the Northern Alliance are preferable to the Taliban taking full control.’

‘When the Taliban are on the back foot we’ll broker a peace,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘That leaves no one in overall control, which would be impossible anyway.’ He faced Han and waited.

‘I will discuss this with my government,’ Han offered, nothing more.

‘Make sure they understand what’s at stake,’ Jimmy emphasised. ‘If the Brotherhood rises in Afghanistan, they will mobilise the Muslims in your western provinces. You’ll fight a civil war ... and lose.’

Scorpion base

We arrived back at Mawlini in August 1994, and I questioned the logic in the timing, at length, since it was forty degrees in the shade; the only thing blocking the sun over the base being the odd unwelcome sand storm. Staff made use of the pool at length, but no one was foolish enough to try and sunbathe at midday. Jimmy had issued a decree shortly after arriving, and all operations halted from noon till three, the working day starting at 5am when it was coolest. Being a desert, the temperature fell dramatically overnight, so a 9am dip in the pool was very refreshing. But you had to make sure you got there after the pool boy had cleaned, or you'd have unwelcome company in the water with you. Many a robe, towel and fluffy slippers from a certain hotel in Hong Kong could be spotted on the poolside, and bed sheets were strung up between posts, parts of the pool and the parched brown grass area shaded over and looking like a giant clothes line.

When the bedding from the old Madsons hotel had arrived no one had quite known what to do with it, so they had rung us. Jimmy instructed that the rooms should have several beds each where possible to double up for transit staff where needed. Some beds went by truck to Kigoma and onto Zaire, to Forward Base. Since most of the beds were in better condition than those purchased locally, people grabbed them and swapped, Mac now slumbering peacefully at night in a king-sized bed. Most of the hotel rooms had received a much-needed writing table, bibles still in draws, and excess bedding was delivered to the two refugee camps; the small camp behind Doc Adam's clinic and the border camp. Nothing was wasted. Tables, and posh wooden chairs, from the restaurant at Madsons now sat outside many huts and were used when the huts themselves grew too hot, numerous Fanta shades procured from Nairobi, an odd eclectic mix of furniture. Many a meeting was held outside and the hangars were cleared of aircraft, their cool interiors used for training.

When I glanced at the secret "enemy engagement figures" I was shocked, an estimated one thousand Somali gunmen killed, most raked by the Mi24. Two Somali warlords were now on board and their areas were jointly or collaboratively patrolled; gunmen waved to, not shot at. The five Army Hueys were now in regular use, existing Kenyan pilots cross-trained, and also taught combat manoeuvres by Hal, whose three-month extension had

been extended, again. Our Rescue Force flyers had all passed their fixed wing pilots licenses at first go, and gone on to advanced training; long range navigation, twin engine flying, night flying, and basic maintenance. For the most part they were now back on Hueys and running regular trips into Somalia, sometimes performing patrols for the Rifles in our tired old Cessna. As we pushed further into Somalia there were more regular engagements and incidents, the wounded evacuated; two members of the Rifles had been killed, a handful injured. The two Rifles killed had been shot in an ambush just five miles across the border, gunmen pretending to be refugees. We altered the incident's position by five miles and made it look like a border incursion, the incident all over the Kenyan TV news. The result was a call for more action against Somali gunmen, the Kenyan public firmly behind us.

With military supplies due to arrive from the Americans any day, we took a trip in a Huey to the new clinic west of Baardheere. In a repeat of the much-glorified initial rescue, I flew the first of three Hueys toward Baardheere, two green Army Hueys following. I flew secure in the knowledge that a fuel truck sat there waiting and no one should be shooting at us. I crossed the border, and our expensive barbed wire fence, and checked my heading, knowing the area below to be just about bandit free these days. We flew over a jeep convoy, one white jeep and two green jeeps as normal, then spotted a Tucano high above us, contact made and greetings extended; they reported no gunmen, and I was certain that not even hardy Somali goat herders would be daft enough to venture out in this heat. A Somali named Abdi, and three Rifles, accompanied us, Jimmy left seat, big Paul in the rear and armed.

This Somali, Abdi, had a future, so Jimmy had explained, and he was being given as much experience as we could afford him as the leader of the small Somali Rifles, now one hundred and fifty strong. Since we had moved into Somali we had found the recruitment simple enough: "Do you want a job, some food and water?" Only a fool would have said no. The Somalis loved the military training and lifestyle, but we had to weed out the killers and rapists early on. When such a group of men was identified they went on a mission with the ex-SAS lads and never returned; we had a zero tolerance for our lads raping or killing for fun.

Two members of the Rifles had also met with accidents, but off duty, several being kicked out. Something Jimmy was adamant about, was that anyone with a taste for rape and murder would not simply be let go to wander around Kenya.

An hour into the flight, and nearing our destination, I contacted the clinic by radio, informing them of our arrival and getting an update on any “action” in the area. We set down behind the clinic, a cloud of dust created by the three helicopters. With the rotors winding down I stepped into the heat, stared at by inconvenienced goats, Abdi and the Rifles close by and armed to the teeth. Jimmy led us forwards, Big Paul babysitting the Huey.

The clinic stood out from the other buildings around here with their mud construction; this was breezeblock and cement, two storeys, thirty yards long. It sat flush to the road, members of the Rifles visible on the roof. At the front of the clinic I noted barbed wire sections funnelling any approach on foot, a machine gun post both sides of the road. Stepping inside, we entered a large waiting room, long benches full of veiled women with their kids, ceiling fans working furiously. Jimmy led us off to the left, past a receptionist station enclosing three of our nurses in uniform sat working. We passed an open door, a glance in at an injured boy being worked on by a UN medic in a blue waistcoat. Finally we found the administrator’s office, knocked on the half open door and entered. The nametag said, ‘Dr Hoskins.’

I recognised his face and we shook. ‘Warm enough for you?’

‘Not too bad in here, and it cools down a treat at night. Cold drink?’

‘Oh, yes!’ I told him as Jimmy and I sat, receiving two cold cans of Fanta, noisily opened and noisily slurped. ‘So, how’re tricks?’

‘Word is spreading that we’re here, many women coming to give birth, plenty of gunshot wounds that are days old and infected. Oh, Doc Adam is on a house call - you want him called back?’ Jimmy shook his head.

‘Much fighting?’ I asked.

‘No,’ Hoskins emphasised, shaking his head. ‘Around here they know that anyone holding an AK47 is fair game. Some warlords jump out of their jeeps up the road and get their sons to drive forwards; had a few unfortunate mishaps.’

‘Such as?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Armed men bringing their wives here to give birth; they got spotted and shot-up en-route,’ Hoskins reported. ‘We treated the newly made widows and orphans.’

‘Are there signs up?’ Jimmy asked, concerned.

‘Yes, now there are, and now they know. But some idiots came past the other day thinking they could rob this place. Buried around the back here somewhere. The Rifles don’t piss about. Abdi and his mob come past a lot, and they warn the locals off giving us problems.’ The Doc eased back. ‘You know he chopped some guy’s hand off?’

‘What for?’ I asked.

‘Robbing women refugees on the road.’

‘Fine,’ Jimmy said. ‘Fuck ‘em. We don’t allow that, and we won’t make a difference here unless we have zero tolerance. There’s no point in fixing the symptom unless you attack the cause, otherwise you’d be sat there for decades and we’ll be no further forwards in stopping the casualties pilling up.’

Hoskins asked, ‘Got anything planned for the local politics?’

‘They can organise themselves anyway they like,’ Jimmy responded with a shrug. ‘I’m not here to tell them to be democratic or western ... or any crap like that. But I will do what I can to stop rape, robbery and killing. So if we see jeeps of gunmen we’ll open fire, not question their political style at the town meeting.’

‘What’s the town like?’ I asked.

‘We don’t go in there. That’s their turf and their politics - as you say. If they want help they come out to us, some UN patrols going in.’

‘We have roadblocks all around the town,’ Jimmy mentioned. ‘No export of gunmen, nor import of weapons.’

‘Must be working, that camp near the border is shrinking a bit,’ Hoskins said. ‘I know we send them food convoys as well.’

‘From the farm near Mombassa,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Some from the orphanage,’ he added with a smile. ‘Kids are excellent at growing crops in excess!’

We chatted for ten minutes, got a feel for the operation whilst noting problems and gripes, then exited back through the waiting room, the nurses thanked for their efforts. Circling around the building we entered the heavily fortified Rifles compound, a mud

wall enclosing numerous tents, watched over by a tall machinegun tower. They jumped up and to attention, greeted in a local Kenyan dialect by Jimmy and told to relax. We sat on camp beds in darkened, and sweltering tents, and chatted to the soldiers, listening to what they had been doing, what engagements they had been involved in. A sergeant explained the reward system for the locals; two hundred dollars for an AK47, four hundred for a loaded RPG, etc. The good citizens also earned themselves a basket of food. So a few times a day a local would approach and ask for money for a weapon, handing one over to be checked before being paid. Turned out that kids would nick their parents AK and sell it, making us laugh. A DHSK heavy mounted machine gun was offered to the Rifles, a price of two thousand dollars fixed, and now it was back at base and part of the Rifles' arsenal. Any Chinese pineapple grenades bought were dropped into a deep hole with their pins out, a dozen resounding thuds echoing around the clinic each day. Anti-tank mines were taken out into the desert and disposed off in a shooting competition at two hundred yards, a betting pool run each day. All in all, we were removing weapons and gunmen each day, clearing a strip along the border.

With the Hueys fuel topped up, Jimmy checking his watch, we collected Abdi and the Rifles and set-off in a cloud of dust, heading fifty miles further east and to a meeting of two friendly warlords, plus a new guy. I found the target compound after climbing to a thousand feet, the compound simply a ring of barbed wire a hundred yards square with tents and jeeps in the centre. A number of Toyota pickups were parked in a line outside the perimeter when we landed, our guests early, Jimmy again checking his watch. When the dust cloud had dissipated we stepped down and walked across to a large command tent, many Somalis sat inside around the edges of a square carpet.

'As-salaam alaykum,' I offered, getting a welcome in return. I sat crossed legged and thought back to Afghanistan as my eyes adjusted to the darkened interior of the green Army tent.

Jimmy offered a lengthy welcome, then sat beside me, Abdi sitting behind us. Singling out the new warlord, Jimmy spoke to him in Arabic, a translator on hand. 'We welcome you to this group, and hope we can work and live together in peace in the future. I have invited you here because we will soon approach

your towns and villages, and what we offer you is of great value. Look around you. These leaders have accepted our peace, our gifts, and are wise enough not to raise arms against us. What we offer you is the same.'

'What do you want with our lands?'

'Nothing, other than to move across them unhindered. If you help us we will give you money and food, if you do not we will make war on you until all of your soldiers are dead, and you and your family are all dead. And we make war from the air.'

'Why would we give up our lands to an outsider?'

'We are not asking you to give up your lands. The leaders here rule their land, we do not interfere. We only stop armed men on the roads if they rob and kill. We seek peace for this land, so that your people do not come to our border with Kenya with heavy hearts. If you are a good leader, your people will love you, not run away in fear.'

Jimmy explained the upside, then told the old boy that we would move across his land inside the month, regardless; he could welcome us and take the food and money, or fight us. After a little more persuading from the other leaders the old guy agreed to try it. Jimmy handed over a hefty bag of gold necklaces on account. A map was produced and the location of a clinic agreed upon; the old boy could now tell his people that *he* had secured the clinic for them. The first food truck would arrive tomorrow. It was done deal, people standing, hugs given, the visitors bade a safe journey home. With this new territory now accessible to us we were almost two hundred miles into Somalia along the Ethiopian border, whilst keenly avoiding the Mogadishu region to the south.

We played at being generals and inspected the dusty camp and dusty men, chatting to everyone and thanking them for their efforts, asking about food and supplies. Big Paul was close by and playing at bodyguard for a change. One man asked about Adbi, was he an officer?

'He is the leader of the Somali Rifles, and never forget that this is their land, not ours,' Jimmy had answered.

As we thought about heading back, a heavily armed patrol returned to the camp, two jeeps armed with 105mm recoilless rifles. We walked over to them. I had not seen the anti-armour weapons before and had a nose, asking questions of the soldiers.

The two ex-SAS instructors jumped down, goggles off and clothes dusted down, explaining that they had been “procured in the field”.

‘You killed the original owners,’ I corrected them.

‘Can you prove that,’ they challenged with cheeky smiles.

‘What’ll these do?’ I asked.

‘Hit a Toyota pickup at half a mile ... and leave no one alive.’

I pointed at the RPGs. ‘And those?’

‘We found them lying around,’ they suggested with less than sincere looks. A trooper faced Jimmy. ‘We intercepted an arms shipment, sent it back to base; Chinese made AKs still in the brown paper and greased, shit load of ammo, plus mines.’

‘Mines?’ Jimmy repeated.

‘Anti-tank,’ they responded.

‘If one of our jeeps goes over one of them...’

‘You’d lose a jeep load of medics,’ they pointed out.

Jimmy beckoned the two men closer. ‘I don’t want our medics anywhere near a mined area. If in doubt, draw a line on the map. And try and find out who the mines were for, offer big rewards, torture if you have to.’

‘Convoy was on the road to Mogadishu,’ they said. ‘So probably Aideed.’

‘If it was Aideed, he’d land them by sea,’ Jimmy pointed out.

‘This lot came over the Ethiopian border,’ they countered.

‘Maybe even bought over there.’

‘Get me some serial numbers,’ Jimmy firmly ordered.

‘Anyway, soon have a few Huey Cobras to back you up.’

‘Yanks coming back?’ they puzzled.

‘No, these helicopters are ... being donated to us to use.’

‘Fucking ‘ell.’

‘Will Aideed come up here after us?’ I asked Jimmy.

‘No, he’ll hang around Mogadishu,’ Jimmy answered. ‘But there’s a warlord this side of Mogadishu who’s a right arse – no negotiating with him.’

‘Stick a Huey Cobra up his backside,’ they said.

Jimmy slowly nodded to himself. ‘How are the boys doing?’

‘Fit, aggressive, good shots, never tire out. They’re a fucking dream to work with. We’re pounding the bad guys and taking fuck all casualties.’

‘Keep it that way,’ Jimmy said threateningly. ‘Hit them from a distance, we don’t want the Kenyan public whinging. Stay out of the towns, this is a war of attrition - see whose supplies run low first.’

‘We’re doing the hearts and minds,’ they said. ‘Food and money, and we got the Somali translators to let them know we’re not going to shoot them or nick their goats.’

‘Keep Abdi involved,’ Jimmy told them. ‘He has ... leadership potential.’

Big Paul chatted to the troopers for a few minutes, and I guessed he was a little jealous of them. But, as he said later, he was living in luxury in the UK and they were sleeping in jeeps in the desert. The Huey’s blew up another dust storm as they lifted off, dangerous because you could not see the other helicopters. I set the heading and climbed to a comfortable height, soon heading back towards Baardheere. But after five minutes a dust trail in the two o’clock position caught my eye, so I turned toward it and climbed.

‘Is that ... a tank?’ I asked Jimmy. ‘One of ours?’

‘No it fucking well isn’t!’ He pressed the radio button. ‘Emergency! T72 tank heading towards the camp. Any ground mobile, come in.’

‘This is Kenyan Rifles camp, Sergeant Nkomo,’ came a slow and deliberate voice.

‘This is Jimmy Silo. There is an enemy tank coming towards you from the northwest, five miles out. Evacuate the camp and spread out.’

‘Receiving and understood,’ came the calm voice.

Jimmy turned to me. ‘Climb, zig-zag, get behind it!’

I climbed as ordered, banking hard one way then the other, soon passing the tank and circling behind it. As I did I could see the Rifles opening up on it with the GPMGs from the Hueys behind. They were not having any effect, but I figured the tank crew would have a headache afterwards.

Seeing a jeep patrol heading towards an intercept course with the tank, I had an idea. I hit the radio. ‘Jeeps on the ground, I’m going to create a sand storm, set a trap and get ready.’ I nosed down and dived straight for the tank from above and behind it. At a hundred feet I pulled back and flared, almost bouncing off the tank’s armour – earning a look from Jimmy. The effect was

to create a clear area around the tank, a blanket of dust preventing the tank from seeing anything else. The turret opened and a startled looking man peeked up at us.

Jimmy turned his head. 'Abdi! Shoot!'

Abdi hung out the side and fired at length, a spurt of blood suggesting that he had hit his mark. The next part I had not anticipated.

'Abdi! Jump!'

I blinked, glancing at Jimmy as he directed me forwards. We closed with the tank till I could see the blood splash clearly, soon a blurred image of Abdi jumping down. He hit hard, rolled and stopped on the engine cowling, soon upright and moving forwards, his AK thrust into the open hatch and fired at length. With the tank not halting he eased his upper body into the turret. The tank jerked to the left and halted, our momentum carrying us forwards. I pulled back on the stick and swung around in a wide arc.

'This is Jimmy Silo, the tank has been stopped, the crew killed, Abdi jumped onto it. Salvage the tank – don't shoot.' He faced me. 'Set it down.'

With the dust settling we ran forwards, jeeps closing in from all sides. Abdi pulled a body out of the tank and dropped it unceremoniously onto the sand at the feet of Big Paul, soon a second as the ex-SAS boys rushed forwards.

'That's an Ethiopian tank!' they shouted.

'These men are Ethiopian,' Abdi added from up top.

'Heading for Aideed,' Jimmy thought aloud. The other jeeps had now pulled up, quiet a crowd gathering. Jimmy jumped up onto the tank, climbing to Abdi. He raised Abdi's arm like a triumphant boxer. 'Abdi! Tank killer!'

The men cheered, and I could see exactly what Jimmy was doing, but joined in enthusiastically anyway, the two British instructors left looking a bit perplexed. Oddly, I noticed Big Paul cheering Abdi.

We finally made it back to Mawlini, a smiling Abdi stepping down to odd looks from the ground crew; the news had reached back here already. We took him to the rooftop bar for a cold, non-alcoholic drink, many people closing in and asking about the helicopter-tank duel. We neglected to tell them that the tank's crew were just moving it and had no idea how to fire the

weapons – not that it had any ammo, that would have spoilt a good story with boring detail. Abdi was not just the leader of the Somali refugee men now, he was their proven hero and respected around the camp. As I saw him enjoying the fame I remember my own transformation from geek to hero. Little did I know what Jimmy had started with Abdi, or how it would end.

We now owned a second hand T72, one careless owner, but no ammo and no spares, and no one who could drive it, but that was just detail. As we stood celebrating, the sun low in the sky and making my favourite place amber, a drone of helicopters caused me to turn and point. A line of Huey Cobras became distinct against distant clouds to the south, soon causing me to face Jimmy with a look of childish surprise.

‘Twelve of them,’ he said.

They approached slowly, landing in turn on the edge of the runway, across from the apron, nowhere else for them to set down. All we needed was a drunk Russian pilot in an Antonov and we could have lost them all in a terrible collision. When the sand settled, people peered down at the line of sleek but menacing helicopters.

With Jimmy at my shoulder I said, ‘We don’t have the space.’

‘Nope, but they’re extending the wire beyond the Rifles outer fence by five hundred yards, going to concrete it over and put up hangars.’

The American pilots, wearing green flight suits, were picked up in jeeps and brought around, soon with us on the rooftop bar. And now that they were close I could see that they were grey haired and overweight; commercial transit pilots.

‘Where the hell were you a few hours ago!’ I asked. ‘I took on a T72 with an unarmed Huey.’

The first man stared at me, then Jimmy. ‘You’re the big guy with all the money, so you must be the crazy fucker, yeah?’

Jimmy and I exchanged looks and shrugs; the man had us right. We got them beers and told them the story before Hal and Mac appeared. Mac beckoned me forwards, so I leant towards him, getting a hard slap around the head, a kick in the shins from Hal.

‘Stupid sod,’ they said. ‘A tank? You fucking mad?’

‘We just been asking that,’ the American pilots told Hal, soon a three-way conversation breaking out and people talking over each other.

After twenty minutes of drinking and chatting, Jimmy picked out four men from their name tags and beckoned them to a quiet corner away from their colleagues. ‘Guys, I know you’ve only been paid to deliver the Cobras off the cargo ship, but I’d like you to hang around a while, help us out and make yourselves some money in the process. I need some cross-over training for the Kenyan pilots, some weapons training, some live mission *on-the-job* training for the guys.’

‘Live mission?’ one queried.

‘You would take out a Kenyan pilot on patrol across the border. If you’re engaged - then you return fire.’

They glanced at each other, and I could see Hal in their eyes. They were not as old as Hal, but flyers were flyers, and they’d do anything to stay flying.

‘What’s the pay?’ one asked.

‘Four thousand dollars a month tax free, plus all food and beer and accommodation, plane tickets home,’ Jimmy offered.

I figured we could have got them for nothing, and they readily agreed – whilst trying not to appear too keen.

Jimmy said, ‘I need a week’s intensive training given. And I mean *intensive*. Then I need you to nurse maid the Kenyans till they’re up to it, which means you go deep into Somalia.’

We had our pilot instructors, and some mates for Hal.

A line of trucks pulled in around dusk, spares for the Cobras, plus ammo, the ammo now being stored with the real and dummy mines outside of the camp in a well-guarded bunker. All we needed now were some trained pilots. Hal had spent a year on Cobras, we discovered, and he would be helping out.

The next morning, just to make things worse, two Kenyan Air Force Pumas flew in to join their colleagues. Now the airfield truly was snug and cosy. The American pilots moved their aircraft one at a time, space made, four left on the apron for training, the remainder covered in spare bed sheets. And we ordered up a shit load of concrete from Rudd, diverting barbed wire from the border and to us.

As I had lunch the next day I glanced down at the base, realising that we could film our own dodgy Vietnam War movie

right here. Some of the staff expressed concerns about the militarising of the base, but we reminded them that it had always been a Kenya military base, and that we had occupied it, not the other way around. With most of the helicopters tucked away, and the Pumas used for ferrying our people into Somalia, a level of normality return. Jimmy spent time with Abdi, teaching him a philosophy of the campaign in Somalia – his philosophy, and more and more Somalis joined their version of the Rifles. The small Rifles camp, behind the clinic west of Baardheere, grew quickly, concrete and breezeblocks sent over with timber. New buildings erected, tents were laid out, guard towers erected. When it was half-decent and secure, the Somali Rifles were moved over there en-mass, just under two hundred of them armed with their standard AK47s, but wearing green Kenyan uniforms with Somali flag shoulder patches. And Abdi, he was given Captain pips for his shoulders, his cronies getting Lieutenant pips.

Our staff were sent over to train them in mine clearance, ordnance clearance, and all the military skills. They got their own jeeps, their own flags painted on the sides, their own areas to patrol with, but they usually never ventured out without a Rifles' jeep tagging along behind. Captured Toyota pickups were painted green, bullet holes patched up – blood washed down, Somali flags painted on doors.

I had made the British tabloids with my tank stunt, that wasn't really "my" tank stunt, and Katie was pissy on the phone again. She was off for a tour of America and asked if I could join her out there. I explained that I was tied up here for at least another week or two, which I wasn't, but said I'd try and get away. And as I put the phone down I realised something that had always been there: flying around in helicopters was preferable to a dinner date with her.

A week after the T72 incident we received a signal from one of the British officers working with the Rifles. He had found an abandoned airfield with a concrete runway in the middle of nowhere, twenty miles to the nearest town or village. We looked on the map, noting that it was further south than we had ever penetrated, a hundred miles from the border but only thirty miles north of several large coastal towns and just eighty miles from

Mogadishu. The danger was obvious; the large towns on the coast were full of thousands of gunmen.

With a UN Antonov sat on the apron we made the decision; a quick airborne seizure of the airfield. We loaded the Antonov with soldiers, tents and supplies, fifty men, and sent it on its way. The Dash was made ready, medics selected and kit organised, tents stowed. As the Dash lifted off, myself right seat and Jimmy in the back, a massive road convoy was organised; trucks of the Rifles, Rescue Force jeeps, water tankers, fuel tankers, barbed wire trucks, spare ammo for the Cobras. Four Cobras were fuelled and made ready, soon setting off for the new forward base, cheekily named River View by the men already there.

The Dash circled the new airfield an hour later, confirming its isolation, also the poor condition of it; there was little left apart from the runway and a lonely control tower. With the Antonov taking off again, having already unloaded, we touched down smoothly, but dare not try and taxi anywhere, the concrete pathways cracked and strewn with rubbish, a fair amount of rusted ordnance visible. In oppressive heat, we fixed hats and sunglasses, navigating carefully around the old ordnance and towards the tower.

As we slowly progressed, watching our step, I considered just what a death trap this place was, not least because of no water for twenty miles in any direction. Everywhere lay rusted old cartridge cases, some large shells, bits of barbed wire, tin cans that had obviously been used for target practice, everything sharp and rusted. And deadly. We passed a bleached white goat's skull, bleached bones and a shoe. Staring down the length of the runway the optical illusion was pronounced; a shimmering haze above the ground, a clear thin strip of sky, then distant hills above the sky, as if the hills floated on air. I considered that, in this temperature, you'd last a day at most without water.

Whoever had abandoned the tower had also used it for target practise, the building pockmarked and looking like it had been hit with RPGs. Of all the control towers we had taken over, this one was the worst, large holes in the walls, the structure itself in doubt, part of an aluminium aircraft panel shading a nice big snake.

Jimmy called the British officer over. 'First things first: stick a man up that tower with binoculars.' A man was despatched.

‘Second: clear a small area, check for mines and ordnance, stick everyone in it. Then we want a complete mine check of the airfield.’

‘Rabbit’s got a graduating class,’ I put in, already panting in the heat. ‘They finish in a week.’

Jimmy said to the officer, ‘Radio back, get the entire class out here with their kit; a *live* final test.’

I set about the tower, cleaning out the rubbish with two men of the Rifles. With dried branches we swept out broken glass and made two rooms habitable, apart from the large holes in the walls. An hour later the drone of helicopters caused me to climb to the observer on the roof and pinch his binoculars. A line of helicopters appeared through the shimmering heat; a Rescue Force Huey, two Army Hueys, a line of Cobras and the two Pumas. Blowing up their own dust storm, and disappearing behind it, they landed in a line on the sand just west of the runway, all sat facing the runway; what had been an isolated airstrip now bustled with life. The Pumas flew off straight away, for additional supplies, patrols were set-up around the perimeter, and tents were erected in the area close to the tower. Jimmy wandered around taking men off guard duty and putting them on ordnance clearance, soon a few dull thuds echoing around as minor ordnance was disposed off.

A jeep pulled up tooting heavily. We walked over to it. ‘Sir, sir.’ The soldier held up a sign: minefield! We put the man aboard an Army Huey and he made ready a GPMG. The Huey lifted off and slid forwards the short distance to the area where the sign had been discovered, climbing to around two hundred feet, a hundred yards away from the target area. The soldier who had found the sign opened up as we observed. It took a good minute before a cloud of dust blew upwards: a mine. Three more mines were destroyed using this stopgap method, the Huey landing again. At least we had confirmed their location, every spare body now put on ordnance clearance.

As the sun lowered towards distant Kenya, the Antonov returned, Rabbit and his entire class unloading with backpacks and tents.

‘Nice spot. Got some mines, have we?’ Rabbit quipped.

‘Just found a minefield, southwest corner. It had a sign up,’ I reported.

‘That always helps,’ Rabbit sarcastically noted. He put his team on the concrete and told them not to raise their tents yet; they’d be under the stars tonight. He assembled the group as if a lecture was about to be given, then drew a map of the airfield in a patch of sand. The students suggested courses of action, methods, and procedures. A command structure was soon set-up, communications tested, team leaders nominated, groups formed. They checked their supplies, made themselves comfortable and decided to do nothing till morning save check a small area in front of the tower in the remaining daylight, electronic metal detectors buzzing around, but hampered by dozens of small calibre bullets.

At midnight, the road convoy contacted us by radio, well and truly lost. A Huey went up and found them, giving them directions. They pulled in at 2am and parked on the access road, everyone told to sleep in their trucks because of the mines, much needed water distributed. Dawn brought a beautiful amber sunrise over distant low hills, which I watched from the top of the tower; we had slept rough under the stars, some kit pinched from the Rifles, Big Paul snoring happily away. Back down at the jeeps we accepted cups of tea and sat chatting to the lads as the light improved, scorpions stamped on intermittently or scolded with tea.

‘The Kenyan lads call this Scorpion Base,’ Jimmy informed me. The name fitted; this was the worst pile of hot sand and rusted metal I have ever come across. This shit tip made Kigoma look like a holiday camp.

Rabbit was kicked up and out of his sleeping bag, grumbling and cursing at length, his students rising. They were split into teams, no time for breakfast, the area between the access road and the tower checked first. When we were happy with that patch of sand the trucks were moved in and unloaded, sent back in a convoy of ten vehicles, that many again remaining. Rabbit’s students worked hard all day, despite the heat; in the body armour they wore it must have been unbearable. Thuds echoed around all day, most of the ordnance being very old and rusted ammunition left lying around, nothing more recent than ten years.

Conserving aviation fuel, a few local patrols were sent up, nothing more than camels sighted, one lonely goat herder

frightened. Upon their return, Jimmy grabbed two American pilots and asked them to run a deep patrol down the south access road, to the edge of the coastal town and back again. With the Cobras dispatched, I questioned the logic of that move, since we'd be letting the bad guys know we were here.

Jimmy led me to a quiet patch of concrete. 'If you stay here you'll lose Katie.'

'Where the hell did that come from?' I questioned.

'There'll be trouble here in a few days.'

I pointed south. 'Those Cobras – they'll be seen.'

He nodded. 'And the Somali warlords will think there are Americans based here.'

'And following their previous successes –'

'Will want a scrap,' Jimmy finished off.

'How many –'

'Five thousand,' Jimmy cut in.

'Five ... thousand!' I whispered. 'We got fifty Rifles and some odd and sods!'

'We got the advantage. They ... are coming to us, along a long straight road with no off-road access to this base. It's the funnel from hell.'

'And we have the new Cobras,' I noted, taking in the bases activity. I took a breath. 'If I stay it'll be all over the news.'

'Yep. And she'll be worried, when she should be happy performing concerts.'

'Which will make her question the logic of dating *someone like me*.'

'Very much so. So you should think about leaving.'

'And you?' I challenged.

'If you go, I go.'

I took a minute to consider his words. And meaning. 'If I stay, do I get some *necessary heroic exposure*?'

'Not to a significant degree, no.'

'Oh. Then we stay...?'

'Because I know the lay of the land, and how the battle will go,' Jimmy explained. 'We have the advantage.'

'If I leave, and *you* leave, our people are in danger!' I testily pointed out.

'I can brief them and run the battle from Mawlini.'

‘But if there’re some developments, some quick tactical knowledge will be needed here,’ I challenged. ‘How many will we lose if we stay?’

‘Handful, it’s a helicopter battle.’

‘And if we go?’

‘Two dozen,’ he finally admitted.

‘And if things don’t work out?’ I pressed.

‘All of them.’

‘I think you got your answer,’ I said as I walked off. War had been declared, a line in the sand drawn, and not just here. My line in the sand included the precious princess in New York as well.

An hour later the Cobras returned, nothing to report. Jimmy sent them to another large town, northeast of the first, as we requested Mac’s presence at the aptly named Scorpion Base. Grabbing the two trooper instructors, we sent them down the road to investigate two ridges and rocky outcrops, and would they be any good as defensive positions. Whilst waiting in the heat, I rubbed a stone down a wall of the cooler tower interior, the stone marking the wall like chalk. Stepping outside I found a clear patch of concrete and made a large drawing of the airfield, people soon stood watching and making comments. I extended the drawing to include the access road, enough scale of drawing to include the ridges Jimmy had told me about, the ridges that the troopers had gone to investigate.

When the patrol returned they were buoyed up. ‘Fucking excellent defensive position: long straight road the other side, see anyone coming two miles away.’

‘What about behind us?’ I asked them, already knowing the answer.

‘It look’s flat, but its full of rocks and ridges – and a two mile walk through the middle of hell to get around us. So no – no access to the rear.’

Jimmy said, ‘Then stick your best people either side of the road at those passes. If anyone is coming to have a go, that’s how they’ll approach.’

The men were dispatched in six jeeps, the bottleneck sealed quickly. I marked their presence on the map, Rabbit now marking mined sections in green and red spray paint that the mine clearers always carried. Stood staring down at he map I

realised what Jimmy was up to, brilliant in its timing and audacity. The Somalis had seen the American Army come and go, taking casualties, and were over confident. The road access here was terrible for the attackers, excellent for the defenders, and we had the added advantage of re-supply by air. To kick things off, our Cobras were out teasing the local warlords and revealing our position, an invitation to the stupid; no western officer would have attacked up that road unless he was mad.

Mac flew in late afternoon, but now in green fatigues - and armed. Handy was with him, plus another fifteen of the Rifles. And Hal.

As Jimmy greeted Mac I approached Hal. 'What you doing here, Hal?' I asked, my tone unfriendly.

'You need experienced pilots,' he countered.

'Hal, the local warlord has five thousand men, we got less than fifty, and I'd like to see *you* die of old age in your bed.

'And I'd like to be anywhere other than that comfortable bed.' He pushed past me and towards the helicopters. I watched him go, secretly glad that he was here, but also afraid for him; he was becoming a father figure to me.

We led Mac to the floor plan and described the layout in detail, Mac agreeing that the airfield was easy to defend. Jimmy exchanged a look with me.

'What?' Mac asked when he noticed.

'We got some intel,' I said. 'Local warlords know we're here.'

'There goes the neighbourhood. You think they'll attack?'

'Most likely, and soon,' Jimmy told him.

'They got nothing other than Toyota pickups!' Mac put in.

'They got five thousand men,' I quietly told him.

'Ah...' Mac rubbed his chin. 'We got the Cobras ... but.' He faced the north of the airfield. 'It's fucking flat all around.'

'Lots of rocks and gullies back there,' I told him. 'No vehicles coming in that way.'

'Mac,' Jimmy began. 'You have complete tactical control here, this is *your* battle.'

Mac put his hands on his hips and studied the map for many seconds. 'We got mines on the trucks?'

'Two hundred, plus what they're digging up now,' Jimmy informed him. 'So another thirty rusted old fuckers.'

Mac called all senior staff together; Rabbit, Handy, the English officers, the trooper instructors, the Kenyan officers and our pilots, including Hal, a look exchanged with me. All stood around the edges of the large drawing.

Mac put on his posh voice. 'Gentlemen, we've got intel' that the warlords south of here are not so happy about our presence. So what we can expect is either a sensible probe of our defences, or they'll all come up for a Sunday picnic, en mass. And let's not underestimate them - they've got thousands of boys to pick from. Fortunately, this pile of scorpion shit is the kinda place no sensible fuck would want to be, and we got just the one access road, long and straight.'

Big Paul knelt on the drawing, 'We've been out to this point, it's a death trap for anyone coming up that road, a narrow passing through rocks. Got a similar set-up the other way, the boys are out there now and nothing will get near without us knowing.' He stood, backing up.

Mac called Rabbit over. 'Stop clearing the mines for now, go out later and plant some along the edges of that south road, starting two hundred yards beyond the choke point.' Rabbit nodded as he studied the drawing.

'Helicopter boys,' Mac called. 'I know this aint what you lot signed up for, so this'll be volunteer only. If, and when, some unhappy chappies come up that road we'll hit them from the front, pushing them off the road.'

'And ... *boom!*' Rabbit let out.

Two of the pilots seemed reticent, Jimmy leading them to a quiet spot. 'Guys, if there is some action here, I dare say they'll be a book written about it. Make sure I got the spelling of your names right for the book, so when everyone in America reads it - we don't mix you up with the other pilots.'

They returned keener to participate, glared at by Hal for their lack of balls. A plan was drawn up, contingencies allowed for, input taken from all sides. The plan was enacted, making the assumption that we'd have company in a day or so.

At sundown we went on alert, a jeep of armed men shot-up at the south ambush site. It was pushed off the road, no evidence left, the bodies buried, their weapons pinched. Knowing that the men would be missed, hopefully, we took to our tents and ate a lengthy steak meal cooked up by the Rifles, a lone inquisitive

camel in the wrong place at the wrong time. At one point Mac bit down on something hard, pulling a 5.56mm round from his mouth, shouting at length at the cook as we laughed. We all chewed slowly and carefully from that point on.

At dawn, Hal took our medical Huey up, since we figured they'd not shoot at it. He circled north a mile out, nothing spotted but camels, then completed a radial search to the south, a lone jeep spotted two miles down the road, but not moving. With no hostile threats appearing we continued to clear ordnance in haste, making the base safe for people to move around in. One of the trucks had a few cement bags, we had plenty of sand, and so I helped patch up holes in the tower. When done, Mac and his command staff moved in, a trestle table set-up and maps spread out, additional maps pinned to the wall. Short range jeep radios, as well as aircraft radios, were placed into the tower, a good view afforded of the runway, a cooling breeze felt by the operators, whose view was unhindered by glass.

That afternoon, as the sun lowered, a three-jeep Somali convoy approached the south choke point, the detail learnt from us all keenly clustering around the radio. They stopped a hundred yards short, had a look about without setting off any mines, and advanced slowly. We were in some debate as to when to open fire, hoping they would pass the crest of the rise first and not set off any mines; fetching them out of the minefield and hiding the debris would prove difficult. I also suggested that they might want to negotiate, a serious point. Jimmy said he knew of the southern warlord, and there was no negotiating with the guy. I was over-ruled.

On the crest of the rise they halted, studying the base with binoculars, our helicopters clearly visible to them a mile away. Then they spotted tracks leading off the road, and towards the small clumps of rocks. That was not allowed, so the Rifles opened up with GPMGs and RPGs, a one sided shootout that lasted two minutes. The bodies were checked, the vehicles moved, but then we got the bad news; another two jeeps had been spotted down the road a mile and had seen the action. They turned about and drove off at speed, no doubt to report the engagement.

'OK, gentlemen,' Jimmy began, 'we've had our time in the shade. They'll be coming in the morning.'

The Rifles ventured out at dusk and laid dozens of grenade traps around the front of the rocky outcrops, one improvised device made up of four anti-tank mines and two grenades, and buried at the side of the road. We were as ready as we could have been, the helicopters checked again and again, engines run for ten minutes after sundown. With the black sky full of stars we sat and waited, the horizon bereft of any distant points of light. Nothing; it was us, and the stars.

At 10am the next morning visitors were announced, a line of jeeps a mile long, a second convoy coming up the east road. The pilots strapped in, started their engines and idled, waiting the signal as we again huddled around the radios. The lead Somali vehicles approached as if nothing was amiss, but stopped a hundred yards short of the ambush point and turned side on without setting off any mines. Two DSHK fifty calibres opened up onto the rocks and surrounding area, our lads keeping their heads down. We warned the helicopter pilots about the mounted fifty calibre machineguns, anti-aircraft weapons, and tactics were hurriedly changed; they'd be keeping their distance.

After ten minutes of intermittent firing at the rocks, two jeeps drove around the DSHK, miraculously not setting off any mines – much to our annoyance, and advanced, their occupants firing wildly in all directions, RPGs loosed off. At the crest of the rise they hit the large improvised device; we could hear the blast in the tower. Mac ordered up the Cobras. They took off in a line and headed north, circling around to the west and approaching the road from the south. In formation, our helicopters shot-up several trucks at the tail of the convoy, blocking the road, and any possible retreat for our unwelcome guests. As the Cobras advanced north they fired intermittently, but consistently, at the Somali jeeps. The DSHK decided to head for the bushes, driving straight over anti-tank mines, echoes reaching us a few seconds later.

‘Both of dee Dushkas is gone,’ came a slow Kenyan voice.

Mac grabbed the radio and ordered a strafing run. The Cobras circled above us with a deafening resonating drone, visible through a hole in the roof, turning south again and lining up on the road. Over the ambush point they opened up intermittently, advancing a full mile along the road as mines exploded on either

side, many jeeps trying to drive back down the road, but clogging it further.

‘Turkey shoot!’ came an American accent.

Mac ordered them to the east, the helicopters using their remaining ordnance on a smaller convoy there, taking some fire from another DHSK. With all ordnance expended they landed to re-arm, a lengthy process since we did not have armourers present; the guys did it themselves in the heat of the day with all sorts mucking in. As they were rushing to re-arm, two Army Hueys lifted off, four GPMGs each hanging out of doors. They approached the road at two hundred feet, a hundred yards west of the road, and fired down at length as they passed, circling west across the desert before returning.

When the Cobras were finally re-armed they lifted off in a line and circled wide, rejoining the road a good four miles south, coming into view of a bottleneck of vehicles, something of a meeting taking place. They fired cannon and rocket, decimating the jeeps and trucks, circling and attacking again at length. Returning to a northerly compass bearing, they fired at any jeeps that looked intact before landing.

Jimmy said, ‘They won’t be any more use today. Shut ‘em down.’

A few brave Somali gunmen had walked towards the rocks, setting off grenade taps, the rest engaged by the Rifles – who had a policy of not taking prisoners, something I voiced my opposition to. From the tops of the rocks the snipers picked off individuals with ease, using M82 fifty cal’ rifles to kill people a thousand yards out.

At sundown the firing finally stopped, nothing worth shooting at still visible. The lads on the rocks were replaced, brought back in a buoyant mood – if not bloodthirsty, stories told of the exchange around the cooking fires. Just one casualty was treated by our doctors, the man suffering a ricochet. Still, it needed minor surgery and gave them something to do. I walked around the groups of men with Jimmy, keeping everyone informed, checking on the men’s spirit – which I soon realised was wholly unnecessary. They were buoyant. I finally sat down on a wooden box next to Hal’s bedroll and accepted a bottle of beer.

‘Fucking turkey shoot,’ he said. ‘Crazy of them to come up that road.’

‘Crazy ... if they knew what we had,’ I countered.

‘They saw us fly over on day one. They know.’

‘Brave of them to come then.’

‘Brave ... and stupid,’ Hal countered. He took a sip. ‘If they were defending their homeland ... well, that’s one thing. But these are warlords and gangsters, extortion and rape.’

I studied him for a few seconds. ‘How was it in Vietnam?’

‘To start ... a great big adventure; you believed the hype and the propaganda. But a year in you soon realised that people didn’t care if we won, they just wanted home. After that ... after that it gets tough, risking your neck when people around you are saying it’s a waste of time. I flew mostly rescues, so never a moral dilemma. And when I got back I did a little commercial helicopter work, logging, remote areas, didn’t talk much about the war. Then, after five years, I signed back on for another eight years, staying with the National Guard after that, some commercial work. Eventually got a training stint in South America, semi-official Army work.’

‘And now look at you. Bedding with the scorpions, risking your balls again.’

‘This aint the same. If Jimmy’s here it’s because it’s the right fight – I learnt that early on. The people around you ... they’d follow you pair anywhere.’ He took a sip. ‘I can see what Jimmy’s doing here; he’s chopping up the warlords, building a free Somali Army, putting in clinics and food. It’s what we should have done – *hearts and minds*, but we’ve never been too good at that. You’ll do more than we could have done with a fucking aircraft carrier.’

‘Jimmy does ... have a way through problems,’ I agreed before sipping my beer, wondering who had smuggled it over. Beer was apparently banned in Somali, and our staff had been banned from importing it.

‘Right now, out there, there’s some young lads bleeding to death in the sand,’ Hal noted, issuing a sigh. ‘But there’s no other way; *they* live by the sword, they can die by it. Their choice.’

‘Given the job situation around here ... not much of a choice.’ I sipped my beer. ‘You know, when I was young I never understood the whole soldier bit, never wanted to join up, paint my face green and run around a muddy field saying “bang”. And

if I met any soldiers I had nothing in common with them. When we came out to Africa my opinion hadn't changed much, the soldiers I could see here were worse than the rebels; *they* were the ones doing the raping and killing. But then we started to recruit our own young lads, teaching them the way we wanted it done, disciplining them hard. If a member of the Rifles rapes a refugee ... he fucking disappears. And in time I could see how useful they were, well, essential really. If we send medics into shit-holes like this then they'd be kidnapped, killed, raped. And when we deployed into Zaire I was finally proud of the Rifles, even concerned that *they* were now in danger, never mind the medics.'

'You're developing an old head in a young body,' Hal noted, sounding tired.

'What's waiting for you in Arizona, Hal?' I softly asked.

'Nothing. A great big ... nothing. An apartment, a few old friends scattered far and wide, some nice sunsets. And if I let it, sunsets will be all I have left.'

'Hal, you can stay as long as you like,' I offered. He slowly turned his head. 'All we need to do ... is to get out of this scorpion infested shit hole in the sand ... *alive*.' We clinked bottles, smiling.

The next day a few Somali jeeps drove up and down the road, viewing the carnage and burnt out vehicles, but never getting close enough to fire at, or worth sending up the helicopters for. One hit a mine. The sun set with everyone hot and thirsty, but in one piece. Jimmy discussed the road with Mac, then sent groups of four out into the desert to use their ears. And he gave me an Ak47 to sleep with, which did not bode well as a sign of things to come.

Around midnight the distant crack of gunfire could be heard to the south. Radio messages came in from the rocks on the southeast choke point; firing half a mile west of them. The exchange did not last long. Half an hour later a jeep burst in tooting its horn, the medics rallied, a man shot in the leg. His team mates relayed the battle: ten Somali men had walked parallel to the south east approach road till they met the four Rifles, who opened up at ten yards, killing most, it was believed. A relief patrol of eight men was sent to that section, but no further shots were fired.

At dawn the patrol moved forwards and checked the bodies, finishing off some of the wounded and removing weapons, but reported back movement ahead, a lot of movement. We called a command meeting. Mac illustrated the place where the enemy was now advancing towards us on foot, a natural gully that would lead them to within a hundred yards of us. He decided to use the two Army Hueys.

They lifted off, surely alerting the attackers with their distinctive sound, then flew away northwest as if returning to Kenya. Five miles out they turned south and stayed low, circling around and coming at the gully from the south. To mask their approach we started two more engines. Our helicopters benefited from as much surprise timing as we could create, but at the end of the day they were very loud. They flew two hundred yards apart in tandem, firing down into the gully; anyone on the ground seeking cover from one Huey would be hit by the other. They radioed back the detail of many men hit as they turned overhead, but also described around two hundred men in the gully, more further south. Mac called them back and ordered them to land, ordering up the Cobras.

With Hal leading the advance, the Cobras fired cannon and rocket into the gully, firing again at men advancing in the open further south, but not as effectually. After a second pass they landed, cutting the attack short. At the base's chalk drawing we grouped, Hal indicating that the Somalis were too spaced out for another attack like that; we were just moving sand around. The snipers on the rocks reported that they were making progress, some Somalis picked off, but not enough. Mac put twenty men at the head of the gully, leaving our rear exposed. The mine clearance lads were issued weapons and placed around the perimeter, just in case, many complaining about their enforced enlistment.

Jimmy had an idea, and took me and Mac to one side. 'We can't play the long game here,' Jimmy began. 'Need to rout them before we get worn down. How about this: we put just about all the Rifles left, right and front of that gully, but unseen. Cobras go down the gully, keeping the Somalis heads down, Hueys behind at ten feet and blowing up a dust storm. When that's happening, the Rifles move in close in their squads. The team at the head of the gully attacks down it, those on the sides provide

cover. They go half a mile then come back, hopefully convincing the Somalis we're more men than we are.'

'Be casualties,' Mac warned, taking off his cloth hat and wiping his brow. 'Close in fighting. But we can't let 'em walk up and knock on the door either.'

'Try it,' Jimmy encouraged.

Mac organised the teams, one of the English officers offering to lead from the front, the two trooper instructors leading their teams left and right of the gully. The Cobras were made ready, and the two Army Hueys would be blowing up a dust storm two hundred yards apart once the Cobras had passed. From the tower I watched the Cobras lift up and turn, noses down, tails up, the first Cobra little more than ten yards beyond the road when he opened fire. His fellow Cobras followed, around five hundred yards between each, the Hueys waiting at five hundred feet like hovering birds of prey. When ready, the radio signal given, the Rifles advancing on the gully, the Huey's dived down and picked up speed. As they reached the gully they dropped to little more than treetop height, their door gunners firing down at point blank range. Even from where I stood the dust cloud was visible, swirling outwards. In the gully, the Somalis must have been blinded and deafened. With the drone of the Cobras fixing them a mile to the west, I could hear small arms fire, the odd dull thud of a grenade. It had begun, so I rushed down to the radio.

I could not make out what was going on. 'Two left of you! Stay down. RPG over there! Man down.'

After ten minutes Mac ordered an update from the English officer, now codename "Rupert". 'Mac for Rupert, update, over.'

'Rupert for Mac, hundred yards in, routing them, several minor wounds. Out.'

It was agony waiting, and I paced up and down what little bare concrete the room afforded.

Fifteen minutes later came, 'Request air strike, several good targets.' Hal was sat waiting and lifted off quickly, positioning himself just behind "Rupert" at a hundred feet. As we listened in, topographical descriptions were given, compass bearings and distance, Hal firing, Rupert reporting successes or misses.

Then came 'Cas-evac chopper needed!'

I sprinted out. A doctor and male nurse were waiting ready and we took off in record time, a few standard checks by-passed.

I flew the short distance over the road and down the gully, but was directed right and towards the west, soon noticing a man stood waving his arms. I set down side-on to them, two wounded men loaded before I pulled up quickly. The doctor got to work as I made the very short trip back to base, at least short in a Huey, jeeps would never have reached the position. I set my Huey down close enough to the medical tent to buffet it, the wounded out quickly with many hands attending. I slid the Huey ten yards left across the apron and halted, easing down the revs but keeping the engine ticking over at a minimum setting, letting Mac know that I stood ready for another trip. I could hear the aircraft radio chatter, but little else as I sat there. But each minute that passed as I sat idly on the apron meant that no one else was seriously injured.

When the recall was finally given I fetched five walking wounded. Disgorging my wounded, I shut down the Huey and eased out, a jeep pulling in with men covered in their green ponchos; two members of the Rifles killed. I took a few seconds to stare at the boots sticking out of the ponchos, Rabbit at my side, then ducked into the medical tent to see if I could be of any use. Everyone that was alive would stay alive, I was firmly told.

The Dash landed an hour before sundown and loaded the wounded and the dead, some supplies dropped off, namely two hundred cans of Fanta and more medical equipment. I didn't get a chance to chat to Tubby before the Dash pulled off, heading immediately west for Mawlini. For the first time I thought about what the outside world was doing, or saying about this. I guessed I was dumped, but I did hope that her concerts went well. If I had known what the press was actually saying I might have been annoyed, not least for my parent's sake.

The soldiers involved in the advance all returned to base, quenching their thirst and treating minor wounds. As I stood there I marvelled at the Rifles as they restocked their ammo pouches, cleaned themselves off and headed keenly back out with confident smiles. Mac called another mother's meeting.

'Report,' he told Rupert as we all listened in.

Rupert was soaked in sweat and dust, breathing heavily and swigging from a water bottle. He stepped to the area of the drawing in question, people moving back, and knelt. 'The Cobras killed and wounded many ahead of us as we got into position; the

Somalis were already turned around. The Hueys blew up the sand, so we ran forwards in squads; tripped over a few and killed them at point blank range. By time the sand settled we were in amongst them, and we shot them with startled looks on their faces. We kept the momentum going, the Somalis leaving the gully and being picked off by the teams on the sides. I halted at four hundred yards and we fired on those we could see, calling in the Cobras where the Somalis had bunched up. When we pulled back they were scattering.' He stood. 'I reckon we killed three hundred.'

'They won't be back today,' Jimmy suggested. 'Might even take a few days to re-group after today's losses.'

'Recruitment won't be so easy for 'em,' Mac said. Louder, he said, 'OK, food, water, ammo, clean weapons, check helicopters. Then we wait.' The group dispersed.

Ten minutes later an unknown aircraft circled, an unarmed civilian plane. We called it up on the radio; Kenyan TV news. They asked a few questions, so we gave them the statistics, an estimated five hundred dead on the Somali side. Actually, by that time it was more like a thousand, that number again wounded.

A calmness descended over the airfield as the sun lowered, and it became almost peaceful, the air still. I guessed it was just the aftershock, a comparison to the earlier action. With not much daylight left, Hal took up a Cobra and scanned the area, engaging jeeps four miles down the road. He had spotted a bridge over a deep ravine and took out the bridge; further visitors would have a long walk around. Around the campfires, the Rifles were again buoyed up and swapping war stories, despite the dead and wounded. The mine clearance students were sleeping in groups on the perimeter still, and I found our medics in high spirits, their own fire going.

'You guys holding up?' I asked as I sat on a crate.

'No problem, this is what we signed up for,' one man said. 'What did your advert say: shit pay, hard training, harsh conditions, always in danger.'

They laughed, leaving me wondering about their sanity; they actually seemed to enjoy this kind of experience. We chatted away, more beer appearing from somewhere, and they left me in no doubt about their morale; some questions about their sanity, but none about their morale. On the tower's roof I found Jimmy

eating meat from a tin can, a small paraffin lamp going. He handed me one.

‘This going ... as expected?’ I asked.

‘About the same.’

‘And tomorrow?’

‘They come up around the east road.’ He handed me a satellite phone. ‘Call your parents after, the British news will be... interesting.’

‘Ah, fuck. What they saying?’

‘That we’re trapped in here.’

‘I’d call Katie, but I haven’t a clue where she is, or the hotel number.’

He produced a piece of paper with a number of the hotel, and her room number.

‘Expensive to call using these,’ I said. ‘I’ll call her ... you know.’

He glanced at his watch, pressing a button to illuminate the dial. ‘It’ll be 2pm in the afternoon in New York. She’ll leave at 6pm for the concert, worried. Call her now, then your parents.’

‘Yes, boss.’ I made the call, and told her me and Jimmy were in Kenya, not in Somali, and the press were wankers. I wished her luck, told her not to worry, and to have a good concert. Then came my parents, deeply worried at the news. Again I told them we were fine, but admitted we were in Somalia. Handing back the phone I said, ‘All done, everyone lied to.’

‘There are good lies, kind lies, and cruel lies.’

‘Mine were kind lies,’ I quipped, a glance up at the stars.

A dull thud echoed towards us, a mine detonating along way off; someone had stepped on a mine on the road, so it could not have been one of ours, maybe a wounded Somali trying to get a jeep working. I got two hours sleep as I sat against a concrete wall, then sat watching the sky slowly change colour, the stars becoming less distinct. Soon we had a pink hue rising, like a giant pink eye opening. I stood at the edge of the roof and peed off it as others stirred. Hal walked out to our medical Huey and started her up, and I noticed Jimmy gone. Downstairs I found him with Mac, coffees made, one handed to me.

‘Hal off?’ I asked.

‘Recon’ east,’ Jimmy said. ‘It’s their next option.’

We heard the Huey pull away, the radio checked and acknowledged. Five minutes later came, 'Stand to! Attack from the east imminent.'

Mac lifted an AK47, stepped out and fired into the air. Everyone was awake. The jeeps were made ready, men assembled, the command team grouping around the floor map as Hal landed back on the apron.

With the rotors winding down he came jogging over. 'There're thousands of them, a big camp about seven miles due east, even looked like a fuel truck and a water truck.'

'I'd hit the camp first,' Jimmy said to Mac.

Mac ordered up the Cobras, then a check of ammo and stocks. As the Cobras lifted off a glint caught my eye, the fucking Kenyan TV plane again. What timing, I thought, as they passed over, seemingly following the line of Cobras.

Mac asked Jimmy, 'What time's that flight due?'

'Now,' Jimmy told him, checking his watch.

'Re-supply?' I asked, Jimmy nodding.

The Antonov contacted us on the radio and we lied a little: all safe to land, no hostiles near by. I think that one qualified as a "good" lie, good for us at least. The heavy transport landed, its tail ramp lowering on the apron as we stepped forwards to grab supplies. Twenty additional men of the Rifles stepped out and jogged over and we directed them to Rupert. From the back of the Antonov, pallets emerged, being pushed off, the small wheels allowing us to nudge them forwards; it looked like enough supplies for a month. Wooden boxes were soon broken open, revealing a range of weaponry I had not seen at the base so far. 81mm mortars were unpacked and checked, placed over shoulders and lugged to the tower, soon followed by mortar ammunition. Mac directed the mortar men to set-up ten yards north of the tower, facing the east. A large pile of empty sandbags did not bode well, but I carried them over and plonked them down. More mortar ammunition appeared, and I glistened as I helped out.

In total, the Antonov left six pallets before powering up and pulling off, bathing us in warm air and sand, the sand sticking to my hairline. I opened a large box to find many smaller boxes, the smaller boxes opened to reveal tinned meat. I organised an ant-like chain of men, and the goodies began to be either stacked up

in the tents, or against the tower wall. More mortar tubes appeared until eight were set-up in a line stretching north from the tower, ten yards apart, Mac ordering sandbags filled and handed to the mortar crews.

Ammunition boxes were carried away and placed on jeeps, the lower pallet boxes revealing a dozen additional sniper rifles. I grabbed two men and we carried the sniper rifles to the tower, placing them on the roof, as well as the top of the old glass tower. Sandbags were organised quickly and passed up, and I laid out a rifle on top of each sandbag, fetching the ammo and breaking open the cardboard boxes. Jimmy put his head out to see what I had done, and just nodded before disappearing. I told Rupert what I had done and he gave me four marksmen. Water was stowed on the roof ready, tinned meat stowed and cover in a broken box; Scorpion Base's sniper section was ready.

Back at ground level, I walked along the line of mortars as the men got ready, a sergeant taking charge and barking instructions as I helped move a few more ammo boxes. Soaked in sweat, I joined the men filling sandbags and carried two of the hefty sandbags to each mortar position, noting that the men were using them to steady and support the mortar's tripod legs.

'How far can they reach?' I asked the sergeant.

'Two miles, sir.'

'Two miles,' I repeated, a hand over my eyes as I scanned the distant rise. I figured the rise to be just about a mile as the Cobras reappeared, one limping in and setting down short, just inside the perimeter. As I observed them, the pilots got out, one man opening a cover panel. It was knackered, not a good sign before today's attack. Figuring they knew more than I did, which was true, I carried on filling sandbags, more passed up to the section on the roof, my earnest efforts lauded by Mac.

The pallets were now just broken boxes, everything distributed or stored as the Dash appeared. It came in steeply, full flaps, a short-landing manoeuvre, soon on the apron, its door opening. Skids and Co stepped down, green fatigues and utility waistcoats.

'No lions here,' I told them, wiping the sweat from my eyes. 'Just scorpions.'

'News says you're cut off,' Skids queried.

'Cut-off by road maybe, it's full of dead Somali gunmen.'

Jimmy stepped out, greeting the guys and shaking hands. He led them towards the mortars. 'Mortars, ridge, bad guys over the ridge heading this way. Get some radios.'

'Fire control,' Skids noted. 'How many Somalis out there?'

'Couple of thousand,' Jimmy casually mentioned. They blinked. 'So go armed. Take a Kenyan with you, a separate radio for updates, map and compasses, some water, off as soon as you're ready please.'

As Skids and Co introduced themselves to the mortar sergeant, I asked Jimmy how this would pan out.

'It's not set in stone, it could go either way,' he answered. 'Get a military compass, one you can see through and mark a bearing, get up on the roof and call the fire when necessary.'

Hal approached, wiping his oily hands with a rag, his face shiny with sweat. 'We need parts for that bird, don't have 'em here, doubt we have them at base either.'

'OK,' Jimmy told him. 'Stand ready for cas-ecav.'

A compass was found for me and I climbed back up the tower. Fixing the rocks on the east road I made them 105 degrees magnetic, the next distinct outcrop 45 degrees. In turn, I gave each soldier a look through the compass, noting places from 45 to 105 degrees, their area of fire.

'Arc of fire, sir,' one corrected me.

Through the binoculars I followed Skids group as they jogged through the scrub and up the rise to the left, almost dead on my forty-five degree mark, informing my four men that Skids' group was out there. All was ready, the breeze cooling my sweat, many men running about below me.

Turning my ear to the wind I could detect the distant crack of gunfire. It seemed to be coming from the east road. I focused the binoculars, certain now that I could see movement there. A clanking sound caused me to turn, a soldier with a huge toothy grin and a huge fifty cal' rifle clambering up.

'Dee officer man say to come here, sir.'

I moved one man down and made a space for the newcomer. Kneeling beside him I asked, 'How far can you shoot?'

The man made a face, 'Maybe ... one tow-sant metre, sir.'

I pointed at the east road, at one of our jeeps. 'You could hit that jeep?'

'Maybe, but better more smaller, sir.'

It was a good range. As I refocused the glasses I could see our men at the rocks running back, jumping onto the jeep and pulling off; the position was being abandoned, most of the men digging in across the road in my two o'clock position. From there they could hit any vehicles as they approached along the arc of the road, from side on to head on as the vehicles aspect changed. To my left the ground looked rough outside the perimeter, many small ridges in the rocks, some wide-open spaces that would have to be crossed by any attackers. And all of a sudden I was thinking like a soldier. Through the binoculars I scanned the ground in front of me and tried to figure out which would be the easiest approach route for the Somalis.

A glint caught my eye and I noticed a jeep on the crest of the rise, the east road. I considered that over there a Somali warlord was staring at me with his binoculars and thinking: that bastard Paul Holton is over there, I'd better not chance it. I stepped to the edge of the roof. 'Jimmy?' Jimmy stuck his head out. 'Indians on the east pass, and on the war path, watching us.'

He climbed up. Pointing at the bend of the road he said, 'Any Somali vehicle we hit, and stopping on the road, will send its men across this patch of land.'

It was my one o'clock position. 'We can cover that,' I confidently offered.

He faced me. 'It's not as easy as you may think, young man. They move, run, duck and hide.'

I nodded. 'Will that fifty cal' stop a jeep?'

'Yes, if it hits the engine. Check the coloured ammo.' He dropped down.

I opened the ammo box for the M82 and noted the different colours.

'Careful, sir, it go bang.' The man pointed. 'To go through steel, to be normal, to see in the dark, sir.'

'Cool!' I climbed down and hunted around, finding more heavy ammo for the M82 and lugging it up. Noting now the blistering sun overhead, the day heating up, I grabbed four collapsible chairs and placed them between the men, wedged against the sandbags. From the men's private kit I pulled out ponchos and strung them out, soon most of the men in shade.

'Good, sir. More dee better see dee enemy.'

The Cobras lifted off again behind me, three of them, and headed northwest, away from enemy. I watched them with my binoculars as they circled north a few miles out, disappearing behind a low hill. Five minutes later the indistinct echo of explosions registered with me, damn hard to pin down its direction, leaving me turning my head like an animal hunting prey. I figured they were probably hitting the Somali marshalling area again.

Below me, Mac was saying, 'Wees hit the camp twice now, fucking thousands advancing towards us!'

Jimmy responded with, 'There'll be senior leaders in the camp, and the men advancing are too spread out. Besides, I don't want to lose a chopper to an RPG.'

The lone Somali observer on the east road now had some friends backed up behind him. He mounted up and slowly advanced, disappearing in a cloud of black smoke a second later. I snatched the binoculars down, the bang registering two seconds later; our people had left a little something behind. As I acquired the image of the road again a second bang registered, smoke coming from behind the rocks, a vehicle tripping a mine. There was nothing left of the first jeep save a wheel and, despite the relatively bare scrub, I could not see the rest of it. But I could see two bodies some twenty yards away. Another jeep pulled forwards, men jumping down and checking the roadside.

I tapped the M82 gunner with my foot. 'What's your name?'

'Beko, sir.'

'Beko, you see that jeep?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Try and hit it, please.' Beko let off a round with a deafening bang and I saw a man on the left spin around and fall. 'Go five yards right.'

Beko let off another loud shot, the vehicle's windscreen smashed, a man dragged out.

'What you shooting at?' Mac shouted up.

'Men on the rise, got two, smashed their jeep!'

'What they doing?' Mac asked.

'Looking for mines along the roadside.'

'Harass them,' Mac suggested.

'Beko, same shot exactly.' A bang preceded steam rising from the jeep's engine. 'Good shot, you hit the engine. Go up and over

the jeep. Fire.’ A puff of sand exploded out of the road in front of a second jeep, three men falling down. ‘Good shot.’ The rest of the Somalis pulled back, the fallen men being dragged back by their comrades, alive but wounded.

A puff of black smoke caused me to focus near the rocks as a whistling sound increased, finally a blast throwing up sand a hundred yards in front of me.

‘That was cheeky.’

‘Mortars, sir. They av dee mortar.’

Mac shouted up, ‘Can you see the firing position?’

‘Yes.’

‘Direct our mortars onto it.’

I turned towards the mortar line. ‘Mortar Sergeant!’ I pointed at the nearest man. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Nketi, sir.’

‘Ket, aim for the right of the rock, and fire.’ The man checked the direction and distance settings, then dropped a mortar down the tube. As the bang of mortar firing rung in my ears I lifted the binoculars and watched the shell drop short and right. ‘Ket, you are short and right. Fire again when ready.’ The second round was closer, but this side of a nice big rock. ‘Ket, you are ten yards short. Fire when ready.’

As he fired, I again heard the same whistling sound of an incoming mortar, hoping their spotter was crap. I was right, a cloud of sand a hundred yards away. And my round landed behind the rock. I saw no dead or wounded, but no more mortars came in.

‘Sergeant! I want this man for me only.’

‘OK, sir.’

‘Ket: twenty yards right, fifty yards longer. Fire when ready!’

He lobbed another one, the mortar exploding as a group of men walked forwards. When the smoke cleared I figured twenty men had either been killed or wounded.

Mac stepped out. ‘Well?’

‘I zeroed the crest of the rise with the fifty cal’ and the mortar, wrecked two jeeps and killed twenty, got their mortar as well.’

‘If anything comes over that rise, hit it,’ Mac shouted up.

I noticed Big Paul pulling up in a jeep. He positioned the jeep carefully, then waved to me. ‘Pauley, tell me where these rounds

land.' He fired a long burst with a GPMG and I could see an oval of sand puffs on the rise.

'Rocks, left edge, hundred yards short, fifty yards left.' He seemed satisfied with that and walked into the tower.

A cheeky jeep drove quickly over crest, too quick for a mortar. 'Beko! Fire!'

Beko fired and missed. The jeep stopped after a hundred yards, men jumping out and into a gully.

'Cheeky buggers.' I lowered the glasses and faced the mortar line. 'Keti? Second mortar tube, not yours; I want the same setting, but a hundred yards right, hundred yards short. Fire when ready.' The second tube lobbed a mortar; long and left. 'Keti, second tube, ten yards to the right, twenty yards shorter.' They adjusted their settings and fired, the cheeky men's jeep blown to pieces.

'Sir. More jeep come.'

I quickly focused on the rise. 'Keti! Tube one - fire two shells! Quick!'

Keti fired tube one, missing the first jeep but sending the second souring through the air. His second round damaged a jeep following the first.

'Keti, tube two ready ... fire!' My timing was good, damaging the newcomer's jeep and forcing it off the road. 'Keti, tube two, five yards right, fire two rounds.' Whoever was in the ditch was killed, both jeep loads by the look of it. I shouted down, 'Mac!' Mac stuck his head out as I said, 'They're coming over the ridge, left of the rocks, fucking hundreds of them, spread right along.'

'Wees gunna let 'em get in close first, catch 'em from the rear forwards. Watch that road.'

'It's blocked in three places. Are there mines this side?'

'No!'

'Bugger.' As I observed the crest, left of the rocks, I became less confident, and less cocky. Everywhere I looked there were small groups of men carrying either AK47s or larger weapons. One group seemed to be carrying a DSHK.

Facing the mortar section I said, 'Tube three, fire one round.' They fired, and I watched without the binoculars, the puff knocking a group down. 'Tube three, one hundred yards closer, fifty yards right. Fire when ready.'

Through the binoculars I watched the men carrying the DSHK. They were knocked down, then seemed to be helping each other, then carried on. 'Tube three, twenty yards right, thirty yards shorter. Fire when ready.' Bingo, scratch one DSHK.

'Any luck?' Jimmy asked.

'Got a Dushka thingy.'

'Good work. How far are they?

'Just touching where Big Paul fired the GPMG to.' Jimmy ducked back inside.

Beko said, 'I see dee man, sir.'

'Where?'

'Where dee mortar kill dee man, sir. Only dee one man, sir.'

'Wait till they get closer,' I suggested, now conscious of ammo levels, which I did not have a clue about, but figured we should go steady with anyway. I licked my parched lips, then grabbed a warm Fanta, the contents exploding out with a hiss.

Every ten minutes I lobbed a mortar at the road, damaging or destroying jeeps, before Mac and Jimmy climbed up and scanned the eastern ridge with glasses, discussing strategies. Before they climbed back down they told me to use the snipers on the closest men only. I asked Beko what range he thought was best, getting back four hundred yards, which was where the advance gunmen were now sneaking along. With the sun burning the back of my neck and my forearms, I ordered all snipers to fire at the closest men only. Volleys cracked outwards, men falling in the distance. And rounds started to crack inwards as well. I lay down next to Beko and got comfortable, small bits of tissue offered by the soldier next to me. I plugged my ears, deadening the effect of the monstrous M82. Wiping sweat from my eyes, I concentrated on the road.

A hot half an hour later, mortar tubes one through four opened up, their shells landing beyond the ridgeline, just a dull rumbling echo coming back our way, that damn Kenya TV plane back. The Cobras lifted off for a third time today, circling south and out of sight, again hitting the Somali camp and the road beyond, trucks and buses, even their water tanker. I heard them land, but did not look around as I concentrated on the road approach. And somewhere out there was a half-decent sniper, the odd round pinging off the tower.

Big Paul and three others fired intermittently with the jeep mounted GPMGs, moving them in an arc backwards and forwards and saturating a wide area. After each firing session, Big Paul would wet an empty sandbag and place it over the barrel, returning to the tower. Before I knew it the sun was low, my elbows sore after many hours on the hard concrete roof.

Jimmy came out the tower and said, 'Maximum effort before we lose the sun, get the men closest!'

I studied the parched soil till my eyes hurt, directing the snipers, hitting a few dead bodies more than once. As we tried to pick them off, men in the distance were walking back over the ridge, right into a hailstorm of mortar fire edging its way towards us. When the sun touched the distant hills behind me the firing ceased. I hadn't realised how thirsty and hungry I was. 'Every second man, get some water, food and rest,' I ordered, and headed down.

In the command room I found a large paper sketch of the area, Mac, Rabbit and Jimmy stood over it with English officer "Rupert". 'How we doing? We discouraged them yet?'

'Killed Aideed's right hand man,' Jimmy casually mentioned. 'We got a transceiver hidden up on the rocks, been listening in to all their comms' traffic. Got a lot of his commanders, and wrecked all his transport, which is what I wanted out of this.'

'They're dirt poor,' Mac said. 'Can't afford to lose so much hardware, this'll set him back years.'

'It was the hardware I wanted, more than the people,' Jimmy explained. 'If Aideed and the other warlords stop paying them, the lads out there will fuck off back to the goat herd.'

Hal eased up from a chair. I had not seen him tucked away in a corner. 'We got at least fifty trucks and jeeps, and they don't have fully comp' insurance. Ten miles east is a bridge over a nasty gully; I took it out.'

Rabbit put in, 'So a long fucking walk back to Mogadishu!' He handed me a beer bottle.

'Will they attack again in the morning?' I asked.

'Like fuck,' Mac said. 'They're bosses all fucked off an hour ago, comms' traffic is down to just stupid questions now.'

'Like ... what do we do now, boys?' Rabbit joked.

For the first time I noticed Abdi. He took off his headset and turned around as our mortars fired again. 'They are talking of leaving.'

'Who the mortars targeting in the dark?' I puzzled.

'Skids has the main group targeted,' Jimmy explained. 'They're not sure about leaving.'

'And they won't be getting any sleep *this* night,' Mac suggested.

We didn't get much sleep either, mortars and intermittent machine gun fire streaking through the dark. At dawn the snipers fired at anything that moved – which were Somalis running away, the mortars now silent, Skids and Co back with us. The Cobras and the Hueys went up, targeting any vehicle that looked salvageable, as far away as twenty miles out. They reported a line of men walking back towards Mogadishu - an impossible distance, the other side of the wrecked bridge.

Teams of Rifles went out and checked bodies, the odd shot fired at a wounded Somali, and came back in with five captured weapons per man, dumped down in a large pile before heading back out; it took all day just to clear the area up to the eastern rise. Blown up Toyotas were nudged off the road by our jeeps, damaged jeeps pushed off the road by groups of our men, then damaged some more. We worked tirelessly all day to clean up and check the area.

With an hour of daylight remaining I joined Hal on a patrol. We flew directly east over the rise, and for the first time I could see the damage to the Somali vehicles, most of whom seemed to have tried their best to find the mines, many parallel tracks in the sand along the road, hundreds of bodies - and body parts. All along the road, mile after mile, we found abandoned or damaged vehicles, eventually reaching their marshalling area, the damage evident, the ground heavily pockmarked. I could not begin to count how many bodies, or comprehend what it may be like on the ground and close up.

We flew on to the east, following the road, damaged vehicles every fifty yards, some bodies. Reaching the bridge that Hal had destroyed we circled, a dozen bodies visible in the ravine below the naked bridge supports, still some stragglers walking along the road. It turned my stomach. Despite my temporary command of the sniper section, I was no soldier.

Back at base, fires were now going, camel steaks cooking, people sat about relaxing, some catching up on much needed sleep. In front of the tower a bonfire of pallet wood was roaring, many seats spread around it, most of the command staff present, and Abdi. I sat next to him.

Facing me, he asked, 'What did you see from the air, Mister Paul?'

'A lot of death. Got to be a hundred vehicles down that road.'

'From death, comes new life, the hope of things new,' Abdi responded in his accented voice.

I wasn't sure I agreed with that. 'And what *do you* ... see for the future of this country?'

'When I was in the doctor house, the doctor man said that the deep cut must heal from the bottom to the top. We can heal only from the bottom. Now, we are the bottom, things is very bad. But Mister Jimmy, he knows how he must fight with his head. He knows the mind of Aideed, he knows they will come to us here. Aideed was the fool, Mister Jimmy was the wise man. Two dead men in the here, two thousand dead follower of Aideed. All Somali will know this. Friends of Aideed will make war on him. And we will sit like the vulture and watch who lives.'

I nodded; the kid had it all figured out. At least, the kid had the philosophy that Jimmy had given him, and that I trusted.

When Rabbit and Skids made jokes about the killing, Abdi seemed a bit put out.

Jimmy said to him, 'Don't tell off the dog because he has sharp teeth. The dog is what he is, strong and brave. We need dogs, and we need doves.' Abdi nodded his understanding.

In the morning we continued the process of cleaning up, Rabbit's crew back on ordnance clearing. At 10am a plane came in, circling the area, that damn Kenyan TV flight again, but this time landing after several passes. Reporters piled out, a Kenyan TV crew walking forwards. Jimmy marshalled the new American pilots, and Hal, closer.

'I will make a statement, briefly, because we still have a lot of work to do here,' Jimmy began. 'Then Paul will take you up in a helicopter and show you the battlefield. Starting at the beginning ... we brought our doctors to Somali, and opened clinics, because there was a great need, much suffering here with the civil war, some of the warlords treating the people very badly.'

Many of the warlords have struck deals with us and we have built clinics in their areas, the UN and Red Cross returning in strength. We moved to this abandoned airfield in the hope of using it for re-supply, building clinics to the south of the airfield.

‘The day after we arrived, armed men drove up to the airfield and opened fire. The next day more men came, and we were forced to defend ourselves, the Kenyan Rifles doing an excellent job. Two days after that we were subjected to an all out attack by five thousand armed men in more than three hundred vehicles. The Kenyan Rifles put up a valiant resistance, suffering two killed and a handful wounded. But the only reason we are still here, and able to talk to you, is the Cobra attack helicopters you can see.’ He pointed at the unserviceable one. ‘That one was shot down. We are only here, because of a handful of veteran American pilots, most of whom are over fifty, some in their sixties. Against the odds, they repeatedly flew missions till they ran out of ammunition or fuel, re-loading their own aircraft, refuelling their own aircraft, and then taking off again, sometimes flying five or six missions a day.

‘General Aideed sent three hundred vehicles and five thousand men against us here. These retired American pilots killed two thousand gunmen, and destroyed two hundred and fifty vehicles, which are still strewn along the road behind me. Four helicopters, and four men, held off Aideed’s army.’

I felt a book coming on. And I considered just how modest the men would be in front of the cameras. Would any one of them correct Jimmy on his stats, or mention the Kenyan pilots that flew with them. I could not bear to listen and went and fired up the Huey, the press sent over to me ten minutes later. With the doors open, safety ropes employed, we lifted off. I flew them low and slow down the south road, almost seven miles, then doubled back, heading along the east road another twelve miles before turning about. They got good shots of the carnage at the Somali campsite, then a view of the rise and all the bodies. Landing, they were shocked, but in no doubt about the stats. As I walked back to the tower with the press, the stats were growing with every step. Jimmy told them it was not safe for them here and we packed them back into the plane. I was glad to see the back of them.

Hal came over as I approached Jimmy. 'Well, what was all that horse manure about?'

'Your country took a hit in Mogadishu,' Jimmy began. 'You, and your friends, are going to help me restore some public pride, or I'll kick your fucking arse.'

'Oh,' Hal made a face. 'You made heroes out of us. Why?'

'You did the job well, Hal, you and your boys. I only stretched it a little ... for a good cause. And I'm going to need you and your buddies to pop back to the States for a week. That, is not negotiable.'

'Ticker tape parade?' Hal baulked.

'No need to contact anyone, the press will come to you, and you tell the truth – my truth. If not, we'll have to let you go, Hal. Go and give it some thought, chat to the guys.'

'Best have a shave and a bath before meeting the press in the States though,' I told him.

'You're still a bunch of rude fuckers!' He turned and walked off.

The next morning the Antonov took many people back, leaving just the rifles and their officers with a lot of bodies to bury and jeeps to move off the road, not that the road could be used without bridges. The Dash picked up the rest of us and I took right seat from Sue, recanting the story for Tubby on the way back.

As Jimmy and I sat down with a stunned looking Rudd in the rooftop bar, Mac fielded questions from the press below.

'What we going to call this book?' I asked Jimmy.

'Kenyan Rifles: Battle for Scorpion Base ... I reckon.'

'I watched the news every day,' Rudd put in. 'I thought you'd be dead. The aeroplane with the TV crew - it showed pictures of the vehicles heading towards you. Forty-five soldiers, against five thousand?'

'Not quite true,' I pointed out.

Jimmy stood, so I glanced over my left shoulder. It was Mister Idi Amin look-a-like himself, the Defence Minister and his cronies.

'Minister,' Jimmy offered as he extended a hand. We sat, more drinks ordered.

'Mister Silo,' the Minister said, shaking his head. 'When do I pick up the newspaper without seeing a story about you. This...

adventure is incredible. The name of the Kenyan Rifles will be written into stone after this: fifty men, against five thousand. Unbelievable.'

I felt like telling him just *how* unbelievable.

'I shall make sure that the families of the dead men are looked after,' Jimmy told the Minister.

'As generous as ever, Mister Silo. And we are in your debt.'

'No, Minister, it was your men who saved me. I ... am in your debt.'

'But these men were chosen by you, paid by you, trained by and you, and equipped by you. So, we shall call it even, no?'

Jimmy smiled widely. 'We'll call it even. And I have a favour to ask. The men of the Rifles who fought at this battle, they deserve a campaign medal, some of them medals for bravery.'

'I will look into it personally, rest assured my friend,' the Minister promised.

'Does your government *worry* ... about things I do in Somalia?'

The Minister took a moment. 'There was a time when we worried greatly about the Somali gunmen coming here, to our country. After this battle, our people beat their chests, and our politicians rejoice. And one story I liked in the papers, not true I am sure, is that the men of the Rifles cut the heart out of the dead Somalis and eat it.'

I blinked.

'As you said, I am sure that it is not true,' Jimmy said with a smile.

After the Minister had left us, Bob Davies came in with his boss, Patterson, the Irishman I had met briefly in Hong Kong.

'Fucking hell, Jimmy,' Bob let out as they sat.

'I'll second that,' Patterson offered. 'Fucking ... hell.'

'I know,' I said. 'Same shirt for five days!'

Bob said, 'You wiped out the armies of the three largest warlords. General Aideed's friends north of him are attacking Mogadishu as we speak, trying to unseat him.'

'The more they fight each other now, the less I'll have to do later.'

Patterson asked, 'What exactly *are* your plans over there?'

'Stick a clinic in every town where they're needed. And, should any gunmen bother the clinics, shoot them full of holes.'

Bob and his boss exchanged looks. Bob said, 'You've altered the politics of the region, not even the Americans did that.'

'The Americans had a short-term goal, I'm more ... long-term.'

'You seen the news in Europe and the States?' Patterson asked.

'No, why?' Jimmy casually asked.

Bob pointed at me. 'Your girl gave an interview, every reporter in America after her, her concert details all over the news.'

'She'll fucking love that,' I unhappily noted.

'She said that she had spoken to you on the phone and that you were safe and well,' Bob explained. 'She's been on CNN and breakfast telly, more coverage than the fucking President.'

'Good for record sales,' I idly noted.

'My superiors want to invite you to New York,' Patterson informed us.

'Tell them I'm washing my hair,' Jimmy suggested.

'Why?' Bob puzzled.

'Some people talk, some people take action.'

'Some wash their hair every fifth day,' I said, Rudd laughing.

'We'll be able to use that new airbase?' Bob finally asked, easing back into his seat.

'I could do with some help clearing up the mess and the bodies. Once the mines are cleared, it's all yours.'

Patterson asked, 'Hotel with a pool?'

'Yes. The Scorpion Hotel.'

'Down in Nairobi they're holding street parties,' Bob casually informed us. 'Some Somalis there being attacked.'

'The Kenyans were pushed around a bit,' Jimmy reflected. 'A reckoning was always on the cards. But now many of the Somalis can return, we're in two hundred miles.'

The gang joined us in the bar one by one, Skids and Co included, and the party begun, beer thrown over people not joining in. Even I felt tipsy, or maybe just tired.

In the morning my mouth was dry and my head hurt, the first time I could remember since getting the stems. I said to Jimmy, 'Did I make a call last night?'

'No, I got a call on the satellite phone, CNN after you.'

'Oh shit, was I —'

‘A bit pissed? Yes, my boy. But the music drowned out what you told them to go do up Katie’s arse.’

‘Oh, crap.’

‘She called this morning, happy as fuck with all the publicity and loving you to bits for it.’

‘Bloody marvellous,’ I snarled.

‘Hal and the boys flew down to Nairobi yesterday, straight after we got back. Be landing in the States in a few hours. Oh, I may have suggested ... a joint interview, her with Hal.’

‘What? What the fuck does Katie know about the mission?’

‘She’s met Hal before ... at the beach, for an hour,’ Jimmy said with a grin.

‘You’re an evil bastard sometimes,’ I told him. ‘I was going to dump her.’

‘Can’t do that now, press be all over it. Oh, and that song of hers – *I worry when you’re not near* – it may be getting a new video makeover, a few helicopter shots.’

I wagged a threatening finger.

‘It’s good for business,’ he stated, grinning. ‘So milk it, young man. Milk it!’

We kicked back for a day, plenty of swimming and lounging around, and I resisted his nagging to fly to the States; if it had been vital he would have said so. We drank a lot of beer, and we slept in large and comfortable Madsons beds. On a TV in the restaurant we got CNN, the four pilots and Hal interviewed with Katie. At least Rescue Force was getting some publicity, but one TV newscaster seemed to make out that Rescue Force staff had been armed, and that this was their battle.

A call came from Host, “M” Group USA; the President was taking a very keen interest in what had happened, and what we were doing in Somalia. CIA were all over it, but Jimmy was not concerned. Rudd dispatched a huge convoy, not least of concrete and breezeblocks, and Scorpion Base would get a makeover. All of the Rifles who had served were recalled, brought back and given a few days off, all thanked, all hands shaken. We flew out that night.

The next morning I stood in the lounge of our house, mug of tea in hand, peering out at the lush green grass, the Alsations retrieving tennis balls thrown by Ricky. It gave the reporters at the gate something to photograph, I suppose. I would have

spoken to them if they wanted to talk about Somali, but they were more interested in Katie.

Bit and pieces

We drove out the gates at 6am in the morning, no press about, and headed to Mapley airfield, pulling in at 8am after a service station breakfast. The weird “above ground” scuba pool was popular with visitors and we planned on trying it ourselves, but first drove around to the Wiltshire Police Aero-Meds. We found two blue and yellow BO105 helicopters on their pad, a hundred yard square of the northeast corner now fenced off for them. We hit the buzzer on their gate and said it was their landlord. Pulling up, the officer emerging was mildly shocked to see us.

‘Get the kettle on,’ Big Paul told the man, leading him back inside.

We invaded their spacious lounge, finding two flight crews, plus a doctor and a paramedic sat in green flight suits reading magazines.

‘No pile ups on the motorway?’ I quipped, sitting next to the lady doctor.

They sat upright and stared for a few seconds, the senior man walking out and greeting us, shaking Jimmy’s hand. They made us tea, soon a barrage of questions, the story of Scorpion Base recanted. I asked them questions of the BO105, technical questions, details of incidents attended, flight times, etc. We were all kindred spirited chopper nerds, even the medics. Comfortable with the people and the surroundings, we stayed for an hour. They offered me a ride in the BO105, so I offered them a ride in a Huey – jokingly refused. We found out that they all used the leisure centre, receiving free staff passes, and were grateful. They’d even tried the climbing wall on a day off, and the Tucano, one of their medics a diver who used the scuba pool often. And the officers were amazed that we had not tried it ourselves yet.

We left them to their magazines and drove the short distance to the aforementioned scuba pool, already a few people in attendance – paying users. Allowing them in first, we checked

out the lower windows, observing the divers through twelve inches of glass. Jimmy took a call and the dive was postponed, Sykes needed us in London, pronto, Host and Keely in town. Karl drove us along the motorway and to the old apartment, kind of nice to be back, nothing out of place. I got the kettle on as Karl and Big Paul searched for bugs, electric gizmos switched on, wands waved around, phones dismantled. We were clean as far as they could tell.

‘Sykes sweeps it regular,’ Jimmy told us. ‘One of his trusted boys lives downstairs now.’

Thirty minutes later Sykes turned up with Jack, soon followed by Host, Keely and another man, some senior CIA guy called Hadley – who looked the part; tall, athletic and silver haired, and with an air of authority about him. We fetched tea and coffee for our guests.

‘Not being bugged by the CIA this time?’ I asked Host.

Hadley was not amused. ‘The individuals responsible for that have been dealt with.’

I faced Host and waited, a teasing question in my look.

Host said, ‘President has been busy, asses kicked. Mister Hadley here is CIA representative to “M” Group.’

‘Then perhaps Mister Hadley would like to kick things off,’ Jimmy casually suggested.

Hadley eased back and studied Jimmy for a few seconds. ‘Right through the incident in Somalia we had satellite images taken, high altitude passes. I’ve studied it at all at length, including the propaganda aspects.’

‘And don’t forget *the timing*,’ I added.

‘Oh, no, that was a big part, if not the most important part,’ Hadley agreed. Facing Jimmy he said, ‘All carefully mapped out ahead of time.’

‘Of course.’

‘And you needed us to take a hit in Mogadishu,’ Hadley noted.

‘In years to come, Hollywood will make a film called Black Hawk Down, easing your collective consciousness’ and making a minor setback seem like a glorious victory.’

‘Some see it as *more* than a minor setback,’ Hadley said.

‘You went into the city,’ I pointed out. ‘Tight streets, and every other Somali with an AK under the mattress. And we did warn you.’

‘Yes, well I’ll be paying a bit more attention to the warnings in future,’ Hadley threatened.

‘Pity people had to die to get to that point,’ Jimmy noted before sipping his tea.

Hadley stared back for several seconds. ‘Yes. But coming back to your involvement in Somalia. When you started edging into that *lovely country* everyone figured you’d get your fingers burnt -’

‘How wrong they were,’ Sykes said without lifting his head.

Hadley slid his gaze across to Sykes, then back to Jimmy. ‘As I said, I studied the battle from every angle. It was the perfect spot, you knew they’d come out to you, and you knew how they’d react step by step. Would I be right in assuming your main aim was their command structure?’

‘In part, also their vehicles and hardware, expensive to replace,’ Jimmy answered.

‘So you shot up all the jeeps, hard to replace in a place like Somalia. Interesting. Your aim was to weaken them, a war of attrition.’

‘Yes. The Rifles will patrol the desert highways, where they have a massive advantage, and leave the cities and towns isolated. We’re already intercepting weapons coming in, some quite expensive hauls *pilfered*.’ Jimmy slid his gaze across to Sykes. ‘Ethiopians selling bits and pieces, their army officers.’

Sykes nodded. ‘Sudan as well. You got a tank I hear?’

‘Yes, a T72 in poor condition. Still, it’ll put the wind up a Toyota pickup driver.’

Host said, ‘Your Mi24 was not seen at the battle. Why?’

I had not even considered the Mi24, it has slipped my mind. I was keen about the answer as well.

‘Two reasons,’ Jimmy began. ‘First, I wanted the ageing American pilots to take the credit, and second, whilst the warlords were sending their people out to us the Mi24 demolished their houses and compounds at night. I think we killed three of the warlords we were after.’

‘We got reports of car bombs,’ Hadley noted. ‘So, that was your lot? Farouk was killed for definite, perhaps Hasim as well, certainly his sons.’

Sykes said, ‘But you won’t move on their turf?’

‘No. Street fighting will produce heavy casualties on all sides.’

‘Then what?’ Host asked.

‘Many years of small moves, building up the Somali Rifles till they can form a government.’

‘So you will interfere at the political level,’ Hadley pointed out.

‘Of course, since there is no government there. One has to be built, a credible one that will last. If not, most of the world’s terrorists will emerge from that region in future years, including the Brotherhood, who’ll attack south into Kenya.’

Host asked, ‘The Kenyan Rifles, they’ve been injected?’

‘All of them.’

‘How do you rate them?’ Hadley asked.

‘They’ll hold their own, man for man, against any western army.’

‘And if Kenya gets expansionist ideas in the future –’ Hadley began.

‘They won’t,’ Jimmy cut in.

Hadley stared back. ‘And where does this all end, in Somalia?’

‘As a peaceful Islamic state, with some oil and minerals, and a good relationship with The West.’

‘After the battle the other week, the State Department and the White House sat up and took notice, more so than Rwanda,’ Hadley reported. ‘I think you’ll find that we take a greater interest in your activities.’

‘Excuse me, dopey fuck,’ I said, getting glared at. ‘We’ve been trying to persuade you to do just that.’

Host hid a smile as Hadley stared back. Hadley eventually said, ‘Well, now I’m involved ... full time.’

‘So, how do you think it’ll turn out with me and Katie?’ I asked, Jack and Sykes hiding their grins.

‘You’re the experts on the future,’ Hadley testily noted. ‘Don’t you know?’

‘No,’ Jimmy said. ‘I know, but he don’t, otherwise there’d be no point in living, would there, with no surprises. I mean, if I said she was pregnant -’

‘What!’ I barked, spilling my tea.

‘She’s not,’ Jimmy said with a smile, everyone laughing. ‘Honest, she’s not. Relax.’

‘Jesus,’ I blew out, breathing heavily. ‘Helicopter battles, fine, but babies...’

‘So why the ageing pilots?’ Hadley asked with a smile.

‘Throw you a victory, of course. After Mogadishu your dear President would have been less inclined to get involved with such matters in the region, which needed countering. In a few years I’ll need some troops around Somalia. And when Hollywood wants to make a picture about five ageing veterans, I’m sure you gentlemen will ... help out.’

Hadley considered that. ‘You need anything for Somalia?’

‘Couple of stealth bombers?’ Jimmy risked.

‘I doubt it,’ Hadley lightly countered. ‘No good bases for them nearby.’

‘Money always helps,’ I said. ‘Some av-gas.’

‘There is one thing,’ Jimmy began. ‘But it’s a bit ahead of time. Could you help to build a harbour? I’m going to seize an area on the coast in the north, an airfield close by, but I’ll slowly build a harbour wall, big enough for heavy cruisers and cargo ships. Once seized, that area is yours to hang onto, you’ll need it in years to come. Directly opposite Yemen.’

‘A long harbour wall?’ Hadley considered, a glance at Host. ‘And the area inland?’

‘Sealed off by the Rifles, no local terrorist action, no threat to the workers.’

‘You say we’ll need it,’ Keely asked. ‘For what action?’

‘A variety, but they are all actions that would happen if Magestic fails to stop a few things. If all goes well, nothing more than an extra deep water stop-off till 2025.’

‘And then?’ Keely nudged.

‘Then it’ll be the only base in the Middle East that’s safe from terrorist attack. It’s isolated, access by air or sea only.’

‘I’ll send in a report,’ Hadley offered. He took a breath. ‘You’ve not been involved in the Balkans.’

‘The Balkans War ... is something that upsets me. It’s ... such an unnecessary waste of life. And more to the point, in time you run the risk of the Balkan Muslim states turning against you. But, in ten years or more they’re all peaceful and joining the EU and NATO, Serbia included.’

‘Serbia? In NATO?’ Hadley questioned.

‘They’re accepted into the EU in 2012, NATO three years later. So you see why it upsets me.’

‘And the flashpoint coming up,’ Jack put in.

‘Flashpoint?’ Hadley questioned.

Jimmy explained, ‘When Kosovo is liberated, an innovative group of Russian peacekeepers seize the airport and don’t let you have use of it. You’ll come within an inch of World War Three, when your commanders order NATO forces to shoot the Russian peacekeepers. If they do shoot, we lose the planet, guys.’ Hadley made a note on his pad.

Sykes said, ‘The British commanders have been told never to fire on Russian peacekeepers, no matter what. And even to *prevent* Americans firing on them.’

Hadley snapped his head around at that, staring at Sykes for a moment. Facing Jimmy, he said, ‘The President was *interested* in your connection to Republican Senator Pedersen. He asked if there were *others* like him, obviously interested in any ... political level interference?’

‘Gentlemen, it is not political - it’s economic. In years to come, when your fine country has been left to rot slowly, I’ll help fix the economy. And ... you’re welcome. As for Pedersen, you see what we want you to see.’

‘He’s a distraction,’ Host stated. ‘Hidden enough, but not enough, knowing we’d find him and waste time watching him while the real work goes on elsewhere.’

‘And that *real work* ... I don’t know about,’ Jimmy said.

Jack said, ‘Our security service, MI5, wasted hundreds of man hours down dead ends. It was easier to just ask Jimmy things.’

Sykes put in, ‘And if some old man with a white beard and a cheery disposition turned up calling himself Magestic, predicting the future, we’d not waste our time on investigating him. We know what we need to know, and we’ve grown used to that. We don’t need to take the toy apart to enjoy playing with it.’

Jimmy said to Sykes, 'Our American cousins like to feel in control, of everything. They see that as their God given right, as the strongest nation. They've not realised that the strongest kid on the block is not always the smartest, and when they face economic ruin they'll blame everyone else but themselves.'

'Is economic ruin certain?' Host asked. 'Even with Magestic's help?'

'Pretty much so,' Jimmy responded. 'Too many different groups pulling too many ways. Which is why I like the Chinese Government. I give them instructions, targets, and they keep to them within a percentage point.'

'You help them ... economically?' Hadley queried.

'Of course. You're heading for ruin, so I'll need their help to fix things after you've given up answering the phone.'

Hadley eased back, thinking. 'What's the single biggest economic problem?'

'There is only one: the oil dollar.'

'I've read a hundred scenarios about that tipping point,' Hadley admitted. 'One's bound to come true.'

'OPEC will drop the dollar as reserve currency,' Jimmy explained. 'Your currency dips fifty percent or more, people holding dollars will buy more American goods – which is good for a whole month – but you can't buy what you need because it's just become too expensive.'

'I've read up on that scenario,' Host said. 'And there's no easy solution.'

'Nuclear power, electric cars and buses, internalisation of your markets,' Jimmy carefully stated, Hadley taking notes.

'And if you had the President's ear?' Keely asked, earning an odd look from Host.

'You're forgetting that your dear President struggles to get anything done now, let alone radical changes with my advice. But, if there was a super-secret group of power brokers, nominated by me, bi-partisan, industrialists and bankers, media moguls, some foreigners ... well, maybe.'

Hadley folded his arms. 'If they were to be nominated by you or Magestic, then you already know they can be trusted, you've already got a list, and Magestic already knows the outcome.'

'Listen, mate,' I said. 'Don't get into temporal paradoxes will you, we'll all get headaches.'

‘The future is not guaranteed,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘A slip up, and it all goes bang.’

With the American delegation gone we chatted to Sykes and Jack for ten minutes, as much about wrecks and treasure as anything else. Sykes had six ex-SAS instructors that he now recommended for us, Jimmy accepting the list. They’d be on the Government payroll, but used by us to train the Rifles. Sykes extended thanks for the police helicopters and the use of Mapley by just about everyone, a new project discussed that involved the Fire Brigade.

At the end Sykes said, ‘Will they ever listen, the Americans – in time?’

‘Look at Somali as an example, and give it plenty of thought,’ Jimmy enigmatically stated.

With our guests gone I said, ‘America - Somalia ... reverse psychology?’

‘Sometimes, the best way to get a girl’s attention, is to ignore her and chat to her mates.’

‘Talking of which, some advice would be useful.’

‘I’d say ... fly out there, meet Hal, do some interviews, do some more interviews with Katie – get the Rescue Force message across, then come back. Oh, and donate some money to Vietnam vets’ groups with Hal. And, at the end of the day, Katie’s good for you – enjoy it.’

I blew out. ‘Yeah, you’re right, as usual.’

He produced the ticket from his pocket, first class Heathrow to New York, leaving in three hours. ‘Buy some clothes out there, use the Pineapple apartment, I’ll get Oliver to pick you up.’

I nodded. ‘That pregnancy joke –’

‘Was just a joke,’ he assured me. ‘You won’t have kids with her. Now go.’

Stateside

Karl dropped me at Heathrow in just the clothes I wore, credit card and some cash in my pocket, plus my passport handed to me. I booked in with no luggage, no hand luggage either, a cute

smile from the young lady serving me. In the Departures Lounge I bought a small bag, then a toiletries bag, filling it with essentials, finally sitting down in the First Class lounge with a paperback I had bought, a book about President Reagan. I got to the bottom of the first page.

‘Paul!’ It was one of our bands.

I closed the book, stuffing it into my pocket. ‘Off anywhere nice?’

‘New York, man. You?’

‘New York as well.’

‘Ah, off to see Katie.’ They sat and surrounded me. Where were the Rifles when I needed them?

After ten minutes of childish chat about “stuff, like” a police officer in a suit came over, flashing a badge. ‘Mister Holton, can we have a word please.’ The man led me to a room labelled as Staff Lounge, making me puzzle the sign. The officer sat with his colleagues. ‘Karl gave as a call, said to rescue you if the passengers got overbearing.’

I sat and accepted a mug of tea with a grin. ‘Thanks. They’re signed to my record label, lovely lads, but I don’t speak *street talk*.’ We chatted about airport security, a bit about Somalia and Mapley, and the time before take-off passed quickly. They escorted me to the plane and said goodbye. Fortunately, the young lads were in economy, and I didn’t recognise anyone in my immediate vicinity as I sat. After take-off I pulled out the book, back to page one.

‘Mister Holton?’

I looked up, a silver haired man in a blue blazer, seemingly headed to the bar. ‘I’m Jacque DuVille, Deputy Director of Red Cross Francais. If you feel like a drink...’

I eased up. ‘Funny you should say that.’

We settled in a corner of the bar on the upper deck, and he thanked me at length for all we had done. We chatted at about Somalia, Zaire and other places, plus his family, his chalet in Switzerland. I picked his brains on UN and Red Cross structures, even drawing a little family-tree diagram of the outline structures; I wanted to know who was who and how it all worked. It passed three hours quickly, Jacque wanting to get some sleep before landing, he would be straight into UN meetings, but would rather be skiing with his family.

I remained in the bar, the booze helping to deaden my senses. At one point the co-pilot stepped out and recognised me, asking to join me with a coffee. We chatted about 747s, aircraft in general and all the quirky incidents he had been involved with flying, including a mouse and a sparrow on the flight deck. He could not stay long, and headed back. I lifted the book, getting to the bottom of the first page before being interrupted, a wide false smile breaking out across my face.

At immigration they asked me the nature of my visit. Well, I had been drinking all night and had not slept. 'A few TV interviews, dinner at the Whitehouse, usual crap.'

The man stared at me for a few seconds, then glanced at my passport stamps. 'I see you're a well travelled man. Do you have a business interest in Africa?'

'Mercenaries, attack helicopters, invading small countries, that sort of thing.'

He called his superior; I guessed I looked a bit tired and drunk. That man ran my passport number through a computer. He had to look twice at what came up, the first man focusing on it. I guessed I was on every watch list they had.

The senior man handed me back my passport. 'Sorry for the delay, sir. Welcome back to America.'

I guessed my credit was good and walked through to collect my luggage, before I realised I didn't have any, then headed out. Oliver was waiting with four burly bodyguards.

'Tired?' Oliver asked as they shepherded me to a car.

'Could do with an hour in a decent bed.'

We drove straight to the apartment that I had stayed at before, chatting about everything Katie had been up to, her face all over America. Anyone would think she fought that damned battle in Somalia. Still, the little dear was making us money. The bodyguards diligently escorted me up in the lift. I turned the key Jimmy had given me and closed the door on the security, thanking them and tipping them. In the lounge I found Katie's mum, Jean, stopping dead. 'Jean?'

'Made it then. I went shopping for you, shirts, socks, pants, all in your room.' She gave me a hug.

'You're staying here? And Katie?'

'We were in the hotel, but it all got ghastly with the press, so we came here.'

‘Oh, well I need some kip. Jet-lagged.’ It was noon and I crawled into bed, soon smelling Katie on the pillow.

I woke up with a cold hand on my privates, hoping it was not Jean.

‘Hello stranger,’ Katie whispered.

‘I thought it was Jean for a minute.’ I eased up. ‘What’s the time?’

‘Four-thirty.’ She peeled off her one-piece dress and eased in, nudging me to the cold section. Cuddling up, she said, ‘I’m not working tonight, but we got an invite somewhere, couple of places I think.’

I kissed her on the forehead. ‘Whatever you think, I’m easy,’ I said, yawning.

An hour later I was washed and suited, stood looking down at the bustling streets. A phone trilled, and I remembered the mobile Oliver had given me, finding it in my jacket pocket. I pressed the green button. ‘Home for fallen women, you picking up or dropping off?’

I could hear a loud, long laugh. ‘Paul, President Harvey. Can you talk?’

‘I got the right visa stamp, you can’t kick me out yet.’

He laughed again. ‘I wanted to invite you to the White House, you and Katie.’

‘Need a ratings boost, do we? Be seen with some good-looking celebs’ instead of stuffy politicians?’

He laughed at length. ‘Tomorrow, 3pm if you can make it. I believe your better half has a TV interview here.’

‘Just like her, pinch the White House to give an interview.’

He laughed again. ‘Let us know tomorrow, enjoy New York, bye.’

I pressed red without needing to, and put the phone in my pocket, Katie stepping out of the bedroom with wet hair. ‘We’ve been invited to the White House.’ She screamed like a ten-year-old girl and ran over, hugging me. ‘Tomorrow afternoon.’

‘I’ve an interview in the evening, you should come to that as well.’

The key turned in the door and Jean entered. ‘Here’s a telegram thingy.’ She handed over two yellow waxy envelopes, both addressed to me.

I tore them open, Katie stood keenly observing as she dried her hair. ‘Two invites to chat shows ... er ... tonight.’

‘Let’s do O’Brian, I like him,’ she said as she examined the telegram.

‘Fine, you’re call. Is there food here?’

‘I could whip something up,’ Jean offered.

‘That’s best thing I’ve heard since getting here. Go, cooking wench, work your magic.’

I sat for forty minutes, eating and glancing down at the busy streets, the kitchen wall glass on one side. Katie came and went, a dozen calls made and received. If I had let it, that would have annoyed me, but I switched off and ate. Jean showed me the press coverage, keeping a detailed scrapbook. The papers had the four different helicopter stunts that I had taken part in, and photographs of me that, for the life of me, I could not work out who had taken. Some were of me sat in a Huey, some clambering down. One was of me holding the snot nose kid in Zaire. The only consistent elements to each picture were large sweat stains in my shirts, and my cheap sunglasses. Katie took a call, from Jimmy. Returning to the kitchen table she looked a little deflated.

‘Problem?’ I asked.

‘That was Jimmy,’ she explained, her serious head on for a change. ‘He says they’ll ask about all the money you give to charity, and then ask me how much I give.’

‘Ah. Well, lie a little.’

She took a breath. ‘Jimmy said he could back date some of my royalties, make it look like I contributed all along, if I donate something now.’ She paused.

‘And...?’

‘And I’m going to do a series of concerts for Africa,’ she adamantly stated.

‘Good for you. I’ll tell them you’ve always contributed when you visited Kenya, no big deal – we don’t expect other people to contribute as much as we do.’

‘I’m going to donate half a million,’ Katie told me, Jean controlling her shock. She faced her mum. ‘I’m going to make a million a year from now on, or more, its OK.’

‘I’ll give it back to you afterwards,’ I offered.

‘No ... no I want to contribute,’ Katie insisted. ‘And I’m going to do the concerts.’

A limo picked us up at 6pm, a long wait ahead of a live show at 8pm. Guess they wanted to make sure we didn't get stuck in traffic. I signed a contract allowing them use of the footage and copyright, and agreed to not swear or try and promote any commercial products, etc, etc. A nice and busty make-up lady tried to make me look even younger, but I was heavily tanned and there was little she could do, or needed to do; I looked younger than Katie. We walked out to applause, Katie in a tight-fitting sparkly dress and looking gorgeous, me in a suit I had found in the closet. And, oddly enough, I was not at all nervous. We sat on a couch, the back wall a painting of a New York skyline.

‘Welcome, Paul and Katie.’

‘It's Katie and Paul,’ I corrected him. ‘She's the boss.’ The audience laughed. ‘And she's more famous and better looking than I am.’

‘Much ... better looking. How're the concerts going?’

Katie chatted about the music business, then he asked if she worried for me. ‘I get to hear about the danger after it's happened, so I don't worry ahead of time.’

‘Paul, you first grabbed the headlines with a miraculous *spur of the moment* rescue of UN workers in Somalia, most of whom – sadly - lost their lives. One was American doctor, Sally Nash, two month's pregnant at the time – which she didn't know until the check-up after getting back. Ladies and gentlemen, Doctor Sally Nash and family!’

A man and woman walked out to applause, the woman cradling a baby. I stood as they neared, not recognising the woman, Katie following me up. As I sat again I found myself holding the baby.

‘You didn't just save one life that day, you saved two.’ A screen came to life, a picture of my battered Huey, the front glass smashed. ‘On that fateful day you provided cover for the other rescuers, yes?’

‘We kept the gunmen busy by letting them shoot holes in us,’ I said. ‘When our other aircraft were on the ground we dived at the gunmen, the men in the back opening fire on them.’

‘Allowing the other aircraft to land and get away,’ the host said. ‘You put yourself in the way to buy them time, getting a formal merit from the UN Secretary General.’

I handed back the baby, leaning across Katie. ‘Did you name him Huey?’

‘We thought about Dash – after the Dash 7 that I was rescued in,’ she said, everyone laughing.

‘Good job you were not in the Russian made helicopter!’

‘Sally is now working in a clinic in Buffalo, New York. How many times were you shot, Sally?’

‘I was hit three times.’

‘But you managed to get that fateful distress call out, saving your colleagues. Four made it out alive, eight unfortunately did not.’ The picture changed, that of me helping down the snot nose kid at Forward Base. ‘And this, this is Zaire after you again went into the war zone and brought out a UN team under fire, your doctors setting up camp and helping the refugees there.’ The husband took the baby away out of shot. ‘And most recently, you attacked a Russian made tank – with your helicopter. How did that come about?’

‘We had just met with a local warlord, to ask him if we could build a clinic on his land. Flying back we could see the tank approaching a Kenyan Army patrol, of just lightly armed jeeps.’

‘No match for a tank.’

‘No. So I dived down and got above the tank, creating a sandstorm.’

‘So the tank couldn’t see anything.’

‘The tank slowed down, and one of the soldiers jumped out of my Huey and onto the tank, killing the crew.’

‘He jumped?’

‘I flew so low I clipped the tank, then he jumped.’

‘Surely saving the Kenyans in their lightly armed jeeps from the tank. And just a short time after that came the battle at Scorpion Base. With a name like that – I’m guessing it’s not Hawaii?’

‘Hot as hell, no water for twenty miles, scorpions and snakes. And hostile warlords nearby.’

‘And why did they attack you?’

‘When the local warlords saw our American made helicopters they thought we were American, so came out in strength to kill us.’

Our host was horrified. ‘They thought ... that you were American, so attacked?’

I nodded. ‘General Aideed sent five thousand men towards us.’

‘And how many men did you have?’

‘Forty-five.’

‘Forty-five ... against five thousand!’

‘But we had the Huey Cobras. Without them we would have all been killed.’

‘You could have left by plane?’

‘My partners in our medical charity, and I, have a simple philosophy: don’t send your staff where you’re not prepared to go yourself. When we knew they were in danger we stayed.’

The audience clapped.

‘And with just four *dated* combat helicopters, and four dated pilots, you fought a running battle for five days, inflicting a serious defeat on General Aideed and his warlords. Has Aideed lost face in Somalia?’

‘Very much so, his neighbouring warlords are making war on him as we speak.’

‘And the pilots we’ve been hearing so much about, they’re in their fifties and sixties? One was in Vietnam.’

‘Hal, yes, he fought in Vietnam. He also taught me a lot about what I know about Hueys.’

‘Ladies and gentlemen, Hal Becker!’

Hal walked out, dressed smart. I stood up and greeted him with a big hug, soon sitting again.

‘So, Hal. Was Paul a good student?’

‘Well, the first thing he did was to rip out the page of the manual that listed things *not* to do with a helicopter.’ The audience laughed. ‘And that red fire warning light, he thinks that means *go faster*.’ They laughed more, so did I. ‘I used to have a wife who drove the car till it stopped, no gas, then called the Auto Club to see what was wrong with it. He’s like that with helicopters, fly ‘em till the rotors stop and wonder why the ground is coming up so fast.’

‘Paul, what was Hal’s contribution at Scorpion Base?’

‘Well, on the third day he took off his flight suit, stood on the tower roof for a cooling breeze and poured water over his lily white blubber to cool down. The Somalis took one look and ran away shrieking.’ The audience laughed. ‘And at night ... Hal’s snoring kept making the Somalis think we had more machine gun ammo than we did.’ The audience laughed again. ‘It kept their heads down. But his real contribution was one of morale, encouraging the other pilots to keep going up, even when the helicopters were unserviceable. Day after day, mission after mission, they kept attacking the convoys coming towards us, keeping them at bay, taking fire all the time. And there were a few warning lights on the Huey Cobras, all ignored.’ The audience had fallen silent. ‘The thing I never understood about your military, is this focus on youngsters. I’d put Hal up against them any day. Hal’s generation are made of sterner stuff.’

‘Ladies and gentlemen, Hal Becker.’ They applauded him at length.

With the cameras off we were led out, Hal knowing a good restaurant. We were already dressed up, so used the studio’s limo to drop us around at the restaurant. The food was good, but the other guests focused on just us, which was a little off-putting. Unlike my dear girlfriend, I never understood the attraction of other people gawking at us; I found it a little unsettling. Remembering what Jimmy had said about Vietnam vets, I asked Hal about vet’s charities. Turned out there was a mini-convention come barbeque in Washington day after tomorrow, and I should have figured that. I told him we would both be attending. Katie was excited and tipsy, which meant she was randy, so we headed off at a respectable hour.

In the morning I was worrying about what Jimmy would say regarding meeting the President. And what I was supposed to say or do regarding Magestic work, and not just the celebrity suck up part – him sucking up to me and Katie for a few extra votes. As I stood in the kitchen at 6am, staring down at the already busy streets with a coffee mug in hand, I realised that I wasn’t afraid, nor even nervous. ‘Odd’, I found myself reflecting. Jean rose early and insisted on making breakfast for me; Katie would need a rocket under her to be up at this hour. If no one woke her she’d be there till noon.

The mobile phone in my pocket beeped and I took it out: *message*. It was one of those new text message things, and I tried to figure out how to open it, finally getting the short message: *Vietnam Vet meet, Hacker, offer job. Jimbo*. I pressed the red button and put the phone back in my pocket, thinking how odd it was that there was no mention of the President. I kicked up Katie at 8am and carried her to the shower, then answered the door to a courier, a thin package signed for, finding seven return tickets for Washington. It took a little thinking, but I figured they were for us three, Hal and three bodyguards. But there were four bodyguards, so I finally figured Hal would make his own way there for the meeting. And I wanted to figure it out without ringing Jimmy and seeming thick.

The bodyguards turned up with overnight bags, so that clinched it, I was right and I gave them each a plane ticket, which they were expecting. They drove us to the airport and we took a short commercial flight to Washington. Coming in to land, Washington did not look that inviting, quite rough in fact. The guys had a hire car waiting, a large people carrier, and delivered us to a hotel not far from the White House. One of the guys was ex-Secret Service, the man keenly briefing us on where to go, the layout, normal protocol, interesting facts and funny stories of Presidents past. We had time for a quick bite to eat and a shower, and I asked the same guy to confirm we'd be there on time.

Katie and Jean were nervous as hell as we drove around, but I told them it was just like Beijing, only warmer. And that he was just a regular guy. As I said the words I reminded myself that he was also a politician, and that made him a snake with his own agenda. I wondered what the real agenda was as we drove past tourists taking pictures of the famous backdrop and up to the gate.

'Holton, party of three,' the ex-Secret Service guy said, displaying some sort of ID. We were in.

We drove around to a small car park, agents in tight fitting suits stepping out and opening the doors. I stepped down, helping Katie and Jean out, the van pulling off, Oliver's hired muscle staying inside the van.

Walking through a busy corridor I said to Jean, 'Tradesman's entrance.' The poor dear looked so nervous I worried for her a little. We waited in a small room, drinks offered, the ladies

having water as I stared up at the paintings, ignorantly not knowing who any of them were. Why couldn't people label paintings?

After ten minutes the door clicked open and an officious looking man appeared. He seemed vaguely familiar, and led us through another empty room to the Oval office, finding the big man himself sat signing papers, left handed, a secretary at his elbow.

'Please, come in,' President Harvey offered as he put the end on his pen and allowed the secretary to take the papers. He stood and walked around.

'You seem taller than on the TV,' I said, making him laugh as we shook. 'This is Katie Joe, and her mum, Jean.'

He shook their hands and said hello, a lingering smile for Katie. We remained standing as a photographer entered. 'Memento pictures,' he said.

'Bollocks,' was what I wanted to say, but I resisted. We sat, and he delicately asked questions about Rescue Force and Somali as if he had not been briefed, which I was sure he had, then asked Katie about her career, her concerts, he even engaged Jean in a little chit-chat. I considered what pretext he would use to get rid of the girls. A tour came to mind.

Here it came. 'Ladies, our State Department officials would like to pick Paul's brains about politics in Somali, would you like a tour?'

They would, and off they went, making me grin, the Chief of Staff noticing. With them out the door I said, 'I figured you'd use that line. Any chance of a beer?' A beer was ordered, now just the President and his Chief of Staff. 'So, how *are* your ratings?'

'They always dip after a year or two in office. I'll play at politician a year from now, before the next election.'

'You running again?' I asked.

'You know something I don't?'

'You get back in,' I told him. He glanced at his chief. I asked him, 'So, what'll you do at the end of eight years, once you're all done with sitting in the big chair?'

'That's a heck of long way off.'

'Not really,' I said. 'We think in decades. So, what'll you do when you're a civilian again?'

He eased back. 'Guess you're about to tell me.'

‘You stay with the “M” Group, having a role to play.’

‘I do?’

‘It’s either that, or you forever sit wondering when the world’s going to end, and not knowing - being on the outside. And that’s a feeling I know. I once fell ill, and was left out of things for a while. Terrible feeling, to be on the inside, *in the know*, then left out.’

Concerned, he glanced at his Chief. ‘I figured we’d ask you some questions, not the other way around.’

‘I figured that you’d make a better job of it in Somali. Life’s little disappointments, eh?’ He didn’t seem to like that, at all. ‘You grow up thinking the States is all powerful, then you realise that power, and common sense, don’t always go together.’

The Chief bluntly asked, ‘How many more are there like Senator Pedersen?’

‘*Like ... him?*’

‘Receiving Magestic help.’

It was my turn to wind up the President of the United States. ‘I once helped Jimmy post on some letters, all US Airmail, about fifty there were.’ The Chief looked quite put out, glancing at the President. ‘They were not all politicians, they were company bosses, bankers, all sorts in there.’

The President began, ‘Some may see that as a conspiracy.’

‘I told you you’d get back in. That’s the truth, not a conspiracy. A conspiracy would be the people we’ve trashed, wrecking their careers.’

Their interest was piqued. ‘Why ... were their careers trashed?’ the President asked.

‘Because we know what they’ll do in the future, of course.’

‘Seems like you’re playing God,’ the Chief complained.

‘Let me ask *you* a question, that was asked of me: if you could go back in time, to when Hitler was a baby, could you reach into his cot and strangle him?’

‘I’d ... probably have a problem with that.’

The President said, ‘Not least, because whoever took his place may have been even worse.’

‘So, it may just be better to watch and wait, then wreck his political career – a humane way to do it,’ I said. I was feeling mischievous. ‘You’re in that chair because you were allowed to be in it, Mister President; because you’ll actually do quite well *as*

a President. The guy that was going to beat you at the next election was ... dealt with. And a hundred small decisions taken a decade ago will help you win and do well during a turbulent period of human history.'

'Jesus,' the Chief let out.

'It's very odd to hear stuff like that from someone from someone so young,' the President reflected, easing back.

'I'm more capable ... than I look,' I told them, being defensive.

'Of that ... we're sure,' the Chief said as he stood and walked to the window. He turned, his hands in his pockets. 'You handed us back a victory in Somalia.'

'You say that ... as if we're not on the same side. Look, mate, we're working around you because you're too damn arrogant to work with us. And until you realise that you'll keep screwing up and losing lives, maybe a lot of lives. You're future economy is screwed, and even if you had started to fix it two years ago it would have *still* been too late. So we're working in secret to try and fix *your* fucking economy, so future American presidents don't go to war to fix the deficit!'

'Go to war?' the President asked, his chief closing in.

'In the decades ahead you'll owe China more money than is prudent, so a Republican idiot will attack China, hoping to wipe out them, and their dollars.'

'Jesus,' the Chief let out.

'You lose everyone on the west coast, your economy fucked forever. Then the same idiots will invade Venezuela, a jungle campaign that'll make Vietnam look like a picnic. Every country in South America turns against you. *And* ... you'll lose both wars. Before that OPEC will drop the dollar as reserve currency, making your imports twice as expensive overnight. So, gentlemen, we're going to carrying on with our *conspiracy* to save *your* arses. And ... you're welcome!'

The beer finally arrived, leaving me wondering if they had popped out for it. I eased back and took many sips. 'Not bad.'

The Chief said, 'This 2025 thing. If that's so bad, why bother fixing what's in between.'

'It's survivable, just very difficult. It'll need the co-operation of many countries, especially Russia and China, which is why we contacted them way ahead of you.'

‘How much do they know?’ the President asked.

‘Just about all of it, in detail. A hell of a lot more than you.’

The President stood. ‘You’re feeding our enemies critical information.’

‘If it was *critical*, why haven’t you come and spoken to us, eh?’ I wagged an angry finger. ‘We’ve had nothing but crap from the CIA, even had some CIA shits threaten us and try and blackmail us. And they’ve tried to bug us every step, they even bugged your fucking NSA boys when they came to see us. You may be the President, but from this side of the desk it don’t look like you’re in charge of jack shit.’

He sat, issuing a sigh. ‘That will change. I was foolish to ignore this.’

‘Well, look on the bright side. You are, apparently, the only US president, past or present, *ever* allowed to join the secret “M” Group.’

‘I am?’ He glanced at his Chief.

‘Yes. There’ll be the regular “M” Group, then the real one behind it. You ... are invited to join the real one, apparently. And that came as a shock to me, since you’re going to get impeached for shagging young political interns.’

‘What?’ the Chief asked, closing in.

‘Yeah, so make sure they’re all fat and ugly,’ I told him.

The look he gave the President suggested he already knew what I was on about. He sat and took a moment, crossing his legs. ‘Do you have an agenda in Africa?’

‘We have an agenda everywhere, mate, including tampering with future presidential candidates.’

‘There’s a lot of people in this town that would not like that, if the truth got out,’ the Chief suggested.

‘Would like it even less if they knew the full truth. Guess they wouldn’t bother going to work or paying their taxes,’ I pointed out. ‘You’ll know if the full truth ever leaks out, you’ll be under permanent Martial Law, soldiers down Main Street.’

They glanced at each other.

The President finally asked, ‘Are you prepared to give a complete history to us?’

‘To some of you ... yes. The problem will be, according to Magestic, that future Republican Presidents will try and use that knowledge for the political and economic gain of the US - so

some detail will always be left out. Unlike the Chinese, you change Presidents often, and policy swings wildly from left to right. Any good work you lot do ... will be reversed and fucked up by the next guy in that seat.'

The President nodded his agreement with that idea. A knock on the door preceded the ladies returning from their tour.

'I told you ... nick some mementos,' I playfully scolded them. 'An ashtray, something.'

The President was all smiles for the ladies, as if we had just had a very friendly chat. He thanked us, and we thanked him, the tour lady leading us back to our van. I wondered if he had a little red button on his desk that could blow up the van.

Back at the hotel I used a payphone in the lobby, many coins in as I dialled the house in the UK. Cookie answered, fetching Jimmy. 'I just swore at the President.'

'Good. Don't forget the Vietnam Vet's thing tomorrow.'

'Didn't you hear what I said, I shouted at him.'

'Ever wondered why you were recruited?'

'Charming personality?' I toyed.

'Because you're a sarcastic bastard who sees through the crap, to what's really going on underneath. Usually, the first thing that comes into your head is the right thing, rude or not. You did what I expected, nothing more, nothing less. Say hello to Katie for me.'

Before he put the phone down I thought I heard a woman's voice. Dirty bugger, up to something when I was out of the house. Katie was nervous-tired and dosed, I sat and thought about things, coffee in hand as I stared at the grey Washington rooftops.

After a meal in the hotel restaurant we headed across town to do a recorded chat show, a very similar set of questions to O'Brian, but no surprise guests. They asked about how much we gave to charity, I said eighty-five percent, Katie explaining that she contributed a great deal as well; it would have been awkward otherwise. She was tired when we returned, straight to bed for her beauty sleep, so I flicked channels for hours.

The next day Hal called my mobile. I didn't even know he had the number, still jumping every time my jacket pocket trilled. I left Katie and Jean to go shopping with two of the bodyguards, who looked thrilled at the prospect, and I drove with

Hal, and the other two bodyguards, south into Virginia to the veteran's event. The meeting was held at a small airfield and looked pretty much like an air show in the UK, hotdogs and flying displays, beer tents and shops selling all sort of crap memorabilia, including German helmets from World War Two. The air was filled with distorted music from the sixties coming from several directions, the breeze tainted with the smell of onions. We grabbed hot dogs, some for the bodyguards, then zeroed in on a line of Hueys, all fitted out with a variety of weapons. At the rope barrier we stood and ate our dogs, Hal describing some of the features on the Hueys. I liked the chain gun, and asked a guy stood looking bored where I could buy some.

'They's military only, mister,' came back.

'And I'm a military buyer for numerous African states.'

The man glanced at his colleague, the two of them stepping forwards.

The second man recognised Hal. 'You were in that Somalia thing,' he said in a thick southern drawl.

'Yes, and this is my boss, Paul. He just had a meet with the President. He's the guy who rescued the UN mission in Somalia.'

'Shit...' the man let out. 'Come on back here, fellas.'

We ducked under the rope and walked to a tent behind his helicopter, magazines laid out on tables. A third man stood up.

'These are the fellas off the TV, that thing in Somali.'

'Welcome, welcome,' the third man said.

'Tell me about the chain guns,' I suggested, getting a brochure handed to me, a description given. I faced Hal, 'These good.'

'Against vehicle convoys of Somalis ... very good.'

'You do new or second hand?' I asked.

'Got six re-furbs' at a good price. A good bulk price on the ammo too. You, er, you got a shipping license?'

Hal suggested, 'It all goes to the Kenyan Army, and they got a contract with the Department of Defence.'

I agreed a price and we swapped details, an invoice and shipping document to be sent to the Kenyan Embassy, a copy to us, six Huey chain guns and a lot of ammo. And these chain guns could be reloaded from the rear of the Huey whilst in flight.

Clutching brochures, we wandered out, a quick ten minutes in the beer tent and another “dog” before finding a Veteran’s charity tent, a large marquee with many poster-boards detailing all their good work. I ducked my head and entered, finishing my dog.

A middle-aged woman in a cowboy hat, high boots and a low skirt shook a bucket in front of me. ‘Ya’ll wanna contribute some-ting?’

‘I’d like to contribute a lot. Where’s the boss, love?’

‘Where’s ya’ll from, honey?’

‘England.’

‘Oh. I’ll go fetch ‘im.’

The grey haired boss walked over, his jacket lapels detailing his many heroic actions through his medals. ‘Can I help you, son?’

‘I’d like to make a large donation.’

‘You’s English, ya’ll weren’t in Vietnam.’

‘That doesn’t mean that we appreciate your soldiers any less.’ I gestured to Hal, who listed his rank and exploits.

‘Well, we’s glad of anything you donate, son.’

I gave him a holdall of hundred dollar bills. ‘One hundred thousand dollars.’

He flicked through the wads, clearly surprised, his mouth opening, but was lost for words.

A second man approached. ‘I know you, you were on the TV, that English fella that fought off the Somali Army.’

The old guy recognised us now. ‘Shit. Come on in fellas, we got us some cold ones.’

People huddled around as we accepted cans of Bud, Hal soon telling the story of Somali, and soon quiet a small crowd of people listening in. The old guy suggested we say something at the next tent, a large marquee where it seemed anyone could simply get up and whinge about the Vietnam War. He led us down the aisle, most of the audience dressed scruffily – me standing out in my suit, rudely chucking off the speaker – who seemed a bit drunk, then took the podium.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, we have a rare treat for you today. Y’all probably seen on the TV about the big battle in Somali, the helicopter battle – four Huey Cobras up against five thousand enemy soldiers. Well, the pilots are here with us today.

Everybody, this's Hal Becker – a vet from '68, and his English boss, the young fella that rescued the UN people under fire.'

They applauded as we took to the stage. Hal went first, explaining some of the battle, but soon had questions thrown up and answered. I noticed a drinks table in a corner, and, grabbing the microphone said the beers were on me. I sent a bodyguard down with a thousand dollars, more than enough. The tent filled quickly, everyone getting a free beer, many people now stood around the edges as Hal fielded questions, gave answers and made jokes. At one point they asked if we had any jobs going.

'If you're a medic or doctor with combat experience, we might,' I answered. Judging by the crowd, none were suitably qualified; most appeared to be alcoholics in various stages of progression.

When I expressed the opinion that Hal's generation made better soldiers, the tent erupted into cheer. And I still didn't know why I was supposed to be here; it certainly wasn't for some old chain guns. We eventually gave up the podium as everyone now stood drinking, more cans ordered from storage. I mingled with the crowd, chatting to the men, finding a few Huey pilots and swapping stories.

Then someone pushed through, dragging another man. 'You said you wanted combat medics, yeah?' The second man, the man being reluctantly dragged, had a green combat jacket that said Hacker.

I shook his hand. 'You were a medic?'

'Still am,' he testily stated.

'Where you working?'

'Charities in South America. What do *you* do?'

'I run a medical charity in Africa, Kenya. We send medics into shit holes where no sane person would go.'

He slowly nodded. 'What ya looking for?'

'Experience.'

He made a face. 'Got plenty of that.'

'You good with gunshot trauma?' He lifted his eyebrows nodded. 'Improvised medical techniques, when the kit is low?'

'Story of my fucking life!'

'What's you asking price, Mister Hacker?'

‘Hacker is a nickname, got it amputating limbs in Vietnam. It’s Doctor Jim Lebante. And my price ... is what I can get. Last job was all costs, food, room and ten grand a year.’

‘My offer price, is all costs, food and room, flights, four weeks paid leave a year, and thirty thousand dollars.’ I gave him five thousand dollars and a Rescue Force card. ‘Turn up in Kenya when you’re ready.’

He stared at the money. ‘I got a funeral to go to, then I’m all yours.’

Hal shook his hand. ‘Welcome to the team. You won’t regret it, they’re good to work for.’

‘Can you fly anything?’ I asked him.

He shrugged, ‘Cessna, Huey.’

‘Excellent. Call the numbers when you land in Nairobi, explain who you are, they’ll send a plane.’

We left the drunken vet’s to it, and I feared what that tent would be like in a few hours. The bodyguards drove us back to the hotel. We picked up the girls and headed straight back to New York.

Katie had concerts in other cities and I made my excuses, catching the first available flight out. Hal was heading back as well, so he altered his ticket to be on my flight; I paid his upgrade. It gave us plenty of time to chat, and we had a lot to chat about – I was always keen to pick his brains, and he was more than keen to help me. It made him feel wanted and needed. In London I insisted he came back to the house and we gave him a room, everyone making him very welcome, even the Alsations. Tired after the flight, he went to bed midday.

In the lounge I eased down with a mug of tea and issued a sigh. ‘Got Hacker by the way.’

‘Good,’ Jimmy said. ‘He’s excellent at combat medicine, he can set-up some courses. He’s performed operations with bits of tin cans.’

‘He flies as well.’

‘He flew a Cessna when he was eleven, grew up in Alaska.’

I nodded before sipping my tea. ‘So, what you been up to while I was shouting at the US President?’

‘Me and Big Paul *disposed* of a few *problems*, that needed disposing off.’

‘Ah.’

‘The club is almost ready.’
‘Did you have a woman in here?’ I teased.
‘That’s Karen, the masseur, niece of Sharon.’
‘Oh yeah?’
‘Yes, she’s nice, and no – you can’t have a massage from her.’
‘Are you...?’
‘Don’t be nosy, young man. Oh, draft of the book on Zaire in the office, go through it. He’s just made a start on Scorpion Base.’
‘Did you see my TV chat show stuff?’
‘Yes, you did a good job. American TV is going to make a mini-movie about Dr Nash. We’ll be in it.’
‘We ... us two?’
‘No, Rescue Force, someone playing us.’
‘That’ll be odd, my mum will be confused,’ I suggested.
‘Anyway, I think the President got the message.’
‘Already contacted the British Prime Minister, urging greater use of ... us two, greater co-operation. Did you tell him fifty Magestic letters sent to the States?’
‘Yeah?’ I puzzled. ‘How’d you know that?’
‘And that we helped him into office?’
‘Yeah, and I made that bit up. How’d you know?’
‘How’d I know anything, young man?’
‘You are so weird sometimes.’
He nodded. ‘Yep. Oh, four killed at Scorpion base, group stepped on a mine.’
‘Who?’
‘Four of Rabbit’s gang clearing the airfield: Tanzanians.’
‘Hell.’
‘Nature of the game with mine clearance.’

Silo’s II

The new nightclub was ready by mid-September, 1995. It now offered two main entrances, plus a secret one, a link to the hotel next door which would allow VIPs to pop in and out unseen.

Many additional fire escapes had been built, and the Health and Safety people had been up and down the building excessively, so too the Fire Brigade. I took Katie on a tour of it on a damp Tuesday morning.

Through the main public entrance we were met by a line of brass turn styles, allowing one person in or out a time through each. Tills were now positioned on the left, a dozen high quality cameras covering all angles, a large screen displaying your face as you passed through, leaving anyone attending in no doubt about the security. Through the turn styles the corridor narrowed, cloakrooms on the right, separated for ladies and gents. You then opened into the main room, a dance floor covering one quarter of it in the far left corner. Around the edges of the room ran a line of brass railings, tables inside and out of it.

I pointed up. Around this large room ran a balcony on two sides, patrons in the member's area able to peer down at non-members and, if they wished, invite them up. Walking around the room counter-clockwise, we poked our heads into five rooms; a chill-out room – that would have no music, a ladies only room with music and bar, a retro dance room, a modern dance room and another bar, a large toilets at the end – a mini shop in both the ladies and gents. Climbing wide stairs to the second floor, we found the Chinese and Indian restaurants, plus two additional rooms, simple wine bars that would offer no music to patrons, so I puzzled why they were not called chill-out rooms. Their proximity to the restaurants convinced me that people awaiting their tables would use them.

At the balcony we stared down for a moment, passing through a door that would normally be manned by security; members being allowed in and out, the public not let in unless invited. The first room we entered was the reading room, a bank of computers lining the far wall, all fitted by our IT man Gareth with the new-fangled Windows 95. Teas and coffees would be served in here, but no alcohol allowed. Next door to it was a large chill-out bar, many comfortable seats but no music speakers. The toilets on this floor were huge, a small shop that sold all sorts, a unisex hairdressers salon at the rear, shaves for gentlemen or jacket cleaning. I peeked into the ladies as well, many seats in front of mirrors, free bits and pieces for the ladies to use.

The main member's area offered a square of four rooms facing each other; Retro room, Dance room, Wine Bar and Ladies Only. They had each been decorated to a high standard, but did not come across as dated, or old and stuffy. We took the lift down one floor and to the member's entrance. We found it blocked by a similar barrier of turn styles, but these were card swipe as per our leisure centre; members would be using their cards for unaided access. A cloakroom sat off to the left as people entered, again split by ladies and gents. Members then either climbed the stairs or entered the Red Room, as we did now. And it was still a barn of a room.

A very long bar ran down the middle of the room, bisecting it and pointing towards the stage; guests could be served on all sides of the bar. To the left and right of the bar tables were laid out, at least fifty on each side in my estimation. Signs labelled the table numbers, arrows pointing. Those at the rear were on a platform enclosed by a brass railing, the platform two foot high. Those in front were just a foot off the ground, the tables closer to the stage at ground level. With Katie having a keen professional interest, we climbed the stage and stood staring out at the room. It reminded me of a 1930s music hall.

Lifting my head I could see a wide balcony on two sides, tables set out all along it. Katie liked the room, suggesting the acoustics would be good. Since she was the opening act, she'd soon get the chance to find out. There was no way to reach the balcony from this room, and I tried to picture the layout in my mind. Back at the main entrance we turned left, noticing signs to a Snack Bar. Voices could be heard. Down a few steps we found a brightly coloured and brightly lit American style diner that was already in use, two chefs serving five security guards and four police officers in uniform. The new staff politely rose, but I waved them down, greeting the police officers. Jimmy had made it clear to the local cops that they could use the snack bar via the rear door when it was not busy, as well as late at night as in Cardiff. With the air full of intoxicating smell of pancakes we sat and had a cup of tea, and many pancakes.

On the third floor we inspected the quality rooms, finding them as good as anything either of us had ever stayed in, a plumber saying hello as he finished up on something. At the end of the corridor we found another small bar for the guests; it did

breakfasts from 7am to Noon according to the sign. On the next floor we inspected the smaller rooms, still sumptuous, and easily four-star quality. The top floor revealed staff apartments, nametags on doors, a few people coming and going. Above them sat more apartments, but with shared facilities; one bathroom to four bedrooms. Jimmy's policy was to use full time staff wherever possible, and then live-in.

Back on the ground level we stepped into the security room for a nose. It was split into two parts, a rest room with tables and sofas for the staff, plus a second room with a huge bank of monitors covering two walls entirely, and already manned twenty-four hours. The two security men said hello before explaining what all the cameras did. Basically, not a mouse could move anywhere without being seen, all footage being recorded for evidence if there was any trouble, and in several key places the cameras had microphones. There was more security than Buckingham Palace, the one man joked. He was not wrong.

That afternoon Jimmy and I made a nostalgic trip back to McKinleys, all the traders waving, many with phones to ears. The directors made us coffee in their spacious lounge; there was I time I did that for them.

'We'll get you some opening night tickets for the new club,' Jimmy offered them.

'This weekend, yes?'

'Yes,' Jimmy confirmed. 'Friday. We'll be running some special events, bankers and traders, some business meetings, international trade fairs, plus the usual list of beautiful women and celebs.'

'A good investment?' one asked.

Jimmy made a face. 'Moderate.'

'When *you* say moderate, it's excellent by everyone else's standards!' They laughed.

'Can *we* have some shares?' another man joked.

'Funny enough, quite a few people have asked that already,' Jimmy answered. 'Been thinking of making it a Plc.'

That was news to me, but I did not react. And I could see the director's grey matter working away.

Jimmy continued, 'If I did, then anyone with shares would get the run of the place, say a minimum value of five thousand

pounds worth. Building was worth five million before we renovated, so probably six or seven by now. Then there's the ongoing business – all the Pineapple bands doing regular gigs.'

I figured every flash young trader in London would know about the club within the hour, and the Plc hint.

'If you create a Plc, remember us, we'll place some shares for you – no fees!'

After leaving them, we went straight around to a pre-arranged meeting of our solicitors and accountants: they were told to create a Plc straight away, ten million shares at a pound asking price each, sold through McKinleys, forty percent kept back for us.

Next came Pineapple, Oliver visiting the UK this week, the offices now bustling and in need of a move within a year.

'We're going to create a Plc so that people can have shares in the new nightclub,' Jimmy told the assembled senior staff.

'We ... can buy shares?' Oliver asked.

'Anyone can,' I informed him.

'And the musicians themselves?'

'Everyone,' I emphasised. 'Be good for the groups, because if they have shares - and do lots of gigs there to pull in the crowds - their shares go up.'

I could see their grey matter working away.

Opening night was a pain for the security outside, trying to explain to people that it was suits only, and entrance was by invitation only; queuing up gave no one a better chance of getting in. People got pissy and the police had to escort them away. And that was despite the radio advertising. If we had space for ten thousand, we could have squeezed that many in.

The public door charged ten pounds each, but the head doorman allowed in the pretty girls free. Since there were not many registered members yet, we sent tickets to many trading companies we knew. With a mini-concert in the Red Room consisting of six of our best groups, the tickets were now being sold on. Half a dozen celebs booked rooms upstairs, many of the groups given rooms free, people we knew given a few rooms. Pineapple got the bulk of the tickets, close to a thousand, and the groups gave tickets to friends and family.

Katie opened with a familiar song, myself, Jean and Jimmy sat at a table on the balcony, a TV crew just along from us. The tables below were all full, a few people stood around the bars. I pointed down at a table to the front, a man with a headset and a large microphone, Jimmy explaining that they were a radio station, going out live. My other half performed five songs, loud applause given between each, then toured the room as the next band got ready. Cameras flashed, reporters that we had invited in, and she shook hands with many people, eventually finding her way up to us. Yes, the acoustics were good, she confirmed.

Sykes and Jack found us, both done out smart, and stood staring down for ten minutes before heading off exploring. Mackey and some of his rescuers wandered past, saying hello and chatting for five minutes. At least they did not have climbing boots on. Big Paul and Karl came and went, skulking around and checking people, doors and cameras. Looking down I noticed food being served to the tables, Jimmy explaining that it was a limited menu, tasty starters from the Chinese or Indian restaurants.

‘So they head there after,’ I realised. I asked Jimmy to watch Katie, and set-off exploring.

The chill-out room seemed to have many couples sat around chatting, the dance room only offering up a few people dancing at the moment. The Retro Room housed gangs of smartly dressed traders in shirts and colourful braces, pissed already and enjoying themselves, the pretty girls gravitating to the guys with money. The wine bar was lined with smart older couples, most well over forty, the reading room scattered with serious looking groups of men stood chatting about business, some sat at the computers. I noticed a few of the directors of McKinleys talking shop.

Burly bouncers let me though to the public area, the Indian and the Chinese restaurants only modestly attended, unlike in Cardiff; I guessed people had not heard about them yet. I also knew the Welsh stuffed their faces more, and loved their Indian food. I walked down the stairs, a few girls smiling welcomingly as I passed, finding the main room packed, many on the dance floor, more again stood staring at the girls on the dance floor. The side rooms were busy, all of them. At the main entrance Big Paul had someone around the throat, the man thrown out and passed to uniformed police officers outside.

‘Problems already?’ I asked.

‘Had his girl by the hair.’

‘Zero tolerance,’ I affirmed before easing through the brass turn styles and through the queues to the street, Big Paul close at hand. For a change he had my back. The queue was massive and I patrolled along its length. Turning at the end I pulled out a wad of tickets for the members area and issued them to pretty girls and attractive couples. By time I had finished, the numbers in the members area had been boosted by fifty. We re-entered via the members and VIPs entrance, just as a bell rang. I smiled widely. The staff had a sign up which said the bell would be rung if someone uttered, “Do you know who I am?”

Our rule was simple: if we don’t recognise you then you’re not famous enough to get in. And I didn’t recognise the man, who stood protesting that he had a string of salons. He was escorted out and told to apply for a membership or a ticket. In the cool night air I stood at the entrance and welcomed people. Two old Bond movie actors caught my eye and I invited them in, escorting them upstairs and getting them free drinks, introducing them to the gang on the balcony.

‘Oh, I love your character!’ Jean let out, giving the poor guy a big hug.

A few latter-day soap actors joined us and we made them all feel very welcome.

Half an hour later I got call to the main entrance, a former gangster, come author, was protesting his lack of welcome. He repeated to me what a well know “geezer” he was, well known in all the wrong circles. Unfortunately for him he spouted off in front of the cameras with microphones. I sent him packing to veiled threats, then handed over a copy of the tape of the police, a second copy couriered to the BBC, the idiot getting himself arrested. I mentioned the incident to Jimmy, who calmly said the guy would not be a problem. All in all, the first night was resounding success, the Saturday night packed.

The next week we held an event for civil servants past and present on the Wednesday, many “old chaps” re-acquainting themselves, Sykes in the thick of it. The following night was the first Emergency Services Charity Ball, full to capacity, our groups singing again. That second weekend we reached capacity and the staff were told to be more selective. At my suggestion we

held an English screen actors reunion, TV cameras and reporters let in, followed by a Bond actors reunion. That one I liked, but was disappointed just how camp a lot of the bad guys were, spoiling my image of them forever.

We made the papers a great deal in the weeks leading up to the floatation, the shares going quickly to 212pence, making us a lot of money. Oliver had bought a great many shares at a pound each, as did many of our groups, and even Katie. Ownership of shares granted a certain number of tickets, the more shares you had the more tickets, including free meals and stays in the hotel rooms. By time the club was settled we had recovered the cost of the hotel almost three times over.

Is that building safe?

The architect and builders had been puzzled when we had ordered the building's construction a few months earlier.

'You want a half built, *badly built*, tower block, collapsed on one side.'

'Yep. Get to work, here are the plans.'

We had bought a field next to Mapley aerodrome from a local farmer and concreted most of it over, leaving a space for the new building. That building was now ready, many senior Fire Brigade staff in attendance today. They had been confused at first, then a bit reluctant to join in today's exercise, but we had pulled a few strings and they had been nudged to take part. We could not explain everything, because we wanted it to be a surprise, a real test. Without knowing what was going on, they had been reluctant to spare men and machines for the exercise.

In the command portakabin our staff waited. Across from them stood the finished building, looking anything other than finished. It was a four storey concrete block of flats with ten flats along each side, all decorated with second hand flammable furniture. The leftmost section, the last four flats, appeared to have collapsed after a gas explosion, or earthquake, or whatever scenario we wanted to give them. That part was just a large pile of concrete rubble rising up to the second floor. It looked haphazard, but had been carefully designed.

In reality, it had all been carefully planned, the structure safer than it appeared, many hidden access tunnels under the rubble that allowed “injured” people to crawl in or out. We also had a few nasty surprises for the earnest rescuers. Under the rubble, Mackey’s cavers now lay with bottled water, heaters, food and blankets, plus fake blood and injuries painted on; they could enter or exit via a cave system. The senior officers sat in a specially made stand, a cover keeping out the elements.

‘Gentlemen,’ Jimmy began. ‘Today’s exercise is simple. The building behind has suffered a gas explosion, there are people trapped in many places. Our brief to you is nothing more than that.’ He pointed at the cameras fixed to poles. ‘The footage is available for later analysis. And yes, the Government will get to see the highlights.’ Stood next to the assembled men, Jimmy lifted his mobile phone. ‘This is Jimmy Silo at Mapley airfield, exercise Blue Sabre. I want to report a gas explosion, a building has collapsed, people are trapped, send help.’ He hung up, checking his watch. To the control portakabin he said, ‘Smoke please, some flame.’

A flame burst out of an apartment’s window, blowing out the glass, smoke billowing. More smoke rose from the rubble as we waited. Since the people taking part in the exercise were stood waiting at their respective fire stations or police stations, they took only six minutes to arrive, the air full of sirens. Four fire engines turned up, a man in a white hat taking charge, followed by half a dozen police cars and two ambulances.

Jimmy ordered, ‘Burst water main, please.’

A section of concrete exploded upwards, scaring the firemen, soon a huge plume of water drenching everyone nearby.

‘More fire!’

A second floor flat burst into flames, an engine attending it, soon Mackey’s actors being escorted out, carried out or stretched out of the main structure.

Jimmy asked the staff, ‘Are they on the third floor?’

‘Yes.’

‘Trap them!’ He faced the senior officers. ‘A fire has blocked the stairwell between floors two and three.’ He ordered, ‘Old lady and screamer!’

An old lady leant out a window, waving a hanky and trying to call for help, a woman screaming loudly from the top floor, the fire brigade kept busy.

‘Trapped man, position three!’ Jimmy ordered.

A man appeared half buried in the rubble, shouting for help. As officers began to clamber up there was some debate, the men ordered down and a ladder used, the rubble unsafe. As the ladder neared the man screamed, disappearing in a plume of concrete dust. Some of the senior officers were on their feet, some shouting advice. The trapped officers had to come down ladders. As soon as they had, the fire obstruction was switched off, smoke turned on, the broken windows now releasing billowing clouds. The fire officers got the fires out, now hunting for the source of the smoke. One source of smoke was at the top of the rubble, a hose brought to bear on it.

Jimmy faced the senior officers. ‘There are people trapped in the rubble, and you’re using enough water to drown them!’

A man ran out and shouted the hose switched off. Now a thorough search of the rubble was conducted.

Jimmy laughed, lifting a megaphone. ‘Police officers! Why are people going back into the building?’

The officers were cursing at length as the fire brigade went back in after people returning to their flats. A man was pulled from the rubble, ambulance staff attending, the man stretchered away. An hour later the firemen were grey with concrete dust, wet and tired. They brought up thermal cameras and searched the rubble at length, asking for silence and listening for knocking. It took ages to cut metal and concrete to free the next two people, who emerged with helmets and plastic goggles covering their eyes. The final person was buried deep, a tunnel cut out of the rubble, a volunteer going in. He was pulled out by a rope tied around his ankles, dragging a man as he went. It took four sets of hands to pull the man free. They finally figured they had everyone out.

Jimmy lifted his megaphone. ‘Anyone left in the building or rubble, come out now.’ A woman appeared at a window in the flats, a man easing up from the rubble. Curses were issued, accusing fingers pointed. Jimmy faced the senior officers. ‘Gentlemen, this facility can be used for simple building searches, simple fires with no victims, fires with victims, trapped

people or not, dog searches. It is available twenty-four hours a day, there is no charge, but you will have to book it in advance. In the control room you can re-ignite fires, set smoke on or off, even make false tapping sounds. We will use this for training our staff who go out to earthquakes, you may use it the rest of the time, playing back film footage to staff as a debrief.'

They thanked us, delighted with the facility and realness of it as the firemen cleaned up, huddled in groups and discussed what they may, or may not, have done differently. The next day the Prime Minister visited, we stayed away, and the exercise was repeated with different crews.

Kimballa

The American Vietnam veteran, Hacker, had his doubts about me after I had offered him a job. Then he went off and read the book, finally deciding to just give us a look over since it would not cost anything. Cosy met him at Nairobi and flew him up to the base in our old Cessna, having a long chat. Arriving at Mawlini and circling, Hacker had been surprised by the super-sized base in the middle of nowhere.

He was greeted by Coup, allocated a room and then given a meal and a few beers by Mac and Hal, the other Americans joining them, now down to three since one had stayed Stateside to milk the fame. The next day Hacker signed up, being issued a white uniform. They checked him out on the jeeps, which he passed in a day, a second day spent on maintenance. He already held a pilot's license, so was given a refresher on the Huey with Hal, getting his edge back in just a few hours. Hal spent a couple of days running exercises with him, before flying down to Nairobi with him for a Kenyan commercial helicopter license. Hacker passed first go.

For the following two weeks he was put through ordnance, a lot of which he already knew; grenades and mines had not changed much since Vietnam. He did the four-week course in two weeks and passed with flying colours, developing a reputation. Mac sent him to the clinic over the road for five days,

the border camp for five days, the Baardheere camp for five days and then on to Scorpion Base itself, the outpost still subjected to the odd half-hearted attack, and a scattering of injuries from ordnance.

When we flew back to Africa, that's where we found him. Stepping down from the Dash into blistering heat, I stood and took in the buildings. The tower now looked like new - large aerials protruding, a large metal hangar was up, another under construction, a barrack room was finished bar the roof and a second building was under construction. Foundation digging was "interesting", as the builders had put it, many old bits of ordnance unearthed. Rabbit now had a permanent five-man team here and they were kept busy. A small town of tents housed the Rifles, many jeeps parked up, soldiers walking about. Across the airfield much of the sand had been concreted over, hard standings for four Cobras and four Hueys, two of which were Rescue Force. And the perimeter now offered a decent barbed wire fence.

As we walked towards the tower I heard a "clunk" and noticed a well being drilled. 'There water here?'

'Deep down, yes,' Jimmy answered.

We entered the re-furbished tower, a generator powering lights and equipment, including a fridge.

Hal gave us both cold beers. 'How's that new nightclub?'

'Sold it,' I said.

'Sold it?'

'Sixty percent, made twelve million quid,' I told him.

'You can fix a pool here then,' he snarled. 'Fucking washing down here is terrible.'

'That new well should help,' Jimmy calmly informed him.

I took in the papers fixed to walls; flight details, arrivals and departures, team rotas, supplies and convoys due. Climbing the tower I was surprised to find two American servicemen. 'What you lot doing here, I thought you left Somalia?'

'You'd be the famous Paul Holton,' the first man said. He stood and we shook. 'We're kindly monitoring the radio traffic for you.'

'Yeah? How far away?'

'Up to a thousand miles.'

'Cool. What's Aided up to?'

‘He’s recovered a bit since they tried to unseat him.’

‘Bugger.’

The second man said, ‘We got a ship off the coast south of Mogadishu, getting the phone intercepts. He’s trying to persuade your friendly warlords to turn against you.’

‘They listening?’

‘No, they know what they’d be up against.’

A Cobra lifted off and headed east.

‘Trouble?’ I asked.

‘No, they fly out and remind people they’re here, shoot up the odd jeep. And last week a certain warlord’s compound blew up, forty clicks east of here.’

‘And...?’

‘We picked up that Mi24 on radar.’

Jimmy climbed up. ‘Gentlemen. Anything on Farouk’s brother?’

‘If all goes well, he’ll be driving down the coast road after sundown. That why you’re here?’

‘No, I just wanted to check you two are as comfortable as you could be.’

They glanced at each other. ‘Lovely spot; chef don’t need no heat to cook a fucking egg!’

Jimmy ordered, ‘Get some rest, back on at sundown, going to be a long night.’

‘Some op’s we don’t know about?’

‘It’s called ... the element of surprise. Have that tub moved north west at flank speed, and close inshore - to just five miles.’

‘Farouk’s brother and his gang ... coming by boat?’

‘Some are, some by road,’ Jimmy told them, leading me back down just as Hacker walked in.

‘Saw you land,’ he said, shaking our hands, odd to see him in his whites.

‘How you getting on?’ Jimmy asked him.

‘Great. Not much here to stretch me, but a few interesting injuries.’

‘Get some rest, you’ll be needed airborne tonight, a mission or two going down. Then tomorrow or the day after you’ll come with us, Kigoma and Zaire.’

‘Why, I ain’t been here long?’

‘More interesting medical cases there,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Something to *stretch* you. Besides, once you’re familiar with all the ops’ we want you teaching, more than doing.’

Hacker nodded. ‘I’ll get some grub and a kip, easier to sleep in the heat.’

As Hacker stepped out, Hal asked, ‘Got an operation tonight?’

‘Yes, warn the lads,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘All of the Cobras will go, plus the Mi24.’

‘Talk of the devil,’ Hal said, stepping into the sun as a thunderous roar announced the Mi24, stalking in at tree-top height, least it would be if there were any trees here. It landed quickly.

Mickey and Yuri joined us five minutes later as we sat sipping our beers.

‘Boss?’ Mickey said, a little surprised to see us.

‘Grab a seat, Mickey.’ They sat, accepting cold cans. ‘Get the bird ready for around 7pm, got a fishing trip for you.’

‘Fishing? A boat?’ Mickey surmised.

‘Farouk’s lot coming down by boat for a big pow-wow, decoy convoy by road.’

‘Slippery fuck, that one,’ Mickey said.

Yuri put in, ‘So we hit the road convoy first, no?’ Jimmy nodded. ‘And they think it is safe by sea. We refuel quick, no?’ Again Jimmy nodded.

‘How do we zero in on them at sea?’ Mickey asked.

‘Yank tub.’ Mickey lifted his eyebrows, Jimmy adding, ‘And when that’s going on, some house re-decorating, just to make a point.’

‘Cobra’s?’ Hal asked.

‘Yes, night attack, But Abdi’s people will set fires just prior to the attack run. But it is a half-moon night, so plenty of ground detail to fly over.’

A distant drone slowly became distinct. ‘Who’s that?’ I asked.

‘Extra Army Hueys,’ Jimmy said. ‘And, those chain guns.’

‘Cool. Give the boys an edge.’

I toured the Rifles’ tents, greeting the boys, all of whom seemed glad to see me. They now had a basic mess tent; no more camel steaks cooked over an open fire. I said hello to Rupert, asking about current operations. Turned out he didn’t know, he had just come back after a few week’s holiday. The ex-SAS guys

were lying on bunks, going out that evening, and gave me a run down of what had happened after the battle here, and the time and effort it took to clear the roads. Seems most of the debris was still on the roadside as a reminder to others. And the bridge south of us, blown-up by Hal, was being bypassed, so they had mined it. Six jeeps had been destroyed, a camel killed, but no further activity seen for weeks.

I ducked into the white Rescue Force tent, greeting familiar faces, a member of the Rifles with a badly cut arm being treated. They all seemed to be in high spirits, despite the lack of a bar or pool, but moaned when I told them that a hotel here would be a long way off. We ate with the pilots at 6pm, the sun dipping below the western horizon, the air cooling quickly. Then Jimmy called an operational meeting in the tower. He checked his watch, everyone else checking there's.

'OK, there are – hopefully – three operations going down tonight. The kick-off will be a boat convoy, three small fast boats heading down the coast just about ... now. If that's confirmed by the Yank tub, we'll hit a road convoy, making the boat convoy think it's in the clear. Mickey and Yuri will target the boat convoy ... with a little help. Check the radio frequencies with the boys upstairs, no mistakes please.

'Once that has been done, the bad guys will think we won't go straight back out, so the Cobras will refuel quickly and hit three targets in the towns south of here. At a pre-determined time Abdi's men will start fires nearby, a signal that the target is at home, and where that happy home is. If all goes well, we'll advance another twenty miles and create a new forward base in the weeks ahead.

'Now, the Jubalad boys are talking about declaring independence for the region we're already patrolling. That will piss off those further east, causing a reaction down the coast road. We'll be waiting ready. If they're stupid, we'll deal them a heavy blow, and independence for this area will survive more than just a few weeks.'

One of the American technicians came downstairs. 'Got three fast boats, forty miles up the coast. Traffic from a jeep convoy thirty miles out.' He retreated.

'OK, I guess we're on. Hal, find and hit that jeep convoy, then back here as fast as possible.' The American pilots stepped out.

‘Mickey, Yuri, wait till they’ve confirmed the attack, sit ready.’ They stepped out. To Rupert he said, ‘I need eyes on that road convoy after it’s hit, then I want an ambush for anyone coming out to nose at it. We need a line right from the coast to ten miles inland for the next two weeks – observation more than engagement. If a convoy moves, stop it.’

That left just the Kenyan radio operators as the sound of rotors filled the air. We cracked open beer cans and sat, listening to the radio chatter, and I found myself wishing that I was up there. Hacker lifted off and followed the Cobras in case one went down, his co-pilot using a hand held night sight to follow the Cobras heat signatures. All our Hueys now came fitted with radio-altimeters; we bought them to enhance our winching capability at night. The tower also now offered short-range radar in case someone got lost, all the helicopters capable of radio direction finding if necessary.

Fifteen minutes later the Cobras reported the convoy attacked, jeeps scattering and being picked off for ten minutes. They also got a surprise from a DHSK on one of the jeeps. The American technicians reported radio chatter to the boats, the Mi24 lifting off with a roar and heading southeast. The cobras returned to re-fuel, plenty of hands stood waiting to help; they were back up in ten minutes and heading southwest, the Rescue Force Huey following. One Cobra reported unserviceable and returned, possibly having taken a hit from a DHSK. They landed safely, the pilots joining us in the tower. With no radio chatter allowed, we had little to do but wait.

Forty minutes passed before Yuri came back on. ‘Five minutes to landing.’

‘Pattern clear.’

The Russian made attack helicopter came in, vibrations resonating around the tower, landing unseen on the apron, it’s engines winding down.

Mickey came in covered in sweat. He nodded towards Jimmy. ‘I think we got all three boats.’

‘Have a rest, good work.’

Mickey and Yuri sat and blew out, cold Fantas downed, sweat wiped off brows with the sleeves of flight suits.

Ten minutes later the radio crackled; Hal. ‘Mechanical fault, going down!’ I was on my feet, Jimmy following me up.

Jimmy grabbed the radio. 'Hacker, report position.'

'I'm close to Hal, but we're close to the damn town.'

'Hacker, pick him up, tell the other Cobras to destroy Hal's Cobra when you have him, over.'

'Roger.'

'I could take a Huey –'

Jimmy cut me off with a raised hand, a shake of his head. Five long minutes passed, the radio crackling with distorted traffic.

'Hacker to base.'

'Go ahead Hacker,' Jimmy said into the microphone.

'Got Hal and his gunner, heading back, Cobras have the message.'

I paced up and down. With the sound of a Huey growing I ran outside and across the apron. Hacker's Huey had its lights blazing and landed smoothly, Hal and his Kenyan gunner stepping down with two of our medics. They stepped across as the Huey powered down, the apron bathed in grey moonlight.

'Any injuries?' I asked.

'Just my pride,' Hal retorted as his grey image came into focus. 'Gearbox went. Hell, that bird's as old as I am.'

'Ancient then.'

'Watch it, whippersnapper.'

We entered the brightly lit tower.

'Still in one piece?' Jimmy asked Hal.

'Dropped from the sky in view of the buildings we hit, not more than mile at most,' Hal reported, his face covered in sweat.

Hacker stepped in as the final two Cobras landed. 'All down now.'

'You find the buildings OK?' Jimmy asked.

'Yeah, fucking great fire illuminating them,' Hal reported, grabbing a much needed Fanta.

A technician came down to us. 'Mogadishu traffic has them in a stir. Seems that Farouk and his brother were on the boats, one of his sons in the vehicle convoy, and Khalid and Mohammad Aleen killed in their homes. Scratch five warlords in one go.'

'Thanks,' Jimmy offered, the man withdrawing.

The remaining Cobra pilots entered, reporting Hal's Cobra on fire.

‘Good,’ Jimmy said. ‘Get some drink in you, some food - you deserve a rest. Dismissed, everyone. Hacker, you’ll be out with us in the morning.’

I climbed up the tower, out on the roof and up a ladder onto the roof of the glass tower. Sat there, my feet dangling, I stared east, remembering the battle. The air was cool, that same desert odour – the scent of wet concrete, or maybe that was the tower. I couldn’t tell. I locked my elbows and let my head flop back, staring at the stars, thinking about many things for half an hour.

Turning my head to the wind I could hear a faint drone in the distance. A helicopter. Scanning the horizon I could see no lights. Rolling over and lying face down I shouted, ‘Jimmy?’ Jimmy popped his head out. ‘We missing a helicopter?’

‘No, why?’

‘One approaching, a heavy.’

‘Stand to! Stand to! Incoming!’

‘Fuck!’ I slid down the ladder, the glass tower lights now off, and climbed inside, tripping over the guys as I rushed downstairs.

Jimmy shoved an AK47 into my chest. ‘Get back up there, try and spot it.’

I climbed the stairs again, scrambled out of the window and back up the ladder to the roof. The drone was growing, but whoever it was didn’t seem know where we were, the camp now blackened. Two jeeps on the road suddenly turned their lights on a sped off. I figured it was a distraction. They stopped half a mile down the road and just sat there. Turning my head like a sonar, my ears to the breeze, I figured the chopper was south east of us, two or three miles. It wasn’t a Huey or a Cobra; I knew their distinctive signatures well.

The unknown visitor crept closer as I heard boots on the concrete apron below, hurried activity, grey shadows moving about. I checked my weapon and cocked it, knocking off the safety and selecting automatic. ‘Jimmy!’

‘Yeah?’

‘It’s a mile south east, running parallel, not getting closer.’

‘Keep the updates coming.’

A minute later I saw it, a flash of grey moonlight off glass. ‘I see it. Due east! It’s coming towards us!’ The way I was

shouting everyone could hear. At five hundred yards out I shouted, 'It's an Mi2! Is it Red Cross or UN?'

'Can't raise it,' Jimmy said. 'Hold you fire! Hold your fire!'

I looked over my shoulder, the moonlight also reflecting off our helicopters. Turning back I strained to see through the dark. My eyes opened fully. Missile pods! I raised my AK and fired, soon a dozen fingers of red tracer streaking upwards, a deafening crescendo of outgoing fire.

From where I stood I could see tracer rounds bouncing off the helicopter, so it must have been receiving hits by hundreds of rounds; every tracer meant four normal rounds, a one to four ration typical. The Mi2 seemed to dip lower, then recover, now thundering over tents low enough to knock them down. The outgoing small-arms fire continued, the tracers following the outline of the grey Mi2 till its nose hit the runway. It bounced in a shower of sparks, went straight through an Army Huey, crushing it, and kept going. It was only a second, but our Huey seemed to be making its mind up before bursting into flames. A second later the Mi2 exploded with such force it wobbled me. I fell off the tower, and down twenty feet to the sand with a thud.

I woke ten minutes later, Hacker shining a light into my eyes.

'Don't try and move, you've bust a couple of ribs, nasty gash.'

'Wha ... wha,' I struggled to get out.

Hacker lifted my head and let me sip water. 'Lay back, take it easy, or I'll tie you to the bed.'

I winced in agony, my ribs protesting their treatment, then felt a needle in my arm.

Dawn brought a bright shaft of light into my tent and I eased up, letting down my legs. My ribs ached, and I found a bandage wrapped around my head. I tested all my limbs, turned my head from side to side, and decided I was still alive. Through the tent flaps I ducked, straightening to face the wreckage of the Mi2 across the runway from me. There was not much left, and we had lost an Army Huey, burnt to a shell, chain guns an all. The other helicopters had been moved away, and looked OK. With no one about except the Rifles patrolling the perimeter, I walked to the tower.

'Tea?' Jimmy asked.

'What the hell happened?' I asked in a hoarse whisper.

‘You were up on the tower when the Mi2 exploded. You fell off, silly sod. Luckily, you hit the sand instead of the concrete.’

I sipped tea for a minute. ‘Why ... why did the Mi2 explode like that?’

‘Missiles in the back, meant for us I guess. It’s an old Ethiopian Army Mi2, four charred bodies. How’re the ribs?’

I touched my right side. ‘Sore.’

‘Keep the bandage on you head for a while, or they’ll wonder why you heal so quick.’

I nodded, still groggy. ‘Was that supposed to happen?’

‘No. So don’t forget, you’re only mortal. And if *someone* hadn’t fired when he did, the Mi2 may have exploded beyond the base.’

‘Don’t know who that was,’ I said, avoiding eye contact. I finished my tea and downed a tin of meat. Hacker appeared, but not with his happy face on. ‘I know, I’ll take it easy.’

‘Any trouble breathing?’

‘No, and no headache either, vision normal,’ I told him. ‘Just fucking hungry.’

‘The Dash will be here in an hour,’ Jimmy informed us. ‘Hacker, go pack, please. Say goodbye to the scorpions.’

The Dash circled twice, having a good look at the damage, then touched down. A few replacement staff stepped, supplies unloaded. We walked across the apron, Tubby closing in and shaking his head.

‘You two have a sixth sense for finding trouble,’ Tubby said, stood with fists on hips. ‘What the fuck happened?’

‘Aideed bought an Mi2 and sent it here for us,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Almost got us as well, it was a well planned job.’

I offered Tubby my small bag. ‘Can you carry that, I’m injured.’

‘Fuck ... right ... off, scrotum features!’

‘That’s a nice way to address your employer,’ I quipped.

Tubby turned, and I followed him aboard, not interested in right seat for a change. Landing back at Mawlini, people were gawking at me, shaking their heads, some concerned for me. Mac was gutted at the loss of two helicopters, more so than any care for me. Another Cobra was sent out to Scorpion Base. With my ribs aching I grabbed a quick burger, then went to my room and lay down for an hour. Feeling better, I tried a swim, looking

silly by keeping the bandages on my head. Laying in the shade on a lounge after my swim, Doc Graham walked out, t-shirt and tracksuit, and sat beside me.

‘Been in the wars again, have we?’

‘Fell of a bleeding roof.’

‘So I’ve been hearing. Still, they’re saying that Farouk and his brother’s are dead on the news, and two other henchmen. At this rate Somali will be a peaceful place soon.’

‘It’ll take longer; Mogadishu will be a tough nut to crack. If our ground troops went in it would be a bloodbath. How’s Zaire?’

‘Lots of fighting amongst the groups, Burundi teetering on the edge as well,’ Doc Graham reported.

‘Forward Base comfortable?’

‘You wouldn’t recognise it. Building work is cheap, labourers cheap, so we build and build. Still got the French Army there, Yanks gone, and the UN make good use of it.’

‘Much in the way of casualties?’

‘Bus loads, and that’s just our small area. The Hutu’s that were displaced are on the warpath, attacking Tutsis indigenous to Zaire. We’ve been channelling supplies to Kimballa for Jimmy, so he can fight back. Hope you know what you’re doing with him.’

‘Jimmy likes to plan ahead. He figures the Hutus are in the wrong, and thinks Kimballa might make a good President of Zaire. He did, apparently, study in an American military college.’

‘Ah. CIA want him in, do they?’

‘Don’t know about that, but Jimmy wants him in.’

‘It’s all a bit odd. First we help the Tutsis, now the Hutu refugees, soon the Tutsis again through Kimballa. Still, the Hutu’s started it all I suppose.’ He focused on me. ‘I’ve heard some bad things about Kimballa.’

‘That’s why we’re going to meet the nice fella – a verbal circumcision.’

I relaxed all day, ate and drank, slept, then ate and drank some more. At dawn we were packed and ready, Hacker a bit bleary-eyed after a drinking session, Doc Graham and Hildy boarding the Dash with us, and ten of the Rifles. I took right seat, still with the silly bandage on my head, and we set off for Kigoma.

Landing back at Kigoma I noted a few new buildings, but overall it looked pretty much the same; there was little room here for new building. On the apron we halted near a Tucano in Tanzanian colours, Bob Davies sat waiting in a jeep. Everyone disembarked whilst the Dash was refuelled, Bob taking all except the Rifles to our hotel for lunch. Bob brought us up to speed on what was happening in the region, the politics and the conflicts, the situation in Burundi. We promised him more people if Burundi imploded. The camp down the road was shrinking all the time, and the base here was now eighty-percent UN staff, many NGOs making use of it.

The hotel was looking good, standing out from the other buildings on this street, the interior nicely decorated. Even the food was good. I had a nose in some of the rooms, finding them about the same as Nairobi hotels, a stark contrast to the street outside.

We made the short flight to forward base, just over the hour, and Doc Graham was right, I did not recognise it. The control tower looked brand new, a long line of single storey buildings stretching out from it in three directions. Two large hangars had been erected, plus two large barrack blocks for the Rifles, their numbers steadily increased in recent months. Rescue Force had its own hotel, complete with rooftop bar, but no pool. As we touched down and taxied around, we halted facing a white building with a huge red cross painted onto it, the base clinic.

A jeep pulled up tooting, Dunnnow at the wheel. 'G'day, part-time workers!'

'Wrecked any more Hueys?' I asked.

'Looks who's talking – tank boy! I heard some daft sod fell off the tower – instead of radioing it.'

We mounted up with our bags, ribbing each other the short distance to the hotel, soon on the rooftop for a cold drink and a meal as Doc Graham showed Hacker around. Cosy walked in and sat, informing us Kimballa would be here soon. Our man, Coy, had been running secret negotiations for almost a year, supplying money and weapons for most of that time. I removed the bandages and probed my healed scalp, combing my hair forwards with my hand.

Kimballa stepped in, in uniform, some sort of high rank that I could not make out, two cronies in camouflage clothing, escorted

by two Rifles. The Rifles remained by the door, stood like statues as our guest closed in. We stood.

‘Mister Silo, I presume,’ Kimballa said in a good western accent. ‘Your size and reputation, precede you.’

We shook, offering seats. Jimmy turned to two doctors on a nearby table. ‘Give us half an hour.’ They scampered out. Facing Kimballa, the man more than fifty in my estimation, Jimmy said, ‘Welcome to Forward Base.’

‘I have heard that *rear base* ... is most impressive,’ Kimballa responded. ‘You build hotels with bars and pools for your staff. Most impressive.’

‘I like to look after my people. They are ... *motivated*, not threatened.’

Kimballa took a moment, digesting the implication, deliberate or otherwise. ‘I know a great deal about The West, and about America. The CIA men who whisper in my ear and hold my hand ... turn cold at the mention of your name and scamper away. And you could not do what you do ... without friends in high places.’

‘True. But do I need them, or they need me?’

Kimballa smiled. ‘The relationship between pawn and king... is often a strange one.’

‘Indeed. So, how are things in Eastern Zaire?’

‘The Hutu’s out-number us, and are making themselves comfortable, although not comfortable for those of us who were born here, or live here.’

‘This we predicted, which is why we’ve helped you in secret. Our aim is to stop the fighting and help the sick, all of the sick. But ... but if a war can be shortened, then that helps produce fewer casualties, does it not?’

Kimballa slowly nodded. ‘You will forgive my ignorance, but I cannot fathom who you are. Who you really are: warrior ... or doctor.’

‘Is there a difference?’ Jimmy posed. ‘Does a doctor not want an end to fighting as much as the warrior? And if a warrior wants fighting for fighting’s sake, he is not a warrior ... but a criminal without honour.’

‘And what of the duration of this fight? What will bring a quick end?’ Kimballa nudged.

‘Attack helicopters, Kenyan Rifles, weapons and ammunition – not western mining companies backed by their various governments. They ... only wish to divert your attention for a few years to steal your treasures.’

Kimballa sipped his beer. ‘I have studied what I could about your engagement in Somalia. I have even spoken to a Kenya soldier who was there. He suggested that *you* controlled this battle, and it is good to have soldiers who believe you are a genius, a genius that cannot lose a battle. Fifty men against five thousand, almost ... biblical in its proportions.’

‘And four attack helicopters,’ I added.

‘And how many *attack helicopters* could be deployed here?’

‘That depends on you,’ Jimmy told him.

‘On ... me?’

‘Yes. If your ... *approach and attitude* ... is in line with a short conflict, then we’ll fight your small war for you, giving you a ... *political* victory.’

Kimballa carefully considered that. ‘And what yardstick will I be measured against?’

‘Mine.’ Jimmy took a breath. ‘A few days ago you caught some of your men raping young girls and simply beat them lightly. I want them hanged ... in full view. If you cannot teach your men honour, I doubt that I can help you.’

Kimballa nodded gently. ‘The mining companies wish conflict, to hide in the shadows. You wish to impose a western style legal system in the jungle.’

‘Where, on earth, is that legal system needed more ... than here?’ Jimmy posed.

‘Many have tried to bring order to the jungle,’ Kimballa reminded us. ‘And everyone wants a piece of this particular jungle.’

‘They ... were not me. And they did not have leaders of honour – like you – as their example.’

‘You would mould me into a better man?’ Kimballa noted with a smile.

‘I would help you ... reach your *true potential* as a great leader of this country in the future.’

‘You sound a little like my father did.’

With a smile, Jimmy said, ‘And as such I will *reward you* with good *toys* to play with... when you have done your chores and behaved well.’

Kimballa laughed, then sipped his beer. ‘And if I wash behind my ears...?’

‘You get a quick political victory, then assistance with your *political ambitions* from my *friends* in high places.’

‘Ah,’ Kimballa let out.

Jimmy added, checking his nails, ‘A great many army officers have progressed to the ranks of national leadership, only to show their true colours and become mindless dictators –’ Our guest blinked. ‘- never reaching their full potential for their people. When you get to the end of your life, and look backwards, what will you think of what you have done – for yourself or your country? The West will help you, fully expecting you to be a great disappointment.’ Kimballa’s features hardened. ‘Just another crack-pot African dictator. You have a fork in the road in front of you, my friend, the path you choose is your choice, I cannot make that choice for you, but I can make the road *long and hard*.’

‘A very big carrot, and a very big stick,’ Kimballa unhappily noted. ‘If I live my life ... as the man I should have been all along, I get the rewards. You are an unwelcome mirror of reflection, Mister Silo.’ He took a breath. ‘How would *you* move this conflict forwards?’

‘If you are in agreement, then we will help you recruit and train local men. But you will have to accept our discipline for your men. We will create a Congo Rifles regiment at your disposal, well trained and well equipped. And they will be backed up by attack helicopters.’

One of our helicopters flew in, Kimballa studying it as it passed. Facing Jimmy he asked, ‘And if I came to power, what would you ask for?’

‘Permission to build many clinics here.’

‘That ... *price*, is no price.’

‘If this land is peaceful, that will be my price.’

‘No ... mining concessions?’

I said, ‘In Kenya, we buy large farms, then remove the white workers and give their jobs to blacks only. All the food and the

profits go to refugee camps. If we had a mine here, its profit would go to the locals who need it, not Western interests.'

Kimballa carefully considered that. 'Warriors ... of light.' He stood, and we followed him up. 'I have a mirror to go and look into. And some men to hang. I will abide by what you ask, you may train and discipline the men.'

'Bring your best men here in a week; we'll have tents for them. Then we'll build a military base here, east of the perimeter wire. And don't worry about recruiting more men, we only need a few well trained men.'

'I have seen ... what you can do with a few well trained men.'

We shook hands and he left us. As we sat Jimmy told Cosy, 'Your work here is done, fly out when ready.'

'How's the baby?' I asked. He produced a photo. 'Beautiful girl. Sure *you're* the father?' Scowling at me, he waved and left us. I asked, 'That go as planned?'

'Yes, including your mining comments – which is exactly what we'll do. There's more oil and minerals around here than anyone realises.'

Ten minutes later, a delegation of French men stepped out; some senior soldiers in uniform, some in plain clothes. They came straight over.

'May we join you?' the lead man asked in accented English.

'Of course, Pascal.' Jimmy said in French.

'You know ... my name?'

Jimmy pointed at each man in turn, naming the men, and spoiling their day. We soon had bunch of unhappy Frenchmen as Jimmy took his satellite phone out. He dialled a number, then handed over the phone. 'It's for you.'

Puzzled, Pascal took the phone. 'Oui?' He listened at length, then handed the phone back.

Jimmy said, 'Thank you, Mister Sykes.' He hung up. 'Gentlemen, I think ... that any questions you had of me ... have just been answered.'

They got to their feet, glancing at each other, Pascal leading them out.

'Party pooper!' I said. 'They're all deflated now.'

We ordered more food, sending for our local administrator, Nbele, who I called Belly, not least because he had one. We welcomed him five minutes later and ordered him a coffee. For

ten minutes we chatted, asking if there was anything he needed or wanted, tackling problems and gripes. All seemed to be in order apart from trivia.

Jimmy told him, 'I want an army base built to the east, just beyond the perimeter, so make a gate. Put barbed wire around it, make it six hundred yards square, roads of concrete, then build barrack rooms - enough for a thousand men. I want classrooms, an assault course, a shooting range with a high wall behind it, a garage for the jeeps. Have good drains put in first. I want enough tents for four hundred men ready in a week, beds and tables and chairs.'

Belly took notes.

'We'll send you more jeeps, but always look out for second hand jeeps locally, some Toyota pickups - paint them green. These men are Congo Rifles, get uniforms and make badges and flags. We'll send weapons and ammo' when we have a secure store, so build one; the men don't go to bed with their rifles. Set-up a food tent and get supplies in, they should be well fed.'

I put in, 'There'll be English Army instructors, some from the Kenyan Rifles.'

With a page of notes taken, we thanked Belly and sent him off from our warm and humid outdoor office, the fly swatting machine not working today. Dunnaw and the gang came up around 8pm and we drank at length, catching up, recanting the story again of Scorpion Base and the tank stunt.

At 6am our new British Army instructors flew in on a UN flight from Mawlini, six of them explaining how unwelcome the nice young lady UN doctors had made them on the flight, labelling them as mercenaries.

'Learn from that,' Jimmy told them as we played host and made them coffee. 'Learn how *you* are perceived. And then next time, tell them you're Kenyan Rifles. Besides, you won't get attitude from the Rescue Force staff unless you give attitude. And if you give attitude ... we'll fly you out.'

I found biscuits and fruit and handed it out, the restaurant not yet open.

'Since you're here, we'll do the briefing, then you can get some sleep if you like,' Jimmy said as they dunked biscuits in coffee. 'One mile east of us there'll be a base built from scratch. If you want some input to layout and facilities talk with Nbele, or

just call him Belly like Paul here. There'll be tents set-up within the week, and next week you get the rabble from hell will wander in. There'll be officers from the Rifles here, and NCOs, some of whom you met at Mawlini. What you saw there, in the training programme, will be the same here, but the culture here will be hard work to start with. The Kenyan boys start with a good attitude, and we make it better. Some of the Congo boys are bloodthirsty killers and rapists. Don't ... turn your back on them.

'Discipline will be a problem to start with, not least disarming them as they come through the door. You can start them with a good wash and a medical; Doc Adam will be here. Then they get kit, boots that actually fit, and you start from there. We'll be recruiting local English teachers, because some of your recruits speak a variety of languages. And education is an important part of it, reading and writing in the evenings, watching educational films, geography, history; these are pig farmers with no knowledge of anything beyond the end of their villages. You get them up early and keep them busy all day; leave them with free time and they'll get into trouble. Organise sports, some competitions, keep them busy, their minds off raping the local girls. If you catch them raping or killing civilians, you hang them.'

'Hang ... them?'

'Yes, rope and tree. That or a firing squad; very loud, very public. Because ten percent of those coming in next week would slit your throats for the watches you're wearing. Keep side arms on in the shower. With the Somali Rifles, we identify the nutcases, then send them somewhere we know they'll be a shoot-out. And, during the shoot-out, they get shot. Very sad, never mind, they died heroes. For minor offences stop pay or food, or kick them out. Then, once you have a good group, teach them how to fight in the bush, take them as far as you can; all weapons, jeeps, mine clearance. What I want ... are the best one hundred men as a core unit. You then make them corporals, and they sort out the lower elements.'

'Who's in overall charge?'

'Kimballa is in charge of his men, and responsible, so defer to him at all times. He's westernised, he studied in The West, but needs... guidance. He has cronies that will make themselves officers, just work around them. And if the cronies are on the

make ... well, accidents happen in the jungle. Use your judgement and thin out the flock a little, but watch out for the CIA, MI6 and French agents around him. They're like flies around shit.'

'And the combat missions?'

'We'll create an intel unit, your best boys, get them to zero in on concentrations of the Hutu militias, then we strike by air for the most part. If you get in close it'll be a fur ball in the bush. For the most part they'll go to snatch or kill the Hutu leaders, quick airborne raids – in and out.'

'And the Hutus? Their capacities?'

'Half a million of them, but mostly women and kids, and the men have had an hour's training on how to point and shoot. If you get shot by one of them it's bad luck, not good aim. They're big on numbers, low on skills, but a couple of hundred of them are ex Rwandan army. They'd be your priority.'

'Will they attack here?'

'No,' Jimmy said with a smile. 'Kenyan Rifles are here, and they'll run you down and cut your heart out.'

'From what we saw at Mawlini, they're pretty good. All built like Rambo and fit as fuck. The range of training they go through was a surprise. Costs a bit.'

'I have deep pockets.'

Sipping coffees, we chatted about Somali and the battle, the restaurant opening at 7.30am. We left them to eat and rest, touring the camp, but avoiding the French over the runway. Flying out the next day we took a flight on a large UN Antonov directly to Nairobi.

The new breed

With tanned faces, we drove into Mapley to meet the new batch of recruits, some of whom were the new breed of non-medics. Mackey had them assembled and waiting in the lecturer room in the AMO building, the latest training dummy being examined, it's realistic form quite disturbing I found.

Jimmy greeted Mackey, then addressed the group; fifteen new faces. 'Welcome to Rescue Force, ladies and gentlemen.' He patrolled along them, taking in the faces. 'Doctors, raise your hands please.' Four raised hands. Jimmy pointed at two of them. 'You look rather young. Got a year to fill?' They both nodded. 'That's fine, you'll be well trained.'

He stood back and asked, 'Nurses?' getting three hands. 'And eight non-medics, yes?'

'Aye,' Mackey agreed.

Addressing the group, Jimmy began, 'The new training programme will be split for your various groups, since the senior doctors don't need basic first aid. You will, however, *all* go through advanced first aid, with plenty of time on the dummy, whether you think you're competent or not. And let me point out, that many doctors are really crap at first aid. It would be *wise* ... to sit and listen, and embarrassing to get questions wrong.

'You'll spend time in the lovely greenhouse, driving jeeps, climbing up walls and learning how to tackle fires, search buildings and find people under rubble.' He stopped. 'We have four qualified rescuers here?' They raised their hands. 'When everyone else is learning to drive and maintain jeeps, you'll do extra first aid and medical training. And you will *all* get to the gym and get yourselves fit.

'Now, has anyone *not* read the book: The Baardheere Incident?' No one raised an arm. 'Good. You will have seen from the book ... some of what we do, and there's another book soon to be published about the Rwandan mission. The training here, in cold old England, may seem a long way from Africa, but we want you to hit the ground running when you get out there, and not be a burden on the staff out in Kenya, who have other things to do. We currently have a presence in Kenya, Somalia, Tanzania and Zaire. Oh, and a new branch just opened in Hong Kong. You may end up in any of those locations, and you will probably get a short spell in each for experience.

'This course is now *at least* eight weeks for most, and it'll give you a chance to think about what you've let yourselves in for, and a chance for us to see if you're full of hot air ... and crap at what you do. No one ... is guaranteed to finish. For those of you that wish to, we can arrange rooms here for you. There's no decent canteen to speak of yet, but there are kitchens and the pub

down the road, a small but tasty little café in the hangar when it's open. And most days the burger van comes in with its very healthy offerings. Please bring in food and use the kitchens in the building next door for those who are staying here. Right, any questions?’

‘When will the earthquake unit start?’

‘Good question. It will start when we have enough people with the skills required, hopefully in around six months. We're training our medics in searching techniques, about six of them, and when we have a few more qualified we'll put our ears to the floor and listen out for earthquakes to attend.’

‘Are PPL places available?’

‘PPL places are allocated in Mawlini, short crash courses and a test in Nairobi. Places depend on time and staff, but you can always give up your evenings and weekends and find someone to teach you.’

‘And helicopter licenses?’ one of the rescue lads asked.

‘If you're a non-doctor, and likely to stay with us more than a year, we'll put you through it,’ Jimmy explained.

‘Are contracts rolling?’

‘We have a simple philosophy: if we like you, and you like us, you can stay as long as you like. If you're not happy you'll be out within a day and flown home, not held to a contract. If you leave, then want to come back a year later, you're welcome – provided you did a good year first.’

‘Can we opt-out of flying with Paul?’ one asked. They laughed.

‘Cheeky bugger,’ I said.

Smiling, Jimmy said, ‘He's safer than he seems, but tends to take on the most hazardous missions, hence the damaged aircraft.’

‘Is it true that we get weapons training?’ a doctor asked.

‘Yes. And it's important. If you crash land in the wrong spot, you may be unwelcome, you may need to sneak your way out, or even fight your way out. Handing yourself over to the local warlord would not be your first choice. Once in Africa you will attend a one week survival course that builds on the greenhouse experience here, just in case Paul is flying you and you go down in the jungle.’

‘Is there ... much danger?’ a lady doctor asked.

‘Yes.’ He closed in on her. ‘You’ll look in your shoes before putting them on, lift the toilet seat to see there’s not a deadly spider lurking, you’ll boil the water, refuse certain foods, you’ll go around in groups, you’ll pass soldiers and gunmen on the roads, you’ll fly in aircraft that are not always well serviced, and you’ll be shot at on occasion. Basically, you’ll be in some sort of danger *all the time*. That answer your question?’

‘Sort of.’

‘We send people where there is no hope, to bring hope to those in need. Here, in the UK, you’ll rarely actually save a life, because you’re not the only person around. Where we send you... you will literally stop people from dying, and dozens of them each day. Because you *will* be the only person there, and if you were not there ... they would certainly die. That, people, is what we’re about: life and death, not developing a new technique for removing fat from arses in a sterile English hospital. You’ll deliver a breach birth, you’ll save mother and child from a shallow grave, and you’ll do it every day. And the only complaint you’ll have ... will be that there are not enough hours in the day – to save more. Because when you get in that jeep and drive off, you’ll come back the next day to a few more bodies – kids that you could have saved. Here, in the UK, it’s work. Out there, it’s a body count: today I saved five, yesterday was three, and maybe tomorrow will be six. And so far, no one has left us other than for maternity leave. Anything else?’

We answered questions for ten minutes, gave out tickets to the club, and left them to a geography lesson.

Jimmy presented Mackey with a thick document. ‘That’s what I think we should teach over at Faulty Towers, have a look, give me an opinion. How’s it being used?’

‘Almost fully booked,’ he complained.

‘Then kick some off - our lads take priority. I want our people knowing how to search that building like experts. They climb up, rope off, abseil down – the works. From now on *all* do at least a week’s earthquake preparation and cave rescue.’

‘Got more old jeeps that we know what to do with,’ Mackey informed us.

‘Store them here for now,’ Jimmy suggested.

Mackey's mobile phone trilled. 'Hello?' He listened. 'OK, send 'em up.' He fumbled to get the red button, cursing the new technology, informing us, 'UN are here.'

Bob Davies, and his boss Patterson, were welcomed into Mackey's office, teas made.

'Cold enough for you?' I asked them.

'I fly a desk in London most of the time,' Patterson answered. 'Oh, we'll be coming to the Red Cross charity event your young lady is performing.'

'Two weeks,' I reminded them.

'No, next week,' Patterson corrected me, Jimmy agreeing.

'Shit, I'd be in trouble if I missed that,' I realised.

'Anyway, good news,' Patterson announced. 'The UN has sanctioned this place for pre-African training as of now. We even got you some money - per head per day.'

'No need for that,' Jimmy suggested.

'It's coming from the UK Government,' Bob informed us.

'Fair enough then, we pay tax,' I quipped.

'Liasé with Mackey, work around the other users, make use of the accommodation block if you like,' Jimmy told them. Facing Mackey he said, 'Best get a decent canteen going, sharpish.'

'Be around forty a year; four weeks here, four weeks at Mawlini,' Bob said. 'Lot of lecturers on structures, do's and don'ts.'

'Saw your collapsed building on the news,' Patterson began. 'When do you think you'll have an earthquake response team?'

'Six months. Then we'll be seeking UN approval.'

'That shouldn't be a problem,' Patterson offered us. 'Your name flies around a lot, although many can't decide if your activities in Somalia are a good thing or a bad thing.'

'Time will tell,' Jimmy said. 'And ... why doesn't the UN think about its own earthquake response team, based here?'

They glanced at each other, making faces.

Bob said, 'You know Western Somali is talking about an independent state.'

'If it's stable ... who cares,' Jimmy commented. 'So long as it's stable.'

'May I ask ... a delicate question?' Patterson floated.

'That girl was over sixteen,' I told him, making them laugh.

‘I’m sure. No, I wanted to ask ... do the American or British Government’s have an agenda in Somalia, and do they ... *pressure* you?’

‘There’s nothing in Somalia worth stealing, so they’re not interested. No minerals, no oil. And the American’s don’t want a repeat of Mogadishu. As for the governments, we do rub shoulders and swap intel’ on occasion. But would I follow their agenda? Never. They’d have to lock me up first.’

‘That’s what we figured. But some are viewing that battle in Somalia as a ... massacre,’ Patterson delicately explained. ‘As ... revenge for Mogadishu.’

‘It was a massacre, unfortunately. And more to come. And there’ll soon be some shooting in Zaire as well because, as I’ve said before, I won’t let a group of gunmen stop me from building a clinic or delivering aid. If they’re in the way, I’ll fight. As for revenge - no, just co-incidence.’

Bob said, ‘Kimballa hanged a group of his men the other week.’

‘What did the men do?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Well, rape apparently,’ Bob answered.

‘Then I’ve got no problem with that. In Somali, Abdi chops off hands for robbery ... and I don’t care, I won’t slow him down.’ He took a breath. ‘Gentlemen, the world at large leaves Africans to fight each other savagely, whilst getting minerals and diamonds off them. Someone needs to draw a line, to install some order – so I’ll do what I can to bring peace where I can. We’ll never agree on tactics, gentlemen, but our aims are the same – a peaceful and prosperous Africa.’

‘Well, you’ve achieved more in Somalia than anyone else,’ Patterson admitted. ‘Kenyans very happy with a peaceful buffer zone, and we’re back in delivering aid in the southwest.’

‘Mind if we ask what that new extension to Forward Base is?’ Bob asked.

‘Congo Rifles,’ I told him.

‘Congo Rifles ... based on the Kenyan Rifles,’ Bob realised.

‘Yep,’ I said. ‘We’ll recruit, equip, train ... and discipline. We’ll create a small force to keep peace in the region. And if they want to get paid - and to eat - they do as they’re told, not run around raping and killing.’

‘They’ll be under Kimballa’s control?’ Bob queried.

‘Yes. But if he wants them paid and fed...’ Jimmy posed.

‘He toes the line,’ Patterson finished off.

I added, ‘We’ll stick attack helicopters in Forward Base. If warlords crop up, we’ll deal with them. They’ll keep the peace, or they’ll meet a Huey Cobra head on.’

‘There’s a sizeable number of ex-Army Hutu’s forming a group, harassing the local Tutsis,’ Bob reported.

Jimmy said. ‘If they attack anyone in force, the Kenyans will get involved.’

‘How many Rifles are there now?’ Bob asked.

‘Coming up to five hundred,’ Jimmy informed them. ‘But each one is worth ten regular African soldiers. They’re better equipped and better trained than any other force in Africa.’

‘We have some with us in Somalia,’ Bob explained. ‘So far, very well disciplined, very helpful. Which is good, because – as you know – many African peacekeepers are more of a hindrance than a benefit.’

‘Bob, when dealing with Kimballa, never forget that African army officers often end up as Presidents ... some day.’

Bob stared back for several seconds. ‘He studied ... in an American military academy, they say.’

‘Very westernised ... I found him,’ I put in.

‘The Zaire Government in Kinshasa is weak, the Army weak, they hardly bother with Eastern Zaire,’ Patterson said aloud. ‘A half decent force could topple them.’

‘Well, don’t include me in the government toppling game,’ Jimmy said. ‘Not my area.’

‘And your people’s future agenda ... for Zaire?’ Bob nudged.

‘I’m going to take a greater interest than I’ve done in Kenya, build clinics all over.’

‘Well, we’ll watch and see as it develops,’ Patterson said.

‘Any intel’ you have on Hutu militias, let me have it,’ Jimmy urged.

‘We will,’ they offered.

We took them to lunch at the pub down the road, then said our goodbyes. On the way back we got a call; the nice man in the White House had delivered a shipment of aviation fuel to Mombassa for us. We exchanged a look.

Jimmy dialled Rudd and let him know, then told him to increase the budget and recruitment on the Rifles, five more

Hueys for them, five for us, and a second Dash if a cheap one was available.

An hour later, as we arrived home, Rudd called back. 'I've got a very good deal on an aircraft lease, a spare Hercules that has just finished it's UN contract, owners stuck for money. We can have two years plus servicing.'

'Take it,' Jimmy told him. 'What colour is it?'

'White already, big red cross on it,' Rudd reported, laughing.

'Good work. Oh, ask the Kenyans for a second base for the Rifles, north of Mombassa, towards the border. And hire some pilots for that Hercules.'

'They come with it, three of them.'

'Excellent. Stick our logo on it.'

I went and dug out my book on the Hercules that I pinched from the RAF, sat down and started reading.

Ballykeane

We flew from Cardiff to Dublin on a cold February morning. Hiring a car at the airport, we drove north towards the border, staying in a posh country retreat, if somewhat cold. The next morning we drove along the coast, to a place thirty miles short of the border with Northern Ireland, the weather crisp and frosty, but the rain and snow holding off. Through an open gate in high stones walls, green with mould, we pulled into the grounds of a small estate. A large, but dilapidated house greeted us, the stone residence sat on an inlet, the tide now out and revealing a thick covering of black seaweed. We parked next to a long disused fountain, now overgrown with weeds.

A perplexed looking man walked out, cap and green wellies. 'Are you lost there?'

'Are you Ted?' Jimmy asked.

'Aye, you'd be after myself then?'

'They said at the village store you owned this place. You interested in selling, Ted?'

'Selling is it? Boy, but you don't get to the point. Come on in, I get the kettle on.'

We patted a keen and excited dog as we entered, sitting at a dated wooden table in a room with low timber ceilings, a welcoming open fireplace warming us.

‘You’d be English fellas, then?’

‘We would,’ Jimmy said, patting the dog.

‘And you’s all interested in this old place?’

‘We are. So I’ll make you an offer, get the business out of the way. I’ll give you one hundred thousand English pounds to buy the land, then a wage of twenty-five thousand a year to stay on and manage it for me.’

Ted stared back for a second. ‘I stay on, in me own home, and get paid, and get the money as well?’

‘You’ll have to maintain the place for us, help some visitors,’ Jimmy informed him. ‘But *we’ll* own it.’

‘Well, I’d be a daft old bugger to pass up something like that, now wouldn’t I. And here I am, poor as a church mouse thinking of selling, and here you’s come. The good lord has a funny side after all, that he does.’

‘We’d like to hold a meeting here tomorrow, and I’d like you in on it, to see what we’d do with the place.’

‘I’ll be checking the social calendar to see if I’m free, so I will.’

I laughed; I liked this guy. He made us tea, showed us around, the views over the inlet, and we arranged to be back at 3pm the next day. As we pulled back in the next day Ted was cleaning rubbish from in front of the house, a small wood fire bellowing smoke too lazy to rise in the still air. Easing out of the hire car, he said to us, ‘I wasn’t drunk and dreaming then, you do exist.’

‘Girls always saying *that* to me,’ I quipped.

‘Bit of a ladies man, eh?’

‘You must be the only person in the UK who doesn’t know our faces,’ I told him, rubbing my cold hands.

‘I don’t get out much, not be reading the English papers. You’s could be the Prime bloody Minister and I wouldn’t know it.’

He got the kettle on, another car pulling in fifteen minutes later. Sykes stepped down with three tough looking men; he had brought protection. We greeted them, showing Sykes the view as his bodyguards scanned the area, the excitable dog whimpering

for attention. Wrapped up warm, Sykes accepted a tea, the bodyguards remaining outside, one of them hidden.

Another car pulling in caught my attention and I walked out alone. The man pulling up did a double take. Stepping out he said, 'You that fella off the telly?'

'Yes. And ... welcome.' I led two men inside, one staying with the car and eyeing Sykes' men suspiciously. We avoided introductions, simply labelling the men up as Brit or Republican. A third car pulled in, a man in a suit with two bodyguards, all of whom seemed to recognise me, the three men studying me carefully with perplexed expressions. The lead man was the Irish Security Minister himself.

Ted organised tea, struggling to find enough cups.

Jimmy began, 'Gentlemen, I'm Jimmy Silo of Pineapple records, and as most of you know I have more money than I know what to do with. I'll be buying this property so that I'm close to the border, and ... the troubled north. What I would like to do here is simple, if not illegal.'

The Irish Security Minister repeated, 'Illegal?'

'Yes. I'd like to buy weapons from people in the north, the south ... and in between.'

'Buy weapons? The Minister repeated with a heavy frown, a glance at Sykes. 'And do what with them?'

'Chop them in half.'

The Minister's eyes widened. 'Chop them in half?'

'Yes, right here. Someone drives in, gets cash for the weapons, watches the weapon cut in half, then leaves. Nothing more complicated than that.'

The Republicans glanced at each other, puzzled looks exchanged. 'This sanctioned by Whitehall?'

Sykes answered, 'Sanctioned, no. Tolerated, yes.'

'Two thousand pounds for an AK47,' Jimmy stated. 'Plus fifty pence a round of ammo. Five grand for a GPMG, six for a fifty calibre, a sliding scale for explosives, two hundred and fifty quid for a pistol.'

Ted looked on in amazement.

The Minister said, 'And you'd be looking for ... what, official permission for this ... decommissioning?'

'Yes. And your assurance that no one visiting will be harassed, followed or intercepted. The British Government will

make similar undertakings, since it's *in their interest*. I will also make sure that decommissioned weapons are never *examined* by the police. Based here will be some African ordnance trained people who have no idea of the politics, and no care either way.'

'How many weapons would you be planning on paying for?' the Minister asked.

'However many arrive. If a thousand arrive, I'll decommission a thousand.'

'We have deep pockets,' I told him.

'I know,' the Minister agreed. 'I saw the programme on the orphanage. Twenty million fooking quid.' He faced the Republicans. 'This is something you instigated?'

'First we heard of it. Came here to meet the Brit under false pretences.'

Jimmy said, 'Gentlemen, I would appreciate if all of you think about it and let me know, because I'll be buying this place anyhow,' Jimmy said. 'And if, in a separate deal, the Republicans or Loyalists wish to decommission for cash a large stockpile, we'll arrange it – with or without approval.'

'Would have thought you'd done that anyway,' the Minister stated. 'You're not one to be backwards about coming forwards.'

'I will always ask first,' Jimmy insisted.

We thanked our guests and they set off at staggered intervals, some south, some north. Sykes was the last to leave, and we discussed the practicalities of weapons disposal here. Ted agreed to sell the land, even knowing what we were planning, and helpfully said he'd find a large metal cutter and a pipe bender. We gave him cash for those purchases, as well as the details of our solicitors, who would handle the sale.

Two weeks later we got a call at the house, the Republicans offering to decommission a hundred assorted weapons. No formal word had come from the Irish Government, but Sykes said they would turn a blind eye to it. We made Sykes talk to the Northern Ireland Police, so that they would not try and watch the place, and Jimmy was confident.

We flew back over with a bag of cash, Sykes providing a car and protection. The small estate was now ours, Ted a contented employee, his dog just as excitable. True to his word, Ted found a large metal cutter, a very long handle to it, and a pipe bender. He had also bought a load of cement, as we had requested. With

Ted in our hire car we visited the local police station and told them what we were doing. They stared back, mouths open. We thanked them with hardly a word coming from them.

With me sat waiting, and watching the road on the nominated day, a fishing boat came in on the tide, four men well wrapped up in oilskins. They unloaded a crate, two carrying it up to us. Opened, it was full of UZI 9mm still in their wrapping. Jimmy counted them, then handed over twenty thousand pounds and a bottle of whiskey. We carried the weapons to the metal press and helped Ted cut them in half as the drizzle began. Each weapon was checked for a round in the chamber, cocked and checked again, then cut up.

Returning to the concrete boat jetty we waited in the rain. After some debate, they came ashore with another crate, this time ten AK47s inside, plenty of magazines and ammo. Jimmy gave them twenty-two thousand pounds and we cut the weapons in half. At the boat they asked if they could come back tomorrow. We agreed, saying we'd go to the bank in the morning, since they now had all our spare cash. Back inside the warm house we debated their method of approach, agreeing that any police action would have seen the weapons quickly dropped into the ocean. The boys from the bog were not stupid.

On the afternoon tide they were back, less nervous than the first day, Sykes' men still hidden. The first crate offered up ten AK47s, but old and worn. Still, they worked, because we checked them. Twenty thousand was handed over. The next crate offered up fifty small Chinese 9mm pistols, not dissimilar to Walther PPKs. Jimmy did some maths in his head, then asked them how much they wanted for them. They had no idea, but suggested twelve thousand. We gave them fifteen and they said they'd be back, but not when.

Ted got to work with the concrete, earnestly trying to keep his dog out of it. He dug a shallow trench, poured in the concrete, then stuffed in the broken weapons, the odd arrangement giving the appearance that the weapons were whole, just bent through the concrete, abstract modern art in the damp Irish countryside. We left Ted twenty thousand in cash and headed back to the country hotel and spa. Returning the next day, Ted pointed to a line of old FN rifles in the concrete, the cash gone. We had drawn more money, and handed Ted a pad of post-dated cheques

that could be drawn to cash at the local bank each week. That bank had received four hundred thousand pounds from us and already knew Ted, the staff a little bemused. That afternoon two Tanzanians arrived, visas sorted out by Red Cross Ireland.

‘Jesus, they’s black!’ Ted commented. Not about that fact that they were Africans, but how dark their skins were for Africans.

They were wary of the dog, since dogs in Tanzania could be rabid. We reassured them, settling them into rooms, Ted asked to keep the heating on for them. And also asked to buy them some extra-thick warm jackets; our two ordnance men were shivering in the Irish winter. Already briefed at length, we left them to it, to their six-month stint on the beautiful Irish coast.

A week later the unofficial decommissioning made the papers and we gave an interview, stating that we wished to help the peace process along any way we could. Ted started to get regular trade, fixing a large sign to the gate stating that no shotguns were taken, since a few locals tried to sell their old shotguns. The papers held a picture of the weapons in concrete and it made me laugh, Jimmy closing in. With my finger on the photograph, Jimmy also laughed; a handprint and paw prints were clearly visible, and we remember Ted tripping over the dog and cursing it at length. That moment had been immortalised.

In the weeks that followed there were days of no activity at Ballykeane, sometimes a few weapons would turn up, a large consignment every two or three weeks reported to us. And the project had eaten up two hundred thousand pounds already.

Mi24

When my satellite phone rang I was asleep for a change, fumbling for the light. I pressed a button on the phone. ‘Hello?’ I croaked.

‘Did I wake you?’ came an English voice.

‘Yeah, who’s that?’

‘Rupert, Scorpion Base, got a problem. The Yanks have intercepted some radio traffic: Aideed has himself an Mi24.’

‘He ... what?’

‘And an Mi2 armed with rockets, like the last one.’

‘I’ll call you back in ten.’ I hung up, threw on a tracksuit, and banged on Jimmy’s door. He’d been asleep as well. ‘Get dressed, meet me downstairs!’ I walked down to the kitchen and got the kettle on, making two strong coffees. As I carried them towards the office Jimmy appeared, grabbing one. In the office I said, ‘Aideed’s gone and got himself an Mi24, plus another Mi2 armed with rockets.’

‘That’s naughty.’

‘You were expecting this?’

Jimmy shook his head as he sipped his coffee.

‘You think he’ll go after Scorpion Base?’

‘For sure; why else get one. Expensive piece of kit, both helicopters, they’ll leave him broke – which could be an opportunity. Where are they now?’

‘Rupert reported that the Yank’s had contact with it.’ I called Scorpion base, confirming the last known position, and hung up. ‘North of Mogadishu.’

‘It’s got the range to reach Scorpion Base easily, so long as it doesn’t loiter too much – or get lost. Wonder where he got it?’

‘Ethiopia?’

‘They’d notice it was gone,’ he said, his eyebrows raised. ‘And the government there hates him. No, maybe ... Yemen or Eritrea, an Mi-35 enhanced version. Won’t know till we see it.’ Jimmy rang Rupert on the satellite phone. ‘Rupert, Jimmy. Listen up. Huey with chain guns will do nothing to an Mi24, neither will a Cobra unless they’re above and behind it and strike it with a missile, even then it’s doubtful. It’ll be a tough nut to crack, you need to hit it from behind and damage it enough for it to land. And a DHSK won’t bother it any. RPGs can be good, fired from directly below as it flies over. And it’s fast. So, in the short term I want slit trenches dug, get as many RPGs as you can, and set them out at 500yards. Inside that radius it’ll demolish the base. Call you later.’

‘Cobra no good?’

‘Mi24 was designed to resist the Cobras 30mm cannon, but if the Cobras hit it with ground attack missiles – maybe.’

‘Jeeps have 105mm recoilless?’

‘That would work, but you’d have to be close.’ He sat, thinking his way through the problem. ‘Even if he gets it to Scorpion Base, the damage would be limited, and we’d rebuild – our helicopters could take off before it gets there. It’s an expensive gesture ... just for that.’

‘What you thinking?’ I asked as I sat on a desk.

‘That it’s more about saving face now.’ He took a big breath. ‘If he was sensible, he’d use it to attack those attacking him – the other warlords.’

‘But is he sensible?’ I asked.

‘Or vengeful? And if he was vengeful, who would he attack?’

‘Us?’

‘He knows very little about us, he’d blame the Kenyans or...’ He grabbed the Satellite phone. ‘Rupert, go see the American technicians in the tower, get them to alert the US Navy off the coast, they’re a possible target. Thanks.’

‘US Navy?’

‘It was American pilots that did the damage, American helicopters, coming after the US attack in Mogadishu...?’

‘Yeah, I suppose. Their ships are just off shore, easy targets, but they’ve got missile defence systems.’

‘Mi24 is a tough nut, and anti-aircraft missiles are designed for soft-skinned aircraft. Still, it would be just a gesture, then he’d lose it when they strike back. No, something else going on here.’ He grabbed a map of Somalia and spread it out across the desk. ‘Right, he’ll drop the extra fuel tanks for weapons – because he’s stupid. So ... Mogadishu ... tank of gas at two hundred miles radius roughly ... refuel just outside the area we control in the north. That gives him ... two hundred miles out, two hundred back - at best – because it’ll be heavy.’

‘Mawlini?’ I puzzled.

‘It’s where everyone comes from; the helicopters, the Kenyan Rifles, the Somali Rifles. And it’s a soft target, lots of nice buildings to hit.’ He dialled the base, getting the duty officer at the Rifles. ‘Go and wake up Mac, get him to call me urgently.’

I made another round of coffees as we waited.

The Satellite phone trilled, Jimmy answering it. ‘Mac? Wake up, and listen up. Aideed has got himself an Mi24 ... yes ... it’s got the range to hit Scorpion Base, or Baardheere, but I think he’ll try and refuel it and head for you ... yes, so get on the

clock. The earliest he could be there is four or five hours. Talk to you later.'

I sent a fax to the Kenya Defence Minister, mister Idi Amin look-a-like himself, the wording certain to cause a stir.

Jimmy studied a map of Somalia. He marked a two hundred mile scale on a ruler and drew an arc from Mawlini, adding a line around the area that we already patrolled, a thin and distorted oval shape created. I closed in as Jimmy tapped the paper, the base of the oval. 'That's mountainous, just the one road.' He moved his finger north. 'That village we're friendly with, we've an outpost near there.' He tapped the apex of the oval. 'A lonely road, flat area, no one about for miles in any direction.'

'And less than two hundred miles to Mawlini, we're right on the bloody border!'

'To get a fuel truck there ... he has to use this road,' Jimmy thought aloud. He dialled Rupert on the satellite phone. 'It's Jimmy. Listen, there's a possibility that Aideed will try and attack Mawlini, a bigger spectacle, designed to save face. If he does, he'll need to re-fuel by truck at the following co-ordinates. Got a pen?' Jimmy gave the detail. 'I want hidden observation posts set-up all around that area, make that your top priority. Now comes the hard part – I want his choppers captured. Yes, Captured. When they land to refuel you can blow the fuel truck, shoot the pilots, and seize them. If that looks likely, get Mickey and Yuri up there in a Huey. Stick someone on every road north of you. If you see a fuel truck, you're in business. In the meantime, disperse some of the people there, and the aircraft. Go to work.'

'Capture them?' I questioned.

'When they're out of fuel they're just big turtles on the ground. Anyway, I'm back to bed for a few hours, nothing much will happen for a while. You kip with that phone, young man.'

At dawn, the Kenyan Air Force was in a flap, its dated Northrop F5 Tiger fighters made ready, missiles loaded. Mac informed the UN and the other NGOs, and they dispersed their staff, UN aircraft on the apron being sent off ahead of time. The Rifles mounted up and drove to the border, setting a wide cordon to look out for any approaching helicopters, a half circle of spotters thirty miles out. At the base, the Rifles lugged heavy DHSK fifty

calibres to the rooftop bars. The Tucanos were sent up, flying low level across the border and patrolling at three thousand feet, low enough to see a stalking Mi24 on the deck. Mawlini also possessed half-decent radar these days and it penetrated thirty miles across the border, many eyes now watching its orange display update every few seconds.

I answered the phone to Mac at 10am. 'How's it going?'

'Done what we can, got radar working and the Tucanos up. Even got the Cessna and Dash up looking, just in case.'

'Jimmy thinks it'll refuel at a certain spot, so we've got teams there. If it lands, we'll hit the fuel trucks.'

As time went by I patrolled up and down the office carpet, Sharon getting on with her work, Big Paul sat staring at the phone, alternating to the map. He even grabbed faxes when they came in, disappointed that they were about the club. Cookie brought in food and tea and the hours passed. I took a break, throwing tennis balls for the Alsations. Returning, the satellite phone chirped.

'Paul, it's Host, Stateside.'

'Middle of the night there?'

'More or less. Listen, Navy has the Mi24 fuelled ready to go, but have lost radar contact. We think it's in the air.'

'Your tubs safe?'

'They've moved offshore, at full alert just in case. Any clues as to where it came from?'

'Jimmy says Yemen or Eritrea.'

'And you didn't know about this ahead of time?' he teased.

'Nope. But we are well ahead of what Magestic wanted done,' I lied. 'We altered the way it goes, unfortunately.'

'I'll let you know if they get its radar ghost back.' He hung up.

I dialled Rupert. 'It's airborne, an hour to reach you, two to the rendezvous point. Stand by.' Re-dialling, I reached Mac. 'Mac, it's airborne, fuck knows where it's heading. If it is coming your way we'll see it well ahead of time. Out.'

An hour later Host was back on; intermittent radar contact, two helicopters heading northwest, a track that put them on a direct course for the rendezvous. I sent Big Paul to get Jimmy as I dialled Scorpion Base. 'It's heading for your trap! Get ready!'

When Jimmy stepped back in I informed him, 'Heading for the trap.'

We all closed in on the map as Jimmy dialled Scorpion base. 'Listen, if they get it, fly it down to you and top up the fuel, check the weapons. If all goes well, attack the following co-ordinates, but fly south around Mogadishu to do it.' He repeated them twice. 'Thanks.'

'What's at those co-ordinates?'

'Aideed's main rival.'

'He'll blame Aideed,' I realised.

'Let's hope so.'

I went back to wearing down the carpet as Sharon sorted faxes, calling Sykes every so often to let him know what was going on, just a courtesy. Sharon eventually grabbed me by the shoulders and sat me down. Then the call came, 'Fuel tanker intercepted, crew killed, took over the tanker, waved down the helicopters, crew killed on the ground, tanker and helicopters captured.'

'Outstanding,' Big Paul said as Jimmy returned. 'Pinched the bloody choppers, boss.'

'Good. Now, one good turn deserves another.' He dialled the last incoming number, ordering the helicopters refuelled, then on to the attack co-ordinates previously listed.

With intermittent reports coming in I stayed in the office all day and night, Big Paul and Karl present most of the time, Jimmy visiting his parents down in Newport. By dawn the next day Aideed's rivals had been bombed and strafed at length, even his banana plantation had been bombed, the new Mi24 back at Scorpion base. Life returned to normal, but not for Aideed. His main rival, knowing he had taken delivery of the Mi24, attacked in force, a trigger for Aideed's other enemies to get involved. We held off attacking directly because of the lack of men, but mostly because the job was being done for us.

Hutu dawn

Jimmy read a lengthy report from Zaire, cursed at the world in general and no one in particular, then asked Sharon for tickets to Nairobi. We rang Mawlini and ordered helicopters moved, our best troops made ready. Jimmy was on the warpath.

At Mawlini, we selected staff and put a team together, all the English Army instructors brought back from Somali in a hurry. The best members of the Rifles were selected, many also brought back from Somalia. Sniper rifles and M82s were packed ready, Claymores and grenades, camouflage netting. Additional Army Hueys had already been dispatched, along with four Cobras and two Pumas. From Rescue Force a field surgical team was assembled and dispatched.

With Jimmy busy, I toured the Rescue Force compound, finding several large tents for the Hong Kong trainees. A new barrack block was under construction, one floor already finished. I dropped in on Coup, finding him now with two of his own assistants, and sat in a purpose built concrete office block, a nicely decorated office with air conditioning.

‘I remember you suffering in a warm hut,’ I told him.

‘The bad old days,’ he said as we shook. ‘It was so hot I’d fall off to sleep.’

‘Still does that,’ they said, making me laugh

‘They keeping you busy?’ I asked.

He rolled his eyes. ‘Hong Kong more than doubled the staff files and programmes. Then we took on another batch of forty Kenyan nurses, forty more in Tanzania.’

‘So lots of courses to be completed,’ I realised.

‘Now recruiting in Zaire; got twenty over there already.’

‘Is Hacker teaching?’

‘Yes, combat medicine and improvised techniques – everyone has to do it. But you just pulled him off for Zaire?’

‘War breaking out between the groups down there.’

‘We had a nurse attacked, but Dunnow beat the guy senseless apparently.’

‘Good for him,’ I commended.

‘We’re teaching self-defence now,’

‘Good. What about jungle survival?’

‘Yes, we’ve put about forty through it so far. Using a camp down in southwest Tanzania, full of creepy-crawlies. They sleep

rough the first night, then build a lean-to, then a bed off the ground, improving it each day. And if they want to eat they have to catch it, or fish for it – some things eaten raw. Your people coming from the greenhouse in Swindon do well on it.’

‘Sounds like we’re making progress. You think we’ll have an earthquake team ready soon?’

‘Got thirty names on the list, but no Africans – they’d not get the visas.’

I nodded. ‘Thirty is a start.’

‘You seen Faulty Towers Two?’

‘No?’

‘We’ve got use of a disused airfield fifty miles north west of here, so we built a pile of mud houses and some breeze-block buildings, all looking like they’ve been hit by an earthquake. We put a team of victims up there, under the rubble, then load the Hercules, fly up, set-up base, search the rubble, do the simulations, stay a few nights and fly back.’

‘Excellent. Just like the real thing.’

‘UN observers went on the last one, they’re thinking of using the place and the scenario. Oh, just read the latest book, I guess most people have. We’re getting famous.’

‘Be a third one out soon: Scorpion Base. It’ll make the Rifles look good.’

‘Don’t need that, their reputation is excellent. Tanzanians were up the other week, have a look how they’re trained.’

‘It’s not the training, it’s the discipline ... and the education in the evenings,’ I told Coup. ‘If a man steps out of line, his entire platoon is punished.’

‘Abdi ... runs a tight ship,’ Coup delicately broached.

‘Needs it over there,’ I insisted. ‘Or the peacekeepers would be the ones doing the raping and killing.’

‘You heading down to Forward Base?’

‘Yeah,’ I sighed. ‘Need to kick some Hutu arse.’

I gravitated towards the rooftop bar. Claspings the wall, I locked my elbows and stared out across the compound, and found myself wondering were all the years had gone. Helicopters took off, Tucanos flew in, jeeps drove in and out. Turning, I toured amongst the staff having lunch, re-acquainting myself with a few, many new faces, some Hong Kong Chinese.

Along dusty walkways I ambled back towards the main base, stopping at the base clinic, now considerably bigger than my first visit to it. I entered a mini-ward, a few people lying on beds with various injuries. All were keen to see me and chat; some from the Rifles and some from Rescue Force. A Chinese recruit with a burnt hand caught my attention; he had tripped, putting his hand down onto a dummy mine. I nosed around the well-equipped emergency room, before sitting with the resident doctors and nurses for a cup of tea.

The next morning the team flew off in the Dash, the Hercules leaving with the newly created Task Force Alpha; they'd get there ahead of us. We refuelled at Kigoma, greeting staff and reviewing the refugee camp, touching down at Forward Base late afternoon, the Hercules already unloaded and departed. As we had flown in I glimpsed the extensive Congo Rifles camp, many buildings already up, many more under construction. I also noticed the French contingent still here. They had previously sent numerous peacekeepers into Rwanda, but had been kicked out under a dark cloud by the new Rwandan regime. They had no peacekeepers in Zaire as far as I knew, so I puzzled their small camp.

Belly met us off the Dash, driving us to his office for a long chat before driving us the short distance around to a newly finished accommodation block. As we dumped our bags into rooms I noticed two senior French offices, extending a greeting in French. They forced brief smiles and nodded. Jimmy noticed, exchanging a look with me as I practiced my Gallic shrug. In the rooftop bar we greeted many of the team, and I made a point of greeting the French we found there, offering them drinks, but getting back odd looks and polite refusals. We found an empty table and ordered food.

'French all over the camp,' I noted.

'They think I'm building up Kimballa to seize power.'

'Are you?'

'No, he'd do that all by himself. Besides, that's just what they're interested doing. Kimballa ... is a popular whore. No, we are ... shortening a lengthy and bloody process. And, starting tomorrow, we'll be shortening it a lot under the careful gaze of our Gallic cousins.'

Twenty minutes later, the same Frenchman, Pascal, walked out with a colleague. 'May we join you?' Jimmy gestured them towards seats. 'Thank you.' They ordered beers from a waiter.

'Still here then?' I asked.

'We are ... monitoring the situation here, Rwanda and Burundi.'

'Making good use of the facilities?' I asked.

'Yes, we are grateful for the free accommodation and food,' Pascal stated, seeming very guarded.

'We're all friends here,' Jimmy stated.

Pascal took a moment. 'May I ask ... about the force that has just arrived?'

'What would you like to know?'

'Their function, since they seem to have many British Special Forces soldiers with them. And now attack helicopters.'

'As you know, the Hutus are forming armed groups and attacking the indigenous Tutsis, as well as back across the Rwandan border. So we brought some additional *peacekeepers*.'

'They will operate under the UN remit?'

'No. They'll hunt down the Hutu gangs and kill them all,' Jimmy coldly stated, a fixed stare held on Pascal.

'Under ... which remit?' Pascal delicately enquired.

'Under our original remit, that of using the Kenyan Rifles to protect Rescue Force medics.'

'But you have no medics ... in Hutu areas?'

'We will soon, right under the noses of the gangs. So, they'll need *protection*.'

'A lot of protection,' I added. 'We take good care of our staff.'

Pascal nodded, a glance at his colleague. 'And when there is peace here? What of the Congo Rifles and ... Kimballa?'

'They'll help to keep the peace,' Jimmy said.

'And if they *desire* more than simply peace?'

'That's an internal Zaire problem, and not my concern. I don't care, so long as my clinics here are safe.'

'Kimballa, and the Congo Rifles, are now the strongest force this side of Kinshasa. They could ... seize power in this area.'

'Again, not my problem so long as my clinics are safe. If you're worried about him, then assassinate him, or bribe him.'

'We don't assassinate people, nor bribe them.'

‘Your nose is getting bigger,’ I said. ‘And it’s a whopper already.’ Jimmy smiled, Pascal fixing me with a look. I added, ‘You know where Kimballa lives, go around and charm him.’

‘If you wish to take control of the Congo Rifles, pay us what we’ve spent on them, then they’re all yours,’ Jimmy offered. ‘We’ll take a step back and have nothing more to do with them.’

Pascal and his colleague exchanged looks. Pascal said, ‘I have a feeling we are being played ... by experts.’

‘Call my bluff, if you think it is a bluff,’ Jimmy nudged. ‘And if you like, get your Ambassador in London to request that I pull out. I’ll will, of course, honour whatever the British Prime Minister requests.’ Jimmy held his hands wide. ‘Tell me what more we could be doing to help you sleep well at night.’

‘Invite us to planning meetings for this new campaign, and subsequent meetings with Kimballa.’

‘OK.’

Pascal stumbled. ‘OK?’

‘First meeting is 9am in the morning, don’t be late.’

‘You need a wake-up call?’ I offered.

Pascal scowled at me. ‘No. Thank you.’ Facing Jimmy, he said, ‘People like you ... don’t get Cobra’s, unless the Americans want you to have Cobras. And we are well aware of the radio traffic in and around Somalia.’

‘Was there a question in there somewhere?’ Jimmy asked.

‘I was wondering about your *real* identity, Mister Silo.’

‘You show me yours, I’ll show you mine,’ Jimmy said with a straight face.

‘You already know who, and what, I am.’ Pascal waited.

With stern features, Jimmy said, ‘You will learn in time that I don’t sleep with those I dance with. We’ll see you in the morning.’ They got up and left.

‘They going to be a pain?’ I asked.

‘No, because their government won’t associate itself with Kimballa yet, in case he turns out like every other African dictator. They just don’t like to be left out of the loop in this region. Besides, they can’t figure out who I am.’

Hacker wandered in with Doc Graham and we waved them over.

‘How’s the head?’ Hacker asked me.

‘Fine, just the odd ringing, spots before my eyes.’

Hacker said, 'You two are jinxed. If you're here, they'll be fireworks.'

'There will,' Jimmy coldly stated. 'Hutus have armed and grouped themselves, they'll be on the march soon, attacking the Tutsis here.'

'The Rifles, they peacekeeping?' Doc Graham asked.

'No, we're going to make a few surgical strikes, take out the Hutu leadership. It's either that, or try and patrol an area the size of England. I want a surgical bay ready tomorrow, Hueys on standby at five minutes notice. Hack, you'll fly behind the Cobras for a few days.'

Hack nodded affirmatively.

'Congo Rifles ready?' Doc Graham asked.

'Nope, nowhere near it, which is why we're doing it. They'd massacre anyone they find - we'll limit casualties. And, afterwards, I'll build some outpost clinics around here. Get some rest tonight, may be busy after that.'

At 9am the French stepped into the main office below the tower to strange looks from the gang. Jimmy waved them in.

Jimmy and I had been pouring over local intelligence reports, drawing many maps and diagrams onto white boards, using Jimmy's knowledge of where the groups would be concentrated, who the leaders would be. The two British Ruperts stood ready with notebooks, alongside them the Kenyan officers, plus eight ex-SAS instructors, all kitted ready for war. Alongside them stood Hal and seven pilots, the room cramped.

'Gentlemen,' Jimmy called. 'We're all here now, so operation Swift Sword will commence.' He took a breath. 'There are close to half a million Hutus now in Eastern Zaire, including many former Rwanda Army officers and soldiers – the ones that started the massacre in Rwanda, let's not forget that. Some of that Army hardware has found its way here, jeeps, mounted machineguns, RPGs, AKs, some armoured personnel carriers.

'They have designs on this region, perhaps to make it a new... *Western* Rwanda. They're attacking the indigenous Tutsis – as we already know. Before they create a civil war here, and threaten this base, we will act first. Today will see five actions on the far side of Hutu territory, and five insertions this side for latter action. You will be busy.' He detailed the five actions,

followed by the five insertions. Teams were formed, helicopter call signs confirmed, the men dispatched.

That just left the Kenyan officers, us and the French, all sat listening to the radio chatter and ticking boxes as missions progressed. The first three helicopter groups flew in a wide arc to the west and north, coming around from the north to attack three Hutu headquarters, returning via a northerly route, another wide arc. The next two helicopter groups flew in a wide arc to the east, straying into Rwandan territory, attacking from the east and leaving again in an easterly direction. All returned safely a few hours later for refuelling.

Reports were given of what was seen, what was destroyed. Two armoured personnel carriers had been destroyed, at least twenty jeeps of varying descriptions – some on the road and moving, many buildings listed as being hit. We ticked what we thought they had, and what we knew we destroyed, a good first mission. With the Hueys and Pumas fuelled, the inserts were readied, kit checked. We wished them well and waved them off, the line of helicopters flying again in a wide arc to the east. They returned after sundown, the runway lights on, all of our pilots reporting successful inserts.

Throughout the night people came and went, the French always leaving at least one man in the control room. We received a steady trickle of radio reports, movements of Hutu soldiers heading west. For some strange reason they thought French peacekeepers, based in Rwanda, were attacking them. In the quiet of the early hours, our insert teams set traps, then withdrew to hillsides above strategic crossroads.

I got two hours sleep, then returned to the command centre, Jimmy still there. ‘Making progress?’ I asked him.

‘A few gun battles overnight, the Hutus firing at each other instead of us, a few of their convoys driving into Claymores. And now we’ve got a complete picture of where they’re heading. We’ve got sniper teams picking them off at five hundred yards, and they can’t figure out where the firing is coming from. The M82s are hitting jeeps at six hundred yards plus.’

Through the day our inserts fed us reports of movements, the helicopters guided onto formations and attacking with great accuracy, but always from the east. By the end of the day some fifty vehicles were reportedly hit, but two inserts reported a long

line of soldiers heading west, forty miles north of us, up to a thousand men.

Jimmy sent for Kimballa. With the French keenly listening in, Jimmy explained the large movement and asked permission to use the Congo Rifles for an ambush. Kimballa offered to lead the action himself, his best men kitted out and armed, jeeps and trucks mounted. It took them two hours to reach the required spot, Kimballa hiding his men either side of a road junction at the end of a densely wooded valley. When the first of the Hutu soldiers were spotted, walking casually along with rifles balanced over their shoulders, our helicopters went up in force. They flew the prescribed wide arc to the east, before strafing the valley at length from east to west, retiring to the east after a thirty-minute engagement, this being the first use of the chain guns on the Hueys. The net effect was for the scattered Hutus to run west, straight into Kimballa's men, who then massacred them, leaving few alive.

Kimballa returned around midnight, ebullient, his men returning in a trickle, since they had scattered and chased down the Hutus in an ill disciplined manner. Trucks went out all night and picked them up in small groups, still fetching them the next day, our Rescue Force Hueys flying out at dawn and picking up the wounded and ferrying them back; most of the wounds having come from friendly fire in the dark. Several large tents now housed the wounded, Kimballa and Jimmy patrolling them, thanking the brave the soldiers. Kimballa had his victory, his status affirmed.

All that day our insert teams fed us intel on movements, the Cobras picking off jeeps and trucks, soon little to target. At 5pm, as the sun lowered, Jimmy took a call on the satellite phone. Facing the French he said, 'Seems that the international press is blaming your French peacekeepers for attacking Hutu refugee camps.'

The French stepped out to make their own calls.

Hal said with a smile, 'Wondered why the large detour to the east.'

Smiling, Jimmy told him. 'Dawn tomorrow: take our helicopters back. Alert the boys, to bed early.'

The Pumas were sent out after dark, guided in by the insert teams for their own extraction. Within two hours all were back,

just a few minor wounds to attend. Jimmy assembled all of the Rifles and thanked them as if a great victory had been achieved, much fist waving and chanting going on, dancing breaking out.

In the rooftop bar we sat with Hacker and Hal for some food. 'Being *stretched*?' I asked Hacker, making him smile.

'Had to work on some guys in the back of the Huey,' he reported. 'Been a while since I've done that. Made my stomach churn when Dunnaw did his reverse flare landing – I was still knelt over a patient.'

'And Ratchet,' Hal complained. 'Couple of cowboys.'

'It's important they enjoy the work, or they might not do it,' Jimmy pointed out.

Kimballa stepped in looking smug, still in his camouflage clothing. He joined us quickly and sat. 'A very efficient operation, yes?'

'It achieved its aims,' Jimmy stated.

Kimballa listed off, 'Intelligence information, a trap, helicopters to shepherd the men towards us – all in a co-ordinated ballet, no?'

'Yes, a well co-ordinated action,' Jimmy agreed. 'And now the Hutus militias have been greatly diminished before having a chance to grow and organise themselves. You can use your men to start defending your lands.'

'All your men back?' I asked.

'I think so.'

'A great leader of men ... would know so.' I told him, getting a look from Jimmy.

Kimballa studied me for a moment. 'You are correct of course, I will check later. Did the French assist today?'

'No,' Jimmy answered him. 'They watched us, because they think I am king maker, and you the prince in waiting.'

'I did not know I was so popular,' Kimballa noted. 'What do you think ... the French want?'

'To be friends of the future leader of Zaire, of course,' Jimmy stated.

'And what of you, Mister Jimmy?' Kimballa asked with a smile.

'You, sir, will get a list of all your men, and check that they are all safely back, or I'll kill you before dawn.'

Kimballa stared back as Hal and Hacker shifted uneasily in their seats. 'You would still make a better man of me.' He slowly nodded to himself, and stood. 'I have some ... parenting to do. If you will excuse me.'

'You think he'll end up in power?' Hal asked after Kimballa became a distant dark shadow.

'Vacuums suck up trash, so why not. Got a power vacuum here, and Kinshasa is a long way off.'

'We done enough damage to the Hutu's?' I asked.

'Enough for the Congo Rifles to have a chance. We bought them some time.'

At dawn our helicopters lifted off, the additional Rifles taken back out by Hercules. We left an hour later, leaving the French to deny questions of involvement in the action. It was not an action we would deny, or try and hide, but causing the French a little discomfort was an added bonus.

A new British Prime Minister, 1997

We had sold all of our shares in Apple Computers a while back, at a great profit, and now sat waiting for a dip in order to buy them back.

The day after the new Prime Minister took office - the first labour Prime Minister for quite a while - he had a security briefing, then met Sykes for a Magestic briefing with the Home Secretary. Both were stunned after the lengthy briefing, the Prime Minister stating that we wanted to meet us, despite Sykes suggesting that "distance" might be prudent. The PM was insistent. The next day Karl drove us up to London, around to the rear of Horse Guards and through to Number 10 the back way. We were checked for weapons and bugs before being led through to a waiting room, finally into the PM's office, Sykes in attendance. It was just us, the PM and Sykes.

With the door closed the PM stepped around the desk, stood stiffly facing Jimmy for a second. Then he smiled widely, hugging him. 'Great to see you again, Jimmy.'

Sykes and I exchanged looks, equally surprised.

Letting go of Jimmy, the PM shook my hand. 'I've followed your stunts with envy, Paul. Please, sit.'

With a puzzled frown, Sykes asked, 'You've ... met before?

'Jimmy came to me in 1983, told me my future,' the PM explained.

'1983?' Sykes puzzled.

'Perhaps now is a good time,' the PM suggested to Jimmy.

Jimmy faced Sykes. 'Can you keep a secret? I'm not Magestic's right hand man, and he's not a clairvoyant. I'm a time traveller, and a lot older than you, Mister Sykes.'

'You're ... you're a *time traveller*?' Sykes stumbled to get out.

'He's been to 2025,' I told Sykes.

'And beyond,' Jimmy added.

'How's your health?' the PM knowingly asked of Sykes.

'You ... know, Prime Minister?'

'Jimmy told me a long time ago how it would unfold, including you. So we'll be hoping you can keep a secret.'

Sykes shook his head. To Jimmy he said, 'You, sir, are a lying toad. And a hell of an actor.' He faced me. 'And you.'

'I'm not a time traveller,' I complained. 'Just a plain old employee. An *underling*.'

Sykes asked, 'And the future?'

'As bad as you already know,' Jimmy told him. 'And you, young man, will remain head of the UK "M" Group.'

'I will?'

'Yes, you will,' the PM confirmed. 'And with Jack.' Facing Jimmy he said, 'How many ticks in the box?'

'We're two years ahead of schedule, but one or two unpredictable moments, like Aideed's Mi24.'

'More you get ahead, the less predictable,' the PM agreed. 'Aberrations in the time line.'

Still looking shocked, Sykes said, 'May I ask, Prime Minister, how much you know of the future?'

'Next to Jimmy, more than anyone else on the planet, including Paul.'

'Yeah?' I asked.

'There are some things the PM knows, that he needs to know in case we're killed,' Jimmy explained.

‘And the way you two are going, that’s a real possibility!’ the PM playfully scolded us. Easing back, he asked, ‘Anything you need?’

‘If there is, I’ll go through Mister Sykes. And don’t forget to enjoy that seat, don’t worry too much about the future, that’s my headache.’

We shook again before leaving, and I was still a little stunned. Still, it made sense to approach future leaders when they were still college students. I found myself wondering how many more there were out there as we left.

In the car I asked, ‘Sykes be alright?’

‘Yes. But next comes Russia, which is tricky at the best of times.’

Sykes turned up the next day with Jack, obviously keen to straighten a few things out. We welcomed them into the lounge, teas offered.

Sykes sat and stared for a few seconds. ‘You ... you’re Magestic?’ Jimmy nodded. After a moment, Sykes said, ‘A hell of an actor. And you look so young. Mind if I ask how old you really are?’

Jimmy wrote a number on a piece of paper, showing it to just Sykes, whose eyes widened. Jimmy put the piece of paper onto the log fire. Sitting, he said, ‘Jack ... *does not* know some things that *we know* about you, Mister Sykes. If you chose to share things with Jack, that’s up to you.’

Sykes carefully considered that. Half turning his head, he said, ‘I was injected, otherwise ... cancer.’

‘I’m glad you were, sir. I always preferred you to ... you know who.’

Sykes regarded his junior. ‘And judging by your reaction to my mentioning of Magestic, you knew.’

‘I knew some of it,’ Jack admitted.

Sykes faced Jimmy. ‘Your body...?’

‘All sorts of wonder drugs. In the future they’ll be able age you backwards.’

‘And Paul?’

‘Injected, like you,’ I said. ‘Fit as fuck.’

‘And others?’ Sykes asked.

‘The orphans, the Rifles, a few select individuals.’

‘The new Prime Minister?’ Sykes lightly asked.

‘No.’

‘I’ve been wondering just who’s running the country,’ Sykes mentioned.

‘He is,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘I won’t interfere with domestic politics ... too much.’

‘And the US President?’

‘Knows what he needs to know for now. So too the Chinese.’

‘And the greatest threat ahead?’

‘American Presidents ... and the Brotherhood – as you know.’

‘The Americans will be a problem?’ Sykes puzzled.

‘To certain future Presidents, the knowledge of the future is neither a road map nor a warning, but a chance to *get ahead*. And if I use the carrot and stick approach, they’ll not like it.’

‘And the Chinese?’

‘Simplistic in their mono-vision of the world, and a delight to work with. Carrot works well with them, so too the Russians.’

‘What’ll Russia do in the years ahead?’

‘Turn more conservative, but in a good way; they need a dictator to control the country. In the end, China and Russia will do more to help than The West.’

‘That doesn’t completely surprise me,’ Sykes admitted. ‘Anyway, the PM wants your security beefed up a bit.’

‘Problem with that ... is that the tabloids will wonder why,’ Jimmy explained.

‘Then we’ll be discreet,’ Sykes insisted. ‘Fortunately, you chose this place well.’

‘I’ll be buying the land behind me soon, lots of houses for staff. And security personnel.’

‘We’ve rented two places in the village down the road, ear to the local gossip,’ Jack put in. ‘Ask Big Paul not to thump them if he spots them.’

I laughed at that.

Jimmy said, facing Sykes, ‘There’ll be a problem you’ll have to face in the years ahead. You ... will not age much, your dear lady wife will.’

Sykes considered that. ‘You’d arrange ... an injection for her?’ Jimmy nodded, Sykes adding, ‘I can fix a friendly doctor.’

‘No hurry,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘What about Jack?’ I asked Jimmy.

‘Again, no hurry. He can be injected in years to come, at a time when some of the wonder drugs are available – less suspicion.’ Addressing Sykes, Jimmy said, ‘We’ll need the PM’s help on establishing a good counter terrorism unit in Kenya, building on their existing unit – which isn’t much.’

Sykes made a note. ‘That would help us keep an eye on Somalia as well.’

‘Be prepared for the fact that my *influence* in that region will grow. The papers here will ask the odd awkward question, especially over Zimbabwe.’

‘That ... will be awkward all around,’ Sykes unhappily stated.

‘I’ll brief you step by step,’ Jimmy offered in an appeasing tone. ‘The Chinese will drop some weapons into Kenya for me soon, so alert the powers. And any ex-Army instructors you come up with will help.’

Mapley

With friends in high places, Mapley developed quickly. A second barrack block was constructed, small individual rooms with communal ablutions for visitors. With the Fire Brigade making good use of Faulty Towers, and the other facilities, the Government quite rightly paid for the block, the new PM visiting a month after taking office. A hotel chain began construction of a cheap hotel between Mapley and the motorway, the net effect being that we could accommodate far more visitors or trainees.

The UN started using the centre for their version of basic training, and the new canteen saw plenty of business seven days a week. Jimmy took on the franchise of a mini-market and placed the shop on the base, open early and closing late. Beyond the leisure centre we bought land, Rolf’s architect firm given the job building six nice semis for permanent staff to live in. Inside the base we began work on a block of half decent flats for staff to live in, some to be used for the people on sixteen-week courses if they wished, or UN instructing staff.

In groups of eight, staff from Mawlini came up for six weeks; courses in rescue, climbing and caving. All became expert at

crawling over, through or under Faulty Towers, trained according to the manual that Jimmy had produced. We even started to rotate the Hong Kong branch, the Fire Brigade now whinging about less access. Many of our courses at the towers were run at night for realism, and that eased the daytime use of it.

A new Hong Kong

A week before the official handover, we flew back into Hong Kong, the hard to come by tickets booked well ahead of time. Unlike many, we arrived secure in the knowledge that the handover would go well and that the Chinese would ring-fence the colony, leaving its wealth generating rationale intact. Po and Han met us in the Roller, delivering us quickly to the Mandarin, an appointment with a masseur essential after the long flight. I left Han chatting with Jimmy and headed down to the sub level.

That evening we met up for food in the hotel's the Chinese restaurant, its entrance overlooking the internal quadrangle. We tried to avoid talking shop too much, but Somali cropped up, getting us onto the topic of Rescue Force Hong Kong, now ninety-seven strong and dwarfing its parent unit in Africa; Po had gone over the top to show how much he cared, now taking a personal interest in the running of it. As we had been arriving in Hong Kong, most of the new recruits had been heading for Mawlini.

The next morning we set off to inspect the Rescue Force building, a short drive from the Mandarin to a private ferry, the craft taking us across the busy harbour, just a short walk from the receiving jetty to the new building. The first thing I noticed was the climbing wall, reaching ten stories high up one side of the building, with what looked like a party of westerners scaling it.

'American,' Po explained, pointing at the climbers. 'Now many come, go climb up.'

At the base of the climbing wall we craned our necks skyward. I was not afraid of heights, but the idea of scaling this wall scared the crap out of me; I seriously hoped Jimmy would

not say it was a necessary exercise. Around the back of the building we met the first staff and I practised my Chinese, now reasonable in light chitchat. They showed us a row of white jeeps, Rescue Force logos painted on, and already a mainland flag displayed.

Through reception, Po led us keenly on, up one floor to the sandbox and its adjoining ordnance rooms. One side of this floor was covered in sand, dirt and rocks, two students now using headset metal detectors and suitably dressed in blue body armour. The classrooms off the sandbox were glass-walled and offered a view of students practising. We stepped in, finding the walls adorned with numerous posters of mines and weapons, the table tops littered with mines from many countries, some cut in half to reveal their workings to the students. We wiped the sand off our feet on special mats, and climbed the stairs to the second floor, to a row of administrative offices positioned opposite a canteen.

In the admin office, I was surprised to find two officials of the mainland, and in uniform. Had made the introductions; the men would co-ordinate training on the mainland. A Hong Kong fire brigade officer came next, the brigade providing training on fire-fighting and building searches, as well as climbing – they had their own mountaineering unit. A westerner stepped out.

‘You must be Mister Hancock’, Jimmy said, shaking the man’s hand. Hancock was tall and thin, a dash of silver hair over his ears.

‘Your reputation precedes you, gentlemen,’ Hancock offered.

Jimmy turned his head a notch to me. ‘We were lucky to get this gentleman, just released from the UN.’

‘You going to head up this unit?’ I asked.

‘Just taken on board, not least because I live here - local wife.’

‘Handy that, on the old commute to work,’ I quipped. ‘Been out to Kenya?’

‘Many times – I know Bob Davies well, but I’ve not been up to your place. Be off there in a few weeks, check the progress of the recruits. Hear you got a Hercules?’

‘Two year lease, complete with crew,’ I informed him.

That interested Po. ‘You pay for two years, and company give pilot?’

I nodded. 'Saves buying a plane and recruiting the crew.'

Hancock led us up a level, a floor of classrooms, two of our dummies laid out and still turning my stomach with their lifelike morbidity, cold white plastic skin.

Po said, 'I give one to hospital, now twenty hospital buy. You people in Welsh-land, they must make fifty more.'

'Selling well then,' I noted.

Hancock asked, 'Have you seen the new computer control?' I shook my head. 'You can vary the heart rhythm, so the senior doctors set or vary the rhythm, the young doctors using their stethoscopes in perfect simulations. It's on the syllabus of medical universities here now. Even got variable breathing sounds, and every cardiology department in the world wants one. Unfortunately, it's called *the Silo stiffy*.'

I laughed. 'Does it last longer than two minutes?'

With the Chinese not understanding the humour, we advanced a floor to a well-stocked gym, a scattering of people using the equipment. We sat in the gym's lounge for a tea and a chat, since the floors above us were just offices and apartments.

Hancock asked, 'How long till we let the UN know we have an earthquake response team?'

Jimmy eased back. 'The basic elements of earthquake response are not that difficult, or time consuming in training. The problem comes in the form of the terrain. You may attend an earthquake in Japan, or Western Indonesia. In Japan you would only be concerned with building search and hand over, in Indonesia you'd have to live rough, travel across country, find and treat primary injuries, then struggle to remove the casualties back to base or hospital – assuming the hospital wasn't destroyed on day one. In that case, surgical teams are needed in tents close to the epicentre.'

'A massive range of different equipment and skills required,' Hancock noted. 'So each response has to be tailored, and quickly.'

Jimmy nodded. 'In Kenya, we have teams of four; a doctor, a nurse, a driver come medic and one other. That way, there's a diversity of skills in each team. You can then create variable teams, of doctor nurses, or medics and climbers when just extraction is required. In the UK we have a specially designed collapsed building, so all of your people can spend some time on

it. After that, they're ready to be deployed. The only factor remaining, is how tough they are, how they'll handle the heat, insects, going without sleep, poor food.'

'Which is why they're in Kenya now,' Hancock noted. 'Toughener and sickener.'

'What we don't want, is someone who would do fine in Japan, but poorly in rural Armenia.'

'Got any flyers?' I asked.

'Not many. Two I think.'

'We'll need at least eight of your lot checked out on Hueys,' Jimmy said.

'I have friend with Huey,' Po put in. 'I buy, use here.'

I told Hancock, 'Our Hueys in Kenya have winches, so they practice winching at length.'

After our tea break we took the lift to the top floor, permanently open windows circulating a stiff breeze, and peeked down at brave climbers coming up, a group of amateur climbers from San Francisco. And looking down scared me even more.

On the way back we stopped off at the Chinese Embassy, without Po, greeting some familiar faces. In good Chinese I offered, 'I hope your sister is a goat.' The sour-faced man told Jimmy I needed some more lessons. We sat, Jimmy answering a lengthy list of questions, a few charts appended or corrected, almost three hours of detail regurgitated. Finally, a map of Afghanistan was laid out, so I closed in.

'We have supplied the weapons as you requested, to The Northern Alliance, whilst you build a hospital for their enemies – a most puzzling scenario.'

'The aim is not to destroy the Taliban, but to achieve a long-term division, a stable division. Détente! The Northern Alliance will never be strong enough to win. If they do, they drive gunmen into Pakistan -'

'Which will be very bad.'

'Yes. So we need ... time.'

The man pointed out current battles and dispositions, Jimmy making a few comments about further types of supply. Overall, he was happy with the progression of the stalemate. Han then displayed many photographs of the treasure recovered, Jimmy indicating that some items were missing. As an aside, he marked a spot on a map of Western China where a half-decent oilfield

could be found, and at what depth. From his pocket, Jimmy handed over a typed document detailing the design aspects of an electric car before we left.

Katie and Jean flew in the next day, my long suffering girlfriend set to perform an outdoor charity concert for Rescue Force on the day of the handover, quite an honour since it had been approved by the mainland authorities. It rained on concert day, but everyone seemed to be having fun, the second and third acts also ours, the TV exposure very good. During the official ceremony we stood at the back, chatting to the last ever British Governor as he moaned about getting wet. That evening the stiffies from the Chinese embassy came over to Po's hotel and looked around at length, staying for a meal and a chat. This was now their territory, even if ring-fenced. Katie flew directly to Los Angeles the next day, Jean coming back to the UK with us.

Diana

One day in August, 1997, I woke to the news that Diana, Princess of Wales, had died in a car crash. I asked Jimmy if he knew ahead of time. He stood, glanced at the TV screen and walked out, leaving me wondering about the event, and his reaction to it. The PM wasn't happy either, since he called Jimmy directly, as had Sykes. After the calls, Jimmy went for a long walk with Karl, hardly saying a word for hours.

That evening, when everyone else had gone to bed, I sat and faced Jimmy. 'Well?'

Without lifting his eyes, he said, 'She ... would have gone on to cause ... problems for the establishment, for the UK in years to come.'

'They wanted her gone?'

'Some, yes, and there will be some conspiracy theories in the years to come.'

'You let her die,' I softly stated.

He lifted his eyes. 'Never underestimate how cold I can be, to achieve my goals,' he snarled. 'And you have no idea how hard

it was to just sit and do nothing. But that's the game I'm in – life and death. Unfortunately, more death than life.'

It was the first time I had ever seen him this morbid, or this introspective. Self-pity was not something I would have ever attributed to him, and I was sure there was a hell of a lot that I still didn't know.

'I ... guess it was a difficult choice,' I offered.

'Difficult choice?' he snarled. 'Let me tell you what a *difficult choice* is. A few years from now there'll be an earthquake that kills hundreds of thousands, makes a million homeless. And to help, to really help, we'll have to risk exposure. And if we're exposed - the world goes to shit real quickly. How's that for a ... *choice*.'

I gave it some thought. 'As you said, it's a numbers game. The highest number wins.'

'Let ten million die ... so that we can save twenty million,' he softly stated. 'Some day, when I'm gone, you'll have that call to make. You'll stand alone and make that choice.'

'I'm hoping that's not some day *too* soon. I'm not ready.'

In a strained whisper, he said, 'It's one of those careers ... where you learn on the job, as I had to.' He got up and walked out of the lounge, leaving me to sit alone and think.

Most of my adult life so far, that working with Jimmy, had been interesting and exciting, and I always had Jimmy directing me, someone to fall back on. But how would I cope alone? Could I carry things forwards without him? I knew what the stock markets would do for a long while, I knew all the key events and key players, but could I hold it all together and alter the course of history? I doubted that very much. The Prime Minister knew a lot, but Jimmy had hinted that there were some deliberate gaps in the detail. So that came back to me, a heavy weight now on my shoulders. I stepped into the office, sat down and starting reviewing files and projects with a renewed determination. Somewhere in here, in the detail, were answers to questions.

He was moody for several days, taking long drives or walks, and met the PM. That had not lifted his spirits. Only work seemed to lift him, and fortunately there was plenty of that at hand.

Making money, doing deals

Po and Han met us at River View Golf Complex in September, and we made sure we were not bugged – we went for a swim together.

Bobbing in the surf, Big Paul on the beach and looking conspicuous, Jimmy Said. ‘There’ll be an opportunity in October to make some money, and I have a use for it, so we’ll need to co-ordinate the timing carefully – without anyone copying our trades.’

‘And Apple Computer share?’ Po asked.

‘That’s longer term, hold onto them,’ Jimmy explained. The sun beat off the water’s surface, making us squint without sunglasses, the damn turtle patrolling around us like a hungry shark. ‘There’ll be a crash on the Hong Kong markets, then in Europe and America, but a quick recovery. Po, I want you to make sure that you sell everything before that day.’

‘We only have America stock,’ Po insisted. He rattled them off, Jimmy telling him which stocks to keep.

‘I want you to trade the futures, but you must be careful, so I’ll send Paul over to make the trades for you. Once the markets have crashed, you can buy a lot of stock, futures, and bet the upside. I’m looking for forty million pounds profit from you and China; fifteen from you, Po, twenty-five from China. Han, have someone with Paul, and create a secure link. Ask your kind government to set-up accounts with many banks, through proxy agents, a hundred million pounds – no more.’

At the shore we sat on the damp sand, our feet in the water, discussing many things, Po still unaware of the truth about us. Po’s nephew and niece walked over, their kids running forwards and jumping on Han. With one child each, Po and Han gave the kids piggybacks into the water as Jimmy and I stood under the beach showers.

As I dried off I clocked a lady watching Jimmy, which was nothing unusual in itself. But this one was rather gorgeous, tall and thin. ‘I think you have a fan.’

‘Irina.’

‘You know her?’

‘I will do, but not today,’ he responded, no joy in his voice.

To the sound of kids enjoying themselves, we enjoyed a long lunch under the shades of the beach bar, and I made the waiters laugh as usual by trying to order turtle soup. After lunch we grabbed scuba kit and enjoyed a dive, out beyond the reef, no sign of the tame shark. That evening I again noticed the delectable Irina as I did the rounds, greeting everyone; some familiar faces, two Rescue Force doctors. We sat with Han, Po and family, a large table for just us, Big Paul eating with the Rescue Force medics, not least because we were mostly talking in Chinese on our table.

After the meal, we all strolled around to the golf complex, earnest preparations underway for the upcoming African Union meeting. Han and Po would both be involved, a large marquee provided for Chinese exhibitors. We’d have our hands full, meetings fixed with several African leaders, not least the delegation from Zimbabwe. Under a ceiling of stars we sat in the rooftop bar and sipped beer. Well, Han and Po sipped, we downed them rapidly.

The next day we drove the gang over to the safari lodge, booking into River View after a lengthy review of some of the other lodges; the entire estate could now handle two hundred and sixty visitors at a time, and without them bumping into each other. And we were fully booked year round, despite raising the prices. When we had arrived at the lodge I had half expected to see the tame lion to bound out, but he had walked off a year ago – it was that long since I was here last, the lion occasionally fed by the staff when they saw him, but the lucky lad now accompanied two females. I guess he finally lost his fear of antelope and his fondness for jeeps. And no orphaned cubs were visible for the girls to stroke. With the staff taking our bags, we climbed to the roof bar, finding the man we had come to meet sat waiting.

‘Mister DeKraft,’ Jimmy said, shaking the man’s hand as he stood to greet us. DeKraft was a large man with a grey beard, dressed now in green khaki shirt and shorts, a hat, and appearing as if he worked here.

‘Mister Silo, Mister Holton,’ DeKraft offered in a slightly accented voice, but sounding more British than South Africa.

We sat, Han and Po off enjoying the view with the girls.

Our guest said, ‘An impressive lodge. And you have six like this one?’

‘Yes, plus one large hotel, the old Schilling place,’ Jimmy explained.

‘I know it; I knew the family. Where did he retire to?’

‘The coast,’ I said. ‘Mombassa. And you, you have a large estate just across the border. Serengeti country.’

DeKraft nodded. ‘Which is up for sale to the right people.’

‘And what *criteria* ... do you apply?’ I asked. ‘I have a note from my mum.’

Our guests smiled. ‘People who will look after the staff, and the land, which is why I’m talking to you - everyone knows you.’

‘Mind if I ask *why* ... you are selling?’ I delicately broached.

‘First, *you* have taken much of our business. But I don’t blame you, we should have advertised more. And unlike you, we can’t bring celebrities down here.’

‘Would you like to stay on where you are?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Stay on ... in what capacity?’

‘General manager, and a shareholder,’ Jimmy suggested.

Our guest eased back, taking a moment. ‘What share split?’

‘Sixty percent to us, you take a pro-rata dividend, we fill up your lodges,’

‘Sounds very reasonable. What would I sell sixty-percent for?’

‘Our people in Tanzania valued sixty percent at two million, mostly due to a large number of working farms.’

‘And if I sell, but don’t stay?’

‘You’ll stay, being buried under your favourite tree,’ Jimmy confidently suggested.

‘You’ve been spying on me.’

‘Yeah, and next time close the curtains when you take a bath, frightening sight.’

DeKraft coughed out a laugh. Facing Jimmy he said, ‘If that’s the deal – a serious offer, I’ll take it.’

‘Our solicitors have already drawn up the papers, and a cheque. All you need do is get to Nairobi, contact Rudd – who you met – and it’ll all be done in ten minutes.’

One of the girls ran over, Jimmy lifting her to a knee and explaining in Chinese what we were talking about.

‘Be bringing Chinese here then?’ DeKraft asked.

‘World’s changing,’ Jimmy said. ‘Be full of Russians and Chinese next.’

‘If you got the connections, that’s what matters.’

‘We do,’ I said. ‘And our plane will take you to Nairobi and back in the morning. 9am at the airfield.’

‘You don’t mess about, I can see why you’re successful.’ He stood. ‘If you don’t mind, I have some calls to make, some people to inform about their future.’ We stood as he left us, the girl trotting off.

An hour later a luxury coach pulled in, a large party disembarking, including the Russians. I noticed Irina. Turning my head a notch to Jimmy I said, ‘Never a lion around when you want to one to wrestle.’

‘That wouldn’t impress her, she’s an ice maiden. She’s all about the money. That’s her brother, a very rich metals broker. He, is who I’m interested in, she is the excuse.’

Jimmy stepped forwards, intercepting the group. The first group were Germans, a loud long welcome given, a few sentences exchanged. Next came an English group, also welcomed, followed by a Belgian group, Jimmy practising his Flemish and astonishing them. Finally he greeted Irina’s group in flawless Russian. It stopped them dead and they enquired if he was, actually, Russian. Denying that, he helped them book in, dispensing useful advice with the forms required.

With the new arrivals asked to meet in the rooftop bar, Jimmy stood on a chair and gave the introductory spiel normally regurgitated by our three resident tour guides. He introduced himself, and said he was the owner of this and many other hotels in five languages, before a five minute intro in each language, explaining meal times, dangers and tours, pointing out many things in the distance. Finally, in a local dialect, he ordered a welcoming cocktail for each guest. Bloody show-off.

Mingling with the new arrivals, I practised my Russian on one of the men. He asked how big our land was. I pointed and said sixty kilometres in two directions, a hundred kilometres in the westerly direction. I then tried to explain that we had bought an estate in the Serengeti, but he seemed to think we owned the whole damn Serengeti. They were surprised that we also owned the beach hotels and golf club, they had not realised, despite the maps showing our properties in Kenya. When Jimmy neared I

grabbed him, getting him to explain the new estate. He found a map and showed the area of our estate and then the new place across the border.

Irina said to me, in her accented English, 'You have girl, Katie Joe, yes?'

'Yes, she's my girlfriend, she has been here many times.'

'And famous club in London.'

'Yes, would you like to visit?'

She shrugged, tipping her head.

The man asked, 'You are here for holiday?'

'No, work, a meeting at the golf complex, African leaders.' I nodded towards Han. 'Chinese Government officials.'

Jimmy stood discussing metals futures trading to the man of interest, Irina not that keen to make small talk with me. But my spirits were lifted by a familiar resonating sound on the breeze. I smiled, walking to the wall, a Rescue Force Huey coming into view. And, surprisingly, coming in to land. Jimmy asked the man of interest if he wanted a tour of the estate. He did, and Jimmy led two men out, leaving me quite jealous. Jimmy's party passed the pilots on the grass, a few words exchanged, before both parties crossed over, the pilots coming up here; Ratchet and Spanner of all people. They greeted me with over-exuberant hugs at the bar as Jimmy wound up the rotors.

'What's he up to?' Ratchet asked.

'Secret, so keep it that way. Some Russian businessmen to impress, some deals in the making.'

Guests came over to meet the famous Rescue Force pilots as Jimmy lifted off and pulled away, soon stories of heroic deeds told, and twisted, and exaggerated. I hoped they were staying the night, because they both downed several pints before Jimmy returned. Still, the way they flew, no one would notice. When Jimmy rejoined us, half an hour later, he told Ratchet and Spanner to eat a meal, and no more booze.

That evening we ate with Po and family, taking our new Russians friends on a private tour in the morning. We grabbed two jeeps and two drivers, setting off for lion country, Irina complaining of mosquito bites and still not interested in small talk with me. After lunch we happened upon a detachment of Rifles on poacher assignment. Recognising Jimmy they jumped down and saluted. Jimmy greeted each man, handshakes

exchanged, then called over the Russian group leader, Yuri. Jimmy accepted two M16s, handing one to Yuri. With a shout to me, I threw a can of peaches as far as I could and onto a patch of dirt. Jimmy let Yuri go first, firing whilst standing, a few shots near the can. Kneeling, and taking careful aim, he managed to hit it. Still upright, Jimmy hit it five times in succession, the Rifles chanting their respects. The weapons were handed back to the solders as Jimmy thanked them, some talk from Yuri of the AK47 being a better weapon as we mounted up.

In a meandering vehicle safari we eventually reached Skids' sanctuary, finding just his staff in. Fortunately, they had a good stock of orphans, including elephants. The Russians snapped away at the animals as I climbed into a pen of lion cubs. It took a minute for them to get used to me, soon overcoming their fear and lunging at me. I sat against a wooden dog kennel being used to house them, legs stretched out, and fended off three cubs under a year old, my arms and hands soon cut all over. Returning to the lodge, Jimmy let Yuri drive the jeep, giving directions at junctions. This evening we ate our meal with the Russians, now that the ice was broken, Irina the ice maiden warming up a bit.

We bade them goodbye at midnight, having to be back at the hotel the next day, and set off for an overnight drive, Po and family having set off around 5pm. The roads were quiet and we chatted as we progressed, Big Paul asleep in the back, being pulled over by a bored traffic officer around 2am as we passed Nairobi. When we said who we were he apologised and saluted. We arrived back around 4.30am, straight to bed to get three hours kip.

In light flannel suits, we strolled around to the golf complex at 9am, the security now tight, and met Rudd and Cosy, the principle organisers of this event. We left them to greet the guests arriving, moving first to a Rescue Force marquee. Ducking in, we greeted the gang; Coup, Doc Graham, Doc Hoskins, Mac, and Hancock from Hong Kong – his whites displaying a Chinese flag. I inspected the posters and table displays, many enlarged photographs pinned to the walls, many copies of all three books available free to visitors. The aim of the tent was simple; to get more African nations interested in hosting a Rescue Force unit, the target for today being Ghana and Uganda.

The next Marquee housed the Chinese industrial delegation and we ambled through, noting numerous large displays and many handouts, thirty people on hand to assist visitors. Jimmy greeted many, chatting to Han and Po for five minutes. Checking his watch, he led me out and into the main building, collecting Rudd and Cosy for a 9.30am meeting with the Kenyan Government, the Ministers for Defence, Schools, Tourism and Foreign Affairs waiting with their aids.

The Schools Minister asked about free lunches and we agreed to extend the scheme to another fifty schools. We chatted about vocational training for kids approaching sixteen, explaining that some would join the Rifles, some would be placed at the hotels and farm, and more again would study farming. The rest would be free to do whatever they chose.

The Tourism Minister thanked us for all the extra tourists, but we made it clear we were at capacity and could not handle any more at the moment. He then handed over the details of farm and estates in default, a less than subtle hint. They were ours for the taking, no charge, so long as we stuffed them full of tourists. We agreed to look at the viability of each, all bleeding thirty-five of them, the hefty pack handed to Rudd.

The Defence Minister, mister Idi Amin look-a-like, then discussed the additional base for the Rifles, an Air Force Base forty miles north of Mombassa, construction under way, sixty men already housed there and patrolling Southern Somalia. We agreed to eventually house three hundred there, increasing the Rifles head count to eight hundred. A new Colonel had been appointed in charge of the Rifles, but worked out of Nairobi. We'd get to meet him soon. We discussed the deployments, the numbers, and how long they would stay in the various countries, as much to make them feel involved as anything else. We would be putting married quarters at both of the bases, a small school and a crèche. At the moment soldiers went home every few weeks to various parts of Kenya.

Finally, the Minister for Foreign affairs asked about Somalia. We explained we would push the buffer east, and some day deal with Aideed, for the peace of Kenya's border as much as anything else. He seemed to be hinting that sooner rather than later would be preferable. I felt like asking him for some money. They did, however, agree to release a regiment of a thousand

men to patrol the buffer zone whilst we moved east, so long as we “assisted” with the logistics.

That led us to our meeting with the Tanzanians next door. We began by explaining we had bought the DeKraft estate and would be bringing many tourists to Tanzania. That pleased them. They asked about Kigoma: was there anything they could do to help? We were recruiting for Rescue Force Tanzania, and explained that the new unit would be answerable to the Government of Tanzania, but funded by us. They delicately asked if we would like to “adopt” an infantry company for “peace keeping” duties. In other words, would we like to pay the soldiers wages. Jimmy told them that if we did such a thing, we would recruit and train as per the Rifles. They had no problem with that, and we suggested a small fifty-man unit to start with, based out of Kigoma. The Tanzania Rifles had just been borne, history in the making. We thanked them for their time, on a tight schedule, and headed to the next room, and Kimballa – President Kimballa now after a quick, but predictable, move on Kinshasa.

His guards let us in, Mister President standing to greet us along with two of his aides. ‘Well, who do we have here? A doctor, a warrior, or a king maker?’

Jimmy shook his hand. ‘One I like, one I have to be, and one I only do for the right reason.’

Kimballa smiled widely. ‘As ever, a good answer. Please, sit.’

We settled. I asked, ‘How’s the new job?’

‘A calling, not a job!’

‘I hear the French Government has – *very quickly* - recognised your legitimacy,’ I said.

‘They have. And after you attacked the Hutu militias, there were awkward questions asked.’ He leant closer. ‘You played them well. I believe they were suitably ... embarrassed and confused in equal measure.’

‘Did you account for all your men?’ I asked.

He nodded slowly. ‘I went out in a truck and found many, after I had been *persuaded* to look, and earned a reputation as a caring leader.’

‘Jimmy can be *persuasive*,’ I agreed.

‘Indeed, and I hear your names mentioned often, especially here. So, as President I can grant you permission to build a clinic ... anywhere you like.’

‘Thank you, Mister President,’ Jimmy offered. ‘I would also like permission to *keep the peace* in Eastern DRC.’

‘If you mean ... keep the Hutus in check ... I have no problem with this.’

‘We would like to continue recruiting and training the Congo Rifles at the base,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘It’s their land, they should defend it.’

‘And if I made you *Governor* of that province, what would you do?’

‘I’d think you wanted me to spend a lot of money keeping that troublesome area from bothering you in Kinshasa. You Ceasar, me Pontius Pilot.’

Kimballa laughed at length. ‘I like this. But I am serious, my friend, I will make you Governor. The French will be ... most displeased. But, since they are not welcome in that part of the world any more...’ He shrugged.

‘It would be *costly* ... for me to build in this region, only for someone else to inherit its control in years to come.’

‘Within the region, all the mines there are yours to manage, taxes to Kinshasa of course.’

‘Of course,’ Jimmy repeated with a false smile. ‘Put it in writing, please, show me you’re serious before I spend a lot of money in your charming country. A copy of the document for the UN.’

‘Consider it done.’

‘We’ll raise a Rescue Force team there, called Rescue Force DRC, your flag on the arm, your patronage.’

When we stepped out my head was spinning, Cosy and Rudd quietly stunned. I dragged Jimmy outside the hotel and in to the brilliant sunshine. ‘Did he just give us Eastern DRC to run, and to mine?’

‘Yep. And under the ground ... is oil.’

‘Jesus. Governor? Are the French going to be pissy?’

‘No, because I’ll involve them, which is more than they could expect given how popular they are in the region, not! Anyway, next meeting.’

The Zimbabwean President was waiting. ‘Mister Silo. Please, come in. And I like the hotel very much.’

‘Thank you, Mister President. Did you get the medical supplies?’

‘They were ... liberated by my countrymen, and diverted to a hospital.’

‘I hereby make a formal complaint: don’t do it again.’ We laughed. ‘I will arrange another one soon.’

‘You are most kind. And growing in reputation and stature on our continent. You must be a great disappointment to the new British Prime Minister.’

‘I hope so.’ We laughed again. ‘And President Kimballa has just offered me Governorship of Eastern DRC.’

‘Governorship?’

‘He knows that I will spend a lot of money developing the region. He also knows I will resist outside influence.’

‘An interesting concept.’

I terrible thought crossed my mind, and I fought to control my reaction.

‘One thing I would like to talk about, Mister President, is Victoria Falls. You are short of tourists because of the sanctions and bad press. I think I could help.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘If I had the concession for the falls and area, I would bring in tourists. And all profits would stay with you. I want visitors to my parks here to also visit the falls, spending a little time at each place.’

‘I will have to discuss that with the relevant persons. We will let you know what we think at a later date. In the meantime, we are interested in the farming college and teachers here. Our farms are not as productive as they could be.’

‘I am sure we can teach your people at our facility, and send teachers to Zimbabwe. I can also get cheap fertilizer from my Chinese friends, they are here at my request.’

‘So I gather. You have some influence with many persons.’

‘If you send people to us here we will teach them, no charge.’

‘That is most gracious. And we will think about the tourists.’

We chatted for five minutes longer, the delegation having to move on, so headed down to the beach bar for lunch with Big Paul, and away from the crowds. Big Paul sat in trunks, a day off, since we did not want him anywhere near the conference.

‘Governor? Fuck,’ I let out. ‘How much oil and minerals?’

‘Tens of billions of pounds worth.’

‘Jesus! And he thinks it’s a fucking wasteland full of Hutus.’

‘No, he expects a big kickback for the mining – from whoever mines there. At the moment people mine without paying any taxes, just an initial bribe to his family. All we have to do, is get the oil and minerals up, whilst making the revenues seem much smaller than they are – like the rest of the bastards already there.’

Returning to the event, we met with the governments of Ghana and Uganda, talking about hotels and tourism, before again gravitating towards the Rescue Force tent to field questions with the gang. That dragged on and on in the heat, a great deal of interest by many countries, except the Arabic countries of the north. At 5pm, with many delegates back in their rooms, we sat down to eat with Po and Han, Rudd still running around and organising people. From the rooftop bar I could see many people on the golf course, chatting as they played. I guessed that was where the deals were being done.

The evening gala was black tie and well attended, many wives putting in appearances in their colourful dresses or robes, and most of them well fed, unlike their peoples. To the Kenyan Defence Minister we played up the concerns over Aideed and others, and offered to fund a small counter-terrorism unit. He fetched the Police Chief and we repeated the concerns and offer, a further meeting promised. Po and Han were kept busy all day, shattered by 10 o’clock and off to bed. Few guests stayed up late, more meetings scheduled for the morning. We wandered back down to the beach hotel around midnight, passing many police officers, finding Cosy sat drinking alone.

Joining him, I said, ‘Alone?’

‘First time in days for a quiet drink.’

‘A bit hectic?’ I asked.

Cosy nodded. ‘Glad it’s mostly over. Was Kimballa serious?’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘He thinks we’ll keep the Hutus in check.’

‘Will we?’

‘Yes. And get mining concessions worth more than he realises. *He* thinks he’s playing *us*, hoping I’ll not let another version of him rise up with money made from mining. He’s hoping I’ll kill every warlord there, saving him the trouble.’

‘Will you pop to the orphanage before you leave?’ Cosy asked.

‘Yes, we’re here a while yet,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘All OK?’

‘Those American doctors left, and the Chinese came and went. We now have one thousand two hundred children, building towards the farmland - places for older children.’

‘The farm gets Chinese fertiliser?’ I asked.

Cosy nodded. ‘The productivity is good, all the spare land now planted.’

‘So what are you these days?’ I asked. ‘Orphanage manager, or farm manager?’

‘A bit of both. I like all of it.’

‘How are the boy scouts?’ I asked.

‘There’s about a hundred boys in the scouts, another hundred in the Army Cadet unit.’

‘Expand the Army Cadet unit,’ Jimmy ordered. ‘Boys over twelve, but keep the bright kids studying. You got the computers we sent over?’

Cosy nodded. ‘Oh, we have two pregnancies.’

‘It happens,’ Jimmy said. ‘Move them to the farm, don’t let the school inspectors see them. Give them small houses and jobs. Oh, you know that land south of you, over the road?’

‘Yes.’

‘Try and buy it, build a girl’s college and a boy’s college.’

‘That would help,’ Cosy agreed.

‘Offer a nurses course, they can go straight into Rescue Force,’ I keenly suggested. ‘And boys over sixteen can join the Rifles junior section, there’s already a few young lads there.’

The day next we took a break from pressing the flesh. Big Paul drove us to the new Rifles base, meeting up with Rudd’s building manager at 9am, the same guy who had built the golf complex. The base commander came over to meet us, a senior Air Force officer, and we toured the Spartan base, a lonely group of four helicopters sat on the apron. The Rifles detachment had taken over an old barrack block across the airfield, two new buildings already under construction next to them. We grabbed the Rifles’ Kenyan officer and continued our tour, climbing the back stairs of the barrack block to its roof.

Jimmy told the builder, ‘We want barracks for five hundred men,’ surprising the base commander. ‘Room for growth.’

I took in the base, noting plenty of room inside its perimeter. It already offered a small dusty assault course and a twenty-five

yard shooting range backed by sand, and what looked like several garages.

Jimmy added, 'We'll need a large canteen, a gym, a better assault course, a hundred yard range that's enclosed, and plenty of classrooms and admin blocks. I'd say ten large classrooms at least. And outside the base, a married quarters with a hundred small houses. And let's get that fence improved, eh?' He faced the base commander. 'We will, of course, clear this with the Defence Minister. Will we be able to base a few helicopters here?'

'There is already capacity for many aircraft, just the one squadron here now,' the man answered.

'Then we may put a few Hueys here, for training and border patrol,' Jimmy informed the officer.

The commander showed us around the quiet officer's mess and we sat chatting over coffee for an hour, catching up on some of the Rifles other activities. The Rifles now had many men being put through parachute training, the best hundred selected for what we called The Pathfinders; they received twenty percent extra pay. They would then be offered free-fall training, and even practised jumping out of Hueys at just a thousand feet, static line drops. We also had a bodyguard course running; close quarter fighting with pistols.

Back at the hotel, the conference was still going, most of the leaders sat now in a large marquee and listening to speeches. At least today was cloudy, and cooler for them. We wandered in and met Rudd, explaining the building work at the air base, soon joining the gang in their tent, a few visitors nosing around and asking questions.

'Much trade?' I asked Mac.

'Lots of interest, the Ghanaian's interested as you said. And Namibia.'

'Namibia?' I questioned. 'Now that would be a great spot for a training camp, miles of open space, and coastline. But we'll tackle Ghana first.'

'Rudd's found more old jeeps than we need.'

'Store them, cover them over,' I suggested. 'Be cheaper now, than later.'

'We give plenty to the Rifles or Abdi,' Mac said. 'They got a need. You heard what he did, Abdi?'

‘What?’

‘He snuck his boys into the coastal town of Djerbi, wiped out the warlord, his family, his pet fucking dog, and left. Some around the southern towns running scared of him.’

‘Only the warlords,’ I countered. ‘And we know what he does, *all* of what he does. We’ll clear those towns soon.’

‘You’ll go into the towns?’ Mac questioned.

‘When we’re ready, and in force, one street at a time, disarming everyone.’

‘And Mogadishu?’

‘Long way off,’ I assured him.

‘They moved another fifty miles east just this week, a warlord came over to our side,’ Mac reported.

I nodded. ‘Small progress. Still, we’ll give Aideed something to think about soon. Oh, Tanzanians gave us permission to start a Rifles regiment over there.’

‘Kigoma?’

I nodded, visitors now entering the tent.

Back in the UK, Jimmy began giving Yuri in Moscow stock market and commodities tips. Yuri did well, soon paying us a visit in London with Irina. We put them up at the club-hotel and showed them around London, a Saturday night spent introducing them to celebs, Irina most impressed. And everyone was most impressed with her, the good lady tall, elegant and very beautiful. She made a big play for Jimmy and bedded him; he took one for the team. In fact he took two, because she grabbed him on the Sunday night as well.

Jimmy asked Yuri to hang onto our revenue cut, and our Russian friends departed back to Moscow.

It’s another crash, but not

October 1997 came around, and I flew over to Hong Kong with Big Paul, our lumbering bodyguard snoring happily most of the way. Jimmy went and sat in McKinleys’ offices in London, a deal worked with the directors, and his trades would be hidden

through their New York and Singapore offices. Han brought me two Chinese traders, and some sophisticated kit that linked me to a central source, then on to a dozen others, Po's trusted family trader sitting alongside me in Po's personal office. We were ready, but it wasn't exactly difficult, knowing ahead of time what the markets would do.

The day before the slide, with the markets in Asia already down, Jimmy contacted the investment bank owned by Senator Pedersen in the States and suggested several trades. Positions were closed out and they were told to wait till the markets had dropped four percent before doing anything. Jimmy and I then proceeded to open large futures positions, following the market down whilst talking in code on the phone or by email; breasts, legs, hips and eyes being metaphors that should confuse anyone listening in. We calmly sat and watched the Hong Kong markets drop six percent and made a killing in Asia, not bothering that much with the UK market in comparison. With the UK and US markets down sharply, but just two percent, we reversed quickly and bet the upside. Jimmy gave the bank in Texas modest trades on the upside, and the market recovered quickly.

'Timing is everything,' I told the impressed Chinese before I left the colony.

Back in the UK, we were hearing rumours of US banks getting their fingers burnt, a whiff of a suggestion that someone had tried to copy us via Pedersen's bank, a little slow on the turn. The bank itself did OK, but anyone copying and not paying attention could have been caught by the snap back, as we had intended; some lessons had to be learnt the hard way. Yuri in Moscow did well out of the mini-crash, Jimmy having tempted him towards the index futures action, away from his comfort zone in the commodities markets.

When the trading accounts had finally been reconciled we were eighty million pounds better off, most of the funds directed to Mawlini's registered charity and its very large security detail, a.k.a. the Rifles. Money from several other beneficiaries of our trading intel' was also sent to Mawlini, and from there it was dispersed into other accounts. Kigoma got a little money for Rescue Force Tanzania and the fledgling Tanzania Rifles, but Forward Base received the lion's share of the money for the Congo Rifles and for Rescue Force DRC, the remaining money

earmarked for projects in our newly administered province. Jimmy was, after all, now the Governor, something that had made the newspapers in many countries.

Building contractors and companies in Burundi, Uganda and Malawi had been awarded contracts, roads now hurriedly being repaired and widened in a triangle, Forward Base at the westerly apex. As the region's generous administrators, we recruited current and former politicians from Eastern DRC – including the former regional governor himself, plus a few former UN managers, and got to work, making the money go a long way by paying local wages and local rates. Forward Base grew rapidly, the Congo Rifles grew rapidly, and we used the carrot and stick approach where we could, buying up surplus weapons and giving people jobs, the Rifles shooting any armed Hutu who resisted. The Hutu camps received well-guarded clinics and well-guarded medics – pistols worn on hips, as the Rifles hid themselves along roads, in trees or on hillsides. Any group of armed men would be fired upon, any vehicles carrying armed men would be shot up by the snipers and intercepted. Jimmy had said to me: “All you need to win a conflict in Africa, is to kill the other guy at four hundred yards, because they can't shoot straight.”

True to his word, Kimballa signed over mining rights to us. The first mine, producing tin ore, had once belonged to a Belgium company. We contacted them and told them we would mine it, whilst giving them ten percent of the profit – take it or leave it. Since they had abandoned it fifteen years earlier we had a case if they went to the European courts. It was in a Hutu refugee area, so we employed Hutus to mine it at a low, but fair wage, and built a clinic at the mine, bringing in new equipment from China where needed. The Rifles kept the peace, and ore soon flowed towards Kenya on repaired road links.

With the profits from the ore coming back to the mine we employed more people, and bought more equipment, paying monthly productivity bonuses. Doc Adam injected our workforce, so sickness became none existent and productivity rocketed. Hundreds of self-assembly huts were brought in from Kenya, the journey adding to the expense. At least it would have done if we had not used ore trucks where possible. Drivers were also allowed to pick up paying passengers both ways, the revenue supplementing their wages.

I was still seeing Katie and enjoying the high life around London, lots of parties, but our fiefdom took much of my time; we were in a big hurry to recover our costs there, and to get beyond the point where Kimballa could pull the plug. We had started paying taxes to Kinshasa as soon as the first ore was sold, just to keep the main man happy, but the tonnage had been skilfully “adjusted” down.

Sitting down with the “M” Group, we explained the future oil revenues from the DRC, and made combined and long-term plans. Sykes created a small unit inside the Foreign Office for just that purpose and flew out advisors to assist us. We also petitioned the UK and US Governments for aid money to the region to come through us. What we had not revealed was that we had continued to build up the Congo Rifles on the quiet.

Fully expecting a backlash from former mine operators, including old colonial companies, we organised a meeting in London for the affected companies, bursting their balloons by offering to help where we could. The mines would, however, be expensive to police and protect; we’d need our cut. Sykes and the British Government had quiet words with British Companies, the US Governments with their companies. Still, Jimmy predicted that several groups would try and kill him, not least because many of the former warlords involved in controlling the mining for western companies had mysteriously disappeared. The meeting produced both people willing to co-operate, and those that sat with folded arms and stern faces, our solicitors present and advising us every step of the way. Actually, they determined that these companies did not have a leg to stand on and showed us a UN report that suggested they were in bed with warlords and guilty of numerous crimes. Being the sort of people we were, we made sure every reporter in Europe got a copy of the report, and nudged the UN to poke the mining companies for answers that they did not wish to give.

The day after the meeting, a cold December day, we held a meeting with representatives of the UN, the US, the UK, Belgium, France, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Malawi. Around a large table at the Foreign Office we assembled, senior people at the table sat with assistants immediately behind them.

‘Gentlemen,’ Jimmy called, no ladies present today. ‘I have invited you all here, and asked for your kind co-operation, in discussing Eastern DRC – and my role in that region, since President Kimballa has taken the unusual step of nominating me a governor of the turbulent region.

‘My first interest in the region came when the Rwandan crisis occurred – I sent medics in to assist where we could. After that, we built a base and sent medics to various camps, and are now involved with building many clinics. I have also been involved in the development of the Congo Rifles, since I believe that the region should be policed and defended by its own people, provided those people are more of a benefit than a hindrance. It is my aim to continue to grow the Congo Rifles until they are both police and army in the region, and outside interests are put second to local interests.

‘As you are aware, I have become involved in several mines, shipping ore out and paying taxes to Kinshasa. Some commentators have suggested that I am financially motivated, so let me state, again, that over eight-five percent of everything I earn goes directly to charity. Of the mines I have become involved with in the DRC, some profits go to their former owners – where losses could be proven, the rest of the profits go to either the Kinshasa Government or local interests. None ... of the money comes to me, nor ever will – I don’t need the money.

‘Some of you have asked what my intentions are for the region. They are this: to first create a peaceful zone, then to develop the resources for the local people – not to the benefit of outside interests. If the DRC develops, then its neighbours should also develop. It is my intention to enter into a road-building phase with profits from the mines, to the benefit of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi and Malawi. Heading west, it is my intention to develop the roads to Kinshasa, and regional airports. Now, those are my intentions, but we’re here to discuss *your* intentions, in particular ... *interference* in my plans.’ He faced the French representative. ‘Yesterday, a group of French colonial nationals and mercenaries, working for a French Mining Group, were intercepted and detained – on their way to assassinate my people in the DRC.’

A chorus of whispers broke out.

The French representative gave a startled, ‘What?’

‘The detail was sent to the French press an hour ago, including video interviews and confessions.’

The UK representative said, ‘We’ll be looking into that with the utmost urgency and importance.’

Jimmy added, ‘The mining group in question has links to many French politicians. May I ask what the French Government has designs on, in my area?’

The French representative complained at length, the Kenyans offering more soldiers, a few fingers pointed by the Rwandans at the French.

Jimmy called them to order. ‘Gentlemen, I will make you all this promise. If, in two years time, I have created a peace in the region, all claims to mine ownership will be looked at in a British court. I cannot guarantee what President Kimballa may wish to do, but I will try and make sure that those who have lost out are compensated, as I have voluntarily done with a Belgian company. You all have the option of approaching the Kinshasa Government directly as well. If they ask me to leave the region I will. At the end of the day, I am a guest there.’

Everyone was allowed to speak in turn, followed by a question and answer session. The UN backed us, and our approach, as did the British and American Governments, and most of the Africans. When the Ugandans and Rwandans offered peacekeeping soldiers, Jimmy refused, saying they would not be necessary. The Rwandans then pointed at Hutu attacks across the border, so we offered to increase the border patrols. But the Rwandans pressed their helpfulness. Jimmy finally said that he had been entrusted as governor, and if any country moved soldiers in without his permission they would be met by force. It left the Rwandans and Ugandans appearing a little put out, especially when the UK and US offered military support if necessary. French peacekeepers were told they would be welcome, despite the French mercenaries, and protests from the Rwandans. Jimmy went so far as to invite the French back in, a formal request – and would they mind operating along the border with Rwanda. The Tanzanians offered a thousand men and we graciously accepted, saying we’d use them in the north, along the Ugandan border.

Everyone knew that the governments of Uganda and Rwanda had eyes on the mines, but no one mentioned it openly. The UK

representative indicated that Britain would send a number of military “observers” and a few aircraft. Our reporting of the Zimbabwean Government sending troops surprised a few, the UN indicating the Nigerian peace-keeping soldiers were ready to move in when requested. Jimmy said they would be most welcome, but not needed yet.

The meeting broke with me feeling that there was trouble ahead. We had invited the French in to short-circuit any objections they could have, and Red Cross France and Medicine Sans Frontier had come in at our request, in numbers, financial assistance provided. But, at the end of the day, I had to question the logic of exposing ourselves like this. The TV news that night was of the French mercenaries, great embarrassment for the French Government, videotaped confessions played, people named. We gave an interview, labelling it as “an unfortunate incident”, and explaining that the men were being flown directly back to France.

When asked, Jimmy said, ‘I doubt there will be a trial, the men are connected to powerful politicians. They’ll disappear in the system, or be acquitted.’

The men were arrested as they got off the plane the next day, in front of the French TV cameras, the French Government reeling. Some of the information sent to the press could not have come from the men themselves, but seemingly only from within the mining company, who must have wondered who talked. Several junior ministers resigned. Even the UN debated the mini-crisis, and the wider exploitation of Africa by mining companies. We spent some money around Africa and Europe to stoke the fire, and the debate raged. Even Kimballa got involved, saying that foreign provocateurs in his country would be dealt with harshly. At the end of it, hardly anyone in Europe could have missed our faces, or the debate. Jimmy gave numerous interviews, stating that African wealth should benefit the Africans, not western mining companies.

As all this was going on our helicopters went back into DRC and pounded not only the Hutu militias, but warlords controlling mines. Jimmy knew exactly who to hit, and where to find them, small groups of Rifles going in with the ex-SAS guys and assassinating the warlords, whilst making it appear to be local infighting. All the while, the Congo Rifles grew, soon two

thousand soldiers undergoing the benefit of good food, clothing, weapons and training – plus education in the evenings. All closely monitored by the modest force of French peacekeepers at the base, who still enjoyed our hospitality.

New year came, and we visited Po in Hong Kong for a break, the Rescue Force building now bustling when we toured it. They had been deployed to a few floods around the region, and minor quakes in China, but no major disasters as yet. We kept them busy with postings in Africa as they awaited something more interesting to do.

Sitting down in the Chinese Embassy, we laid out a twenty-year plan for African ores to reach China, our host always happy to entertain long-term plans. We asked them to contribute towards improvements at Mombassa docks, and help towards a long road from the West African coast through the DRC and towards our area. The cost of the road was factored into future tonnage and rates, a very detailed calculation handed over and discussed. Jimmy had to insist that no work start yet, lest people think we had the Chinese in mind all along; they would wait a year as they made plans. We gave them the name of a mining corporation that they had dealings with, and that would be a pain regarding the DRC. Gentle financial pressure was to be applied.

The new year trip was noteworthy for the fact that I was unfaithful to Katie, the move finally making me realise that life with Katie was more about the parties, than us. It had run its course after almost three years, something I had known after eighteen months. I took the coward's way out and sent her a text message. And that was that. I made the tabloids for all the wrong reasons.

Back in the DRC, we chartered a 737 and scheduled it to fly Mondays and Fridays to Kinshasa, requesting a dozen officials from the Kimballa Government and paying their wages and costs. Everything we did, most everything we did, we ran past them and they reported back, Kimballa left in no doubt that everything was above board. The UK and US Governments finally agreed on an aid package to the region, a cool four hundred million pounds at our disposal. We wasted no time. In a massive move we employed five thousand Hutus to build houses, new small towns at the refugee campsites. We employed another ten thousand directly to mine ore, taking over dozens of mines.

Goma, our nearest big town, got a face lift, a revamped hospital, and a permanent garrison of Congo Rifles, many former police officers re-hired, armed, and well paid. At the same time, we built a new camp at Forward Base, a police training academy, paying for police officers from Kinshasa to come out and work.

Each town in our region had its courthouse revamped, the security improved, judges and lawyers flown in from Kinshasa where necessary. The wild east of DRC would not be like The Wild West. The placement of French peacekeepers along the Rwandan border was a poison pill that the French had reluctantly taken, soon regretted with numerous clashes with both Hutus, and Rwandan Tutsis soldiers who blamed the French for not having done enough in the genocide. With French public opinion eventually bringing pressure, they were withdrawn and replaced by the Congo Rifles, who were Tutsis. They got along with the Rwandan Army, but killed Hutus when the Kenyans were not around. The French observers at the base, however, remained, and we tolerated them, being annoyingly helpful.

The international aid money that we had been entrusted with - was focused mainly on the long-term solution of the camps. Although Kimballa had pushed many Hutus back across the border, a large number remained. If they were not going to take up arms, they'd have to be employed, and kept busy. That also went for the indigenous peoples, many used to taking up arms for their supper. As each mine was taken over, most with no existing leadership in place, we hired as many people as we could. Many locals mined ore by themselves, or in small groups, so we set-up purchasing stations, where we would buy the ore from them and truck it out. That worked well for the diamonds, because we knew that anyone gainfully employed in diamond mining would steal most of what they found.

Magestic

Geoff Wolak. October, 2009.

Part 4

Another new house

With the time judged to be about right, Jimmy approached the owner of the land behind our house, actually three owners with all the acreage he wanted. The first small farm was up for sale, so that wasn't a problem, a quick sale and an extra one hundred and sixty acres acquired, Rolf extending the fence along a winding road that delineated the northern edge of the property. The third property would have been isolated if we could not acquire the middle property, so they were approached first. Their land consisted of almost fifty percent mixed woodland and backed onto the river, a valuable stretch for trout and salmon fishing. We sat and had a pleasant chat with the owners, asked if they want to sell "some" land, suggesting to them we wanted cottages for family and visitors. They made various non-committal noises, so we left them to it.

The area we had already purchased was cleared quickly, trees cut down, tarmac avenues laid. Those trees that remained had their branches below seven foot chopped down, many bonfires burning the debris of an afternoon. Jimmy had applied to the local council the day we had signed for the new property, a hefty planning petition to build "staff" houses in the grounds, the plans pre-prepared and professionally presented. Since they were for our staff, and internal - not on a public street or for public sale or use - only the construction needed planning permission. And with the proposed houses hidden from view of the public road, there was little for any neighbours to object about.

Foundations were laid in anticipation, gas and electric extended to non-existent premises. When the permission arrived, the builders were waiting, brought in the next day. Eight houses would now be built on an internal avenue, the tree-lined avenue leading to our house one way, to a distant gate the other way. Each new house would be two storey, four bedroom, but with high sloping roofs and loft conversions. Front grass would be communal, rear gardens segregated with six foot wooden fencing. We even put in street lighting.

When the neighbours in the middle saw the building work for the new houses they figured that we had given up on them, but gave an asking price anyway, but only if it included their whole

property. We waited a few weeks then made a low offer. The offer was accepted a week later, paid and signed in record time. That day we drove to the third property, whose owners wanted to retire abroad. We now had the three properties, the final property important for privacy, since its small rise would afford the press a view into the main central area, and one damp Monday afternoon Jimmy presented Rolf plans for the main house. Poor old Rolf asked Jimmy if he was crazy, making me laugh. So what if it was bigger than Buckingham Palace, the Palace was not that big. With his head spinning, Rolf headed up the estate to look over the topography.

As we had done on the first plot, we trimmed the trees, and all branches below seven feet, some left for ornate appreciation, some left as a barrier to being viewed from the road. Internal avenues were laid across the land as per Jimmy's précis instructions, not least to give the builders unhindered access across sodden ground. The fence was quickly extended all the way around the estate, a second fence placed fifty yards inside. That was the special fence, to be fitted with sensors, the first was to keep out the public.

I got home one day to an empty house and decided to have a nose at the new foundations, finding five yellow portakabins belonging to the builders, a guard supplied by the builders to look after their huts. A second guard approached, a man that Jimmy had just employed, another mate of Big Paul's called Rob, the guy around forty. He greeted me with two fully-grown Alsatis, pointing at his temporary home just down slope. I wasn't happy at him living there, said so, and led him down to have a look. The cabin was like a caravan on the inside, quite cosy. And came complete with four Alsatian pups in a basket.

'Your pups?'

'For this place when it's ready.'

'Be eight then,' I realised.

'Need it, fucking big place.'

'You happy with this for six months?'

'Sure, I've lived in worse. And it saves coming back and forth. When I want a warm shower I use Ricky's place, Cookie spoils me, so no big deal. With my wages I'm saving money, no rent.'

'Wife? Kids?'

‘None of the above,’ he said with a grin.

We ambled back up, throwing tennis balls for the dogs, and stopping at the muddy foundations.

‘What’s that going to be?’ he asked, pointing a concrete section.

‘Swimming pool. Rest will be a sort of basement office.’

‘Big place.’

‘Very ... big place. You’ll live in one the houses?’

‘Nope, got a cottage down by the river; Jimmy offered it, I took it. Isolation, river, woods – it’ll do me fine. What you doing down river from it, those big holes?’

‘Two fucking great ponds, linked to the river.’

‘You must be psychic - fishing’s my passion. You’ll stock them?’

‘No, they’ll have special little tunnels to the river so that fish can get in at certain water heights.’

‘You’ll have trout in there, coming and going. Be interesting to see what else turns up. If you get Dace or Grayling in there they’ll make a happy home and stay. What’s the little wall for down there?’

‘Flooding. Some years it comes a foot over the side. Your cottage at river level?’

‘Nah, four or five feet above it.’

‘Why aren’t you in there now?’ I puzzled.

‘Being gutted and done out. Three months work.’

‘Get some fly fishing rods, you can teach me. We’ll have a go at the river.’

‘Sunday I’ll be down there, after 8am.’

‘It’s a date.’

Bananas

Mickey and Yuri had been joined by two Russian pilots down on their luck and in need of some work – no matter how dangerous, both Mi24s now in use and attacking convoys or jeeps when they were spotted. Hardly a Somali gunmen would dare venture out in our area. And that area was creeping slowly towards Mogadishu;

not on the ground, but in the air. North of Mogadishu, along the Ethiopian border, we extended our influence, easily taking land that was barren and mountainous, land that no one wanted.

When Jimmy considered the time was just about right, we launched a large-scale attack at dawn, one day in June. The two Mi24s lifted off, followed by a line of six Cobras and four support Hueys, Hal and Hacker both in action. They flew directly to the important banana growing region north of Mogadishu, part controlled by Aideed, part controlled by his rivals, and the source of their rivalry; the banana sales propped up Aideed's militia. Ten small bridges over gullies were destroyed, two more significant bridges downed. Where the roads were good, half-decent tarmac surfaces, large holes were blown into them. The helicopters then set about the trucks used to move the bananas, finding them helpfully parked in neat rows. At the end of the operation, anyone wanting to move bananas to Mogadishu port would have to first borrow a few trucks, then divert a long way around the blown bridges.

Abdi had men working in the port, his spies, and no trucks came for a week. When the trucks re-appeared, Scorpion Base received a signal, the repaired bridges blown again, roads further potholed. The trickle of lorries slowed, hurting Aideed in the pocket. When Aideed, now struggling financially, met to discuss this common threat with the other warlords we were waiting, Jimmy having anticipated the meeting. Many of Abdi's men had been placed inside Aideed's militia, a small transmitter giving the helicopters a signal to close in on. With the sound of the helicopters scattering men at the meeting, the noose was tightened, the approaching Cobras making holes in the road as they approached. In an operation that lasted six hours, our helicopters returned time and again, strafing the jeeps, attacking buildings. At sundown the US Navy intercepted phone calls; Aideed, many of his lieutenants and two other warlords, were reported dead.

Abdi was now Colonel Abdi, and commanded over two thousand men, many having switching sides as a prudent move. They were well trained, well equipped, and – unlike those they fought against - well fed. The exiled government had returned, first to Baardheere, then to a coastal town, and gave our activities more credibility. We gave them money, Abdi gave them

grudging respect, and they told the world's press that they had invited us in.

With the death of Aideed we did the unexpected, and pulled back. The regular Kenyan Army took responsibility for the border, the Kenyan Rifles massing in the southwest with the Somali Rifles, under the young Colonel Abdi. The first small town on our list was surrounded, the armed men inside told to come out - or be slaughtered. They took the sensible option, not least because of fly-bys with everything we had that could stay airborne; the inhabitants must have thought we had a hundred aircraft. Abdi's men moved in and searched everyone, and every house and building, a few exchanges of gunfire. All weapons were collected in, the local leader allowed to keep a few for personal protection. Abdi left ten soldiers of the Kenyan Rifles and twenty Somali Rifles to police the small town.

The next town along the coast was larger, but the same fly-by left the residents fearing annihilation. Leaflets were dropped, armed men told to surrender – or else. Some surrendered, some threw their weapons into the harbour, and some hid their weapons. On the second day, the combined forces moved in before dawn, searching houses, setting up roadblocks. Abdi's men had already infiltrated the town, and now pointed out gunmen and warlords, the men taken away - never to be seen again. Houses and compounds belonging to the warlords were raided, weapons seized.

The third town was larger again, and again rude dawn fly-bys were duly organised. But this time Abdi's men had snuck into the town in reasonable numbers. At dawn on the prescribed day the combined forces moved in, Abdi's men hidden near the abodes of the identified, yet sleepy, warlords. When the men in question fled their rude awakening they were cut down, air strikes called in where pockets of gunmen grouped. Three towns had now been liberated, government officials moving in, along with the UN and other NGOs. To settle the populations, food trucks rumbled in from Kenya, wheat from the UN and the US. And that signalled a pause, and a consolidation, as Abdi's men spied on movements in Mogadishu.

1998. Calling International Rescue

June and July were typically very hot in Kenya, as well as in Hong Kong. With a combined training exercise well overdue, we organised an exercise with Dunnow's old mates in the Australian army – they had read the books. June and July in Oz were typically cooler by a few degrees – it being their winter, but the scheduled exercise was being held in the tropical north. The majority of our experienced staff assembled in Nairobi on June 20th, and a party of fifty-two departed by commercial airliner to Australia, heading for Cairns in the northeast. It was a long way to send our Hercules aircraft, so we simply hired three commercial Hercules, the Australian Army laying on two more for the exercise if we'd pay the fuel.

RF Hong Kong turned out in force for the exercise, sixty of them, our people billeted at a seldom used and remote Army base. The base consisted of a meandering spread of low huts, a large mess hall, and not much else. The ground was hard and parched, one small area of green grass in front of the mess being nurtured. Along roads with whitewashed curbs, we would walk or drive back and forth to the mess hall or the toilet blocks.

The first exercise involved long distance navigation in hired tourist jeeps, a four day jaunt of sleeping rough and camping along the roadside, "Roos" shot and cooked. That was followed by several days of survival training, courtesy of our Australian Army hosts, whilst Jimmy finished off a special training scenario. Po and Han came down to see how the HK teams were doing, and joined me and Jimmy as the special scenario was finished, the first mixed group of five rescuers being brought out to it, Dunnow and Ratchet amongst them. Forty miles from anywhere, in the middle of a flat expanse, our convoy of trucks disturbed the Roos and pulled up on the wreck of a large aircraft. I noticed immediately a camera fixed to a pole, trained on the wreck. With a hand over my eyes I took in the flat shimmering horizon, finding no features.

Jimmy called everyone together. 'Ratchet, you're nominated leader, Dunnow second in command for the next seven days. This ... is your scenario. That –' He pointed at the wreck with a mischievous smile. – 'was your aircraft, which crashed here.

Inside you will find a map indicating where the pilot marked his last known position before dying. Inside the aircraft is everything you're allowed to have and to use for seven days. You may, if you wish, wait to be rescued. You may decide to walk out of here - it's only forty miles to the nearest farm. If you get lost, it's sixty or seventy miles. It's your call; we're not giving you any advice. Ratchet, take your people inside.'

As Ratchet led his perplexed team of unwilling volunteers inside, we drove off in a cloud of dust and left them to it.

'How much food?' I asked with a grin.

'Enough for three days.'

'Three days?' Po repeated. 'It small.'

'*It ... is a test,*' Jimmy emphasised. 'There's fuel in the wings, water in the engines, local animals that could be trapped. They can make tools from the wrecked aircraft, and they have a satellite phone just in case. There're also two dummies in the pilot's seats; they have compasses and matches – assuming they're searched.'

Eight days later the weary group reached a farm; improvised headgear, improvised walking sticks, improvised sunglasses, cans of fuel for fires, other cans for water. Their lips were cracked, their feet raw, the local farmer shocked. Back at camp we greeted them with cold beers and quick medicals. And they were sworn to secrecy, the next group already debating whether to stay with the wreck, or head out on foot.

Isolated from the rest, their feet soaking in water, I asked the first group of victims, 'Did you find the compass?'

'No,' they puzzled.

'It was in the dead pilot's flight suit.'

'Bugger.'

'The matches?'

'Nope.' They exchanged looks.

'Same place.'

'Frigging 'ell!'

'Water in the engines?' I probed.

'Yep, got that out and cleaned it up.'

'Catch any animals?'

'Killed a small kangaroo,' they admitted.

'Made nice light tents from the parachutes?' I teased.

‘Nope,’ they groaned, looks again exchanged. ‘And fucking Wombat Fly Boy was with us!’

They got a full debrief from the Australian Army on what else they could have done, or done safer and better, two day’s rest earned, blisters tended.

The second group used the parachutes, and the water in the engine. They found the flares, the matches and the compass, then right royally screwed up the navigation and marched a hundred miles, right into a town. While that was going on our main body launched airborne rescues in isolated areas: an hour’s flight, a day’s march – camping out at night, a rescue in a collapsed building – an old mine building, followed by a march back out and a flight back.

The third group at the plane wreck were led by a HK doctor. He organised everything very well, but caught so much food they decided to stay, eventually relieved by the next team. There was no rule against waiting to be rescued, it was a test of survival skills, and the camels and kangaroos would not be missed, the team actually putting on weight.

On July the 15th we deliberately gave them a two day break in Cairns town; shopping, swimming, exploring. Everyone was refreshed when they returned on the 17th. That evening, with everyone sat eating in the large mess hall, we got a call from Hancock in Hong Kong: there’d been an earthquake in Papua New Guinea and could we help, the call no surprise to us.

With everyone conveniently gathered in one place, Jimmy stood on a chair and called for silence. ‘Listen up! There’s been an earthquake in Papua New Guinea, a bad one. It’s not far, so we’re attending. You’ve got ten minutes to pack your kit. Move it, people!’

A thunderous scrapping of chairs preceded a mass exodus. We called the airfield and asked for the Hercules to be made ready, and could the Australian Army loan us theirs as well – we’d pay the fuel. Our hosts rallied every mode of transport they could find and we headed out to the airfield. Assembled at the airfield, national teams were made up, sub-teams grouped. I patrolled the lines, giving out Australian dollars, indicating that they should be used to buy local food and shelter in Papua.

With Hancock getting us permissions for the operation we took off for Papua New Guinea, Jimmy telling the pilots to head

to the northern coast, explaining that we had UN permission, which we didn't. Ear defenders were handed out and checked, the inside of Hercules a good environment for high-tone deafness for unprotected ears. Dunnow and two others rigged hammocks, people found comfortable places to lay down, the basic seating along the insides of the fuselage unsuitable for long flights.

In little under an hour we approached the Southern Coast of Papua New Guinea, the pilots relaying to the local air traffic controllers that we were a UN emergency flight. No objections came back for a lack of a flight plan. Jimmy and I heated water, every Hercules having a small water heater, and we made tea whilst trying to remain upright in the turbulence. Teas and coffees were distributed, performed with some difficulty in the darkened hold.

Just over three hours after taking off we landed at Vanimo airfield, the tower not expecting us, but not surprised either; the north coast was a disaster zone. The first thing I spotted after landing was a bright red Huey sat on the apron. With the Hercules powering down, the trailing Hercules coming into land with their lights blazing, I walked into the small tower building and found the pilot's lounge, a few people milling around.

'Whose helicopter is that?' I shouted.

A man with a heavy frown stepped in, looking me over. 'Mine. Why?' The pilot, obviously an Australian, squinted out the window at the Hercules.

'You want a week's work at a thousand dollars a day?' I waved a wad of Australian dollars.

'Doing what?'

'I run Rescue Force, those are my UN medics. We want to get where the damage is.'

'Oh, right. You ... er ... pay fuel?'

'And your lunch, and a bonus for good work.' I gave him five thousand dollars.

'OK,' he said, making a face.

I stepped closer. 'Fuel it, get it ready.' He stepped out, and I joined the rescuers forming into groups, stood under the airport's bright lights. 'I've hired that Huey, so teams of six will go out. That's teams of *six*, some of you ... get into teams of six!'

Ten minutes later the Huey lifted off into the black night sky, Jimmy and I grabbing a man with a car, Australian dollars thrust

into his hand. He took us the short distance south to a logging company, tooting as we entered. We found another Australian.

‘We’re UN, got medics at the airport.’

‘That’s who landed.’

‘I’d like to hire some jeeps, or trucks, anything you got,’ Jimmy told him.

‘Oh, well ... I got two open top trucks.’

‘Thousand Australian dollars a day each,’ I told him, waving the money.

‘The drivers are asleep inside, mate. You can have the drivers, but I want them to stay with their trucks.’ He pointed out the two trucks, so I handed over four thousand dollars, Jimmy and I soon waking up the local men, who smelt as if they had made a home in the truck cabins.

At the airport we loaded as many people as we could onto the backs of the trucks, the small airfield now appearing cramped with the Hercules. We set-off into the dark, Jimmy knowing exactly where he was headed.

We pulled up first at a small hospital, Jimmy climbing out the truck and shouting, ‘Four doctors, four nurses!’ Eight people jumped down with their packs. ‘Do what you can here, meet back at the airport if there’s a problem – that’s the command centre.’

Knowing exactly where he was going, Jimmy drove on into the night, occasionally passing local people walking both ways, some appearing dazed. And the wet road was becoming a slalom course of debris. At the next junction we could go no further, Jimmy knocking off his engine and jumping down, signalling everyone to de-bus.

With the gang assembled, he addressed the group in the light from my truck’s beams, more than sixty people. ‘I cannot brief you well, because we don’t know what’s out there. This road goes on another thirty miles down the coast towards Aitape, and it looks blocked, so you’re on foot. If you can find local transport then hire it - or steal it. There’s been an earthquake here, and a tidal wave apparently. In your teams, follow the coast road, but don’t go far inland because it’s uninhabited jungle. I don’t want any team smaller than four people at any time.’ The Huey flew over us, back towards the airport. ‘We’ll be here with the trucks, so try and bring the injured here and we’ll ferry them back. If

we're not here, we'll be at that small hospital, or the airfield. I want three teams searching this small village, the rest of you head up the coast road in your teams, and stick to the road till it's light. And good luck.'

They marched off through in the dark, over the junction and around fallen trees, some checking nearby houses. We soon had ten dead bodies, many children, but no one alive who was injured and in need of our attention; whatever had happened here, it left healthy people or dead people, none in between. I stood at the darkened crossroads and watched the Huey head down the coast, figuring I should be up there at the controls. With the sounds of the wind reclaiming the night, I stood and stared at distant dark shadows. The white uniforms helped, but there was no illumination at all here. A cry caught my attention, but I could not figure out where it was coming from. There it was again, off to the right.

'Over here!' I called out, the sound of boots on the road signalling the approach of a team of four. 'Stop and listen. Quiet!'

We listened, catching another cry. 'It's coming from that tree,' someone said. And there were lots of trees. 'Go towards the sound.'

The man did so, and we followed him, soon a splash as he waded through water and into a field. 'Hello?' he called, getting back a cry. 'Here,' he called, and we followed his dark outline. Turning on a small torch, he illuminated two children up a tree, their mother close by and obviously dead, hanged by a branch. 'Get below, I'll go up.'

Holding the torch in his mouth, he began climbing as we stood up to our ankles in mud and water. The kids began screaming, so he simply grabbed them and unceremoniously dropped them to us, one aged around six, the other around four. The women in the group grabbed the naked kids, soothing them as we squelched back to the road. As we reached the junction a car approached from the inland direction, waved down. Peering inside we could see only the driver. 'You go hospital?' The man nodded, the kids loaded with the two women medics, the vehicle heading back the way we had come.

A few hours later, with the dawn half-light illuminating the bodies, Jimmy headed back to organise things. Two of our

groups, those that had been searching the immediate area, approached the crossroads.

‘Mount up,’ I said. ‘We’ll try and drive up that road.’

I woke up the driver, who seemed none too concerned about the carnage, and we set off down a road of grey pre-dawn images, soon swerving around fallen trees. In front of one large tree we had to stop. I had noticed chains in the rear and so grabbed them, soon tying off the tree and dragging it as the lorry reversed. It was enough of a gap, so we pressed forwards as the sun threw light over the devastated coastal area, noting numerous bodies face down in water as we progressed. We slowed as a group of locals approached. Since they displayed bright white bandages on wounds we figured they had been seen.

A mile further along, we spotted a group of four of ours tending a family, tooting and waving as we passed. Another tree was dragged with the chain, allowing us to progress further, the morning now bright and warming up. Two miles around a headland we found a small village and another crossroads, and what looked like two or three teams. I tooted as we approached, halting near them.

‘That road clear now?’ they asked, getting back a thumbs-up from me. ‘Load these people.’

I indicated for the driver to do a three-point turn, facing us the opposite way, then jumped down with the others to load the injured. One child, still conscious and wide eyed, displayed a long piece of wood right through her abdomen, the remainder injured by floating debris; twelve were loaded up. I sent a team back with them, telling the driver to come back to this spot – and wondering all the while if he would.

The truck disappeared around the headland, leaving me with a very muddy group of medics, a wide variety of nationalities. ‘Take five,’ I told them. ‘When then truck gets back, we’ll try the road again, clearing as we go.’

I closed in on Dunnaw when I recognised him. ‘How’re the feet?’

‘Still damn sore, now sopping wet.’

Ten minutes later the sound of a helicopter caught our attention, the red Huey coming into land when it saw us. As it touched down Jimmy stepped out of the rear, quickly unloaded several cardboard boxes. With a thumbs-up he closed the door

and it lifted off. Closing in on the boxes I could see water bottles, chocolate and apples.

‘Grub’s up!’ Everyone received a much-needed chocolate bar, an apple and a small bottle of water.

A long twenty minutes later the truck returned, our medics still aboard. We mounted up and pressed on, twenty medics in white aboard a dirty and dilapidated old truck; an odd site for roadside pedestrians. Around the next headland we approached a small town, part of which included a shanty town built into a hillside; people must have survived the tidal wave up there, I considered. I directed the driver towards the main square, driving through drifts of sand, soon finding other teams treating dozens of injured.

‘Unload!’ I shouted to the gang in the back, directing the driver to turn around again. I soon realised there were more injured than we had space on the truck. ‘Dunnow, grab two men, come here.’

In a ditch we yanked, pulled and pushed a trailer up onto the road and hitched it to the back of the lorry, space for ten kids in the trailer after we scooped out the sand. We put two mildly injured locals in the cab, the rest in the back and sat upright shoulder to shoulder, the kids in the trailer with one medic, the smallest lady we could find. With all the injured loaded, room for only one medic in the back, I told the driver to go slow, giving him a few dollars before sending him off.

Ratchet approached. ‘Everyone down here is dead, those up the hill are injured. Tidal wave smashed into them, so the houses below rammed into the houses above.’

‘Houses, they’re just shacks,’ I noted. ‘Many more injured up there?’

‘Fucking loads of them. We’ll need that truck back.’

‘Bring them down, it’ll take half an hour minimum for the truck.’

Tooting caught our attention, a bright yellow bus coming around the far headland. When it neared I could see Hildy driving. Stepping aboard I scanned the bus, finding a handful of injured. ‘We need the bus, lot of injured here.’ Everyone else could now see the bus; they could hardly miss it. ‘Drive up that hill and turn around if you can, the injured are up there.’ She turned and headed up as I hopped off, remaining at the

crossroads. By time she returned to the crossroads the truck was back. I said to her, 'Keep this bus, it's ours now, bring it back.'

She eased around the truck and headed off down the road as I called to the teams. 'Many more up there?' The answer was no. 'On me, everyone!' I waved them towards me, directing them onto the truck, just squeezing them all on. Stood at the rear of the truck I said, 'Is that all of ours, no one missing?' They checked off their teams, finally satisfied, and we pushed on around the next headland. As we trundled slowly along we passed people on the roadside, able-bodied locals walking along, and covered a good four miles through lush green vegetation before the next village.

Alongside a team of ours I stopped. 'What's here? Anything?'

'Mostly dead, a few minor wounds. We got two cars working.'

'Take your team back to that hospital, it's probably a bit swamped by now.'

With our driver finding the right gear, eventually, we pulled forwards. Around the next bend we happened across a small industrial complex, a team visible inside; white jackets on the top, muddied trousers on the bottom. Stopping, I tooted, a rescuer running towards us. 'What's in there?' I asked him from the truck cabin.

'Just found a large number of injured at the rear, company nurse looking after them.'

'Hop on, show us.' I directed the driver inside.

The truck bounced along uneven surfaces, past rusted metal frames and damaged buildings, wooden huts that would have stood no chance against a tidal wave. We climbed a gentle rise and stopped, many men now visible sat against a hut that had survived.

'All out!' I cried.

With everyone down, the driver turned in a wide circle and halted ready. Inside the hut I could see twenty injured, many serious, the doctors taking charge and shouting various medical conditions to each other, ranking their priorities. I fetched a water bottle, little else I could do, and offered sips to the men outside. The last man was a white, not a local. 'Here,' I said, giving him a sip.

'Where did ... you come from?' he gasped.

‘We’re Rescue Force, we flew up from Australia, but we’re normally based in Kenya.’

‘Kenya?’ He reached around behind himself, dragging forwards a jacket. ‘Nothing to do ... in the evenings here,’ he struggled to get out. ‘We read ... a lot.’

He handed me a sodden paperback, making me laugh. ‘That’s us.’ I opened the wet pages, finding the centre almost dry. Selecting my black and white image, I held the page next to my face and raised my eyebrows.

‘Fuck me,’ he whispered. ‘Of all the places, and all the fucking people to meet.’ He coughed again, now a trickle of blood down his chin.

I stopped smiling. ‘You ... OK?’

‘Don’t think so.’ He coughed up more blood.

‘Medic!’ I called. ‘Get me a doctor!’

A HK doctor knelt beside me. ‘Internal bleeding, maybe a punctured lung.’ He hurriedly placed on his stethoscope and listened to the man’s breathing for a minute. ‘Fluid in both lungs.’ He felt the man’s chest, making the man wince. ‘Ribs cracked both sides, lungs punctured.’

He stood, so I followed him up. ‘Should we get him straight to that hospital.’

The doctor led me away. ‘He doesn’t have the time. We’d need a full surgical ward right here, and then it would be touch and go.’ The doctor walked off, leaving me feeling like yanking him back. I knelt again, not knowing what to say or do.

The man stared up at me, his eyelids heavy. ‘I have ... a daughter ... in Taunton, Somerset. Tell her ... I’m sorry.’ He coughed up bright red frothy blood, his chin now covered. ‘Liked the book...’

Nothing more came from. I didn’t know at what point he died, he just stopped; there was no last gasp, no slumping or falling over, he just stopped, still staring at me. I stood up. This was all a bit too real. The rest of the injured men were being tended by our medics as I just stood there holding the damp book. Tossing the book into the bushes, I knelt down again and eased him over onto his side, checking his back pockets and pulling out his wallet. Inside I found a driver’s license, enough to identify him from. I pocketed the license, placing the wallet back.

Back at the truck, a doctor announced that they had twelve injured to move straight away. I nodded absently, helping to load them onto the back of the truck. Leaving the teams behind, I jumped into the cabin and directed the driver back to the hospital, a glance back at a line of feet sticking out of a sheet.

It was noon by time we reached the hospital. I sent the truck back without me, catching a lift along the coast and to the airport, figuring I'd should probably be organising things there. Hungry and thirsty, I jumped out at the airfield's busy gate and thanked the driver. Ambling in, feeling in no particular hurry, I noticed a number of tents, figuring they were ours. Chinese medics jogged past as I closed in on the tower, but a call caused me to turn. Jimmy waved me over to a tent, disappearing back inside. I ducked into the tent, finding Hancock from Hong Kong, plus many of our senior staff, Doc Graham and Doc Hoskins attending a map spread over a table. Jimmy thrust two tins of meat and a spoon into my hand.

'You look knackered. Get some food in you.'

Doc Graham lifted his head. 'Anymore injured at that mine?'

'Just ... minor injuries, rest I ferried to the hospital,' I reported in a low voice, feeling drained.

'How many walking wounded there?' Graham pressed.

'Thirty. More.'

A senior Chinese medic approached me, but not a HK medic, it was the same guy I'd met in Kigoma all those years ago; the People's Republic were here. 'You do not look well, Mister Holton.' He lifted a coffee mug, the contents downed quickly.

'I found a man, British worker at the mine ... he ... died in front of me. Nothing I could do.'

People raised there heads and glanced towards me. Jimmy gestured me to a chair. Sitting, I tackled the meat, accepting more coffee. With the food in me I felt better, the tent bustling with command staff coming and going. Standing and stretching, I stepped outside, now noticing function labels on the various tents. As I stood there, the red commercial Huey came in to land on the apron, four injured disgorged before it lifted off again. And the pilot was wearing white, one of ours. Ducking back into the tent I downed a bottle of water, a chocolate bar, and a coffee. 'OK, where'd you need me?'

Jimmy said, 'When the Huey gets back, go left seat. Make up a bag; a small medical kit, water, chocolate, tinned meat.'

With a renewed determination I set about my assigned task, soon left seat to Dunnnow for a run twenty miles down the coast. With Dunnnow appearing tired I took over, running back and forth till the sun disappeared below the hills. With a fuel truck attending the Huey, I ducked into the command tent. 'Where we at?'

Doc Graham stretched his aching back and sighed. 'All the urgent cases have been attended to, as far as we can reach. It's now minor wounds and dead bodies.'

Jimmy stepped in. 'Be out of here tomorrow, boys and girls, our planes will be coming back. I'm going to leave eight doctors and ten nurses, and the People's medics will stay a day or two more.'

Hancock ducked in with an Australian Army officer. Hancock reported, 'The Australian Army is trying to reach outlying areas, islands and far off spots. UN is here.'

A toot caught my attention, the yellow bus. I stepped out and looked up, a grubby-faced Hildy still driving. Thirty of our lot, sodden and dirty, stepped down. They followed me to the mess tent, all in need of a warm meal, the People's medics running the spacious canteen. Our medics had been downbeat as they stepped off the bus, but spoonful by spoonful the mood improved, even the odd joke cracked. I made teas and coffees for ten minutes, distributing them, fetching a large plastic block of water bottles. Forty minutes later everyone looked better, and sounded better, heading off to the accommodation tents for some well-earned rest as the sun set behind the hills. From the command tent I grabbed a list of personnel and totalled our inventory of warm bodies; whether they were eating, sleeping or on the toilet. Matching Doc Graham's dispersal list I tallied the numbers; twenty of ours left at the hospital, twelve still in the field at a small town clinic up the coast. We were not missing anyone. A Hercules coming in to land signalled the arrival of the world's press, but I had no intention of talking to anyone. At the back of the command tent I lay down next to a snoring Doc Hoskins and closed my eyes.

At 5am I lifted up and yawned, the tent quiet, a few of the People's medics attending the map. Scratching and yawning, I

noticed Jimmy sat in a corner. Plonking down next to him, he poured me a coffee. 'I slept well, for a change.'

'Thirty-six hours straight, burning the adrenaline. You need to remember to keep stuffing the meat down to keep going.'

'You get any kip?' I asked, yawning again.

'Hour or so.'

'All OK out there?'

'Yeah, done what we could, good first test. They performed well.'

'Did I hear that it was a planeload of reporters?'

'Yeah, they're here. We gave a few interviews last night, and they've filmed at the hospital and along the road.'

'I feel a book coming on.' As soon as I uttered the words I regretted it, remembering the Brit who died in front of me. 'When I was at the mine, yesterday, this English guy died right in front of me. Before he died he pulled out a soggy copy of the first book, he'd just read it.' I took a reflective breath. 'Small world, eh?'

'You'll get used to the death and destruction.'

'Hope not.'

'I did, eventually. But once you get beyond it, you start to take more pleasure in saving lives.' I showed Jimmy the man's ID, Jimmy adding, 'He hasn't seen his daughter for four years. He came out here to avoid the child support payments, not very honourable.'

'Some day, you'll have to explain to me how you do that.'

'I will. And don't contact his family.'

After a final look, a little hesitation, I tossed the ID away. Twelve hours later we landed back at Cairns, driven to the camp.

In the mess hall, Jimmy called everyone together. 'Ladies and gentlemen ... well done ... and thank you, that was a successful first earthquake deployment. Once you've eaten I want everyone to have a shower.' They laughed. 'You stink! After that, rest, take it easy, but all day tomorrow I want kit checked, washed, lists made up of what you're missing and what you need. We'll be flying back to Nairobi day after tomorrow. And between now and when we get back I want everyone thinking about how the deployment could have gone better. I know it was not planned, but let's think about kit, supplies and on-the-ground procedures. In the meantime, stuff your faces – that's an order.'

Arriving back at the house, I pinched one of the new golf carts – Big Paul’s now painted in camouflage colours - and sped along at six miles per hour to the gate with the new property, manual to unlock and open, then through. With the breeze in my hair I followed gentle curves through the grounds, the grass now good enough to play golf on. The building work was intense, close to sixty men coming and going, two storeys already up and scaffold clad. It was starting to look like a house, albeit a very big house that looked like a hotel.

I walked in through the front door, no doors hung yet, and across bare grey concrete, everything just bare concrete. In front of me rose wide stairs, men in yellow hard hats stepping down. Turning right, I passed two large rooms destined to be studies and offices, their windows placed above six feet and oblong; you could not look out, nor anyone peer in. Turning left at the end of this corridor, I followed yet another bare grey corridor to the pool, passing the changing rooms on the right, the twenty-metre pool was ready bar the water, tiles being cleaned. Through a large gaping hole on the left - that would be plugged by windows some day soon - I peered toward an internal courtyard. Backtracking to the stairs, I headed the other way, peeking into a large space on the left that would become a formal dining room, the kitchens off to the right. Past the dining room would be a lounge, a second lounge I remembered, a staff canteen on the right, and another room. What it was earmarked for I could not remember.

Later, I glanced at the sketches Rolf had made, what the place would look like when finished. When Jimmy thrust a printout of an email in my face I did the sums quickly. Yuri had been over-active, making a killing on the commodities markets. At this rate, he’d soon be the richest man in Russia.

The road to Mogadishu

The Pakistani peacekeepers at the airport, who did little other than sit at the airport, were notified that the Somali Rifles would

soon join them, just not how soon. At 3am the next morning, four UN Antonovs and our lone Hercules landed in a tight sequence, quickly disgorging their men, and took off before the Pakistanis had their socks on. The first wave of Rifles all sported blue UN helmets, just in case the Pakistanis wanted to see if their weapons worked after all.

Under the direct control of Abdi, the Somalis spread out around the airfield and started to occupy the Pakistani positions, politely asking the Pakistanis to give up their pillboxes and sandbagged positions. The head of the UN peacekeepers lived outside of the base and was called, arriving as a jeep convoy a mile long approached, the lead drivers in blue UN hats. The Rifles opened the gates and let their own people in, soon a thousand of them. The flustered Pakistani officers were handed a letter from the Somali Provisional Government, asking them to stand down; or at least not to interfere.

At dawn our helicopters roared across Mogadishu, trying their best to wake the slumbering population, firing at open spaces and making a lot of noise; the residents must have thought it was a full scale invasion. Landing back at the airfield, having announced their arrival, the helicopters met a convoy of trucks trundling in, crew and supplies for the helicopters, plus a detachment of Kenyan Rifles to protect the crew.

The Somali Rifles put their snipers on the perimeter, then organised themselves, unloading the trucks. Shortly after dawn, fighters from the local warlord came out to see what was going on, all being engaged at distance by the snipers. That caused a larger response, the skilful snipers soon fully engaged as the day warmed up, inflicting heavy casualties on the militias. With the sun lowering at the end of the first day, the militias tried to sneak closer, tripping claymores and being picked off under withering machinegun fire. They retreated.

The next morning, a crossroads east of the city was grabbed by sixty Kenya Rifles, soon dug in and heavily armed with anti-armour weapons. Having stopped a few vehicles, and disarmed a few disgruntled individuals, word spread. Militias from the east of the city ventured boldly out, their convoy neatly packed between two rows of claymores, and shredded; the survivors were picked-off by snipers. A second approach, this time from the north, produced a similar result.

That evening, in a simple yet daring raid, two hundred heavily armed men of the Somali Rifles walked the short distance along the coastal path from the airport and to the port, taking the port and the prison after brief, but fierce fighting, and digging in. With the coastal path defended, a slice of Mogadishu had been isolated from the militias, the all important port and airport; no banana boats would be leaving anytime soon. The militias reacted with an anticipated large-scale attack on the port, leaving many of them firing at each other as much as the Rifles. The helicopters went up, making good use of night sights and inflicting heavily casualties.

For the next four day's, snipers effectively fended off numerous attacks, and picked off men who falsely believed they were out of range. The numbers of enemy casualties were steadily rising, our casualties light in comparison. Dug in, with almost every man possessing a sniper rifle, some with M82s, we played the waiting game; every probe at the airport was effectively repulsed, claymores replaced each evening. Thinking better of it, the Pakistanis withdrew in groups by plane each evening, members of the Provisional Government flying in. At sundown each day, the best of the Somali Rifles slipped into the city and set ambushes, disappearing like ghosts after inflicting casualties. With spotters placed on rooftops, laser target designators carried, the Cobras fired missiles at suitable targets, especially trucks with anti-aircraft weapons and DHSK.

With no banana trade now possible, and many of the local warlords now dead, militias were not getting paid, bellies were empty – and not just for the militias. So before dawn each day half a dozen helicopters were loaded with grain in three layers of sacking. They flew low across the city dropping the sacks, sometimes with lethal effect. It was common for people to wake up as a sixty-pound sack of grain came through their bedroom window at forty miles per hour. Most landed in the streets, grabbed by opportunists to sell or barter. Also in the quiet pre-dawn hours, trucks would drive through safe areas and dump grain at intervals. Our roadblocks did not stop supplies entering the city, only militias and weapons; we could not be accused of blockading the city.

On the fifth day the number of gunmen attacking either the airport or the port slowed to a trickle. Abdi's men advanced

building by building and street by street, always consolidating their rear and their supply lines. The skill of the campaign came in the form of Abdi's patience, and that came from Jimmy's timing. Roads to the north, and the banana growing regions, were seized and blocked, attacks on our blockades countered with helicopter fire, since the attackers had to drive along isolated roads to reach our strategically placed blockades.

By day ten all roads to Mogadishu were blocked. Leaflets were dropped over the city, telling all militias to surrender and walk unarmed towards the airport, where a huge tented camp was now being prepared. Our advertising literature offered three meals a day and a job for those who co-operated. Fifty walked in the first day, less militia and more hungry jobseekers. They were identified, clothed where necessary, fed and cleaned up, then given lessons to occupy their time; driving, vehicle maintenance, brick building, a few selected for the Somali Rifles and sent back to Baardheere.

On the second day, no one was allowed in unless they brought their weapons with them for decommissioning, soon a trickle returning and carrying weapons, many unarmed men turned away because they were just jobseekers. As days were crossed off the calendar, more hungry gunmen wandered out, many in jeeps laden with weapons. Under UN scrutiny they were disarmed, cleaned and fed. Some were arrested and detained for their murderous intentions and past history, a few sent to Baardheere, but not arriving; Abdi would not put known killers into the Army anymore than we would.

Every day we got faxes of the progress, numbers and statistics, every day a few more streets captured, another fifty men giving up and coming out. The warlords north of the city were a bit strapped for cash, no banana harvest, and started to lose men; and to lose face. They offered to talk, but the Provisional Government was having none of it, they could smell victory. Grain was dropped over outlying villages, food convoys getting through to many. And Jimmy was nearing the end of his tick list.

One day he ordered the Kenyan Rifles to hold the airport, and for all the Somali Rifles to move forwards that evening, a big push. They moved quietly through the streets before dawn, took up rooftop positions and awaited the warming sun, enough

supplies for a week. Gunmen moving around were hit from all sides, nowhere to run. The fighting was intense on the first day, the casualties amongst the militias great, but as each new day dawned the fighting eased. And then, twenty-one days after the push had begun, the Government declared the city taken – and by Somalis, not outsiders. That was not strictly true, but no one cared; the Kenyan Rifles were flown out for a rest.

The UN moved in, noting many hangings in the days that followed liberation; scores were being settled. We nagged at the UK and US Governments, and secured two hundred million pounds for reconstruction. In a move that would kill two birds with one stone, we spent most of the money in Kenya. Firms were hired by Rudd to improve the road to Mogadishu, and as much cement as we could find was procured and driven across the border. From Po we bought two shiploads of cement and wood, the ships docking at a peaceful Mogadishu. And true to our word, we hired as many people as we could afford to within the budget. Roads were cleared, debris removed, buildings repaired street by street by some six thousand labourers.

Mogadishu hospital was a priority, reduced to rubble during the years of fighting. Rescue Force moved in under escort from the Kenya Rifles, four clinics set-up soon after the taking of the city. The place now bustled with NGOs that we had nagged, asking them to get in quickly. Banana trucks moved again, taxes grudgingly paid to the Provisional Government. The odd shootout still occurred, but overwhelming force was used to chase down the gunmen, dealt with harshly when caught. And, as in many other places, money was offered in exchange for weapons.

Two weeks after taking Mogadishu, Jimmy sent Abdi and four hundred men north to disarm the banana warlords still holding out. Those not surrendering immediately were killed. After a bloody four-week campaign, Abdi returned to Mogadishu, to be made General Abdi. His next task was the large, and lawless east of the country, not least because the Provisional Government had given BP drilling rights in a small area off the coast. Strangely enough, they struck oil straight away. A week later, citing Jimmy's recommendation, a French mining company was puzzled at being offered a sizeable contract in Somalia.

Congo diamonds

Fresh from our successes in Somalia, we stepped into a room in the Foreign Office one bright August day and met our DRC team. Our team consisted of three men we had hired to help administer our province in the DRC, supplemented by six civil servants. The wider world, and the French, had been surprised by Jimmy's ascendancy to governor, but even more surprised by how organised we were, and how much we had pushed things along. It was almost as if we knew what the future held, and had planned for it. The team gave us an update.

A group of Ugandan mercenaries had been intercepted by Hutus working for us, and massacred. Their bodies had been found by the UN the next day, identified, questions asked of the Ugandans as to what they were doing in the DRC. Drunken Rwandan soldiers were filmed in secret shooting up parts of Goma, the tape being sent to every TV station in Africa, the UN looking into it. Further south, Rwandan soldiers pushed into the DRC under the pretext of hunting down Hutus who had attacked across the border. Our helicopters attacked, allegedly having mistaken them for Hutu militias. And what were they doing twenty miles inside our border? We apologised for the tragic mix-up, but pointed out that armed groups, other than the Congo Rifles or peacekeepers, were subject to attack.

In one controversial move, our trusted ex-SAS guys intercepted six French nationals, mercenaries, in the north of our territory. Former British soldiers had fired on, and killed, former French soldiers. Two had been killed, two wounded, a total of four captured, the mercenaries Congolese associates killed. The captured French were offered interrogation at the hands of the Rifles, life imprisonment, or a confession followed by a flight out. They chose the later, revealing that they had been hired to set-off bombs in certain mining areas. They made the news, and we leaked the fact that British soldiers had killed French soldiers. The diplomats and the tabloids had a busy weekend, but at the end of the day the mercenaries had been acting like terrorists.

Coming so soon after the last French incursion, the Paris Government was again reeling, their Ambassador to the DRC expelled for seven days by a co-operative Kimballa. Just to make things worse across The Channel, the Prime Minister sent in another two hundred “observers” at our behest.

At Forward Base, some thirty administrators toiled night and day, a regional command centre set-up for NGOs. Rescue Force DRC had recruited every doctor it could find in the region, and there were not many. Medics were flown up from Kinshasa and hired. The Congo Rifles enjoyed plenty of fresh young recruits with hungry bellies, the camp now holding four thousand and growing rapidly. Kimballa had flown in once at Jimmy’s request and toured the base, meeting our people and the NGOs, impressed with the super-sized admin operation. With the man himself in London this afternoon, we were getting an up to date picture first, the civil servants briefing us as if we were their political paymasters.

Sheets of statistics were poured over, productivity graphs glanced at, diplomatic intelligence about our African neighbours offered. Sykes had deployed men where we informed him they would be needed, the offices of a few European mining companies in Africa currently bugged. Jimmy had furnished him with a list of names; once spotted around Africa to be reported to us. We thanked the team and walked the short distance to our scheduled meeting with Kimballa. Stepping in, Jimmy greeted Mister President in his native dialect, Kimballa dressed in traditional robes.

Kimballa smiled, hugging Jimmy. ‘There are not many westerners who make such an effort to learn our language. And even fewer who manage to sound as if they were born in my village.’

‘I consider that you are worth the effort,’ Jimmy responded. I shook Kimballa’s hand and we sat, two Foreign Office officials and two of Kimballa’s assistants present.

‘How you liking England?’ I asked.

‘I have been here twice before, and to America, and a few European countries,’ he rattled off. ‘I have been to France, your good friends across The Arm – as they call your channel.’

‘The French ... have been difficult for hundreds of years,’ Jimmy mentioned.

‘Indeed. And I asked the French Ambassador just the other day why their people are so interested in Eastern Congo.’

‘We know why,’ I cut in. ‘If the region is ungovernable, then anyone can take your minerals without paying for them.’

‘And you seem to be making some good progress towards a *governable* region.’

‘And when it is *governable* ... there’s no reason why your country should not be one of the richest in Africa. All it takes is the will to do it,’ Jimmy insisted.

‘And some considerable resources, from a well connected Governor! I have followed the campaign in Somalia with interest. I noted, that you only allowed Somalis to capture the city, after which the Kenyans withdrew, the exiled government brought back. Tell me, Somalia has no resources, only sand, yet you have been heavily involved for many years. Why?’

‘First, they were a threat to the region and my interests in Kenya. And second, I have always said that a small group of well-trained men could liberate Africa from tyranny. Somali only needed a small group of well-trained men to liberate it from self-destruction. It would have been ... cruel, not to have helped there. And for the record, I had nothing to do with the liberation of Somalia, I wasn’t there.’

Kimballa smiled widely. ‘You are also absent from my country, yet much is improving rapidly.’

‘And will continue to improve, year by year.’

‘You us asked for our military officers. Why?’

‘The Congo Rifles are loyal to you and your government, so you should keep an eye on them through officers you trust. We would not want another *you* to rise up.’

‘Indeed. One ... is quite enough.’

‘I wish to see your government more closely involved in what I do in your country, *everything* I do in your country, a regional government based in Goma. That way, any benefits I may bring would be quickly passed on to other parts of the country. There are warlords running mines outside of my territory - the Congo Rifles could police them.’

‘I will do as you ask, and if there are other regions that need *policing* ... as you say, inform my officials and we will give permission for them to be *policed*. And I see you have started an orphanage.’

‘Yes, it will be a large orphanage. In fact two, one in a Hutu area. When the Hutu children grow up they will be peaceful, and loyal to Kinshasa.’

‘Give me the child and I will mould him into anything,’ Kimballa recited. ‘Nietzsche.’

‘I thought that was Adolf Hitler,’ I suggested.

‘What?’ he asked.

‘Neither,’ Jimmy put in, a glance toward me. ‘It was a man called Skinner. But the principle is sound. Education ... makes the man into anything he wants. May I ask, Mister President, if there is anything that we are doing that you are not a happy with?’

‘No, you’re doing what I anticipated you would do. And I think I understand your personality. To you, Africa is a giant challenge, a giant puzzle that must be put back together. Since many have tried, and all have failed, a man like you sees it as all the more of a challenge.’

With a smile, Jimmy said, ‘You may be right. I just hope I can achieve much before the mining companies assassinate me.’

‘Let us hope they not successful. But I have noted that you sent back these men. I would have been happy to hang them as an example?’

‘When a man throws a rock at you, and misses, it causes great annoyance to the man if you hand it back and suggest a second throw.’

We all laughed. I liked that one, I’d have to remember it.

Jimmy added, ‘Why prevent your enemies from throwing rocks, when you can have the great satisfaction of annoying the hell out of them.’

Nodding, Kimballa said, ‘We are making every effort to work on the new road, maybe to soon join up with the road work at your end.’

‘I fear that road will take many years, Mister President. And while I think of it, if you can find twenty good men, I will pay their wages. I want mine inspectors, to make sure mines are legal *and* paying your taxes.’

Kimballa glanced at an aid, who made a note. ‘If anyone other than you had requested such a group, I would feel it a con trick.’

‘You may yet regret making me governor. I will be creating a lot of paperwork for you.’

‘I admit to enjoying reading reports with your name on, Mister Silo. They are always good news. And I like to play a game with visiting European diplomats. When they ask for things, I say... I will talk with Jimmy Silo and see what he thinks. It cut shorts many a meeting with great consternation and much grinding of teeth.’

Jimmy laughed, glancing at the Foreign Office staff. ‘Diplomats, and Civil Servants, are paid to be toyed with. It’s what they sign up for.’

After the meeting we met Yuri and Irina at the club, Jimmy still occasionally taking one for the team. Yuri now hung on our every word, and had just bought an Aluminium plant with his profits. Jimmy explained about the DRC, and its mining potential, Yuri salivating at the numbers; and the synergies. What luck! We explained that as soon as the security situation was sorted, we’d try and get him in there.

“M” Group

With the new British Prime Minister settled into the job, the US President well into his second term, Jimmy said the time was right for a fuller “M” Group briefing. We typically met with Host and Hadley at least twice a year, and both answered questions and offered suggestions, but it still felt as if the Americans were cherry picking what they liked, and ignoring the rest. We flew into Washington with Sykes and Jack, Han and his superior meeting us there; the British and Chinese would be joining talks on day three.

The first briefing was for the formal American “M” Group, some of the members present today also being dual members of their secret, behind the scenes, “M” Group, which was a bit odd at the moment because President Harvey knew about it, and tolerated it. In today’s meeting, held in the White House briefing room, we had the President and his Chief of Staff, his National Security team, plus Hadley, Host, Keely and a select few others.

‘Morning all,’ I loudly greeted, tackling the coffee maker in the corner. The faces, and expressions, ranged from playfully happy, to dour.

‘Lady, gentlemen,’ Jimmy offered, nodding his respects to the sole female member as he took in the faces. He shook the President’s hand. ‘You seem taller than on TV.’

President Harvey laughed. ‘And you’re just as big as on the TV. So what do we call you ... *Governor?*’

‘Now you can call him Deputy British Ambassador to the Congo,’ I told Harvey.

‘Yes?’

I added, ‘And ... UN Ambassador for Relief Projects, Central Africa. And most recently, the ink still wet, UK Deputy Ambassador to Somalia.’

‘How’d you keep track?’ the President asked with a smile as we all sat.

‘At home,’ Jimmy began, ‘I have many desks, each with a flag and title above it – so I can remember. That way I don’t send rich tourists to the Congo by mistake.’

‘We got the white boards you asked from,’ the Chief put in, Jimmy glancing over his shoulder at them.

‘First things first,’ Jimmy said. He pointed at a man who I did not recognise. ‘That gentleman has been feeding information about Magestic to his colleague – and old college buddy – at the new York times.’

If that didn’t sour the mood, I didn’t know what would.

Jimmy added, ‘Nothing will be said with him in the room.’ He waited.

With a disappointed look, President Harvey said to the man, ‘Step out, please.’

Host escorted the protesting man out, returning a few minutes later. ‘FBI heading to his apartment and desk.’

Jimmy stood and took off his jacket, approaching the white boards. ‘What I’m going to give you, is a time line of key events, cause and effect. The events I’ll detail will – most likely – not take place, because many people are working to prevent them taking place. The timeline is ... what would happen if nothing was done.’

On the first board he drew an economic timeline. On the second he drew political timelines, future political leaders given

coded numbers instead of names. The third board was concerned with wars and conflicts, the final board with The Brotherhood. For thirty minutes he added detail to each board, and how they were linked, flawlessly, and as if he had done it a hundred times before.

When finished, Jimmy sat and Hadley took over. 'The most important key event ahead of us, is Pakistan. Or, more suited, Afghanistan de-stabilising Pakistan. If that key event is bypassed or delayed, then the Brotherhood may rise up in the Horn of Africa, our after economic decline in the Middle East following wider conflicts elsewhere, and finally in 2025.'

'Seems you've got the Horn of Africa sewn up,' the President noted.

'It's all on track to becoming a peaceful region,' Jimmy informed him. 'And even if it destabilises, the Kenyans could now fend off the Brotherhood.'

'How much oil in Somalia?' someone asked.

'Enough to rebuild Somalia and to feed it's people, but little more than that. And Somalia will help to be a buffer when Yemen disintegrates after 2012. Whilst we're on the topic, the natural water supplies to Israel and the Middle East will dry up around that time, a major crisis, and costly desalination plants employed.'

They took notes.

Jimmy continued, 'Israel will pinch all of the Jordan River's water, so a major source of aggravation with the Jordanians, and the West Bank Palestinians. And your own water tables, from Vegas west through California, will all dry up, farming in California will be devastated, contributing to the ruin of the California economy, affecting the US as a whole. And New Orleans sinks into the gulf. But let's talk about the upcoming housing bubble a little. From 2001 onwards property prices will rise, far too steeply.'

'Too ... *steeply*?' someone challenged.

'Let me explain it to you, as I did to a Chinese official a while ago. If house prices rise five percent each year, everyone is happy. If they rise twenty percent each year, every is very happy, people start buying second properties against the equity on their first home, hence house prices rise further and faster because of the speculative investments. Other people see house prices rising,

and jump onto the bandwagon. When saturation is reached, and first time buyers can no longer afford to buy, people rent and house prices crash. Now, if you give a man a hundred dollars, he'll be happy. Give him two hundred dollars, then take back a hundred, he'll be very unhappy. People become unhappy when they lose what they have, not when they make ten percent a year instead of twenty.

‘A financial crisis, built around the property market, will hit in 2007. The subsequent recession will do a lot of damage, many banks going under, many people defaulting. And it comes around because the markets give two hundred dollars, then take back thirty. The solution, is to build more houses, to tighten fiscal policy, and to toughen mortgage loan regulations, no hundred percent mortgages for anyone who wants one – which will be the case at the time.’

They all diligently took notes. Doughnuts were brought in, teas and coffees dispensed, ties loosened.

Then came the first shitty question. ‘Do you favour the British Government over others? We know they’ve had financial help.’

‘I favour, and Magestic favours, those who listen ... and co-operate with us. Assistance was offered to you five years ago, but you were too damned arrogant to accept it. And if we fell out, we might just boost the Chinese and Russian economies to the detriment of yours.’

‘So it’s co-operate ... or else!’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy said, fixing on the lady who had asked the question. ‘Would you like that in writing?’

After a pause, another man asked, ‘What about the others in this country who receive Magestic letters? What’s their function?’

‘Quite simple; to save you from yourselves. And we’d never let your economy take a hit. Those people are in place, working on the assumption you’d rather lose the planet – than America lose its place as top dog. Those people are in place, because we assume that you’d rather see a hundred million Americans die in a global nuclear conflict – than ask for our assistance. Does that answer your question, dumb fuck?’

They were stunned into silence for many seconds.

‘And what of China? You said the economies would be linked?’ Hadley asked.

‘By time we get to 2007, China will be the largest lender into the US, by far. They’ll hold 1.3 trillion dollars. In order to do something constructive with those dollars, China will invest some of them here, helping to fuel future boom and bust cycles. At least, that would have been the case before I gave the Chinese the full picture.’

‘Causing what change?’ the President asked.

‘They’ll be more prudent lenders. So when your banks are issuing hundred and twenty percent home loans to anyone who can sign their names, the Chinese will not be funding your banks. That will not harm your economy, that will help to save it from itself. Remember, small rises are good, sharp rises followed by sharp dips ... are bad.’

‘And the OPEC crisis?’

‘That comes, in part, because of future Republican Presidents behaving like arseholes - people don’t want to be associated with bad dollar politics. If, and when it comes, it’ll lower the dollar by fifty percent overnight and force all you imports up by a hundred percent.’

‘And complete chaos and financial ruin,’ the President noted. ‘That’s 2015?’

‘It’s variable. If all goes well, it’ll never happen at all. But that would mean a tight fiscal policy in years ahead – and no major wars.’

‘China and Venezuela,’ Hadley noted.

‘You’ve made a lot of effort in the Congo?’ the Chief nudged.

‘It has third of the world’s mineral deposits, and more oil than Saudi Arabia.’ That woke them up. ‘Problem is, if the region is unstable and warlike, mining and drilling is near impossible. And the best areas are a thousand miles from the coast – in any direction. Build a pipeline and they’ll blow it up.’

‘What’s the outcome there?’ the President asked.

‘Unless otherwise altered, my plans are to allow the Chinese in to take most of it.’

Our hosts glanced at each other.

‘And how does that ... impact on The West?’ the President broached.

‘Positively,’ Jimmy carefully mouthed. ‘First, it will ease pressure on metal, ore and oil prices, and *you* buy from the wholesale markets. Second, it’ll help the region, because the

Chinese are cheaper to employ in the region than your experts, so I can get more done with the profits. And finally, if the Chinese do not move in, then after 2015 – when Islamic terrorists move south and attack the green belt – a future US administration will have to commit two hundred thousand soldiers to the region for ten years.’ He placed a map over a white border. ‘Where brown desert turns to green jungle – there’ll be a war zone for a long time. That can be fought by Africans and Chinese, or by the West.’

‘No way we could commit that many men for that long,’ the Chief complained. ‘And what casualties?’

‘Fifty percent casualties.’ That shocked them. Jimmy added, ‘Trust me, and leave that region to me – with your kind assistance. But, if you want the war, it’s yours to take.’

‘A ten year conflict? In desert and jungle swamps?’ the Chief baulked.

Hadley asked, ‘Should we worry about shortages of ore?’

‘Worry, no. Plan, yes. Congo will export much of the ore, it won’t all go to China.’

‘Once China is dependent on that region...’ the President hinted.

‘They’ll stay, and take on the fight for you,’ Jimmy finished off.

‘And 2025?’ President Harvey finally got around to.

‘A ... natural disaster that kills a hundred million people and reduces the global economy to zero overnight, followed by the rise of the Brotherhood.’

‘Let me ask a direct question,’ the President began. ‘Is America hit directly?’

‘No.’

Harvey glanced at his team. ‘And America survives?’

‘Intact. There’s just the small problem of no imports or exports, not much oil, martial law for ten years, the Brotherhood destroying Europe, Asia and Africa – finally arriving in South America and moving north, armed with nuclear, chemical and biological weapons. You’ll fall around 2037.’

I found myself dwelling on that date. It was the furthest pointing in time Jimmy had ever mentioned.

Jimmy continued, ‘And no, no wonderful technology to save you, no spacecraft leaving to populate other worlds – because

you're economy is screwed much earlier.' They exchanged sceptical looks. 'Oh, and the odd situation ... is where Texas breaks off and becomes independent – and does quite well.'

'Texas? Breaks off?' the President repeated. 'Typical. Is Senator Pederson their President then?'

'No,' Jimmy said with a smile.

'So,' the President said, taking a breath. 'Are you about to tell us there's a solution for all this?'

'There is, but future Presidents will try and manipulate the situation to their own benefit, fucking it all up. Which is why we have people working behind the scenes. And why certain future Presidents were ... *discredited* a long time ago. We're working on the assumption that we'll have to save your arses, without your co-operation, or your help.'

We broke for the day, leaving them to talk amongst themselves – and to plot and scheme and politic. At our hotel we joined Sykes and Jack for our evening meal, now with "protection" sat in the corner, conscious of the fact that the place may be bugged.

The next day the President and his Chief were absent, but a long list of questions awaited Jimmy. It took two hours to get through them. After a lunch break of sandwiches, the food being brought in, the questions continued, as with the Chinese. Having concluded the meeting, we dove straight around to the Russian Embassy – certain that it would get back to the White House immediately, for a meeting that was nothing to do with the "M" Group. We asked about a Rescue Force unit in Russia, all paid for by us. That evening we met Han and his superiors at the Chinese Embassy, another fact that could not have been missed.

On the third day we sent message that the venue had been moved to the British Embassy, the British PM having flown in the night before. President Harvey was not due to be present for this meeting, but turned up unexpectedly, his first meeting with our Prime Minister. Around a highly polished dark-wood table we sat, Sykes and Jack behind the PM, Han behind his superior, Minister Wen, Hadley and Host behind the President, his Chief of staff and National Security Chief present, plus the UK Ambassador to the UN – a man with a future, apparently. Polite greetings were extended to the Chinese, tea and coffee offered, people now talking in hushed, respectful tones.

‘Gentlemen,’ Jimmy called. ‘Please forgive my impertinence by assuming to kick things off. But as you are all aware, I have an agenda ... and a lot to say.’ No one objected. ‘We are here, this first tri-party meeting of British, American and Chinese officials and leaders, at my behest, so that we can discuss Magestic objectives, operations ... and aspirations, to the common good of all here. We have a vested interest ... in saving our own necks.

‘Now, as you will have all observed, I’ve been busy in Africa in recent years, and will be closely involved for ... as long as I continue to live. Somalia has been dealt with, except for the east, which should not be a problem. As you are now aware, there is a small amount of oil in Somali, not enough to get excited about, but enough to help that country recover. There are also mineral deposits which will benefit the region.

‘Now, let me point out to ... all sides, that Yemen will implode after 2012, so a strategic positioning in the area is essential in the years ahead. To that end, the Somali Government will allow a US base in the north, on the coast, and accessed by air and sea only. In any future conflict in that region, such a base will be important to *all* of those concerned. As for the Congo, it has great wealth under the ground. All it needs is a lack of conflict, and a lack of interference from its neighbours. To that end, I would like all those here to pressure the neighbouring states – Uganda and Rwanda, as well as France – not to interfere with attempts to impose a peace. After such a peace is created, mining can begin, to the benefit of all. May I ask, Mister President, if the United States has any particular objection to me closely involving the People’s Republic in that region?’

‘The US has no designs on that region, and we’ll help where we can.’

I resisted a smile.

‘OK, all parties here are aware of the housing bubble that will occur from 2000 to 2007, and let me be clear that there will be *interference* in US and UK housing, to prevent a crisis in 2007. That interference will be detailed to you before I get involved in it, and the People’s Republic will be more prudent lenders than may have otherwise been the case. Are we all agreed that a steady growth in house prices is desirable, a target figure of no more than eighteen percent per year on average?’

Our PM said, a feint hint of a grin, ‘That would keep the British voters happy.’

‘No doubt,’ the President lightly agreed.

‘In order to achieve that, it would be prudent to build more houses when the target looks like going too high, and some of the money from that would come from the People’s Republic, making them a reasonable – yet managed – profit. Are the US and UK Governments in agreement?’

‘I am,’ our PM adamantly stated, turning his head towards Harvey.

‘While I’m still in office,’ the President pointed out, tipping his head.

Wen nodded. Progress was being made, I considered.

‘OK. Afghanistan and Pakistan. We are all aware ... of what may happen if Pakistan destabilises. I would like to request that the People’s Republic are ... generous in their arms sales in future years, especially helicopters that can be used against insurgents in the hills. If, in years to come, the US could supply old Cobra helicopters, that will also help fighting in the hills. In the meantime, the UK and US need to tightly monitor Arab fighters travelling into Afghanistan, and do all they can to support the Northern Alliance in not only keeping the country split, the Taliban at bay, but also helping to target Arab fighters through the Northern Alliance; a job, which if not done internally, will require Western troops and a lengthy occupation, leading directly to the destabilisation of Pakistan. I ask the People’s Republic to supply limited weapons to the Northern Alliance.’

Wen bowed his head in acknowledgment.

‘OK, the Millennium Bug will be a giant damp squid. Nothing will happen, no problems.’

‘World not going to end,’ our PM joked.

Jimmy shook his head. ‘Finally, I ask for the UK and US to greatly increase their passive intelligence operations in sub-Saharan Africa, feeding me that intelligence. The granddaddy of the Brotherhood is already there and taking shape. I would like more old Hueys and Cobras from the US, without being too obvious about the assistance. And that region has to learn to stand on its own two feet. Now, questions please, gentlemen.’

Wen began, in his accented voice, ‘We have considered at length the unpalatable nature of 2025. Should there not be more information supplied.’

‘Only at the risk of panic now,’ Jimmy countered. ‘Great panic.’

‘We have a right to know,’ Harvey suggested, but not forcefully.

‘The three principals at this table have a right to know, that was always my intention. Would everyone else please step-out for ten minutes.’

With nods from their superiors, the men trickled out.

‘You too, Paul,’ Jimmy said to me. ‘You can’t know yet.’

Deflated, I walked out with the rest.

Jimmy took a map and laid it out. ‘Gentlemen, if this gets out the cost will be high – in lives, and economic ruin. Make no mistake, accidental disclosure – now or in the future – will come at a terrible price.’ He had their attention. ‘Watch my finger as I draw on the map, and consider the area inside – and near – the area drawn.’ He ran his finger over a large area. ‘Everything inside that region will be destroyed, everyone killed. Everything within a hundred miles will be damaged, millions injured.’

The three principals straightened, horrified looks exchanged.

‘How the hell could this planet survive that?’ the PM whispered.

‘It will survive, but not as we know it,’ Jimmy said, walking to the window and peering out.

‘Who else knows?’ Harvey asked, still shocked.

‘Just us four and Magestic; no more,’ Jimmy said without turning away from the window. ‘But, closer to the date, others will know. And in case you’re wondering, there is no benefit in trying to warn people now. You can only ... quietly prepare yourselves without revealing as to why.’

Wen insisted, ‘The People’s Republic will be ready.’

Jimmy turned. ‘You, my friend, have the benefit of an authoritarian government, the West doesn’t. You’ll do better than most.’

Harvey approached. ‘And you think our economy will already be hurting by this point?’

‘That depends on your replacements, Number Forty-Two. I can sort your economy, but the question remains, how good your countrymen will be at listening.’

‘Will the Vice President win the next election?’ Harvey asked.

‘Some steps have been taken to ... *assist* in that. But it will be a small margin. He won’t survive two terms without a miracle.’

Our PM closed in. ‘What should we be doing now, really doing?’ Wen closed in as well.

Jimmy breathed out. ‘First, start thinking about future oil prices, and start inventing technology that can generate energy; nuclear, hydroelectric, bio-fuels, wind turbines, electric cars. The less dependency on oil, the better your economies will fair in the years ahead. Then begin a process ... which is inevitable anyway; start to make the large corporations truly international, part owned by Russians and Chinese, so that in time your future Presidents are brow beat by these super corporations, instead of making foolish national decisions. If China and Russia own a third of every large western company, they won’t do anything to screw with them, and vice versa; the US owns parts of Chinese companies. Then, when future leaders want to stir up trouble, and nationalism, they’ll find it difficult.

‘You see, there’s a good reason why Britain would never attack Portugal, and that’s because there’re lots of Brits living there. If a great many British and American citizens live in Shanghai and Moscow, the chances of a conflict are reduced. And, when the time comes, the global economy will need to make a truly global response. Europe, America, South America, Russia and China will all have to tackle the crisis together, to have any chance of survival. If you start squabbling over dwindling resources, you’ll fight a global nuclear war.’

‘And does Magestic know what we do in 2025?’ Harvey puzzled.

‘No, it’s too fluid. And I don’t have a good solution for you.’

They walked around in small circles.

‘Anything you need in the Congo?’ our PM idly enquired.

‘Money. I’m going to build a huge orphanage, give them the blood, then build an army of super soldiers to defend the region from the Brotherhood. It’s a ten year plan.’

All three principals agreed to assist the orphanages. The rest of us were let back in. Seated, thirty minutes of questions on small detail were fielded by people other than the principals. And that was that, we'd broken the ice. I felt strangely relieved that it was not just our problem anymore. The three principals, Jimmy and me posed for a photograph, released to the press as a meeting to discuss aid for Central Africa, which it was - in part.

We dropped in on Senator Pedersen before leaving Washington, asking him nicely, but firmly, to lower the medical insurance premiums. His company, based in Texas, was now also operating in three neighbouring states and could number more than a million customers, a respectable annual growth of twenty-five percent. The next day we dropped in on Pineapple, New York, now occupying new offices and with a headcount of more than sixty. Sitting with the accountants, we noted the profits, paid Oliver his dividend, then transferred our dividend directly to Rescue Force, forty-six million dollars.

I lifted the satellite phone and got through to Dunnow eventually, waking him. 'Dunnow, there's good news and there's bad news.'

'What's that?'

'The good news is, you're fired. That bad news is, you're hired as temporary head of Rescue Force Australia. You'll be on a plane in a few days. Find a base, start recruiting.'

'Good on ya, mate. I was going to suggest something like that.'

Rescue Force Oz had just been born, Han told to finally create Rescue Force China, a modest three hundred rescuers to start with. And, oddly enough, Rescue Force Sri Lanka, India and Sumatra would now be formed. Sumatra I understood, but Sri Lanka? We told Coup to create a new rank, that of Group Leader, and made up five people straight away, pay rises sanctioned. Each group leader would have an assistant and an office, for those that did not already. A chief training officer was appointed, a doctor from London, and tasked with co-ordinating training, and international standards.

We arrived back at the house to news that Bob Davies had been killed in car wreck, something that caused both of us to slump down around the coffee table and sulk. It was not expected. But an hour later we got a fax to say that he was not

quite dead, just a bit dead; busted up and in a hospital in Tanzania. Doc Adam was dispatched with haste, to go visit him. And inject him if necessary.

I walked around to the new house the next day, just a few short weeks from completion, an army of decorators now attending it. Four static guards from a private firm patrolled the house, Ricky, Big Paul, Karl and Rob all keeping an eye on it twenty-four hours a day. The tabloids already had a picture of grey walls and a sketch of the layout, courtesy of an unknown builder. From the front doors, standing on a smooth tarmac road, I stared down the slope and took in the view. Two very tall pine trees bracketed the main road down to the gate, but they naturally possessed no branches below thirty feet. Below them the grass lay neatly trimmed, a wide park leading down a hundred yards to a row of regimented pine trees masking the internal fence, an ornate internal gate now visible. We had no view of the road, but no one on the road had a view of us either.

Wiping my feet, I ducked inside through thick wooden doors, through the reception hall and to the stairs. Figuring I'd try it out, I took the small lift to the third floor. Turning left, I wandered along a carpeted corridor to the north end, climbing a set of private stairs and to the flat roof. Ricky stood on guard with binoculars.

'Anything worth looking at?' I asked.

'Couple of tits.'

'Blue Tits and Grey Tits.' We laughed. I peeked out over the wall at the north end. Unfolding before me, the grass stretched up a gentle rise for three hundred yards, a large pond in the centre, a line of fir trees prevented further views. To the right, many of the original tall trees remained, cut by a winding road down towards the river and Rob's cottage. To the left I could just glimpse the staff houses, their red roofs visible the other side a row of trees. From the west wall I had a commanding view of the cobblestone courtyard, an ornate carp pond at its centre, a few benches dotted about. On my right the third storey staff quarters stretched out, yet to be filled. Underneath them sat the gym, below the gym the pool at ground level. To the left, at ground level, I could see the family guest quarters, more above them, small apartments with two bedrooms each. The top floor was again made up of small apartments for staff, or used by visitors

when needed. Backing the courtyard, the garages stretched across, single storey and with a view of the walled vegetable gardens beyond; Cookie was a keen gardener.

A floor below, I inspected my new quarters, a self-contained apartment with bedroom, lounge, bathroom, kitchen and office; I could lock myself away if I so desired. Jimmy's apartment was next door, but somehow he ended up with the smaller one, the décor almost identical to that of our London apartment. Also on our floor was a lounge come study for just us. The other side of an internal wall were more guest quarters, no access from our side. Below our apartments ran a floor of just guest quarters, fifteen of them, the two corner apartments on a grand scale, and right royally decorated. The smallest room on this floor would have cost a thousand pounds a night in London, each room en-suite with lounges, TVs, computers, views out over the grounds.

The diner was similar to that at the existing house, the lounges also familiar; it was just that there were three of them now. The two offices on this level were huge, three times bigger at least than our office down at the existing house, rows of neat desks around walls, large central desks that could be used for meetings. In the basement I opened a heavy metal door, blast proof, and followed the corridor past numerous rooms destined to be offices – private offices. At either end of the corridor two bomb shelters hid behind strong doors, both equipped with food and water, and escape tunnels that exited under the grass. They were for “just in case”, and had been finished off and made ready by some of Sykes' boys working in secret, the press not having reported them yet.

In the entrance hall I met Big Paul coming in. ‘Where you going to live?’

‘House round the back, Jill and the kid.’

‘Oh.’ We both seemed uneasy. ‘I thought you said ... you know...’

‘Well, it's that or drive back and forth each day ... you know.’

I put my hands in my pockets. ‘Oh. She ... OK?’

‘A bit odd from time to time. You know.’

‘Kid will like it up here,’ I suggested.

‘Yeah, nipper loves it here. Already been fishing a couple of times. An he can go to the upper school down in Newport if he likes.’

‘She seen the house?’

He raised his eyebrows and nodded. ‘I told her it was for just me at first, then she made a few hints about, you know, saving money.’

‘They’re nice houses alright.’

‘Jimmy’s offered her a job here, part-time, if she wants it, so extra cash.’

‘Good. Keep it in the family.’

For the grand opening of the new house we invited over Han and Po, Haldey, Host and Keely from the States, Mac, Doc Graham with Hildy and a few others from Mawlini, Rudd and family, Cosy and family, Sykes and Jack, and Rolf of course – he built the monstrosity.

The mob from Kenya arrived in a group on the Friday, allocated rooms, mostly making use of all the small apartments. The phrase “fucking hell” was used a lot for the first few hours. Po was afforded a corner suite, his bodyguards sharing an apartment. We entertained our guests in the lounge that Friday evening, Cookie working his magic, Jimmy and I taking time with each group to discuss things particular to them.

On the Saturday, Sykes and Jack turned up just before Rolf, the Americans the last to arrive around 3pm. People wandered around at length exploring the place, handy little colour coded diagrams supplied. The lounges and the diner were continuously occupied by small groups, Rudd’s kids making good use of the pool and gym. Just about everyone tried the sauna, the Jacuzzi, the steam room and pool at some point, most taking long walks around the grounds, viewing the river or the pond; there were plenty of interesting things for visitors to see or do.

At one point we grabbed the Americans, Sykes, Jack and Han and held a mini “M” Group meeting in the third lounge. Jimmy asked if anyone had any questions, problems or gripes.

Han said, ‘If you will run operations in Africa, and elsewhere from here, would it not save time if a representative of the People’s Government had a desk here?’

‘I got no problem with that,’ Jimmy responded. To Sykes he said, ‘Any objections?’

‘We’d obviously not wish discussions of substance without a British representative – if those discussions were relevant.’

‘Likewise,’ Hadley echoed.

‘I’ll accept a representative from each country to live here.’ Jimmy said. ‘And for good reason. I often pick up the papers and see a story about something I should discuss with you. If you each nominate someone, I’ll let you know if they’re acceptable to me – since they’d have to live here.’

Jokingly, I said, ‘Wanna move out of London, Jack?’

He glanced at Sykes. ‘If I was asked.’

‘What about your wife?’ I asked.

‘She was born in Gloucester, just up the road. And she never liked London.’

‘As an interim step ... I’ll nominate Jack,’ Sykes said. ‘To be ratified by the PM.’

I glanced at Jimmy before facing Jack. ‘Seen those houses with red roofs?’ He nodded. ‘You’d have one of those.’

‘Very nice.’

‘I will consult with my Government,’ Han offered.

‘I’d put in a few months,’ Keely offered, a glance from his boss. ‘I’d like to see *behind the scenes*.’

‘I got no problem with that,’ Hadley put in. ‘But again, I’d discuss it higher up.’

‘Well, let me know,’ Jimmy offered. ‘I’m easy.’

I wondered why he had built so many staff quarters and houses. Now I knew.

Jimmy added, ‘While I think of it – Sri Lanka. In 2008 China realises it wants a port in Southern Sri Lanka and so gives the Sri Lankan Army weapons to defeat the Tamils. After that, Sri Lanka is peaceful. I see no reason in not accelerating that process, so that Sri Lanka rebuilds quicker. I would suggest that the Chinese give weapons around 2005.’

‘You mentioned Sri Lanka before,’ I queried.

‘If a global conflict takes place, or the Brotherhood rise, Sri Lanka is they key marshalling location for our forces in the area. That, Deigo Garcia, and the base in Somalia.’

‘I will consult with my Government,’ Han offered.

‘India no good?’ Host asked.

‘No, Southern India has Muslims.’

‘Iraq is still a problem area,’ Hadley prompted.

‘General Masoud will make contact soon, then a stealth bomber can hit Saddam – Masoud will claim the strike a car bomb for you. After that, Masoud will co-operate with you, whilst maintaining a tight grip on the country. When he loses that grip, the region goes to hell quickly. So don’t try and enforce democracy there, the country will split up. And Basra is the hotspot for the rise of the Brotherhood. When Masoud takes over, let them sell oil, and try and improve the quality of life for Iraqis around Basra.’

With the usual suspects departed, we enjoyed a whole day of peace before Yuri, Irina and their staff arrived. Yuri got a corner suite, Irina another, Jimmy spending the rest of the day explaining to the leggy Russian lady why he had such a small apartment. Still, she was impressed to hell with the house and grounds and would have moved in if he had let her. I both practised, and improved, my Russian during their visit; it always helped to converse in a language.

Yuri brought Jimmy a gift, a diamond encrusted Faberge egg, and a posh Russian Doll set. The next day a strong glass cabinet was delivered, already on order, the gifts put on display in the dining room, small lights illuminating them. Jimmy always had an item of jewellery for Irina, it kept her quiet, and made her feel wanted. And while all this was going on, Jimmy’s masseur was in Kenya with her parents, the trip a gift from us.

Problems

Jimmy was invited to do an interview at the BBC about the DRC, a live interview with the Congo’s Ambassador to London attending. Fortunately, Jimmy had met the man several times, and had arranged a secret meeting two days before the interview. Jimmy was ready, but I was not privy to the detail.

Like many at the house, I watched the exchange live, our solicitors sat glued to their TV sets and salivating. The

programme began with a ten-minute review of life in the DRC that made it appear to be under the jackboot of tyranny, pictures of people hanging from tress, soldiers firing at refugees, attack helicopters in action, starving kids. The picture they painted made many at the house angry, others confused and saddened.

The interview opened with the lady interviewer asking, 'Mister Silo, what do have to say to say to charges of widespread murder in the region of the Congo that you administer?'

'I'd first correct you – I don't *administer* any regions of the Congo. My title of Governor is a mostly an honorary one, with little real power. I cannot set laws, I cannot organise elections, the police and army do not answer to me.'

'That's not what I understand your role to be at all – you are de-facto the ruler of that region.'

'That is not correct,' the Ambassador objected. 'No one rules our country - but us.'

To Jimmy, she said, 'You control the violent militia known as the Congo Rifles –'

'That is not correct,' the Ambassador objected. 'Colonel Ngondo is head of the Rifles in that region, and has been all along. They are not a violent militia, they are part of the National Army of the Congo.'

'And what about the British mercenaries you employ to kill people?'

'They're paid for by the UK taxpayer, they're sent by the British Government,' Jimmy calmly explained. 'They're ex-SAS soldiers with families in this country, watching this programme tonight.'

That caused her to stumble; she could hardly accuse the UK Government of murder. 'What involvement do have with numerous hangings that take place in your region?'

'Not enough.'

'Not ... enough?'

'I'm very much in favour of capital punishment for murder, and other crimes, it's the only way to keep order in lawless regions.'

'Have you ordered hangings?'

'No, but if I had the choice I'd hang some of these men myself. You see, in the Congo, men tend to favour raping virgins, some as young as ten years old, slitting the girls throats

afterwards. If it was in my power, I'd hang them myself – and not lose any sleep over it.'

'So who orders the hangings?'

'The military commanders have that authority,' Jimmy explained.

'Why not the police or courts?'

The Ambassador put in, 'There are no police, and no courts in these regions.'

'Why not?'

'Because it's a very poor and lawless area of jungle,' Jimmy explained. 'Why do you think I got involved in the first place? I've had to pay magistrates and lawyers to come up from Kinshasa, and offer then twenty-four hour protection – just to do the job.'

The Ambassador said, 'If the British Government would like to pay for a judiciary, we will be happy to talk about it. We are a very poor country.'

'We've seen footage of attack helicopters, Kenyan Helicopters, attacking refugees.'

'Fabricated camera work,' Jimmy suggested.

'Fabricated?'

'Yes. Shots from two different angles, fabricated by the cameraman – something you *will* have to defend in court. And the footage is from the old Rwandan crisis, not taken since I was involved – a complete lie.'

The lady was starting losing her composure. 'Are you profiting from illegal mining operations in the region?'

'All profits from my businesses go to charity, as you are well aware, and the Congo is no different. All profits from mines I have become involved with go towards the two orphanages I have set up.'

'The largest orphanages in the world!' the Ambassador stated, raising a pointed finger. 'Twenty thousand children.'

'And that orphanage is run like a prison, high fences with barbed wire and armed patrols. Is that right?'

'Yes.'

'Yes? It is a prison then.'

'Local men used to break in and rape the girls, so we built a secure fence.'

'Then you failed to protect the children under your care.'

‘A minute ago you were complaining about the fence being a prison, now you’re saying not enough is done to protect the kids. Make your mind up.’

‘The orphanages fall under the Schools Minister,’ the Ambassador insisted. ‘And without the money donated by Mister Silo there would be no orphanages.’

The screen went to a cartoon. Glancing at my watch, they had twenty minutes left to go.

‘Pulled the fucking programme,’ Big Paul noted.

Our phones and fax machines went into overdrive, Sharon having returned for just that contingency. We got the coffee on. The BBC’s switchboard was jammed, not least by the PM himself shouting down the phone. The next day our solicitors handed over a writ for twenty-five million pounds in damages, the tabloids lambasting the BBC as a waste of taxpayers money; the press had all been tipped off about the legal action half an hour after the programme aired. In Parliament, the opposition joined in condemning the BBC. By late afternoon the TV news, the BBC TV news, was reporting the British Ambassador to Kenya and the Congo kicked out, along with all BBC correspondents – and we didn’t even have a hand in it. Tanzania and Rwanda followed, and I’m sure Zimbabwe would have keenly followed if they actually had a British Ambassador to boot out.

Jimmy and I gave a lunchtime interview, followed by numerous interviews for the tabloids, both of us appearing on Sky News that evening. The UN, the Red Cross and other agencies got involved in the debate. The nice lady interviewer, and her controller, were both duly sacked from the BBC and hounded by the press. Now the talk turned to a rise in TV license fees to pay us what everyone thought would be a massive settlement. Since that would have made us about as popular as a tax rise, we dropped the legal action on condition that the head of news programming spent a week in the DRC, at least a day serving meals to orphans. And the BBC got the bill for our hyenas, otherwise known as solicitors.

With Jimmy not keen for people to see him as extravagant, we invited Sky News down to the house. They were obviously shocked by the size and grandeur, filming the house from the outside, but were then led on a tour by Jimmy, first to the two

offices, which bustled with more staff than normal. Jimmy explained each desk and function; the farm in Kenya, the orphanage in Kenya, the DRC, Somali relief operations and Rescue Force operations. The palatial guest quarters were displayed, Jimmy filmed in his own small apartment in contrast; bedroom, lounge, kitchen. A comment about the staff houses being better than Jimmy's quarters made it to the final footage.

In the weeks that followed, all sorts of journalists and camera crews visited the DRC, our orphanages, our well-run mines and other projects. The exposure was huge, and Jimmy ticked a box on the long path to 2025. Representatives from the Governments of Kenya, Somalia and the DRC turned up at the house as requested, given rooms and desks. They were followed by a surprise. One day Bob Davies wheeled himself in.

'Is this the home for fallen women?' he asked, seemingly quite cheerful.

'Bob, you OK?' I foolishly asked.

'No, dope, I'm paralysed,' he joked. 'Besides that, just fucking peachy.'

Jimmy appeared at my side. 'Bob is now head of Rescue Force International, to be housed in Mapley at some point, but for now he's here.' Jimmy took the wheelchair handles. 'Let's show you your desk, lots to do.'

'Slave driver already!'

Bob greeted the staff, running an eye over his new desk, everything within reach, a keyboard on a specially extendible base. Grabbing a pad and paper, he said, 'OK. What's first?'

'Keeping Dunnaw in check, for one,' I said. 'He's organising the start of Rescue Force Oz near Cairns, and he'll need plenty of hand holding.'

'He's no administrator,' Bob quipped. 'You don't have him down as director there, do you?'

'No,' Jimmy said. 'He'll not want a desk to fly, so find us someone, ex-UN if possible, or ex-army officer.' Bob took notes. 'Then there's getting the People's Rescue Force to Mawlini and doing things our way. Then, I want to hit Mackey with part-time earthquake teams, the UK Fire Brigade with the same. RF Tanzania needs work as well. So, ask for dispositions and help them to grow and organise – you're the boss of them all.'

'In at the deep end,' Bob said, blowing out.

‘There’s a physio’ coming in twice a day, pool and gym.’

‘Oh?’

‘Do as your fucking told,’ Jimmy threatened. ‘You may yet walk again.’

As I returned to the diner for pancakes, I realised why the damn place was so big. I recognised our accountant, also stuffing his face, and a second man.

‘This is Neil,’ our accountant offered. ‘Be based here.’

‘Doing what?’ I puzzled.

‘Accounts, plus co-ordinator for the hotels and clubs, leisure centre.’

‘Great, free me up a bit.’

Jack stepped in and sat next to me. ‘Alright, boss.’

‘We ... are not your bosses, remember. You’re here to keep an eye on us.’

‘OK. Boss.’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Wife settled in?’

‘She loves it, and the dog’s got plenty of space. Oh, three men from *protection* down tomorrow ... with their suitcases.’

Big Paul wandered in, making himself a tea.

‘How’s *the nipper*?’ I knowingly asked.

‘What’s he done now?’ Big Paul asked with a sigh.

‘Karl threw him into the pond.’

‘That’s how he got wet.’ He rolled his eyes. ‘Why?’

‘He smacked a car with a golf cart. Twice! And rammed into one of Rob’s Alsatians. For a big strapping lad, you’re soft on the kid.’

‘It’s a fine line with Jill, can’t push too hard, and this place has lots of fucking temptations for him.’

‘Three more *Karls* here tomorrow. Maybe *they* can keep him out of trouble.’

‘Wouldn’t bet on it, his teachers call him Bart Simpson.’

People settled into their rooms, into their work routines, and into odd little social groups. Jack and Rob played chess a few evenings a week, something that had surprised me about Rob; he didn’t seem the type. There was the fishing club: Rob, Big Paul, two of the protection guys and Neil the accountant. They fished the river and the ponds, making the odd trip to other locations, a betting pool run on the largest fish caught. The secret poker

group, that everyone knew about, met twice a week and played for plastic chips. It included two Africans, Bob Davies, David Gardener when he visited, Jack and Keely, and Sharon's husband, our American cousin being the best player. The movie club had a fluid membership, and simply consisted of people sat in the second lounge in front of a white screen and projector, films not yet released played off tapes – the dodgy tapes courtesy of Gareth the computer guy.

Jimmy and I preferred to use the gym early mornings, and most people avoided it at that time, not least because they liked their kip. Keely joined us a few times a week, not a problem with six running machines. I was now into the martial arts, Jimmy setting me exercises to perform each day, moves to practice on a lifelike dummy. Whenever I felt as I was making progress he would knock me on my arse before I saw him move. The four protection men, plus Big Paul and Ricky, were under orders from Jimmy to complete a certain number of miles per week - or else. Rob was excused, a serious knee injury preventing too much running. Monday to Wednesday, as with our leisure centre, the gym was well attended in the evenings. Kids and families used the pool of a Saturday, Jimmy and I avoiding it.

Overall, everyone was kept so busy that they enjoyed their time off, and our resident "M" Group guests were often cheekily given tasks by Bob Davies if they appeared bored.

After a month, Han turned up with suitcases, his stay being that of a fixed one-year assessment. He joined the poker group, took long walks, and started a rose Garden with Jack. In order to keep Jack and Han busy, Jimmy had tasked them with improving the grounds, a labour of love for the men. Most evenings Han could be found either reading, or watching English TV.

Bob Davies was a natural leader, and soon had people organised, well beyond his own remit. He even moved a few desks around. Some people quietly questioned his enlarged role, but Jimmy was happy with it. Bob was also brilliant at being cheeky; begging, borrowing or stealing whatever we needed from various NGOs or governments.

When in residence, we held Rescue Force meetings on a Monday morning, typically taking all day. Tuesdays would consist of meetings with the Africans in turn, typically an hour each, more general directions than specifics. Tuesday afternoon

was Neil's review of accounts, summary figures compared month on month, then a review of staff costs and claims, often some swearing at items requested. Wednesdays were formal "M" Group meetings, Sykes usually popping down. When staff asked what the "M" stood for, we joked that it was for "Mothers". Items were discussed or debated, Jimmy answering specifics. But for the most part Jimmy would read the papers each day, make notes, then inform the relevant person about a topic before he forgot about it.

Our part-time staff, those working out of the London lockup, and with no connection to Pineapple – nor contact, would sieve through music tapes each week, sending Jimmy the summary of names and song titles. He'd then email Pineapple with a list of who to sign up. Those new sign-ups would then be required to perform at the clubs in Cardiff and London.

Thursdays became the well-attended curry night at the house, an Indian chef assisting Cookie to rustle up a feast. Not many of the "guests" went to the club on a weekend, but the rest of the staff were regular attendees, Ricky organising trips for the security staff. Big Paul was now bit hen pecked, and I took no pleasure in taking the piss out of him. Keely resisted the club for four weeks, then journeyed down with us, impressing the Welsh ladies with his American accent and putting it about a bit.

I often invited down our singers from Pineapple, putting them up in the best rooms and spoiling them. And Jimmy, he was happy with his routines, especially his visiting masseur, Sharon's gorgeous niece, Nicola. He insisted there was nothing to it, but anyone making a joke would be stared at till they grew fearful.

Izmit, Turkey, August, 1999.

RF Oz had grown quickly, a suitable director found in the form of a former Army Major, a specialist in wilderness survival. Recruitment had been simple, since nearly everyone taken on board could fly something, they could all drive and maintain a jeep, and long distance navigation in hot climates was second nature to them. They had no problems with creepy-crawlies, and

dangerous animals were a fascination, everyone having a story about a mate that had been killed in some grizzly fashion. Twenty Aussies had been recruited and sent to Mawlini, the Australian Government then taking a keen interest and offering to fund and support the fledgling unit. In response, Jimmy invited the Australian Ambassador to the house, Bob Davies and others discussing RF operations at length. But Jimmy emphasised to the ambassador that RF units should appear to be politically free of bias, private organisations that could go anywhere. Within a few days the Australian Government offered to fund a further thirty people, indirectly, and would “sell” old kit at good prices. Extra bodies were recruited, many ex-Army and already ticking many of the boxes on the training schedule.

At Mawlini the Aussies were tested more than trained, and programmes altered to accommodate them. They were easy to spot around the base from their traditional Army hats; one side up, one down, and now bleached white. They all needed mine clearance training, and some cross-trained from Jet Ranger helicopters to Hueys, a simple enough course. That course would typically be followed by Hal putting the Aussie pilots under pressure, stretching their flying skills to the limit. They were mostly spared the survival course in Tanzania, many having already attended far more extensive courses. With a group of ten checked out at Mawlini they came up to Mapley, Faulty Towers attacked at length.

The People’s RF unit needed special permission to enter the UK and to attend Mapley, making it into the newspapers. They tackled Faulty Towers with admirable professionalism and dedication, each training area taken very seriously. Two weeks was all they required in the UK, several days spent on the dummies in simulations. At Mawlini they excelled again, good at just about everything they put their hands to. Each got a taste of simulated action with a Hercules flight to the isolated airstrip, a rescue of instructors pretending to be casualties, a few days camping out in the desert heat followed by a return flight.

The Sri Lankan Government had been a bit puzzled by our request, but pleased that we would be paying for extra medics in their country. An instructor from Mawlini flew out, and we bought land on the east coast, huts built. Fifteen doctors and thirty nurses were hired – mostly male nurses, their wages good

for the country. Training began at Mawlini, Mac complaining that he could not keep track of who was who arriving at Mawlini and “when would the fucking Eskimos get here?”. The Sri Lankans were dedicated, keen, technically competent, but lacked the strength and endurance often needed for deployments. Fitness was an issue cut short by Doc Adam, but only selectively, and only with Jimmy’s say so.

Sumatra was a different case altogether, it was a disaster zone at the best of times, minor earthquakes occurring most every week. The Indonesian Government took a minute to convince, offering up a shared army base in Sumatra. Recruitment was simple, since we offered wages twice the national average, attracting thirty doctors, some male nurses, no lady nurses. We could have hired hundreds, there were that many applicants. Jeeps were bought cheaply in-country, a few old Hueys floating around and purchased with contract pilots as part of the package. The Indonesians needed training in all areas, but plodded through with keen interest, each one undertaking at least twelve weeks in Mawlini before being signed off. In the UK, Faulty Towers was home from home for them; there was no one who had not either been buried alive themselves, or had searched through damaged buildings for real. They understood the scenario better than any others and took it all very seriously. As for India, the paperwork was dragging on.

By July, 1999, we had many teams in many countries to call upon. Jimmy had savaged the currency and futures markets, a great deal of money earmarked for a deployment in August. He would not say what the job was, simply that it would be a bad earthquake. Supplies had been procured and stored in Mapley under the pretext that they may needed “some day”, a great many family-sized tents organised, twenty-thousand camp beds stacked up, Bob Davies scratching his head at the expense. With the PM’s permission, an exercise called “Unity” was earmarked for Mapley in August, five Antonovs and a few Hercules hired, Bob Davies planning the show along guidelines Jimmy had given him.

On the fifth of August we greeted the teams and their leaders, most housed in tents around the airfield; all other local groups had been banned for the two-week duration, the air cadets would have to run their summer camps around us. A second barrack

block had been finished at Mapley, the ladies from several nations housed in the blocks if they wished. The airfield's canteen was a good size, but meal times had to be set by groups of nations, the bases mini-mart busy all day. Bob Davies and Coup took over an office next door to Mackey, other senior staff housed in Mackey's admin' block.

The combined exercise was to take the form of two weeks of competitions, followed by a four-day test deployment on MOD training grounds near Norfolk. A scoreboard was set up, a list of nations and events marked up. Some of those teams included British Rescuers, and a Fire Brigade team. The differences in national team sizes were not a problem, since individual scores were aggregated and averaged.

On the first day, everyone was given a time trial run around the airfield, an individual event with all times averaged. It used up the whole day to get them all around, the Chinese just ahead of Hong Kong, a British rescue team in third place. I was glad that Tubby was busy elsewhere, RF Kenya looking a bit unfit. The next day the individual wall climbs were timed, in parallel to five man teams negotiating the scaffold with a colleague in a stretcher. The British Rescuers did well on the wall, as expected, the Chinese winning on the scaffold, not least because several teams dropped their stretcher, the colleague being carried complaining loudly. By the end of the second day the Chinese were ahead, the British Mountain Rescuers second, Australia third.

On the third day the Prime Minister popped in, knowing more than I did about what Jimmy had planned for the deployment. As he toured about the various groups and nationalities, teams had to build makeshift bridges across the small gully, and again secure a stretcher across, as others rescued instructors in the nearby cave. At the end of the third day the British Rescuers were in the lead, Australia second, our mob from Kenya closing the gap, the People's RF slipping. The fourth day consisted of two person teams tested on a bank of dummies in the AMO building whilst others sat a computerised test, a hundred general rescue questions. Doctors then sat tests suitable to their skills, nurses likewise. The Sri Lankans jumped a few places, the Indonesians lifting off the bottom, the Brit Rescuers slipping two places.

From the tower, Jimmy and I stood and took in the field. 'The national teams are starting to gell a bit,' Jimmy suggested.

'Let's hope so, only got a few days.'

The fifth day consisted of trials bikes being negotiated around courses and timed, the same for jeeps and quad bikes. The foreign teams slipped, the Brits climbed and Kenya took the lead for a change, a reason for much celebration that evening. In the morning the teams all had a quick lesson in scaffolding, a little practice, then an area in which to build the same scaffold shape that now sat in plain view as example.

'Here's one I made earlier,' bounced around.

The Chinese teams made perfect shapes, albeit a bit slow and methodical. The Sri Lankan's effigy collapsed a lot, the Indonesians got there eventually – falling off a few times, but the Brit Rescuers did the best job, closely followed by Kenya. The Tanzanians injured themselves and gave up, and the Australians built higher than they should have, wasting time. On day six we gave everyone a rest, just one game in the morning, raising a large tent, many collapsing in on their erectors. Day seven was all in the pool, groups brought in and timed swimming in the morning, rescuing in the afternoon. Whilst waiting, people could improve their team scores on the rowing machines in the gym, the Australians powering through.

Day eight consisted of teams spread out and timed as they tackled a jeep with no wheels, no oil, no battery connected and no fuel. The Sri Lankans struggled, as did the Indonesians, the remainder assembling the jeep in varying times. Australia was now in the lead, the Brit Rescuers second, Kenya third, the People's RF fourth. But most important of all, they laughed and joked around the canteen in the evening, sore fingers covered in plasters.

Day nine brought a more elaborate exercise. The teams were tasked with carrying a colleague over the assault course, followed immediately by making a bridge over the gully, assembling the jeep, driving a course with the stretcher – carefully handled – then building a scaffold over a wall and getting their colleague over. In total, the average time was forty minutes, the teams sweating. The People's RF won the event, followed by Hong Kong, Australia in third place. Day ten was a rest day as we awaited the inevitable.

The following morning we woke everyone early and assembled all groups with their kitbags. Stood on the tower roof in the grey dawn light, Jimmy shouted towards four hundred rescuers. 'There has been a serious earthquake in Turkey, not far from Istanbul. We are deploying. Aircraft will be here in less than an hour, so everyone please check your kit, get into your teams. British Mountain Rescuers, you may attend if you wish, but grab white jackets from us. Fire Brigade, you'll need to contact your superiors if you wish to accompany us. For all national teams, we are contacting your governments now, we are also checking permissions from the Turkish authorities. We will move on the assumption that existing permissions are sufficient. Dismissed.'

As the quake had struck Turkey, faxes had gone to embassies and national governments, special software used to batch them. Jimmy had called the PM and asked for Air Force assistance, which was granted immediately. Our hired Antonovs were on their way from various airports, their arrival times carefully pre-planned, our own Hercules stood waiting on the apron. It's engines started up as we stepped in from the tower roof.

Below, in Bob's office, Jimmy said, 'I want Kenya and Australia on our Hercules, off as soon as their ready. We'll fax UK and European air traffic control now. Mackey, contact every volunteer you can find and ask them to assemble here. Bob, contact each home base unit and get any spare bodies we can, so that's the remaining Chinese and Hong Kong boys – flown straight to Istanbul.'

Jimmy and I made coffees and answered the phone, many embassies spoken with, before setting about the task of getting supplies onto the planes. The media had been tipped off as soon as the quake had registered, the first TV crew at the gates and let in around 10am. They had just set up in front of the tower when our white Hercules powered off. Little over ten minutes later the first RAF Hercules landed, picking up sixty people and lifting off quickly. That process was repeated till we had just twenty warm bodies remaining. With the assistance of British Rescuers, and the Fire Brigade, we loaded supplies onto the Antonovs using small forklift trucks; tents, blankets, camp beds.

Then it fell eerily quiet on the airfield. With a tea in a plastic cup I wandered out as the day warmed up. Bending down, I

picked up a RF cap someone had dropped, wishing I was on a plane. But not this time, I had to learn to send people out. I approached the TV crew as they stood about with their own plastic cups. 'All gone I'm afraid,' I said.

'Not going with them?'

'No, we're co-ordinating the effort here, trying to get a shit load of tents and blankets organised. Besides, when I get involved in stunts I get told off a lot.'

'Do you want to give an interview?'

'Bit later, when we know what's happening. It's five or six hours in a Hercules to Turkey.'

The day warmed up, Han brought over from the house along with the Africans; they all had nationals deployed. We set-up a command centre, phones and faxes available.

The Fire Brigade got permission, and Mackey's rescuers called in to say they were on their way. Jimmy opened a store of white jackets, all sizes, this batch printed with simply "Rescue", Union Jacks on the sleeves. Each man got a jacket, some already wearing various jackets describing their skills. A hired Antonov touched down and we loaded forty men, extra food and water, money given to team leaders for hotels and transport.

A lorry appeared, halting on the apron and being tended now by forklift. Nosing, I broke open a card box. Inside I found plastic packs that contained water, chocolate, tea and coffee, powdered milk and tinned meat, toilet roll. I remembered it was our equivalent of army field rations. These would arrive a day after deployment, for our people to replenish stocks. They were also excellent for people without homes. A white UN Antonov landed and taxied around as I watched, soon disgorging numerous empty flat pallets from the rear. The boxes were loaded, the TV crew having something to film, something more interesting than me.

As the day wore on, more and more individual rescuers turned up. I entertained them all in the AMO training rooms, fetching snacks from the shop and making the tea. At 6pm we totalled forty and called in another Antonov, the men duly loaded and sent on their way as I stood and jealously watched. By midnight another twenty had arrived, told to get some sleep, the next plane due in the morning. Some of this lot had driven down from Scotland, an eight-hour drive.

By this time our teams were reporting in via their satellite phones; "Sit Reps". They had landed at Istanbul airport to much faffing about paperwork from the officials, eventually let through. The British Embassy was nominated as command central, Doc Graham heading there with his assistant, plus the national leaders from each group. Outside the airport our people hired buses, hard cash offered, and quickly reached the areas most devastated. With roads blocked they got off and walked, stopping to help wherever they found large buildings collapsed. That first night they supported the Turkish authorities and scrambled over and under buildings in the main towns, life-saving first aid given. The next day they were split by teams and sent to other towns and villages, no group totalling less than twelve rescuers.

The remainder of our people turned up in Turkey that evening, large numbers from China and Hong Kong, another fifty from Africa, small groups from the UK. Supplies were flown out steadily, tens of thousands of tents and blankets. All the while Jimmy and I camped out at Mapley, plenty of spare beds available. Bob Davies worked tirelessly on the phone all day, people encouraged, bullied, offered bribes or just down right threatened. Red tape was cut through, supplies forced through, and in Turkey those supplies were driven to where they were needed. And as the days unfolded the scale of the disaster became apparent; an estimated twenty thousand dead, a hundred thousand injured, and a million homeless. Spare tents were sought from around Africa and flown up, dusty old UNHCR tents that had seen better days, and had seen the odd refugee crisis.

Five days in, few were being found alive and the recall was duly issued, two RAF Tristar aircraft sent to bring back those who had flown out from Mapley, the jets landing back at RAF Brize Norton at noon on the sixth day. The additional African rescuers came with them, some in an Antonov later in the day after Doc Graham had performed a head count; he accompanied the last non-Chinese group out. The Chinese would fly their people directly home.

Drab green RAF buses signalled the arrival of our people, their old tents or rooms re-occupied, much-needed showers taken, food downed. The buses came back and forth for an hour

from the nearby RAF base. When cleaned up, the British and Australians were allowed to give interviews to the press. Doc Graham, Ratchet, Spanner and the senior staff arrived around 6pm, straight into a logistical debrief; people, numbers, and injuries sustained being dealt with. We found out that a Chinese rescuer had been killed, another had crushed an arm in the same incident. Two of ours had suffered broken arms, and minor injuries were in the dozens; everyone displayed cuts and scrapes.

The sombre mood improved after some food and a cleanup, lager cans staked high in the canteen and free for everyone. Jimmy and I toured around, greeting people, discussing what they had been involved with. Some had walked thirty miles or more from the main town, out to remote areas. Many had bought supplies locally, many more again having food gratefully handed to them. As they were pulling out, the tents were finally arriving and being distributed where people had lost their homes. That evening, some got drunk, some put on music in the canteen and danced around, others walked around chatting. People could be seen hugging new friends from different teams, but many just went to bed.

With dawn rising on an overcast English day, everyone was told to wash their kit, check and replenish. The press seemed to have lost interest as our team leaders organised their staff. At noon all team leaders were called into the lecture room, a debrief held, questions asked, comments taken, problems and suggestions aired. One comment, about not being prepared, met with the following response from Jimmy.

‘Can you predict earthquakes? No, then every single response will be a surprise. All rescue force staff must be packed and ready to go at all times. Group leaders must regularly check that kitbags are correct, and correctly stocked. You never know when the phone may ring.’

The main gripe was a lack of jeeps on the ground, and we indicated that we’d look at getting jeeps onto Antonovs in the future. In this case, there were no jeeps in the UK available anyhow. Everyone was thanked, told that planes would take them home the next day. Jimmy would accompany the Sri Lankans and the Indonesians, the Australians would leave a day later, and I would accompany our people back to Africa.

We drove back to the house that evening, the first time back for six days. After packing bags, we both tackled a mountain of paperwork, faxes, and emails – many replied to. It was restful to sleep in my own bed, even if it was for just three hours. At 5am we headed back down the motorway, myself to Mapley whilst Jimmy continued on to Gatwick. At Gatwick Jimmy met the cleaned up rescuers from Sri Lanka and Indonesia, leading them aboard a chartered 747. I boarded an Antonov with the first batch of our people; we were over Southern France when Jimmy's plane headed off for Sri Lanka, the 747 only a third full.

At Mawlini, the next morning, I met with Mac and helped tackle the paperwork, three more plane loads arriving during the day, the last around 6pm. Rooms were found for the non-residents, everyone gravitating towards the rooftop bar later, and most everyone drunk as usual. In the morning I accompanied the small Tanzanian unit as they were sent onwards in the Dash, six staff heading back towards the DRC. A quick tour of Kigoma was organised for my benefit, people greeted. Another party was held that evening at the rooftop bar, UN and NGO staff present and interested in the detail of operation. The next morning I would have to reverse my journey with a different purpose.

With a cleaned up detachment in tow, we flew down to the new Tanzanian capital, Dodoma, and everyone pretty much sick of planes by this point. The Tanzanian press were waiting, Rudd having a hand in things, and we gave interviews at the airport, a Government Minister putting in an appearance to say how proud he was of our contribution. A short hour later we flew back to Kigoma, the job done. Giving a lift to a few UN staff, we flew up to Nairobi, the cleaned up Mawlini group bussed down for the next day. I spent the night in the apartment Tubby kept in Nairobi, Sue cooking a meal. Neither of had them been on the deployment, their flying skills too valuable down here, and I explained what I knew of what happened on the ground.

In the morning Rudd picked us up, the four of us meeting the gang outside the familiar Government buildings. Another round of interviews, more poses for photographers, more Ministers smiled at. At least we now had a decent group photograph. After the reception the gang got bussed back up to base, I hopped on a flight for Dubai, from there onwards to Singapore and Hong Kong.

Jimmy had repeated the tortuous process in Sri Lanka, meeting their President and thanking him for his people's contribution. He was on the ground for two hours. In Jakarta the press were waiting, having been tipped off. Interviews were given at length, much time afforded to the publicity drive. His chartered 747, now quite empty, returned to the UK as he flew on the next morning to Australia, arriving just before the Australian detachment returned. He met them off the plane, a hotel room waiting for each of them in a Sydney hotel, TV interviews scheduled. At this point I was half way to Hong Kong from Singapore.

Jimmy hopped on an early flight north to meet me, as I was sleeping comfortably in the Mandarin. At breakfast he was booked in, washed and fresh.

'Timing ... is everything,' I suggested.

'Indeed.'

Po met us after breakfast, a trip across the bay and to the RF HK building, a TV crew already in attendance. We gave an interview before greeting all the staff, many of who had taken part in the deployment without attending the Mapley games. Two stood with arms in plaster, a few with wrists bandaged, Hancock noting their fondness for tunnelling into collapsed buildings, and the subsequent injuries accrued. They would be told off, in time, their approach refined. Po gave an interview in a lounge upstairs before we all headed back across the bay for two additional interviews, at two separate TV stations. And I was getting sick of it. At the Mandarin I headed straight down to get a massage. Led on the bed, the lady remembering me, I relaxed. I was half asleep when it happened.

I heard a question, a shout, a scream. It took a full three seconds to wake properly and spin around. The blade stuck into my side. For some reason I instinctively moved my elbow, lessening the effect. Grabbing the man's wrist, I held tightly and just stared at him in abject surprise. He was a local, short and skinny. He threw a punch with his other hand, which I caught easily, surprising myself. With my left thumb against his wrist I increased the pressure as Jimmy had taught me, the man wincing, then screaming, dropping to his knees. Holding the man firm, I took in the masseur, unconscious and bleeding, my own side covered in blood. The door burst open and two women looked in,

shrieking and closing the door quickly. My Assailant dropped his knife. I let go of his left wrist and smashed down onto his bent right wrist as I had been taught, getting a piercing shrill from my attacker. I pulled his arm past my left hip, twisted, then slammed down onto his elbow with my right fist, bending it the wrong way. I was still holding him when a security guard burst in, grabbing my attacker around the neck and dragging him out.

I pulled on my tracksuit bottoms, over my swimming trunks, stopping to look at my wound, and wondering if I was going to die. The blood was not pumping, no arterial bleed. Holding a towel to it, I examined the masseur, finding a strong steady pulse. Without having heard anyone enter I was grabbed and led out, dozens of faces, people staring at my blood. The chill corridor I was led along helped to wake me from the shock, soon being gawked at by stunned guests as blue lights flickered from the streets. From the corner of my eye I clocked Jimmy's huge form, Po with him.

Jimmy pulled the towel away. 'It's non fatal.'

I couldn't even think of a witty comeback. I boarded the ambulance without a word, leaving Jimmy and Po stood in the hotel entrance. As I lay down my injury started to sting, and I wondered why I needed to be strapped in; that worried me more than the wound. The roof of the ambulance was inspected at length as we sped along unseen streets, the paramedic looking a bit weird upside down. My wounded body was bumped out on a trolley into a chill wind and ceiling lights flashed by, my side now protesting having been stabbed, people shouting and fussing. And all I could think off was 'What a smooth floor we must be on?' A needle entered my arm, and I woke to pastel blue curtains.

'Still alive?' came Jimmy's calm voice.

I touched my side, little pain evident. 'I was ... stabbed.'

'Yep. You treat your masseurs like that ... that's what happens.'

I turned my head. 'What?'

'The man who stabbed you, has connections to known gangs, so he was hired. We're not sure who yet. And you, young man, you broke his wrist and elbow, most effectively.'

'How long...'

‘Overnight. Oh, I’ve spoken with your parents. Told them it was the masseur’s husband.’

‘This...’

‘Was not supposed to happen, no.’

Po ducked his head in. ‘Hello Mister Paul. You good, no?’

‘I think so.’

Po informed Jimmy of something in Chinese.

Jimmy faced me. ‘Your masseur, in her youth, was married to a gang member, then ran away and started a new life; they just found her, so you ... were in the way. And Po’s family have just declared war on this gang. So, this was not about ... us.’ He stood. ‘There are guards outside the door, don’t go far, I’ll be back in a few days.’

I counted the ceiling tiles, in both directions. Several times. Then I added them up, multiplied, then cursed. My boredom was only broken every three hours by a nurse spoon-feeding me soup. By the next morning my side had stopped hurting. When the doctor eased off my dressing he squinted at it, at the chart, at me, and then put the dressing back. All was ‘vely’ good. Too good, I figured.

At noon, a knock at the door preceded a smiley, and beautiful face; Ling. Things were looking up, unless she had a knife. She inspected my rapidly healing wound, lifting my spirits with a blowjob followed by a bed massage of all my limbs. All told, she was with me around two hours. An hour later a cute young nurse entered, explaining that Po had sent her. She gave me another blowjob, as I considered that Po did know about his daughter’s visit. When my usual nurse brought in my soup she smelt the massage oils, which I explained truthfully. After soup she gave me a bed bath.

Hancock popped in the next day for a chat, followed by Po, then the Manager of the Mandarin, who apologised at length. I found myself wondering if Po had threatened him. And it seemed that getting stabbed inside the hotel triggered an insurance claim. I asked how the girl was, being informed that she was just a few doors down and fine. As for the insurance, I wanted it paid to Rescue Force. That was not possible, apparently, it had to be paid to me. But it was tax free, so I could send it on. I thanked him, and told him not to worry. The room’s TV allowed me to practise some Chinese, but, bored with that, I asked Po’s security

to step in, and chatted away at length, now very bored of my medical incarceration.

The next morning the quack was puzzled at my scar. I insisted that I sign myself out, not wishing him to investigate my recuperative powers any further, soon back in the Mandarin in a tracksuit, finding my room as I had left it. After a decent meal courtesy of room service, I tempted fate with a massage, Po's men stood outside. Returning to my room I met Jimmy coming the other way.

‘All better?’ he asked.

‘Fine. Quack was asking questions about my quick healing so I skipped prison.’ He nodded. ‘How was Beijing?’

‘Plenty of ceremony, hand shaking, interviews. I did some “M” Group stuff whilst I was there, and attended a funeral.’

‘The guy we lost?’

Jimmy nodded. ‘I’m off for a curry.’

I lifted my eyebrows. ‘I’ll see you in there in ten.’

Sat eating, I said, ‘I was half asleep. That guy could have killed me.’

‘Your reflexes are better than most, and you did well after you got going. But ... this guy is no reason not to relax. I’ll warn you when I *know* people are trying to kill us.’

‘And if I *was* killed?’

He took a moment. ‘It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve seen you killed.’

‘That is so ... weird and freaky. Let’s not talk about that, OK. Let’s ... just press on, eh?’

‘A good attitude, young man.’

Arriving back into Gatwick, a dozen photographers and reports awaited us. With Karl grabbing our bags, we led them towards the bar and bought everyone drinks, the detail disgorged till they seemed about done. I did not, as asked, show them the scar. I hit my own bed feeling like I’d been around the world.

Vice Presidents, Generals and others

The incumbent Vice President won the race for the White House, a lot of effort to stay where you were, I considered. True to form, he did not offer the former President a job. I found myself wondering how that conversation went.

One of the last things that Harvey signed off before he left was the assassination of Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi dictator making the mistake of staying the night in a modest house in Tirkrit one evening. His sons survived, only to be arrested and held as General Masoud grabbed power. And Jimmy ticked a box.

A few days later, General Abdi and several Ministers of the new Somali Government came to visit, snubbing Whitehall a little by coming straight to us. This was Abdi's first trip aboard, the first time in a commercial jet liner, the first time to see the "wet green land", and the first time to see a house like ours. We gave our visitors palatial rooms to rattle around in, a meal organised in the dining hall that evening, many attending. Sykes came down with a Whitehall mandarin and the new Somalia Ambassador to London, Keely, Han and Jack attending as a courtesy. And because they would have asked about it afterward anyway, being a pain.

'How's Mogadishu?' I asked the senior Somali official as Abdi tackled chicken tikka starter.

'It will take many years to ... make repairs and heal our wounds.'

'Oil revenue coming in?' I probed.

'Yes, we have been given *credits* abroad and buy many much needed items from the west.'

'The French at that mine?' I added.

'Yes, they employ many local people and ship the ore through Mogadishu Port, increasing trade.'

'Sounds like progress,' I suggested.

'Indeed. And your medical centres are much needed, still much fighting.'

'Yes?' I puzzled.

'Young men, used to a more ... easy living, find working for their food a difficult adjustment.'

Jimmy asked Abdi, 'And the east and north?'

‘Some small groups resist,’ he answered. ‘It is a problem of distance and space, more than fighting. And what of you, how is business?’

‘Business is good,’ Jimmy said with a smile.

‘I read of what you did in Turkey,’ Abdi mentioned. ‘Many countries working together, and many here at this table.’

‘Oh, no,’ Jimmy corrected him. ‘Mister Han does the Chinese laundry, Mister Keely teaches poker in the evenings, and Jack here tends my garden.’

‘For the most part,’ Han commented, ‘that is true. And Mister Paul provides for the gossip – as the English say – on poker night.’

‘You talk about me?’ I challenged.

‘We have a pool on women and accidents,’ Keely explained. ‘I have you down for a car crash with one of the Spice Girls in there.’

‘I have read all three books,’ Abdi proudly stated. ‘But some words I needed help with. Still, a man should always widen his horizons through language.’

I could hear some of Jimmy in there, and Abdi still looked young in his ill-fitting General’s outfit. ‘Be a fourth and fifth book soon,’ I informed him.

‘The fourth book is available,’ Han put in. ‘I am reading it now.’

Abdi focused on Jimmy. ‘We have had a small incursion by the Ethiopians. How would *you* deal with them?’

‘Have you captured their men?’ Jimmy asked. Abi nodding.

I put in, ‘Then clean them, feed them well, give them money, thank them and send them back.’ The Somalis were puzzled. I added, ‘If someone throws a rock at you, hand it back cleaned and offer them another throw. It will annoy them no end.’

Jimmy grinned. To Abdi he said, ‘This is what I would do. You want good relations with your neighbours, all of your neighbours, even when they behave like children.’

‘Tell me, Mister Jimmy, do you think they have designs on our land?’ Abdi asked, many eyes now on Jimmy.

‘No,’ Jimmy adamantly stated. ‘Remember, a government is made up of many people, few who agree with each other. And the people in the government change often.’

I could see Abdi considering that. ‘The new American President was the old Deputy President, yes?’ Jimmy nodded. ‘But he will not give his old friend a place in his government?’

‘It’s complicated,’ Jimmy began. ‘But always remember that politicians have a lot of pride, what we call *ego*. To reach a high position, and to accept a lower job is ... very difficult for the ego, especially if you’re an American.’

Abi focused on Keely. ‘And how do you like this new man?’

‘Ooh,’ I let out, Abdi taking in the faces.

‘I work for the government, so I *don’t have* an opinion about my political paymasters,’ Keely explained.

‘He’s a political eunuch,’ I explained to Abdi, making his ambassador laugh.

Jimmy said with a grin, ‘If I was you, Abdi, I would avoid politics for many years to come.’ The Somalis took great interest in that statement, as did the others. ‘It is best for you to use your heart to defend the security of your nation, till that need has passed.’

Abdi, and the Somalis, got the message, people exchanging looks from under their eyebrows.

‘May I ask,’ the ambassador began, ‘about the farm land in Kenya that you *purchased* for us.’ He did not seem happy with the project.

‘Your land has a limited potential for food growing, now and in the future,’ Jimmy explained as our main courses were brought out. ‘If I use aid money to employ Kenyans, they get a benefit. You get the food, so you get a benefit, and your two countries become closer. Two birds, one stone.’

Abdi sat nodding. ‘The Ethiopians have tanks. Should we buy tanks?’

‘Yes, from the Chinese,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘No more than a hundred, they could defend Mogadishu if need be. And to pay for them, you could offer ores from your old mines in the north. I’m sure they have more potential that you realise, they just need experts to survey them.’

Han piped up with, ‘I am sure that my Government will assist with such surveys, at no cost.’

‘We are grateful,’ the senior Somali said towards Han. ‘Please communicate with our man here.’

‘I know him well,’ Han pointed out, and I wondered why he was not in on the dinner. Perhaps he was not important enough.

Jimmy asked the Somali leader about counter-terrorism.

‘We are happy to receive your people, and co-operate with the regional government agencies.’

Sykes put in, ‘We are building up a team with our American colleagues, and the Kenyans. They will work out of Nairobi for now, since we already have the structures in place, but will inform you of any insurgents.’

‘Of which there are many,’ Abdi noted. ‘We are a country of a thousand villages, with a thousand chiefs’

Jimmy said, ‘That will change when prosperity reaches the villages, assuming it is allowed to reach them – and not concentrated around Mogadishu. Jobs, and education, are your weapons of the future.’

Big Paul knocked, stepped in and handed Jimmy a fax, withdrawing quickly.

Jimmy scanned the detail. ‘Ah, it would seem that my Russian associates are interested in the modest Aluminium deposits in your country. If you are happy enough, they’ll test drill a few areas to see how extensive the deposit is.’

‘Would the Chinese not do that as well?’ Abdi puzzled.

Jimmy focused on him. ‘A girl does not get into bed with her first suitor!’ They laughed.

I said, ‘And in this country they try them *all* out first.’

After desert we stood in the third lounge with drinks, non-alcoholic for the Somalis.

Sykes and his Whitehall buddy cornered Jimmy. ‘Would we not wish to sell them some arms?’ Sykes nudged.

‘Two words come to mind, gentlemen.’ They blinked. ‘Bargain... basement. You’d not make anything, otherwise ... yes, of course I’d get you in there. The People’s Republic will throw a few tanks at them for cost price, less twenty percent. But let BP know that there is more black gold than ... anticipated. I just want it fished up slowly.’

The next morning we risked the rain and dressed our guests in green wax coats and hats, teaching them fly fishing in the ponds to start with, then the river. To say they looked a bit odd...

After lunch Jimmy took Abdi for a long walk around the grounds, protection following close by. That evening the

Ambassadors of Kenya, the DRC and Tanzania joined us, another meal, more cocktails, an informal meeting. A golf putting green appeared overnight, I saw it in the morning from my room, and everyone relaxed with a little limited-range golf. The cheeky sign in the grass said, "River View Golf Complex II".

Sykes and his colleague headed back, the Ambassadors having just been down for the evening. The Somalis enjoyed one more evening, trying the pool and saunas, proudly shown around the rose garden by Han and Jack. When it rained they found it fascinating, lifting their faces to the falling drops. We bid them farewell, promising to visit Mogadishu ... at some point.

From Russia with love

Jimmy had arranged for all five of our books to be translated into many languages, including Chinese and Russian, and ten thousand books in Russian had been forwarded to Yuri earlier in the year. He had been tasked with sending them on to Medical Universities around the country, but would also, no doubt, sit down and read them.

By time we arrived in Moscow in late October he had an idea: why don't we create a RF Moscow unit? We explained the red tape after landing, as he drove us along in a sumptuous limo from Domodedovo airport towards town. Flying in, I had thought: what a shit hole! Driving in, I thought: yep, a shit hole, nothing but white high-rise Stalinist blocks as far as the eye could see. How people got themselves home when drunk was a mystery to me, the blocks all looked the same.

The limo pulled into what looked like a run down apartment block on the outside, the inside highly decorated. The lift from the parking level appeared to be gold-plated, Yuri's apartment huge and expensively furnished, if not a little 1970s pimp in style. It seemed like he had taken over the entire top floor and had converted the old apartments into one large apartment, a dozen small suites available for him, his family and his guests.

That first afternoon Jimmy had requested a trip to the local teaching hospital, so after lunch we set off in the limo again. Crossing the river I glimpsed the famous Kremlin walls, which I was told meant Hill Fort – or defended hill, and that Red Square was nothing communist, but a play on words; red and beautiful sounding alike in Russian. It had been Beautiful Square before Stalin changed an inflection.

At the medical university we found the principal, eventually, passing a few doctors that looked like bread bakers in their tall white hats. Jimmy asked the principal if many of his students made use of the student flights scheme. They did. Jimmy then explained that he had both started it, and funded it all, shocking the man. To top that, he handed over a letter from a British medical equipment supplier, granting the university a million pounds credit for equipment. Not to be outdone by that, and typically Yuri, our Russian host explained that he would be buying a million pounds worth of the latest equipment and handing it over. I took a snap of the happy group, the principal needing a glass of water and a sit down.

That evening, after Yuri's cook provided us a bland meal, our hosts took us to an exclusive and expensive nightclub, thousands of dollars just to get in. Given a choice, the MacDonalds we passed on the way would have been better than this place; it offered idiot bodyguards on steroids, their idiot gangster bosses, and skinny hookers. Still, we settled at a table upstairs and tackled a starter, with champagne to wash it down.

Little more than fifteen minutes later a group passed, a look exchanged with Yuri, an insult inferred. Jimmy stood and made reference to the man's parentage as I counted eight bodyguards, all Jimmy's size, or bigger. Stood there, calm as ever, Jimmy insulted the guy's bodyguards, producing a wad from his jacket. A hundred thousand dollar bet was offered, that Jimmy could take down all of the bodyguards in sequence. People moved out of the way, tables being cleared by frightened guests, and I thought, "bloody hell". Jimmy placed the wad on a recently vacated table, taking off his jacket, leaving me stunned at what he was doing. I swallowed. The insult thrower nodded one of his men forwards.

Jimmy crippled the man in an instant, causing a second man to move, and knocked flying into a third. Two men, that were not

blocked by bodies on the floor, moved forwards, both struck down with effortless grace. The next man jumped over his buddies, meeting a flying kick as he landed and crumpled. Stepping over an unconscious man, Jimmy walked around to the remaining three men, the insult thrower now urging them on. They fared no better, some horrible noise produces as joints buckled and bones broke.

Jimmy retrieved the wad. He handed it to the man, saying, 'I apologise for that vulgar display. This is towards their medical bills and some new bodyguards. And why don't you join us for a drink.' Replacing his jacket, Jimmy sat, the crowds staring.

The insult thrower, still holding the wad, stepped over and sat as the club's staff attended the injured men, no concern for his bodyguards. After a few seconds staring at the side of Jimmy's head, he said, 'We have not been introduced.'

Yuri said, 'Marko, this is the famous Jimmy Silo from England.'

'British? You sound Russian.'

'He speaks many languages fluently,' Yuri proudly informed our guest. 'And he fights quite well too.'

'So I see.'

Jimmy dabbed his knuckles with a napkin. 'Fighting, is normally the last recourse of the intellectually challenged. I try and avoid such vulgar displays. That was rude, and I apologise.'

Irina did not seem put off, quite the opposite.

'You won the bet,' Marko pointed out. He handed back the wad. 'You English are strange.'

'What business are you in, Marko?' Jimmy asked, still attending his knuckles.

'Diamonds and gold.'

I hid a smile as Jimmy glanced at me.

'Interesting', Jimmy noted. 'I own all the mining rights to the Eastern Congo, I'm the Governor there.'

'You!' Marko just realised who he was sat next to, his face going through a wide range of emotions; shock, surprise, excitement and wonder. 'If I'd known –'

'You'd not have been insulting to my business associate here?' Jimmy posed.

'I ... apologise,' Marko forced out, as if it was not something he did very often.

Jimmy handed him a card. 'We'll have to talk about the Congo in detail at some point.'

'It's where you have the world's largest orphanage,' Marko noted.

'Yes, twenty thousand children,' Jimmy confirmed.

'You have business in Moscow?' Marko enquired, a glance toward Yuri.

'I'm going to open a medical rescue charity, I have them all around the world,' Jimmy explained.

Yuri said, 'You saw the rescuers at that quake in Turkey? They are all paid for by him, ten countries.'

'I saw it on the news, yes.'

'Well, Marko, let me explain how I do business. People get mining concessions in regions I control ... if they assist me with my medical charities.'

Both Marko, and Yuri, got the message as the manager put in an appearance, not a happy bunny at all. We retired to Yuri's apartment, Jimmy offering to protect Marko and making him laugh. Yuri accepted his unwelcome guest well enough, Marko using the phone to order a car and driver. We sat around the lounge and discussed the only topic of interest to the Russians, the Congo, Marko making his excuses an hour later. Jimmy had no choice but to retire at a normal human bedtime, with Irina, leaving me in my room with a paperback, and feeling oddly jealous for a change.

The next morning we set off to meet the Deputy Mayor of Moscow, our donation to the University making the papers and the TV news. Yuri had clout and pull, and Marko turning up added to the weight of force and influence. But it was not a difficult sale: could we start a team of rescuers here, and pay for it all, whilst Russia gets the credit? It was a done deal, Yuri taking the lead as principal member of the board of trustees for the charity to be set-up. Jimmy handed him a detailed document of structures and procedures, asking him to find a suitable airfield nearby. Marko knew of one, he flew out of it often in his helicopter; it all fell into place as if Jimmy knew how it would ahead of time.

Marko had business to attend to, not least some new hired help, and so Yuri and Irina took us to the airfield in the limo. The airfield was large, not too far outside of Moscow, and already

offered a modern and functional tower, hangars and a few other buildings, Yuri promising to get the lease soon. We suggested Yuri visit Mapley as an example on his next trip to the UK, and start the recruitment process in the meantime; doctors, nurses, fire brigade staff, ambulance staff and paramedics; they would all need basic English, to cope with Africa and other countries.

Driving back, Yuri took detailed notes, annotating the document Jimmy had given him, and I was sure he'd be off to a running start. We explained that the commissions he owed us should be used to pay for RF Moscow, some nine million pounds already. That shocked him more than Jimmy's vulgar fighting display. Was all of it to be used? Yes, kept in the charity for the long term.

They treated us to lunch near Red Square, followed by a tourist wander around the outside of the Kremlin under grey skies. At 3pm Jimmy said he had an appointment inside, Yuri puzzling that. We asked for a car at 5pm. Passing through the tourist entrance, and paying a few roubles, we walked up a ramp and ventured inside the walls. I was surprised by how many churches there were inside the Communist citadel, the whole thing seemed to consist of just churches. We passed a huge cannon, the largest ever built – at least the widest bore of any cannon, Jimmy playing at tour guide as if he had been here a hundred times before. Approaching a white and yellow office block he told a guard he was expected, and by whom. An official appeared within a few seconds, obviously stood waiting, and ushered us quickly inside. Along bland corridors we marched behind the official, into a warmer corridor and past four guards into a large office, four officials sat around a small coffee table, guards in suits stood like statues in far corners. Jimmy greeted the men as they stood, leaning and shaking the hand of the shorter man, the Deputy President Mikhail. Offered seats, we sat, tea and coffee offered.

'You look young,' Mikhail noted.

'My body has been genetically altered,' Jimmy responded. 'I do not age.'

They puzzled that, hard frowns taking hold.

'And you can predict the future with great accuracy,' Mikhail noted, seeming very cool and reserved.

‘No, I can remember my past, that will be your future. I’m a time traveller.’

The hard frowns became wide eyes as people sat up, looks exchanged.

Jimmy added, ‘The time machine was built by a consortium of Russian and Chinese companies, after the Americans began work on one of theirs,’ he lied. ‘In the year 2027. I was selected as the traveller.’

They sat staring, mouths open.

‘What ... what is your purpose?’ a man asked.

‘To help prevent World War Three, and to stop certain future American Presidents from making terrible mistakes.’

‘You are Russian?’

‘No, English.’

‘You speak with a Moscow accent.’

I said, ‘He speaks Chinese with a Beijing accent as well.’

‘And you?’ they asked.

‘Just an assistant. But I have been injected with his blood, so I can run a marathon in less than two hours.’

‘Injected?’ they puzzled.

Jimmy explained, ‘If I inject my blood into someone they take on super-human qualities, immune to all diseases known to man – and a few you have not yet discovered. If you get a few soldiers together, I will inject them so that you can study them. The Chinese are already doing this, so are other governments.’

‘Who else knows about this?’

‘British, the Americans and the Chinese Governments, representatives from each live at my house in Great Britain.’

‘The Americans know?’

‘They Americans know ... what I want them to know. The Chinese know more, they were the first government I contacted.’

‘How did you find the letters?’ I asked.

‘Very ... accurate and useful,’ they guardedly admitted.

Mikhail asked, ‘What is your mission remit?’

‘To help you and the Chinese build up, and to provide a buffer to future American aggression.’

‘You know when and where that aggression will take place?’ Mikhail pressed.

‘Yes,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘And when you are ready I will give you a route map of the next twenty years.’

Mikhail turned his head to one of his men. 'Cancel all my appointments today.' The man got up, heading towards the door. 'I would like this information now. If we sent you – a future Russian group - then you are working for us.'

Jimmy smiled. 'I was chosen, because in the future I am the head of the United Nations. I did not *work* ... for anyone.'

'UN Secretary General?' they puzzled.

'Yes, my friend. So do not assume that I follow orders from anyone. Now, you have black boards or white boards?'

'Upstairs,' a man said. They stood.

In a room upstairs we found both white boards and paper pads on easels, Jimmy grabbing four. I switched off and peered out off the window at the tourists as Jimmy gave the spiel for an hour, many questions asked, many points gone over. All in all, they were delighted with the way the Russian economy would unfold. Jimmy offered to work a deal through Yuri, whereby we gave him trades and he made money for the Russian Government, but discreetly. Jimmy explained that any large trades made by the Russians would be noticed by The West and countered. Secrecy was required, something that seemed to cheer them no end.

They then asked about future Russian leaders. Jimmy informed them with a grin that Mikhail would be President for eight years, then Prime Minister for another eight years, followed by returning to President for a third set of eight years. I think I saw the little guy actually grow an inch. Jimmy explained about the "M" Group, the secret one, and the very secret one, a representative asked for at the house and readily agreed to. They offered us a large batch of bodyguards, but we resisted, it would draw attention. We finally accepted two men. They would not let us leave without giving blood to four perplexed, and hesitant guards.

We walked out like tourists, our two men shadowing us to the car only. Yuri met us a 5pm as scheduled, delicately pushy about our mysterious meeting. We explained that we had business with the Government concerning arms sales to Somalia. That deflected Yuri, who suggested such things were dangerous. If only he knew. The bodyguards rang Yuri's bell and explained who and what they were about, Jimmy asking the two men to sit in the lounge and read the papers as we discussed Rescue Force with Yuri.

Explaining some urgent business, we packed and headed to the airport, tickets booked for us that day and waiting at the airport. We touched down at Gatwick around 1am.

Two day's later a middle-aged Russian diplomat named Paul turned up. We named him Ivan so that no one would be mixed up, and he greeted the "M" Group houseguests. As anticipated, the Russian President-to-be took a seat on the board of the Rescue Force charity. It was almost as if we had planned it that way.

With Jimmy out of the house, a few days later, we got a fax from the nice man in the White House, the good gentleman in his final year. It offered 55 ex-National Guard Hueys if we wanted them, twelve Cobras. We'd have to pay a scraping fee so that it did not look suspicious, just a couple of million. I faxed back straight away and said yes, followed by a chat to the Kenyan at the house, letting him know that the Kenyan Army would take delivery and we'd pay.

I rang Coup. 'How much space we got for more helicopters?'

'Fuck all, they're all back from Somali.'

'OK, how about the base near Mombassa?'

'Loads of space, get ten or twenty in there.'

'I see. Right. You know the far side of the Rifles helo base, what's there?'

'Nothing but a wasteland used for training.'

'Build another helo compound, room for ... oh ... fifty or sixty helicopters.'

'Fifty or sixty? You mad?'

'We only need them there in storage. We're going to see which one's are best, send them off around the world for other units to use. You'll only keep a few if you want them.'

'Oh. What are they?'

'Fifty Hueys and another dozen Cobras.'

'Easy enough to stick a fence up, we've still got a shit load of barbed wire,' Coup reported.

'Do it, they'll take eight weeks to reach you. But I want a small hangar and workshop, some concrete.'

'How was Moscow?' Coup asked.

'We've started a unit there, airfield outside of Moscow.'

'They be coming down here for basic training?'

‘Yep, but they speak English. All OK there?’

‘More nationalities than you could poke a stick at. We got twenty from Ghana.’

‘Ah, good, I wondered about them. They any good?’

‘Yeah, good bunch. We’ve got a cricket competition and football programme. But we had to clear the pitch of mines.’

‘Mines?’

‘Yeah, someone put a few practise mines around the football pitch.’

I laughed. ‘You built another bar I hear?’

‘Back of the senior staff quarters, segregate the drunken senior staff from the drunken junior staff. Jimmy insisted that we not be drunk in front of new recruits.’

‘Damn right.’

‘Got a problem with the Indonesians as well, they don’t approve of the drinking, so we have a non-alcoholic bar for them. Some of the Africans are devout Christians and don’t like it either.’

‘Be less of a bunch of piss-heads then,’ I suggested.

‘Can’t take out all of the fun with being here. Still, we keep them so tired they’re in bed early!’

When Jimmy returned I showed him the fax. He informed me, ‘I’ve ordered sixty extra fuel tanks. Puts the range to almost six hundred miles.’

‘Six hundred? Shit. But we lose space and bodies with those tanks.’

‘Not really, we don’t normally have more than four or five in the back, they can take ten or twelve. Oh, order up winches for them all pronto, we’ll need them for an op’ in February.’

Let’s party like it’s 1999

TBA...

Helicopter hops

The new batch of Hueys arrived at Mombassa port in January. When asked, I confirmed with Coup that there was no hurry for them to be made ready. An hour later Jimmy informed me there would be a mass deployment, so I rang Coup back and told there was now a need for them – and could he get a move on; extra fuel tanks and winches as with our other Hueys.

At about the same time a new training module was created, that of boat handling, people being sent off to a lake Turkana in groups of ten. They were pushed through an intensive five-day boat course, rescuing people out of the water, from muddy banks and off of waterlogged trees. Everyone was required to maintain the boat's engine in turn, to re-fuel it and change oil, and swim for people whilst fully clothed; winching people out of the water was practiced in parallel by the Huey pilots - it made a change from the desert!

When six of the new Huey's had been checked over, test flown by Hal and others, they were left in their green colours and flown down to Mombassa base, Kenyan pilots awaiting them. Four more went to RF Tanzania, four to the Rifles Tanzania, pilots having been selected and cross-trained many months earlier. Ten Hueys were sent to Forward Base and scheduled to be used for internal flights by our facilitators there, as well as to be available for use by the Congo Rifles. But, for now they would be flown by contract pilots, the pilots a hardy bunch living around Africa, many of them former mercenaries.

Six of the new Cobras had been checked out by our pilots and flown down to the Tanzanian Rifles base south of Kigoma, where Jimmy said they would be needed in the near future. Oddly enough, we got a request from the Rwandan Government as to why there was a "militarisation of the region", Jimmy suggesting that they would creep across the border again. Mac arranged for ten of the new Hueys to be painted white, five shipped off to Australia, five to Sumatra. We took on board six more for Mawlini, just enough pilots amongst the staff; five of our British lads, basic rescuers, had keenly learnt to fly. All in, Mawlini offered more than twenty operational RF Hueys.

When February came around, Jimmy explained the Mozambique floods that would be. We made secret plans. Unaware of those plans, Bob Davies asked the UN for as many Mi8s they could muster for a combined exercise, and for us to hire them for the exercise – their Russian pilots included. And the first batch of Russian RF trainees were now gladly avoiding the Moscow chill and enjoying the pools and bars at Mawlini. To make sure that they were up to speed for Mozambique, Jimmy had altered their training programme so that mine clearance would be last, not first. Eight of them were qualified Mi8 pilots, hired for their specific flying qualifications, two of those familiar with Hueys.

Exercise “Desert Wind” was scheduled for February 10th at Mawlini, the Australians joining in since they had many Huey pilots to call upon. RF Tanzania and RF DRC sent up sixty people in total, housed in tents when they arrived on the 9th, rain now pelting Mozambique more than a thousand miles to the south.

Arriving back in Mawlini, the new lecture hall had impressed me, seats for two hundred at a push, and air-conditioned; I thought back to my days at Kingston Polytechnic. A new barrack block had also been thrown up to cope with the foreign trainees, ten to a room, and thirty rooms in a long two-storey block. We called all the senior staff and team leaders together in the lecture hall at 9am the next morning, warmly greeting the new Russian participants.

‘OK, boys and girls, fools and heroes,’ Jimmy began. ‘Exercise Desert Wind is a helicopter hop exercise. The scenario is this: an area needs assistance, but is just out of range of our helicopters from whatever forward base we are using to assemble. So, fuel trucks – and navigation – are key. We’ll make use of the old airfield northwest for a drop-and-search, but to get there no Huey will be allowed more than a quarter tank. That’s ... a *quarter* tank. And to get there you will first need to re-fuel at four designated rendezvous sites right in the middle of nowhere, some in Kenya, some in Somalia. He drew on the board the square route, annotating the grid co-ordinates of the re-fuel points. People took notes as he read them out.

‘You *must* spend the night at the second hop, advancing the next day to the third, then the rescue itself, back to the third hop

for the night and a reverse route out. That's three days. Now, the senior staff will need to plan this with many things in mind. First, how to move twenty something helicopters without colliding and killing anyone.' He let them think about it. 'Second, how to schedule, land and refuel a fleet of helicopters efficiently, how to group by squadron, communication protocols, call signs. You have till the morning. Mac, over to you.'

We left them to it, touring the Rifles base with Big Paul. The compound bustled, nearly all the soldiers back from Somalia, the main deployment for them now being the Congo, two month postings. At any one time a third of them were in the Congo, some back on the border, some training at Mombassa base. Many now proudly sported parachute wings on their arms, others displaying marksman's badges, some displaying their qualification as a medic. Driving through, we toured the helicopter compound, two long lines of Cobras sat doing very little. Beyond them we entered the storage area, twenty aircraft under dusty bed sheets, two being worked on.

'More choppers than pilots,' Big Paul helpfully noted.

Back at the rooftop bar, Jimmy and I sat and enjoyed cold beers under Fanta shades, a slightly cooling breeze crossing the roof, Big Paul off for jaunt in a Huey with a Kenyan pilot co-seat.

'When do we deploy?' I asked, not meaning the exercise.

'After the exercise,' Jimmy responded. 'And then by debate, or it'll seem odd – getting an emergency every time we have a exercise.'

After a leisurely bite to eat we re-entered the lecture hall, Hal and Hacker taking a lead role in the proceedings. Hal was, after all, the most experienced pilot. On the board he had drawn proposed helo formations.

'OK,' Mac said to the group. 'Groups of four at most, staggered side by side with the two on the right twenty feet higher, yes?' Everyone was in agreement. 'The distance between the groups to be no less than half a mile. OK, refuelling times?'

We listened for an hour, everyone getting a one hour lunch break, Hal and Hacker invited to join us.

'Tough scenario?' I asked Hal.

‘Not really, did lots of hops in Vietnam,’ Hal responded. ‘The trick is finding the tanker - and not running out of gas. But if you get lost, the sequence is disrupted for the guys behind you.’

At 4pm they presented us their plan, in detail, Jimmy giving the go-ahead for a dawn lift-off. The tankers were sent out, escorted by the Rifles. All was set. That evening we called Rudd and asked him to find any spare fuel tankers he could in Mozambique and South Africa, but to keep it quiet, notifying only us.

At dawn the helicopters lifted off in staggered formations, heading southeast into Somalia for the first refuelling point, each helicopter packed with rescuers grouped by nationality. If the UN staff on the base were not already awake, they were now; bleary eyed people peering out of windows of the UN hotel and cursing. With the last group disappearing into the distance, four Mi8s, we ambled down to the tower. Sitting out of the way, we listened in to the radio chatter as the day warmed up. The first group of four refuelled on time, the second a few minutes behind schedule. The third group got a little lost and overshot the tankers, turning to find it, eight minutes late.

The last group of four Hueys got a shock, not least for one of the Australian pilots; he landed on a mine. It was an anti-personnel mine, just smashing his foot-well glass, but he could not risk proceeding. Jimmy grabbed the radio and ordered the helicopter abandoned, the crews to double up in the remaining three Hueys or the trailing Mi8s. They flew on without it, the Rifles babysitting. The Mi2s landed at the same site, but with some trepidation. Refuelled without incident, they re-joined the exercise.

They reached the second refuelling point just before sundown, the helicopters grouped on the ground, rescuers and crews eating cold rations and sleeping in the desert, gossiping about the Huey that had landed on a mine; at least it hadn’t been Dunnaw piloting. In the grey dawn light they checked their aircraft, lifting off in tightly controlled sequences, cautious because of the dust storms created by preceding aircraft. The old airfield was reached in an hour, the rescuers going to work and searching the ruins, something of overkill with the numbers deployed; the sight of twenty white helicopters on the ground quite amazing – I flew over them in a Cessna. At 3pm a whistle blew, people re-

grouping, whether they had searched all the buildings or not. Again in their tight sequences, they lifted off and headed east. At 4pm the next day the last group flew back in to Mawlini, one bird short; it had set down near the border with a fault. After a few well-earned cold drinks, the senior staff and team leaders met us in the lecture room.

Jimmy asked, 'So who landed on a mine?' The Australian pilot raised an arm, being jeered. 'Not related to Dunnow, are you?'

Jimmy made observations, took comments from Hal and Hacker, listened patiently to the Russian pilots and senior staff, then opened the floor to a general discussion. 'Overall, I'm happy. Moving that many helicopters is not easy, and I doubt we would ever do such a thing for real. Getting the helicopters to an earthquake zone is tricky, and lengthy. But we will, in the future, put Hueys in the backs of Antonovs.' The gang were thanked, and dismissed.

The next day, as anticipated, a senior UN official came and found Mac, Mac sending him to us on the rooftop bar. We shook his hand, getting him a beer.

'How's Bob Davies doing?' he asked.

'Fine, even taking a few steps with the physio in the gym,' Jimmy replied.

'Oh, excellent. And he's got a job at the palace'.

'Palace?' I queried. 'You mean ... our little house?'

'Not so little, I've seen the photos. Anyway, we were wondering if you'd help out in Mozambique.'

'Mozambique?' I repeated. 'No wars or earthquakes *there*.'

'But major floods, and getting worse every day. Some main hospitals swamped.'

'What do you need?' Jimmy asked.

'Doctors and nurses, triage tent - the hospital is a write-off in Beira. Some helicopters would be nice, you've got four of our usual Mi8s here.'

'Of course,' Jimmy acknowledged. 'But if we're going to do this, then let's do it well. Could you brief the team on the situation there?'

'Sure.'

We stood. Jimmy grabbed the bar phone, calling Coup. 'Coup, I want an emergency meeting of all senior staff in the

lecture room in ten minutes, get the Hercules and Dash ready for a deployment.'

We listened to our own tannoy message go out as we walked down the stairs.

After the briefing by the UN, Jimmy took the floor. 'Opinions, people?'

Doc Graham said, 'It's a three point operation. First, a replacement primary care scenario – we replace the flooded hospital. Then you've got people up on their roofs, that's helicopter and boat rescue. Then the aftercare with dysentery, so medical teams remain.'

Hal waved a hand. 'In case anyone hasn't looked at a map lately – it's a fucking long way off for a helicopter.'

Jimmy suggested, 'The Mi8s could make it in a few days, we'll take those.'

One of Coup's assistants stepped in. 'Sorry to disturb you, Jimmy, but the Mozambique authorities have made a *formal* application to the Kenyan Government for assistance.'

'And, no doubt, the Government volunteered us,' Jimmy noted. 'OK, boys and girls, I want a plan on that board in thirty minutes, a plan for a full mobilisation of all African units, plus the Rifles from here and Tanzania. We'll need refuelling trucks in Southern Tanzania and in Mozambique, I'll get that sorted.'

Hal said, 'We going to fly down there – in the Hueys? It's twelve hundred miles.'

'Sixteen hundred, actually,' Jimmy corrected him. 'With the extra fuel tanks that's three hops, four to be prudent – two hops a day, no night flying.'

'Assuming no mechanical faults,' Hal pointed out. 'They're old ladies.'

'We'll have you with us, so what can go wrong, eh? I hear you're good with old ladies.' People laughed at Hal. 'Go to work, people.'

In Coup's office we called the house and notified Bob Davies of the situation, asking him to talk to the Mozambique authorities, permissions for us and the Rifles – which were implied in their request, the same of the Tanzanians. Calling Rudd, we discovered he could hire nine fuel trucks, enough for an operation inside Mozambique. We told him to arrange plenty of fuel at Mombassa field, at Dar Es Salaam airport, and inside

Mozambique at Beira airport, we'd base the helicopters there. The senior officer of the Rifles was duly contacted, told to have all available – and trained - men ready to move in the hour, all jeeps and trucks to be made ready, all helicopters. He was also told him that no weapons other than pistols should be carried, and then just by NCOs and officers; this was a mercy mission, we did not want Mozambique to think they were being invaded.

Back in the lecture hall, half an hour later, Jimmy asked, 'Well?'

'Got a plan,' Mac confidently suggested. 'Refuel at Mombassa field, then in Tanzania at Das Es Salaam, then southern Tanzania -'

'Rudd's got tankers on their way now,' Jimmy said.

'Rest go by jeep, it'll take two days straight, triage tent by Hercules,' Mac explained.

Jimmy hesitated. 'Is this helicopter hop do-able, or are we being ambitious?'

The gang glanced at each other. Hal said, 'If the fuel is waiting – and no hop greater than four hundred miles - then yeah, it's doable. We got spares on the birds, and I'll stuff my bird with extras.'

Jimmy slowly nodded. 'OK. I'll take a Huey, Paul another, Big Paul a third – less experienced pilots left seat. Mombassa field will fit everyone, so that's the first marshalling point. Have two members of the Rifles in each jeep. OK people, mobilise and deploy!'

As we walked out, the tanoy sounded again. 'All Rescue Force staff, prepare for deployment to Mozambique, this is not a drill.'

I signed the logbook and grabbed RF012, an Australian pilot left seat, three of his team in the back sitting amongst plastic packs of emergency rations. Assigned as lead aircraft for group One, I checked my little squadron, reminded them of take-off sequence, and pulled back on the cyclical control. Soon over parched brown dirt, I smiled widely, back in the seat and on an operation. 'OK, boys and girls, your pilot today is Crazy Paul. And you can be sure that if you're in a chopper with me ... nothing will happen, it'll be a smooth ride.'

My co-pilot glanced at me. 'We read the fucking books, mate.'

I glanced over my shoulder at the team, smiling, then peered over my right shoulder, finding my number two fifty yards back and twenty feet higher. It was if they had practised it. 'Don't you just love this; mucking about in helicopters, off on missions. This is what gives me a hard-on, not making money or shagging beautiful girls!'

My co-pilot said, 'I'd take some of the money and celebrity babes, mate.'

'Uh ... excuse me, there are ladies in the back,' came a voice.

'Love, if you passed Rescue Force basic training - you're no lady,' I pointed out, her colleagues laughing.

We spotted the highway after fifteen minutes and followed it south towards Mombassa, passing Tubby's favourite café and buzzing it at low level. A long four hours after lifting off I called the field's tower, announcing the arrival of thirty-two helicopters. The tower clarified the message: yep, thirty-two helicopters inbound, so clear all other traffic please.

I put down on the grass that edged the runway, the far left end of the field, already viewing the fuel truck driving out. Greeting the tanker driver, I found our credit was good. As I stood on the edge of the runway with the Australians, the second and third groups appeared, soon a long line of white Hueys edging the runway, opposite them four white UN Mi8's, eight green Army Hueys. And that was just so far.

Cosy drove out to me, tooting. 'All OK, Paul?'

'Pay the fuel tanker guy, will you,' I said, as a cameraman clambered out of the car.

'We have an account, no need.' Cosy thumbed behind himself. 'And this guys wants to come with you, Rudd organised it.'

'Yeah? Oh, OK. While you're here, see if you can rustle up thirty fuel cans.'

Cosy drove off, soon back with five fuel cans. The tanker guy filled them, and I directed each of my team's to have a can in the back. Just in case. We sat and waited for the last helicopter to be fuelled, finally winding up the rotors and diligently performing our checks. All was in order.

'Group One, and all helicopters, standby. Tower, this is Romeo Foxtrot Twelve, taking off. How's the pattern over?'

'Traffic north, low and slow, south is clear, over.'

We were soon passing over River View, a deliberate small detour, many fond memories surfacing and making me smile. 'That's the hotel and golf complex we own.'

The Australians had not visited, and peered down. As they did so, a young lady doctor in the shallow surf turned around and looked up, a hand over her eyes. She had read the books, conveniently finding them in her room. Now she realised that she was looking at the physical embodiment of the characters in those books, and took a keen interest with many others on the beach. As she stood there, a line of white helicopters a mile long thundered past. She counted at least thirty, wondering where they were off to. A thought had entered her mind, a thought about the future.

Dar Es Salaam International Airport sat on the western edge of the city, but I did not set a course, I followed the coast south as it curved around to the east, not wanting to fly out over the sea, which would have been the shortest route. This next leg of navigation would not be hard; sea on the left, land on the right - even Big Paul could cope with that. We had enough daylight to reach the city, but even if we lost the sun the city lights would be a hell of a beacon. As it turned out, the sun presented us with a huge red navigational aid, a beautiful sunset; so long as it was in my three o'clock position I was on course. I contacted the Tanzanian tower ten miles out, my co-pilot having checked their frequency first. We identified ourselves as Rescue Force Kenya, and they were expecting us, just not thirty of us. We requested permission to land on the grass. Since they had no more flights due till the morning that was not a problem - just highly unusual.

We touched down in a line facing the tower, the press waiting in the lounges to film us in the dying light. I heard Jimmy contact the tower, putting down to our right, Big Paul just following him in without tower contact. Hell, they could see us. Everyone disembarked for the refuelling, the next leg scheduled for dawn. Lines of white uniforms converged on the arrivals lounge, the toilets queued for, the small shop doing brisk trade as the press were let through. Airport officials welcomed us, no doubt Rudd's work, or maybe Bob Davies. And my cameraman, he sat with small groups getting personal perspectives.

Stepping away from the throng, I phoned the house. 'Bob awake?' I asked Ricky.

‘Yeah, they’ll all in there mucking out.’ He put me through.

‘Bob? Got the next refuelling position?’

He read out the co-ordinates. I double checked them, got an area name, Lindi, and ground description, checking the map I had stuffed into my pocket. This next leg would again be simple: down the coast till you either see the airfield, or run out of fuel. I offered to give Jimmy the detail, but he just stared at me; of course he knew where it was. I handed the detail to the other pilots, explaining that Jimmy would take the lead in the morning.

People lay on hard floors, or the seats, and settled in, packs opened and food retrieved, the arrivals hall now full. Jimmy grabbed the airport manager and rustled up some food, a few pillows and blankets for the ladies. The café upstairs enjoyed an hour of brisk trade, people allowed up in modest groups. At eleven o’clock Jimmy ordered quiet, everyone resting ready for the morning. Not trusting the fuel tanker driver, I sat in each Huey in turn and switched the power on long enough to read the fuel gauges. Good job I did, one had been missed. I found the driver and sent the man back to it, the man protesting the hour.

At dawn we issued chocolate and glucose tablets to the pilots, fetching coffees from a vending machine, as well as from the pilots lounge. People stretched their aching backs, whinged, had a pee, then splashed cold water on their faces. Rescue Force was awake, but teeth had not been brushed. Yawning, everyone reclaimed their transport as it started to rain.

With rotors turning, Jimmy used the radio to order the birds up in sequence, left to right, following his group. I waited my turn, thanking the tower as a courtesy as I passed city houses below, our resident cameraman filming out of an open door. I caught up to Jimmy’s group, a visual on their lights, and eased back, counting off my team; three little chicks were behind mother hen as the weather became suitable for only ducks, a little turbulent for the people in the rear. Flying through the rain was not something I had experienced since basic training in the UK, dozens of water drops now racing each other down the windscreen, a little condensation collecting on the inside. Three hours later, swigging water from a bottle, I checked the fuel. We should hit the isolated airfield in thirty minutes. And thirty minutes later my little chicks were radioing their navigational concerns.

Jimmy came on. 'Stop whinging, we've had a head wind, so we're late. Fifteen miles out.' Jimmy came back on a few minutes later. 'Follow my lead, land right to left in sequence. Big Paul, left is the arm with the watch on.'

We laughed as a curse came back over the airways, soon following the helicopters in front of us down. Landings were bouncy, a bit of a cross wind, but everyone hit the deck in one piece. A hell of a rainstorm moved over us, no one getting out as the poor tanker driver struggled to refuel us for the next leg. If the chopper burst into flames we'd jump out, we agreed.

I called Bob Davies on the sat phone as we waited. 'You awake?'

'Yeah, got fuck all sleep. Your next leg is just about four hundred and eighty miles.' He gave me the co-ordinates. 'You could save time and fuel by a direct course, this'll keep you on the coast.'

'The weather's terrible, so a coastal route is better for navigation if it gets furry out there. There's a cyclone ahead of us, and I don't want to put down in the jungle.'

'Weather should clear for a day or two, then get worse.' I radioed the next leg to the group, confirming it with Jimmy: Angoche airfield.

It took an hour to refuel everyone, a few pilots complaining of less than full tanks. Still, they had enough. With the rain easing off Jimmy ordered a review, anyone with any mechanical faults? None came in, so he lifted off and headed southwest along the coast. Four hours later we touched down at a large, yet seldom used airfield, two white UN Antonovs sat on the apron. Unable to contact the tower, if it was manned at all, we set down wherever we liked, two fuel trucks visible. They wanted cash, twelve thousand dollars, which Jimmy handed over.

The guy in charge of the airfield came out and complained at length. We said we were UN medics heading to the floods, and would he kindly fuck off. The group was refuelled before he returned, and we left without again talking to the tower, the next leg the final hop to Beira airport and our base of operations. As we again followed the coast, the flooding became apparent, large areas of water appearing blue from the sky reflecting off them, some areas flooded with brown water. I glimpsed people on their roofs, crowds huddled on stretches of road above the flood level.

Beira airport contacted us as we approached in the fading light, a familiar voice, one of ours. Approaching, I could see the town under water, the angry river creating a huge brown plume in the blue ocean. The airport was above water, but only just, surrounded by flooded fields. I clocked our Hercules and Dash on the brightly light apron, a white UN Antonov on the runway; it was home from home, the advance party already in residence.

The small terminal building bustled with white jackets and UN staff. I followed Jimmy, and he followed signs on the walls towards “RFHQ”, finding Doc Graham and Doc Hoskins buried under maps and paperwork.

‘Made it then,’ Doc Hoskins quipped.

‘How’s the water level?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Rising all the time,’ they informed us. ‘And a storm on its way.’

‘Where’s the triage tent?’ I asked.

‘Just outside, out the front. Local hospital is suitable only for ducks,’ Doc Graham informed us. He straightened. ‘Need those birds off at dawn, lots of villages cut off.’

Jimmy nodded. ‘What’s the fuel situation?’

‘Not great, some tankers made it through. You may need to fly sixty miles just to refuel.’

‘No big deal,’ I said. ‘We can take fuel cans and bring them back. Or Send an Mi8 on a fuel run.’

‘Vehicle convoy?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Forty miles away, and not getting any closer,’ Doc Graham explained. ‘As soon as they advance a mile they find people to treat. They’ve split into four groups and they’re doing what they can, the Rifles with them. One group is a hundred and twenty miles away.’

‘It’s all part of the same effort,’ Jimmy said with a shrug. ‘What’s it like between here and Moputu?’

‘A hundred mile lake. No good unless you’re flying.’

Doc Hoskins asked, ‘Your people flying with life preservers?’

‘Nope,’ I responded.

‘Might be an idea, it’s deep out there.’

‘Storage bins,’ Jimmy reminded me.

‘Ah, yes.’ I faced Hoskins. ‘Little life preservers in the storage bins, I’ll mention it to the troops.’

Doc Graham said, 'We've taken over a hangar for dossing down, not comfortable, but some space here upstairs as well. Have a look.'

Jimmy nodded, 'First, give me dispositions and stores.'

It took twenty minutes to get the full picture, a few moves suggested. With the light fading quickly, and the sky overcast, there was little we could do. We walked around to the hangar, finding tents erected inside. Ratchet and Spanner walked out, waving.

'Isn't it bad luck to raise a tent indoors?' I quipped.

A medic said, 'They're designed for deserts, not swamps. Outside you get soaked.'

We grabbed bunks, dumping down the bags we had brought with us. The gang offered us folding chairs around a gas heater, tins of meat handed to us, coffees without milk or sugar. Through the drizzle I retrieved four emergency packs from my helicopter, plonking them down to a sedate cheer from the happy campers, not least the provision of extra toilet paper. Others copied my actions, soon all the packs pinched. They told us stories of the Hercules flight, and yesterday's triage set-up; a line of injured a hundred yards long, three babies delivered. As we sat there in our damp clothes, lorries and jeeps were directed in so that they blocked the rain and wind at the mouth of the hangar, some people choosing to sleep in the backs of the trucks in their teams.

Half an hour later I clambered into the back of a truck full of Australians. With the flap down and a small gas fire going it was warm and cosy, the Aussies in high spirits.

'That flight some kinda record?' they asked.

'Probably,' I said. 'Pushing the old Hueys a bit. They'll cool their old bones tonight, have a few problems in the morning.'

After tea, and what passed for toast, I slipped back out into the colder hangar air. In the larger ten I found Jimmy, Hal, Hacker and a few other pilots, a small heater going and throwing a dull yellow glow around the tent. 'Cosy in those lorries.'

'They'll set fire to the bloody things,' Hal suggested. 'What's for the morning?'

Jimmy said, 'We'll split sectors, then random searches for the stranded and injured, but you'll have to refuel sixty miles up the coast, then back here.'

‘It’s never easy, is it?’ Hal whinged.

‘This is Rescue Force,’ Hacker said. ‘We go where sane people wouldn’t dare. That’s what Paul told me when he recruited me.’

‘He wasn’t wrong,’ Hal agreed.

Jimmy and I grabbed camp beds around midnight, both a little tired from the flight, but mostly a bit run down for a lack of decent protein. At 4am we were awake, looks exchanged through the dark. We slipped out quietly, walking over to the terminal building in the dark. Stepping softly, so as to not wake anyone, we pinched a few tins and sat spooning out the corned beef. Feeling better, we walked down to the large triage tent, noticing lights on inside. A Kenyan nurse greeted us with a smile, a doctor face down at his desk and snoring. A Tanzania nurse made us tea, this time with milk and sugar, and we sat quietly surrounded by thirty injured people, all of them sleeping soundly.

Inside the next tent we had a nose, greeting another nurse, some fifty people laying on camp beds. At the airport gates we greeted members of the Kenyan Rifles in the grey pre-dawn gloom, two rather sorry looking Mozambique police officers acknowledged. Staring through the gates, I could see dozens of plastic make-do shelters along the road, floodwater visible beyond them. Walking away from the direction of our hangar, we happened across the Kenyan Rifles tent, greeting the sentry and ducking in. Half of the lads were awake, sat around a heater, and Jimmy waved them down when they stood. Sitting, we accepted tea and tinned meat, soon chatting quietly. We were still there as the dawn light peeped through the tent flaps, the NCO getting his men ready for their duty shift.

On the apron, we figured we’d use the Hueys as alarm clocks. In our respective Hueys we powered up, ran through the checks and turned the rotors. After winding down, I headed into the hangar to find my crew. Lifting the flaps on the lorry, I found two awake, the rest still slumbering. ‘Let’s be having you, you lazy bunch of Kiwis!’

‘Kiwis? There’s no need to be rude, mate.’

With my crew cursing under their breath at no one in particular, and everything in general, I kicked up Doc Graham, pinching a map. Sat studying it, I chose an area I thought would

need our attention, a small island, a river on either of side it. I grabbed a pilot for left seat and a winch operator, explaining that was all I needed – more space in the back for trapped people. Waking the airfield, I pulled up to forty feet and ordered the winch down and back up. It worked. I spun the tail, nosed down and headed off southwest at speed.

Five minutes later I said, ‘Navigation will be interesting, there’re no fucking features, just water!’

‘If we get lost, hit the coast and back up, it’s the only way.’

He had hardly finished the words when we both noticed someone waving.

‘Winch ready, start lowering now!’ I brought the bird to a hover forty feet above the isolated shack, a man and a child stranded, but not injured.

Now with our guests on board, the winch operator wrapped our first two locals in blankets. I turned one-eighty and dropped them in the town, a quick dust off. Back on the same heading we passed their shack and pressed on over turbulent brown water. On a patch of exposed ground we spotted eight people; since three were kids I figured I’d risk the numbers. With no way of telling them to move over, I buffeted them into the water, waving them forwards once my skids hit something solid. As they boarded I noticed cuts and open wounds, some of the men in a bad way. With the doors closed I pulled back, nosing forwards and skimming the water as I gained speed, finally pulling up and climbing – a heavy take-off. A reciprocal course was selected.

‘Romeo Foxtrot twelve to tower. Anyone on?’

‘Receiving you, Paul.’

‘Inbound with half a dozen injured. Get me some medics on the apron. Out.’

Approaching the airfield, we passed three Hueys on our left heading off, rude messages exchanged about the ungodly hour. I touched down smoothly and quickly, my passengers assisted out by waiting teams. With the doors closed I lifted up again, only then informing the tower I was departing. I made eight trips that day, bringing back more than forty injured. At 3pm I took a break, letting my co-pilot take right seat and fly the Huey out alone to the refuelling point and back. In the commanders office I found Jimmy sat with the senior staff.

‘Well?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Eight trips, forty odd injured or stranded. Couple winched up.’

‘I lost one off the winch,’ Jimmy informed me, his head lowered.

‘Lost ... one?’

‘Woman. She seemed to be in the harness well enough, but slipped out, into the river and under. No sign.’

‘Christ.’

‘For her kids, my co-pilot hovered, and I operated the winch as the guy in the back went down. Got her three kids, but not her.’

‘It happens,’ I offered. ‘I didn’t send a man down when I fetched mine up. Sometimes I lifted two people at the same time.’

‘Big Paul took down a power line,’ Jimmy mentioned. ‘No power at the time, so he was lucky, his bird OK.’

‘Any other incidents?’ I probed.

Doc Graham said, ‘Got a bird down at the refuel trucks, gearbox they reckon. Hal’s flown out there. We’ve got more tents coming in, two hundred injured a day here.’

‘What about the hospital?’ I asked. ‘Upstairs?’

‘That’s fine, hundred patients in it,’ Doc Graham explained. ‘But no water or electricity. We’ve got nurses down there now, can’t move some of the injured out.’

The sound of heavy helicopters caused me to peer out of the window, four Mi8s slinging four of our jeeps. ‘That’s handy, the Mi8s bringing in four jeeps.’

‘We’ll get around the town with them,’ Doc Graham suggested.

I spent that evening wandering around the troops and keeping spirits up. In one tent I found Big Paul and a team bonding around a heater, sitting for ten minutes and cracking jokes. The Aussies made me tea, but I resisted the toast this time, the unwelcome sound of the rain pelting the canvass roof as we sat there. The weather got worse as the hours passed, the wind picking up, even inside the hangar. With no let up, and concerned about some of the tents, I grabbed a jacket and cap and headed around to the Rifles. They had used concrete blocks to weigh down the edges of their own tent. Now, under my direction, we performed the same exercise on the triage and

recovery tents, and none too soon. It was difficult to see in the dark, and the rain was now coming in sideways. Inside the tent I assured the nurses that it would hold, some of the injured frightened by the storm. With the tents still flapping, I grabbed two jeeps and parked them alongside tents, directly on top of the concrete blocks, the Rifles moving a lorry to the tent flaps, affording the entrance plenty of protection from the wind and rain. Before I left I ordered four of the Rifles to remain inside the tent and keep an eye on it.

In the hangar, conditions were not good for the staff, a chill moist wind making everything damp, a layer of water over the concrete floor. I found Jimmy and the others in the command tent. 'Rough out there.'

'Not much better in here,' Hal complained.

'Triage tent OK?' Jimmy asked.

'I parked jeeps on the side flaps, lorry at the door, four Rifles inside.'

Hal tapped water with his foot. 'Are we sinking?'

Jimmy dabbed a finger into the water and tasted it. 'Sea water. So ... yeah, we're sinking.'

I grabbed a large torch and fought my way around to the rear of the hangar, bent double in the wind whilst trying to shine the torch towards the nearby coastline. I saw nothing but water as far as I could penetrate the gloom with the torch. Back inside, I said, 'Tides in. Right up to the back door.' I lay on a camp bed with wet boots. 'If it reaches my arse, I'm moving into the tower.'

Before dawn I ventured out, no one else in a hurry to make that journey, finding a centimetre of water across the airfield, and, more importantly, the runway. 'That should make landing interesting,' I said to myself, heading to the tower with my head down against the rain. In the tower I discovered that our Hercules was inbound, an hour away. 'Do they know?' I asked our controller.

'It's patchy, not deep,' the controller said. 'I drove down it.' I stared at him. 'We need the supplies.'

'We need the Hercules not skidding off the fucking runway as well!'

'Well ... we can divert if you want. But I'd say they can do it.'

'Well then, let's get the kettle on and see, shall we?'

The dawn light revealed an overcast sky, a cloud ceiling of little more than a thousand feet, a nifty crosswind. When our Hercules finally made contact I took the radio. 'Inbound Hercules, this is Paul Holton at the tower. Please be advised, we have a twenty-knot crosswind, cloud ceiling of a thousand feet and water on the runway. Do you wish to divert, over?'

'Romeo Foxtrot One Niner to Biera tower. How much water on the runway?'

'Tower to One Niner, centimetre on the runway. It looks worse than it is, over,' our controller informed them, exchanging a look with me.

'One Niner inbound.'

They broke through the cloud layer a mile away and banked, coming around in a wide arc, their lights blazing. Their landing was fine, and they taxied around to the apron. Inside the terminal building the pilot said, 'Won't be taking off in that.'

'No?' I questioned.

'No, it'll slow us too much. Have to do a fast taxi down it to test conditions, but I guess we need a day for it to go. Landing in the slush slows you nicely, taking off is a big no no.'

At least we had our supplies, lots of emergency packs with toilet paper and chocolate, but not much chance of further re-supply, the Antonovs warned off beginning their journey, or being diverted. And the weather worsened quickly, the cloud base now little more than a hundred feet. The jeep crews bravely ventured out to do what they could, no helicopters allowed up. When a jeep returned with word of a large grain warehouse up the road, empty and dry, we decided to commandeer it. The patients were shuttled up there in two buses, soon several hundred people inside the dry warehouse, most of our doctors present, the old triage tent sodden and abandoned. All that day our jeeps penetrated ten or fifteen miles along the main roads, bringing back injured where necessary.

At dusk, the electricity to the airport died on us. Now we were wet, blind, and pretty damned useless. Jeeps ran their engines and provided some illumination to the hangar and the terminal, small generators powering the radios. All day we had run jeeps and trucks out along the roads, stopping when we could no longer discern the road from the ditches alongside them, a lorry having to tow a waterlogged jeep out of a ditch in the dark and

driving rain. With the weather expected to get even worse, supplies were sent to the warehouse before everyone was ordered to hunker down, our aircraft now in danger of being damaged. People grabbed ropes, concrete blocks, and fashioned anchors for the Huey blades in pitch blackness, rain coming in sideways.

With everyone in the hangar already damp, a sheet tore off the roof, the rain pouring in, Jimmy ordering everyone to the terminal. Excess furniture in the terminal was tossed out, many heaters used to warm up the place, people making themselves comfortable wherever they could, some on the chairs, some below the same chairs. It was cosy that night, the stink of damp clothing filling the air. At 1am a sheet off the hangar roof smashed through a tower window, injuring two people and making a large area wet. We pushed the same sheet of metal back out the window and wedged it against the outside, to block the hole, a ghostly whistling sound created. In frustration, people up-ended a long desk and placed it against the hole, a blanket used to plug gaps. The Rifles slept in their jeeps and lorries without complaint, toughing it out. Then it got worse. The floor of the terminal's lower level started to take on water, people waking to find themselves in an inch of water. Cursing, they moved upstairs, some sleeping on top of check-in desks.

Dawn brought no respite, just a little better illumination on our dire situation. I grabbed a jeep, people still asleep in the back, and tried the runway, estimating two or three inches of water. And from the tower I could see at least one Huey with a cracked windscreen. We were taking a battering.

The Hercules crew had returned to it during the night, run up an engine and kept themselves nice and warm, now thirty people on board. All day people tried to dry off clothes and warm up water for drinks. They ran generators hot, drying clothes over them, their time rationed; under garments, like t-shirts, were given priority. And all the while our jeeps and lorries pushed as far as they dare, finding injured or stranded people, my daring cameraman braving some of these trips. That night it again howled, people sat around playing cards, chatting, or trying in earnest to manufacture more elaborate and comfortable places to sleep. Shelves were tested for strength, the ladies then sleeping in them like bunk beds. A Rifles lorry pulled up at one point with a

load of blankets pilfered from the town, and still in their plastic. They were dry, and much appreciated.

At dawn I was groggy, cold and damp, but my eye opened to a ray of sunshine. I lifted up and thrust my face towards the window, finding a clear sky on one side, dark clouds on the other; but at least the rainstorm seemed to be moving parallel, not towards us. I climbed the stairs and onto the roof, taking in the airfield. From my vantage point I could see a strange optical illusion, the water on the airfield seeming higher than the surrounding land. I studied it at length, then realised that the small wall around the airfield was holding up the draining of the runway water. I grabbed the Rifles, and they found pickaxes and shovels, soon smashing up walls and digging trenches, all the while stood in three inches of water. As soon as the trenches were dug the water flowed quickly, which meant it was working. I ordered dozens of trenches dug on two sides, helping out myself. The rain had been trapped by the rising tidal surge, that surge having receded overnight.

As I stood there I could see bits of tarmac starting to reveal themselves, so I ordered some of the shallow trenches to be extended well into the airfield, right up to the runway, the sun now out, the day warming up. The Rifles retrieved sweeping brushes from the terminal and began to sweep water off the runway and towards the trenches. Jackets were taken off and placed on jeeps, turns taken to sweep the water, soon large patches of tarmac revealed.

The Hercules pilots walked over, inspecting the runway in the sunshine. 'Hour or two and that'll be good enough to take off from.'

'What it needs, is a hairdryer,' I said, ordering the jeeps moved off the runway. With soaking wet feet, I unclipped the blades of my Huey and started her up, soon skimming sideways to the runway. At just about six feet, I flew down the runway and back several times, the downward pressure squeezing and blowing water off the runway and into the trenches. After four passes I put down on the wet apron, a few sections of the runway's tarmac changing colour as it dried. And on the apron I could see water swirling around the drains, meaning that they were working, not blocked anymore. We were in business. I

grabbed my crew and flew off in brilliant sunshine, my legs still soaking wet, my feet a bit numb.

By time I returned, some three hours later, the Hercules was gone, half of the Hueys up and about somewhere, the Mi8s deployed. During the day I had dumped my injured at the warehouse, the original triage tent now being dried out and made ready for potential further use. 'Lovely day,' I said as I plonked down in the command office, Jimmy handing me a tin of meat.

An Antonov touched down. Jimmy said, 'We'll be out on that, work to do elsewhere. Go pack.'

I nodded absently as I ate. 'That damaged Huey salvageable?'

'Hal says no,' Jimmy informed me. 'We'll leave it here, salvage what parts we can. The two with cracked glass are operable.'

We detached Big Paul from his team - they had bonded, and boarded the Antonov, wishing people well. They let us off in Nairobi, straight onto the Dash in the dark, a discreet flight to Kigoma. At Kigoma, four members of the Rifles Pathfinders boarded, camouflage clothing, utility waistcoats, M4 assault rifles. They handed Big Paul a bag, our trusty bodyguard changing his clothes at the rear of the plane, soon dressed like the Rifles; it did not bode well for our trip to Forward Base. After a quick refuelling, we headed on to Forward Base, flying in a wide arc and avoiding Burundi or Rwandan airspace. Eighteen hours after leaving Mozambique we touched down in the DRC in the dark, our arrival unannounced, the Dash landing without its lights on.

Two jeeps approached the aircraft on the runway, without their headlights on. We boarded the jeeps, the Dash taking off immediately. The jeeps took us directly to the Congo Rifles compound through well-guarded gates, and to the command centre. I had not seen this building before; three storeys and bigger than our house, all the lights now out. We were led inside, along corridors illuminated by torches held by the Rifles, and down to a lower level, a basement. The room we approached was brightly lit, warm, with many overlapping conversations emanating from it, the background noise dipping as we entered.

'This a private party, or can anyone join in?' I asked, shaking hands with Keely. Beyond him some twenty men in various national uniforms stood around a large map and battle board.

‘Dried off, have you?’ Keely asked.

‘Just about, still wet behind the ears though.’

Jimmy introduced me to Russian Army officers and I practised my Russian. Next came two Chinese Army officers, my Chinese now tested. Beyond them we greeted two British Army officers, SAS, then our own Rupert. Beyond them we greeted a representative of Kimballa, plus officers of the Congo and Kenya Rifles. It was quite a crowd.

Jimmy picked up a sheet of paper and handed it to me as I took in a line of radio operators. The page detailed a helicopter hop, Mi24s flying off a ship off the coast, three stops to get here.

‘You just never now when you need to practise helicopter hops,’ I quipped.

‘OK,’ Jimmy loudly called. ‘Keely, what signal intel?’

Everyone approached the table, and its large map of our area.

Keely said, pointing, ‘The PUF guerrillas are moving in from the north, the MLF are moving up from the south, and the Rwanda Army is moving west across their border, their lead columns not more than twenty miles from here. The Tanzanians on the border were withdrawn two days ago.’

‘Numbers?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Estimated two thousand five hundred PUF fighters, supplemented with Ugandan irregulars, tightly grouped. In the south: three thousand plus MLF, spread out into four main groups. And ten thousand Rwandan soldiers, who could be *here* by dawn.’

Jimmy faced the Russians. ‘Helicopters ready?’

‘Da!’

‘Forward air controllers ready?’

‘Da!’

He faced the Chinese. ‘Supplies delivered?’

‘Yes.’

To the SAS he said, ‘People in place?’

‘And reporting back the movements,’ they confirmed.

To the Kenyan Rifles he asked, ‘In place?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Finally, to the Congo Rifles officer, he asked, ‘Ready to tackle the Rwandans?’

‘Yes, sir. We are ready to defend our land.’

‘OK. Good.’ He checked his watch. ‘Launch the Cobras from Kigoma.’ A radio signal was dispatched to the Tanzania Rifles. He faced me. ‘The Cobras here are sat quietly, and quietly being observed.’

‘Ah,’ I let out.

He faced the Russians. ‘Launch the first wave, please.’

‘Mi24s?’ I queried.

‘We’ve twelve that we bought, twelve on loan.’ He lifted his gaze to the SAS. ‘Wake up calls, please.’

The first officer tapped a radio operator on the shoulder. ‘Execute plan - Interrupted Slumber.’

I asked, ‘What’s that?’

‘The Rwandans have pitched their camp in a rather poor area, surrounded by nasty little things, not least more claymores than trees. Oh, and a whole squadron of hairy-arsed troopers.’ True to form, Big Paul appeared as if he wished to be in there with them.

Ten miles inside our border, Rwandan tents, jeeps and lorries exploded, men shredded by the ball bearings propelled by exploding claymores. At the border itself, roads and bridges over gullies were blown, hampering a retreat, but also hampering re-supply. Two strategic bridges were blown, collapsing into the river they spanned, a surprise for the column moving over them at the time. From either side of the far bank, GPMGs opened up, our teams soon withdrawing as the Rwandans – thinking the bridge defended – opened up on their own forces already across. Along the wooded valley that the advance column had already probed the Rifles fired down, hit and run tactics. Hidden SAS teams called in accurate mortar fire, the column scattering.

In the north, the PUF approached Hutu refugee areas, unaware of the shadowy figures hidden in the undergrowth watching them; co-ordinates were being relayed back, handed to the Russians. Ten minutes later, with the sounds of helicopters approaching, phosphorous grenades landed alongside PUF concentrations; the Mi24 gunner had only to fire at the brilliant white points of light. Visible only from above, green lights pinpointed friendly forces. Twelve angry Mi24s roared in firing, four columns of three aircraft, looping around and strafing a second time. In the noise and confusion created, the Congo Rifles opened up from the hillsides, many of the roads crossing the northern border now blown.

In the south, the Kenyan Rifles made like trees and silently observed the MLF passing by. As the Cobras approached, more phosphorous illuminated startled guerrilla concentrations. With missiles raining down, the Congo Rifles moved forwards and opened up, again employing hit and run tactics. Narrow roads in tight gorges were blown at the border, the Congo Rifles firing down unseen from high above; the MLF were trapped.

I sipped coffee with Big Paul as the reports were relayed. 'Whoever's watching this base ... is scratching their fucking heads right about now.'

'All quiet as fuck up top, 'cept the Yanks with scanners finding the fifth column,' Big Paul commented.

'Second wave,' Jimmy said to the Russians.

Our co-ordinator, Belly, walked in, a little bleary-eyed. 'The faxes have gone. The Congo Government has complained to the UN about the attacks on our borders.'

Jimmy nodded. With a hand on the map he said, 'Congo Rifles, Company "A", forwards, please.'

That command dispatched six hundred of the Rifles towards the front ranks of the now bewildered Rwandan Army, their jobs being to halt the advance - and to keep them busy.

'Cobras returning to re-fuel,' came a voice. 'Hueys with chain guns advancing on a parallel course.'

Our Cobras were returning to Kigoma on an easterly course, Hueys coming out on a westerly course, ten of them fitted with chain guns. In the north, the PUF suffered underneath a second wave of Mi24s, the area bright with parachute flares and phosphorous, our soldiers picking off the guerrillas before disappearing back into the shadows.

The Rwandan army were now awake, dispersed and digging in, but all the time suffering accurate mortar fire and sniper fire, burning vehicles inconveniently illuminating their positions. With the first squadron of Mi24s refuelled and re-armed at a secret location, they took off and attacked the jammed-up Rwandan columns either side of the border, attacking a few miles into Rwanda itself. The columns were boxed in and decimated. With the Rwanda soldiers running to the jungle, the helicopters returned to base.

Jimmy said, 'It's now attrition till they re-group, man against man. And my money is on the Rifles.'

Some time later, a man announced, 'Dawn in thirty minutes.'

The Russians said, heavily accented, 'Crews down and resting.'

'Hueys back in Kigoma,' came a report.

'It's now a sniper campaign for today,' Jimmy announced, sitting and grabbing a few tins.

Officers sat, stretched out, crossed legs and folded arms. Eyes were closed.

The Congo Rifles "A" Company had already been waiting in position, just a few miles from the Rwandans, and now advanced silently in their platoons through the jungle, routes that they had trained along previously. When the first units reached visual distance of the enemy, they found the Rwandans loading injured onto trucks. They hid themselves. A single sniper would then open up, slow and carefully aimed shots. The Rwandans would then send their own platoons to where the firing was coming from, only to be opened up on at close range by twelve men, several with GPMGs. After a five-minute engagement the Rifles slipped out backwards and ran to another location. All along the Rwandan bulge inside our borders, they were attacked and harassed with hit and run tactics all day. Close to the border, the SAS teams watched the Rwandans try and reach the border from both sides around the damaged bridges and roads, tripping claymores all day, mortar fire directed in. By dusk that first day the Rwandans had lost a thousand dead, that many again wounded.

Whilst this was going on the UN Security Council was condemning the Rwandan "invasion" and demanding its removal, the Rwandan Government bewildered by the coherent UN reaction, as well as it loses on the ground.

As night fell the helicopters lifted off, but not to attack the columns or valleys. They flew low level directly to Kigali, the Rwandan capital, and struck the parliament building, civic buildings, the airport terminal, the TV station and transmitter, then pounded the presidential palace at length. They returned at low level as the Rwandan Air Force, what it was, tried to rally a defence. The principal power lines to the city blew and power lines fell, the city plunged into darkness and panic. Naturally, the Rwandans recalled all soldiers to defend the beloved homeland

and the beloved capital. A few working bridges would have helped.

One squadron of Mi24s set off for the coast, and their refuelling stops, the second would remain at their hidden base. And all the while the six Cobras stationed here sat gathering dust in plain sight. Four people had been grabbed with radios, zeroed in on by Keely's boys and their electric gizmos. Their torture was brutal, but short, names given up, other saboteurs arrested.

All through the night the Rwandans, the PUF and the MLF withdrew in disorganised order, harassed and picked off by the Rifles; the invaders had not slept for the better part of three days. At dawn a full-scale attack was sanctioned, all spare troops sent into the jungle to hunt down stragglers, few prisoners taken. The damage at Kigali was all over the news around Africa and the world, but most countries still condemning the Rwandans with having invaded the DRC.

At lunchtime we drove over to the hotel and enjoyed a leisurely lunch, greeting UN and Rescue Force staff, Big Paul playing bodyguard and staring at people. We even said hello to a few French UN workers, French Red Cross and Medicine Sans Frontiere staff. We were now, officially, at Forward Base, that fact bound to be reported. As we sat eating, a Dash landed in Rescue Force colours, and with our markings. Tubby got off and joined us for lunch, and we all pretended we did not know what would come next.

Belly requested flight clearance for the Dash to fly across northern Rwanda, Southern Uganda and on to Kenya. He got no reply. At 4pm we drove around to the command bunker, thanked the officers for their assistance, then drove out of a side entrance. As we did that, Big Paul took two Russians dressed like us - same height and build - around to the Dash. The men bordered with four Kenyan Rifles bodyguards, Big Paul taking a lingering cigarette on the tarmac, his face in full view of anyone in the hotel or rooftop bar. With his cigarette tossed away, he boarded the Dash. They took off and headed northeast.

We lifted off in a green Huey and flew south, then east towards Kigoma. At the Tanzania Rifles base, the old refugee camp, we waited, chatting to the officers. An hour after sundown a Huey landed, Big Paul, Tubby and the Kenya bodyguards stepping down.

I closed in on Tubby. 'How'd it go, fat boy?'

'A brief exhilaration - like my first *and only* sexual experience.'

I laughed, looking Big Paul over. 'Still in one piece?'

'Yeah, easy jump, ten thousand feet.'

Beyond him I thanked the Kenyans, a thousand dollars for each man. We sat in the officers lounge and enjoyed a tea as we discussed the expensive stunt, a Tanzanian soon stepping in and informing us that our Dash was being reported as having been shot down by a missile over the Rwandan / Ugandan border. What no one else knew, was that an American AWACS had tracked the Dash and the missile, pin pointing its launch to Rwandan soil. I called the house, and told them we were not dead, even if reported as dead, an odd conversation. I next called my parents and said I was not dead, should they see the news. As I hung up Doc Graham called.

'Paul? You're not dead.'

'No, we weren't on the plane.'

'Tubby?'

'Fat as ever, just as ugly, sat here. Don't worry.'

Mac called immediately, so I repeated the words. And the damn phone did not stop; the UN, the Red Cross, Pineapple Records, the nightclubs.

With the shooting down of our plane, even though we were alive, the Kenya Government moved soldiers west, as did the Tanzanians, both threatening the Rwandans.

Then Kimballa called. 'You are alive and well, Mister Paul?'

'Yes, Mister President. Are you well?'

'Very well, and enjoying the news. The damage in Kigali was most agreeable. What of the PUF and MLF?'

'Massacred, Mister President. It will be a long time before they return or bother anyone again.'

'Good, good. I am visiting the England soon, I will visit you at *the palace*.'

I rolled my eyes. 'You are always welcome, sir.'

'Have a good flight back.' He hung up.

Jimmy handed Tubby ten grand without anyone noticing; a profitable two minute parachute jump. We drove up to Kigoma field, greeted a few people we knew, assured them we were quiet alive, then boarded the Dash, the real Dash. The other had cost

forty thousand pounds, just for the one flight. And the state it was in, it could have just about made the one flight. We touched down in Nairobi in the small hours, booking into our favourite hotel, the Kenyan bodyguards remaining close by.

In the morning, we held a news conference at a Government building, the world's press interested in many things. We explained the Dash, and the parachutes, by claiming a high ranking Rwandan Minister had tipped us off, asking for money – which we said we paid; I guess that would have made the Rwandans suspicious of each other. We suggested that we arrived in the DRC *after* the fighting had started, then condemned the blatant Rwandan aggression. Since Kimballa was claiming credit for the attack on Kigali, we had nothing to defend. We finally got onto questions of Mozambique, the African news having shown footage of the helicopters in action, and on their way down there.

After the lengthy news conference, a good hour, we met with the Kenyan Government and thanked them for their soldiers. They thanked us for the good publicity, Rescue Force now synonymous with Kenya. An hour later we met Rudd and Cosy, much staring and “fucking hell, boss”. We caught up on business, the hotels, the orphanage – now with three thousand kids, and Somalia. All seemed to be on track. We agreed to start an orphanage in Mogadishu, extra funds for the giant orphanage in the DRC. Then, as an afterthought, Rudd informed us that Hal was in hospital here, with a serious fever.

Jimmy lifted him by the neck. ‘That ... I should have known about first,’ he growled.

A terrified, and silent Rudd, drove us to the hospital at speed, the bodyguards following. At the hospital we found Hal in a coma, cornering his doctor and getting a brief. It did not look good for Hal. We asked for time alone, Rudd asked to organise a private hospital. In Hal's room, Cosy watching the door, Jimmy self extracted blood, a small amount, and injected Hal in the leg, not wishing to leave a track mark on the arm, the needle dumped out the window. When Rudd returned, he softly informed us that he had arranged a room, but that they were not happy to accept Hal in this state. They'd come and make an assessment here.

Jimmy slowly nodded to himself. ‘We can see how Hal is tomorrow. Move our flights, or cancel and buy again.’ He slowly

cranked his head around to Rudd. 'My staff, Rudd, will always be more important than facts and figures.'

'Yes. Sorry.'

'It's not your fault, *someone* at Rescue Force should have informed me.' He nodded toward me.

I stepped out and shouted down the phone at Coup. It turned out the doctors reported he just had mild pneumonia, no one at the hospital had informed them of anything else. I told Coup to get hold of the hospital administrator and rip him a new asshole. Back in Hal's room, I said, 'Fuck up this end, the quack here didn't inform base.'

Calmer, Jimmy led us out, and back to the hotel, Rudd and Cosy back to work. Jimmy said little till we had downed a pint in the rooftop bar, Big Paul and the bodyguards sat in a corner.

'This not supposed to happen?' I asked.

He shook his head. 'Bit of a shock, we need Hal.' Four beers later, he explained some of Hal's future role.

Two men stepped out, stupidly obvious, blacks with hard stares and bulging jackets. They made a fatal mistake by reaching into their jackets. Jimmy didn't even bother to move as the two men were hit by dozens of rounds from Big Paul and the bodyguards, guests screaming and ducking.

'Fucking amateurs,' Jimmy quietly cursed, finishing his beer as I lifted up off the floor and breathed again.

Big Paul searched the bloodied bodies, removing their weapons, one of our bodyguards using the bar phone. Sirens soon filled the air, police stepping out and ordering the shocked guests below. Twenty minutes later, the Police Chief and Defence Minister stepped out onto the rooftop bar, a quick look at the bloody sheets covering the two men.

'Are you OK?' they asked. Jimmy had not bothering to stand, our guests sitting.

'We are ... unharmed.'

'And these men?'

'Probably Rwandan,' Jimmy calmly stated.

'We will check their identities,' the Police Chief offered. 'Do you need more protection?'

'No,' Jimmy replied. 'Your people did an excellent job.'

The Ministers glanced at their men as they sat nearby.

With the Ministers gone, and the bodies now gone, the floor being cleaned, Jimmy rang Rudd. ‘Rudd, get me two hundred thousand in cash for tonight if possible, if not the morning. And you’ll see on the news that two gunmen just tried to kill us, our security detail killed them. I’m sending two men to you, some to Cosy, let him know. And don’t worry or fuss.’

With bodyguards from the Pathfinders on their way to Rudd and Cosy, we dispatched a few more to the hotels, Skids & Co alerted. The Safari parks were secure, anyone approaching would be seen, and many people there were armed. The guards at the hotels had always been armed, but they were no experts.

Calmly, Jimmy ordered food from a terrified waiter, reassuring the man. Sykes called, concerned, and we discussed the Rwandans, Jimmy suggesting that he had anticipated the attack. When Rudd arrived, and eventually got let into the hotel, he placed down the cash and sat looking shocked.

Jimmy said, ‘Kindly get a list of guests, compensating them each ten thousand.’

Rudd nodded. ‘These men ... Rwandans?’

‘Probably,’ Jimmy said. ‘Don’t be too concerned, you’re not important enough to kill. Besides, you’re Dutch. People don’t assassinate the Dutch.’ Rudd did not look convinced. ‘This will settle down, but security will be tighter for a while.’

‘They want you out of the Congo, so they can steal the diamonds,’ Rudd suggested.

‘Yes, and I’m going to fix the Congo, so it’s a fight I’m afraid.’

‘The news says the Tanzanians are threatening war on Rwanda.’

‘That ... should calm them down a bit,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Give out the money, go home, and don’t worry. Oh, and some more security to the orphanage, just in case.’

With Rudd gone I said, ‘Made the fucking news again – for all the wrong reasons!’

‘Yeah,’ Jimmy sighed. ‘Would have been nice to focus on Mozambique. But I did not make the world as it is, I’m just the man trying to fix it.’

‘Know now why we have that house, and a bloody great fence; the London apartment would make us vulnerable. We in a shooting war now?’

‘Yes, and no. This was expected. But one good turn deserves another. I’ll give the French mining companies concessions next to the Rwandan border.’

‘Nice peaceful spot,’ I quipped. ‘They behind this?’

‘Partly. Mostly it’s the Rwandans after the diamonds and gold.’

‘Right now, those mining dickheads must be wondering just where the firepower came from. And parachutes on the plane – that’ll make them scratch their heads.’

‘This will have cost them a lot. They’ll be hurting for some time.’

A middle aged couple walked out, showing the bodyguards their room keys. They came over to us. ‘Some bastard tries to shot you – for all the good work you’ve done in the Congo – and you offer *us* compensation? We won’t be taking your money, Mister Silo, give it to the damn orphanage!’

Jimmy smiled. ‘A good attitude. Please, have a seat.’ They sat. ‘Where are you from?’

‘Poole, Dorest.’

‘Know it well, I like Lilliput.’

‘Lilliput?’ I queried.

‘Real area of the town,’ they explained, Jimmy beckoning a nervous waiter for them. A young woman stepped out, also showing her key, and stepped over. ‘This is our Cassie, just finished Med School.’

She sat with a huge smile. ‘You two certainly grab the headlines. You’re worse in real life ... than in the book I read.’

Jimmy laughed. ‘Careful, young lady, you may end up working for us reprobates some day.’

‘I start at St. Barts, London, next week.’

‘Bring your friends to the club, we’ll get you some tickets,’ I offered.

We detailed the mission to Mozambique for them, a few other guests wandering back to the bar. Then we explained some about the DRC and the troubles, finally the parachutes, their mouths opening as they listened.

Cassie said, ‘So, when you’re not working, what do you do for excitement?’

We both laughed loudly. ‘Fishing,’ I said, Jimmy agreeing with a nod.

Tubby and Sue turned up in their whites, let straight in. Cassie stood and greeted Tubby with, ‘You were in the book.’

We pulled tables together, ordering more food and drink, Tubby and Sue concerned for us – for a whole minute, before grabbing beers. When Tubby informed them that he had jumped out of the Dash they were amazed. We drank till late, the bar modestly attended, setting off at dawn for the hospital. Hal was awake and coherent, telling us to stop fussing. Once again, we moved our tickets, this time back to the original day.

We said goodbye to the bodyguards at the airport, Big Paul handing back a pistol. Our plane was a 747, and we got a few odd looks from the passengers in first class. At Gatwick we slipped out the side entrance and headed home, Keely arriving back at about the same time. I made a tea, no one else around, then sat in the lounge looking at the rain for an hour, and wondering where my real life was.

In the days that followed, the “M” Group guests expressed their concerns for our safety in a variety of ways, messages relayed from their governments. Po was deeply concerned, as usual, but we reassured him. We gave a few interviews, the situation in region worsening, the UN, plus many principal countries, getting involved. Tanzania and Kenya were still threatening Rwanda, Kigali still had no electricity, and the Rwandans protested how many casualties they suffered. Since they had suffered the casualties in the DRC, no one had any sympathy for them. They had lost almost six thousand men, that many again wounded, a dramatic strain on their resources, exacerbated by principal donor countries withdrawing aid to them.

No one complained about the PUF and MLF guerrillas, their corpses left rotting in the jungle; they had no official sponsors. The Congo Rifles hunted down the stragglers ruthlessly, even crossing the borders in pursuit; Ugandan border guards had been killed in their dozens.

A peace conference was called in Paris, attended by all the nations involved, but not by us. We urged the Kenyans and Tanzanians to pull back, that move leaked to the press. Information extracted from captured prisoners hit the news headlines around the world, blame again pointed at various mining companies. Some Africa nations even issued arrest

warrants for the directors of various companies, mine managers in Tanzania briefly held for questioning. As we were busy trying to put together a programme, and ultimately a book, on all the good work in Mozambique, many TV channels debated the pre-planned and deliberate attack on the Eastern DRC, mining companies named; French and Belgian Governments again felt the unwelcome heat. UN officials descended on mass to the area, preparing a report for the Security Council, the French dreading the outcome.

There was no mention of the SAS, nor the Chinese or Americans in the press, but the Russians were noted as having sold Mi24s to Kimballa. So what, Africa was full of warlords buying from the Russians. Kimballa further cheered the Rwandans with the delivery of twenty Russian tanks, oddly enough delivered via Kenya, Tanzania and Burundi, the roads from Kinshasa to our area unsuitable. The Congo Rifles now listed four thousand well trained and well equipped men, two hundred jeeps, a squadron of Mi24s, a squadron of Hueys, a squadron of Cobras, and now tanks. They had 81mm mortars, and a very high percentage of sniper rifles per platoon, no shortage of ammo, and western instructors.

In a move ahead of time, Jimmy requested – and got – ten thousand Chinese peace keepers, a base made for them quickly just west of Forward Base. They came armed to the teeth, ready for a fight, and to stay, the UN noting the numerous “concrete” buildings being erected.

The Paris Accord imposed a peace, the Rwandans agreeing not to enter the DRC – even if provoked by Hutus, and the Tanzanian and Kenyans moved back their troops, not that they would have attacked anyway, it was all posturing. The UN interim report suggested some involvement of mining corporations in provoking the fighting, Jimmy encouraging everyone not to push that point too hard. Rwanda was finally offered a return of aid if they stayed out of the DRC. The Chinese moved into position and manned every border crossing, letting each surrounded country know they were there. Since the Chinese were buying ore from these countries, firing on the Chinese peacekeepers was unthinkable. And that move was at least four years ahead of schedule, Jimmy suggested.

Peace re-claimed the Eastern DRC ahead of schedule. We looked west, to Sierra Leone and Liberia.

The British SAS contingent left the DRC quietly, heading to River View beach hotel with just a few minor wounds, five days of well-earned rest – a free bar, a contingent of unarmed Kenyan Rifles making sure they did not wreck the place. They returned from Kenya by RAF flight, nothing out of the ordinary since they trained in Kenya on a regular basis.

Back in the UK, we invited them to the Cardiff club a week later, a free meal and a free bar.

Little more than a month after the conflict in the DRC, we issued Yuri the right to an Aluminium mine, Marko the right to buy up diamonds wholesale from us. Marko purchased his first batch, appraised them, then bought every batch we had to offer, soon a large pile of cash generated. Fifty percent went to Kimballa's Government, fifty percent to the regional projects; the orphanage, the Congo Rifles, and infrastructure projects. And the road to Kinshasa was improving day by day.

The Chinese took over the running of six Aluminium mines, shipping the ore through Burundi to Tanzania, where it was smelted, the ingots sent to China by ship. Smelting in Tanzania was a condition we imposed, it meant jobs for the Tanzanians. And the taxes flowed back into the DRC. American and British mining corporations were allocated mines, we did not make good on the threat to give French companies the mines straddling the Rwandan border; they went to the Chinese. All told, the region as a project was now four years ahead of schedule, the Chinese mining operations a good six years ahead of Jimmy's original plan – as he described it.

The RF deployment to Mozambique lasted six weeks before Jimmy ordered the main body to return, the helicopter hops reversed. The Mi8s would remain with the UN, and some of our doctors would help with dysentery and cholera outbreaks, a handful of jeeps kept in Beira. The airport authorities had disappeared before the place flooded, they had left us to it. Returning, they had not been pleased with the mess. Our staff had moved out to a hotel in the town, cleaning the terminal as

best they could before leaving. Despite the fact that most of the damage had been down to the storm, we paid the authorities to re-decorate.

At the time that our helicopters were returning to Mawlini, Jimmy showed me a fax. As the last flight of Hueys had returned to Mawlini one developed a fire a minute before it came into land. The Australian pilot put it on the deck immediately, just outside the fence, ordering everyone to jump clear at ten feet. One lady doctor was a bit slow, still inside when he hit the sand, but thrown clear. The pilots made it out, the Huey burning fiercely. And the lady doctor, Dr Jane Hicks, suffered a dislocated shoulder. I smiled widely, shaking my head; it was the same lady doctor that had crashed with Dunnow in the DRC, the star of our book about the Rwandan crisis.

And my cameraman in Mozambique, he came to the UK to interview us. His extensive footage of the operation took a month to put into a coherent one-hour story, shown in the UK and around Africa. It portrayed the journey as miraculous and epic, the deployment a human battle against the elements. He had filmed the howling wind, people lying in water, and the triage tent being buffeted. And our friendly writer, he was already half way through the next book: *Rescue Force, mission Mozambique*.

Moving on

After most of the RF staff had returned from Mozambique, Jimmy produced a new training schedule, and it would mean that some people would have to undergo up to six months of training. But the individual modules could be fast-tracked if people already had the skills, so a fit and skilled Army doctor may just qualify in four or five weeks at a push. Fitness training, and fitness tests, had been introduced at Mawlini, a series of walks to be completed out in the desert, slotted in during the other training modules. They would culminate in a four-day exercise, thirty miles a day covered, the last leg without any sleep and a thirty-six hour time-limited hike. I studied the new schedule for several

days, making a few suggestions, and discussing them with Bob and Jimmy.

With a new command centre building at Mapley just about finished, we drove over there early one morning. On the way, Jimmy called the house on his mobile. 'Sharon, Jimmy. Advertise for a personal assistant for me, London papers.' He gave the details, then assured Sharon she was not fired, nor doing a bad job; this P.A. would travel with us. When he hung up, I jokingly asked if I was now redundant. 'Your admin skills are limited. We need someone who can spell big words.'

'I can spell,' I mock protested. 'And do joined up writing.'

'Your handwriting is worse than mine,' Big Paul commented from up front.

'Watch out for power lines as you drive, numb nuts!' I retorted.

At the airfield we paused to let a line of cadets cross the road, before stopping at the admin building to meet Mackey, Rolf stood ready to show us around the new building. It stood opposite Mackey's admin building, away from the airfield and towards the leisure centre. It was roughly the same size as the existing building width ways, but stood three storeys high, not two. Through a double set of glass doors we entered, finding a large reception desk on the right, a waiting room on the left. Behind the reception counter, several desks were laid out like a typical office. A ladies and gents came next, positioned opposite each other, sat at the base of a large central stairway that dominated the ground floor. We did not climb the stairs immediately, but skirted around them, finding two lifts opposite each other, past them a series of offices, the last room fitted out as a small staff canteen.

Finally climbing the wide stairs, we opened to a balcony and corridor. Starting at the far left end of the corridor, we poked our noses into each office in turn, each room big enough only for four people at most. And they resembled the offices in the house, high windows and no view. Back towards the stairs we found a large room dominated by a monstrous central table, ten six square. The walls of this room were already adorned with numerous maps, clocks displaying eight time zones. Around the edges of this room sat a dozen desks flush against the walls, big

enough for two people sat opposite each other. Two sofas lined one wall.

From a cabinet, Jimmy grabbed a plastic bag and emptied the contents onto the map table, at first glance just kids toys. 'Helicopters, jeeps, trucks, the Dash, the Hercules.'

I picked up a model Huey just an inch long. 'For dispositions on deployment. A battle board.'

Jimmy grabbed small plastic blocks with national flags pinned into their tops. With a marker pen he wrote "100" on one, retrieved a stick with a flat end and pushed it across the table.

Mackey said with a smile, 'Just like Churchill!'

We peered through a large window that offered a partial view of the airfield, a thick set of curtains tested and drawn. The room opposite met the same dimensions, but consisted of classroom styles desks facing white boards, a large "teachers" desk at the front and facing back, sat on a raised podium. Around the walls ran a continuous desktop, cut by two-dozen small dividers.

Jimmy said, 'For operational planning and briefing, the directors sit at the top, the group or national leaders sit out front.'

Climbing a final set of stairs we found a nicely decorated office with a large window facing out over the airfield, a side door through to an adjoining office.

'Bob's office,' Jimmy informed us.

Along the corridor, the next door revealed a comfortable lounge with a breakfast bar and kitchen, and a toilet. Opposite Bob's office-to-be, we found a duplicate office and side room, beyond it another lounge. This one had no kitchen, but eight single beds laid out behind a partition.

'For when the staff are knackered - and don't want to go home,' I told Mackey.

The last three doors of this floor revealed three self contained apartments, decorated in line with our London apartment.

'Bob'll live here?' I asked, Jimmy nodding.

Jimmy led us to a final small stairwell, and up onto the roof. We found no rooftop bar, but a flat roof with a waist-high wall and a great panoramic view, four weatherproof plastic benches and a stack of white plastic chairs awaiting some interest. In a stiff breeze, we stood and looked out over the airfield.

'Time to raise Rescue Force UK,' Jimmy suggested. 'I'll ask Coup to advertise internally for a handful of instructors to work

out of here. The training standards guy and his assistant will come up here, and I've asked some of the senior staff if they want directors jobs up here. In the meantime, we'll run some TV ads for staff.'

'TV? Expensive,' I cautioned.

'We've got the credibility, just need to sex it up a bit.' Jimmy faced Mackey. 'How many waiting to join?'

'About twenty, but half of those are non medics,' Mackey replied.

'We need fifty good people here,' Jimmy said, a reflective sigh issued as he took in the airfield. 'But we'll get them operating around the UK, helping the police. I've asked the PM if he'll allow paramedics to do a one-year transfer to us, whilst their jobs are safeguarded. We're only asking for twenty or thirty, so it should be OK. Same for the Army and RAF, a twelve month posting.'

Back at the house we got to work on advertising the new vacancies, looking for secretaries who lived around Swindon to work in Mapley, plus people experienced in logistics or NGO relief operations. Adverts went to every Army and RAF base, the pay offered being on par, but not great.

The PM had already been prepped on the idea of paramedics or military personnel getting a one-year paid sabbatical, but extended it to the police and the fire brigade. With a massive response from the UK emergency services coming in, a parallel unit was put together on paper for all those on one year placements; their emphasis would be on operating mostly around the UK, and Jimmy allowed for over a hundred.

Three weeks after advertising for an executive P.A. we had a shortlist, six ladies invited to the house since it was a live-in position. One was put off by the security, especially when we said they carried guns, and departed sharpish. One did not quite understand the concept that they were no fixed hours or holiday entitlements, and that she may be away six weeks at a stretch. She was driven back to the station. The next three were very efficient, had glowing references, and had all worked for either celebs or the directors of international companies. But they seemed to lack a sense of humour. We told them we would let them now.

The final candidate, named Helen, was stunning; tall, auburn haired – almost blonde, and perfectly kept together. She reminded me of Jimmy's ex, Liz; this final candidate was "posh totty". According to her CV she was sporty, running and swimming, she had flying lessons, she'd been parachuting, she loved Africa and had no particular ties in the UK. Her last job was for the boss of an oil company, a job that involved a lot of travel, the good lady speaking French, Italian, Spanish, some German and some Russian. So far, she was the only serious candidate.

Jimmy gave her a scenario. 'You're stuck with us in ... Mozambique, one hotel room left. We've been driving across Africa for three days, we all stink – and the water and electricity cuts out. What do you do?'

'I go down to the bar – if it wasn't open I'd break in – and I'd buy whiskey to clean our teeth and cleanse orifices of bacteria, soda water to wash it off. If there was just the one bed I'd expect to be in the middle, but allowed to sleep on whoever is softest to cuddle up to. If you snored you'd get an elbow.'

I stared for several seconds. 'Oh.'

Jimmy hid a smile. 'And if the President of a nation being visited got ... *frisky* with you?'

'I'd ask for a large diamond ring and a house, and not before. That usually cools them off - rich and powerful men prefer their wealth to a quick leg-over.'

I was still staring. Jimmy asked, 'A journalist offers you a million for an exclusive on us?'

'I'd take the money.'

'You would?' I found myself asking.

'I'd retire to a small island and drink cocktails all day.' She held her playful gaze on me.

Jimmy asked, 'And if, after being with us for a week, the tabloids had you down as being in a relationship with one of us?'

'Well, since you both qualify as some of the most eligible bachelors in the country, if not the world, I'd have to see that as a good thing - my friends would be jealous.' I smiled widely, then forced it away. Facing me, she said, 'You're currently number five in the UK.'

'Me? Fifth?' I questioned. I thumbed towards Jimmy. 'What's he?'

‘About twenty five, I think.’

I laughed, proudly.

‘They have you, Mister Silo, down as mysterious and dangerous, popular with the ladies over thirty-five.’

I was still smiling.

‘So,’ Jimmy asked. ‘How do you feel about ... threats to us?’

‘My last boss was hounded by Green Peace, and in Africa we had armed guards everywhere we went. What would be different?’

Jimmy and I exchanged looks.

‘Final question,’ Jimmy began. ‘A senior politician, or member of the security services, approaches you, plays on your patriot nature, and tells you we’re a threat to national security – and would you mind spying on us. What do you do?’

She had lost some of her composure. ‘I’d make my own assessment, and if I thought you were up to no good I’d leave, letting the authorities know what I knew.’

Jimmy stared at her for several seconds. ‘We’ll let you know in a few days.’ He stood. ‘Thanks for coming down.’

With Helen gone, I said. ‘Well?’

‘Wait a day and hire her.’

‘She is good,’ I agreed.

‘She ... is your future wife.’

I stood rigid, staring for ten seconds. I pointed, but I didn’t know at what. ‘She...’

‘Is your future wife, but don’t ask her out for four months or so, play it cool.’

I was still staring, and still pointing at the wall.

Jimmy added, ‘Get yourself a smart car or two, and buy an Agusta helicopter for us to use, have an area out the back concreted over. Do the conversion quickly, like ... tomorrow.’ He left me stood there, and I recalled the conversation I had with him two years ago.

Ten minutes later I went for a walk around the grounds. Married, I considered. Four months, then we ... well, I suppose we get it together. And then, well ... me and her forever. I got scared at the idea, but if Jimmy said it would happen... I blew out a lot, but it was not helping. Was I ready for marriage? But, then again, maybe we’d date for a long time, years maybe, and then maybe kids. Kids? Oh my god, kids, Jimmy had said two

daughters, after he had mentioned it the first time. Two daughters, and married? Well, mum and dad would be happy.

In the lounge, I downed a few large whiskeys. Han sat, and noticed my expression.

‘Is all OK, Paul?’ Han enquired.

I blew out. ‘Jimmy just informed me of my ... future. My future... family.’

‘And this ... worries you?’

‘Well, I ... would not have chosen to marry at this point.’

‘I see. And when would have been a good point? 2015? 2025?’

I focused on him, and held my gaze for several seconds. ‘You’re saying ... make the most of it.’

‘I have some experience of these things,’ he softly stated, looking away.

I suddenly felt very sorry for him, knowing his own sad family history, something we had never discussed openly. If we had, how would I have even related it to it? It was a powerful nudge towards living for now, and I found myself nodding absently. With my head spinning, I had to drink myself to sleep that night.

At 5am I found Jimmy in the diner. Sitting, I said, ‘Some sage advice would help.’

He studied me. ‘You’ll be very happy. Ten years from now, if you had the chance to go back and change it, you wouldn’t – for anything. You may, at times, curse her – and curse me – that’s life, but you would never change it. And I would never change it for you.’

‘Do ... well, me and her ... do we have a role, a strategic role in things?’

‘A higher purpose? No, not really. But she does help us, and you being with her helps *you* a lot. It ... anchors you to a path. Her *role* – as you say – in the grand scheme is not great, but it is a role. As is ... Cosy and Anna. Not a huge role, but still necessary.’

‘My being with her is not something you’ve ... organised?’

He shook his head. ‘No. But it is something I am happy to allow to happen, because it’s a benefit to you, therefore to the mission.’

After breakfast, and a swim, I headed out to buy an Aston Martin in Cardiff, a nearly new Augusta found and ordered. When the Augusta owner realised it was me, he flew it straight down and left it; full tank of gas, logbook, one careful owner. Karl drove him back to Wiltshire after coffee and a chat, and I read the manual, an instructor booked in for the morning.

Sykes came down two days later for an “urgent secret chat”. Even I was excluded. He began with, ‘I have my suspicions about your new PA to be.’

‘Oh yes?’ Jimmy said. ‘Do tell.’

‘There’s nothing definite, but I suspect she’s on the books at MI5.’

‘Why do you think that?’

‘She’s worked for three powerful men since college. And they’ve all been of interest to us. MI5 got the inside track on each of them - so.’

‘So, you think she was ... what, sent to spy on us? Nice bit of leg to tempt me, deflect me from her rifling through my files here. Well, first of all, nothing is written down – nothing of interest. And second, she *is* working for MI5 – for General Timkins.’

‘You ... know!’

‘Of course I bleeding know. I’m me.’

‘Then why –’

‘Keep you friends close...’

‘Your enemies closer still,’ Sykes finished off. ‘You’re taking a hell of a risk.’

‘Again, I’m me. She’s here to snuggle up to me and get into bed. But ... that’s not how it will turn out. She’ll marry Paul.’

‘Marry him! You mean -’

‘She’ll convert to our side. Yes, so relax. When the time is right I’ll deal with the good general, and you can deal with one other inside MI5. In the meantime, I want the file to say that she is clean.’

‘It says that now, it’s just the associations,’ Sykes pointed out. ‘No one except the likes of me would make the connections.’

‘Good. Lunch then?’

Helen turned up the following week, two suitcases and several plastic suit carriers, everyone nosing to see who she was. So far, only Sharon knew that we had hired someone.

In the hallway, Jimmy stopped her dead and called me over. 'Leave your stuff there for a ten minutes,' he told her. Facing me, he said, 'Paul, show Helen around the house, and external houses, at length, and ask the nice young lady where she would like to live.' He left us to it.

'OK,' I said. 'Let's start with the posh rooms, shall we.' She gestured me onwards and we climbed up one flight of stairs. 'All of the rooms on this floor are typically guest quarters, but we don't have anyone living here – but that's not to say you couldn't ask to.' I opened the door of a corner suite.

'Oh, very nice,' she let out. After a five minute nose she said, 'But not very practical. What else is available?'

I showed her one middle suite, then led to the end of the corridor and up a level to the apartments above the gym. 'These are known as the Gym Flats, because the gym is below us.'

She looked around one flat at length. Since they were all the same size and layout, we took the lift down and walked past the offices and the lounges, turning right to the guest family apartments. These were larger, and two-bedroom, but she did not wish to live on the ground floor. Upstairs, we viewed the same apartment, but a first floor version, repeating the same viewing on the top floor, the view of the grounds taken in. Leaving the main house, I showed her one of the red roof houses.

'I'd be rattling around in here,' she suggested. 'Very nice, but also too big.'

'Final option is the original house, down the hill.'

'If you called for me, it would be a bit of a trek in my dressing gown.' I lifted an eyebrow. 'I'll take a top floor front apartment, the second one you showed me.'

'Sold.' I helped her move her things in, then led her back down to Jimmy as he sat with Bob. 'What would you like done with this lady?'

Jimmy lifted his head. 'Every room, and every person in this house, then the grounds, then the old house, the club in Cardiff, Mapley, the London apartments and club, then stop for coffee.'

'Oh. Is that all?' I quipped as Bob smiled up at me. 'Helen, this is Bob Davies, Director of Rescue Force International –

formerly of the UN. He likes tea with milk and no sugar, Sharon's home made cake, and bossing people about.'

'Nice to meet you,' Bob said, shaking hands with Helen.

'You've met Sharon, she works nine till four, and mothers everyone.' Sharon lifted her head from a pile of papers and smiled. I pointed, 'That's my desk, this is Bob's, that's Jimmy's, those are Sharon's, and the one in the corner there is yours.'

'And who do I answer to, and take work from?' Helen asked.

'You answer to me,' Jimmy said without looking up. 'But you will also do any reasonable task that Paul asks of you, and assist anyone else around the house if they ask you to perform a reasonable task, if you're not busy doing something for me. You do not take orders from Sharon, but you may ask Sharon to do things that are better suited to Sharon than yourself. If we're abroad, and I ask you to do something, then instructing Sharon to do it is fine. Your primary task is to save me time, your secondary role will be to handle communications to a variety of people, and handle the press communications. Paul, go be useful.'

I led Helen out, taking her the short distance to the second office, finding a handful of people sat at their desks. Halting, I wondered how I would describe some of the people and their roles. Speaking softly, I said, 'The African gentlemen here are representatives of their countries, mini-ambassadors if you like. We have representatives from Kenya, Somali, Tanzania and the DRC. They could not give you a task, or vice versa, but you could ask them to pass on information, and ask for details and permissions from their governments for our operations in their countries. They live in the house or grounds.'

'Quite a gathering,' she puzzled.

I introduced each one in turn. Han stood and bowed when we reached him. 'This is Mister Han of the People's Republic of China. We have business dealings in Hong Kong and with the Chinese in the DRC.'

'That ... warrants a full time liaison? Wow.'

Keely sat grinning up, finally standing. 'Ma'am,' he let out, the first time I'd ever heard him use that salutation.

'Keely here, is actually called Donnelly, but I call him Keely.' She gave me a confused look. 'Long story. He liases with Uncle Sam, and teaches poker master class.'

‘Thursday night, if you want to play around.’

‘Play ... *a round*, did you mean?’ Helen clarified.

‘Sorry, Ma’am, it’s the accent.’

I shot him a look, leading Helen out. In the diner I found Jack. ‘This is Jack, he works at the foreign office – and does the rose garden.’

‘Nice to meet you,’ Jack offered. ‘You must be Jimmy’s new PA.’

‘And this is Cookie,’ I said.

Helen faced Cookie. ‘Don’t tell me, you’re the cook?’

‘Did the apron give it away, love?’ Cookie asked.

‘Tell him all your favourites and he’ll get them in,’ I suggested.

‘Very accommodating,’ Helen approved.

In the lounge I found Dave Gardener. ‘This is Dave the Gardener, visiting us. He represents the Israeli Government –’

‘And does the gardening?’ she finished off.

‘A passion I have for damp English gardens, but not here, my own. Although when I visit I do get involved.’

Big Paul stopped in the corridor, eyeing the newcomer with a professional interest.

Gesturing to him, I said, ‘This is Big Paul, driver, sometimes helicopter pilot ... and security guard.’

‘You a singer, love?’ he asked, shaking her hand.

‘Only in the shower,’ she responded.

‘Helen here, is Jimmy’s new PA,’ I explained.

‘P ... A?’ Big Paul asked with a frown.

‘Personal assistant,’ I carefully mouthed. ‘She’ll be travelling with us some times.’

‘Really? She don’t look stupid.’ He shrugged and walked off.

‘Stupid?’ Helen queried.

‘We suffer the odd ... mishap abroad.’

Dave laughed, getting glared at by me. I led Helen out, and to the second lounge. ‘This is Ivan, from Russia.’

Helen practised some of her Russian, finally saying, ‘You call him Ivan because you already have two Pauls?’ I nodded. As I led her down the corridor she said, ‘So, you give people pet names, and supplant their natural surnames with occupations or characteristics.’

‘Makes it easier to remember them.’

‘And you’ll be calling me ... what?’

I made brief eye contact. ‘You already have a nick name.’

‘And...?’

‘Posh totty.’

‘It could be worse,’ she sighed.

I showed her the pool area, and she was very impressed. Up the stairs I displayed all the gym equipment, Helen lingering at the lifelike upright dummies and puzzling them.

‘You fight?’ she asked me directly.

‘Yes. It’s ... necessary when abroad.’

‘You were stabbed what, face down *arse up* on a massage table?’ she toyed.

I took a measured breath. ‘I was stabbed as I jumped up.’ I touched my side.

‘And broke the man’s wrist and arm, taking his knife off of him?’

‘You read the papers,’ I noted.

‘Does Jimmy do any martial arts?’

‘Yes, but no one around here would risk sparing with him.’

‘Why?’ she asked with a frown.

‘You saw Big Paul. You’d need ten like him just to have a chance against Jimmy.’

‘He can be ... violent?’

‘Oh, no. I’ve only ever seen him fight twice since I’ve known him.’

‘And ... what happened?’ she nudged.

‘He took on six the first time, eight the second.’

‘And ...?’

I lifted my eyebrows. ‘I think he had a hair out of place the second time.’

‘Then I shall feel safer when I’m abroad with you.’

I did not quite how to take that, but led her on. I showed her the garages, Cookies garden, the rose garden, then drove her about the grounds in a golf cart, introducing Rob, his Alsations, and two of the protection guys, explaining that there were four. I could see she was struggling to understand the security, hoping Jimmy would explain it all away. We viewed the old house, met Jimmy’s parents and Ricky, then returned to the house for lunch. She asked to speak with Jimmy, who joined us for lunch.

‘Mister Silo. Boss,’ she began. ‘You have a house bigger than Buckingham Palace, more security than the Prime Minister, and representatives from all the world’s most powerful – and most dangerous – nations. Perhaps now ... would be a good time to let me know what I’ve let myself in for.’

It was unexpected, certainly for me, and I was suddenly worried that my future wife to be might leave us on her first day. I swallowed.

Jimmy calmly explained, ‘There are two things that I involve myself with, that are of interest to the world’s powers. First, Rescue Force. Our medics are *courted* by many as a great political tool, flying the flag of national pride around the world. And, as you know, that flag has been flying for some time around war torn and troublesome Africa. As a result of our work in Africa we have a lot of good contacts, and a lot of respect on the continent - I even talk to the Zimbabwe Government. As a direct result of my work in Africa, various African Governments offer me mining concessions. That means that I’m courted by the worlds governments, who wish to get at the minerals and oil. I’m also seen as an honest broker by many on the continent, broking deals for corporations and governments alike. A good example of that is the DRC, where I was made Governor out of respect, President Kimballa knowing that I would organise his own mining concessions better than he could – without looking for any profit for myself. I also provide a function to many governments who wish to talk to each other, but cannot be *seen* to be talking to each other. Each side trusts me, and knows that I cannot be bought, bribed or threatened.’

She nodded slowly. ‘For the UK Government to give you four armed officers is ... unprecedented.’

‘They’re protecting their investment in me, and wouldn’t won’t any mining corporations or hostile governments to bump me off. That BP oilrig off Somalia - I got the deal for the UK Government. And my friends in Somalia, they let me know what’s happening with Islamic extremists around the region, I let the UK Government know. A ... *symbiotic* relationship.’

‘Wow. I never knew there was so much intrigue here.’

‘You’re involved with something far more important than you realise,’ Jimmy emphasised.

‘And *all* your profits go to charity?’

‘Pretty much. My mining operations in the Congo make more than ten million a month, most of which goes on roads, building projects, or the orphanages.’

‘And they really have twenty thousand children?’

‘A thousand kids a month die in the DRC, so it’s no great figure; we administer an area bigger than the UK. Kimballa is over soon, you’ll meet him.’

‘Look at it this way,’ I said. ‘If there was anything less than upright and honourable about what we do ... would we get UK Government support?’

Sharon brought in the sat phone. ‘The nice man in Number 10.’ Jimmy put the phone to his ear and stepped out.

Facing me, Helen said, ‘The Prime Minister?’ I nodded. ‘He calls often?’

‘You’ll soon be taking his calls for Jimmy.’ I hesitated. ‘Is this all a bit too much for you?’

She seemed immediately defensive. ‘No, it’s just ... that I don’t understand it all yet. It’s all very unusual, that’s all.’

‘Not afraid of challenges are you?’ I pushed.

‘No,’ she carefully mouthed. ‘But the job description was –’

‘Deliberately vague,’ I finished off. ‘Yes, we know. Why don’t you give it a few weeks.’

‘I will. And I’m not stupid, those *government* representatives are more like intelligence officers.’

‘You may think that, I could not possibly comment,’ I said with a smile.

‘The standard response used by *shadowy figures* in that profession.’

I clicked my fingers. ‘Miss Money Penny. That’s what we’ll call you!’

She grabbed my finger, pulled my hand toward her and bit down on the end of my finger. I was immediately aroused.

As Jimmy returned and sat, I said, ‘Your posh totty just bit my bloody finger.’

‘Could have been worse, stop annoying her.’

‘Thank you, boss,’ Helen offered.

Jimmy added, ‘After lunch, show Money Penny around Mapley, use the helicopter with the ejector seat.’

Helen let out an exasperated sigh. ‘Does he have an Aston Martin?’ Jimmy nodded.

After lunch I powered up the Augusta, Big Paul left seat and Helen in the plush reclining seats in back. I needed to move the Augusta anyway, there was no diagnostic kit here, no technicians, and no fuel truck; it would be housed at Mapley most of the time. We sped across Welsh countryside and crossed the Severn River. When I remember about the no fly zone around Berkeley Nuclear power station I banked hard, following the M4, soon to Mapley. I made a deliberately smooth landing, I even remembered the undercarriage in time.

A group of new RF recruits were undergoing basic training, all keen to meet me. I stood and chatted for ten minutes before showing Helen the base from the roof of the new block, just about all the training stations visible. As we walked back to the Augusta, now topped up with fuel, a police helicopter landed nearby. Powering down, they walked over.

‘Hey, Paul.’ We shook hands. ‘New ride?’

I wondered what the guy meant for a moment. ‘Got the range,’ I said. ‘Can reach a lot of places around the UK.’ The pilots put their heads in, asking about the amazing helicopter trip down to Mozambique.

Back at the house, I double-checked that the gear was down, landing smoothly again. Helen was given Rescue Force literature to read by Jimmy, booked in with me for a trip to the Cardiff club in the morning, followed by a flight to London and a review of the London club, Pineapple and the apartment. That evening she ate with the gang in the diner, asking many natural questions. She retired to her apartment straight after, then turned up in the pool later. When Ricky called me I stepped into the camera room. I told him off for zooming in on her, but had a good look anyway. And ... wow! She caused quite a stir that night. On the third day, I handed her back to Jimmy.

We had hired two secretaries for Mapley, they would start in two weeks time. We had also hired two former Army Medical Officers, both of the men in their forties. They would not be practising medicine, but directing operations in Mapley and training the UK Supplemental Group, those on a twelve-month sabbatical. Bob Davies had been over to see the new place, but preferred the house. “Tough”, Jimmy had told him; Mapley may be quiet now, but would grow rapidly. Bob liked the office and

the apartment, who wouldn't, but the house had a buzz and a camaraderie.

With the two new secretaries, and their families, off to Mawlini for a week, followed by a stay at the beach hotel, we held a meeting with the two new facilitators, Bob Davies, and a few from Mawlini: Mac, Coup, Doc Graham, Doc Hoskins, Ratchet and Spanner, our training standards co-ordinator. Hancock from Hong Kong joined us, Helen sat in on this meeting in the lounge and taking notes, Han listening in as a courtesy.

'OK,' Jimmy began. 'Rescue Force UK: cold and wet. We have a good base at Mapley, sufficient facilities for basic training, both for RF in general, and the new supplemental group. First, that supplemental group. I obviously want the UK public to be behind *us*, by being behind *them*. I see the day when we have a few helicopters at Mapley with police pilots, ready to go at a moment's notice, and flying to a pile-up on the motorways. Since everyone in the chopper will be a UK Government employee, there'll be no problems with licenses or insurances.'

'How many interested?' Coup asked.

'Hundreds,' Jimmy emphasised. 'It gets them out of their regular jobs for a year. Some may see it as an easy option, so we'll have to recruit carefully.'

'They'll come down to me?' Mac asked.

'They come down to you ... for a few weeks, little more, for experience as much as anything.' He held up a finger. 'But, if there was a major earthquake, for instance Turkey, the UK Government would have no problem with sending them out.'

'So they all need the basics covered,' Coup noted.

'They'll not need mine training,' I said.

'Saves a lot of time,' Mac noted.

'Or jungle survival,' I added.

'No, but they'll need to be shit hot on Faulty Towers,' Jimmy suggested. 'Then first aid, extracting people from cars, searching woodland for missing kids, cave rescues, mountain rescues. We've got them for a year, so we want them productive after three months.'

'And the regulars?' Coup asked.

‘Same as now, but a longer training schedule. As time goes on we obviously desire a more detailed, and better, training schedule, refining things as we go. I want everyone from RF units around the world to be *at least* shit hot with the Mapley subjects. And if they’re already well trained – like the Chinese – we need only test them.’

Han raised a finger, catching Jimmy’s attention. ‘My Government has built its own Faulty Towers. Next to it, a large village of damaged houses, and a tower some ten stories high.’

‘Good,’ Jimmy said. ‘We’ll rotate groups there for a week or two.’

Hancock said, ‘The Aussies have a mine, good mile across, lots of buildings damaged, and caves, collapsed cranes blocking roads, the works.’

‘Excellent. In which case, the rotations should be annual swaps.’

‘Be another games this year?’ Hancock asked.

‘Oh, yes, an annual event. Competition between the teams is good.’

Hancock added with a smile, ‘The Aussies have been winding up the Chinese as to who would have won.’

Han said, ‘I think you will find that our teams skill with jeeps has improved.’

‘You see,’ Jimmy said. ‘Competition is good. Right, Mapley HQ. In little over two weeks Mapley will become the international HQ for Rescue Force, Bob Davies sat there twenty-four hours a day.’

‘You’ll live there?’ Doc Graham asked Bob.

‘Yes, it’s all very nice. Not as nice as here, but then again ... where is?’ They laughed.

Jimmy faced our training standards guy. ‘You happy to move up?’

‘Yes, Mawlini is a pain for international travel. If I’m to co-ordinate them all, then being an hour down the motorway from Heathrow airport is a great benefit.’

‘Your assistant?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Yes, happy to move. He likes Africa, but not to stay permanently.’

Jimmy faced Doc Graham. 'You want a promotion, a house and more money? Director of RF UK, and the supplemental team?'

'I'd still go out to deployments?' Doc Graham asked, easing back.

'Yes, but in a supervisory role – three or four times a year. You'll be head of the UK's flagship unit, lots of prestige, tea with the Queen.'

'Can I ... bring a few people up?' Doc Graham risked.

'Three, in consultation with Mac and others.'

'I'd want Hildy, of course, then my assistant, and Jane Hicks.'

'Have they expressed an interest?' Jimmy asked.

'Yes, I've discussed it with them.'

'Mac? Coup?'

Coup said, 'It's not grabbing all the talent, Jane's only good for falling out of helicopters.' Everyone laughed.

Mac said, 'She had to be restrained from hitting that Aussie pilot, broken arm or not! So, who'll head up Kenya under me?'

'That job will first be offered to Doc Hoskins.'

'I'll take it,' came quickly back.

'Mac?' Jimmy called. 'You accept him?'

'Aye, he buys a round now and then.'

Jimmy said, 'Ratchet, Spanner, you'll now be looked at for group leader positions, unusual for non doctors.'

'Ratchet ... and Spanner?' Helen queried, everyone laughing.

'Robert Ratchet ... and James Spaniel,' Jimmy corrected her. He faced our two new facilitators. 'Your positions will be that of operational co-ordinators first – that means you panic twice a year when there's an earthquake – and thereafter deputies to Doc Graham, heavily involved in the supplemental group.'

'And Mackey?' I asked.

'Stays where he is, doing what he's doing, but under Bob. RF UK is a customer of the airfield, asking for facilities, but getting priority. Doc Graham, your first priority is recruitment. We'll be running a series of ads.' Jimmy glanced at me, and I loaded a tape into the video recorder, turning the TV on. 'There are three in sequence.'

'The one's shot in Mawlini?' Mac asked. 'We ain't seen 'em yet.'

The first two-minute advert started with a war scene in an Africa desert, RF medics helping injured locals to a Huey and taking off, flying into the sunset to the soundtrack of the Rolling Stones song Paint it Black. People nodded approvingly. The next advert consisted of a collage of different training tasks and activities, giving the impression that RF staff were always busy and pushed. The third advert I liked the most. It began with kids playing in the street, the roar of helicopters getting louder, soon the kids and others looking up and pointing as a squadron of twenty Hueys roared past. People stopped cars and looked up, pointing.

‘OK, opinions,’ Jimmy called.

“Good” was the consensus.

I said, ‘Show of hands. First one ... second one ... final one.’ The vote was for the second one.

Hancock suggested, ‘It gets the exciting training across.’

‘We’ll experiment with them all,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘That last one goes out around Africa soon, in Kenya in a week. Oh, I’m going to buy a small castle in Scotland, on a loch, a training facility for RF UK – and anyone else; lots of steep hills nearby, and a small island. What I’m thinking with the island - is survival. Stick some chickens and pigs on it, dump a group and see how they do. I’ll also get all our helo pilots up for some poor weather training in the mountains.’

We chatted for twenty minutes. After a fifteen-minute break for cleaning-up, we all settled about the large dining room table, a lengthy three-course meal served up. Many topics were discussed over the meal, gripes listened to, suggestions made, Helen getting a good grounding in the gangs personalities. Retiring to the lounge, all of our lot got drunk, as usual, all staying the night, some doubled up. The next morning they were up late, taking it easy, using the pool or sauna and relaxing. We took everyone to Mapley in the afternoon, four cars and two small luxury coaches. I let Helen drive me there in the Aston Martin. Some were seeing the base for the first time, others already familiar with it. Mackey joined us, and gave a quick lecture from the rooftop vantage point. The large sign over the door of this building now labelled it as “Rescue Force UK & International”. Doc Graham checked out his office, as did the two new facilitators, impressed by the facilities. Doc Graham

also had a house waiting, just down from the leisure centre, one of the facilitators allocated an apartment on the base.

Checking his watch, Jimmy said he had a surprise for us. We walked to the runway, our Huey powering up. With a wave from Jimmy the Huey lifted off, hovering around two hundred feet above the runway. A door opened, soon numerous small parachutes drifting down towards us. Attached to the parachutes, we noticed the clear plastic emergency packs. They hit the grass without bursting open, the water bottles intact. With the Huey landing, we picked up the packs, stretching out and examining the clear plastic parachutes.

Jimmy said, 'They're cheap to make, just a few pence each for the parachutes if produced in large quantities. If we can't reach a certain area then we can throw these out. Problem is, we can't dump thousands in one go, you have to pull the cord on the parachute, then throw it.

Big Paul brought over two unused packs. Jimmy took one, pulled the chord to release the parachute, and threw it up into the air, the pack drifting down.

'Could have used them Mozambique,' Doc Graham complained, examining the parachute.

'Next time,' Jimmy offered him. 'I'm working on a pallet system for the Hercules, to drop hundreds at a time.'

The gang came back for a second night, another meal and boozing session, Helen quietly questioning their raucous nature. They were driven to Gatwick late the following afternoon, spending the night in a hotel before flying off early the next morning.

RF International now had a base, and RF UK had been born. Bob Davies was tasked with contacting each RF unit and requesting a full-time representative for Mapley, live-in positions. Each position was for six months in rotation, and an experienced person was requested, someone very knowledgeable about the teams, any national issues and the local terrain particular to the teams.

As the days ticked by, Helen became suspicious of the "M" Group meeting, even questioning us directly on what went on behind closed doors; she could not believe that the nations represented would co-operate on anything. When the Prime

Minister made a secret visit by helicopter she greeted him, having spoken on the phone many times, but was then peeved to be kept out of an “M” Group meeting with him attending. In a carefully orchestrated move, she was called in with files on the DRC, lingering long enough to hear Han and Keely protesting each other’s involvement in certain Africa countries. Jimmy had to say “thank you”, and hold his gaze to make her leave. I don’t know why, but I enjoyed her jealousy of those attending.

Three weeks later, and with Helen fully briefed and up to speed, we journeyed to Mapley, the house a little quieter now without Bob Davies. The RF national representatives were in place, all eleven of them. It made for a great photograph in front of the HQ, everyone in their whites, shoulder badge national flags toward the camera. And Bob Davies stood up out of his wheelchair for the photo, copies sent to all the world’s media by Helen, with a full description of the nature of Rescue Force.

India had finally come on board, a small unit created in the southeast of the vast country, just thirty strong at the moment. Uganda had been delayed, not least because of their government’s involvement in the PUF attack on the DRC. Ghana was growing and improving rapidly, Australia some sixty strong and earning merits points at home by helping out at forest fires and floods. For the most part, the representatives at HQ organised team swaps and joint exercises, and there were always plenty of new recruits rotating in and out of Mawlini.

Trial by fire

Five weeks after joining us, Helen accompanied us to Africa, the gang flying down to Nairobi first class. Rudd and Cosy met us at the airport, along with ten bodyguards from the Pathfinders imposed on us by the Kenyan Government. Big Paul tooled up as Jimmy caught up on gossip with the bodyguards, conversing in their local dialect; families, babies, new houses, promotions. With a Rifles jeep at the front, one behind, and feeling like royalty – or someone very unpopular and under threat - we

journeyed to Rudd's office, introductions made to Helen on the way. At the office we greeted the two local secretaries, sitting and reviewing business, as much for Helen's benefit as anything. After a two hour meeting we retired to our favourite hotel, soon eating at the rooftop bar. If the patrons were nervous, they did not show it. Either that, or they did not recognise us or clock the beefy security detail.

'This is where you met Judy,' Helen noted.

'That wasn't in the books,' I responded.

'You'd be surprised what we gossip about on Poker Night,' she toyed. 'So, you thought she was a spy – and took one for the team.'

I tried, and failed, to hide the smile. 'I'm a dedicated individual.'

'Hmmm,' she let out. By 9pm she was in bed, a mere mortal, and jet lagged.

The next morning we drove down to Mombassa in convoy, staying at the golf complex for a change since the huts at the original beach hotel were not very secure. The hotel manager, responsible for all three hotels, gave us a detailed report of attendances and events. We already knew the figures, but went through the motions anyway, asking questions, and answering his questions in turn. After the meeting broke we noticed and greeted a few of Po's family members, conversing in Chinese, and introducing them to our new PA. As for Helen, she examined the hotel at length, taking in all the views from the rooftop. As a group, a large group, we toured the other hotels, stopping at the beach bar and greeting staff from Pineapple, plus tourists that just wanted to meet us and say hello. Jimmy chatted to a German couple for five minutes.

After a quick bite to eat we greeted Steffan and Lotti, taking Helen for a dive; she was already qualified to PADI Rescue Diver standard and both competent and confident under the water. A new friendly shark startled her, but she relaxed enough to watch us feed it, the old turtle taking his chances with the shark and jumping the queue for some food. Showered after the dive, we sat on plastic loungers in the shallows, our feet in the water, enjoying the sun. And I had to try and not to stare at her body. Somehow, it just felt as if it was mine to possess.

On the second day we slowly ambled around to the zoo behind the hotel, taking time to stop and feed the cubs, and displaying a keen managerial interest in each keeper's section. Noticing two fourteen-year-old boys in blue uniforms helping out, I asked about them. They were from the orphanage, on day release job experience, and I explained it to Helen. Calling the boys over, we found them very polite, their English good. And they both recognised us from our photographs; seems that it was part of the curriculum, recognising the pair of us.

We made our way up to the boy's orphanage home after an hour at the zoo, meeting Cosy and Anna, and their rapidly growing daughter, Mary. I lifted up the two year old, the girl holding my nose with some interest, and a good grip. Helen pinched the infant straight away, getting a better response than I had, the kid smiling and gurgling. Sitting in spacious air-conditioned offices, we chatted for an hour about the progress of the orphanage, two new sixth form colleges now sat across the road, three hundred boys and girls attending them. Anna reported that the colleges offered two-year nursing courses for both sexes. It also offered a cadetship to the Rifles, two days a week spent at the Rifles base north of Mombassa, the remaining time spent on subjects such as electronics, communications or mechanical engineering. The Rescue Force cadetship now being offered covered all the subjects that the youths would use in later life, plus further English, maths and computer studies. Helen was most impressed with the cradle to grave approach, reluctant to give the infant Mary back. Cosy led us up to the roof, pointing out the two new colleges to the south, many new buildings tucked in around the original structures of the main orphanage.

I pointed, addressing Helen. 'As far as you can see, that's orphanage land. Three thousand kids.'

She put a hand over her eyes, surveying rows of four blocks stretching out to the horizon, thirty-six blocks in the main group, many ancillary buildings.

I added, 'Up the road is our farm, three miles by three miles. It grows all the food for here, and we give fifty local schools free lunches for the kids.'

She took in the regimented rows of kids marching about. 'It's very ... *military* in nature.'

Jimmy said, 'Keeping control of three thousand kids is not easy. But they're very well treated, well educated, but more than that ... they have a chance of a life. The educational standards here, for sixteen year olds, are the highest in the country. A certificate from Ebede helps them to get a job.'

I put in, 'And four hundred of the kids here are not orphans.'

'No?' Helen queried.

'No, the locals board them here. They go home on weekends. Another three hundred are day attendees.'

'You charge for that?'

'Nope,' I said with a shrug. 'It helps the country, the country helps us.'

On the third day we packed up, and journeyed the short distance to Mombassa field, the Dash awaiting us. Surprising Tubby, I offered Helen right seat, getting a look from Jimmy. It was a shaky take-off. Helen came back after half an hour, not a keen pilot, and I took right seat. Landing at Mawlini, we dismissed the bodyguards for a week, the lads off visiting old friends in the Rifles camp. Most of the senior RF staff had already met Helen at the house, and now we introduced a few new faces, some known by name, nickname or dodgy reputation. In Mac's office she stared long and hard at a large photograph of what the base used to look like, the only common feature being the runway.

Mac stood at her shoulder. 'The lease says ... when we leave we have to put it back the way it was!'

At the UN hotel, she said, 'The famous rooftop bar,' taking in the image she had seen in the books. From the wall she stared out as I described everything. 'And you built all this, and paid for it?'

'Didn't build those two little UN sheds up the top end,' I pointed out, getting a look from her.

As we sat drinking and chatting, many people paid their respects, Jimmy standing and greeting some. The Rifles officers saluted as they presented themselves, as did our British Rupert, something she puzzled – and questioned.

'They're ... just being respectful,' I suggested.

'They ... are British and Kenyan Army,' she pointed out, awaiting a response.

'We fund them, so that they protect our medics,' I explained.

‘You ... *fund* them?’

Jimmy cut in with, ‘Just under a thousand men, thirty helicopters, two hundred jeeps, all the world’s best weaponry. We also fund the Tanzanian Rifles, and the Congo Rifles - another four thousand men, thirty helicopters, hundreds of jeeps. And attack helicopters, here and the DRC. We used to fund the Somalia Rifles, but they’re now paid for by their own government. Did you ... have a question?’

‘It’s just ... that I’ve never come across anyone *funding* their own army like this.’

‘It’s not *our* army,’ I pointed out, being defensive. ‘Think of them like ... hired security guards. They keep the bad guys at bay whilst we ... rebuild places.’

‘Oh,’ she said after a moment, two Somali officials walking out.

‘Are we disturbing you?’ they asked Jimmy. The two officials stood with jet black faces and buck teeth, smart grey suites that seem two sizes too big.

‘No, not at all.’ He grabbed seats for them both, ordering soft drinks, conversing in Arabic for a minute. Arabic was not the native Somali language, like Kenya they had several dialects, but most Somalis understood basic Arabic. He Introduced Helen, and she offered a simple greeting in Arabic.

The first Somali said, ‘The French mining group, they wish other areas.’

‘You should allow them to expand the mine they are in, outwards five miles, but no other areas yet. My Russian friends will visit you soon to open a mine – and they will pay up front for the concession.’

The Somalis nodded their acceptance.

‘How’s the building work in Mogadishu?’ I asked.

‘Your company employs twenty-five thousand men, all kept busy, much improvement.’

‘Enough building materials from here?’ I asked.

‘Yes, ten trucks a day, cement, blocks, wood, paint,’ they listed.

‘And the banana plantations?’ Jimmy enquired.

‘Your people are there, productivity better. We make irrigation, and take fertilizer from your people in China. Sales are good, two ships a week.’

‘And food from here?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Twenty trucks a day, two ships a week at the port. The President asks for water purification equipment and experts.’

‘Send a request to your representative at the house, we’ll sort it quickly for you, my friend,’ Jimmy offered.

‘How are the clinics?’ I asked them.

‘Twelve in the towns, six in Mogadishu districts. And three hospitals in the city are rebuilt, many foreign doctors now.’

‘Sounds like progress,’ I approved. ‘The orphanage?’

‘The building is finished, many children,’ they happily reported with toothy smiles, both in need of a trip to the dentist.

We chatted for ten minutes, the Somalis thanking us as they left.

‘If you don’t mind me asking, but what positions do those gentlemen hold in Somalia?’ Helen delicately enquired.

‘Government Ministers,’ Jimmy replied. ‘And in answer to your question, we paid for the Somali Rifles, had warlords removed, and are now busily rebuilding the entire country. The US and UK aid package comes through us – so we can exert influence.’

‘Oh.’

Big Paul stood, drew his weapon and placed it to the head of UN official. It was an unusual move, even for him.

Jimmy put down his knife and fork and stood, a nod at the barman. I followed him towards the worried looking man, Jimmy asking, ‘Was he eating too loud?’

‘I know his face, but I can’t place him.’

‘And you feel that warrants a gun to his head?’ Jimmy calmly enquired.

‘Something about him ain’t right,’ Big Paul insisted.

‘Stand up, please,’ Jimmy told the man, his two female companions standing and moving back. Jimmy faced the two women. ‘Do you know this man?’

‘He was on our flight,’ they said in French accents.

‘Beyond being on your flight, do you know him?’ Jimmy pressed. They shook their heads, Jimmy taking out his satellite phone. He called the house. ‘Bob, Jimmy. Got a problem here, a Frenchman, UN, who may be a spy of some sort. I’m putting you on with him.’ Jimmy handed over the phone, the suspect answering questions in English. So far, he seemed legitimate.

Handing back the phone, Bob said he could be genuine, but did not know one man he should have.

Waving the man to his seat, Jimmy ordered the resident UN manager over, the bodyguards bursting out and surrounding the worried official. The UN manager was both worried, and horrified at the treatment of a member of his staff. Jimmy was insistent: check him out.

As we stood in the heat, the manager asked a lot of questions. He finally said, 'He seems genuine, but I was not expecting him.'

'Call Paris, someone you know personally, get a description,' Jimmy insisted. All the while, Helen seemed very concerned at our actions, and I was wishing the scene would just go away, quietly cursing Big Paul.

The UN manager finally handed back Jimmy's satellite phone, looking deflated. 'The man he is supposed to be – is in bed very sick.'

Jimmy sat opposite the man. 'Co-operate, and you'll not be harmed, but flown straight out. Fail to co-operate, we hand you to the Rifles for ... interrogation.'

'I choose ... the flight out,' the man said with some attitude.

'And...?'

He glanced at the crowd from under his eyebrows. Almost whispering, he said, 'DGSE.'

'And your purpose here?' Jimmy calmly enquired. 'Did you come here to ... kill anyone?'

'No,' he insisted. 'Passive monitoring.'

'Your government is welcome to send as many officials as they like to look around here, or interview the staff. You know that. So don't insult my intelligence with ... *passive monitoring*.' Jimmy lifted his head to the guards. 'I want him treated well, not harmed. Take to Nairobi, photograph, fingerprint, deport him to France.' Jimmy stood. Facing the man, Jimmy pointed to the meal. 'Did you pay for that?'

After a moment, the man said, 'Not yet.'

Jimmy waved his fingers, the man leaving a few notes on the table, plus a small tip. The bodyguards escorted him out. Jimmy turned to the two French ladies. 'If you ever discover why your government is so intent on spying in us, kindly let me know, because it puzzles me. Please, finish your meal. Bon appetite.'

We sat as Mac stepped in. ‘We need to screen all the fucking UN people now?’ he complained.

‘No, no big deal. They like to spy on us, so let them.’

‘Eat at the bloody RF hotel next time, huh!’

With Mac gone, Helen asked. ‘Why *are* the French spying on you?’

‘They’ve long had a colonial interest in many parts of Africa, and they don’t like being left out of the loop.’

‘No French in the “M” Group,’ she noted.

‘No. And their mining corporations lost out in the Congo.’

‘How so?’ she probed.

‘Before we got involved, anyone could set up a mine and take ore or diamonds, the Kinshasa Government too weak to police the region. The French mining companies made a lot of money, and *they* have influence with the French Government.’

‘But you said you gave them a mining concession in Somalia, and I just heard you agree for them to expand it?’ Helen puzzled.

‘They want more. They want ... chaos in Africa, that way to *take* the ore, not pay for it.’

‘That’s terrible,’ Helen said, on our side for a change. ‘And you just sent that guy back to try again later.’

‘Oh, I didn’t say that,’ Jimmy said with a grin. He lifted his satellite phone. ‘Rudd? Jimmy. The Rifles have captured a French spy at Mawlini, he’ll be deported; make a big splash, his face in the papers. Thanks.’ He dialled the house. ‘Han, we just caught a French spy at Mawlini, let the “M” Group know, and you know what to do. Thanks.’

I told Helen, ‘We’ll get them some unwelcome press, some heat from the various governments.’

‘And around here, you can order people deported,’ Helen noted. ‘You are influential gentlemen.’

So far, I could not work her out. She was impressed by much of what we did, but was also naturally inquisitive and suspicious. Sharon was not like that at all, and Helen knew who and what we were when applying for the damn job. Her attitude was a growing source of frustration for me.

We flew down to River View Safari Park the next day. After booking in I decided to ignore her; I’d had enough. If Jimmy wanted to defend what we did, that was up to him. As for her

being my future wife, I was starting to doubt that. Future murder victim came to mind.

I played with a few cubs for a while, fed them, spoke to guests and enjoyed the view with a cold beer. I grabbed a sandwich, a few tins, and pinched a driver and tracker, heading off in a random direction. We got back just before sundown. Fortunately, Jimmy and Helen sat a large table with several guests; talk of work would be limited.

Jimmy asked me, 'Anything interesting out there?'

'I thought I saw our lion.'

'He stays close, apparently,' Jimmy answered.

'And a fox, those long eared things.'

'The Serengeti lodge is now at capacity, DeKraft was up here the other day.'

'Good. We'll have to visit.' I got into a conversation with a man from Gibraltar, ignoring Helen. It made a pleasant change to find someone truly impressed by all we did, and I relaxed a bit. After the meal I sat in the bar with the man, slowly drinking away the evening. Jimmy and Helen eventually joined us, the man off to his poor forgotten wife.

Jimmy said, 'Helen thinks you're avoiding her.'

'She'd be right,' I said, focused on the dark savannah. 'Still, she's your PA, not mine – thankfully.'

'You think we made a mistake in hiring her?' Jimmy calmly asked, easing back with his beer.

Without facing either of them, I said, 'I think we have enough problems without our own staff acting like ungrateful bitches.'

'Kindly clarify *ungrateful bitch*?' Helen testily asked.

I turned my head a notch. 'You got the job a hell of a lot of people would like, and you question what we do more than the fucking French.'

'Oh. Well, I don't think I'm ungrateful, I just don't understand what you do. It is all ... rather puzzling.'

'That's fair,' Jimmy commented.

I faced her again. 'We make a lot of money, and spend it helping people. Even *you* ... could understand that, Blondie.'

'Blondie?' she softly repeated. 'You employed me because of my high IQ and inquisitive mind. I don't like things I don't understand, and much that you do makes no sense *at all*.'

'That's fair,' Jimmy conceded.

‘I shall try and limit the probing questions to Mister Silo alone in future,’ she offered me.

‘Good.’

We sat in silence for a while, then she excused herself, we were up at dawn for a safari.

‘You sure I marry her?’ I questioned. ‘Not strangle her?’

‘There’s a very fine line ... between love and hate. She’ll get better and adjust. I’ll ... educate her.’

‘And quickly.’

‘Well at least she respects you more now, girls like men to tell them off. You’ve been a bit ... soft with her.’

‘I won’t in future,’ I threatened.

In the morning I was up early, a long breakfast with Jimmy.

Helen joined us an hour later, noting our plates. ‘You two don’t sleep much.’

‘Clear consciences,’ I quipped. ‘A few pages of the bible and we’re out like a light.’

She helped herself to tea and biscuits, not a breakfast person, and we set off after kicking Big Paul’s lazy carcass out of bed. Five miles south of the lodge, we stopped and entered a small Rifles camp, three jeeps and two tents. They made us coffee and offered up cooked chicken. Heading on, we followed the river for a while, noting the crocodiles. For the first time we spotted an African Kingfisher skimming the water for fish. And Helen, she kept the conversation to animals. Crossing a tarmac road, a RF jeep approached, heading the other way. We waved them down.

‘Jimbo!’ came an Australian voice. ‘Paul, you reprobate!’

I greeted the Aussies with a huge smile, the team piling out, soon a four-way conversation going on. Two of the team greeted Big Paul warmly, jokes about helicopters and power lines bandied about; this lot had been deployed to Mozambique. They tried to explain to Helen what it was like in the Biera Airport terminal building, waking up in water. For fifteen minutes we stood and blocked the road, not that it saw much traffic. Setting off again, we headed towards Skids’ sanctuary.

On the approach road to the sanctuary, Jimmy faced me and said, ‘Something’s not right,’ Big Paul glancing towards us. ‘At the lodge, a face. A face that I can’t place.’

‘Who?’ I nudged.

‘Like our good bodyguard here, just a feeling about a face. When we get to Skids I’ll call and check the lodge register. Big Paul, stay awake please.’

Big Paul checked his M16.

‘Should I be worried?’ Helen asked.

‘Only about their cooking,’ Jimmy quipped.

With the thatch roof of Skids large house coming into view, Jimmy seemed to be studying the jeep with a puzzled frown. Facing the house, he said, ‘No one to greet us.’

‘They working?’ I asked.

‘Pull up,’ he told the driver. ‘Everyone out.’

I was bent double, holding the sides of the jeep, when the blast hit me.

A wave of flame engulfed me, my eyes closing automatically. Then I was airborne and tumbling – sky, dirt, sky, dirt - pain starting to register from my face and hands. I hit a thorn bush, going right through, the flesh being torn off my arms, hands and head. My shoulder impacted the ground, my vision filled with sandy earth, parched grass and a large beetle. With my legs on fire, I screamed, reaching down to them with hands that no longer responded. Rolling in the sandy soil, for how long I couldn’t tell, I doused the fire on my trousers.

Gunfire. Was that gunfire? Screaming?

In the press-up position I tried to stand, the sand sticking to my bloodied hands. Upright finally I felt dizzy and sick, fighting to get my bearings, smoke blocking my view, blood trickling down my face. Turning, I thought I could see the jeep. Taking a step I winched in agony, screaming aloud with anger and determination, desperate to get back to the jeep to help my friends. And Helen. I fought away the pain and plodded on, stumbling to my knees twice. Again I thought I heard gunfire.

Through the smoke I plodded along, all the while my legs feeling as if they were on fire, each movement of my trousers agony, the beige trousers now dark red with my blood. At the jeep I could feel the heat of the fire, but could not hear it. It was oddly silent. And in the sand, more blood, lots of blood. I peered through the smoke to the jeep, the driver dead at the wheel, no one else visible.

A large figure came through the smoke, Jimmy carrying an M16 prone. And I only recognised him by outline, his face

covered in blood, his clothes, his arms, ribs visible in his trousers. He grabbed me under the armpit and dragged me quickly towards the house, a trail of blood snaking through the sand, drag marks visible. In the darkened interior it took a moment for my eyes to adjust, blinking away the blood. Big Paul lay face down, tourniquets on his legs, and on the floor beside him enough blood to swim in. Next to him lay Helen, just a pile of bloodied clothing, and still smouldering. I stopped dead as Jimmy let go of me, stood staring down in shock. I just stood staring down at her seemingly lifeless body.

For what seemed an age I just stood there. Lifting my head, I noticed four other bodies, but they had not been with us on the jeep; three local women, one white man, enough blood to make me feel sick.

Jimmy reappeared with a charred medical kit, snatching it open. He broke open a plastic case, revealing a syringe set. From his arm he hurriedly extracted blood, soon injecting into Big Paul's legs in many places. After a second extraction, he injected the seemingly lifeless Big Paul in the arm. And I just stood there, in a silent world of my own. Switching hands, Jimmy extracted a full vial from his right arm, soon injecting Helen in her limp arm.

Standing, he took me by the shoulders and sat me down. Rushing to the kitchen and back, he emptied a bucket of water over me, my legs coming back to life with excruciating pain. He drank some of the water from the bucket, offering me some before retrieving another bucket full. Water was splashed over Helen and Big Paul in turn, the floor now awash with blood and water, and trickling out of the door. With my face contorted in pain, I eased forwards and knelt, pointing at Big Paul's legs.

Jimmy retrieved pads from the medical kit, placed them on Big Paul's legs, then my hands on top of the pads. I pressed down, my finger tips now in warm blood. Jimmy lifted two haemostats, opened a wound with his fingers and reached in like a dentist pulling a tooth. With what water was left in the bucket he splashed the wound, putting his face close and examining it. Releasing the tourniquets, he studied the wound, his fingers probing it at length. He jammed in a white pad, pulling it out red and examining the wound further, finally satisfied. He turned to me.

He said something, but I could not hear. From head to toe, he ran his bloodied hands over me, checking for wounds or fractures, easing off my shirt and discarding it. With another bucket of water he carefully soaked my legs, the rest of the bucket's contents applied to Helen's legs as she lay lifeless. Sitting me down, he pulled my shoes off, my feet numb and not protesting, the socks pulled off and discarded. Next came the trousers. He pointed, and motioned for me to take them off. I stood, fumbling to undue my belt, my thumbs not wishing to cooperate. As if sitting on the toilet, I bent down and lowered my trousers, horrified at what I found; red and white blistered skin, blackened patches. Burnt skin. Jimmy indicated that I should stay standing, and I stepped out of my trousers, my shins a colour that I could not describe. And all the while, my world was that of silent pain.

With my legs exposed, he poured more water. For the most part, they were numb, the odd shooting pain making me wince. From the kitchen he brought a rope, throwing it over a rafter and making a loop. He helped me forwards, into the loop as if being winched by a helicopter. Hanging there, supported, I drifted into unconsciousness.

With the sound of another jeep registering, Jimmy ran out with the M16, soon recognising Skids and Trev as they sped around the burning jeep, pulling up in a cloud of dust. Jumping down with their weapons they approached Jimmy with incredulous stares.

‘Jimmy, wha ... what the fuck happened?’

‘Mine in the road, remote detonated,’ he reported, getting his breath. ‘I killed two gunmen.’ They looked past him towards the house, a watery line of blood flowing down to the sandy dirt of the road. ‘Your mate ... is dead, and the women.’

They rushed past, a scene of carnage greeting them. Stepping carefully through water and blood, they took in the view of me hung up, my wounds, the others laying in the recovery position. They stepped past us, finding their dead friend, and their dead local girlfriends. Jimmy returned to the house, tending Helen as Skids and Trev stood over what had been their life.

‘Check the perimeter,’ Jimmy barked. ‘They may still be out there. I shot two, maybe more close by. South, look south.’

With Skids and Trev stepping again through the blood, still stunned by the scene and glancing back, they stepped out. Jimmy grabbed the radio with slippery fingers. 'Silo for River View.'

'River View rangers hut here, go ahead Jimmy.'

'Get hold of Doc Adam in Mawlini, I want him down to Skids' farm as fast as possible. Then get Cosy and Anna from Mombassa urgently, we've ... got an injured man here.'

'Your want aero-med rescue?' came a concerned voice.

'No, just do as I ask. We have armed poachers south of Skids' farm, I want people looking towards the border.'

'Poachers shot a man?'

'No, but he has some burns. Silo out.' He returned to Helen, stripping her. By time Skids returned, two hours later, she was trussed up like me, naked, Big Paul stripped down to his pants and spotted with white adhesive pads. With Jimmy's shirt and trousers now off, Skids stopped dead.

'Jimmy, those burns are fatal, we got to get a helo for you.'

'No,' Jimmy said in a forced whisper. 'But I need your help.' Skids hesitated. 'Snap out of it man, do as I ask! Get me some protein, tinned meat, anything. And water, lots of water.'

At some point Jimmy woke me, forcing me to drink plenty of water, and to take some tinned meat. It was night when I woke, now facing Cosy and Anna working on Big Paul. They eased me down. When I screamed in agony I was injected by Anna, soon out of it again. In the morning I was slapped awake by Jimmy, soon drinking a pint of water before being lifted out of the harness again, my armpits raw. They laid me down on a wet plastic sheet, cool to the touch, a mattress underneath. Lifting my head, Anna fed me a tin of meat, more water to wash it down with.

'Helen?' I asked.

'Alive,' was all I got back. I closed my eyes in agony as they applied cream to my limbs.

I was dreaming that I was on fire. I heard Helen scream, but could not reach her. Nudged awake, I noticed it was sundown. Anna propped me up and gave me a drink before feeding me three tins of meat, one straight after the other. A hot sugary tea followed. Turning my head, and looking over a blood-soaked sofa, I could see Helen being force-fed tinned meat, most of her face bandaged, a blanket up around her neck. After the feeding

she sobbed uncontrollably, injected with a sedative and laid back. With an angered determination I eased up, stood in my pants and covered in cream, my skin red underneath.

Jimmy stepped in with his shirt off, one side of his torso still reddened, but otherwise looking fine. 'You still with us?'

'What ... happened?'

Cosy and Anna exchanged looks.

Jimmy said, 'Mine under the jeep, two gunmen in the bushes. Skids and Trev killed six more up the road. They ... killed the women here, and Skids mate. They're ... buried out the back.'

'And Big Paul?' I croaked out.

'He'll make it. Unfortunately, he had never been injected till now. Lay down, eat and drink as much as you can.'

Anna spoon-fed me more tinned meat as Skids stepped in looking haggard. He sat, staring dispassionately at me. 'You should be dead. You should all ... be fucking dead. Someone wanna explain that.' He faced Jimmy. 'And you, injecting Paul and the woman with your blood – what the fucks all that about?'

Jimmy sat opposite Skids, taking a breath, a glance towards Anna. 'Many years ago, the Americans made a medical break through, a drug that speeds up your metabolism, healing you quickly. Unfortunately, it costs ten million an injection. Paul and I had injections, so we heal very quickly if we get water and protein. And my blood has a concentration, so if I inject someone else they'll heal quickly till it wears off.'

Skids pointed at Anna and Cosy. 'These two ain't looking surprised at that.'

'We experimented with the drug at the orphanage, kids that were terminal. Had some successes.' Anna and Cosy again exchanged looks.

'At ten million a pop – it ain't gunna fucking catch on, is it?' Skids snarled.

Jimmy informed him, 'UK forensic team here in the morning, they'll go over the jeep and ordnance. And the bodies.'

'You know who's behind this?' Skids asked, his eyes tired.

'Could be a number of groups, we'll see where the evidence takes us.' Skids stood. 'Skids,' Jimmy called, his head lowered. 'They came for me; this is my fault. I'm ... sorry for your loss.'

Skids glanced towards me, peering through cold, dead eyes. 'Those that live by the sword. We should have fucking retired

when we could have.’ He stepped out, the door slamming behind him.

Voices woke me later, strange faces, Jimmy giving instructions to people. I turned my head and eased onto an elbow, facing Helen as she stared back with a haunted look. ‘You OK?’ She did not respond. I eased up, Anna and Cosy both snoozing. Grabbing a towel I wiped grease off my skin, registering little pain. I was still in my pants, my old trousers nowhere to be seen, not that they were in a good state. I stepped across the room quietly and into a bedroom, finding Doc Adam attending Big Paul on a bed. He looked up. ‘How is he?’

‘He will be OK, he has the blood.’

‘Any clothes?’

Doc Adam opened a wardrobe, handing me green shorts and a t-shirt. I put them on with little pain, returning to the lounge. Next to Helen I eased down, lifting a water bottle.

‘Drink,’ I whispered. She took a few mouthfuls whilst staring out of focus. Putting down the water, I grabbed a half eaten tin, swiping off flies, and soon fed her corned beef without protest. Grabbing a pack of wet-wipes, I cleaned her face gently, but at length. I got some of the blood out of her hair, easing off her bandages and examining a set of stitches that seemed well healed already.

Easing the blanket lower, I lifted her reddened arms and cleaned them with the wet wipes, Anna now awake and smiling encouragingly. With both arms and hands wiped down, nails cleaned as best as I could, I tackled her neck as she stared out of focus. Kneeling, and lifting the blanket, I cleaned her feet and legs with a cloth dipped into a bucket of water. After a moment’s hesitation, a loud breath issued, I pulled back the blanket and wiped down the rest of her, scabs coming away and revealing new pink skin. The smell was horrendous, but I wasn’t sure if that was Helen, or me. Having cleaned her torso and armpits, I covered that section with the blanket and revealed a messy groin area; a very messy groin area, a recent bowel movement.

Anna handed me a large cloth and some paper towels, and I cleaned Helen like a newborn, removing the stinking cloth and paper, pulling the blanket back down. I washed myself in a bathroom, my hair under the shower, and dried off. After using the toilet I returned to Helen. Dragging over my own single

mattress, I placed it down next to hers. Lying down alongside her, I pulled her over to me, her head on my chest. As I slowly ran my hands through her hair she closed her eyes.

When Jimmy returned, he stopped to study us. 'Every dark cloud.'

I lay there staring at the door for hours, perhaps six hours, people coming and going, all the while listening to her breathing.

Finally awake, she started sobbing straight away. 'I'm scarred for life.'

'What scars are those?' I asked.

She held up her hands, turning them in and out.

'What scars?' I softly pressed.

She sat up and lifted the blanket, studying her legs, legs that had been shredded. She found only a few red marks. Anna approached with shorts and t-shirt, handing them to Helen.

I stood up, lifting Helen by the armpits and leading her to a bedroom. 'Get dressed,' I whispered.

She re-emerged as Jimmy stepped back in. He closed in on her. 'You OK?'

'Did I dream it?' she puzzled with a heavy frown, running her hands through matted hair.

'No, it was a car bomb.'

'My ... legs.'

'Were shredded.' He led her to a seat, Anna and Cosy closing in, Anna offering a hot tea. Helen took it, cradling the mug as she sipped.

'There's something you need to know. But first, Paul, there's something *you* need to know. Helen ... was sent to spy on us.'

My mind was a blank.

Helen lifted her head. 'You know?' she said, softly, as if asked an innocuous question.

'I knew ... more than a hundred years ago, young lady.'

Helen glanced at Anna, Cosy and me. Anna smiled. 'He is much older than he seems.'

Jimmy said, 'Which is why the good General wanted you to spy on us, despite the fact the British Prime Minister knows about me. If the General was caught he'd go to prison – as would you, so don't worry about him.'

'A ... spy?' I queried of Jimmy, my brain a bit slow.

He nodded. 'But a very nice one.'

‘You ... you don’t mind,’ she puzzled.

‘One of the reasons they asked you to spy on me - is my blood. My blood ... has very unusual properties. If injected into someone else they heal very quickly. It cures all diseases known to man; AIDS, cancer, you name it.’

Helen took in the faces. ‘You ... you injected me with your own blood.’ She closed her eyes and shook her head. ‘What?’

‘Look at your legs,’ Anna told Helen. ‘They were shredded in the car bomb attack, and you were burnt all over. And us, we were injected by Jimmy many years ago.’

‘I was injected as well,’ I put in, my voice hoarse. ‘My legs had third degree burns.’ I coughed. ‘Fatal, normally.’

‘As were *your* injuries,’ Anna told Helen. ‘You should be dead now. At best – horribly disfigured.’

Jimmy said, ‘A day from now you skin will be perfect, better than before. Just eat a lot, drink water, and take it easy.’

He led Cosy outside as Anna relayed the story of Mary in the war, Helen sat cradling her tea mug as she listened to the incredible story.

When Jimmy returned, Helen asked him to sit. ‘How could you have been in the Second World War?’

He took a moment. ‘When you were ten, and in boarding school, a gift came from an anonymous admirer, a silver necklace and a locket, one you keep hidden at your mother’s house.’ Helen bolted upright, her eyes wide. ‘If you open the locket, it says Magestic – spelt with a “g”.’ She gasped. ‘I sent it. I’ve been looking out for you ever since.’

Anna smiled widely. ‘See.’

“‘M” Group,’ I told her, tackling a new tin of Spam. ‘Magestic Group. All the world’s most powerful leaders listen to Jimmy. Just not the French.’

Doc Adam stepped out.

‘Big Paul OK?’ I asked.

‘His wounds have knitted very quickly and well. Jimmy gave him a lot of blood, praise God. I must go now, be well my friends.’

‘Take care, Doc,’ I offered, Anna giving him a hug.

Big Paul appeared in the doorway a minute later, struggling to walk. ‘Fuck I’m hungry.’

I grabbed two tins for him, pushing him back to bed. 'Eat these, then rest, you were badly chopped up.'

'Jimmy, he –'

'Injected you, or you wouldn't be with us.'

'The legs,' he coughed out. 'They'll ... heal up?'

'Good as new, if not a hell of a lot better. Not so much as a scar. Now sit the fuck down and eat.'

Big Paul winced as he sat, then accepted a tin. I stood over him as he spooned out a mouthful, returning to the lounge when I was satisfied I had a co-operative patient. With Helen also sat eating, I stepped outside, wincing in the bright light, a hand over my eyes; I had no idea where my sunglasses were, probably in the dirt somewhere. Jimmy stood with two men over a line of bodies under sheets. In the distance, I could see four men attending the burnt out jeep, taking swabs and collecting dirt samples. Barefoot, I stepped gingerly across the sandy soil; green shorts, and a green t-shirt that said "Kill 'em all, let God sort 'em out!" I walked up to Jimmy, the soles of my feet sensitive.

'Still with us?' Jimmy asked, a glance past me towards the house.

'Just. Who're they?'

'British forensics, trying to get a footprint on the bomb and the men. So far, the two principals are Belgians who served in the French Foreign Legion. Last known address was Angola. Their six black mates were Tanzanians, just the hired help.'

'Wha ... what happened?' I struggled with, my head hurting, my eyes just about closed.

'They came in the morning before we got here, after Skids and Trev had driven off. They killed the third man, the women, the fucking dog. Then waited for us.'

'Did we tell anyone ... you know ... were coming here?'

'I seem to remember saying we'd go see the sanctuary. Someone at the lodge heard it, but these guys must have been close by anyway. If they didn't get us here, they may have attacked the lodge instead.'

'What, two of them? The rangers are armed.'

'Yeah, I've been puzzling that as well. The other possibility is Skids and Co, but I doubt that. More likely someone wanted Skids and Co out of the way first, then come for us. It's a work in progress, no one alive to question.'

Skids drove back in, skirting around the burnt out jeep. Pulling up, he reported, 'The Rifles shot-up a jeep of four white men at the border, bodies on their way here.'

'So they were waiting to hit the lodge if this pair missed us down here,' Jimmy suggested.

'Could be more out there,' Skids noted, taking off his hat and wiping his brow with his sleeve. 'Got a hundred of the Rifles down there, all the park rangers.'

'Anything in the news?' Jimmy asked Skids directly.

'Not so far.' Skids stepped closer and lifted Jimmy's shirt. Making eye contact, he said, 'That's some fucking wonder drug.' He looked me over. 'Got any more?'

'In the fridge, enough for the two of you – if you want it.'

Skids took in the line of bodies, glanced at both of us, then stepped inside.

A line of jeeps approached: Pathfinders and someone else. A minute later the Defence Minister himself stepped down, dressed now in civilian clothes. He stood and took in the burnt out jeep, turning to the line of bodies. Stepping up to us, he said, 'I have been informed of the ... poachers. Perhaps you would honour me with the truth - this was no *poaching* incident, Mr Silo.'

'No, they came for me.'

'Rwandans?'

'We don't know yet, we're investigating. And it's important for tourism in Kenya ... that this remains a poaching incident that is played down.'

The Minister regarded us both carefully for a moment. 'Of that, we are in agreement.' Facing me, the Minister said, 'You are not well?'

'Minor injuries, some our staff hurt,' I told him.

'You ... were in the jeep?' he puzzled.

'No, we stepped out before the blast, the driver was still sat in it,' Jimmy informed the Minister.

'I see. You ... were very lucky. And the men at the border?'

'Poachers,' Jimmy insisted.

'I see.'

Jimmy firmly nudged the Minister back to his jeep, and back to Nairobi, promising to keep him informed. The man departed with an escort, one jeep of bodyguards remaining. Jimmy told them to protect the house. Back inside, I gulped down tepid

water, sitting next to Helen. Finishing her tin, she put a pillow on my lap and lay down. I found myself running my fingers through her hair again.

‘How long did you look after me?’ she asked in a weak voice.

‘Dunno. Day or two, it’s all a blur.’

She closed her eyes. When I opened mine, Anna and Cosy were gone, Skids and Trev sat staring with cold eyes, the floor now clean, a fire going. Jimmy appeared at my shoulder, handing me a chocolate bar and a bottle of water. Helen stirred, and he offered her the same.

‘We’ll leave soon, back into the lodge at night to get changed, have a decent meal,’ Jimmy informed us.

Big Paul appeared, yawning and scratching his balls. ‘Fuck I’m hungry.’

Jimmy thrust a tin towards him. ‘Be leaving soon, find some clothes.’

Still in his pants, Big Paul sat, revealing long scars on his legs, numerous reddened patches.

‘Will they heal?’ I asked Jimmy, pointing towards Big Paul’s legs.

‘Not as well as we’d like. I’ll get a plastic surgeon to tidy them up. After that the scars will go. I’m afraid I had to do a bit of DIY artery repair.’

‘I should have bled out,’ Big Paul noted between mouthfuls, seemingly none too concerned.

‘I injected you with a pint every hour, twelve pints in total.’

‘We compatible blood types?’ Big Paul puzzled.

‘No,’ Jimmy replied. ‘But with my blood it doesn’t matter.’

‘Neat fucking trick,’ Skids said from across the room.

Jimmy turned his head towards our hosts. ‘You’ll be compensated for the loss you’ve suffered here. You also be required to be just as discreet ... *as you were in the past*, or we’ll fall out.’ He held his gaze on them. ‘Are we reasonably clear about that, gentlemen.’

After a moment, they both nodded.

We drove back in the dark, the bodyguards dropping us at our rooms, our keys having been retrieved from tattered and bloodied clothes. We all showered, grabbed fresh clothes, then met in the bar at 10.30pm, food ordered - lots of food ordered, beers downed in mostly silence.

Jimmy said, 'Since the three of you are here, I'd like to take this opportunity ... to apologise for what you went through. Helen, Big Paul, you'll both be compensated in cash when we get back.'

'Sounds good,' Big Paul offered. 'How much?'

'A quarter million.'

'And then?' Helen asked.

'And then ... what?' Jimmy nudged.

'And then ... what happens? We just try and forget this happened?'

'We move on,' I said without looking up.

'I'm not sure I can,' Helen suggested.

'You have no choice,' Jimmy told her.

'No ... choice?' she queried.

'You knew what you were doing when you agreed to spy on us; that decision came with consequences. Whichever way it went, you would be facing a lengthy jail sentence. Now that you know about us, Her Majesties intelligence services will not let you walk the streets with what you know.'

'So ... I'm a prisoner?'

'Not yet, you're not,' Jimmy explained. 'But the day you stop working for me they'll be waiting, you and the General in the dock.'

'I was doing my duty,' she quietly protested.

'I'm sure the judge will accept that,' Jimmy sarcastically offered.

'You didn't give me that locket as a kid ... just to throw me to the wolves!'

Jimmy smiled towards me. 'She's not stupid, is she?' Facing her, he said, 'I could give you the money, and a head start. So long as you can outwit the security services of the UK, America, Russia, China and Israel ... you'll do fine.'

Big Paul laughed, getting a chip thrown at him from Helen.

'You could ask them to leave me alone, I've seen the influence you have,' she pressed.

'Why do you want to leave, you just started working for us?' I asked.

'Something about being *blown-up* comes to mind!'

'You'll get used to it,' Big Paul stated, getting stared at by the three of us.

‘OK,’ Jimmy began. ‘Here’s my best deal. You work a twelve month contract, I’ll give you a million quid and a change of identity, faking your death. How’s that?’

‘Why *the fuck* ... would you want me working for you, *boss*, when you know I was sent to spy on you?’ Helen testily asked.

‘Big Paul?’ Jimmy called.

Big Paul looked up, and faced her. ‘That stuff with the blood, that’s just a small part of it. He’s a fucking time traveller – that’s why all the world’s leaders have him on speed dial.’

She straightened, wide-eyed. ‘A ... time traveller?’

I said, ‘He knows what the stock markets will do next week, hence the money we make. For the past ten years he’s been tipping off the world about disasters, plane crashes, earthquakes, assassinations, wars.’

‘This is getting so weird,’ she said, shaking her head.

‘Would you like to know your own future?’ Jimmy asked her as he cut up his steak.

‘My ... future?’

‘Why’d you think he hired you, dopey!’ Big Paul told her. ‘Fuck, for a smart bird she’s a bit slow.’

She threw another chip.

‘Blonde, you see,’ I told Big Paul.

She heaved a big breath. ‘So what’s in my future?’

‘Well, ten years from now you’ll be married, you’ll have two gorgeous daughters – both musical, a great house, a high paying job, lots of respect, and lots of work satisfaction.’ That shut her up. Jimmy added, ‘And your daughters will grow up to have a significant effect on the future development of mankind.’

I was keeping quiet, thinking about many things. Not least, did I even want to marry her?

‘And I get to that ... future position –’ Helen said.

‘By taking advice from Uncle Jimmy,’ Jimmy told her.

Big Paul said, ‘When I first met Jimmy, he told me when and where I’d get back together with Jill – right spooky.’

‘And he told me I had a destiny,’ I put in. ‘And, for a smart bird, you haven’t ask the main question: why go back in time?’

‘So why go back in time?’ she testily asked.

‘Prevent World War Three,’ Jimmy coldly stated, his gaze held on her. ‘Kicks off in a few years. Unless...’

‘Unless you prevent it,’ she realised.

‘And to do that I need a good team, people that I know – from the future – have it in them to make a difference. As of now you’re on the team, not least for your daughter’s sake. Your *future* daughters, who will never be born if you’re in prison.’

‘So,’ I said. ‘Door number one – nice house, good pay, nice family. Or door number two – the booby prize. Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen.’

‘Not much of a choice,’ she conceded.

‘It never was,’ Jimmy said. To me, he said, ‘She lost her virginity at fifteen –’

‘Hey!’

‘To the grounds keeper of her school.’

‘Hey!’

‘And she once fashioned a dildo out of wood.’

She slapped Jimmy’s arm. ‘Enough!’ She forced a breath. ‘God, how much do you know about me?’

‘All of it,’ Jimmy told her. ‘Test me.’

She hesitated. ‘Who did I stab?’

‘You’re step uncle, Patrick Tailor, in your garden shed.’ She put a hand to her mouth. Jimmy calmly added, ‘A week before I killed him.’

‘You topped him?’ Big Paul puzzled.

‘He would have done something ... *not nice* to Helen.’ She stared back, Jimmy adding, ‘In Nigeria, when you accompanied your old boss – but got lost, four men surrounded you.’

‘That was her?’ Big Paul asked. She focused on him. ‘I shot them from the roof. Sorry if I scared you, love.’

Her eyes moistened. ‘You saved me,’ she realised.

‘I didn’t love, I was just following orders,’ Big Paul said, stuffing his face.

Jimmy placed his hand on hers. ‘I’ve been looking out for you for a long, long time.’

She got up and ran to her room.

‘She be alright?’ I asked.

‘Yes. And tomorrow we’ll fly back and plan a war. Some bastard will pay for this.’

In the morning, Skids radioed to say he had our “package”. We grabbed a quiet and moody Helen and set off, bodyguards in tow.

Outside of Skids house we found a man sat in a jeep, trussed up and held by Pathfinders.

‘They got him before he boarded a plane,’ Skids informed us. ‘He connected?’

With a wave from Jimmy, the Rifles bundled the man out. ‘I recognise your face from Forward Base in the DRC.’ He lifted the man, slamming him against the jeep. I could see a cut lip and bruised eye. ‘And you were at the lodge. Now, tell me what I need to know and I’ll stick you on plane – you know I will. Now, who hired you?’

The man took in the faces. ‘APIC Mines. Renee Shultzman,’ he said with an accent.

‘To do what?’

He hesitated, glancing at the various faces. ‘To kill the English soldiers here, and you and your people.’

Jimmy waved Helen closer. ‘This is the man who organised the attack. It was his bomb that burnt you.’ He took a big step backwards. And waited.

Helen did not hesitate. She punched him in the mouth, took a half step backwards and kicked him in the groin, finally stamping down on his shins and making him scream.

Big Paul tipped his head towards me. ‘You wouldn’t want to criticise her fucking cooking.’

‘No,’ I agreed, stood wide-eyed.

Jimmy waved the Pathfinders to the jeep, telling them to drive down the road and wait. Our bodyguards mounted up. Jimmy faced Skids. ‘He’s all yours.’

‘You said I could go!’ the man protested.

‘Lions need to eat. Sorry.’

We mounted up as Skids and Trev dragged the man off to his unpleasant fate, driving back to the lodge without speaking. At the lodge we packed quickly, picked up at the grass strip by Tubby and flown to Nairobi. Eighteen hours later I sat with a cup of tea, staring out at the grass in the dawn light.

At 9am an “M” Group meeting was called, Sykes taking the unusual step of an early helicopter flight down to us. The men assembled, Jimmy finally walking in with Helen in tow, her presence puzzled.

‘Gentlemen,’ Jimmy called as we sat about the lounge. ‘Let us welcome the latest member of the “M” Group, Helen.’

‘Are you sure?’ Sykes cautioned.

‘She’s been ... converted,’ Jimmy said to Sykes. ‘And she has a destiny. Why’d you think I hired her?’

‘And how much does she know?’ Sykes pressed.

‘Just the basics. But, after the car bomb, I had to inject her – no choice. That brought my plans for her forward by around a year.’

‘Welcome,’ Han offered, the group smiling and nodding towards her.

‘First of all,’ Sykes began. ‘The group, and its governments, would like to protest your ... reckless disregard for you own safety.’

Jimmy turned to me. ‘Are you feeling wanted, needed and loved?’

‘I have a warm glowy feeling all over,’ I sarcastically stated. ‘It’s as if they like us, and not just need us for what we can provide them.’

Jimmy nodded. Facing the group, he said, ‘We’re touched, but let me make something clear: this future we’re moulding... is not guaranteed, *we* are mortal, and getting to 2025 will be difficult every step of the way. If you think I can get you there without tripping a few times ... you’re mistaken.’ He let them think about it. ‘Now, we have a problem with APIC Mines, not least their desire to kill us, and de-stabilise the Congo. This, is what I would like to happen.’ He gave the detail.

That evening the TV news in Belgium and France was dominated by APIC, their share price having dropped ninety percent before closing. The Chinese Government, large customers of APIC, had cancelled all contracts. That, in itself, was a problem for APIC, but when the Chinese cited “terrorist charges in Africa” as the reason the company took a nose dive, China indicating that it would not be paying what it owed the company. At the same time, the Kinshasa Government accused APIC of terrorism, arrest warrants issued, the UN launching an investigation into APIC’s Africa operations, and involvement in the futile Congo invasion.

The next morning the Financial Times was full of APIC stories, the companies share price down to twenty pence from

two pounds ten. Since two Belgian Government Ministers were on the board, they resigned, now being hounded by the press of many nations. Two APIC board members were, unfortunately, in China and trying to get more business, now arrested on non-specific terrorist charges. When the share price touched fifteen pence, the Russian Government - acting through proxies, started buying heavily. They approach principal shareholders who were keen to be distanced from the scandal, buying up blocks at knock down prices. Our friends in low places were also buying shares, especially the Israelis. By the end of the day the Russian Oligarch tasked with the share purchase had enough of a block to launch a bid for control of the company. The existing board and chairman were sacked, a Russian board taking over in record time. They promised an immediate cleanup, inviting in the UN, the French and Belgium police, and Interpol. The share price started to recover.

Jimmy, as Governor of the Eastern DRC, issued a writ for damages for APIC's involvement in the DRC invasion. In a move that stunned the financial press, APIC offered to settle out of court, further condemning the former directors by implication. China, having been "reassured", resumed its contracts, paid its bill, and added a few extra contracts, the share price back up to two pounds, the Financial Times still full of the story. When the Kinshasa Government confirmed that the newly reformed company would be allowed into the DRC, its share price topped two pounds fifty, our friends in low places making plenty of money.

A week after destroying the company, we received two hundred and fifty million in damages, paid to the corporation we used to develop the DRC. We had hurt APIC where it mattered – in their pockets, Mossad taking care of Renee Shultzman for us.

Helen had been subdued for many days after returning, and she mostly ate her meals in her own apartment. She had received the compensation Jimmy had promised her, but that had not fixed a smile to her face. Then, on the Monday, she turned up in the gym around 6am, getting on a treadmill and running for an hour. The three of us ran together, nothing said. The next day Big Paul started using the gym early, his legs still giving him some pain, a physiotherapist used; tendons had knitted back together, but not

quite correctly; surgery was planned. For a ten-minute period, all four of us attended the line of treadmills.

That evening I asked Helen if she fancied a meal out, a break from the house. She took a few seconds, then agreed, Karl driving us to a local country pub, quiet on a Monday. She downed a large white wine quickly.

‘You feel like a prisoner?’ I delicately broached.

‘A bit, I suppose. But like Jimmy said, I chose the assignment, I knew the risks.’

‘It’s not an unpleasant assignment,’ I suggested. ‘And you’re part of something important.’

‘It’s ... a challenge,’ she conceded.

After a moment’s thought, I said, ‘If you want out, I’m sure we can arrange a new identity, some money, a Caribbean island.’

‘And be on the run?’

‘One word from Jimmy - and no one will touch you,’ I assured her.

‘You trying to get rid of me?’

‘No, I’m trying to help you.’

She had been avoiding eye contact, but now studied me. ‘Why, pray tell?’

‘That’s better, more like the old acidic you.’ She raised an eyebrow. I continued, ‘As to why ... Jimmy says you have a destiny, a part to play, and he’s never wrong.’

She accepted another wine. Staring into it, she said, ‘That uncle I stabbed, he ... would have raped me.’ She took a sip. ‘They found him hanged; supposedly suicide. And those men in Nigeria ... well, that would have been horrendous.’

‘Is there an *I’m grateful* in there somewhere?’

She looked up. ‘I suppose,’ she conceded, breathing out.

‘So what’s the problem?’

‘How did you react when you found out?’

‘Ah, Jimmy played me well. He told me I’d be rich and successful, lots of pretty girls.’

‘He played to your faults.’

‘And then he hit below the belt, talk of plane crashes and saving lives – made me feel very guilty. But I got buttered up for six months first; money, girls – I was a bit backward with the ladies at twenty-three.’

‘And now you have your pick,’ she noted.

‘Not quite, I have to be very careful who I date. The smart ones question what we do, the dippy one’s don’t – but aren’t worth dating then.’

‘And Katie Joe? What happened there?’

‘Her ... love hate relationship with the press pissed me off. She courted publicity, then whinged when she got it. It was all about the size of her arse and the latest tabloid review. That got on my tits.’

‘Jimmy’s masseur...?’

‘We don’t know,’ I said with a smile. ‘And anyone asking risks death. Or worse!’

‘I was ... *chosen* for this because I was supposed to remind him of Liz.’

‘You do,’ I said. ‘But he would never get involved with someone he worked with. If your friends in intelligence thought that, then they’re thick.’

‘You don’t think I could have worked my charm?’ she toyed.

‘Nope, not a hope in hell.’

‘What do you know that I don’t?’ she asked, squinting at me.

‘Your destiny.’

‘Do tell.’

‘Nope. Not allowed. Sorry.’ I was enjoying teasing her.

‘I bet I could make you with a good tickling.’

I noticed her glass empty. Again. She ordered another. If she was like the rest of us, the booze would have little effect.

With a fresh wine, she said, ‘You saw me naked.’

‘You saw me in my pants,’ I countered.

‘And you wiped my arse.’

‘You say that ... as if you’re surprised I’d look after you. You’re part of the team. Of course I’d look after you.’

‘Not because you fancied me?’ she toyed.

‘I’ve seen your shitty arse, love,’ I said, making a face. ‘Enough to put any man off.’

‘Hey!’ she playfully scolded. ‘That ... part should be consigned to a deep dark place.’

‘Trust me, it is.’

‘I go on one trip with you ... and get burnt alive.’ She shook her head.

‘It’s a dangerous game,’ I conceded, our starters placed down. I glanced at Karl and his oppo sat in the corner, stuffing their faces. ‘What’ll you do?’

‘Do?’

‘Stay or go?’

‘Jimmy said I’d have to serve my year long penance.’ She made a face. ‘It’ll give me time to re-think my life.’

‘No more spy work after?’

‘No,’ she firmly stated. ‘Fool’s game; let someone else do it.’

‘What would you do, right now, if this had never happened and you weren’t playing at being a spy?’

She gave it some thought. ‘The notion of two musical daughters appealed to me. I’ve been thinking about that a lot.’

‘You’re twenty-eight, so settling age, I suppose. What about work?’

‘Find a nice rich man and be a lazy cow.’

‘Are there *nice* rich men?’ I challenged.

‘Not really, they’re all driven – or complete arses.’

‘I can’t quite see you sat at home all day. You’d need something to keep you sharp.’

‘I fancy writing a novel.’

‘Why not do that now, you only sleep a few hours, like us? You could get in two or three hours a day. There’s one book that Jimmy was going to commission someone to write – The Future of Africa. Why don’t you tackle that, we’d make sure it got published and widely read.’

‘I couldn’t publish as me, they’d know,’ she complained.

‘They ... will disappear, or go to prison. Don’t worry about *they*. If Jimmy scrubs your past, you’ll be fine.’

‘You’re being very accommodating, young sir.’

‘Trying to get you back on your feet, and your old acidic self, less of a mopey bitch.’

She downed the remainder of her third wine, another ordered from a surprised waiter. We chatted and ate till the staff asked us nicely if we’d fuck off home, Karl yawning. She did not appear drunk, but had packed away enough to down a horse, the waiters now convinced we were both alcoholics. At the house we linked elbows as we walked in.

‘Walk me to my abode,’ Helen suggested, now sounding a little drunk. ‘There could be assassins waiting.’

‘I wouldn’t joke about stuff like that, not around here.’

In her apartment she got the kettle on as I examined what she had done with the place, the little feminine touches. The pictures on the wall were moody landscapes, fogs at dawn, the CD collection mostly classical, the newspapers broadsheets, and the magazines all about decorating posh homes.

She sat, placing down my tea. ‘Stop nosing.’

‘I paid for half this house, so I’ll nose if I want, *employee*.’

‘He can predict the stock markets, where’s the challenge in that?’ she challenged as she plonked down.

‘That’s not the point – we use the money to fix things, and pay for Rescue Force and the orphanages.’

‘Yeah, you’re such *lovely* people.’

Shaking my head, I stood up, and walked out. Ten minutes later she knocked on my apartment door. Then banged on it. Still dressed, I opened the reinforced door. ‘What!’

‘You misunderstood me,’ she said, barging in. I closed the door as she added, ‘I don’t want to be fighting with you. I ... don’t want to be fighting with anyone.’

‘Perhaps you should just shut your trap more often,’ I helpfully suggested as we both flopped onto the sofa.

‘This is difficult for me,’ she began.

‘What is?’ I pressed.

‘I was ... I did not really want the assignment, but it *was* a challenge. I didn’t even know if I’d get the damn job. And now all this, all this ... fucking time travel stuff. It’s ... hard. I just don’t know where I am, what I’m supposed to do. Am I the enemy, a prisoner, a PA?’

I was sympathetic. ‘Yes, it must be a bit confusing. But all you need to do is make a choice. Just say – I’m on the team, I want to help fix the world.’

‘I’m on the team, I want to help fix the world. I do.’

‘Great. I’ll take you back to your room.’ I stood.

‘No. I like you running your fingers through my hair. Could you be a love ... and do that for me.’ She help up a hand.

I helped her up. On the bed we lay fully clothed, and I ran my fingers through her hair till she fell asleep.

At 5am she woke me with a tea, placing it down on the bedside cabinet, sipping one herself. ‘I’m not normally so relaxed with men. You like a well worn old pair of slippers.’

‘Thanks, I think.’

‘It’s odd. It’s as if I know you.’

After her tea, she headed back to her own room to cleanup, I headed down to the gym.

Jimmy said, ‘Well?’

‘Just like Katie: fully clothed on the bed. I’m beginning to worry about my animal magnetism.’

‘Give it time.’

She joined us thirty minutes later, running in her spandex and looking very sexy, Jimmy not saying anything.

When Big Paul appeared, he said, ‘Morning slack draws,’ to her. She stopped the machine and stared at me.

‘Cameras,’ I carefully mouthed. ‘And security staff all night with nothing to do,’ I explained.

She reached across and punched Big Paul on the shoulder before re-starting her treadmill. At breakfast we managed to get a smile out of her, the four of us ravenously devouring Cookie’s creations. We were busy that week, everyone with their noses in files, and Helen seemed much better. She took over a few tasks from me, collating figures. On the Thursday I found her shouting down the phone at a supplier. Smiling, I went and found Jimmy.

‘She’s chewing some guy out down the phone,’ I reported. He stared at me. ‘She’s trying to get us a better deal, she’s taking *our side* against his.’

Jimmy nodded. ‘It’s a good sign. Now go and ask her to do that in a quiet, yet acidic and condescending tone.’

The following day, the Friday, I asked her if she wanted to go to the club in Cardiff. She thought about it, then suggested the London club. I grabbed Karl and his mate, and we drove out around 4pm. I thought I saw the masseur’s car pass as we drove down towards Newport. When the kids are away, I thought to myself. We parked in the basement of the old apartment, bags dumped into rooms, Helen in Jimmy’s old room, and grabbed a taxi around to the club at 8pm. In the VIP area we walked straight into Katie and her new man. I seemed to remember something from the tabloids, but could remember nothing about him.

‘Katie,’ I flatly greeted her as we halted.

‘Paul. This is my fiancé, Rod,’ she got out quickly.

‘This is Jimmy’s new PA, Helen,’ I said.

They shook, I shook his hand with a thin, formal smile.

‘So, no one trying to shoot you lately?’ Katie toyed.

I exchanged a look with Helen. ‘Not in the last week, no. So what do you do, Rod?’

‘I’m sure you already know,’ he came back with.

‘Paul doesn’t read the papers,’ Katie put in. ‘Just the Financial Times. Rod is in jewellery.’

‘Rod Jason, yes?’ Helen asked.

‘Yes, the Jason family.’

‘The *infamous* Jason family,’ Helen pointed out.

‘Excuse me?’ Rod demanded.

Helen said, ‘You were arrested for VAT fraud a few years back, your father jailed for six months, were you not?’

Katie stopped smiling.

‘I was acquitted,’ Rod insisted.

‘No, you were let go because you sold out the other directors. They took the rap, and you had police protection for six months. You were guilty, just a Judas,’ Helen insisted.

Rod stormed off, dragging Katie as he did.

‘Well, that could have gone better,’ I said.

‘He’s a gangster, you should warn her,’ Helen suggested.

‘I think you just did.’

‘No, properly, before she makes a mistake.’

I stared at her for a moment, then lifted my mobile, calling Jimmy. He sounded out of breath. ‘Jimmy, Katie is about to marry some idiot called Rod Jason –’

‘They won’t marry. Don’t worry.’ He hung up.

I held the mobile for a moment. ‘Jimmy says they won’t marry.’

‘For the best, she would have been hurt.’

I stood squarely facing Helen. ‘And you wish to get involved because...?’

‘I don’t like men *like that* hurting women.’

‘Oh,’ I said, nodding as I thought about it.

We walked around to the Indian restaurant and packed away a three-course meal with plenty of beer for me, plenty of wine for Helen. Two hours later, back in the VIP area, we mingled, many people recognising me and saying hello. And many people enquired if Helen was my new girlfriend. We chatted to staff from McKinleys, they’d made a few quid from APIC Mines,

then stood with a group of our singers, Helen quite taken with the celebs.

Katie reappeared alone an hour later, looking less than well kept together. She stormed over to me. Noticing her, Helen closed in. 'Why did you do that!' Katie asked me in an angered, whisper.

'He didn't, I did,' Helen loudly cut in with. 'Because I know men like that, and I didn't want to see him hurt you.' She led Katie forcefully to a quiet area, Katie now tearful. 'Did you ask him?' Katie did not reply. 'Then he must have told you the truth. He's a crook! And you would have lasted six months before he wrecked your career.' Helen produced a tissue, and gently dabbed Katie's eyes, cleaning up her mascara smudges. From a table, she lifted her own white wine. 'Down that.'

Katie did as asked, helped down into a corner seat.

Helen lifted her head to me, 'Give us ten.'

I took a breath, and left them to it, wondering what the morning papers would say. Karl and his mate asked what the drama was, so I explained it as we stood chatting in line of sight. Helen eventually escorted Katie to a taxi, returning to us in the VIP area.

'She OK?' I asked.

'She'll be fine, just as soon as the tabloids have finished with her. Still, for the best.'

I fetched her a fresh wine. 'You ever been engaged?'

'Nope, not even close. It's all been work, work, work since college.'

I most definitely did not want her to clarify just what "work" entailed. We returned to the celebs, Helen enjoying the chit chat, especially the respect she got when she told people she was Jimmy's PA. An hour later, with a group of singers grabbing us, we were led into the Retro room, soon dancing to the kind of crappy old songs that you normally hear at wedding receptions; and enjoying them greatly. Helen seemed to connect with a girl band, and seemed to be enjoying herself, the first time since Kenya. I got propositioned a few times, but politely declined, saying no to a few real stunners, and a couple of tipsy singers.

'Why you turning the girls away?' Helen shouted into my ear at one point.

'You're my date for the evening.'

‘Am I?’ She went back to her dancing.

Needing a break, I stepped out of the Retro room and into one of the chill-out rooms, grabbing a beer and chatting to Karl and his mate, now a bead of cooling sweat on my brow.

Karl said, ‘There’re more beautiful women in here than you poke a stick at.’

‘We don’t let the mingers in!’ I joked.

‘So, you and ... Helen?’

‘Guys, I have no idea either way. When I figure it out, I’ll let you know.’

Helen walked around the corner with two men in tow. Stopping at us, she said, ‘This is my date, Paul Holton, and these are his armed bodyguards.’ The two men backed up quickly and out.

‘Problems?’ I asked.

‘No, they just needed a cold shower. But it’s nice to take your name in vain. I told a guy earlier I was Jimmy’s girlfriend - should have seen the look on his face. Right, I’m done, shopping in the morning. Take me home, guys.’

At the apartment block, Karl and his mate ducked into Big Paul’s old apartment, I led Helen back to the main apartment, putting the kettle on.

‘It’s not all bad, working for you two,’ she shouted from the lounge.

‘Very little of it ... *is bad*,’ I countered, placing her tea down on the coffee table. ‘Except getting blown up.’

‘And your nosy staff.’

‘It is a bit of a gossip shop,’ I admitted.

‘You could have pulled tonight,’ she toyed, a glint in her eye.

‘I can pull anytime, anywhere, not just in nightclubs,’ I defensively pointed out. ‘But like Katie, I have to be careful *who* I date.’

‘And then you date them for a year or so, two years with Katie.’

‘Learnt that at Poker Night?’

‘No, that was in the papers last week. You really should scan the tabloids.’

I cradled my tea mug. ‘I used to, but it gets a bit silly – caring about what people say.’

‘Your staff think we’re at it,’ she toyed.

‘I have bigger concerns,’ I told her. ‘Stuff like that doesn’t bother me.’

‘In Kenya, you nursed me, right after getting pissy with me in the lodge. Why so much care?’

‘You ... have an important destiny. It’s good enough for Jimmy, so good enough for me.’

‘Do you know what that destiny is?’

‘Yes.’

‘And...?’

‘Not allowed, so don’t ask.’

‘Bet I could get it out if you.’

‘Bet you couldn’t.’

She put down her mug and stepped around, straddling me. ‘Please, boss, can you tell me what it is.’ I shook my head. She lifted off her top. ‘Please, boss, I’ll be a good girl,’ she whispered, leaning in and nibbling my ear, her boobs in my face. I resisted for a good five seconds before throwing her onto her back on the sofa, biting at her nipples and making her shriek. And I hoped the floor was relaying the sounds to the guys below.

In the morning we were both up early, having stayed in my old bed. Showering together led to a marathon sex session, and another shower before breakfast.

Sat in a robe, she faced me, toast in hand. ‘So, where do we go from here?’

‘Shopping.’

‘And after that?’

‘Where would you like it to go?’

‘You normally see girls for a year, after which ... I guess Jimmy would release me from servitude. Be a pleasant enough year.’

‘That’s the nicest thing a girl has ever said to me,’ I quipped. ‘Next you’ll be comparing me to an old pair of slippers.’

‘And ... being your woman, your ... bit of stuff, I’d expect a good shopping allowance.’

‘Oh, of course,’ I said, mockingly. I fetched the credit card Jimmy had given me a few days ago, and handed it over.

‘It’s in my name,’ she puzzled, pulling off a small sticker with the pin code.

‘Ten grand a month limit.’

She focused on me. ‘You had a ... ready made card in my name ... with a ten grand a month limit?’

‘Had it made up when you started with us,’ I lied, although I was not sure when Jimmy had ordered it.

‘And it’s to be used for...?’

‘Anything you like. Go clothes shopping, I’m sure Karl would love to trail you around.’

She stood. ‘It may be a pleasant year after all.’

At 4pm she burst in with a dozen bags, and three singers, Karl weighted down with bags. I welcomed the girls, laughing at Karl as he muttered under his breath. I had stayed in the apartment, buying the papers, and the tabloids for a change, and sat reading all day, making a few calls. It had been nice to just sit in the old apartment and chill out. The girls plonked down their bags in piles, teas organised. Seemed we were out with them that evening, whether I liked it or not.

With the singers gone, Helen dragged me to the bedroom, another marathon session initiated; we were so tired afterward we actually had a quick nap before going out. Helen called it “post shopping-high sex”. At Po’s Chinese restaurant we met the girls, enjoying a lengthy meal. Fortunately, one of the girls brought her boyfriend along, another singer, but also a car and plane geek. I had someone to talk to. We hit the club around 10.30pm, straight into the busy VIP area. I spent thirty minutes greeting people I knew, and some who just wanted to meet me. When I noticed a few girls interested in Karl and his mate, and what they did for a living, I stepped in and gave the guys a good write-up, explaining that they were “on duty”, but allowed to spend the evening chatting to pretty girls. Then a large figure loomed near: Jimmy. Big Paul and Keely were with him, two doormen in tow.

Jimmy took me to one side. ‘Well?’

‘We’re an item. And she has the credit card,’ I happily reported. ‘Last night in here she let her hair down - it did her good. We had *post shopping sex*!’

‘Excellent. I’ve got a room here, you use the apartment.’

We joined Helen, who thanked Jimmy for the credit card. He thumbed towards me. ‘Coming out of his account.’

‘He won’t tell me what my future is,’ she mock complained.

‘I will, in four weeks, relax.’

The music seemed better than normal that night, the beer tasted better, and was happier than I had been in quite a while. But it took this evening for me to realise that.

On Monday morning, back in the office, Helen playfully referred to me as Mister Holton. Everyone knew about us, but no one said anything openly.

After the meeting we got a call. 'Could we receive the French Interior Minister today?' Jimmy confirmed that we could, and suggested he take a helicopter from London, kindly paid for on our account. At 2pm the Minister arrived in a commercial Agusta. Helen greeted the French delegation, fluently conversing with our guests as she walked them in. She stopped to explain Karl and his buddies when asked. In the lounge we welcomed the delegation, three men, the "M" Group tucked away, but listening in; we had bugged our own lounge.

'Minister,' Jimmy greeted, gesturing him towards a seat, French coffee offered for our guests, Helen acting as translator. Sitting, Jimmy began with, 'It's an honour to receive you. How can we help the French Government?'

Our three guests spoke English well enough. The Minister began with, 'We are obviously aware of a lot more of what *happens* in Africa, than the public and the press.'

'I would be disappointed in your security services if you were not,' Jimmy told him.

'We are also certain that the APIC Mines takeover was ... contrived.'

'Are you suggesting that the Chinese and Russian Governments were duplicitous in the takeover? It would seem... *unwise* to make such an allegation, since trade, and relations may be adversely affected with both those nations.'

The Minister hesitated. 'That would be a ... concern. We also have the concern of our citizens being held in China.'

'If you are suggesting that APIC Mines are innocent, then I am afraid I would have to release enough information to the press to bring down the French Government.'

They shifted uneasily. The Minister said, 'We did not come here to make this situation worse, but to find a ... solution.'

'What did you have in mind?'

‘We do not condone the actions of APIC, of French mining companies, and of the involvement of some of our ministers. But we would, naturally, not wish to see our influence in Africa diminished, either politically or economically. And your influence in the region is both great, and a great puzzle to us.’

Jimmy held his hands wide. ‘Gentlemen, if you’re nice to the people of Africa, they’ll wish to do business with you. It’s no more complicated than that. And I’ve never asked anyone to operate against French interests. When we catch your people spying on us, or trying to kill our people, we send them back – as you’re well aware.’

‘Those *people* ... were not sanctioned from the top,’ the Minister insisted.

‘I’m sorry to hear you’ve lost control of your intelligence services,’ Jimmy offered.

‘We have not ... lost control,’ the Minister unhappily insisted.

‘Then may I ask, if any more DGSE spies will appear at my facilities in the future?’

‘They have functions other than monitoring you, but may occur in areas where you have an interest.’

‘In which case, let them identify themselves to me ... and we’ll sit and have a coffee when we meet.’

The Minister lifted an eyebrow. ‘That is a kind offer,’ he mockingly stated. He crossed his legs. ‘Now, we would like to ask what your plans are for the Democratic Republic of Congo?’

‘Can you be more ... specific?’

‘Your plans for mining,’ the Minister clarified.

‘Once peace has been established, any and all mining companies will be welcome. What you must keep in mind is that the currently mined totals are less than one percent of what could be mined – if the country had a peace, and a decent infrastructure. It’s the fighting that’s keeping the ore under the ground.’

‘And would you co-operate with us, in infrastructure projects in the region?’

‘Of course, any help you offer be will be appreciated. I have no problem with France, or its mining corporations – those operating inside the law, that is. As you will have seen, I recommended to the Somalis that a French company be allowed in.’

‘Indeed. And French companies will not be disadvantaged in the Congo?’

‘Not at all; when there is a peace, all companies will be allowed to make tenders in the region I have influence. And Kimballa can always override me.’

‘Unlikely. He fears you.’

‘I doubt that. And why is an Interior Minister here to discuss matters of commerce? A bit beyond your remit.’ Jimmy waited.

‘We know that there is a ... combined intelligence bureau operating in many central Africa nations, and that there seems to be many non-English living here. Our recent approach to your Prime Minister was *unprecedented* - he told us to come and talk to you directly, someone without political high office.’

‘Maybe he was just busy,’ I helpfully put in.

‘Gentlemen, what is it that I can help you with?’ Jimmy pressed.

‘We naturally wish to assist you in Africa, not be on opposite sides. We are close nations in Europe, and co-operate on many things. This ... departure from that is a great concern to many.’

‘As it should be,’ Jimmy firmly stated. ‘It should be a concern for the French people, and the wider Europe, that French mining companies should be trying to rape Africa, to kill its people and steal its ore. That is something I will not allow. I’m going to fix the Congo with or without you. The people will have roads, education, hospitals ... and security. They will have what they deserve to have with the riches under their feet!’

The Minister took a breath. ‘That ... I agree with, as would any sane person. May we ... move on from that premise?’

‘Of course,’ Jimmy said with forced civility. ‘What would you like me to do?’

‘We would like to co-operate on combined intelligence matters in Africa, we would like to assist on infrastructure projects in Eastern Congo, and we would like a fair and equitable chance of future mining operations.’

‘I agree to all three, as far as they are within my power to influence. I will send you formal requests for assistance with certain projects. Now, Interior Minister, perhaps you would like to get to why you really came here.’

The Minister glanced at his colleagues. ‘We know that you have the ear of the British Prime Minister, the American

President, the Chinese Government, and the Russian Government. We have also seen what you can *magic out of a hat* in Africa. We've seen the Kenyans allow you your own army, so to the Tanzanians and the Congo and Somalia. What you did in Somalia was ... unprecedented. We are not just curious, we are utterly confused as to who you are, which is why some see you as a threat.'

'Indeed,' Jimmy let out. 'Well, would your two colleagues like to step out for a minute?'

After a moment the Minister nodded towards his associates. With them out of earshot, Jimmy said, 'Your ambassador in London has been receiving letters from a powerful clairvoyant named Magestic.' The Minister bolted upright, Jimmy adding. 'I'm his right hand man. I get detailed instructions, including when and where your agents will turn up in Africa. You may let your President know that. Who he chooses to inform is up to him.'

'Why did we not know this before?'

'The time was not right. It is now, because you came and asked nicely to join the club.'

'How much do you know –'

'About the future? Pretty much everything.'

The Minister turned to me. 'And you?'

'I'm *his* right hand man.'

He turned further towards Helen.

'I make the tea ... and look good.'

Jimmy addressed Helen. 'Miss Money Penny, call in the "M" Group, please.' She stood and stepped out, the gang appearing and lining up. Jimmy named each nation represented, and no, the French could not send a representative yet. With his head spinning, the Minister was nudged back towards the waiting helicopter as an "M" Group meeting was held in the second lounge, the first being checked for bugs. 'Questions, gentlemen?'

Han asked, 'They will be given mining concessions in the Congo?'

'Some. If they were kept out, they would continue to be aggressive. We need ... peace and quiet in the region. And as I said, less than one percent is known about or mined, the good areas have not yet been discovered.'

Ivan asked, 'They will make accusations about APIC?'

‘No, I don’t think so. It would hurt them to keep that in the news. They want closure on it.’

Jack asked, ‘Can I tell the PM that relations will be improved and normalised?’

‘You can.’

Keely asked, ‘When will oil flow from the DRC?’

‘Not for a long time, it’s in a bad position. The best way to use the oil there - is to refine it on sight, sell it around Africa – so that Africa doesn’t import oil. That will help to lower the global oil price. If the refined petrol is used internally, the ore can be taken to the coast cheaply. Remember, it’s a thousand miles to lay a pipeline, the best route out through Tanzania. China needs to consider that cheap internal oil will make the extraction of ore in the whole of Africa much cheaper.’

Jimmy took a moment. ‘I made a mistake in Kenya the other week. My plans are ahead of schedule, so the *predictability* has been affected to a small degree. It’s good that some things are ahead of schedule, bad in other ways. I will be ... more careful in future. Oh, Mister Han, would you be so kind as to release and expel the APIC people in your country.’

Loose ends

A week later, Jimmy said we needed to deal with someone, and we set out on a long drive down to Kent. At 5pm we approached a cottage, Jimmy kicking the door off its hinges.

‘Subtle. Bell not working?’ I asked as we entered.

A startled man stood in his lounge, bald and sixty years old. ‘Silo!’ The pictures on the walls suggested a military background. A young woman appeared from the kitchen, startled and afraid. Then amazed to see the two of us.

‘Sit down!’ Jimmy barked at them both, Karl and his mate filling the view behind us.

The man and his daughter sat, staring up at us.

‘Paul, this is the nice gentleman that hired Helen.’

‘Ah.’ I took a nice photograph off the wall, and smashed it against the fireplace. ‘Sorry, old chap.’

‘What the hell are you doing!’ the daughter shouted. ‘What are you doing here?’

Jimmy sat near here. ‘Well, here’s the thing. Your dear father, the good General here, has been spying on someone ... directly against the wishes of the Prime Minister. I’ve just had a cup of tea with the Prime Minister, and I think I’ve worked a deal to keep him out of prison for the rest of his life.’

The daughter turned to her father, who simply lowered his head. ‘Dad?’ She got no answer. ‘Dad?’

‘So,’ Jimmy began. ‘The deal I’ve worked out involves you retiring abroad within thirty days, or you go to prison, your face in the papers. And, since your daughter here wishes a career in law – might best be avoided.’

‘Dad!’ she shouted. ‘What is he talking about?’

Jimmy stood. ‘You’ve got thirty days to leave the country. And, if I should ever hear from you again, it will be your daughter I turn my attentions to.’ He stepped out.

‘Been nice chatting,’ I said to the daughter. In the car I asked, ‘Will he make trouble?’

‘Not if he wants to avoid prison. Sykes will drop in tomorrow for an *unpleasant* chat.’

We drove all the way back; four hours.

The following week Rolf turned up with plans and sketches for a new house in the grounds. When I nosed, Jimmy said it was for me.

‘Kicking me out?’ I toyed.

‘You may want some privacy.’

I took a moment. ‘Well, yeah, might do. Where will it be built?’

‘Left of the pond, nice view out from the top floor, view of the pond the other way. But, don’t tell the missus yet. Just say that you’re considering you own pad. Let her ... have an input.’

I put the drawings in my room. That evening, when she popped in, she noticed them. Well, she couldn’t miss them where I had left them.

‘What’s this?’

‘I was thinking of building my own place, just up by the lake. Privacy from here.’

Jimmy must have known, because the next three hours was spent discussing the design and layout, what furniture would look good where. We did not row about the design, but she had strong opinions about the place, and seemed to have some very good ideas about the kind of stuff I would have never considered. Unknown to me, the foundations had been started already, the area taped off like a crime scene. The next morning, I invited Rolf over with his sketchpad, handing him to Helen around 3pm, the poor lad enduring two hours of discussion. He headed off to make a few more drawings. With the new drawings from Rolf approved by Helen, and agreed by Jimmy, Rolf was given the go ahead, told to complete it in record time for a bonus, twenty-four hour crews.

The new house would face southwest, no views of the main house, its rear facing the lake. It would offer eight bedrooms, two floors, but with a loft area suitable for an office or study. The front door would open to a series of terraces stepping down the gentle slope, the main access being at the rear, where a road would run past. The lounge would be large, the dining room big enough for dinner parties of twelve or more. I agreed to let Helen decorate, and her spare waking hours were spent trawling through house magazines, many pages torn out. At bedtime, I would often have to throw the magazines out of bed and demand some attention.

With Jimmy indicating an earthquake in Sumatra in June, we increased the budget of RF Indonesia and encouraged them to recruit another hundred people, keen medics easy to find in Indonesia for the kind of money we were offering. They would undertake training in Mapley, followed by a month or two in Mawlini depending on their competence levels.

A large combined exercise of international RF units, that now included a small detachment from Israel, was scheduled for the end of May in North West Australia, a short distance to Sumatra. It would be attended by some four hundred people.

Five weeks after getting together with Helen, and comfortably settled into a relationship – the two of us known affectionately

around the house as the bionic couple – Jimmy presented me with a gift in front of Helen.

‘Your five week anniversary,’ he said, Sharon avoiding eye contact and making me suspicious.

With Jimmy sat smugly watching us, I tore off the wrapping paper, to reveal a long thin pregnancy tester kit. I stared at it for several seconds, before Helen leant in and peeked at it. She snatched it off me and stared at it herself. Heaving a big breath, I took her by the elbow and dragged her out, and up to my apartment.

‘I’m on the pill,’ she protested.

‘It’s Jimmy!’ I countered.

‘But I’m on the pill...’

Several classes of water later, she emerged from the bathroom. ‘It ... it’s positive.’

I stood staring at her as a knock came at the door. I opened the door to Jimmy. He strode in, telling us to sit on the sofa. He sat opposite.

‘So...’ he let out.

‘It’s positive,’ she said.

‘Good,’ Jimmy responded.

‘Good?’ I queried.

‘You wondering now why I got that new house started?’ Jimmy teased. ‘It’ll be ready in three months or less.’

‘You knew?’ I found myself asking.

‘Of course I knew,’ he loudly stated. ‘You’ve both got my blood, so you’re as fertile as a field of drunk fucking rabbits. Besides, Helen’s been on that old brand of pill for so long her body has adjusted. I mean, six years with the same brand.’

I faced Helen. ‘Six years?’

‘I’m pregnant,’ she said with a smile, not a reaction I had expected.

‘And you have plenty of money, a nice house being built, and a man that likes you a lot - and will stick by you,’ Jimmy listed off. My mind was blank. Jimmy added, ‘You remember me telling you that you had a future, a destiny? Well, it’s more about your daughter than you I’m afraid. Still, the girl will need to be raised and nurtured in a loving environment. Marriage ... comes to mind.’

‘Marriage?’ I asked.

‘I accept,’ Helen said, stunning me.

‘You do?’ my mouth asked without any prompting from me.

‘I do.’

‘She does, so you’ll need a huge ring,’ Jimmy encouraged.

My head was spinning.

‘Helen,’ Jimmy called. ‘Go get a cup of tea downstairs.’ Still holding the pee stained pregnancy kit, she stepped towards the door. Jimmy called, ‘Helen? The kit?’

She put it down before closing the door.

‘Marriage?’ I repeated, staring at the carpet.

‘How many people, through their lives, have wondered if they would meet the right person, and should they settle with that person? You, are in a good position, in knowing – via me – that she is the right person, and that it’ll all turn out well. What could be simpler?’

‘A baby?’ I said, not knowing why.

‘A baby girl, who’ll be very bright, and no trouble at all to raise.’ He stood. ‘There’ll be a party on the weekend to celebrate. Oh, and Paul, any hesitation on your part, any at all, and you may harm your future irreparably.’ He lifted me by the armpits. Standing, he smiled, then slapped me hard.

‘Ow. What the fuck was that for?’

‘Wake up, and pay attention, or you’ll spend the rest of your life regretting this day. You *must not* show any hesitation about this. Right now, your future self is screaming through time for you to do the right thing.’ He raised a hand, as if to hit me again.

I stepped back, rubbing my face. ‘Stop hitting me.’

He offered a hand to shake, and we clasped hands. ‘I think congratulations are in order.’

‘Well, yeah, thanks. I think.’

‘Get a grip quickly, or you lose everything. Just ... try and imagine Anna’s kid, Mary. You’ll have one of those, and no sleepless nights because you’ll have a nanny. And when you want to pop out, there’s one or two people around here who can baby-sit.’ He reached into his jacket pocked and produced a ring case, handing it over. ‘She’ll like it, she did before.’

My chest heaved itself. ‘Would have been nice to get to know her.’

‘No, it wouldn’t have. Her past, and her attitude, have been wiped. You would not have liked the old Helen so much. You

will like the ... maternal, house decorating Helen better.' He took a breath. 'Right now, young man, I am very ... very jealous of what you have. If you screw this up I'll do a lot more than just slap you.' He stepped out.

I stood there with the ring. I was thirty-six, and most days felt like I was well past my sell-by date. The image of Anna's daughter lingered. Did I want one just like that? Yes, I did, and I smiled for a moment.

I found Helen in the diner, Jack and Keely at a table, Han on a stool. 'Gentlemen, I need some witnesses.' I knelt, Helen beaming. 'Helen, PA and spy, would you marry me?'

The diner fell silent as I offered the ring. She took it out and placed it on, the ring fitting perfectly – of course.

'Yes,' she adamantly stated.

I stood and we kissed, the gang stunned. Holding Helen around the waist, I said, 'Jimmy says it was our future. And he's never wrong. Oh, and Helen is pregnant.'

Jack stood and shook my hand. 'Congratulations. I think a party is in order.'

'Friday,' I said. 'I have to break the news to my mum.'

Han offered his congratulations, Keely shaking his head and smiling. In the office, Helen showed Sharon the sparkler.

From his computer screen, Jimmy said, 'You've got the rest of the day off. But tomorrow morning I want the silly smiles gone, and back to work!'

I led Helen back to my apartment, and we lay on the bed clothed. 'Wow,' I said. 'What a day.'

She put her chin on my chest. 'Afraid?'

'A bit. But Jimmy says it's our future, and that you'll be a great mum.'

'He said that?' she asked with a huge smile.

'Yep. You'll do an excellent job of raising our daughter. Well, daughters.'

'Daughters?'

'He says two, and they have a destiny.'

'The new house...?'

'He knew, and got it started,' I explained.

She put her head flat on my chest. 'Before I took this job, I thought about just getting some guy to make me pregnant.'

I stroked her hair. 'You wanted kids that badly?'

‘Still do, more than anything. You?’

‘When I see other people’s kids I want to play with them, but the whole ... *mission thing* has always put a dampener on things. Now, if Jimmy says it’s to be, then ... that’s fine, I suppose. But let’s agree on one thing.’

‘What?’ She asked.

‘Not to ask him how it turns out.’

‘God, yes; I hate knowing how things will turn out.’

‘I think ... I think that if we had a year together, we would have stayed together.’

‘We must have done before, for him to know.’

‘Yeah, well he’s all mystery - and low on explanations.’

‘He’ll never marry?’

‘No, he can’t take the risk. And we won’t age.’

She lifted her head with a frown. ‘Not age?’

‘Nope. You, me, Jimmy – fifty years from now we’ll just like this. Didn’t I tell you that?’

She sat up. ‘No.’ She took a breath. ‘I won’t age?’

‘Not much. So when our kids are thirty, we’ll look like brothers and sisters.’

‘Will she be ... normal?’

‘Yes, just like Anna’s daughter. She’s not guaranteed to have your blood, or mine. She’ll grow a bit faster, that’s all. And Anna came to term in seven months. Will your parents...?’

‘I don’t talk to my father, my mum will be happy, but she’s a bit ... Cuckoo. Hit the bottle a few years back, I don’t see her much.’

‘Jimmy could probably fix her,’ I suggested.

‘Fix her? You mean ... inject her?’

‘It reduces the effect of the alcohol, repairs damaged brain cells.’

‘Not sure I care about her anymore.’

‘Maybe you will ... if she’s, you know, *better*?’

She made a face. ‘Maybe. We’ll see. So, party on Friday at the London club. Big splash, let everyone know in one go.’

‘If we let the tabloids in, they’ll know in Eskimo country.’

Sumatra, June earthquake

This was one deployment that we would not be attending; Jimmy said we needed to practice using the command centre. We had popped over to see Bob Davies a few times to help plan the exercises in Australia, and now turned up on day one, reading reports of activities, games and competitions. So far, the Aussies were just ahead of the Chinese on points, the competition fierce. We made a point of talking with all of the national representatives, getting to know them, some already known to us.

Bob Davies was now settled in, personal pictures on the walls, his desk covered in papers and files, his secretary kept busy. After greeting Bob, we sat and had tea with Doc Graham and Hildy, checking up on the fledgling UK unit. Thirty-five people had been recruited for the basic unit, two hundred for the supplemental unit, all now undergoing training around Mapley and being pushed hard. In addition to Faulty Towers, the airfield now offered a very large shed full of old cars. Fire Brigade instructors would teach vehicle kinetics – what happened when a car hit something like a pedestrian – and vehicle extraction. Teams of trainees would cut the top of a car off, or smash windows, forcing doors with crowbars; the supplemental team would have a role in UK motorway pile-ups. In consideration of inclement UK weather, Doc Graham had ordered clothing suitable for our cool shores, all produced for us in white and labelled as “Rescue Force UK”.

The next morning we checked the weather forecast early, made a decision, then ordered our Agusta flown over with a commercial pilot; we had a few days to the earthquake. With myself co-piloting, we flew north up the M5/M6 and to Blackpool to refuel, flying on into Scotland, the weather holding. We eventually landed at a Prestwick airport in late afternoon. Refuelled, we checked the maps, and set off across the Isle of Aran towards a castle on a loch, hoping to arrive before sundown. Jimmy directed the pilot in from the ocean side of the loch so that we’d have a good view of the area, our Augusta cheekily putting down in their quiet car park.

‘Beautiful,’ Helen commended as we walked toward the small castle, Big Paul cheekily roped into lugging her bag.

The castle sat on a promontory, water on three sides, the tide now out and revealing black seaweed. This old stone edifice dominated the top of the loch, the loch itself bordered by steep hills on either side, one in shade, one catching the late sun. Facing away from the castle, I could see a gently climbing valley, criss-crossed by small fields marked by traditional stone walls, the access road snaking up the middle of the valley.

The laird of the castle came out in traditional dress, tweed, a pack of small dogs darting about. ‘Yee have a mechanical fault?’ he puzzled.

‘No, Douglas, we came to see you,’ Jimmy said as we closed in on the man, patting the excited dogs.

The man stopped dead. ‘I know you. Off the TV, those ... rescue people.’

‘That’s us,’ Jimmy told him, shaking his hand. ‘And I heard this place may be up for sale.’

‘Aye, it is.’ Douglas eyed the waiting helicopter.

Jimmy told him, ‘I’ll take it, *if* you give us a few rooms tonight.’

‘You not want to know how much?’ Douglas asked.

‘I’m sure you won’t cheat me,’ Jimmy suggested. He faced the Augusta and waved it up; it would return the next afternoon.

Douglas led us inside, through heavy wooden doors studded with iron, their authenticity lessened by the plaque of recommendation by the British Board of Bed & Breakfasts. Through a small courtyard we entered an entrance hall, turning right and ducking our heads into a lounge and bar, the castle offering bed and breakfast to the public. We settled about the lounge on dated furniture as our host ordered teas from a young girl in an apron.

Douglas stood with his back to a log fire, his hands behind his back. ‘You mind if I ask what you’ll do with the old place – *if* I sell to thee?’

‘It’ll be an outdoor training centre for rescue medics,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Hill walking, mountain rescue practice.’

Douglas nodded, seeming quite happy with our intended use for his home. Back in character, he asked, ‘And the staff here?’

‘Would be welcome to stay on. If anything, we’d need more. And you’re welcome to stay as well if you like.’

‘Me? Stay on here?’

‘Why not, you know the area and the people,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘In what capacity?’

‘Helping to run the training, running this place. We’d build some wooden huts outside, so at peak training season you may have a hundred people here. Could do with someone of your skills.’

Douglas studied Jimmy for a moment. ‘The asking price was six hundred thousand.’

‘Fine,’ Jimmy replied. ‘You may consider this a firm offer, money transferred tomorrow.’

‘Jesus, but yee don’t hang about.’

It was done deal, the “laird” staying on and offered a salary. He showed us to our rooms, the room allocated for me and Helen found up a winding staircase. The small bedroom was dominated by a giant four-posted bed, wood panelling covering the walls, the low window offering a good view if you got on your knees. Seems the original castle builders were all three feet tall.

‘It’s lovely,’ Helen offered, bouncing on the bed. ‘You won’t gut it, will you?’

‘No, this’ll stay the same, but we’ll build barracks around the back for the trainees. The UK Supplemental teams will come up here, some of the regular RF units.’

‘The Kenyans would freeze to death!’

‘They’re all from warm climates, save the UK. But they need to be flexible, to go anywhere.’

We enjoyed a lengthy meal around a heavy wooden table, ghostly sets of silver armour staring down at us, the walls adorned with shields of various clans, Douglas relaying tales of noblemen past. After the meal we sat about a huge log fire, sampling many whiskeys. Every time Douglas asked Jimmy to try a whiskey, Jimmy knew what it was, astonishing our host. It was as if he’d been here before. At midnight Douglas retired, a bit drunk, but we remained till 2am, chatting around the fire.

Our breakfasts were enjoyably large, and included local sausages, all ravenously downed. After breakfast, and a leisurely tea in the lounge, we took a walk down to a jetty on the loch in bright sunshine, big Paul keen to try the fishing at some point. In still warm air, we strolled around to a field with a wooden hut stuffed full of yellow and red canoes; Doc Graham would be

tasked with bringing in additional huts. The side of the field was delineated by a traditional stone wall, a peek over the wall revealing a fast flowing stream.

‘Trout stream,’ Jimmy informed us. ‘Comes with the castle, as do the loch sides.’

Ambling back, Jimmy stopped and pointed: otters playing in the loch, a delight to see. We said our goodbyes, the Augusta returning for us after lunch, Douglas receiving a fax of our offer and confirmation of funds transferred. And we politely refused to pay for our stay, making him laugh. As we flew off, our training standards guy was heading the opposite way on a flight to Glasgow airport, heading here to make an assessment.

When the news of the Sumatra earthquake appeared on British TV, we were at Mapley and discussing the castle with Bob.

Doc Graham knocked and entered. ‘There’s been a big earthquake in Western Sumatra – and we’ve got *their* bleeding rescuers in Oz.’

Jimmy faced Bob. ‘They’ll want to be home, arrange transport, please.’

‘We attending this?’ Doc Graham asked, closing in. ‘We’ve got the Hercules there, four of them. And it’s a single leg flight to the area affected.’

Jimmy stood, and I followed him up, looks exchanged. ‘Bob, you’re the international director. Is it ... practical and appropriate?’

‘It’s a simple hop, and the Indonesian lads have a base in Western Sumatra. So yeah, simple enough.’

Jimmy said, ‘Call all national representatives to the control room.’

Bob hit a button on his phone, a tanoy coming to life. ‘All Rescue Force national representatives to the control room, this is not a drill, we are deploying.’

In the control room, the representatives sat facing Bob and Doc Graham, we sat at the back. Doc Graham operated a slide machine, a map of the area affected being displayed. He gave a rundown of the situation, Bob Davies calling for opinions. RF Indonesia was a definite for a full turnout, and they were probably already heading there. Australia was in, so too Sri Lanka, the Africans figuring they’d take too long to get there. RF

China and Hong Kong offered good numbers, but Jimmy limited them. Bob called for Jimmy's final say.

'Bob, you don't need my final say, you have a reserve budget for things like this. *You* can order such a deployment. I'd only get involved for a specific reason, or an overspend.'

'Then we go,' Bob firmly said. To the national representatives he said, 'Go tell your governments, meeting in the map room in one hour. Those with people deploying, work from here after the meeting, computers and phones. This ... is the control room, it says so on the door.'

The exercise in Australia got promptly cancelled, the staff kitted out and made ready, the four Hercules aircraft soon in the air.

I said to Jimmy, whispering, 'This is no fun – at all. I want to be there.'

'You're a leader, not a doer. Anyway, make yourself useful. Go to the shop and get chocolate and sweets, cans, they'll be here a long time. Then grab a room, we're staying.'

I led Helen off to the shop.

Jimmy called Mawlini. 'Coups, there's a deployment to an earthquake in Sumatra, no Africans going unless they're already in Oz, would take too long. But put together a disease control team, send them off in five days. Thanks.'

When Helen returned, Jimmy told her to prepare a press release, and I'd have to admit it, her written English was far better than mine. She typed up a page and ran it past Jimmy, faxing it to the tabloids, TV and radio, soon fielding the press calls coming in. In effect, she had become the de-facto press secretary for the deployment, busy on that first day.

Our teams from Oz had landed in Western Sumatra, no problems with permissions, the first team off the plane being Indonesian themselves. The senior man on the ground, Doc Hoskins, split the Indonesian teams so that there was one Indonesian for each team acting as guide and translator. They moved out in hired vehicles, and hired buses, to the effected areas. Most of the houses in the area had been constructed of wood, and few had collapsed with the quake. Mosques, schools and hospitals had crumbled, and our teams created an out-door hospital along the damaged walls of the original main regional hospital.

On the second day we had teams telling us that they had treated all of the effected and injured in their areas, and so were moving on; it soon became apparent that they were not swamped with casualties where they were. They split into smaller teams and ventured out to find trade. The Chinese and Hong Kong units turned up in strength, immediately directed towards areas that the first wave of rescuers had not touched. By the end of the second day we were certain that our six hundred rescuers were all that was needed in the region, soon treating diseases and delivering babies alongside trauma injuries. As far as deployments went, this was running smoothly, and most of the casualties had access to a medic.

By the third day our people were spread far and wide, finding villages that had not seen any help so far, our people treating minor wounds, and a range of ailments that were present prior to the earthquake. We gave the teams one more day, then a return to base order, the competition teams back to Oz; this time they would finish the competition. Karl drove us home that evening, things winding down, but we arrived home to an emergency “M” Group meeting.

Someone had shot dead the phoney Magestic clairvoyant from Brighton, the man we had given money to adopt the name. He had received plenty of press attention in the past few years, getting many predictions right. The second Magestic phoney, from Blackpool, was missing. Jack was busy calling around to get details, Keely checking out the phoney Magestics in the USA; so far, the problem was limited to the UK. Then came the bad news, that was actually good news. The Blackpool Magestic, pissed off with the success of the Brighton Magestic, had blasted him dead with a shotgun. It was bad, in that we’d have to create a few more, good in that no intelligence agency was bumping them off. People relaxed, Cookie rustling up a curry in the diner, the Sumatra deployment discussed.

The next morning bought more bad news, three Chinese peacekeepers killed in the DRC, four more wounded. They had been on a border post with Zambia, the culprits probably a regrouped faction of the MLF. War was declared. For the first time, the basement was brought into use, a large table covered in a map of the DRC and Zambia region, the representatives of Kenya, the DRC and Tanzania in on the planning. Extra

members of the Kenya Rifles were dispatched, the Mi24s and Cobras made ready.

Phase one involved the Kenya Rifles and Congo Rifles infiltrating across the border and setting up Ops; observation posts. That was done quickly. We now had twenty OPs strung along the border, another twenty a few miles in and positioned above road junctions. At the border crossing where the Chinese had been shot the peacekeepers were pulled back five miles to offer up a nice tempting gap in the lines. At night the DRC police and army withdrew as well; the door was left wide open.

On the third night, interesting reports came in, coffee was made, and people stood around the map board. An OP ten miles across the border reported vehicles, six of them, an OP a mile out confirming the convoy. A trap was set. It was midnight when the MLF crossed the border, another thirty minutes to reach a blocked road. When they stopped to inspect the felled tree, they were cut down, three prisoners taken and “questioned” by the Congo Rifles as to where they had come from. They were from a town we had suspected. The Kenya Rifles lifted off in ten Hueys, landing in the next valley to the town and walking through the night to the ridge above the town. I got to bed around 3am and snuggled up to Helen, waking her with my cold hands.

All the next day our spotters observed movement in the town, normal domestic day to day life, as well as jeeps of armed men, identifying which buildings were housing commanders and guerrillas. An hour before sundown a squadron of angry Mi24s roared in, targeting the nominated buildings. Behind them, the Cobras flew in, picking off individual jeeps, the towns people now scattering to the hillside jungle, and straight into the sights of the Rifles, anyone in uniform, or carrying an AK, being cut down. Without wanting to enter the town at night, the Rifles surrounded the town and waited, picking off gunmen as they tried to drive south, further into Zambia.

At dawn the Rifles moved in from all sides, a jeep convoy from the border joining them after a long drive down from the Congo Rifles base. Senior men of the MLF were wounded, but taken alive and extracted, all others shot on sight, weapons confiscated. And all the while we denied to the Zambian authorities that we were there. The operation ended with ten prisoners brought back up to Forward Base, several hundred

MLF irregulars killed, two Congo Rifles killed in the crossfire, a number of minor wounds accrued. At Forward Base the Chinese were in on the interrogations; we wanted answers. After several days of interrogation, it seemed that it was just a local incident, no one behind the attack. Life in the DRC returned to its normal cycle of low-level violence and grinding poverty. We left the Rifles on the border, regular helicopter passes flown to remind anyone in the MLF that we were there.

Supplemental group

The applicants to the UK Rescue Force Supplemental Group had all been signed up on the same day, medical fitness and general fitness guaranteed by their employer, the UK Government, ahead of time. They came from the police, the fire brigade, the ambulance services, the NHS, the coastguard and the armed services, a few of the number army medics. On day one they had been given an orientation lecture, being allocated rooms or apartments, some sharing. A few lived within driving distance, and the selection process had factored in families and commitments, married men living a long way off turned down; this one a one year attachment, not worth moving homes and schools for.

That first day, they had all filled in forms listing relevant skills, the instructing staff then working out groups based on skills. Two army doctors, and three NHS doctors, were given supervisory roles straight away, fire brigade staff given team leader status. Only a few had experience of off-road jeep driving, so that was the start point. The intake was split into practical smaller groups, so that when some were out driving, in our limited number of jeeps, others were in the pool, on the wall or in the cave. By the end of that first week people were tired, but they all had experienced some aspects of rescue.

The training programme of next three weeks followed the same format, groups rotating, some people being signed off on skills early. Such people were then granted time on the fun stuff; scuba diving, flying in the Tucano or the Huey. Everyone was

required to complete the climbing walls and the cave extractions first. Once they had done so, groups of ten headed to a nearby quarry, where they tackled a hundred foot sheer face. They were required to climb up, plus abseil back down, a nurse refusing and quitting. Following the successful completion of the quarry, the groups headed up to the Lake District for a five-day residential climbing course, the course broken with some pleasant walks in the hills. First aid training was on-going, and in modules, many already having the required skills, and simply sitting written, oral and practical tests. Those with no medical skills had a lot of homework.

At the end of the first month two had quit, and one man had been kicked out for liking his beer too much. Two more were given warnings about conduct about the canteen in the evenings

A week after the Sumatra earthquake had been wound down, the recruits were told to pack their standard rucksacks for a ten-day exercise, and to assemble on the Sunday night at 7pm. Grouped on the grass in front of the tower the recruits were individually looked over, rucksacks checked. They were each allocated a water and food ration, scratching their heads as to what the exercise might be. Our Huey flew in, followed by three hired Hueys in a variety of inappropriate colours. Groups of six were shouted at, to quickly board the helicopters, soon being ferried down to RAF Lyneham, where four Hercules sat waiting. They boarded without time to think, nudged into seats by experienced RF staff up from Kenya, ear defenders issued. The minute that the first Hercules was fully loaded it lifted off, the bewildered recruits wondering where they may be heading.

They were told not to sleep till midnight, allowed just six hours. Our staff wrote notes on a small white board, walking around and issuing silent messages. People ate what they were told, when they were told, and used the toilet at fixed times. At one point the staff issued packs of wet wipes, everyone ordered to wipe hands, face, armpits and groin area in full view of each other. The next evening they touched down at Mawlini, the place they had heard so much about.

Straight off the plane, they were allocated jeeps, formed up into a long convoy, and drove out the base following the instructors. At the Somali border they made camp in the amber dusk light; tents up, fires soon going. At dawn they were rudely

awoken, shouted at to get the tents down quickly. They again drove off in convoy, but without any breakfast. And they drove all day, taking turns at the wheel. At dusk they found themselves in lion country, on our land at River view. The jeeps made circular camps, the recruits given freshly killed pigs and chickens to cook over open fires. That evening they slept to the sounds of lonesome male lions, hyenas and crickets.

The next day the huge convoy drove to the escarpment. Backpacks were topped up with water and rations, the group setting out on foot in pairs, a long line scuffing up dirt, a ten-mile march in the heat. At dusk they again camped out, unaware that the Rifles were close by, a meal of tinned meat and water. At dawn they reversed their course, glimpsing lions, giraffe, elephants. Back at the escarpment they mounted up, turns taken on the seven-hour drive back up to Mawlini, arriving at dawn. Without a break they marched out to the busy airfield, twenty RF Hueys sat waiting with ten Army Hueys, plus two Pumas. The recruits boarded the helicopters in their teams. With doors open, safety ropes employed, the recruits flew low level up to the disused airfield, rudely plonked down into the heat and sand. Tents were set-up, a command tent and medical tent pitched, rescue teams formed. They spent three hours searching the make-believe collapsed buildings, an earthquake simulation with our instructors pretending to be casualties. In the medical tent, Silo Stiffy dummies were examined at length. Darkness brought some rest and relief, fires roasting pigs and chickens, the recruits allowed to get a good nights sleep.

Back at Mawlini, they were split into groups of twenty-five and given tours of all the facilities, each allowed a cold beer in the rooftop bars – the first pause for breath and reflection. At noon they drove out in their jeeps, the long drive down to Mombassa, a convoy a mile long. At Mombassa Field the Rifles were waiting to take the jeeps back, the recruits boarding air conditioned buses for the short distance to our beach hotel, which now stood empty of guests. And there we met them.

In the car park, Jimmy stood on the bonnet of a zoo jeep. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, what you have just been through, is what you may experience should you attend a Rescue Force earthquake deployment. The difference would be that a proper deployment would last longer – and be much tougher. You have

been given some experience, without the dangers often involved in deployments. In recognition of what you've endured for the past week, you now have three days at this beach hotel, followed by a commercial airliner back to the UK. Relax, kick back, have some fun.'

We greeted each of the recruits, helping to issue room keys. For the most part, they slept that afternoon, the beach quiet. Helen and I enjoyed a dive in the bay for an hour, watching the sun set later on the roof of the golf complex. The next morning the beach was full, people snorkelling, some diving, others fooling around on the plastic pedal boats. Mac and Doc Hoskins turned up, taking time to talk with many groups and doing the rounds with Jimmy; hearts and minds. That evening, after the evening meal, a film of the Mozambique deployment was played on a white screen, the hour-long programme that had been shot by the cameraman that had flown with me. The hope was that some of these would join us in years to come, hopefully not deterred by the hardships illustrated in the film, or the hardships they had just endured.

A week after the recruits returned to Mapley, Doc Graham noted an improved attitude, a quiet determination to pass tests and improve skills; and a growing sense of camaraderie. Seeing that the time was right, Jimmy invited Doc Graham, Hildy and Bob Davies to the house for dinner, Bob meeting the household gang again and catching up on the gossip.

Over dinner, Jimmy said, 'I think we can get the first UK units up to speed in a few weeks, get them doing some practical work and, more importantly, some newspaper column inches. I've given Rolf the architect, who's not called Rolf –' Everyone laughed. '- the plans for a helicopter station just behind the apron, left of the control tower as you face the field. It'll be three hangars, big enough for a Huey or a BO105. I've ordered two BO105s to police specifications, and asked Wiltshire police to round up some police pilots for us. Our Huey, and the 105s, will be painted white, our Huey to get some extra kit to police specs. Once the choppers are ready, I suggest the following.

'First, a team on permanent rotating standby at the helicopter bay, covering the M4, M5, M40 triangle and linked to the 999 service and the Wiltshire aero-meds. They'll be an ... extension,

for serious problems. They can also involve themselves in things like missing people. And, since we're five minutes from the M4 motorway, two jeeps kitted out ready to go at all times, to a similar remit – we'll help if we're asked to.'

He made eye contact with Doc Graham. 'I want some additions to the jackets they wear. Make them say ... NHS doctor, Fire Brigade, Paramedic, Nurse, where the person wearing the jacket is already employed to do that. That way, when they arrive on scene the other emergency services won't get pissy, they'll recognise their own kind. I suggest that the aero-meds should be doctors and paramedics, always a doctor in each jeep with an advanced resuscitation kit, typical paramedic standard, plus tents and camp beds for mass casualty situations.

'Then, once we've ordered a few more Hueys, I'd like to see a Mid Wales air ambulance service, same for Scotland. Unlike the BO105s, our Huey's could deliver six or eight people, or pick-up as many as that. So if there's a bad car wreck in the middle of nowhere we can put a doctor down, and lift most – if not all of the casualties – in one go.'

'That's a big step,' Bob noted.

'If we're to get the UK public behind us, we need to be seen to be *giving back*. There are almost two hundred people in the supplemental group. They, and RF UK, need to stay sharp, and the best way to achieve that is through live rescues. So I see ten in Wales, twenty in Scotland on rotations, always twelve on standby in Swindon. We'll get Mackey involved, sticking a Huey in Cumbria, Mid Wales, and Scotland.'

'You out to pinch work off the RAF?' Doc Graham asked with a smile.

'No, to supplement them,' Jimmy replied. 'If they have a rescue to go to, we can move a stroke patient, save them acting as taxi.'

'Do they know?' Bob asked.

'I'll mention it to the PM when we're ready,' Jimmy suggested.

'Nice working relationship you have with the Prime Minister,' Doc Graham noted.

'He's a politician. Being seen stood next to us makes him look good.' We all laughed. 'Everyone loves the emergency services.'

‘We’ll bring birds up from Africa?’ I asked.

‘No, they have to be brand new and top spec to operate in the UK,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Signed off by the Home Office and Transport Department. I’ve ordered six helicopters to be ready, and another four in six months. Then we’ll think about some pilots, most likely ex-services or ex-police.’

‘Or police pilots on attachment to the supplement group,’ Helen suggested.

‘That would be best, and cheapest,’ Jimmy said to her. Facing Doc Graham, he added, ‘Consider it an initiative, go ahead and make some plans. First we need the hangars, then a pilot’s room, then a kit store. Chat to Mackey about the remote locations.’

We had a plan, the two BO105s turning up with two police pilots and two navigators, keenly out of retirement, the men living within commuting distance. The pilot’s room was a corner office of the control tower building for now, the aircraft housed on the apron and serviced by the technicians for the existing Wiltshire aero-meds; they were identical and interchangeable. They flew four one-hour jaunts with existing police pilot instructors, duly signed off and licensed. Wiltshire police, fire and ambulance services were notified on a Monday morning, a doctor and paramedic sat ready for each helo. And we waited.

On the Tuesday afternoon the first call came in, a pile-up on the M4, long queues both ways. Both our birds were airborne in minutes, soon twenty miles along the M4 and landing in a field. We had placed four medics on the tarmac eleven minutes before the first ambulance arrived, the injured being stabilised. With the injured motorists being ferried by ambulance, our medics rejoined their aircraft and flew back, Helen putting out a news release immediately. We made the six o’clock news.

The next call, on the following Saturday, was right up our street; a missing kid in a river in Oxfordshire. A hired bus with forty recruits, plus six jeeps, drove out the gates and journeyed the thirty miles north east to the scene, dumping seventy people into the search grid whilst our helicopters buzzed overhead. The kid was found by one of our firemen, slightly hypothermic from being stuck in branches in the water, attended by a one of our doctors and airlifted to hospital by us. RF UK Supplemental Group had come of age.

A bar had been commissioned at Mapley when the recruits had started their twelve-month stint. It was now finished. It offered a wide range of bar meals, a small cosy area for formal meals, and a large lounge and bar capable of holding two hundred or more. It got christened properly a week after the kid had been rescued, the PM coming down for a photo opportunity, the establishment named "The Thunderbirds Bar" after a vote of recruits.

Three months after starting, we had good bunch of rescuers, morale high. That morale was increased with the arrival of four white Hueys, powerful Bell 214s with extended range fuel tanks and winches; just about everyone volunteering for the helo-teams. After a weeklong shakedown the Hueys were certified, but we only had two Huey trained pilots so far, four commercial pilots hired and put through their paces by Hal in the Welsh hills. Jimmy had his doubts about them. The RAF assisted with training for winch operators, the CAA signing off the helicopters and crews, but then came a wait whilst the Government signed us off to carry out rescues in the UK. They were not happy with commercial pilots, not yet, so we located more retired police pilots, retired at a young forty years old. They cross-trained quickly, Hal again giving them Huey specific advice. After a long drawn out process we were finally ready for the October, refusing to use the lightweight BO105s in the mountains.

Mackey's people had quickly converted a rescue station in the Snowdonia National Park for one Huey, another sited on military training grounds near Brecon, South Wales. Two more were deployed to Central Scotland, the mountain rescue teams there all keen to have one. Each Huey had an assigned crew of twelve so that a twenty-four hour cycle would be covered, along with provisions for crew downtime. That put twenty-four RF staff in Scotland, twenty-four in Wales, both sets on eight-week rotations. RF jeeps were kept alongside the helicopters, allowing ground support to rescues and the deployment of medics. And we urgently set about training pilots, two brought up from Kenya to be re-assessed by the CAA in the UK.

At Mapley, we could now offer the emergency services two BO105s, four Hueys and twelve jeeps, and they were kept busy; hardly a day passed when our helicopters were not flying out to a motorway pile-up inside our designated triangle. A white Huey

landing on a motorway became a common scene, often glimpsed on the TV news.

Then, one weekend, I caught the evening news, and felt prouder than I had ever been. A police officer was interviewed at the scene of an accident: "When we got here we found twelve vehicles involved in the pile-up, just the one patrol car, the ambulances stuck in traffic. It was just the two of us. Then we heard a helicopter and looked up, two white Rescue Force helicopters landing on the side of the motorway - a beautiful sight. Every injured driver had their own personal medic, the worst casualties airlifted out in minutes." I rang Doc Graham I told him about it, and how proud of the gang I was. Walking around the house, I told everyone I could find, finally relaying the story to Helen in my apartment. She had to tell me calm down.

I had a look at her abdomen every day, but could not see much of difference. There definitely was a bulge, but mostly I just blew raspberries in her bellybutton. When she increased her bras a cup size I took to relaying the changes to the guys at poker night.

By time the new house was finished my dear fiancé was showing. We organised a house warming, inviting just a few people over for the first night; Jimmy, Bob Davies, Big Paul and wife, Doc Graham and Hildy, Sharon and husband, Oliver Standish and wife because they happened to be visiting Wales. Helen cooked, with a little help that I was not supposed to know about. Our large dining room now seemed smaller, dominated by an old oak table that Helen had discovered in a second-hand furniture shop. Professionals had restored it for us, Helen insisting that they could not be found today. The end result was impressive. She had picked out all of the furniture for the house, Jimmy reminding me not to interfere. In truth, she had done a very good job. I found very little to complain about.

The evening went well, the meal tasty and ample. Everyone hung around till midnight drinking, many having just a short walk to either their usual abodes, or their rooms for the night. That night was the first time we stayed overnight in the new house and, with everyone gone, I walked around and checked all the windows and doors like a normal person; I had not done that

for about six years. I knocked the lights off and climbed the stairs, feeling a bit odd. Our bedroom offered a large en-suite bathroom and we christened it. Climbing into bed, we lay there taking in the room, the walk-in wardrobes and the ceiling.

‘Feel odd?’ I asked.

‘A bit, but that’s just new house stuff – same for everyone.’

‘It smells nice.’

‘That’s the new carpet smell.’

We took in the room.

‘No bodyguards,’ I said. ‘That’s what’s different.’

She turned her head to me. ‘Cameras from the main house are focused on us, six on the walls, dog patrols, high fence. And if anyone breaks in I’m on the door side.’

‘It’s not burglars I’m worried about, it’s the highly trained assassins.’ I blew out. ‘Just feels a bit odd, probably because I was sharing for so long.’

‘You’re still sharing, sweetie.’

‘Yeah, but I can’t talk *man-talk* to you. You’re ... you know, the missus,’ I toyed.

‘Man-talk? You mean girls with big tits at the club.’

‘Yeah, stuff like that.’

‘And did Jimmy often talk about stuff like that?’

‘No. But I’m sure he would have if I had wanted to.’

‘You don’t need to talk boobs when you have a great pair right here. And getting bigger.’ After a moment she asked, ‘Do you miss anything? Really miss it?’

‘Nope. I’d much rather be with you, I never really get tired of your company. Not yet anyway, give it ten years.’

‘Charming.’ She snuggled up, her head on my chest as I ran my fingers through her hair.

‘Jimmy said we’d get along well. He also said that home life with you would be a good contrast to *problems* with the mission, and people shooting at us. Which is good, and bad. Good in that the home life is there, bad in that the mission is so fucking hard sometimes – and set to get much worse.’

‘I feel like I’m part of the team now,’ she softly stated.

‘Jimmy says you have an important role,’ I offered. ‘But we’ll all hit some problems around 2005.’

‘What problems?’

‘Finally risking getting exposed to the wider world, which is why we have a great big fence and dogs. Jimmy says that we’ll blag it till 2010, then be exposed for sure. He says he has a few tricks up his sleeve, but he’s not confident. He says the Yanks will expose us.’ I looked down. ‘You awake?’ No response came back. I reached up and pulled the cord for the bedside lights.

The next evening we invited over the “M” Group and Sykes, a meal prepared by Cookie and Sandra, carried over and re-warmed. Everyone had a good nose around the house before the meal, finding the house modest in comparison to its large neighbour. The meal went off well, little talk of world politics, much pulling on my leg about marriage, kids, balls and chains and the loss of the bachelor lifestyle. After the meal we broke into small groups and sat around chatting, drinking wine. Helen showed Jack and Han around upstairs, and the attic room, the main topic of conversation downstairs being the US Presidential elections.

Cuba

Jimmy asked Helen and me to pack a bag ready for the Monday, and not to forget the sun tan cream, little more than that. We were ready, the cars loaded up with our luggage, sun cream packed.

‘Where we off?’ I asked as we headed out of the main gate.

‘Cuba,’ Jimmy replied.

‘I heard it’s nice,’ I said. ‘Met a few people who’ve been.’

‘There’s a small island in the north, great scuba diving,’ Jimmy explained. ‘I’m going to buy a hotel near there. Also going to meet the Cuban Government.’

‘Castro?’ I questioned, wide-eyed.

‘If he’s well, he’s a bit ... batty these days, his brother doing a lot of the work. And as we get there, Doc Graham should be touching down in the Dominican Republic to talk to their government about an RF unit there.’

‘They’re dirt poor,’ Helen put in. ‘Recruitment *should not* be difficult.’

‘Exactly,’ Jimmy noted. ‘That’s why I like these third-world countries; we get three or four medics for the cost of one over here.’

Sixteen hours later we landed in Parado, Northern Cuba, the tourist hotspot. A small luxury coach awaited us, room for the four of us for a forty-minute drive to the resort. We progressed slowly through green and lush countryside, noting many palm trees backing the coastal road, glimpses of an inviting ocean. Two sets of gates were negotiated to reach the hotel, finally halting in front of a wood and thatch gate arch that would not have been out of place in Kenya. Jimmy led us inside, passports handed over, three adjoining rooms on the top floor allocated to us of this four storey, two hundred-room hotel.

From the balcony the pool looked great, a large oval surrounded by parkland dotted with short and stubby palm trees, the hotel offering its own section of adjoining beach. Brilliant white sand beckoned. Helen and I took a stroll down to the pool, across the grass and to the beach, finding that it stretched out in either direction for miles; we could see no interruption to it.

That first night, and the next day, we simply flopped around the pool, setting off towards Havana on the third day with overnight bags, a private mini-bus hired. It took a good three hours to reach the capital, passing spectacular vintage cars all the way, open topped American cars from the fifties that had been lovingly maintained. We booked into a small boutique hotel on a charmingly dated street; stone walls with peeling paint. In our room I could have imagined Hemingway banging away at a typewriter, writing *The Old Man and the Sea*.

I didn’t know where the bus driver slept, but he was there in the morning, taking us across the city and to the government buildings. At the gates, Jimmy handed over a page of detail, conversing in Spanish with the guards. We were directed through, and to a second set of gates. I guessed they did gates in pairs in this country. The paper was flashed again, the bus driver told to park up; we’d have to walk. Jimmy found the door he wanted as if he had been here before, and greeted the receptionist, handing over our invite. After a twenty-minute wait

on hard benches, nothing more interesting to view than the ceiling fans, we eventually made it to the Health Minister. Jimmy greeted, and thanked the man in Spanish, but our host spoke reasonable English.

‘You are Rescue Force International medical charity, yes?’

‘Yes we are, and we thank you for your time today,’ Jimmy began.

‘And how can the People’s Government assist you today?’

‘We already run rescue units in China, Russia and Africa – they respond to earthquakes and floods – and we would like to create one here, on your beautiful island.’

‘And ... what would that involve?’ the Minister puzzled.

‘We would buy or rent land and buildings, then recruit doctors and nurses, training them in disaster response. They would then join the other units when an earthquake hits somewhere in the world. And we could pay for everything.’

‘*You* would pay?’ the Minister puzzled. His phone went. ‘Excuse me.’ He answered it. ‘Yes?’ His face dropped. ‘Mister President! Yes, they are here now, sir.’ He listened. ‘I will, sir, rest assured.’ He placed the receiver down, taking a moment. Resting his arms on his desk he asked, ‘What would you need?’

‘An airfield, buildings, land to make training areas. Then we would recruit a hundred medics and begin a training programme.’

‘How long are you in Cuba?’

‘Ten days,’ Jimmy answered.

‘I will show you an airfield tomorrow myself, we’ll assign a hundred medics to you within days. And *we* ... will pay for it. What else would you require?’

Jimmy handed over a brief document, typed in Spanish.

The Minister read the detail, nodding as he stood. ‘Leave this with me, please. Return to your hotel, I’ll call you later.’

We stood. Jimmy told the Minister, ‘The best way for you speed this process along, would be send a representative first to England, then Kenya. All of the training facilities are available to be viewed, in both locations, and you’ll find the details on the last page. They are expecting you.’

Outside, I said, ‘Did he get a nudge?’

‘Chinese and Russian nudges, this morning.’

‘It’s good to have friends in high places,’ I said. ‘Sounded like Castro himself kicked his butt.’

‘He did. And they’ll produce a unit to rival the Chinese, a great team. Tonight, we should get a visitor.’

‘Not the old boy himself?’ I keenly questioned.

‘Wait and see.’

At the hotel, we sat about eating and drinking in a cool marble courtyard, wicker chairs and some very quiet parrots in cages. I got no “pretty polly” from them; guess they only understood Spanish. At 6pm an official in a suit came and found us, a uniformed police officer behind him. We stood, the official explaining that “his excellency” the President’s brother wanted a word, a limo waiting. It would have been impolite to refuse.

Fifteen minutes later we entered another marble courtyard, this one larger and with a lively fountain at its centre. Our host, dressed now in green fatigues, shook my hand, assuming that Jimmy and Big Paul were bodyguards. I grinned, Jimmy introducing himself and labelling me as his assistant.

Settled, Jimmy began, ‘We thank you for seeing us, sir.’

‘I have been doing some research on you - we are not without resources. And it is an honour to meet you. I welcome you to our country.’

‘Thank you. I will be looking to buy a hotel here, if I get permission.’

‘We will arrange it, my friend. Now, tell me, how many men do the Russians have in their rescue unit?’

‘About thirty.’

‘And the Chinese?’

‘About three hundred.’

‘Three hundred? That is a big unit.’

‘They use it for internal disasters, of which there are many in their country,’ Jimmy explained.

‘And the English?’

‘About thirty.’

‘Americans?’

‘They do not have a unit.’

‘No?’

‘No, I find them hard work to deal with.’

Our host nodded to himself. ‘Rumour has it, we also find them hard work.’

We laughed. 'I have heard this also,' Jimmy said with a smile. 'And if we create a unit here, I will make sure the Americans are jealous.'

'You have no love for them?'

'They are what they are: it's a case of ... cats and dogs. I prefer the Chinese because of their clarity of purpose. They do not change leaders and policies every week.'

'You are a socialist?'

'I am a capitalist to make money, a socialist when I give it all away. I am a whore.'

Our host laughed. 'As are all politicians!'

'You will find, with the rescue unit, that a few medics helping at a disaster – with a national flag on their arms – create a lot of TV minutes, and a loud political message.'

Our host lit a cigar, offering a box to us. We all refused. Holding the cigar, and exhaling, he said, 'You think like a politician, more than a whore.'

'I am involved in the politics of the heart, that which binds all peoples, and is beyond the reach – and corruption – of the politicians. I influence many people ... without holding high office.'

'So I have been discovering.' He took a moment to study Jimmy. 'How quickly could you put a unit together?'

'Four weeks. It's something that we are expert at.'

'You will have every assistance.'

'And I'm sure that the unit will find much business in Central America. But please let me make one thing clear: for the unit to integrate with other nations, and to be welcome in all countries, it must appear – at least – to be non-political; under my control, and not yours.'

Our host took a moment. 'How do the other countries do it?'

'Most units are completely independent – paid for by myself. The Chinese unit is state run, but I decide on their deployments overseas, through our headquarters in England.'

'And the Russian?'

'Mostly paid for by myself.'

Our host took a long drag and exhaled. 'And if we wished to... gain more exposure?'

'That's something that I will plan for you - you need not worry; I will always have your best interests at heart. Your team

will be kept busy, you flag appearing in many countries, including England, Russia, China and Africa. If the Chinese Government trusts me, then I think can you too, my friend.'

Our host stood. 'Tomorrow we'll show you an airfield.' He put out a hand and shook Jimmy's hand, turning quickly and disappearing with his aides.

At our hotel we extended our stay, sending word to the beach hotel. After a quick wash we grabbed a taxi, driving around to the Chinese embassy. They were not expecting us, but Jimmy blagged our way in, soon sitting in another courtyard, this one decorated in a Chinese style. The Ambassador came downstairs and greeted us, well aware of who we were, Jimmy cheekily asking for some good home cooked Chinese food. Two hours later we were still sat there, chatting and joking to the Ambassador and his staff. The only official thing we discussed was as formal request that some Chinese send some instructors to assist in creating the Cuban unit. I think the fax went out before Jimmy had finished the sentence.

In the morning the Cuban official was back, and we followed his vehicles in our mini-bus, the driver now puzzling just who the heck we were, a police officer sat next to him. The airfield they led us towards we found little more than ten miles outside of Havana, its buildings a little dilapidated, but not as bad as some airfields we had occupied.

'How far are we from the US Marines?' I quietly asked Jimmy. 'Bay of Pigs and all that?'

'Long way off. We're north, they're south east.'

The official asked us if the airfield would do, Jimmy immediately agreeing that it would. We poked our noses into the tower, which was fine structurally. It even had electricity. From the tower itself we peered out, taking snaps, asking questions of the length of the runway, the condition of its lights. Satisfied with the airfield, Jimmy handed our Cuban minder a sheet of paper, the details of our training standards guy, explaining that Coup and Hacker would be arriving the next day. We also mentioned the Chinese, now on their way; the Chinese, and our people, would stay two weeks and help set-up the new unit. Not to be outdone by that, the official informed us that when we flew back to the UK their guys would accompany us. They were

falling over themselves to get their unit up and running. If only everything we did was this simple.

It was nice to get back to the beach hotel and just flop about in the surf with Helen. A lot of the time we were like a pair of teenagers, often getting a disapproving look from “Old Man Silo”, as we had started calling him. And it turned out the hotel that we were now staying at was up for sale, owned by a Spanish hotel chain. We made an offer by fax from the UK, accepted immediately. I wondered if we’d be let off paying for the room, then realised that our trip was all part of a package paid upfront. Knowing that Steffan and Lotti desired a change of scene, I brought up the subject with Jimmy. He had no objections, so I rang Kenya; early morning this end, late night their end. They were delighted, the deal done, just as soon as they could recruit new instructors for Kenya.

We enjoyed a relaxing few days diving and sunbathing whilst things at the airfield got moving without us. We ate too much and lounged around, driving back to the airfield a day before our planned departure. What a contrast. Twenty large green tents now stood in a line on the grass behind the tower, two white RF tents from Kenya next to them, two white tents from RF China beside them. A handful of Cuban army jeeps were already painted white, and many white jackets could be seen near the tower. The Cubans recruits, however, we all in green army fatigues for now. Stepping down from the bus, I could see a small army of builders tackling new foundations, as well as repairs of the existing buildings. Hacker and Coup walked out to us.

‘What you doing here, Yank?’ I joked. We shook.

‘Not invading,’ Hacker said, a glance over his shoulder. ‘If Uncle Sam knew I was here...’

‘Were you at the Bay of Pigs?’ I teased.

‘No, fucker.’

‘How’s this lot doing?’ I asked.

‘Keen as hell,’ Coup answered. ‘Anything we want is sorted straight away.’

Jimmy approached, shaking the guys hands. ‘Listen, use the tents for now, but get me the best team of eighty you can for January the first, some Cuban demonstration of skills or parade or other. Send them to the UK, then Kenya, push them along.’

‘That’s only two months,’ Coup warned.

‘I know, just do what you can. This lot are all shit hot anyway.’

‘They look good so far,’ Hacker agreed.

‘I’ve bought some old Hueys from around the region, they’ll be here in a week, so sort some pilots. If this lot deploy to Central America for an earthquake there’ll be Hueys on hand, so they need the exposure. I’ll rent a Hercules or two before Christmas.’

‘What’s the rush?’ Hacker asked.

‘Politics,’ Jimmy carefully mouthed.

‘No need to swear,’ Hacker quipped. ‘How long you down here?’

‘An hour, we’re out tomorrow,’ Jimmy told him.

They gave us the tour, meeting the Chinese instructors, then the Cuban senior staff assigned to the unit, all currently serving army officers or army doctors. A basic assault course had already been constructed, the perimeter fence being attended by builders, and the foundations for numerous buildings were taking root. In the command tent we found large black and white photographs of the facilities at Mapley that Coup had fetched over; seemed these guys were aiming at a straight copy. The Chinese Ambassador put in an appearance, driving out to us with his opposite number in the Cuban Foreign Ministry. We showed them a large diagram of the airfield, discussing various buildings and training areas under construction.

Stood on the tower roof with Helen I remarked, ‘I’ve done this once or twice before.’

‘Mawlini was the first, that picture on the wall in Mac’s office.’

‘Yes, nothing there but three small huts, and lot of hot sand. It’s getting easier though.’

‘We’ll advertise the new hotel through the Pineapple magazine?’

I nodded. ‘Some people visit our places just to tell their friends they’ve been. Still, it makes us money. Now that we’re here, Jimmy says there’ll be a domino effect around Central America.’

‘They’ll want their own RF units.’

‘Yes, and we’ll need to generate some money, it’s getting expensive.’

‘Two million a month at least,’ Helen noted. ‘But the reserves are big, sixty million sat around, a lot of that with Mac and Rudd.’ It seemed to be a question.

I faced her. ‘If anything happens to us, Rescue Force goes on - at least for a while.’

She took a moment. ‘Jimmy won’t tell me what happened between you and me the first time around.’

‘Do you want to know the future? I don’t.’

‘Not the future, how we met and dated.’

‘He said we dated for two years and got married.’ I took a breath. ‘You were sent to snuggle up to him, but got no where, so snuggled up to me instead.’

‘Sounds about right.’

‘And I, apparently, knew all along.’

‘The first time around, you said Jimmy went to Canada – you stayed in London. And died.’

‘He said I would not leave my family, which I also thought was my parents. But he meant you, and the sprogs. But don’t ... ask too many questions in that area, there’s some giant secret he’s keeping. It would be harmful if the “M” Group found out, apparently.’

She faced me squarely. ‘Even if he went to Canada, then back in time, he couldn’t possibly know what he does, or do what he does. There’s something else; telepathy or clairvoyance.’

I took in the airfield. ‘Some things you just have to accept. My own theory is that he can jump back and forth – or they can pull him back and forth. I know he spent ten years odd in China, ten years living in Kenya, another ten in Russia – but when exactly? When did he find the time to do all that?’

‘Do you think he can fix it all?’ she softly asked.

‘He doesn’t think so. He keeps hinting that I’ll come up with a good idea or two.’

‘I think 2025 is a massive earthquake.’

‘Why?’

‘Look where we are, always building up rescue force earthquake rescuers,’ she suggested.

‘Even a million rescuers wouldn’t fix a major quake. And if they did, the world economy is still screwed, so the Brotherhood rise. That’s not solution, that’s a sticking plaster.’

‘If he didn’t have a solution he wouldn’t be here,’ she quietly insisted. We walked down, boarded our bus and thought about the return trip, chilly old Wales.

Anglo-French relationships

With the Welsh weather keeping us all indoors – and Helen now huge, Jimmy announced that the time was right for the French to join “M” Group.

Their President, Chambon, had invited us over within a few days of their Interior Minister visiting. Jimmy politely told them that the time was not right. The invites kept coming, and even a nudge from Sykes and the PM, who were getting some heat from their counterparts. Jimmy finally said he would meet Chambon, at the house, no more than two advisors and two bodyguards. Chambon moved his diary around and jumped on a plane the next day, Jimmy explaining to me that the man had a fascination with the occult, and time travel.

The French delegation flew into Cardiff Airport, where cars from the Foreign Office awaited; they had only to endure a forty-minute drive to us, a police escort cutting its way through the traffic. Helen met the vehicles, fluent in French, and brought the guests inside, chatting about babies. We met them in the dining room, the existing “M” Group stood waiting with Sykes. The French President shook Jimmy’s hand, looking a bit perplexed at the number of people in on the meeting. Helen explained, in French, that they were members of the Magestic Group, surprising our guest, and listed names and countries. By time she had finished Chambon seemed most put out; put out and having been left out up to now. Everyone sat, Helen acting as translator.

‘Welcome to my home,’ Jimmy began. ‘And welcome, also, to the Magestic Group. If you are wondering why the French nation was never invited before this time, then I’ll explain. First, the principal strongest countries were contacted; America, Russia

and China. The UK was involved because I needed their kind assistance on my home turf. Others have not been involved, yet, because of risk of containment, and because it would have served no useful purpose. France was not considered for many reasons, not least your policies in Africa – which we have seen *and felt* first hand. What you may not be aware of, Mister President, is that there have been a dozen attempts on our lives, and on the lives of our people in Africa, all at the hands of French and Belgians, motivated by mining companies. At least, I hope ... it was motivated by mining companies.’

Chambon objected, and denied any involvement.

Jimmy continued, ‘Then I suggest you get a tighter grip on your nationals. Twenty French nationals were caught and interrogated, most of whom turned out to be *agents* of some sort, past or present.’

Chambon seemed annoyed, but controlled it. He insisted that measures had been taken, and would be taken in the future. Then he asked, ‘Your policy in Africa, it is Magestic’s policy?’

‘Yes.’

‘And the long term goal? It seems to be to hand African ore to the Chinese.’

‘In years to come, Islamic extremists will move south from the Sahara and attack the African states. If I had not become involved with those states, they would have fallen at a later date.’

‘The West would surely step in,’ Chambon puzzled.

‘The West, at the time, would be embroiled in World War Three.’ The French stiffened, glancing at each other. Jimmy added, ‘Cause and effect, Mister President. One would not happen without the other. So my efforts in Africa are to strengthen that region, to prepare them for a potential future attack. And the Chinese are best suited to benefit from the ore, whilst offering military assistance when the time is right.’

‘We have a great deal of experience to offer ... in Saharan Africa.’

‘That is true, and we will welcome it. Now that you know what we are trying to achieve, you can assist. And before you ask, I will give you a briefing of the main problems that the world will face between now and 2025. But that briefing will come at a price.’

‘A price?’

‘Do you have a paper and pen?’ Jimmy cheekily nudged. Chambon readied himself. ‘First, I want you to create a Rescue Force unit of fifty people, modelled on the UK unit.’

Chambon smiled. ‘It is already in progress.’

‘Second, I want a small clinic and a nursing college set-up next to our orphanage in Kenya, which will need to be English speaking. It will be your clinic, flying the French flag. Third, I want you to get involved in the student exchange programme, in particular with Russian and Chinese students. Next, I want you to promote tourism to Cuba, not least because it will upset the Americans.’

Chambon glanced at Keely. ‘The French have never upset the Americans,’ he said, less than convincingly. It caused a few smirks.

‘And finally, the most important condition: I want you to join with the Chinese and Russians in opposing any UN Security Council resolution put forwards by the Americans that involves an American attack on Iraq or Afghanistan.’

Chambon eased back and coolly regarded Jimmy. ‘That is a real possibility? War in Iraq?’

‘Yes, and it will lead directly to a global conflict. You *must* make every effort to support General Masoud, no matter how badly he behaves, and to assist their oil development. Oil must flow to keep prices stable, and to build Iraq. If Iraq disintegrates, it’s all over.’

‘All ... over?’ Chambon wanted to clarified.

‘End of the world – all over,’ Jimmy emphasised.

‘Can you ... expand upon that?’ Chambon nudged.

‘I’ll give your people a full three hour briefing. In simple terms, there are a number of key events between now and 2025 that give rise to an Islamic terrorist group called the Brotherhood. If they rise, they will destroy everything, a million suicide bombers sneaking across Europe.’

‘And this 2025?’ Chambon asked.

‘At that date their rise is unavoidable,’ Jimmy coldly stated. ‘You can only prepare for it as best as possible. Even with all the nations represented at this table working together, the chance of success for us is very small. And the chances of the various governments working together is ... slim at best.’

Chambon put his pen down. 'This has not all come about ... just to fail.'

'I say that often,' Helen put in.

'As do we,' Han offered.

Chambon firmly suggested, 'Magestic did not just appear from thin air to lead us towards a failure. I don't accept that.'

'Success in 2025 is easy,' Jimmy began. 'All we need is most of the world's people co-operating with each other, at a time of oil shortages, food shortages, economic strife and global pandemics.' He took in the silent faces. 'When people in America are suffering, they won't care about the Middle East, or Africa. That will give the Brotherhood their foothold. Politicians in Europe will be eyeing their ratings, not throwing lives away to fight in the desert – or to defend Israel. If the Brotherhood rose up tomorrow we would do well. But they won't, they'll rise when we're weak, when our economies are in turmoil, when bellies are empty.'

Chambon looked deflated. 'You are a realist,' he conceded. He sighed. 'Is there a ... route map to avoid those problems?'

'There is, and you'll get it.'

Chambon took a moment. 'You are younger than I would have figured, but with a very old head.'

Jimmy smiled. 'We have been injected with a special drug. In 2025 we'll look just as we do now.'

'Drug? What drug?'

'A drug Magestic designed. It cures all diseases known to man.'

Chambon glanced at the "M" Group, angered. 'And you all knew of this drug?'

Keely said, 'It's no miracle cure, and so far our scientists can't make head or tail of it.'

'Neither can ours,' Han and Ivan put in.

Jimmy said, 'At the moment, the only way I know to reproduce it is through direct blood to blood transfer, which could not be explained to the public – or used for large scale inoculations.'

'And they're side effects,' Keely put in.

'Side effect?' Chambon questioned.

Keely explained, 'Increased appetite; in healthy people, rapid weight gain is a problem. And because you'd be much healthier,

obese people would not get heart disease or diabetes. If you used it on a wide population you'd have healthy thirty-stone people not able to get out their front doors. But the one good thing is the high metabolism. If someone cannot eat for five days, they'd lose twenty stone quickly.'

Chambon puzzled that. 'Then why was it developed?'

Jimmy said, 'After the various governments have figured it out there'll be a few pandemics, not before. The inoculations will be ready in time; ten years.'

Keely put in, 'We're terrified of it - if it got out. Our population is already heading towards unhealthy oblivion. With this, we'd bankrupt our health insurers.'

Dave Gardener offered, 'Israel will co-operate with you, we can hand you what we already know. It will save you a few years, if we can enter into a joint venture.'

I cocked an eyebrow at that, Jimmy not reacting. Chambon offered Dave his thanks.

Jimmy said, 'You'll then be at a point in this process where our activities do not disadvantage France.'

'And ... Germany?' Chambon posed with a wave of his hand.

'Will suffer no particular problems in the years ahead, no wars, no crisis. My only criticism of them ... is a lack of interest in world affairs, because of their history. They need to move beyond it and to re-arm. And in answer to your real question, if you discuss what we've told you with them, then you *will not* join this group or get further assistance. The dissemination of that information is not something to be taken lightly - European partners or not. If this group is exposed, then we may well see a global conflict prior to 2025. By displaying loyalty to the Germans, or others, you risk the planet.'

'Will the detail of this group be made public in the future?' Chambon asked.

'Yes, around 2010. But not by choice.'

'Not by choice?' Chambon queried.

'There will be a number of disasters. In order to save a lot of lives we'll have to risk exposure - and warn people in advance. It's difficult to warn people ... of a pending earthquake.'

'Why tell people?'

'Why tell *yourselves* ... when we could have endured further assassination attempts?' Jimmy testily asked. 'Because it's

necessary. And because I won't sit back and watch millions die when I can help.' Chambon was about to say something, but Jimmy cut him off. 'There will be devastating earthquakes in Italy and Greece. Are you saying that we should not warn them?'

Silence gripped the table.

'It is a ... difficult scenario,' Chambon finally admitted.

'Which is why *I'll* decide, and not by vote.'

'You?' Chambon queried.

'Me,' Jimmy firmly stated. 'Because the nations represented here could never reach a consensus. So I'll decide, and I'll take the risk of being condemned by all sides.' He pointed directly at Chambon. 'What would the Europeans do to you, if you knew of a massive earthquake about to hit Athens – yet did nothing and millions died.'

Chambon lowered his gaze for a moment. 'I expect I would face the guillotine.' He raised his head and took in the faces. 'Will ... Athens be struck?'

'Yes, and Italy.'

'How will you warn them?'

'Between now and then I'm going to develop earthquake prediction software, and I'll have some spectacular successes. I'll warn the people months ahead of time.'

'This ... software?' Chambon puzzled.

'Won't work, its results will be fiddled.'

'Ah, I see. And Rescue Force?'

'Is under my control,' Jimmy pointed out with a false smile.

Chambon smiled and nodded. 'A beautiful symmetry. Bravo, Mister Silo, bravo. You know, I have studied your life and work, and a lot more makes sense now, especially Kenya and the Congo. We considered many things, and many angles. With the knowledge you have you could make a lot of money, yet you ask us for clinics and medics, and give all your money to charity – notwithstanding this house. One of our best people referred to your *position* ... as the greatest gift. I think I know otherwise. It is no gift, it is a curse – a very great burden you carry around. To be chosen for this burden, you must have a strength of character beyond anything of the rest of us in this room.'

Jimmy took a moment. 'You're not as stupid as your newspapers suggest, Mister President. But remember always, the motto of Rescue force: fools and heroes. It's a fool who rushes in

to save lives, only a hero afterwards. You may consider me the well meaning fool ... till 2025 judges my efforts.'

A week later the French liaison to the "M" Group arrived. Jimmy had resisted all attempts to have one here, there were even raised voices with the Prime Minister and Sykes. People thought that Jimmy did not trust the French, but he was not being very forthcoming about his reasons, and objections. With the person in question on their way, he was moody and quiet, avoiding the gym, and evening meals with the others.

On the day of the liaison's arrival I walked out to the car, passing Big Paul coming in shaking his head and smirking. I opened the car door, finding a lady just finishing a mobile call. A lady!

She stepped down, and I smiled from one ear to the other like a grinning idiot. 'Is ... something wrong?' she asked in a delightfully sexy accent.

'Everything, and nothing.'

She puzzled that with a frown as I led her inside.

Helen came around the corner and stopped dead. 'Oh ... my... god.' She turned around and scampered off.

'Am I not welcome here?' the lady unhappily asked.

'It's not that. My fiancé ... she's pregnant, so a bit loopy. Don't bother about it.' I was still smiling like an idiot. 'What's your name?'

'Michelle.'

'Follow me, Michelle.' I led her down to the lounge, where I knew Jimmy was sat with some of the "M" Group guys.

Keely stepped out and halted, soon smiling widely, too widely as he walked past. Michelle watched him go. 'I was told you would co-operate!'

'Please, wait here.' I stepped into the lounge, still with a huge grin, catching the looks of the guys.

Jimmy looked glumly up at me. 'Fuck ... right ... off!'

'The, er, the French liaison is here,' I reported, the guys puzzling my expression. 'Michelle!' I called.

She stepped in, the guys standing.

'Oh dear,' Jack said, just loud enough for her to hear.

Han shook her hand. 'Welcome to the house, and to the "M" Group, on behalf of the People's Republic.'

Jack shook her hand. 'Welcome on behalf of the British Government.'

Jimmy was still sat as I walked out.

In the office Helen quietly said, 'My god!'

'I know.'

'They can't get away with that, it's outrageous!'

'Yeah,' I teased. 'Not something UK intelligence agencies would do.'

She slapped my arm.

'What is it?' Sharon puzzled.

'The new French liaison,' Helen explained. 'She's stunning, and a dead ringer for Jimmy's ex, Liz.'

'Oh, hell,' Sharon let out.

I led Helen outside, the two of us giggling like teenagers. I lifted my mobile and selected the PM's office. 'It's Paul Holton. Is His Majesty in? Yes, it's important.'

'Paul?'

'Mister Prime Minister, small problem. The French liaison is here.'

'So?'

'She's a she, a stunner, and a dead ringer for Jimmy's ex.'

'What? They're sent a honey trap? Cheeky blighters!'

'I'd suggest you avoid the big guy for a while, a year or two.'

'Christ. Let me know if it goes pear shaped.'

'I'm sure he'll take one for the national interest.' I hung up laughing.

Jimmy stared up at her for a long time, then stood. 'Follow me, Michelle.'

He led her to his private apartment, which she questioned on entry, not least its small size. He opened a cabinet and retrieved an A4 colour photograph.

Handing it over, he told her, 'They sent *you* ... because you look just like my ex-girlfriend.'

She studied the photograph. 'My god, I do look like her.'

'I've sworn a vow of celibacy, so keep it business, young lady.' He led her back down, asking Jack to brief her, and to show our guest around. Jimmy went down to his parents at the old house, not returning till late, the gossip all around the house by then.

Secret weapons

Jimmy grabbed me one evening and told me to pack a bag, just me. Sixteen hours later we landed in Nairobi, picked up by Cosy and a team of Pathfinders, and driven directly to the large farm north of the orphanage.

The place bustled with kids in blue, the crops looking to be well attended, if not lovingly over-attended. We parked up, Cosy leading us on through thick trees to a part of the farm I had not visited. Two Pathfinders stood protecting a sturdy gate in a high fence, their presence a puzzle. They saluted and greeted us, a few words exchanged. Inside the highly protected carrot patch I frowned at the fence, Cosy leading us on. At the next gate we again found a high fence, this time guarded by armed Chinese soldiers. Now I was right confused. I practised my Chinese, which was pretty good these days, and they let us through. We approached a large colonial house with bars on the ground floor windows, surrounded by neatly tended gardens and lawns. Through the main door we again passed Pathfinders, this time in civilian clothes, and found a busy hallway, busy with kids of all ages – from twelve to eighteen in my estimation.

A girl, appearing to be around sixteen, approach Jimmy with a huge smile. She greeted him – in Chinese, followed quickly by Russian and French. Conscious of the fact that my mouth was open, I closed it and faced Jimmy. He simply smiled back and led me on, leading me to a computer room, a handful of kids sat behind the screens.

A twelve-year-old child looked up at me. ‘Paul Holton. Any more crazy helicopter stunts?’ the local boy asked in a posh English accent.

‘Er ... no, unfortunately,’ I answered, now seeing what the child was viewing, a screen of algebraic formulas that were way beyond me.

Jimmy led me to the next room, a play area dominated by a large roulette table.

‘Aren’t they a bit young for gambling?’ I asked.

Jimmy called two youths across, a boy and a girl. As he placed his finger on various squares, and groups of squares, they gave the odds of winning – whether with a single zero wheel or an American double zero wheel.

‘OK,’ I said. ‘They’re very smart.’

‘They’re all Mensa rated, IQs off the scale.’

‘That’s nice. So why the security?’

‘Why do you think, dumb fuck?’

He hadn’t called me that for a while, so I must have missed something. ‘They’ve ... had the blood?’

He nodded. ‘One in three hundred has a genetic aberration, so we’ve got twelve kids here. When they’re ready, I’ll put them to work solving problems.’

‘Like...?’

‘Things like ... electric cars, aircraft engines, computer software, and even political modelling. But what else do you think they could lend their talents to?’

I gave it some thought. And shrugged.

‘The blood?’

‘Ah, they can reverse engineer it,’ I realised.

‘And more, much more.’

‘In the Congo, there’re twenty thousand kids getting injections. So ... that would be –’

‘A lot of smart kids,’ Jimmy finished off, my maths a bit slow. ‘Harvested like ripe tomatoes, put to use solving the world’s problems.’

‘The Chinese obviously know, who else?’ I asked.

‘Just them. No one else for now.’

‘Is that ... wise?’

‘If the Chinese are involved I can control the projects. The kids won’t develop nuclear weapons – or trade the stock markets.’ I found myself nodding, Jimmy adding, ‘Not a word to anyone, not even Helen.’ He held his stare on me.

Defensively, I said, ‘There are many things I haven’t told her, and won’t.’

‘This is my secret weapon, our best hope.’

‘You think they could find a solution to 2025?’ I puzzled.

‘It’s a hope, but at least there is a hope. And I had some good news this week.’

‘Good news?’ I repeated. He wouldn’t answer.

We greeted all of the kids, conversing in a few languages. I even sat and played a computer game with one of the students. A middle aged English teacher turned up in a white lab coat, greeting Jimmy warmly and updating us on the kids’ remarkable progress. The two eldest youths were now tackling a mathematics degree by post, a home study course. Another had passed a chemistry degree, his age inflated for the official records. The precocious thirteen year old was putting me to shame with my HND from Kingston Polytechnic.

‘Is there one of these in the Congo?’ I asked.

‘No, they’ll come here when they’re spotted,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Too soon yet, it takes five or six years at least to spot them.’

The teacher put in, ‘The girl, Kako, is the best student. She’s coming up to sixteen, and digests encyclopaedias; the other students like to ask questions about places and people around the world. I gave her a one thousand-question test and she got them *all* right. She even spots errors in the books, so we have fun writing to the publishers each week.’

‘And their mental well-being?’ I asked.

The man answered, ‘If they’ve got their pet projects they want nothing else in the world, no desire to be anywhere else. They exhibit autistic characteristics, in that they focus hard on just one area of study. None have a desire to travel outside of the safe confines they find here.’

Jimmy explained, ‘They grew up in the orphanage, they’ve known nothing else.’

He led me out of the house, and to a large workshop. Inside we found a wide array of tools and machines, benches of electronic components, and more computers. Two boys stood at benches making remote controlled toy cars. At Jimmy’s request they placed the toys down, racing them around the central walkway using radio remote control. Jimmy and I had a go, mine crashing. Still, it gave them something to put back together. Beyond the workshop we inspected a small laboratory, finding two students in white coats and protective glasses concocting something in beakers. The next building appeared to be simply a regular greenhouse, stuffed full of large plants, mostly tomatoes.

‘They’re experimenting with increasing yields,’ Jimmy explained. ‘The soil here, its from the Congo, some of the best soil in the world. So far they’ve grown tomatoes twice the normal size, melons weighing a tonne.’

I handled a ripe tomato. ‘How far advanced are they, against say ... students at MIT in America?’

‘Individually, on par. But collectively they’re much better. They’ve been raised to work in teams, and deliberately so. I’ll give them problems as a group, each tackling one aspect of it; division of labour.’

‘And world politics?’

‘Not a hope, I’m afraid. This lot will help fix foundation problems, helping to ease political problems in certain areas; slightly better electric car, slightly better food production. Science they can tackle, people they can’t.’

I stopped dead, a heavy frown taking hold of my face. ‘Helen!’ I turned to face Jimmy.

‘Unlikely. It’s not normally passed on. At best, you’d have a one in three thousand chance of your daughter being autistic.’

‘You said she has a future,’ I quickly got out.

‘Not as a mad scientist,’ he assured me with a grin.

We toured the main orphanage, greeting kids and teachers in neat military formations as they walked about, then sat with Anna and her staff, young Mary now toddling. I pinched the little lady away, holding her hands as she toddled around the courtyard in her nappies. Her English was not great, seemed they were teaching the girl Dutch and German; she understood “yah” and “nein”. With Mary sat on my lap, and sharpening pencils till they were an inch long, Anna briefed us on problems and progress. They made us lunch in the staff canteen, getting to meet some of the teachers, one an English graduate on an exchange visit. Little more than two hours after arriving we headed back to the airport, a quick catch-up with Rudd as we sat waiting our flight back.

Rudd produced a bank statement, stopping to stare at it, lifting the paper to his face. Facing Jimmy he said, ‘Someone has transferred two hundred and forty million pounds to the account!’

‘What?’ I gasped in a whisper. We both stared at Jimmy, and waited.

‘A ... foreign government wants to help out,’ he calmly explained.

‘Jesus,’ I let out. ‘That’s ... a lot of help.’

‘Keep it under wraps. And Rudd, I want a cut in spending here, not an expansion. Mawlini is costing too much, trim some of the activities – five or ten percent. Allocate more funds to RF UK.’

‘What is this money for?’ Rudd puzzled.

‘It’ll be used for a variety of things, but not for a while. Transfer twenty million to the Congo, the general fund, and earmark another thirty million to build smelting plants in the Congo. But I want the roads in the Congo treated as a priority, followed by an expansion of mining. Oh, the planned port in the north of Somalia, you can make a start on that. Then, I want an investment account set-up here for the excess money – stock markets. It may as well make some money whilst it’s sat there.’

We left Rudd looking stunned. My head was spinning as well, wondering if a particular government was trying to buy favour with us, and considering the implications. The French came to mind, but Jimmy said no.

New year

There was an outside chance that Helen would give birth on Christmas day or New Year, a month or so premature – which Jimmy assured us was normal for a mother-to-be injected with stems. The lads had a betting pool running, and even Michelle made a bet, Big Paul betting on a boy. We’d been visiting the Harley Street clinic run by Sykes and his mob, the doctors aware of Helen’s condition. We’d also had the benefit of calls to Anna in Kenya; she’d been through it without problem.

Anna had opted for a “C-Section” on Jimmy’s advice, oddly enough for the sake of the child. Helen was not averse to a “C-Section”, not least because the scar would be gone in a few days. I left the decision to her. On Jimmy’s advice, I also left the name to Helen, so long as it was not something exotic. But, after some

head scratching, she had gone and asked Jimmy what we called the child before. He took some persuading, but finally relented; our first daughter was previously called Michelle. We both liked the name, but wondered if the “M” Group Michelle could have ever had any influence previously. Helen liked the idea of the nickname “Shelly”. It was a done deal.

The Cubans had visited Mapley and inspected it at length, their first troop of fifty arriving a week after we had returned, keen to get started. With the other new recruits in attendance, the place was buzzing with activity. It was too cold for tents, but the barrack blocks just about housed everyone, some people on camp beds. The Cubans tackled Faulty Towers with vigour, the course now involving metal cutting with grinders and acetylene torches. They were worked hard twelve hours a day.

They found the Silo Stiffy dummies fascinating, Jimmy offering to send a few out to Cuba. The climbing wall was generally wet from the rain, but the recruits went up and down till their fingers were sore and their limbs hurt. Whilst they were training, a Cuban representative took up station in the HQ building, along with a French representative, Bob Davies advising the French on recruitment, facilities and training standards. As with the UK unit, the French had created a supplemental group for internal work, but there was no way the French could deploy in January, Jimmy hinting at an earthquake to attend. We had accepted an Indian representative before Christmas, who had stayed a week and gone home without explanation. A replacement arrived two weeks later.

Four weeks after landing at Mapley, the Cubans were packed off to Mawlini for an intense six-week course. Since most of them were military doctors our expectations were high of quick passes. With my dear lady wife-to-be taking it easy, Jimmy and I travelled over to see Bob Davies, Mac up for a quick visit. We met in Bob’s office with Mac, Coup and Doc Graham, Coup now here so often he had a desk and a room.

Jimmy began, ‘I’ve been thinking about the necessary stages of alert, from an earthquake happening somewhere, to us deploying. This is what I think we need, assuming that we grow considerably, and attend more disasters in the future. First, we

need an alarm system here, reaching into every area, and the dorms. So if there's an alert at night you can wake everyone up.'

'A loud alarm then,' Mac said with a smile.

I said, 'Unlike *your* place, the people here don't get that hammered on a Saturday night!'

'Some do,' Bob admitted. 'It's their free time, so we can't get involved.'

'So a loud alarm and tanoy,' Jimmy repeated. 'And the same for all bases worldwide. We'll then need a system of reaching people off base, out of hours. I have a bit of software that will send faxes and automated messages, even to a non-fax numbers: when you pick up the receiver a mechanical voice reads a message over and over till you hang up. Bob, I want that looked into quickly. Then there are pagers; all instructors and senior staff should have pagers.'

'We have them on the deployed Supplemental Group,' Doc Graham put in.

'We should buy in bulk, then link them to the software,' Jimmy suggested. 'Mac, down at your end I doubt they would work, so senior people should keep their satellite phones handy at all times. We then need software in here to help with a deployment. We may send, let's say, just the ten best people from each unit, or a lot from one unit and none from another. We need to be able to say it's an all-out panic, or selective, or regional. We also need a way of saying that someone is skilled enough, say a new recruit, to attend certain types of deployments. So if they haven't passed minefield or survival yet, they could still do jobs in Europe.'

He took a breath. 'Then, we need a grade of alert, and type of alert. How about this: first, Unit Standby. That means the unit is on six hours standby to move. Then, Ready Alert, which means thirty-minute standby to move, transport arranged. Next, Deploy, which is easy enough, but let's split that between a simple non-emergency deployment and an emergency. So if we issue Emergency Deployment it means get there any which way as fast as possible. Regular deployment would be the next available flight. And let's consider part-timers – as in Turkey - and supplemental groups. They would deploy for only certain types of emergency. So, someday, god forbid, if I said Full Emergency Recall, Full Emergency Deployment – that means everyone who

remember their own name gets called in. If they're tired or pissed, they can sleep on the plane.'

He stood. 'We'll leave it with you, but by tomorrow I want a simple set of phrases to describe each stage. Then we'll look at the software and pagers. Oh, we already have some units who've graded their rescuers by teams, so that they have a team on standby, say - Alpha Team, and so on down. Let's get that formalised, huh. We could always say Deploy Alpha Teams only.'

We stood and opened the door, finding a man stood there about to knock, his hand hovering. 'Mister Silo.'

'Roger, good, you're just in time. You can sit in on this meeting. Everyone, this is Roger, your new Communications Officer.' They stood. 'Roger is good at anything electrical, and the kind of software we need to co-ordinate people like us. Put him to work immediately.'

We left them to it.

Given Helen's condition, Po came to us for a quiet New Year at the house, many of the "M" Group off to see relatives and to visit their hometowns. We invited a few people up for a dinner and sedate New Year's Eve party, Helen about to burst and getting much sympathy. On January the tenth she said she had enough, the London doctors called. They met us at a private clinic East of Cardiff for a "C-Section" that took far less time than I would have anticipated. I paced up and down the corridor whilst Jimmy sat calmly reading a magazine, not at the bedside because Helen had not wished to be seen operated upon. I had argued the case, but did not push it. Little more than twenty minutes later I was handed a small bundle in a white blanket, asked to wait before going in to Helen. Sitting next to Jimmy, I examined my red and wrinkly daughter, a silly grin from ear to ear.

Jimmy had called my parents earlier in the day without me knowing, and I looked up to find them stood there with Big Paul and Karl. They sat next to me, my mum taking the baby.

'Michelle,' I informed them in a whisper.

Helen was wheeled out fifteen minutes later, looking well, and taken to a private room, a separate bed made up for me. Jimmy checked Helen was OK before leaving us, my parents remaining for an hour before heading back to the house. When

the baby cried, Helen tried breastfeeding, making me a little jealous. And I said as much. I don't know how long I just stared at her, but it must have been hours. With Helen sleeping, I sat watching my daughter breathe, having been warned by Helen not to just sit there watching the baby breathe.

The next day my parents came back to the hospital for an hour, and Helen was discharged that afternoon, Helen surprising the medical staff with how quickly she had recovered. Back at the house, Sharon went all maternal, her own kids now eleven and thirteen and a right pair of trouble makers. Everyone in the "M" Group took a peek, Michelle allowed to hold her namesake. Jimmy handed me a large pile of faxes, telegrams, and letters in a plastic bag, informing us that presents had been left in our house.

In the house we found my parents waiting, Sandra cooking, our home warm and inviting, the hallway stuffed full of gifts. With Helen breastfeeding again, I trawled through the cards, the telegrams from world leaders, the rude cards from the RF staff: yes, I did have lead in my pencil, and yes I did know who the father was. My mum helped to open gifts, many simply kitchen utilities, some ornaments, baby clothes, plus a few books on helicopters. It felt as if Christmas had been extended and, with my parents there, quite nostalgic. Helen brought the baby down and handed her to me clean and fed, the four of us sat around the lounge as Sandra placed down snacks. As I took in the scene, I realised how far I had come since meeting Jimmy. And no matter what dangers the world faced, for now this was my little world. I didn't care what the world outside was up to.

Sound recall

On January 13th a quake struck El Salvador. By strange coincidence, Russian, British, Australian and Chinese RF units had been training in Cuba, all sizeable teams. Jimmy called me over to the office. With me stood there waiting expectantly, he dialled Mapley.

‘Bob Davies,’ came from the speakerphone.

‘Bob, Jimmy, got a pen?’

‘Fire away.’

‘Earthquake, El Salvador: in reference to those teams in Cuba *only* ... sound Emergency Deployment. Copy that?’

Bob read it back.

‘Good luck.’ With that Jimmy said I could go.

The teams were ordered over immediately, flying the short distance in Hercules and Antonovs hired for the exercise.

That evening, somewhere in the Cuban Government buildings, Castro and his men watched Cuban rescuers, in white uniforms and Cuban arm patches, land and deploy. With Cuban rescuers on the ground, many Cuban citizens watched their TV screens with interest. An American audience also watched the events unfold, the flags of many countries represented, but none of them American. The new US President was busy getting ready for his inauguration, but he had caught the news as well. ‘Timing was everything,’ Jimmy had often said. Now, our rescuers in El Salvador were getting more TV minutes than the new President.

As I watched the news with Helen, both keenly attentive, I remarked, ‘Yanks won’t be pleased. It’s their backyard, and there’s a shit load of communists helping out.’

‘Why have you never started a unit in the States?’

‘Jimmy says the timing should be right. Besides, it’ll be expensive as hell; the insurance is a killer over there. If a rescuer dies, we pay out ten million to the next of kin.’

‘It’s too much - it would bankrupt us. Will you open one there eventually?’

‘Yes, but either state run or run from Kenya. If the rescuers are hired by Kenya they can’t really sue anyone. Jimmy says that in the future the relatives sue us loads of times.’

Helen and I were officially on holiday at the moment, but when you only sleep four hours a night there are a lot of hours in the day. After four days we started to drift back to the house, attending our paperwork with the baby in the pram. And Michelle was a good sleeper, sometimes woken-up just to be fed on time. If she did cry, Jimmy would lift her out. She’d always stop crying for him, usually for me, less often for Helen. We all agreed; the girl was a flirt.

With the teams back from El Salvador for little more than the one day, Jimmy sat watching a website as it registered a quake in India. It was 3am, and Helen and I sat with him and the baby in the office.

Jimmy lifted the phone and dialled Mapley, waking Bob Davies. 'Bob, Jimmy, wake-up, get to your desk, call me back.' When Bob called back, Jimmy said, 'Earthquake, Gujarat, India – a bad one. With reference to all trained and qualified rescuers - but no reservists except UK Supplemental - sound Full Recall worldwide and Full Deployment. And with UK Supplemental, leave the UK deployed teams where they are of course. I'm on my way.'

'We'll man the phones here,' Helen and I offered. 'We're bored not being involved.'

'Do whatever hours you wish to,' Jimmy offered, a wave at my sleeping daughter.

With Jimmy gone, we got the kettle on and woke Han, since he always wanted to be involved in deployments of Chinese rescuers. As Rescue Force mounted its biggest ever deployment, a truly international deployment, Michelle slept soundly through it in the office. Helen readied the press releases, the software faxing more than a hundred recipients.

Many aircraft *just happened* to be in the right place at the right time. An IL76 jet stood on the apron at Forward Base, the Congo team loaded quickly. It flew to Mawlini, picking up the command team and their tents, a second IL76 landing as doors were closed. In Cuba, a hired commercial 747SP was diverted from the Dominican Republic, soon on its way across the Atlantic. At RAF Lyneham, dated RAF VC10s and Tristar transports made ready.

Helen got a few hours sleep as I manned the office with Han, swapping roles at 7am, my daughter in the steady and regular routine of eating, sleeping, and then filling her nappies. By time I returned, at 10am, the "M" Group were pitching in, problems of flight plans, permissions and re-fuelling. Jack assisted Sharon with the mundane faxes and emails, filing them in the right places for us to check them later, bringing things to our attention if they were important. And our French liaison, Michelle, she drove herself to Mapley in her hire car, expressing the desire to see how a deployment worked, the French on the sidelines for

this one; their only involvement was to send tents out. And of all the teams deployed, the Indian's own team took longer to arrive at the epicentre than the Cubans.

That first day was frantic, trying to move over a thousand rescuers to India. I spent time on the phone offering cash to Indian companies to help move our people; regional aircraft, helicopters and buses. The larger aircraft, the 747s, had landed in Mumbai, the IL76s putting down on a small strip inside the affected region. Jimmy appeared on the news at 6pm, background shots of the map table and bustling command centre. He relayed the problems of Indian officials at Mumbai airport not making certain nations welcome and delaying deployments, despite Indian Government agreements in advance. The diplomatic phones lines would be red hot.

As the days wore on things settled down, Helen and I driving over to Mapley to see how things were progressing on the ground. The command centre still bustled, people unshaven and appearing tired. We found Jimmy in Coup's office with Michelle, our French liaison now tasked with buying food and supplies around India and moving them to the affected area, a mountain of papers and faxes under her nose; Jimmy had given her a ten million pound budget. Listening to her on the phone, I figured she was getting good rates. Two middle-aged French officials stepped in and greeted me briefly, handing Michelle faxes. Jimmy explained to me that Michelle had roped in the French Foreign Office, and their Ambassador to India – whether they liked it or not.

I returned to Bob Davies. Quietly, I mentioned, 'Michelle seems to be ... mucking in.'

He glanced past me, grinning. 'She's shit hot, very efficient – and aggressive with it. Not just a babe. Reminds me of your missus before you knocked her up.'

'I heard that!' came from Helen, stood behind me.

'She'll be after your job next,' Bob joked.

I turned and exchanged a look with Helen. To Bob I joked, 'Helen's irreplaceable.' But I had caught Helen's expression.

Driving back, Helen said little. Pulling into the house she suggested a part-time nanny, which I agreed to straight away; I knew exactly what was going through her mind.

In the office, Sharon said, 'Your new nanny is at the house,' as she left for the day.

Puzzled, and curious, we walked straight around, finding a girl waiting in our lounge. She was a little plump, with a cheerful round face.

Standing, she said, 'I'm Katie, but everyone calls me Cat. Jimmy hired me. My sister is, Sue, the masseur that visits sometimes. Sharon is my aunt.'

'Oh. Er ... and your background and qualifications,' I asked after shaking her hand.

'I'm a nurse, paediatrics, an SRN. When my contract finished Jimmy asked me to work here, better pay and close by. Did you... not know?'

'I did,' I lied. 'Wanted it to be surprise for Helen.'

Helen knew I was lying, but welcomed Cat to the household. Cat already had a room in the main house to use when it was necessary to stay over, and Sharon had briefed her thoroughly. There was nothing to do but to hand over our sleeping bundle. I led Helen outside.

'She was probably the nanny we had before,' Helen suggested.

'If Jimmy hired her ... definitely.' I stopped Helen outside the main house. 'Listen, what Bob said, it was just a joke.'

'I know,' she said, but I wasn't sure if she accepted her own words.

'Listen, you're going to me my wife, so houses and money forever. If you don't want to work ... you don't have to.'

'I couldn't just sit around.'

'Well, no, I appreciate that - this is no regular job.' I took a moment. 'Stand still.' I dialled Jimmy. 'Jimmy, what you got in store for Michelle?'

'Tell Helen she'll be my PA for many years, Michelle could never fill that role – nor ever be fully trusted. Relax.' He hung up.

'Michelle could never be fully trusted, so there.'

We both took a breath and walked in. Tackling the mundane paperwork, we took it in turns to pop back over to our house, simply finding our daughter sleeping for the most part. In the days that followed we settled into a routine, Cat arriving at 8am and leaving at 5pm each day, but eating with the gang in the

diner a few days a week. And when Helen and I wanted an evening out, Cat was always available.

Our first meal, at the end of the first week, was with Jimmy and Michelle oddly enough. Helen was a little defensive to start with, but when the topic turned to family, Michelle quite openly explained that she could not have children. After that, Helen warmed to her, the two of them getting on well. Michelle had been quite angered at the honey trap, not in on it, and had applied for a reassignment – assuming she was telling us the truth.

The next morning, Jimmy called an “M” Group meeting. And stunned us.

‘I have ... received a message. From where, I will not reveal. Ever. There is a solution to 2025.’ People stared at each other. ‘I don’t know what the solution is, but at least there is one. I would hope to get another message before then.’ He stood. ‘That’s all, so don’t ask stupid questions all day.’ He left us to it, and I was just as surprised as the rest.

‘A message from Magestic,’ Michelle assumed.

Han and Jack exchanged looks, getting up and walking out.

Keely nudged me outside. ‘They’ve sent a message back?’

‘Right now, your guess is as good as mine. But as far as I know, he can’t contact them or vice versa.’

‘They’ve found a way,’ Keely whispered. ‘And if they can find a way to get a message back, they may just be able to open some sort of portal?’

‘All speculation, mate. Still, it’s a good sign,’ I offered.

Keely nodded to himself. ‘We’ve ... er ... heard that the Israelis got a shit load of diamonds.’

That was news to me. ‘How much of a shit load?’

‘A billion dollars worth. At least. They Congo diamonds?’

I turned Keely by the shoulders and led him to Jimmy. ‘Our American cousin has heard something about Israeli diamonds.’

‘Congo diamonds,’ Jimmy said without lifting his head from his computer. ‘Israelis didn’t want them on the open market.’

‘Ah,’ Keely let out.

Now Jimmy lifted his head. ‘If it was relevant, I’d discuss it with you.’

Keely left us. ‘That where the two-forty million came from?’

Jimmy nodded. ‘Get started on the RF celebration bash, next Saturday, London Club.’

I sat with Helen, paper and pad, planning the Indian deployment celebrations. The senior staff from each team would be there, Ambassadors, the press, and UK politicians. We invited the most senior staff from the UK emergency services, Mackey and his people, and of course, the Mapley RF commanders, Bob now walking with crutches. And I had only recently found out that Bob had not been injected, Doc Adam convinced that he would recover without it.

Arriving at the bash we found the street partially closed off, police manning railings, armed police milling around. Dressed smartly, we all stepped down from the Range Rovers to a blizzard of camera flashes. I didn't know why, there were twenty of the buggers inside by invitation, plus TV crews.

Helen and I had left the baby behind with Cat, no longer worried about leaving her. Still, we'd called Cat just before reaching the club. Now we stepped through the VIP entrance, Helen lifting the train of her long back dress, and looking stunning. We walked through to the Red Room, finding a small crowd already stood around, some sat at tables. Around the outside of room stood dozens of easels displaying photographs from the deployment, tree diagrams, movement plans. From the balcony hung flags of all the nations involved, including France we noted. We greeted Mac and Coup at the bar.

Dunnow squeezed in, putting an arm around Helen's waist. 'God, love. What's a babe like you doing with him, huh?'

'Money,' Helen joked. 'And what do you earn?'

Dunnow was deflated as we all laughed at him. 'Yeah, but I'm a hard working hero type.'

'When I'm down on my luck, I'll call you,' Helen teased.

Jimmy straightened Dunnow's bow tie. 'Scruffy bloody Aussie.'

I turned to find Po and family walking over, not expecting them. Ling kissed me on the cheek, introducing herself to Helen, congratulations offered on the baby. With them chatting, and me a little nervous, I wound up our short fat Chinaman. Turning back I found Katie Joe now chatting to Helen and Ling, Jimmy smiling at me. I took my beer and wandered off. Upstairs, I found Han and the Chinese Ambassador, so stopped to practice my Chinese for a while, Sykes walking past with a few stiff in

suits, but no one I recognised. I sat with the McKinleys directors for ten minutes, catching up on the markets and the gossip, noticing Keely with a girl. Stood at the bar, ten minutes later, Helen appeared at my side.

‘Avoiding me?’

‘Not you ... per se.’

‘How many ex-girlfriends do you have at this bash?’ she teased.

‘Well, it’s early yet,’ I said, getting a dig in the ribs.

‘I’ve invited Kate Joe to the wedding.’

‘Isn’t that supposed to be bad luck or something?’

‘She’s dating an exec’ at Pineapple, been steady for six months. He could be the one.’

Jimmy stepped in, Helen grabbing him by the elbow and dragging him over.

‘Does Katie Joe marry the Pineapple exec?’ Helen asked.

He nodded. ‘She’ll sing at your wedding.’

Now it was my turn to smile at Jimmy, nodding towards the corner of the bar. He turned his head to find Liz.

‘We gave her a membership,’ he explained. ‘Would have looked odd otherwise.’

‘You’re not seeing anyone...’ Helen suggested.

‘How do you know,’ Jimmy posed.

Ten minutes later, with Liz having said hello, Michelle stepping in with another lady, both of them looking beautiful in the evening gowns. She introduced her sister to us, Jimmy grabbing the wandering pack of photographers. He called over Liz, told me to “sod off, short arse”, and posed with the four ladies. They snapped me with Helen, me with Jimmy, then Jimmy with our French ladies.

Michelle and Liz struck up a conversation in fluent French, Helen joining in.

‘How are you and Michelle *getting along* these days?’ I teased.

‘If someone sends you a ready cooked meal...’

I tutted. ‘But it’s good, you taking one for the team.’

He gave me one of his disappointed, fatherly looks. We drifted back down to the Red Room, greeting Bob Davies and the national representatives with their ambassadors, nudging people to tables as the singers readied themselves, the lights lowering.

We sat on a table near the front, twelve of us in total, three of our most famous singers belting out popular numbers for an hour as snacks were served. In a surprising move, Katie Joe's last number was introduced as having been dedicated to myself and Helen. We exchanged looks, both gobsmacked, people now staring our way. The song, 'Soul mates,' moved Helen to tears, leaving me embarrassed as I sat there not knowing what to say or do, Jimmy seemingly enjoying my discomfort.

With the lights back up, people wandered around and met those rescuers who had turned up in their whites. Jimmy made a fuss of the Cubans, but told the Indian Ambassador that any further problems and we would withdraw from India. In a surprise move, the Prime Minister put in an appearance, his Australian counterpart visiting the UK and dragged along to meet his team. We pressed the flesh, Michelle and her sister sticking close to Jimmy, certain to be noticed and reported. Since she was, after all, the French "M" Group representative; the other "M" Group nations would be asking questions on Monday morning. It was turning out to be a surprising evening.

We did not have long to wait for the questions to start, Sykes cornering me. 'Is it Silo-Holton policy, that when spies are sent you, you bed them?'

'Only if they're gorgeous,' I replied.

'This is not funny,' he quietly pressed. 'She's a trap.'

'And Jimmy could wind her up like a clock. He dated Liz for a year or so, and she never suspected a thing. When it comes to lying to women, he's the best.'

'The PM has already asked questions.'

'Well, tell the PM, that as far as I know, he hasn't done both sisters together yet.'

Sykes was not amused, trotting off.

I led Jimmy away from the Sri Lankan Ambassador. 'Sykes and the PM are on the warpath. They think you're enjoying yourself too much.'

'If I don't snuggle up to her and feed some disinformation, the French will make many attempts to spy on us. It's the lesser or two evils.'

'Be brave,' I told him, then headed off and explained it to Sykes. Peace reclaimed the evening, Helen only ringing home twice.

We stayed the night in the club, setting off early the next morning with Karl, Jimmy and Michelle not returning till 10am Monday morning. By then I had whispered into the ears of the “M” Group. The photographs of Jimmy with the girls made all the tabloids and glossy magazines, lots of speculation about him and Michelle. Since they were seen, and snapped, sightseeing around London on the Saturday and Sunday, everyone in the damn country knew. Saturday’s tabloids also seemed to have gained access to our bank accounts in Kenya, labelling us as having sent three hundred million to the charity this year alone – and we were only in February. I hoped the taxman didn’t read the papers. I rang Rudd, who suggested the board of trustees for the charity had discussed it openly. Jimmy was not too fussed, suggesting that it served our purposes, Helen releasing a press statement to say that others had contributed to the sum.

Hail to the Chief

With Harvey out of the White House, his former Vice President now sworn in, he came for a “private” visit a few weeks later, inviting himself. Guess his library building was not keeping his full attention. He called and asked for a chat, Jimmy asking him how many bodyguards he would have with him for the visit. When told the number, Jimmy said that only ten would be allowed in, take it or leave it. Harvey re-worked the security he was required to drag around, the UK police offering to cover our fence.

Harvey had flown into Heathrow on a private jet, an Agusta helicopter then bringing him over to us, his ride trailed by two RAF helicopters; some of his staff in one and an SAS security detail in the other. He landed on the lawn, the Augusta flying off to Cardiff airport to wait. The first RAF helicopter, a Puma, put down eight people, the other RAF helicopter circling for five minutes before it headed off to wherever they hung out. We greeted him on the lawn, his assistant and two bodyguards, soon

followed by another assistant and seven bodyguards – all lugging cases, yellow-clad British police in view around the grounds.

‘Nice house,’ he said, looking up. ‘Very nice.’

‘It eases the burden of what we do,’ I suggested, making him laugh.

I showed him his room – a corner suite, his bodyguards being allocated apartments, their senior man shown to the camera room, but already knowing the way. Settled in, Harvey toured the house before joining us in the lounge.

‘So, you get protection for the rest of your life, yeah?’ I puzzled.

‘Afraid so.’

‘What, even when you’re like ... ninety years old?’

‘They reduce with the years,’ he informed me with a smile, his assistant sat ready with pad and pen, bodyguards at the doorway.

‘So,’ Jimmy began. ‘What will you do next in your career?’

‘Not much I can do, or would be allowed to do.’

‘I’m going to create a new charity,’ Jimmy informed him, news to me. ‘The Organisation for International Co-operation and Development.’

‘Toficad?’ I questioned.

‘OICD,’ Jimmy corrected me. To Harvey he said, ‘And could do with someone with *diplomatic* credentials.’

‘Do I accept the post?’

‘You do,’ Jimmy carefully mouthed.

‘Then I accept. What’s the pay?’

‘Million dollars a year plus all costs and travel.’

‘And will involve...?’

‘Some *controversy* when you help to promote low carbon technology and electric cars, amongst other things. Strangely enough, I just happen to have some designs for some low carbon emission bits of kit.’ Jimmy reached under the coffee table and pulled out a thick file. ‘Reading material, ideas, suggestions. But your first job will be to meet all those involved in the student exchange programme, and to promote its awareness – nagging the various governments for cash.’

As I sat there I could picture 2015 and 2025, and Jimmy’s role in the key events. It struck me hard, as the formerly most

powerful man in the world sat taking Jimmy's directions, Jimmy now his de-facto boss.

'But that's enough about work, lets eat and have a few beers,' Jimmy suggested.

'Sounds good.'

'And it's poker night,' I put in. 'But your NSA guy is unbeatable.'

'Typical NSA, they probably run courses on it!' Harvey joked.

The "M" Group joined us around the dining table, dressed smartly, and we laughed and joked with Harvey like old mates.

In the morning, Jimmy's masseur turned up with a curvy mate. It seemed that she was called "Bouncy", but I must have heard that wrong. Harvey received an hour-long massage from Bouncy, people avoiding enquiring as to "how was it?" The Africans were in awe of him, Sharon not phased at all and taking his contact details for his salary. She told him to have expenses claims in within thirty days, or else! She also told the bodyguards to get out of "her" office, making me smile.

Bob Davies came over and spent an hour with our new employee, giving him a complete run down of Rescue Force operations worldwide. Over coffee I picked Harvey's brains about White House trivia; sleeping in late, having your mail re-directed, did you get a reference for your next employer – and who wrote it, was there a secret bunker and tunnel. Any death rays?

Forty million pounds from the Kenyan charity fund was diverted to OICD, Harvey tasked with improving computer education and Internet access for Africa, starting in Kenya. A fibre optic cable would extend from Suez, down the Somali coast and to Mombassa, thereafter inland across Kenya and Tanzania towards the Congo, permissions a foregone conclusion. Rudd had transferred the money, before noticing that the same amount of money was still in the account, eventually figuring out that the investments had done quite well; very well, in fact.

Two weeks after his first visit, Harvey was back, this time on a mission from the new President, Art Johnson. We met him with the full "M" Group, since it involved Magestic work.

Harvey began, 'Art would like to tax the rich, and Wall Street, without them knowing about it; put more money into Government projects. He could do that if stock trading information, plus currencies and ores, was made available.'

Jack, Ivan and Han could not object since they already got such information.

Ivan asked, 'What effect would that have on the global economy?'

'Not much,' Jimmy told him. He faced Harvey, 'How much does he want to take out of the economy?'

Harvey raised his arms and shrugged. 'It all helps.'

'He must have a figure in mind,' Jimmy pressed.

'Let's start simple,' Harvey suggested. 'And extra fifty billion a year.'

'From Wall Street, you can take as much as you like,' Jimmy suggested. 'That's your right. But currencies would affect some in this room. Ores are less of a problem, but if you buy a lot of ore futures you'll create a shortage. Now, how are you planning on getting around the legislation that prevents you from doing just this? Congress *will* see the audit.'

'Good question,' Harvey said with grin. 'We can't do it directly, certainly not in a large way. So we'd ask you to nudge up the investment funds of military and civil service medical insurers and pensions. We'd then lower our contributions, freeing up money. In addition to that, you'd assist the investments of nominated friendly states, and we'd lower aid packages. Finally, a few friendly construction corporations would get a boost from you, dropping their prices to us. And as for Senator Pederson and his *rapidly growing* medical insurance company, we're happy for that to expand greatly – we can lower some of our contributions. And none of this would be provable, since it's simply a matter of investments doing better than in previous years.'

'And what is it that you think I'll put on my Christmas list?' Jimmy posed.

Harvey upturned his palms, and waited.

Jimmy took out a piece of paper. 'First, I want greater pressure on the Pakistani Government to stop Arab fighters reaching Afghanistan. Second, I want the US to have no objections to the Chinese supplying weapons to Sri Lanka to end

the Tamil war, thereafter building Chinese commercial shipyards in Sri Lanka. Next, I want relations improved with Venezuela, no matter how much you dislike them. I want tighter regulation of the US mortgage market, and an expanded programme where you buy up abandoned houses, employing locals to fix them, then rent them out – state owned. I want the Mexican border buttoned up tight and more illegals repatriated. And finally, and most importantly, I want a big push to mend relations with Cuba.’

‘Cuba? Jeez.’

‘Let me put it this way: you have your list, I have mine.’ Jimmy handed over the sheet and sat back. ‘And with Cuba, keep in mind that over the next decade I’ll buy up some nice real estate. When Cuba and you eventually kiss and make-up it’ll be worth a fortune. And you *will* make-up eventually.’

Han asked, ‘Would Cuban hotels be a good investment?’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy told him, Michelle taking notes.

‘So how do we do this?’ Harvey asked.

‘Until I see in the news what I want to see, I’ll only help the military pension investments.’

‘Just how the hell do we *quantify* relations with Cuba?’ Harvey complained.

‘You can start by appointing me US special envoy to Cuba.’

A cat walked in, taking in the faces. Jimmy lifted it up, placing it on the arm of the sofa.

‘Sorry, Jimmy, that’s mine,’ Jack offered. ‘Don’t know how it got in.’

Jimmy stroked the cat’s head. ‘It’s OK. We have a baby, so a cat was inevitable. I’ll start worrying when Paul’s girl starts bringing bikers home.’

‘I’d have them shot at the gate,’ I suggested. ‘I’m not going to let her out till she’s thirty.’

Jimmy faced Harvey. ‘You have the list, and it’s not negotiable. Dinner at 6pm for all here, drinks afterward.’

A month later, Jimmy was appointed Special Envoy to Cuba, making a formal visit with representatives from Russia and China, a weighty group backing us up.

We began with tourism, offering to assist Russians holidaying in Cuba, Yuri and Marko wanting to buy up a few hotels. We

also wanted to buy, or build a few hotels ourselves, all good news to the Cubans. The French had made moves towards increasing tourism to the island, the cost of hotels rising already. By the end of that first hour-long meeting we had agreed to build another thirty hotels between us.

After lunch we agreed to increase the size of Rescue Force Cuba, almost doubling it, the Cubans accepting money from us. With the storms that often hit Central America, not to mention earthquakes or volcanoes, their RF teams were already kept very busy, a sizeable foreign contingent swelling their numbers; this was where the action was.

The next morning we got down to politics. Jimmy firmly suggested that he was not about to criticise their socialist system, something he admired for its efficiency, but that they should look at China and Russia, communist countries that now embraced capitalist ideas and offered growing economies. We indicated that there was movement from the Americans, and that we could promise progress if the Cuban rhetoric was toned down.

The question of reparations came up, reparations for US corporations and families who lost businesses and properties when the communists had seized power. Jimmy's solution was simple: allow those who had lost out to have land at no cost, to build hotels and bring in tourists. That way everyone benefited, and the Cubans would not have to shell out any cash. They were surprised, and we left it with them. I rang home to see how Helen and the baby were doing before we flew to the Dominican Republic, catching a flight to the US.

After a night in the New York apartment, we flew down to DC and met Senator Pedersen in his office. Jimmy began by saying he would assist the medical insurance company to grow by three fold, the good senator staring back wide-eyed, then asked for help with Cuba. It was a kind of "one goes with the other" sort of deal. That cake was iced with a mention of African oil for Pedersen's friend, Ted the oilman with the loud wife. We outlined the reparations deal, even suggesting we'd put some money on the table, before heading off for a TV interview.

Settled around the interviewers desk, our faces now dabbed with make-up, teeth cleaned, we went live.

'Mister Silo, you're best known for your charity work around Africa, more than a billion dollars spent —' We did not correct

him. ‘- and of course Rescue Force medical charity, but now this move into world politics. How did that come about?’

‘Being heavily involved with Rescue Force, I have always dealt with governments and politicians, trying to cut through the red tape to get my medics into certain countries. You’d be surprised how difficult it can be to help people in need.’

‘And now you have a rescue team in Cuba, with the backing of the Cuban Government.’

‘We’ll take help from anyone who wishes to give it.’

‘You have units in Russia, China and now Cuba.’

‘Yes, and they’re great to work with. I admire an ordered society, especially after the chaos of Africa.’

‘You have several orphanages in Africa, the largest has some twenty thousand children in it – run along military lines.’

‘Most people watching this show will have trouble with controlling two or three kids - try twenty thousand in one place!’

‘And why is it militarised?’

‘It’s not militarised - it’s regimented and disciplined. My philosophy is simple: they *will* study each day, they *will* be punished for misbehaving, and they *will* respect their teachers. In Kenya, the sixteen-year-olds in our orphanage have a higher educational standard than the whole of Africa, higher than the American average. A certificate of education from our orphanage just about guarantees a good job.’

‘And in the Congo, where you were awarded a Governorship, you run a tight ship, criticism from some groups.’

‘I don’t have the authority to set policy or laws, but I have influence. Where possible I have encouraged capital punishment and have brought back hanging.’

‘Hanging?’

‘Yes, hanging. When a man rapes and kills a ten-year-old girl, we hang the bastard. My only regret is that I’m not allowed to do it myself.’

The interviewer blinked. ‘And now you’ve been appointed US Special Envoy to Cuba.’

‘That is just because no one here has the guts to talk to the Cubans. It’s silly really, because for the past ten years, British and European tourists have enjoyed holidays in Cuba, the numbers growing all the time. We’ve bought a hotel down there, property prices appreciating by at least twenty-five percent a

year. If you Americans don't want to make a buck down there, we will. And Cuba offers some of the best beaches in the Caribbean.'

'You've recently met with the Cuban leadership.'

'Yes, and they want a solution, they've wanted one for the past twenty years. All you have to do is pick up the phone and stop talking to them like they're naughty children. But I seriously doubt there are any politicians here with big enough Cahonies to visit the place with me, except maybe Senator Pedersen.'

The interviewer blinked again. 'And ... what's on the table?'

'First, I think the Cubans are willing to discuss reparations for what American companies and individuals lost when the communists took over, a kind of land deal that I have put to them.'

'Land deal?'

'Land for hotels - very valuable land - islands with great scuba diving. I see no reason why anyone who lost out should not get something. And something is better than nothing.'

I put in, 'If the US wanted to take a first step, you could allow your tourists to visit the islands in the north. After all, we wouldn't want innocent and naïve American tourists to be converted to communism after a stroll through Havana.' Jimmy hid his grin.

'And what has President Johnson said about the Cuban position?'

'No much, unfortunately,' Jimmy replied. 'He wants a solution, so do they. But it's like getting back with you ex-wife for the sake of the kids. Damn hard! But if the States doesn't get a foothold in the Cuban economy, the Russians and Europeans will. By time your ready to kiss and make up it'll be too late, all the good business opportunities will have been taken by us. There're some folks out there hoping you don't open up trade yet.'

'Jimmy Silo, Paul Holton, thank you for being with us today.'

We were off air. Still, I got one sentence in. And we got plenty of column inches the next morning as we met Pedersen for breakfast with some of his Republican buddies.

'Ya don't pull no punches,' the first white haired man said.

'You want a job here?' the second joked.

Pedersen discreetly dropped into the conversation the fact that his buddies had oil and mining interests. Jimmy explained that the minerals and oil in the Congo were ten times bigger than anyone knew about. I think they call this “horse trading” down in Texas, where Pedersen hailed from. Jimmy was blunt and to the point, and in most countries this would have been illegal, if not immoral. Here, it seemed to be the norm.

We suggested that it would be in the national interest for a delegation of Republicans to visit Cuba in a month’s time, the men sure they could arrange it. Thereafter we’d talk about the Congo. It was no more complicated than that, or more difficult, a surprise for me; I had entered the world of American politics, where the dollar was king, horse-trading the norm.

Jimmy received a call from the White House after breakfast; we were summoned. Vans with blacked-out windows picked us from the hotel an hour later, whisking us the short distance to the White House. I was back in the Oval Office, admiring the carpet, the Chief of Staff the same guy we’d met with Harvey. At least they made me tea this time, President Johnson turning up a little late.

‘Sorry about that, a bit hectic still.’

‘Don’t appoint Decker,’ Jimmy told him.

‘No?’ Johnson queried, a glance at his Chief.

‘He’ll embarrass you. Badly.’

‘Oh. Well, thanks for that.’ He sat. ‘OK, that TV interview: what the hell was all that about?’

‘Stage play,’ Jimmy said. ‘You wouldn’t want me to appear to be a Democrat, would you?’

‘I think some are calling you Jimmy “hang ‘em high” Silo. Still, your ratings are good.’

‘We have ratings?’ I asked.

‘They poll everything here,’ the Chief explained. ‘You got a seventy-two percent approval rating, an older affluent demographic.’

‘If I understood any of that – I’d still think it weird.’

Johnson asked, ‘You met with a group of Republicans for breakfast?’

‘They’ll go to Cuba,’ Jimmy explained.

‘And were they ... induced?’

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘Good old fashioned horse trading.’

‘Are reparations a possibility?’ Johnson asked.

‘They are,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘And now your TV audience believes they’re missing out on business opportunities down there. Some will open bank accounts in the UK to buy property there.’

‘And the next step for Cuba?’

‘Let the Republicans take the lead for now, it’s a long process. But if you ease some restrictions it will help my hand. Allow US citizens to holiday there, as some already do in a round about way. Tourism is the one key factor: they’ve got the beaches, your people like cheap holidays. It’s no point you trying to change the regime, just work around them, deal with the people direct. And between now and 2015 *your ratings* in Central America drop to all time lows. That needs addressing. Now, if you make a big effort in Cuba this year I’ll give you an oilfield in the gulf, a big one, and address your ... shopping list.’

‘Why’s Cuba important?’ Johnson asked.

‘That ... you’ll discover just before it’s too late.’

‘Oil?’

‘They have oil,’ Jimmy agreed.

‘And...?’

‘And ... wait and see. Everything at the right time.’

Johnson took a moment. ‘Do I serve one or two terms?’

‘That’s a naughty question. If I answer that ... it may be seen as interference.’

‘Cut the crap. One or two?’ Johnno pressed.

‘You only just scraped in this time, you won’t next time.’

‘And with your kind assistance?’ Johnson risked. I could not believe what I was hearing.

‘Look at this way. Following you, a Republican gets into office, and does a lot of harm. But, that harm gets the next Democratic President in for two terms, and he does a lot of good.

If I help you get back in you’ll upset that pattern, and the idiot getting in after you serves two terms. So think about it. Cause ... and effect, and you’ve already used up one wish by being in that chair to start with.’

‘You interfered?’

‘Directly, a long time ago.’

‘Some might call that *interference*.’

‘Something about *gift horses* comes to mind,’ I put in.

Jimmy smiled. 'You will, however, have an important future after office, a significant role.'

'Not with Harvey?' Johnson baulked.

'No, more important than that role.'

'What about Israeli and the Palestinians?' Johnson asked.

'Nothing will ever change, so don't waste your time. Cats and dogs.'

'Russia?'

'Always a pain, but again – *deal with the people*. Let them visit New York in droves, buy apartments. Wine and dine their new middle class. By-pass the Government, leave *them* to me.'

'No problems there?'

'None. Right now they couldn't hold their own in a fight with Estonia, let alone you. But they have a shit load of gas and oil, and will get rich quickly. Get your corporations in there. But most importantly, get them over here. The key to the future is *corporate integration*; by 2015 it's a truly global economy.'

'And if it's not interference, the biggest domestic problems faced by the US in the years ahead.'

'That will be your successors battling with the oil industry. You'll resist electric cars too long, other countries ahead of you. You lose that race. And beyond 2010 you'll get used to ten percent unemployment, twenty percent by 2015 onwards. You can't compete with China, India or Brazil, they pay a third of the wages for skilled workers. Only after 2015 do Chinese wages start to hurt them, Indian wages never will.'

'And the solution?'

'Not sure I'm qualified to best judge that, even with knowledge of the future. There are ... many paths to take. For the most part your future Presidents just get angry at the world, blaming others. Your best bet is to nudge US corporations into Russia, India and definitely Africa – as you did in a way after the Second World War. You need joint projects with many nations, and you need to get back to making things and selling them abroad. If tractors don't do it any more, look to see what does. But no matter what you do, China, India and Brazil will grow and take your trade. They'll rise and you'll slip; not even I could alter that. Learn what every small businessman knows: if you can't sell more, cut your costs. Your core costs are oil, wages,

healthcare, and food. Look for the efficiencies before it's too late.'

At the airport, sat in the First Class lounge, I made a confession to Jimmy. 'I must admit, I'd rather be home with the family than here. Not sure my mind is on this.'

'I know. But you'll appreciate them more, and then you ... if you travel. Besides, I said you could take some time off...'

I nodded, taking in the other passengers. 'I can't say I have a lot of respect for this lot.'

'It's politics: you're not supposed to respect it, you're supposed to use it for your means – for good. Anyone who enjoyed this would be a serious concern. But don't judge Johnson too harshly, he's a good man, it's just the game he's in.'

'He cares more about the size of his arse than Katie Joe.'

Jimmy smiled. 'Washington is a game which, once started, is hard to give up. And it's all about the ratings. Often, the best way to get things done is to hold a TV interview, get good ratings, and then sell the ratings to whoever wants to buy them. The other way is good old fashioned dollars.'

I was glad to be back, wondering if the baby even recognised me. Helen showed me a chart that Cat had made, basically how long our daughter measured week by week since birth; baby Michelle was in the highest percentile. With Cat watching our rapidly growing child, we went and found Jimmy, acting like a pair of concerned parents. In his apartment we sat on the edge of sofa.

'The baby's in a high percentile,' I said.

'It's too soon, that happens normally sometimes. We need a year.'

'And if she has the blood?' Helen asked.

'She'll be tall till fifteen, then her height will freeze.'

'How tall?' I asked.

'Like Helen tall, not like me tall,' he said with a smile.

'Oh. And when would we know if she was heading that way?'

'Like I said, a year.'

'Any other side effects?' Helen asked.

'Same as you: lack of sleep, fit, immune.'

'How much lack of sleep, I mean – as a baby?'

‘She sleeps too much as it is, I doubt she has the blood, she’d roar more often. Best thing to do is just inject her and get it over with.’

‘Should we?’ Helen asked.

‘That’s you call, but if it was my kid – with a chance of getting Meningitis – then I’d inject the kid. And the first time the kid gets sick, you’ll inject her.’

‘We will?’ I asked.

‘If she got sick, and you didn’t inject her, and she died – just how would you feel, knowing you had the cure?’

It was a sobering moment. There was no answer to it.

‘We’d never forgive ourselves,’ I finally said.

‘First time she gets sick, inject her,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘But I think she’ll be fine either way. And don’t spend all night worrying about it.’

We headed off, and spent all night worrying about it. In the morning I put a call in to Anna, discovering that she had injected young Mary after a month. Since that time, she had noticed little difference, Mary sleeping a good ten hours a night. I called the London doctors the next day, the man due to visit soon anyway. He came with a very small needle, anticipating just such an occasion. He took a blood sample first, injecting the baby with a tiny drop of my blood.

‘As far as we know,’ he said, ‘the drug works the same way as a baby works – its growth pattern, so no particular changes really, just the immunology. But if I’m wrong, she’ll cry more and need more feeding.’

‘Thanks a lot,’ I quipped.

‘I injected my own granddaughter six months ago, and so far very little difference. We’ve all the stats from the orphanage as well, and the worst case was only ten percent growth acceleration. No particularly tall boys after all these years.’

‘Will she run a fever now?’ I asked.

‘No, that doesn’t happen in babies. Like I said, it’s trying to make her body do what her body is already doing; it’s most pronounced in adults. I’m staying over in the house tonight, I’ll check in on her in the morning. Don’t worry.’

‘Poor little mite,’ I said. ‘Big needle in her leg.’ We sat and worried.

Housing plans

We created a new Limited company, not a Plc, and sold the Chinese ten shares for a pound each. The nice men in Beijing then made a directors loan into the company, a cool one billion dollars. Actually, Po bought the shares and made the loan on their behalf, another two hundred million from his own family. It was a big number, but for what we planned on doing not nearly enough. Helen organised a one-page advert in The Times, inviting investors with more than twenty-five million to spend to attend.

A week later, three hundred people sat in the Red Room at the club, refreshments free. It was the least we could do. Jimmy took to the podium.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Jimmy Silo.’ He waited as people laughed, no one unaware as to who he was. ‘And we are here today to find people interested in investing in my property business. That new venture will be involved with several areas of the property market, here and abroad. It will involve the building of new properties, renovating old properties, rentals, apartments and hotels. Hotels would only be built in certain strategic locations, and only where I feel they will enjoy a good rate of appreciation. Holiday homes would only be bought where I feel the resort is not going to be a flash in the pan. At least forty percent of the company’s investments will be in the UK, thirty percent in the US – possibly more in time.

‘Now, the way we want this to work, is that those interested – that we have no objection to – would buy a single share in the Limited Company, followed by a directors loan in. That loan would attract interest on a pro-rata basis in line with how well company’s investments are doing, paid out at the end of a fixed two year period. In order to withdraw that loan we would need one years notice to unwind the investment. That’s two years fixed, one-year notice. My estimated return is twenty percent per year compound with no downside; money will never be invested into anything other than bricks and mortar. For those prepared to

make a five-year investment, we believe we can offer a better rate of return, and will pay out annual interest adjustment at our discretion, aiming at six percent.

‘You will all have the details in front of you. They list our solicitors, and McKinleys stockbrokers who are helping out. And before you ask, this venture *will not* be converted to a Plc.

‘Finally, and most important, all investors get a free membership here.’ People laughed. ‘OK, questions please.’

Jimmy fielded questions for fifteen minutes, many quite repetitive, most answered with a “no”. When done, Jimmy said, ‘Any investment houses, or anyone playing with more than a hundred million pounds, please come forwards for a chat now. Anyone wanting a shorter or longer term, please wait till called, those investing from twenty-five million upwards go see the nice men to the right of the bar for application forms.’

We formed the first group into a line, seats provided, then spoke to each party briefly in private. Some wanted to forego the annualised payment for a better return, others wanted a better annual payment; details were taken, terms agreed. One fund manager informed us with a grin that he handled US civil service pensions, a less than subtle hint. Jimmy told him he could have any terms he liked. Yuri and Marko had their brokers in the audience, the amount they wanted to invest limited – for now. By time the big players had finished, six billion pounds had been pledged, a big number. But in property terms, it represented two hundred thousand small abodes worldwide, terraced houses in the UK. Chuck in a few hotels, a thousand apartment blocks, and there was not much change left; it was a paper number.

Jimmy and I split up and wandered around meeting groups of investors, five London stock brokers that we knew grouping clients funds together to create a master fund, then investing it with us, a safe twenty percent a year. Many admitted to believing our returns would be higher. Little did they know that we were doing this to keep property prices down in the years ahead.

An hour and half after the meeting began we closed up, having a bite to eat in the diner before our second meeting; Rolf the architect plus several house-building companies, one general construction company from Swindon. We met upstairs in the computer room, refreshments offered before getting down to business.

Jimmy began, 'Rolf here, whose name is not Rolf, will be acting as liaison between ourselves, and yourselves, assuming that you wish to be a part of this. We have, today, created a new property business, and it has just under six billion pounds in it.' They blinked. 'We'll be looking to commission you to build houses and apartments on land we buy, the first part no more complicated than that. And it's easy work for you, because we're paying upfront for the construction, and you don't need to try and sell the property afterwards. The second part, possibly even the biggest part, will be the company buying run-down properties that meet a certain criteria, then doing them up for sale or rent. Rolf, I'll need you to find me twenty hard-working architects covering an area from Birmingham, south east to the coast, and including South Wales. They start as soon as you have them, their task to find run down properties with potential. We'd buy them, and start the renovation rental process straight away.'

He faced the construction company. 'I've selected your business and, provided you don't try it on, we'll spend a lot of money with you. We'll also force down material costs by buying in bulk upfront and storing them with you.'

'How many properties per year?' the man asked.

'Upwards of ten thousand.' That got his attention. 'I appreciate that you don't have the staff, so we'll make a few upfront payments to ease your cash flow and wages bill. You can grow ... as fast as you can grow.'

He faced the house building companies. 'Your role is easy enough, your cash flow a joy – we'll pay fifty percent up front with each commission.' He turned his head to Rolf. 'Your job will be to pick areas that show promise for the future - road links, schools and supermarkets - then find land at good rates; the skill comes in the location. We'll then want a mix of two-bed, three-bed and four-bed properties – no luxury retreats. For London, and urban areas, think four storey apartment blocks for the rentals market. Gentlemen, I want sample house designs and costs as soon as you're ready. Renovation guy, you'll have to quote each job and be audited by Rolf's company. OK, you lot, meet amongst yourselves, let's all meet at the house in ten days time, co-ordinate through Rolf – whose real name I've forgotten.'

Ten days later, on a cold Thursday night, the same guys assembled at the house, their co-directors in attendance. We examined sketches and diagrams, Jimmy tending towards “practical” rather than “fancy”, the renovation guy offering a ramp up process for us to look at. Helen and I looked at diagrams for apartments, making a few comments.

Rolf had started the process of recruiting architects, already a handful commissioned as self-employed surveyors. The first two properties were under offer, several bits of land under offer – Rolf explaining their location in relation to schools, road links and proposed supermarkets. We were making progress, the company already showing a good profit since we had traded some of the money through the DOW Jones futures markets; it was twenty million pounds ahead without having sold nor rented a property.

Jimmy then commissioned the construction of an entire holiday village in Croatia, causing a few raised eyebrows. He commissioned three large hotels, six bars and three hundred holiday homes, the Croatian authorities happy to lay the roads and promenade. In the Russian resort of Sochi we commission two hotels and two hundred holiday homes, another two hotels and a three hundred holiday homes in Bulgaria. In Tenerife, we commission a sixty-apartment block.

Across the Atlantic, we petitioned the Cuban Government for land to build four hotels, and in the US itself we hired a team to work with Rolf. They would find well-made stone houses and apartment blocks that needed a bit of work, to buy and renovate them and rent out. But most of all, we concentrated on the UK, where Jimmy knew what the markets would do, and when. When estate agents approached and offered up apartments in Dubai, Jimmy told them firmly to “fuck off”.

We landed back in Cuba a day ahead of the US politicians visit, staying at the same hotel in Havana and driving straight around the nearby RF unit. The base was now accessed through a high fence manned by soldiers, many brick buildings completed. Someone had been busy.

English, Russian and Chinese rescuers greeted us, the Cubans now issued whites to wear. From the tower roof the senior Cuban, who spoke perfect English, pointed out the training stations: the cave, the climbing wall, Faulty Towers, the assault course, the rapid water feature, the gym under construction; it was Mapley's twin brother. They even had Huey helicopters, a leased commercial Hercules sat on the apron.

Ratchet and Spanner stepped out to us, being warmly greeted; it had been a while. They showed us around, illustrating the strengths and weaknesses of the Cubans, what kit they needed. Ten land rovers had been imported from Kenya, more promised, the Cubans training on the British made vehicles to be compatible with other units. They also seemed to possess twenty of their own jeeps, for local use, RF Mawlini paying their fuel. We arranged to meet Ratchet and Spanner, plus their Cuban counterparts, that evening at our hotel for a meal.

The next morning we met the Cuban Government for talks before talks, the diplomacy delicate. Jimmy explained all of the various etiquettes of international negotiations, then ignored them and did his own thing. The Cubans were not thrilled about any discussion of reparations, since they blamed the US for everything apart from the weather, especially the state of their economy. Jimmy asked if they would table the reparations, but not do anything about them; it was a chip on the table. That got us over hurdle one. They were happy to sell land and increase tourism, and would sell to us at reasonable rates. But the sales were not sales, they were ninety-nine year leases, the state owning the land ultimately. Jimmy asked if they would do the same for certain US corporations that may help our political cause. They agreed in principle, but saw it as back to reparations.

Next, Jimmy surprised me. Could our Russian friends drill for oil in Cuban waters? They were a bit taken aback. Me too. Jimmy asked for a concession to drill at a few sites, suggesting it would not cost the Cubans anything, and may bring in good revenue. He then asked if we could drill for oil just outside

Cuban waters, with their assistance and blessing; outside of the twelve-mile limit, but inside of the two hundred mile zone. That puzzled our hosts, since we did not, technically, need their permission. They agreed the last part after a phone call, Jimmy pushing them on the first part, emphasising that they had nothing to lose. Over coffee the call came in: we could bring in a Russian oil company. It just so happened we had a Russian company in mind, and could they sink test drills around Havana itself? Oh, and they would arrive next week in force. Our hosts were perplexed, calling the Russian Ambassador. Yes, we did speak for the Russian Government and its principal oil companies in this matter.

Breaking for lunch, Jimmy explained that the Russians would be “lucky” in finding oil. He also explained that a letter from the Russian President should be reaching Castro right about now. After lunch, a few extra bodies were in on the meeting, a slight change in tone evident. Jimmy eased back towards simple reparations, at least the hint of them. If they were on the table, we would ask the UN to counterbalance such claims against the damage the embargo had done. Jimmy suggested that such a claim and counter claim would take ten years, but in the meantime the embargo could be tackled. We finally had an agreement in principal.

The next point was simple enough, if a bit out of context: could we open a large orphanage here, and fund it all ourselves? At first they were insulted, the UN itself acknowledging that Cuban orphanages were well funded and well run. We explained that it was our way of helping, we were not saying that the orphanage was needed. They agreed in principal, nothing to object about. Jimmy suggested a modest thousand kids to start with, and did they have land we could lease for it?

Doctors came next. Cuba had a lot of well-trained, but underpaid doctors. Could we employ a thousand of them for Africa? We’d pay the Cuba Government the equivalent of four times their monthly pay, and all their costs, a pay package that was still a tenth of a British doctor. Cuba would get the political benefit, and make some money. They made a call, the project approved, and we asked for the first two hundred to be readied for the Congo within six weeks. They would wear RF whites and work out of Forward Base.

Breaking for coffee, we stepped out, Jimmy lifting his satellite phone after a moment's hesitation. He called the White House, getting through to Art Johnson. 'Mister President, something I wanted to clarify, just in case I did not relay it well enough when we met. First, I've just got the Cubans to allow in a Russian oil company, and second ... they have enough oil to shift the balance of power in the region.' He listened. 'Did I not mention that? Never mind.' He hung up.

'Did you just kick him in the balls?'

'More like the throat,' Jimmy quipped. 'I wasn't going to do that for a while, I must be getting adventurous in my old age.'

Back in the meeting, we simply asked what steps could be taken to improve relations with the Americans, a whole host of silly ideas given to us, and rejected. Everything came down to the embargo, Jimmy explaining that the Russians, British and French were keen to improve trade in the near future. We did not get far and broke for the day, travelling around to the Chinese Embassy for a meal, the Russian Ambassador invited over.

Jimmy took a call from Art Johnson. It made him smile, so must have been good news of some description. Back at the table, Jimmy told the Chinese and Russians that it would help our cause if senior figures from their governments visited around four weeks from now. They promised to relay the messages.

The next morning we met the American delegation at the airport, four Republican senators, four Democrats, Pedersen in the group. A coach whisked us to the same building we had been using, cold and formal greetings swapped between the Cubans and Americans. Everyone settled around a large table, Jimmy kicking things off because he was, after all, the special envoy.

'Let me start by informing everyone here that I spoke to President Johnson last night, and as of next week America would like to offer two flights a day between Florida and Havana, visa restrictions applying of course. If Cuba is happy to co-operate, President Johnson wishes to make this first gesture of peace and goodwill.'

The Cuban side of the table exchanged looks, making formal noises of approval, heads bowing polite acknowledgements. Pedersen made a short speech, and managed to use a hundred words to say absolutely nothing, his colleagues repeating the move. Jimmy finally asked the Cubans if they would put

reparations on the table. They would, the American delegation could take that back. Jimmy then asked if the Cubans could tone down any anti-American rhetoric whilst talks continued, regardless of what American commentators said. They agreed. Thank god for small miracles, I thought.

Jimmy then introduced a few sweeteners, which I was not sure about. He explained that the French and British Governments would be sending medical supplies for Cuba's hospitals, a large consignment. In a way, it made the Americans at the table look bad. The American delegation entered into detail, small detail, of "maybe" deputy assistant ambassadors swapping between Havana and Washington. Sometime soon. I felt like shouting at them.

Jimmy halted proceedings, saying he wished to try and reach the White House. We stopped for coffee and cake. Returning, Jimmy announced that full Assistant Ambassadors would be welcome to swap within a month, the US expanding its team at the Swiss Embassy. Progress. And that was all we got done, the Americans leaving on the plane that had brought them, Pedersen thanked. We stayed another night, Cuban officials dining with us at our hotel. Somehow, they had got the impression we could get things done.

A week after we departed, a huge Russian contingent landed in Havana by boat, all the equipment needed to drill wells. They got to work. Two weeks after their mini-invasion of their communist allies, the Russian Deputy Prime Minister landed for a visit, closely followed by his Chinese counterpart a day later, a joint British-French delegation slipping in after them. The nice man in the White House could not have missed the attention Cuba was getting, and I'm sure he uttered a few words when the Russians struck a major oilfield, a very major oilfield.

In the deal we had struck with the Russians, they made significant upfront payments to the Cubans, twenty mainland wells sunk before offshore rigs arrived. The prospects for Cuba were good, the island soon to follow Russia as an oil rich nation, the White House moving as far, and as fast, as prudence would allow in order to mend relations.

Jimmy's next interview with a US news service was simple and blunt. 'The Cuban's have enough oil to make themselves the

richest nation in the Caribbean, if not all of South America. If American corporations don't get in there soon they'll lose a hell of an opportunity to the Russians and Europeans. You need to think about jobs and the economy first, regime change and politics second. You deal with Russia and China, so why not Cuba?'

As this was going on, the first Chinese oil well was sunk in the Congo, just ten miles south west of Forward Base. Strangely enough, they struck oil at the prescribed depth, work already underway for a small refinement plant. Yuri was also busy, a modestly sized smelting plant nearing completion. All it needed was a good source of cheap oil nearby.

All was progressing well enough with our projects, when news of Kimballa's death came through. We were in the cars, driving over to Mapley one morning.

'Did you know?' I asked Jimmy.

He nodded. 'The man was a liability anyway; his own people bumped him off. His son will take over – and do a better job.'

'Will it affect our project there?' I asked, concerned.

'No, no change.'

At Mapley we examined three new buildings, the first being a press centre next to the HQ building. It was a two-storey office block, two large rooms downstairs for giving press conferences, numerous small offices for reporters to use. Upstairs, two sets of video conferencing kit had been set-up, allowing someone to be interviewed for the TV news remotely. Helen was tasked with the press centre's upkeep and operation.

The next building was a similar size to the HQ building, but designed for NGOs to hang out in, free office space for any NGO that applied, the UN and the Red Cross already moved in. Others would drift in over the years.

The final building was another barrack block, this one for temporary visitors, recruits visiting for just a few weeks. That freed up the other barracks, those with separate rooms, for members of the Supplemental Group. This building was two-storey, but long and wide, twenty different rooms, each with ten beds in. As we poked around it, I considered that Mapley was going the same way as Mawlini.

In Bob's office, we discussed the Cuban doctors.

‘They RF sign-ups?’ Bob queried.

‘Not really,’ Jimmy explained. ‘More your ... flying doctors. They’ll wear whites and come under your remit, but they don’t need all the courses - they’ll work out of clinics. But, in the future, if they’ve done some of the courses, they could be seen as supplemental groups. There’s two hundred in the DRC, under our people there for now, so get involved. A hundred will go to Somalia, but most will help out around the Congo, especially at the mines.’

Driving toward the gate, we passed the first batch of French rescuers I had seen. Their base, near Toulouse, had everything Mapley offered, but they were required to pass the tests here to be signed up to RF International. If they wished to be part of the family, they’d have to stick to the family rules. Mapley also hosted teams from Ghana, India, and the latest addition, Namibia. Namibia was chosen for its excellent training grounds, its long stretches of desolate coastline now subject to teams on navigation exercises and survival courses.

Savagery

Jimmy handed me a task, a secret task. I was only to describe it as “trading funds”, even to Helen. The “M” Group were not to be informed, but Jimmy hinted that certain members knew about it. I was informed that I would be allocated a hundred million out of the property fund, then led up to my old apartment, where three new computers had been installed, each with a satellite link to accounts set-up by McKinleys’ directors, via Switzerland. They were real time, state of the art, the communications channels secure.

‘OK, I’m confused,’ I admitted. ‘Why the cloak and dagger?’

Jimmy gave me a sheet detailing what certain markets would do in the months ahead. ‘There are many very rich banks and brokers in the Gulf States, doing little with their money other than build useless marble edifices in the desert – and invest in Western property markets.’

‘Ah...’

‘And we’re going to bankrupt a few.’

‘What? You mad? What happened to discretion?’

‘It’s all secure,’ he assured me. ‘If they track back, it goes through a Swiss bank client account, then McKinleys. Besides, it’s not illegal, it’s just a private client trader having a bit of luck.’

‘How’ll you bankrupt them, they’ll offset trades in the market?’

‘No, some will act as principal.’

It was the process whereby brokers and banks acted as bookies. They did not take your trade and place it with many individuals in the marketplace, they took the opposite side of the action to your position. If you won, they lost. But they worked on the assumption that, overall, everyone loses; just like Vegas. My job was simple: find those acting as principal and break their balls, slowly building up positions till their eyes watered, then moving on to other brokers. We knew which brokers were international, so avoided them. This was about Gulf State and Saudi brokers and banks only.

I explained to Helen that I had more stock trading to do, much of it real-time, and that I would be behind the screens a fair bit. She handed me the carrycot, a subtle hint. If I was to be sat on my backside upstairs, I could make myself useful.

In the days that followed, Cat babysat out of the apartment a few days a week, Helen popping up each day for coffee and lunch. When trading the US or Asian markets in the evenings or early mornings, Helen would sit with me, picking up a little about trading, or we’d lay on the bed watching TV, my screens bleeping for attention when a sell trigger had been reached. Within seven days of making the first trade, my first account had been forcibly closed out. We had not lost anything as a result of it, but the bank behind the brokers was hurting badly; some pencil pusher in an air-conditioned office Kuwait would have to adjust his balance sheet by almost twenty million pounds.

With the money in the account, Jimmy asked the PM for a chat at the London apartment, Jimmy asking for a license to build a new prison. If the PM promised the building some suitable guests, we’d go ahead. It was done deal, the press all over this new Government-Private Sector partnership. After the

meeting, Helen and I lay on the bed in the old apartment, a large floor plan of the proposed new prison spread out. It was American in design, a star shape that allowed the five wings to be viewed by a central security desk, and could hold four thousand prisoners. This prison was due to be built north of Bristol, a second hinted at for South East London.

I continued to savage the brokers, often opening accounts with the smaller brokers just to destroy them. It did not sit well with me, but the brokers had the money to lose. One brokerage working out of Dubai folded inside a week after selling me stock options. We hadn't lost any money, but had not received a potential further sum they owed us. Jimmy would sit with me at least once a day, often playing with the baby. He even did the nappies once. One day he brought up a plan for a new pensioners complex, a "super retirement home", and something that the PM was already aware of. He explained the concept to Helen and me.

'You have a large number of pensioner flats, small flats that they sleep in, TV, mini-kitchen, etc. But they also have communal areas for TV, an internal courtyard like Po's hotel in Hong Kong. That courtyard has a café, plus a restaurant or two for evening meals – all included in the cost of living there. Because the restaurants are feeding large numbers it gets cheaper, an economy of scale. Outside the complex you have gardens and ponds. At the point where the access road meets the complex you have a doctors surgery and a pharmacy, open to the public, but aimed at the complex. That means that a large number of pensioners can be seen by the doctor doing his rounds, just like in a hospital, and saving money. There'll be a shop inside and regular orders can be delivered each day, even milk in the mornings. At the back of the complex there'll be a hall for church services and dancing.'

'Dancing?' Helen queried.

'Keep the pensioners active and healthy.'

'Could just inject them,' Helen suggested.

'Could do, but that would bankrupt the nation,' Jimmy pointed out. 'If all pensioners live to be a hundred and fifty it will bankrupt us. As we stand, by time we get to 2015 most pensions will be undervalued, people going hungry. People are already living longer, not enough young people working to pay their tax contributions.'

‘That going to be a problem?’ I asked.

‘A big problem,’ Jimmy emphasised. ‘Hence, cost saving ideas.’ He tapped the drawing. ‘The first one will be built just down the road, we’ve already got the planning permission. I’ll roll out twenty or thirty of them, but there’s no money in them.’

‘Hence the top up with the trading,’ I noted. ‘It’s almost as if you’re working to a plan.’

Working behind the screens gave me a new focus, and a new appreciation of the Helen. Many a day I would get home after a long thirty yard walk, and sigh loudly. Sometimes it would get me sympathy, sometimes a good massage after straining my eyes all day, Helen always quipping about the relationship between eye strain and the need for a massage.

One day I heard a helicopter land, walking to the window of the apartment. Yuri and Marko stepped down from the Agusta chopper. I set an automatic sell on the computer and walked downstairs, finding Po’s vehicle convoy pulling up. I practised my Chinese, soon followed by my Russian, finding Jimmy in the office finishing a call. In the lounge, we closed the door and sat.

Jimmy began, ‘Gentlemen, I have a favour to ask. In order to assist my operations in Cuba, I would like you to use some of the *good favour* you have accumulated, and jointly build a new university in Havana.’

They glanced at each other. ‘You have the plans?’ Yuri asked.

‘They’ll be ready soon, and I’d like you to journey to Cuba to meet the government there and make the offer, on behalf of all of us. Paul and I will contribute ten million, I’d ask for ten million from each of you.’

‘That’s a big university,’ Yuri noted. ‘In Cuba, it would cost a tenth of that!’

‘Yes, but we want it to be the biggest and best university in the region, with computers, and western teachers. Students would come from many countries to study there. The money is for a five year plan.’

They were all happy to be involved, and they would be all nominated as honouree chancellors, themselves and their families involved for many years to come. It was a done deal. Big Paul and Karl brought in three map boards, Han and Ivan joining us. Over the next hour we discussed each mining

concession, any problems or suggestions. Jimmy laid out plans for expansion, the routes through Tanzania and Kenya. In order to keep the Kenyans and Tanzanians happy he wanted small smelting plants in their countries, refining ore for shipment on the coast. All were in agreement.

Jimmy then mentioned that the UN, and certain human rights groups, were nosing around the Congo mines and smelting plants, suggesting that more hearts and minds was needed. He suggested that small schools be built near each Chinese and Russian installation, on a pro-rata basis per million tonnes extracted. On that basis, Yuri's mine should have a school big enough for two hundred kids, little more than ten thousand pounds to build at local rates. He would also need a clinic with three medics. Marko's mine would need a school for three hundred kids, a clinic with five medics. The Chinese would have to supply a great deal more, but Jimmy said to make use of the Cuban doctors for their philanthropic contributions. Po was then surprised, by being offered a small mining concession. He readily accepted, his corporation already heavily involved in shipping the ore back to China.

With the Chinese tonnage up to a trigger point, Jimmy said they should start work on the highway from Forward Base towards Kinshasa, a ten year project through mosquito infested jungle, and regions still controlled by warlords. We would be fighting our way through. And as for our region, we had pushed five hundred miles beyond our remit, the Kinshasa Government not fussed; they had more tax revenue pouring in than they knew what to do with.

With the meeting concluded, Jimmy surprised everyone by saying we'd all now make a surprise visit to Forward Base, a plane sat waiting. I quickly packed a bag, said goodbye to a disgruntled Helen, and set off for Heathrow in the cars, the Russians in the Augusta, Po back in his vehicle convoy. We met at Terminal Four, our flight not listed on the board, but taken through to a private lounge, our 747SP packed with supplies for the Congo. Passports were checked before boarding, the aircraft offering only sixty seats up front, the rest of the plane all cargo hold. Seven hours later we broke through the clouds over Forward Base, known to most as Kigeli after the nearest town.

Coming in to land, I was surprised by the changes, my last visit here made in the dark. What had been a green and lush valley now looked like a Russian suburb - all concrete! The building work staggered me; it was a city.

We touched down on a wet runway at sunset, taxiing around to the new terminal building. It wasn't much, and reminded me of Biera airport in Mozambique. Clambering down the high steps into drizzle, the officials were clearly not expecting us, guards saluting. They arranged a line of jeeps, whisking us first to the RF unit.

'Jimbo! Paul!' the Australian senior man offered. 'Welcome to the backwater.'

'Not any more,' I said. 'It's grown a bit.'

'It grows by a hundred yards a month,' the man informed us. 'Got the Cubans here now, hundreds of them.'

He gave us a tour of the RF facilities as we lost the light, meeting those staff that were not out on deployment, a few I recognised. One had flown with me in Mozambique.

After forty minutes with our RF unit, Chinese and Russians rescuers introduced to their countrymen, we booked into a new hotel, a far higher grade of finish than the RF hotel. Jimmy sent word that we'd hold a meeting with the senior administrators at 7pm, giving us time for a shower, and a bit to eat in the hotels plush restaurant. Yuri and Marko had already stayed at the hotel and now showed us around, the hotel even offering an indoor pool and sauna. At 7pm we drove around to the administrative buildings, and I did not recognise them. This complex was as large as the Cuban Government buildings, the main planning room impressive. It stretched out thirty yards square, huge maps pinned to the walls, a large central table with a map of the region ten feet square. Mining operations were denoted by small plastic models, also oil wells, hospitals, clinics, military bases, national flags placed on many items. If someone sneezed over the board, workers could end up in the wrong area.

The administrators gave a brief run down of main operations, current operations that mostly involved the ongoing battle of moving west. We told them about the highway project, and they illustrated where it would run, the best route given the terrain. There was much debate about a tunnel, since it would cost as much to go around a mountain as through it. Jimmy favoured

going around. He then surprised them by announcing a plan for a small hydroelectric dam, in fact ten of them around the region. The thinking was simple; a large dam could power a large region, but that would mean a lot of power cables going through the mountains and jungles. So they would be small, some just ten metres high and fifty metres wide, enough power to light a small town or a factory. Or a smelting plant, Han pointed out.

They showed us the latest tonnage and revenue figures, making my eyes widen. The diamond trade was not measured in tonnes, but dollars, an obscene amount of money generated, but one that we had capped in case the global price dropped. After a little persuasion, the Chinese and Russian Governments had agreed to buy up excess diamonds at a discount, and hold them with their national gold reserves.

We broke the meeting after an hour, thanking our staff, and headed for our evening meal at the hotel. We had only just settled when Hal stepped in.

‘Part-time workers here then?’ he asked.

I stood to greet him, dragging over a chair. ‘What you doing down here?’

‘Got some warlords in the west playing up.’

‘Aren’t you a bit old for this?’ I asked.

‘Still kick your arse, sonny!’

Hacker walked in smiling, grabbing a chair. ‘We’re honoured with ya visit to the backwater.’

‘Not such a backwater,’ I pointed out. ‘All mod cons!’

An hour later, the meal finished and a few beers downed, we sat reminiscing about Mozambique when one of the base officials came and found us, carrying a map.

‘Sir, we have reports of a Nigerian aircraft crashing, on our border with Zambia.’ He illustrated the position for Jimmy.

‘What type of aircraft?’ Jimmy asked, everyone now listening in.

‘A civilian 737, sir.’

We stood, Jimmy loudly ordering, ‘I want Rescue Force Congo to full emergency deployment. Move it!’ The man ran out, civilians in the restaurant now keenly attentive. Facing Hal, Jimmy said, ‘I want every Huey we have ready to go ten minutes ago!’ Hal and Hacker ran out.

Jimmy led everyone out and down to the foyer, ordering vehicles. He dialled Bob Davies on his satellite phone. 'Bob, a 737 has crashed in the jungle about four hundred miles southwest of Forward Base, which is where we are now. I've ordered the Congo team to emergency deployment, put Tanzania and Kenya on Unit Standby, and get me every Mi2 and Hercules we have in Kenya over here, and the Dash. Get me the best twenty people from Kenya. I'll call you back.'

I called Helen. 'Get everyone in the house to the office, a plane has crashed southwest of us, Rescue Force is going after it. Thanks, love.'

In the map room, flustered officials trotted back in. Jimmy barked, 'I want the Congo Rifles senior officers and the British instructors! Quickly.' A man lifted a phone. 'What aircraft do we have on the apron?'

They listed off two Antonovs, a commercial 737 and the 747SP.

Jimmy ordered, 'I want them all fuelled tonight, get me the pilots!' He pointed at the man who had informed us. 'Get me the flight plan of the downed aircraft, and last known position. And double check it.'

We closed in on the map, Jimmy placing a small model on the indicated area.

'There no roads,' Po pointed out.

'None at all,' Han added. 'Not within thirty miles.' Yuri and Marko had a nose at the map.

Jimmy called a man over. 'Tell us about this area.'

The man made a face. 'It is unexplored jungle, deep gorges and rivers, that's why there are no roads. And around it, many warlords.'

'Jesus,' I let out. 'Couldn't have picked a worse spot. We'll even have to fight our way in.'

With the aircraft's flight plan checked, we stretched out a piece of red string onto the map board, a kink in it where the last known position was indicated. It was in the middle of nowhere. For all we knew the place still had dinosaurs and cannibals. The RF senior staff appeared with radios and satellite phones, claiming a desk as their command centre. I showed them the crash site.

‘Jesus, it’ll take a week to reach it by foot from the nearest road!’

Jimmy tapped the map, one of our outposts. ‘What’s there?’

‘A clinic, a helo pad, twenty Rifles,’ they reported.

‘Alert them to expect the Hueys, set-up lights, send all the Hueys there now.’ Jimmy faced an official. ‘Send fuel trucks to this location for the helicopters.’

The pilots of the Antonovs and civil aircraft we led in, white shirts with gold bars on shoulder epaulets.

‘Gentlemen, I need your help. A commercial 737, Nigerian Airlines, has crashed four hundred miles south west of here – in the middle of nowhere. Two hours before dawn I’d like you to help with the search pattern, I’ll pay the fuel and time.’ They were all agreeable. ‘Go and get some food, plenty of sleep, back here at 4am.’

As the pilots stepped out, the Congo Rifles entered. Their senior officer was a local, his adjutant British. Six ex-SAS troopers trailed behind, some I knew. ‘Gentlemen, a Nigerian Airlines 737 has crashed in the jungle.’ He pointed out the spot. ‘Where are your nearest men?’

The adjutant pointed out the bases and outposts, none closer than a hundred miles.

‘Order them all to this village,’ Jimmy said, he finger on the village in question. ‘Fight your way in if you have to, seize the area. Get six of your Hueys ready for the morning, we’re sending fuel trucks to the outpost here.’ They noted the location, familiar with it. ‘Then replace the men you’ve moved with men from here, or other areas. Now, we’re going to need explosives to blow down large trees and to try to make a helicopter zone near the crash site. It’s jungle, so tall trees and no fields. Get the explosives onto a Huey tonight and get it going, we’ll update you after you get there.’

The adjutant dispatched the ex-SAS guys, grabbing a desk with his boss, phones lifted.

Jimmy turned to me. ‘Get hold of Keely at the house, see if there are weather satellite photo’s of the area.’

I made the call, Jimmy made coffee, discussing the options with our gang. Reports came in: Hercules lifted off from Mawlini, Mi2 from Tanzania, Dash-7 airborne, Antonovs refuelled. The RF Hueys had departed, heading southwest

through the night sky, soon followed by the Rifles' Hueys. I called Helen and dictated a press release, asking her to send it out to the usual outlets, but then to hit all the African outlets as well, Jack helping her.

Michelle called me back, having anticipated the need for a weather update: the storm from hell was approaching that area, which is probably why the plane had crashed in the first place.

'Jimmy,' I called. 'The storm from hell is closing in on that area.' We all stood and stared at each other for a moment.

Jimmy finally said, 'We'll have to try it anyway, get as close as we can. Walking in *is not* an option.'

We invited Po, Han and the Russians to return to the hotel and get some sleep, we'd crash out here. Han remained, since Chinese RF units here were involved, the others taking up their rooms but promising to be back in the morning. Keely's satellite images began emerging from the fax machine, weather maps and projections, the storm clearly visible. Luckily, the centre of the storm was moving south and past our area of interest, assuming that the plane was in that area.

At 4am Jimmy ordered ten members of the Rifles into each plane to act as spotters. The planes were dispatched; the Antonovs first, followed by the 737, finally the 747SP, the graduation one of speed; slow to faster. Each plane was given a slightly different heading and altitude, a different area to search. The 747 cargo would reach the target area at dawn, the others later. We paced up and down.

As the 747 reached its search area it relayed low cloud and poor weather - it had no choice but to move east and adopt a new search area for now. It had the range and fuel, and could stay over the search area all day long, so we were not concerned. The 737 was diverted, starting a search pattern east of its intended target. At least those areas were being eliminated.

The Antonovs arrived an hour after dawn and flew straight to their target areas, ignoring the storm and riding it out, the soldiers in the back a bit sick. An hour after starting their search pattern the Russian pilots spotted the wreck, its tail and rear fuselage intact. They reported a red tail with a white line, so we checked with the airline. Yes, it had a red tail with a white line. They fixed the position by GPS, all planes ordered back. They

also reported that it was a deep gorge, on a river bend. We fixed its position on the map, finding the gorge and river.

I straightened, 'They're in the worst part, of the worst area, of the poorest country in Africa. With a storm overhead! And that's if there *are* any survivors.'

Jimmy replayed the co-ordinates to our outpost, Hal complaining that the weather was too dangerous for a flight. We asked him to take off the minute he could.

The map room now bustled as the rescue plans were arranged, people coming and going, updates handed over. Yuri and Marko had mines to visit, people to see, and so Jimmy asked them not to waste their time here today, we'd meet up later. Po stuck close by, a handful of RF Hong Kong rescuers involved. Tubby wandered in with Sue, and I pointed out the position of the crash site. They were not optimistic, soon refuelled and about to transfer the RF Kenya staff to the outpost. I wished them well. Stood outside for a breather, I peered up at angry dark clouds, cursing the weather.

At the outpost, a few hours later, Hal and Hacker lifted off. Badly buffeted, the two Hueys fought their way southwest, often losing sight of each other, but fixing their positions by radio and landmark. With fifty miles of virgin jungle to cover, they followed valley contours, trying to stay as high as they could, but under the cloud layer. More than once they banked to avoid hitting the mountains, soon out of radio contact with the outpost.

Forty minutes later, and figuring they were close to the crash site, they followed the river they believed the aircraft to have crashed next to, fighting the wind all the way. The team in the back opened the doors to try and spot the wreckage, soon soaking wet as they stared down through cloud and mist at primordial jungle.

Around the next bend they passed a steep cliff on the left, the red tail spotted on the right. Hal slowed to a hover, Hacker climbing over Hal's Huey. They both turned about, the way they had come, and into the wind. There was no sign of life at the wreck site, a handful of bodies visible, the Huey hard to handle in the gorge. Hal estimated the clearance to be just about enough, but the wind buffeting too much for a safe winch of survivors; he'd have to risk landing if any survivors were to have a chance.

Hacker sounded his objections, loudly, but Hal went down anyway. For ten minutes Hal fought to hold the Huey steady, descending very slowly, his crew and team shouting clearances. But the lower he got, the less the effect of the wind.

Facing the prospect of landing right in the main debris field, maybe even on bodies, Hal continued down. At that moment, the very old lady he was flying decided she'd had enough abuse over the years, a connecting rod on the transmission popping. Warning lights flashed, alarms sounded, and the bird dropped onto its belly with a jolt, breaking the tail off. The tail rotor hit the debris field, tearing itself off and spinning around like a mad Catherine wheel.

From high above, Hacker could only watch, no radio contact coming back. White figures raced out of the Huey and dived clear, six in all. Everyone was accounted for. With the Huey's rotors winding down, they ran back and grabbed backpacks and emergency supplies, stripping anything useful from the Huey in case it caught fire. With a green flare fired, to show they were all OK, Hacker pulled up and began the arduous trek back alone.

An hour later we got the news, Hal's Huey blocking the only place to set down. Only then did Hal remember his satellite phone, calling Mawlini for Jimmy's number before calling Jimmy directly.

'Hal, what the fuck was that?' Jimmy asked, people closing in.

'Any landing you walk away from...' Hal shouted over the roar of the storm.

'You planning on paying for that Huey?'

'You can bill me, if we get out of here.'

'Any survivors?'

'Five: various states of injury. I think four might make it. Drop us supplies, extra IV drips, and stretchers, food and heaters.'

'The weather has deteriorated, so you'll have to wait till the morning. Have you searched the area?'

'Near impossible, it's a death trap just to move around. If the weather is better in the morning we'll go out again. We're camped in the tail section. Hal out.'

Jimmy announced to the room, 'Five survivors.'

I closed in. ‘Did Hal bend one of our Hueys?’

‘Broke the tail clean off. Anyway, issue the following press release: veteran pilot Hal *deliberately* crashed his helicopter into the jungle to land the medics, etc.’

Shaking my head, I rang Helen.

At the crash sight, our team battled against the odds to save the injured, whilst also battling the raging storm. Their backpacks possessed basic rations, enough for two or three days, and small cooking heaters, now being employed to make hot sugary tea for the injured, our rescuers trying to get fluids back into them. With night approaching, not that the available illumination was great now, Hal scrambled over razor sharp debris and to the Huey, stumbling over a headless corpse. In the back of the broken helicopter he opened a storage locker and pulled out a one-man yellow dinghy pack, not much bigger than a football. Back at the 737’s tail section he pulled the chord, the dinghy hissing into life and flapping in the wind. Dragging it in sideways, Hal jammed it between seats, blocking the opening and affording those inside some shelter from the wind and driving rain. With his toolkit retrieved, Hal removed the last row of seats, further blocking the opening with them whilst making space for the injured. They had a shelter and clinic for the night, but a hell of a draft.

Hal was up before dawn; he had been injected with stems in hospital in Nairobi. He had found many bottles in the aircraft’s small galley and now siphoned-off aviation fuel. Small Avian water bottles were filled and transported back. Away from the tail section, Hal collected chairs, stacking them up, broken branches placed on top; a beacon for the other helicopters when lit. He fetched water from the nearby raging river, soon plenty stored ready, albeit a little brown in colour.

An hour after dawn, staring at leaden sky, his face wet from the rain, Hal could swear he heard a helicopter. He shouted to the others, who emerged and looked up, before lighting the beacon, a liberal amount of aviation fuel making it roar.

A green army Huey was a surprise. The small parachutes were also a surprise, more than a dozen of them drifting down and snagging on trees. He grabbed the closest one. Explosives!

‘They’re explosives!’ he shouted. ‘Be careful!’

A white RF backpack came tumbling down, no parachute, and slamming into the debris. It was stuffed full of blankets, one sheet of tarpaulin. In the centre of the pack, wrapped in the blankets, four IV packs lay unbroken. Two more packs descended, thudding into the ground; more blankets and IV sets. And that was all, the Huey pulling away.

Back at the shelter, Hal collected his team. 'Right, we got blankets, IV, some tarpaulin. You lot use that, I've got some trees to blow down.'

Hal spent fifteen minutes scrambling over the debris to retrieve all of the explosive packs, placing them in the Huey. With the first block of plastic and detonator in hand, he studied the steep hillside, and the trees. Blowing them down without killing himself, or anyone here, would be the trick. After five minutes study it came down to two tall trees preventing another helicopter landing or winching. Fetching rope from the Huey he set off, sliding down a steep gully and across to the other side, up the tree's exposed roots. At about the height he figured he would set the charge he found a convenient hole in the trunk, dreading just what may be lurking inside. Hanging onto the wet and slimy roots, his hands muddled, he fixed the detonator. It looked like a standard five-minute fuse. Before snapping the fuse to start it, he threw the rope around a nodule and back down to the gully. With one hand on the wet rope he snapped the fuse and tossed the explosives into the hole with a curse, soon sliding down uncontrolled. In the gully, up to his knees in water, he figured he'd not have time to scramble up the opposite bank. He turned and walked down the gully, finding an overhang after five yards and ducking in. He waited, hands over his ears.

A pressure wave passed over him, the modest blast registering afterwards and repeating twice off the curving cliff face over the river. Then nothing. He peered out as the tree slowly considered its options, finally opting for a slow and graceful bending, its high canopy now covering the nose section of the plane and its debris. He retrieved the rope, now dangling in front of him, and set off again, soaked right through, his whites now brown.

Thirty minutes later he again slid down the rope, too wet to control his descent, and reclaimed his shelter in the gully. This tree, however, wanted to show off. Its trunk splintered, and it danced sideways, landing above the gully on the debris side,

remaining upright for a moment before falling on top of the first tree. It took Hal ten minutes to scramble over and under branches and back to the tail section, every inch of him soaked and muddied. At the tail he heard another Huey, and stood wondering if his efforts had been enough.

Whoever was in the white RF Huey, they floated slowly past, turned into the wind and then lowered to twenty metres, their rotor signature resonating off the cliff. A door opened, a stretcher spinning as it lowered.

‘Get the injured out!’ He grabbed the dinghy and tore it out of place.

With three injured stretchered up, the Huey pulled away, a second dropping into place. The next two injured were sent up, the recipient Huey pulling away. The third Huey dropped into place, but instead of sending down winches, rescuers came down with their packs.

‘You’re to stay here,’ the man reported. ‘Search for any survivors walking off, then gather the bodies.’

Hal turned to his team and shrugged, four more rescuers descending, followed by tents and supplies being lowered, together with almost fifty body bags. The next Huey winched down four members of the Rifles, armed and kitted out, the sound of helicopters soon just a distant echo as the rain and wind recovered the valley. Standing there, Hal considered that he had never felt better. Or fitter. ‘OK, people, let’s get organised!’

‘Injured at the outpost,’ I reported. ‘Dash landed on a road, they’re heading directly to Lagos, Nigeria, being treated on-route.’

‘Good. And our people?’ Jimmy asked.

‘They’re fine. But the Rifles are busy shooting up the local warlord.’

‘Contact our book writer. Got another chapter for him I think.’

With the search underway, normality resumed to a degree, and we got back to the commercial reason for being down here. We marshalled the gang, a large party of bodyguards, and headed for the oilfields.

In a small building that acted as an office for the drilling operation, we met the Chinese workers. With Han and Po close by, Jimmy suggested that they strike a second well, his finger on the map. Han had the authority and told them to arrange it, to order the extra equipment from China.

Addressing the group, Jimmy said, 'The problem ... is that we're a very long way from the coast. We're also a long way from a large market. Now, the African economy is growing, but it's already fed by Nigerian oil - we would not make a lot of money by trying to transport the oil, or to sell it. If a pipeline was considered, it would cost a billion dollars at least, the best route being through Tanzania.

'So the solution, is to stick to those products that are valuable enough to be transported by road or rail. Now, if ... the Tanzanian railway could be fixed to a good standard, then it may carry ore and crude oil in the future. That's something that should be considered. The simplest option is that which we're already seeing - to refine locally and to sell to ourselves locally, for the cheap transport of the ore. And, as the area and the country grows its industrial base, that internal market will increase in value: we can sell oil to the French mines. We can also sell oil to Uganda, Rwanda, Kenya and Tanzania. It is not a huge market, but it is a market.

'I suggest that we put together a working group, with the Tanzanians and Rwandan authorities, to review road and rail links. Year by year, we should spend some revenue on the rail link, thinking about long trains full of oil. But, in the short-term, let's increase the oil production here to match refinery limits, then use the petrol locally. Once that stage is ready, we'll issue another ten mining areas to you, the aim being to have the fuel supply ready before the large dumper trucks arrive. That stage should be six months. Han, if you can be ready to begin new areas in six months.'

We toured the nearby refinery, asking about production levels, before dropping in on a mine on the way back, listening to gripes about equipment and the local unskilled labour market. Back at Forward Base we met with a French administrator, the man a representative of the French Government, and listened to his concerns and needs, helping where we could, a French consortium now mining a sizeable area.

The next morning, our visit here dragging on longer than planned, the Rwandan Government came over, polite enquiries made about the plane crash. Jimmy began by asking that they take back more Hutu refugees, and offering crude oil and petrol as incentive. They offered to consider it. Jimmy offered to force all the Hutus back across the border in one go. The Rwandans modified their approach. They would take five thousand a month, the oil deal, and some money from us for each person accepted back. We thanked them, telling them that when oil refinement was increased, we would sell them cheap petrol. We'd also offer some money towards improving their road and rail links. It was a done deal: we were paying them to take back their own citizens!

Next came representatives of Seirra Leone, their country suffering at the hands of guerrillas, not least those sponsored by Liberia. Jimmy was blunt: invite us in, offer us mining and oil exploration rights, and we'll kill everyone holding a gun - or spitting on the pavement. We'd start with two-dozen attack helicopters, five hundred soldiers of the famous Rifles. There was nothing in the deal not to like, a paper signed and handed over there and then. We handed them a Swiss bank draft for twenty-five million pounds: "towards their orphanages".

With the Seirra Leone delegation packed off, the gang asked about the move.

'Sierra Leone has ore and oil,' Jimmy said with a grin. 'But first, we need to sweep the small nation, then use the guerrillas as an excuse to destroy Liberia. If we don't, Liberia will send guerrillas to attack our mines there.'

Orders were signed for the squadron of Mi24s to be dispatched to the coast, along with the Cobras, twenty army Hueys and five hundred members of the Kenyan Rifles. War, had been declared. After lunch, with the 747SP sat fuelled and waiting, representatives of the Zambian Government arrived, an hour late landing. We quickly settled them in the same meeting room.

Jimmy began with, 'We would like to help you with the MLF problem that still plagues your northern border, our southern border.'

'How ... exactly?' they wearily enquired. The last time we had just invaded their territory.

‘We would like to offer to raise a small brigade of Zambian Rifles, and pay for it. They could then be used to quell any problems with the MLF. They would be under your control, but we would pay them, equip them and train them, as we have done with the Kenyan Rifles. Their base would be near the border so that they can patrol that area. That way you have fewer problems with guerrilla fighters, and so do we. We will then, when the security situation is better, build schools and hospitals for you. Your northern region would be as peaceful as the Congo has become.’

They liked the idea, and the sweeteners, offering to get back to us as soon as they could, then cheekily asked for investment capital in a few projects.

‘Security first,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘We would not invest in a country if it was dangerous for our staff.’

I was glad to board our plane and take off, soon above the clouds and in the brilliant sunshine. Not having slept much in the past few days, I dozed off, Jimmy discussing Sierra Leone and Zambia with the gang. Yes, Zambia had mining potential, and Liberia; Jimmy was out to dig up the whole of Africa.

Po headed home from London, so to Yuri and Marko. On the drive to Wales, Po and Jimmy were scheming in detail, so I just switched off. At the house, Jimmy told me to meet him at 9am for a war council. Helen opened the door to our house and I lifted her up, squeezing her tightly.

‘I missed you,’ I whispered into her ear. I stepped in and closed in on my daughter, finding her awake and giggling. Lifting her out of the cot, I tickled her feet, eliciting shrill laughter. ‘And I missed you even more.’

Helen sat. ‘All sorted?’

‘The rescuers found five,’ I said.

‘One died, but they found a small girl in the jungle.’

‘A girl?’

‘Three years old, her parents dead.’

‘Christ, she must have been wandering around for ... three or four days.’

‘Hal found her. And they airlifted most of the bodies out, the transport officials were airlifted in.’

I found myself nodding, then took in my own daughter's face.
'If anything ever happened to her...'

'It won't, Jimmy would say,' Helen softly insisted.

'It's not guaranteed, not since he's altered the time line.
Hence that car bomb.'

'Well, let's not think about that now, huh. Some food?'

'Lots of food. Then the three of us can take a bath.'

More to follow... this is not the end.

Magestic

Geoff Wolak. October, 2009.

Part 5

War council

The “M” Group gathered in a lounge, the topic Sierra Leone.

Jimmy sat back and crossed his legs. ‘Gentlemen – and lady, the government of Sierra Leone has asked us to assist with their counter-insurgency, and we have readily agreed. As we speak, our attack helicopters are boarding a Russian aircraft carrier off the coast of Africa, for a short sail to Sierra Leone, the advance guard of the Kenyan Rifles already *in country*. We’ve been allocated an old army base with a runway nearby. Our aim is simple: to rid the country of insurgents, then to assist the country to develop roads, schools, hospitals ... and its mining activities to pay for it all. We’ll then look at Liberia, the cause of much trouble in the region.’

‘*Look at ... Liberia?*’ Keely questioned.

‘*Look at ... cross-border raids,*’ Jimmy clarified.

‘We have long-dated relations with Liberia,’ Keely noted. ‘Should we not be involved?’

‘American boots on Africa soil is not a good idea,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Nor is an American peace keeping force. The Africans need to fix themselves – with my help.’

‘You’ll raise a Rifles unit in Seirra Leone?’ Jack asked.

‘Of course. They can then police themselves. All they need is for their mining profits to go to the government in order prosper, and hopefully the money won’t end up in Swiss bank accounts. They have a chance at good future.’

‘Do *they* have oil?’ Keely testily asked.

‘Yes, offshore. And, when it’s pumped, it should sail across to America or up to Europe. That would be ... the most efficient use for it.’

‘How much oil?’ Keely pressed.

‘Not as much as Cuba, and not as much a Liberia, but enough to make them a small rich nation.’

‘Liberia has a lot of oil?’ Keely queried.

‘Yes. And nothing short of a complete sweep of the entire country would make it safe to dock oil ships there.’

‘And after that sweep?’ Keely pressed.

‘The new government could sell its oil to anyone it wants, I won’t interfere.’

Big Paul stepped in and handed Jimmy a note before withdrawing.

‘I bomb has gone off in Equatorial Guinea, West Africa, the President and all his cabinet – have been killed.’ He put the note away. ‘I guess they’ll need a new President.’

‘Do *they* have much oil?’ Keely baulked.

‘Yes, a very great deal of oil. Perhaps Uncle Sam could get involved there.’

‘Will *you* get involved there?’ Michelle asked.

‘Not for many years,’ Jimmy replied. ‘So, Sierra Leone. It’s a one-year campaign, longer to train their military. Does anyone have any questions?’

I asked, ‘How long before the mines make a buck?’

‘At least a year.’

‘So we pay up-front for everything,’ I noted.

‘Not quite, there are good diamond mines in the north and east, the locals willing to sell wholesale.’

Michelle asked, ‘The Kenyan Rifles will not remain?’

‘Only for training, most withdrawn within a year.’

‘And Liberia?’ she asked.

‘A difficult political situation – they won’t be asking us in. We’ll need a UN remit to attack.’

‘UN?’ Keely questioned.

‘The guerrillas in Liberia are attacking several neighbouring states, it should not be difficult.’

‘Art Johnson won’t be pleased,’ Keely suggested, getting a look from Han.

‘If your dear president wishes to send troops, he’s welcome to do so. It will save me a few quid.’

‘And after Liberia,’ Michelle cheekily nudged.

‘Darfur, in the south west of Sudan. A civil war will break out, the Sudanese Government attempting to drive black Africans out in favour of Muslims. And, before anyone asks, we already know that Southern Sudan has a shit load of oil.’

‘And Zambia?’ Jack asked.

‘Good question. First, we’ll need to defeat the MLF guerrillas, then help the country grow its economy. On its border with the Congo are a lot of minerals. If we don’t defeat the MLF they’ll attack at will for decades to come.’

Keely asked, ‘When will Congo oil hit the open markets?’

‘Not for many years - if at all. It will mostly be used to assist mining operations there.’

‘Bombs have gone off at Iraqi oil terminals,’ Keely put in. ‘Who’s behind it?’

‘Some Iranian, some Saudi.’

‘Saudi?’ Keely challenged.

‘They don’t want the oil flowing,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘If Iraq, Iran, and the West African states got up to speed, the Saudis would be ... most displeased. Oil prices would drop, the US and European economies boosted, more goods bought from China. The Russians also have an interest in keeping oil prices high, but they’re not setting off bombs.’

A day later Hal called, asking for a favour.

‘You broke our Huey!’ I complained. ‘What fucking favour, *old man*?’

‘I want to adopt the girl I found, she’s now an orphan, no relatives at all.’

‘Oh,’ I stumbled. ‘I’ll ... get back to you.’ I went and found Jimmy in the canteen, sat now with Jack. ‘Hal wants to adopt the kid he found, little girl – no relatives.’

Jimmy nodded. ‘I’ll make a call. Tell him she would have to be placed at Ebede, not in the Congo. He could visit if he’s based in Kenya.’

I called Hal back and explained it. He wasn’t completely happy, but understood that he moved around a bit. Given his dodgy occupation – attack helicopter pilot, the courts would never give him custody.’

Jimmy called Anna and she formally asked for the child to attend Ebede orphanage and school.

Sat back down with Jack and Jimmy, Jimmy raised a finger as if about to say something, then just stared out of focus.

‘What?’ I asked.

‘You’ve had no challenge to that Saudi account?’

‘No. Maybe they don’t reconcile till the end of the month.’

‘Today’s ... the twelfth,’ Jimmy noted. ‘Jack, ask Sykes to ask the PM if he’d like to take some money off the Saudis.’

With a curious expression – a smile and a frown, Jack stepped out. An hour later Jack came and found me in the apartment, a sheet of paper in his hand. ‘That’s the account, routed through

Switzerland to London - hard to track. There's sixty million in there. Jimmy said to tell you to make their eyes water.'

I took the paper, entering the account details and passwords into my system.

Jack pulled up a chair. 'So what's this about?'

'Looks like this Saudi trading account is not checked every day, so anyone doing well may not get noticed till the end of the month.'

'You're doing ... nothing illegal,' Jack puzzled. 'So why—'

'If you do well, they close your account, unless they're placing your trades in the market. This lot are not offsetting by the look of it.'

'Which means...?'

'Any money we make comes from their back pocket.'

'Ah. That'll hurt.'

I chose a stock that I knew would spike upwards today, checking my watch. I called up its chart, already a small price rise ahead of a noon news release. I bought Call Options, the confirmation note emailed to me, the bottom line indicating that they were "acting as principal". So I bought more, followed by twenty million pounds worth of stock. When the acknowledgement came through I bought more Call Options, several batches of odd numbers.

Jack sat checking his watch as noon approached, the news flashing up on my Reuters screen as Helen stepped in. With a finger on the screen, Jack read the detail, the stock skyrocketing.

'Ouch!' Jack said, Helen closing in, the baby on the bed.

'What's ouch?' Helen whispered.

'I just took ten million off a Saudi bank, small deal just to break the ice. They sold me stock without having it, probably, so now they'll scrabbling around to find it, and forcing the price higher.'

'You'll sell now?' Jack asked.

'Nope, that would let them off the hook. I'll wait five days. They'll have to get the stock to deliver it.'

Jack became a regular behind the screens as I busted up several brokers, but he never knew what I was up to. I knew of a few Europeans acting as principal, and pushed three of them to close my account, taking millions off them. By the end of the

month the UK Government's sixty million stood at ninety-four, the Saudi account closed down. Sykes rang to thank me, the civil service pension for the MOD now looking a lot healthier.

Jimmy told me to change the account numbers, and to take more risks, calling me a "risk averse slacker". Cursing under my breath, I moved money around, checking the upcoming trades. On a wet Monday, and telling Helen I had a busy twelve hours ahead, we settled into the apartment. I had an eye on the FTSE, another of the DOW, a third on the Nikkei; a three-eyed financial monster who now figured that the three markets would lag a bit, the Saudis not paying attention.

With some determination and aggression, and confident key tapping, I started to open modest trades, building up positions. I even threw in a few spoilers - trades I knew would lose money or go sideways. Anyone checking the account would consider me to be opening balanced positions, so long as they could not add up. When the DOW opened I added to the positions, even though they were now slipping a bit. The computer must have thought I was crazy. By 8pm the baby was fed, changed and sleeping. We even found time for a bit of mummy and daddy time.

At midnight, just the Nikkei remained open and I adjusted positions, making the largest trades whilst assuming the Saudi brokers were off for a bite to eat. With nothing to do till 8am, we headed back over to the house. At 7.45am we were both back and sat watching the screens. The FTSE opened down eight points, dipped to be down twenty - enough to cost me millions - then rallied, soon up fifty, up eighty points by 4pm. I closed out the FTSE and DOW trades, an automatic sell on the Nikkei trades - whichever way they went.

I went and found Jimmy in the diner. Glancing over my shoulder I said, 'I just took a sixty-eight million from a Saudi broker. If they're not off-loading, it'll hurt.'

He handed me a sheet. 'That's Yuri's account. Go murder the futures markets, but through regular brokers.'

I scanned the paper. 'If I type something in wrong, he'll lose a lot ... and kill us.'

'Then don't type something in wrong.'

I got started, and over the next month made Yuri, or the Russian Government, just over a billion dollars, most of the trades made in the Asian futures markets. I hoped we were on a

commission. I tried teaching the baby to trade, but her typing was terrible. And she dribbled on the keyboard. Helen, on the other hand, got a book from Jimmy without me knowing about it and studied hard, soon able to make useful comments, even to check screens.

One day two mini-buses turned up, Big Paul driving one, Karl another. They offered two seats behind the driver, then four seats facing each other as on a train, even a table to use. The windows were tinted, curtains pinned back. Jimmy explained to Helen and me, sitting now in the table seats, that they had been reinforced, making them safer for motorway use. They would be used for airport runs. 'Cool,' I said.

Sierra Leone

Hal, the would-be adoptive father, went off to war, hopefully realising just how unsuitable he was for the whole parenting thing. Hacker went with him, Ratchet and Spanner, and many senior staff from around the globe. Sierra Leone was action central, so they wanted to be in at the start.

They landed at the designated airstrip, pitched tents, set-up security patrols of Kenyan Rifles, and got to work. A tented clinic rose just outside the dilapidated fence, open for trade to anyone passing and in need of a doctor. A second tent rose at the army base just up the road, a surgical unit ready for casualties. Five white RF Hueys landed in bellies of IL76 transports, their rotors detached. Ten green Hueys joined them, the Mi24's and Cobras having been at the base for a week already. With more IL76s flying in with ammunition, the attack units were made ready.

Setting up a base and converting an airfield was something that our facilitators could write a manual for. They fixed the fence, got their supplies organised from local farms and shops, then hired every local building firm they could find to raise buildings, both at the army base and the airfield. The UN still housed eight thousand troops in the area, left over from the larger

UN force that helped to end the long civil war, but the soldiers in blue helmets stuck to their bases or their fixed patrol routes around the capital, Freetown. One of the first things our lads did was to fly up to the UN base and drop in for tea and a chat. They explained what they were planning on doing – in general terms, and asked for a UN co-ordinator at our base, just to be sure that we didn't injure any UN peacekeepers. The next thing our people attempted was to fly over those parts of the country that hosted rebels, in our white Hueys, dropping leaflets over every village and town. Those leaflets, in many dialects and languages, demanded that all armed gangs should surrender their weapons and accept food from us. Two RF Hueys were shot at with fifty calibre machine guns, so I guess we got their reply to our message. Either that or they couldn't read, using our leaflets to wipe their bums.

Jimmy provided the commanders on the ground a very accurate map of where "satellite intel" showed the bad guys. In a bold move, and a quick move, we set-up roadblocks at every road junction from the capital to the northern border, cutting the small country in half. The first groups of gunmen had read the leaflets, but chose to ignore them, getting themselves shot-up on sight. That produced the response we wanted: more gunmen headed for the roadblocks, hungry Cobras circling nearby, Hueys with chain guns on standby. When pitched battles began, the helicopters decimated the gunmen quickly.

In a move approved by the Sierra Leone Government, we threw a ring around the capital, roadblocks on every junction, an RF white tent at many crossroads to attract passing trade; free medical care, even a few babies delivered. It was our stock in trade, and we were good at it. With that phase complete, a second batch of a hundred RF medics landed, another three hundred Rifles, some Tanzanian. The roadblocks moved outwards, more RF tents pitched as part of the hearts and minds campaign.

In Freetown itself, a hundred Cuban medics arrived, adopting the main hospital and offering an excess of medical supplies, and the best of equipment, as part of the package. Tents were set-up outside the main hospital buildings, locals treated for anything they needed, a whole new maternity ward created. We even had a dozen dentists on hand. Through the main port we shipped bags

of rice and wheat, handing them out free; people would wake to find a 2kg bag on their doorstep. In a move that Jimmy organised, that I thought was counter-productive, tens of thousands of corrugated metal sheets were imported. Trucks drove around after midnight and left one or two sheets outside every shanty shack; a new roof, or wall for the inhabitants. A separate set of trucks dropped new plastic buckets filled with household goodies; pots, pans, cutlery, towels, soap.

Coup flew in a month after the first RF units had cut ground and organised a meeting of NGOs already in the country. His message was a simple one: what do you need? We offered ships full of wheat, unlimited medical supplies, even money. No one had anything to complain about, but they still managed to complain about our presence. Apparently, according to some, the country would be better off if left alone.

The airport received a new fence and a lick of paint, as did the government buildings, a ship full of concrete arriving from Po. The cement bags were transported to all the builders in the city, simply handed over to the perplexed locals, the excess stored at a government warehouse. Timber arrived from Ghana, not that there were a lack of suitable trees here, but this wood had been cut into suitable planks and boards, again just dumped outside shacks or handed to builders.

Outside of Freetown an old army base was appropriated, its officers and NCOs kept on and paid an incentive. The fence was repaired, the buildings touched up and painted, the armoury secured, an RF medical tent set-up. Instructors from the Rifles, plus our British instructors, set-up home, placing adverts for new recruits: regular wages, food, shelter and three cooked meals a day. The take-up was not great because of years of civil war - they knew what it was to fight in the jungle. But a hundred eighteen-year-olds signed up, medicals – and injections - given. The Sierra Leone Rifles had been born, new uniforms flown in, new boots, new weapons and plenty of ammunition. The Sierra Leone Army, what it was, got forcefully told to join us by their government. We took our pick of the men and NCOs.

The main pockets of gunmen had no intention of surrendering to us – or anyone else, they were enjoying their diamond-funded drug habits too much. So the ex-SAS guys and the Pathfinders did what they were good at, and snuck about with GPS position

finders and night sights, their M4s fitted with silencers. When concentrations of gunmen were spotted, air strikes would be called in, the Mi24s thundering in at dawn and blasting the insurgents in their beds. Such an attack would typically be followed by Hal's Cobras picking off jeeps or attacking individual buildings, the Rifles landing nearby and mopping up. It was a huge mismatch of firepower. Day by day, mile after mile of jungle was cleared as the war moved north.

As for funding, we spent twenty-six million in the first six weeks alone, all appropriately misappropriated from the Congo mine revenue fund. Mining equipment was unloading on the dock before we had even secured the mines, plus enough road building material to reach to the mining areas. Trucks started to be off-loaded. And all the while Liberia watched with interest, as did the nice man in the White House. As a result of our activities we got an invite for coffee.

Being the sort of people we were, we flew to Cuba instead, to the dedication of the new University, the first building just about complete. The campus had a long way to go, but politicians liked ceremonies. Just to show Art Johnson how much we cared, senior Chinese, Russian, British and French politicians attended the dedication, in town for a trade fare. Po, Yuri, Marko and ourselves were all made honouree chancellors and we gave interviews about the importance of education, co-operation and international peace. It was just an unfortunate co-incidence that this first block would be for budding Cuban oil engineers.

Making like Prince Charles, we inspected an old factory building that was now being converted to our orphanage, before dragging the international media out to the RF base. Footage was shot of us observing training sessions, in particular at Faulty Towers el Cuba, the collapsed building a carbon copy of that at Mapley – albeit surrounded by pleasant palm trees. After lunch we met with Cuban officials, but they had a new attitude, a less helpful one: who cares about America, we have oil now. Jimmy explained that the embargo would still hurt the economy, and that we were making diplomatic progress. Even with the oil revenue, he argued, it would take ten years at least to revamp the Cuban economy and industrial base. And the Americans could put pressure on others not to deal with Cuba. I left feeling that the oil strike should have been delayed by a year, Jimmy

explaining that it could not come soon enough, a hint at the 2015 conflict between the US and Venezuela. ‘Pieces on a chess board,’ he had remarked.

After a relaxing two days at our first hotel – making many calls home, we flew off to the Dominican Republic and on to New York. Staying a night at the apartment, we met with Oliver at Pineapple’s plush Fifth Ave offices, taking him and his wife out that evening – the companies same hired guards in tow. The following day we made a familiar journey down to Washington, booked in again to the Hilton on Massachusetts Ave. The black vans picked us up, our visit that of official Special Envoys.

‘How are you’re ratings?’ I asked the Chief of Staff, shaking his hand across the nice blue carpet in the oval office.

‘Never as good as you’d like.’

‘And ours?’ I toyed as I sat.

‘Not many people like your associations, old habits die hard.’

Jimmy lifted his face to the man. ‘You know why I like the Chinese system. Because when future disasters hit, they’re authoritarian regime copes well with them. You ... crumble on day one.’

The Chief stared back, the door opening and Johnson stepping in with the Joint Chiefs, quite a crowd; much braid and brass displayed - as well as cold and unfriendly stares.

I faced the guy in the blue Air Force uniform. ‘You the guy who hides the UFOs at Area 51?’

‘You tell us,’ he countered with a cheeky grin. The men settled.

‘I hope you don’t mind the group, Jimmy, but we have some... questions.’

‘Fire away,’ Jimmy said, easing back.

‘I have a list,’ Johnson joked. ‘First, Liberia. We ... obviously have historical ties, and emotional ties – and you’re planning on invading.’

‘As I told your representative, if you want to do it - knock yourselves out, it’ll save me a lot of money.’

Johnson eased back. ‘And in the grand scheme of things, what part does Liberia play?’

‘Well, once it’s free of insurgents and tin-pot dictators, and a peaceful little backwater, there’s the issue of its off-shore oil.’

‘How much oil?’ Johnson asked.

‘If you were to take Sierra Leone, Liberia, Nigeria, Cameroon and Guinea – together they have more oil than the Arabian Gulf.’ The Joint Chiefs exchanged looks. Jimmy added, ‘And those nations would sell it to you cheaper than the Saudis. Less of a shipping route as well. And, in 2025, oil suddenly becomes... extremely hard to come by. When there’s fighting in the Middle East, West Africa will be ... *available*.’

‘So what you’re saying ... is that we’re in the wrong damn place.’

‘You can be in more places than just the one. But if you don’t embrace West Africa soon it will cost you dearly in years to come.’

‘Then we should consider military bases in that region,’ a General suggested.

‘No. In the Middle East, you have people that you’ve pissed off, people that the Israelis have pissed off, and you have functioning governments that don’t like you - lots of them. In Africa, no one hates you, and you have no enemies at a government level, you have twenty bandits with rusty AK47s terrorising oil workers. You will never need to defend your interests at the government level. You need only let me sweep the area, then get your corporations in there. You’ll never enjoy a target worthy of an expensive jet bomber.’

‘Anything you need - like a new broom?’ Johnson joked.

‘No, it’s all under control.’

‘OK, let’s talk about Cuba,’ Johnson suggested. ‘What will they do?’

‘Right now, they think they’re clever because of the oil. They have yet to learn how difficult it will be to modernise their economy after all the damage you guys have done. It’ll take them ten years just to get into second gear.’

‘Any threat there?’ a General asked.

‘Lots,’ Jimmy emphasised. ‘If you miss the opportunity to kiss and make up they’ll use their oil revenue to buy the latest Migs, missiles and boats. If you screw this up, you’ll have a very rich and well-armed adversary on your doorstep. And that’s just the military problem. When the neighbouring states start getting more dependent on them for oil than *others*, they’ll exert political influence in the region. They’ll deliberately give petrol to countries - if those countries agree to piss *you* off. In a

nutshell, the kid you've been bullying for forty years just won the lottery.'

'And the solution?' Johnson asked.

'Kiss and make up, and buy their oil – all of it if you can. Before it's too late. You need the oil, they desire colour TV. If you're tough with them, you get no oil ... and a war.'

'And their military capability ... by 2015?' a General asked.

'Enough to hurt in a conventional war, three hundred of the latest Migs, plus all the surface to air missiles they could want. If you nuke them, every South American state would turn against you – and the rest of the civilised world.'

'We are ... making small steps,' Johnson admitted.

'The guy that follows you will reverse them, so why not make some big steps.'

'And Venezuela?' a man asked.

'Run by a nutter, who will always be a nutter, no matter what you do. If ... and it's a big if, you get Cuban oil flowing sufficiently, Venezuela gets sidelined, their economy suffers, the people change their leader. They need oil above \$50 a barrel. Cuban and West African oil could dent that.'

Johnson made notes. 'We could squeeze them.'

'Which would also squeeze Canadian sand oil a bit,' I put in. 'They also need it above \$50 a barrel.'

'I wasn't elected to run Canada,' Johnson quipped, making notes. 'How soon could African oil flow?'

'Soon enough to aid your cause. You could send rigs to Sierra Leone next week.'

'And Guinea needs a new government and a lick of paint,' I put in.

'Any clues about that?' a man knowingly asked.

Jimmy replied, '*Whoever* arranged it used American mercenaries. Would be awkward if *that* got out.'

The man who had asked the question cocked an indignant eyebrow.

'We've started to help your guys in Northern Somalia,' an Admiral stated. 'That urgent?'

'No,' Jimmy emphasised. 'That's for 2025 mostly, some trouble with Yemen around 2012 threatening the Suez Canal. You'll need a good dockyard there.'

The Air Force chief glanced at Johnson, then asked, ‘Principal military threat in the years ahead?’

‘There isn’t one. Russia is on its arse, China needs you to buy things, North Korea will sabre rattle for the next hundred years. Your first main war will be in the Caribbean, when a certain future President goes for Venezuela and Cuba, or either one. You biggest national threat is your own banking industry. In 2008, 2014, 2020, there’ll be crashes in the markets, each one worse than the last – all caused by bankers wanting to make more and more profit. You’ll be plunged into a deep recession for no reason other than greed and stupidity, at a time when your economy is doing well. It will give rise to neo-conservatives, hence the attacks on Venezuela, and ultimately China. If you want to save tens of thousands of American servicemen’s lives - shoot greedy bankers.’

‘And what about Afghanistan?’ a man nudged.

‘I have a solution, leave it to me. *Don’t* ... invade. If you do you’ll set the region ablaze.’

‘And Al-Qa’eda?’ the same man pressed. ‘We’ve intercepted several attacks.’

‘And you’ll keep intercepting them,’ Jimmy emphasised. ‘Right now they think god is against them, or that you’re better than you actually are.’

‘We can’t ignore them just because you’re informing us of their planned attacks!’ a General protested. ‘If we miss one...’

‘Try *not* to miss one, and keep in mind that American boots on the ground Afghanistan will make Vietnam look like a quick victory. If you go in ... you’ll never leave. Leave it to me.

‘If you want to busy yourselves with something useful, consider 2025, a conflict in the Middle East, not much oil from the region – and how you’ll adapt. The solution is not a military one, because your military is driven by your economy. Think hydroelectric, nuclear power, electric cars, home grown food. Think ... war in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, isolation of the Americas. It might just be you and the South Americans, and a nice big ocean to keep the bad guys at bay. Oh, and if you don’t pull your fingers out, 2025 will see fifty-one percent of the US population being Hispanic. By time you get to 2015 you may see fighting on the streets, public schools teaching in Spanish

only. Al-Qa'eda, gentlemen, are the least of your worries. You lot, are set to implode, not be attacked.'

We took a mini-breather as a coffee tray was wheeled in. They even had biscuits.

Over coffee, Johnson admitted, 'This lot have a room with fifty people in it, studying every move you make.' The Air Force General seemed a little ill at ease with the revelation.

'Really?' I asked. 'What've they concluded so far?'

The head of the Air Force reluctantly explained, 'So far, the one consistency – is a lack of consistency. Fifty different people with fifty different takes on who and what you, and Magestic, are.'

The Admiral said, 'I blindly favour the US astronaut theory, it helps me sleep.'

Another man said, 'We got a bunch of people who swear blind that you got onto a plane in Africa ten minutes after you landed in London.'

'Now that would be good, no more boring flights,' I approved.

'And they can't figure the blood,' the Admiral admitted. 'Best they can come up with is that it was developed for long-term space flight. For hibernation.'

'They'd be mostly right', Jimmy told the man, causing a reaction. 'Hibernation causes cell damage, which needs continuous replacement.' They considered that. 'But I think you'll find, that the medics of the decades ahead will take one very nasty retro virus, and alter it so that it does more good than harm. They'll not understand the science, just make use of its delivery system.'

A man said, 'We have people claiming you've been to Afghanistan four times, but we can't even prove you've been there once. And as for the Rifles in Africa, every Army general is jealous as hell as to how they do so much, with so few numbers.'

'You know what the biggest controversy is,' Johnson put in with a smile, holding a coffee cup now. 'Your house.'

'The house?' I asked. 'What, they think it's a bit ostentatious?'

'No, they can't understand why the house is so well protected, yet you two use public transport, planes, and risk your lives on a regular basis, getting right to the front line of battles in Africa.'

The house is more secure than this place, built to withstand direct assault, yet as soon as you step outside the gate you're exposed. It's a puzzle. So they think there something, or someone, at the house that needs protecting – maybe a damn time machine!'

'You're people have been all over it,' I reminded them.

'So why so secure?' a man asked.

'To protect the "M" Group from interference,' Jimmy suggested. 'Their presence is a puzzle for the UK press, so we keep them under wraps.'

'I don't accept that,' a man quietly stated.

'Think of it this way,' Jimmy began. 'If they came and went on a regular basis, it would attract far more attention. And ... from whom?'

They glanced at each other. 'Other governments?'

Jimmy nodded. 'It's a secret that should be kept secret as long as possible. But, as we sit here, the Germans are asking the French what goes on, so too other nations not part of the club. In years to come the "M" Group itself will be the subject of direct attacks, even bomb attacks.'

I didn't like the sound of that, at all.

'Other governments – jealous – will attack the group,' Johnson realised. 'Makes sense, they're at a great disadvantage.'

'And the French liaison?' a man posed with a smirk.

'He took one for the team,' I suggested, making them laugh.

Hiding a grin, Jimmy said, 'If I had not satisfied her ... *curiosity*, they would have made several dangerous attempts to get close. And will do so in the future when they get impatient with the delightful Michelle.'

'It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it,' I helpfully added, getting a look from Jimmy.

The Admiral said, 'You know the one thing that has the brain boys most puzzled? You pair risking your lives so much. Some of them think that you're the astronauts, or that you're the real Magestic, then agree that such a person would not take so many risks – not with the future of the world at stake. Every week some guy makes a presentation to prove that you, Mister Silo, are the real Magestic. Then they prove otherwise and go back to square one.'

'A waste of good brain power,' Jimmy suggested.

‘Coming back to Liberia,’ Johnson put in. ‘We should, at least, play a role.’

‘It’s a tricky one for you, since we’re there to remove the token government. In the future that will be known as *regime change*. There is, of course, a lot that you can do, it’s just that I would recommend that you don’t – for your sakes. Try ... and keep your image, in the mind of the Africans, a good one. The best thing you can do is to help me secure a UN resolution to move in after the rebels. After that, I would have asked you to build a naval base and airbase there, a staging area for the 2025 conflict – where you should assume that all Mediterranean bases are compromised quickly, all of North Africa unsafe, The Brotherhood attacking south into Africa.’

The generals looked sceptical. ‘You’re saying, that in 2025 – with all the technological advances of our military by then – that we lose the Middle East and the Mediterranean to a bunch of terrorists.’

Jimmy put down his coffee. ‘Let me illustrate the scenario for you: a hundred thousand suicide bombers wearing explosive vests under their clothes; men, women and even children. They mingle with refugees. At your checkpoint they blow themselves up ten yards from your gate, killing your gate staff. In the confusion, a dozen of them run through to your next check point. Some are shot, one blows himself up, knocking down your men. Others run forwards, blowing themselves up as soon as they are within ten yards. And so on, and so on, through the towns and cities. Pretty soon you can’t allow anyone to approach within a hundred yards of your soldiers, making it kinda hard to be there and interact with those you’re supposed to be protecting. What about local officials and local soldiers? They approach, and blow up. Soon, you can’t deal with anyone.

‘Then they’ll go around you, and advance. Across North Africa, into Europe with its densely populated streets, dressed like locals. They’ll blow up power lines, water works, government buildings, anything that represents technology - since their aim is a return to the Stone Age. You can’t use tanks, or planes, or ships, because it’s a counter-insurgency campaign like you’ve never seen before. Every attack creates panic and chaos, and more refugees, the Brotherhood infiltrating the

refugees. Boats blow up at sea, others are rammed into your naval vessels.'

'Jesus,' a man let out.

'So, coming back to what I mentioned early, you have two nice large oceans to cut yourselves off. You could easily sink every boat they send. Problem will be them attacking Russia, with a view to getting at Russian nuclear missiles. China will lose half its land, Russia the Southern Islamic Republics.'

'And Israel?' a man asked.

'They'll shoot so many suicide bombers on their borders it will create a health risk, then a plague. They'll be surrounded and cut off, their nuclear weapons useless, their aircraft useless. It's about hand to hand, not technology. So, over the next twenty years you'll be busy designing high-tech kit to beat the Russians and Chinese, when what you'll actually need is more men with boots and rifles.'

They collectively blew out.

'I'll give you some hints and clues, for your war games. You can cut off the Suez, cutting off Africa from the Middle East. You have the Bosphorous straights to use, the Black Sea. You have India as a buffer in the east. You will have no choice but to try and contain, not to occupy. Think ... contagion and isolation.'

'Abandon Israel?'

'Think Alamo,' Jimmy emphasised. 'You could re-supply by ship, and hold onto the land as a bridgehead, but what of the Israeli people and their economy? It would just be a large base under constant attack, the Brotherhood dropping all their dead bodies into the Jordan upstream. Holding Israel will cost you twenty thousand men a year, at a time when you're losing fifty thousand a year to the insurgents, three times as many wounded.'

'We couldn't sustain those losses,' they baulked.

'Hence the isolationism,' Jimmy responded. 'Besides, the folks back home won't give a shit about the casualties, they'll be keen for you to stop the Brotherhood reaching New York. Instead of learning difficult lessons at the time, you should make a choice ahead of time.'

'The way it would pan out,' Johnson began, 'would be the pull back to the Suez, then a pull back to the Atlantic – political

pressure to reduce casualties at any cost, that cost being Europe. And when Europe's ablaze ... why hang onto it?

'So it's best not to go through that process at all. Draw a line somewhere, cut off a limb.'

'The Israelis know that?' a man asked.

'Yes, and they'll dither till it's too late,' Jimmy emphasised.

'Is there enough oil outside of the Middle East?' a man asked.

'Yes, and I know where it is.'

'So isolationism could work,' another man suggested.

'What? And give up the future of the planet?' the Admiral baulked. 'Blanket nukes would have an effect, also chemical warfare. I'd rather lose the deserts than Europe!'

'The Israelis might not like that approach,' Jimmy suggested. 'Remember where they sit.'

'You declared that you received a message, that there's a solution,' a man challenged.

'Yes, but I don't know what it is. I'm was kinda hoping to get another message, a thick document detailing the fix would be nice.'

'There's no simple solution to the scenario,' Johnson insisted. 'Only degrees of containment – terrible, or less terrible.'

Jimmy nodded. 'I can see no solution other than containment or isolationism, and it occupies a lot of my time. And we still have to get to 2025, through several conflicts and economic crashes. You may reach that point being dirt poor.'

I said, 'So get those fifty idiots in the room thinking about a solution, not how often my daughter takes a dump.'

Back at Heathrow, the mini-bus was waiting with a Range Rover tail car. We battled through the traffic to the old apartment, Helen, Cat and the baby already there, the food on. An evening at the club was planned, Cat babysitting.

The next morning we headed to the Foreign Office, and our Congo team, now twenty strong. We also continued to receive the assistance of twelve Foreign Office staff, so the main room buzzed as we entered.

'Morning everyone,' Jimmy loudly called. People grabbed chairs and sat, Jimmy producing a page. 'OK, we won't keep you too long. First, the Congo Development Corporation is making too much money – a nice position to be in. As a rule, I want no

more than twenty percent of annual income kept back, the rest spent on the projects.’ A chorus of whispers broke out. ‘From now on I want five percent of profit to be offered to any NGO that wants a few quid. Provided that the money ends up in the region, I don’t care about the NGO. Appoint someone as chief *money-give-away-person*. I’d guess that they would be both very popular, and very busy.’

The senior man raised his hand. ‘Jimmy, the corporation made six hundred million in the past nine months alone - is all to go on building up just *that* region?’

Jimmy held his hands wide. ‘As opposed to Kinshasa? They get their cut, what they do with it is up to them. Our aim is to create a shining beacon of efficiency in Central Africa. Then ... we’ll look at Kinshasa.’

They exchanged looks.

‘Next, I want more building materials brought in from Kenya and Tanzania. And let’s get every skilled builder we can find in Western DRC up to the region to work on projects. But, let’s keep migrant workers out; we’re there to fix the Congo, not the world. OK, those small hydroelectric dams, get a move on please, we need a test case to have a look at. Buy British or German turbines ready, use the money and get the power cables down there.

‘OK, next: food production. I want large areas cleared, state run farms expanded – bring in specialists from around Africa or the world. I want to grow twice as much as the region needs, and soon. Collaborate with our farms in Kenya - buy seeds. And let’s go out and buy cattle from the neighbouring states, large cattle ranches set-up.

‘Now, as you will have seen from Sierra Leone, we can get cheap corrugated metal sheets, so someone order-up a shit load for the region, for the shanty towns. And those buckets that come from Hong Kong, the ones filled with household goodies, let’s get a million and dish them out. And more mosquito nets as well. Overall, my main interests in the short-term are the dams. Kindly make that your priority. OK, questions?’

‘What are we doing on regional air services?’

‘Hire a Dash-7 or two, stick them at Forward Base and radiate outwards. Subsidise them a little and, when passenger numbers increase, go for larger aircraft. Between the mines and Forward

Base, hire some commercial S61s, or Super Pumas. But feel free to cut a new dirt runway anywhere you like.'

'There's a stretch of river heading west. If it was damned and flooded, with three lock gates, it would reach three hundred miles.'

'For boat transport, or ore transport?' I asked.

'Both,' the man said.

'I want an advanced feasibility study done right away,' Jimmy suggested. 'Would it flood a few villages?'

'Lots of them, but mostly small hamlets. It could join the main waterway.'

'The villagers would need compensating. Besides, that's a twelve hundred mile trip down to Kinshasa.'

'Are we extending the rail line from Tanzania through Burundi and to the south of our region?' a man asked.

'That's a Chinese project for next year, leave it to them.'

'Tourism?' a man asked.

'Yes, but not for a year or two. Before then I want to look at an international airport west of Goma.'

'We've started clearing the ground for a two runway airport, the runways long enough to handle anything. Just hope we have the passengers.'

'It'll be a UN hub as well, and it'll fill up with engineers coming and going,' Jimmy explained. 'But to start, three hundred people a week – no queuing at check-in! I want ILS, long distance radar, the works. We'll offer the tower services to other airlines transiting Africa.'

'We've appointed a French company to build it.'

'Then tell them to get a move on, please,' Jimmy lightly suggested. 'OK, schools and colleges – where are we?'

'Mostly primary schools going up, not many suitable sixteen year olds.'

'That will change in a few years. Then we'll want a University and Technical College. The orphanages OK?'

'Standards are rising all the time,' a man happily reported. 'They're pushed hard, just like Ebede. We've added a farming college next to it, thirteen year olds and above. We've also got a vocational mining programme going. In time they'll be able to learn to drive trucks, diggers, operate machinery. A home grown labour market.'

‘Teach them how to make roads and bridges as well!’ Jimmy suggested with a smile.

‘We’re laying a hundred miles a week,’ they offered. ‘Making tar at the oil refinery as well now.’

‘Just another thirty thousand miles of road to go,’ I thought out loud. ‘Can we drag in some Kenyan road gangs?’

‘Could do,’ they answered.

Jimmy lifted his eyebrows and nodded. ‘Push it all along.’

‘Congo Rifles?’ a man asked.

‘Congo Rifles ... what?’ Jimmy asked.

‘They’re four and a half thousand strong, so what level you aiming at?’

‘Over ten thousand,’ Jimmy replied. ‘They’ll be used like police officers. And they’ll replace the Chinese.’

‘Cadet scheme at the orphanage?’ a man asked.

‘Yes. Plus any sixteen-year-old not gainfully employed; two-year courses. Oh, while I think of it, that new airport would be a good cargo hub, so let’s think about building transit sheds nearby, then apartments, and office blocks. I’m thinking that, in years to come, the road from the airport to Goma would be a new city all by itself.’

We got into small detail, the questions lasting thirty minutes before we got out of there. I managed a quick lunch with Helen, then got dragged to the new Somali Embassy, part paid for by us, certainly renovated by us.

General Abdi, Defence Minister, greeted us with the Somali Ambassador to the UK. ‘How are you, my friends?’

‘Well,’ Jimmy said. ‘Just back from the Congo.’

‘I have read much about it,’ Abdi said as he gestured us to seats. ‘You will make a paradise out of a jungle.’

‘And what of Mogadishu?’ Jimmy asked.

‘We build, we repair, we clean. Soon to have a city worthy of visitors.’

‘And the northern territories?’ Jimmy asked.

‘No more warlords worth my attention,’ Abdi lamented. ‘I miss being the soldier under your guidance. I would go back and start again.’

‘I know that feeling,’ Jimmy quipped, exchanging a look with me. ‘How is oil revenue?’

‘Increasing,’ the Ambassador put in. ‘Three oil rigs are now present off our coast.’

‘And what do you do with the revenue?’ Jimmy cheekily enquired.

The Ambassador hesitated, noticed by Abdi.

‘We have no secrets from Jimmy,’ Abdi nudged. Facing Jimmy, he said, ‘We are building our nation, modernising.’

‘Some of you ... are putting money in Swiss banks for when you retire,’ Jimmy stated. I blinked. Jimmy took out a series of photographs and handed them to Abdi. ‘What need do you have for cash deposits in Swiss banks?’

Abdi studied the pictures. ‘This is the Junior Finance Minister. Excuse me, please.’ He stepped to the table and made a call, the Ambassador seemingly most put out as voices were raised. Returning, Abdi said, ‘This man will be arrested and questioned.’

‘Perhaps the money should go to your people, not on western prostitutes, drugs and gambling,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘It is a great sin, he will pay dearly,’ Abdi insisted.

‘It would be necessary to retrieve the money *before* anything happened to this man. The Swiss will not co-operate with you; you will need the identity, the account numbers and the passwords.’

‘You serve us well, Jimmy,’ Abdi acknowledged.

‘If you wish it of me, I will keep an eye on your people abroad.’

‘I wish it, yes.’

‘Now, I understand the Saudis have opened an Embassy in Mogadishu.’

‘Yes, they wish many joint projects,’ the Ambassador explains.

‘That is good for Somali,’ Jimmy noted. ‘But what do they expect in return?’

‘They wish only to assist their neighbour,’ the Ambassador suggested.

‘I believe they wish you to join OPEC, and sell only through them – at *their* prices,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘Not so much assistance, as an arm around your shoulder.’ Jimmy faced Abdi. ‘When a woman gets into your bed, you must see if she has large breasts – or large teeth.’

Abdi laughed at the analogy. ‘You think our Saudi friends wish to tame us?’

‘I think you should be wary of gifts from anyone other than myself. And when you need advice, you need only call. Now, down to business: I think your neighbours to the north may be... troublesome in the years ahead. The Somali Rifles now stand at six thousand soldiers, so I will send money – fifty million pounds – towards an increase up to twenty thousand soldiers in the years ahead. More jeeps, and more helicopters, and tanks from China. You should be in a position where you can defend yourself.’

‘I had missed you, Jimmy,’ Abdi admitted with a smile. ‘It is good that we shall build the army further.’

‘And soon some military aircraft, so look for some pilots. I will help you to start an airline, Somali Airways, and arrange aircraft on lease from Europe. Now, if you are happy, I will send to you my Chinese friends to drill for oil. If lucky, you will have more money – perhaps best used through my people.’

‘We will take your counsel,’ Abdi offered, the Ambassador forcing an awkward smile.

With that we left them, Rudd transferring the money from the Mawlini account to the Kenya Rifles and into an old account for the Somali rifles. The recruitment process would start again.

In the months that followed I settled into some serious trading, Helen showing off her knowledge from time to time. We set-up a computer in the house so that we could call up screens, Jimmy warning me not to trade from there: it was an area to be kept tightly under lock and key, and he became a real pain about it. At 10pm each day we could equally be heard chatting about the baby, or the close on the Dow Jones.

January 2002

Shelley’s first birthday came around quickly, and I wondered where the year had gone, Helen and I still not settled on a wedding date. Jimmy had suggested April in Kenya, at the golf complex, and it was a serious candidate. Jack had taken to

studying the stock markets, which meant that Han had copied so that he understood what we were talking about. Some days, around the diner, the conversation was all trading, Big Paul asking for a posting to Seirra Leone.

On the 3rd of January a minor domestic war broke out. Big Paul's lad, thirteen now, had shot Jack's cat with an air rifle. Jack had slapped the lad hard. Now the parties were in the diner, sat facing Jimmy and me.

Jimmy began by addressing big Paul, 'Remove the air rifle today, never to return – nor anything like it.' He faced the lad's mother. 'You, madam, will pay the vet bills. And the next time your lad does something like that on my property you'll be kicked off the same day, because we both know you're soft with him. Your partner here will be allowed to continue working for me, but you'll be gone – never to return. Now, is there any part of that which I have failed to make clear?'

She shook her head.

Jimmy faced the lad. 'Do you want move back to Ross-on-Wye? Do you want to see your mum lose her job, maybe your parents live in separate houses?' The lad became tearful. Jimmy continued, 'We have a lot of security around here because important people visit. As such, it is important that no one messes about, or you may set-off the alarms, or get shot at. You either look at living here as a privilege, the kind that your friends don't get, or you move away.'

With his head down, and not saying anything, Big Paul led his family out, Jimmy apologising to Jack. In the camera room, Ricky was told to keep an eye on the lad in future.

When Big Paul returned, he asked, 'Do we stay together, Jill and me?'

'It will never be easy, you will move out once or twice. It is... a rocky road. And no, I won't advise you.'

January 17th neared, a volcano about to erupt in the Congo, in the famous Rift Valley north of Goma. Jimmy reported to the team at the Foreign Office that a seismologist on the ground had issued a warning, and they were to take immediate, and large-scale, steps. Forward Base was alerted, soldiers and medics moved closer to Goma on the 15th. At Mapley, we practised a

few alert procedures, the communications officer sat behind a computer screen.

Jimmy ordered, 'For RF UK and UK Supplemental, overseas-available, send the following: standby, standby.'

A message appeared on Bob's screen, followed by an alarm that sounded like a break for school dinners. Someone unseen announced, 'Rescue Force UK – standby stations for overseas deployment. Supplemental Group – standby for overseas deployment.'

Bob's pager went off, the message checked. Apart from a spelling mistake, it was the right message.

Doc Graham stepped in, 'Yep, got it by email, fax *and* pager.'

Jimmy turned his head. 'Go pack a bag, you're in overall charge of the deployment on the ground.'

'About bloody time.' Doc Graham headed out.

Jimmy ordered, 'In regard to RF Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Russia, China, Hong Kong, Israel and Australia: standby, standby.' The message was sent, soon calls coming in. Jimmy modified the message. 'For China, issue standby of sixty people only. For Hong Kong make it forty.'

The parameters were altered, second messages sent out.

On the 16th we were back at Mapley, the volcano now reported to be growling and rumbling. Jimmy ordered, 'For units on standby, issue deployment orders. For Kenya, Tanzania and Ghana, issue Full Deployment.'

Mac was on the phone an hour later, reporting planes in the air, other units faxing in lists and numbers of people deployed. Forward base would be busy. Helen issued the press releases and we made the news, the baby with Cat upstairs in an apartment.

On the 17th the volcano blew, ash clouds drifting towards nearby towns and causing a massive evacuation. RF units had been deployed right around the mountain in a circle, but none closer than ten miles. Some had a spectacular view, followed by a quick dash to get the hell out of the way as day turned to night. Almost half a million people were displaced, massive tented cities put up across a wide area, a RF group of tents in each. Injuries from the volcano were mostly ash inhalation, eye-sores, or people getting trampled. Much of the time, the RF staff simply helped to evacuate the elderly, or sick people from local

hospices, some mad helicopter dashes made to rescue people cut off or left behind.

Helen, Jimmy and I gave interviews in turn in the new press centre, even to overseas news stations via the new video conferencing system. The UK press occupied the offices for a day, soon heading off; it was not that big a story. On the ground, however, it was a logistical nightmare. We were attempting to feed and house a third of a million people for a few weeks. Grain had been stacked ahead of time, the tents ready on the ground, but it was still a huge undertaking. Some camps had fifty RF staff to ten thousand people, the Rifles keeping order.

After two busy weeks the British and French Supplemental groups were ordered back, the remainder staying on for another week as the locals drifted back to their houses. RF Russia, Hong Kong and China got the recall message after three weeks, the African units mopping up. By week four even they were heading back. All in all, it was a well-run operation, a post mortem done at HQ Mapley, the only hiccup being Tubby's desire to fly right through the volcano's ash whilst getting very lost, minor damage to the Dash-7's paintwork. He would never live it down; I wouldn't let him.

With the deployment wound down, Jimmy popped over to the house one evening, a surprise since he rarely dropped in. He picked up the baby, asking us to sit. 'We need to talk about your return to work,' he said to Helen.

'Return to work? I am ... working.'

'You're helping out, you're not being a full time PA, not the role I anticipated for you when you signed on.'

'Oh. So, what changes are you looking for?' Helen puzzled, a glance my way.

'You'd spend more time at my side, and travel more – UK and abroad. And no, we'd not take the baby into the First Class cabin on a 747.' Helen and I exchanged looks. 'I've given you a year,' Jimmy emphasised. 'Now you can play PA, or I'll get another one and you can play at housewife.' He tickled the baby, making her shriek.

'How much travel?' Helen asked.

'Wrong question,' Jimmy said without looking up. 'Try again.'

I urged her with my eyes.

‘I’m ... ready and available for whatever you need?’ Helen stated.

‘Better,’ Jimmy said. ‘Now, give some thought to spending time away from the sprog, to using the brain that we both know you have. Tomorrow you get a laptop with a secure link to the computer server back here, to take with you when we travel. You’ll also get a sophisticated pager. And there will be times, many times, when it’s just us ... your dear husband holding the fort here. And holding the baby, no doubt.’

With Jimmy gone, we sat and thought about it. It was no great hardship for Helen, we both trusted Cat, and Helen was keen to work. She most definitely did not like the “housewife” label, but like any mother of a young child she did not want too many long trips away. We got up in the morning assuming that Helen was back to being Jimmy’s PA.

In the office Helen received the new laptop, a few hours instruction on various programmes, then found a shorthand dictation teacher stood in the doorway. Helen was already trained in shorthand, but had not used it since joining the household. Lessons began in earnest. The next morning Helen was ready to adopt the new role, some areas an overlap with what she had been previously tackling. She drove off with Jimmy to meet Rolf, taking notes at the meeting. On the way back Jimmy dictated a few letters, Helen practising her touch typing on the laptop as the minibus negotiated slow traffic on the M4 motorway.

‘Hard day at the office, love?’ I asked as she entered the house.

‘It’s just like working for my old boss,’ she said with a shrug, handing me the property business summaries.

As she showered I read the detail, Cat feeding the baby. We had bought over a thousand properties, most now renovated and rented out. Twelve apartment blocks were under construction, none taller than five storeys; we were high-rise averse. The overseas properties were progressing, all just about on schedule. The first super-sized OAP centre was nearing completion, a second patch of land purchased.

When Helen came down, now in a tracksuit, she said, 'Jimmy had a go at Rolf. They're behind on the UK purchases, so they're getting estate agents involved as well as surveyors.'

'Are the builders and decorators flat out?'

'No, that's the problem. The criteria will be sent to estate agents in the areas we're interested in, to by-pass the surveyors. We need another thousand properties by June to be on track because the Chinese will put more money in. There's an estate agent in Bournemouth doing a good job, so Jimmy has asked them to find three hundred properties in their area, by-passing Rolf, another estate agents in Cornwall. So, what did *you* do today?'

'I made a few trades, then took the baby around the ponds for an hour.'

She punched my knee. 'You're not supposed to say things like that.'

Rob the dog handler knocked on the door. 'Sorry to disturb you Paul, but have you got yourself a cat?'

'No, why?'

'Twice now I've seen one around your house.'

'It Jack's?'

'No, this one is a tabby.'

'Oh. Must be a stray. Guess it'll wander off eventually.' I went and asked Helen if she was feeding the cat. Then we asked the animal's namesake, Cat.

'I've seen a cat, but I thought it was Jack's. I gave it some food. Little tabby.'

'Nearest neighbours are a long way off,' Helen noted. 'Now that you've fed it the cat will hang around.'

'We could catch it, dump it up the road,' I suggested.

Then there it was, on the kitchen window, crying.

Helen opened the window and lifted it in, placing it on the floor. 'We could get the security guys to dump it up the road.'

Our daughter made her mind up, crawling quickly towards it as the young cat wandered into the lounge sniffing the carpet. We sat and exchanged looks, our daughter chasing the animal around the room. Frustrated with her lack of speed, our daughter amazed us by lifting up on her feet bum first, and toddling after the animal. Helen shrieked, and I grabbed the video camera, soon

recording the first steps. Once up, Shelly would not settle for anything less than running across the room.

When she stumbled, Helen moving closer, I said, 'No, watch.'

Shelly got straight back up without any tears and toddled after the nervous cat. We had been wondering about her lack of toddling, but obviously she was saving it all up for one giant leap forwards. Now that she was up there was no stopping her, we'd have to put gates on doorframes and the stairs.

Later, we took her over to the house, Shelly toddling around the "M" Group, Han always happy to play with her. Holding her fingers, he took her for long trots along the corridor and back.

'I think you've bred a marathon runner,' Keely said.

'She'll have a bad habit of climbing trees around ten years old,' Jimmy informed us. 'A tomboy till thirteen – like her mum.'

'I was terrible,' Helen admitted. 'I cut my hair short and got into fights with boys – my parents even getting me a psychiatrist.'

French Michelle admitted, 'I set fire to a barn at twelve, my grandfather's. I then ran to the local river, three miles, and pretended that I had been there all day.'

Shelly's toddling was a milestone, much filmed by us, everyone amazed by the sudden transformation from rug rat to sprinter. Now the problem was keeping her in the pram; she wanted out.

The following week we travelled over to Mapley together, a new employee to greet. Dug was an expert in earthquakes and volcanoes, a seismologist-vulcanologist. When I asked about nicknames, his wife called him Crusty, after the earth's crust he was always studying. Either that, or she meant something else. Crusty, the earthquake man, was on board. We introduced him to the team, asking him to arrange lecturers for all recruits, plus a written test. After an hour, sat chatting with a cup of tea, Crusty admitted to experimenting with earthquake prediction software. I got the feeling that he would have some successes in the future.

Security breach

One March evening Jimmy took the call that he had dreaded. The secret school for the autistic Ebeye children, hidden in the farm, had been penetrated. There had been a shoot-out, a guard killed, others wounded. Someone had gone to great lengths to find out what went on inside.

Jimmy ordered a hundred of the Rifles to surround the farm and the secret school, and woke Han and me.

‘Pack a bag,’ he told me. ‘Just you.’

I always had a bag ready these days, and Helen came across to the office with me.

Jimmy told her, ‘Go online, book Paul and me open tickets to Mombassa, or Nairobi.’

With Helen tackling that, Jimmy explained the security breach. It could only be at government level. Han stepped in, his bag packed.

Jimmy told him, ‘Fly to Shanghai immediately, ready the college. Before you go, send a plane for the children as we planned.’

Han hurried out, getting into a Range Rover for the trip to Gatwick. Helen found us tickets on the first flight out in the morning, 7am.

Keely appeared in the doorway of the office, odd for him to be about at 1am, but he had been injected and did not sleep much. ‘You’re up late. Another earthquake?’

Jimmy stepped to him. ‘There’s been a security problem in Africa, Mister Donnelly. If I find a connection to your government then your life will be in danger. If you know something, say so now ... or don’t be here when I get back.’

Shocked, Keely glanced at Helen and me. ‘If ... the CIA was up to something they wouldn’t tell me, that’s for sure. And the NSA don’t go overseas. What’s ... happened?’

‘We’ll discuss that when I return,’ Jimmy threatened. ‘In the meantime, try and find out if the CIA are in Kenya - shooting my people.’

Leaving Keely looking stunned, we drove off to Gatwick. I managed to catch two hours sleep on the way. Touching down at Nairobi, we had more of an escort than usual, the Defence

Minister waiting, not least because he had a dead soldier to explain.

In the jeep, Jimmy said, 'I have scientists at the farm, working on crop yields. We've spent millions of pounds on the science behind it, hoping to make some breakthroughs.'

'And somebody wanted to get access to it?' the Minister puzzled.

'I don't know. Maybe someone saw the security I had there, and figured it was something valuable – maybe the cash we keep at the orphanage. They would have been stupid to break in with guns just for the science.'

'This science ... it would be very valuable?'

'If it works, very valuable.'

I wasn't sure if the Minister was convinced, but he could never have guessed the real reason. We dropped him off and headed towards Mombassa and the farm. Cosy met us there, the Chinese soldiers now removed.

'Did the children see or hear anything?' Jimmy asked him as we walk through the gates.

'They heard it, sure, but it was dark. Today they are curious, but not afraid.'

'Get me some buses with tinted windows,' Jimmy told Cosy. 'Food and water for a long flight.'

'You'll take them?' Cosy questioned.

'They're in danger here. I have no choice.'

Inside the house we called together all of the children.

Jimmy heaved a big breath. 'Children, we've arranged a treat for you, a flight in an aeroplane.' They did not look pleased.

'Who *does not* want a flight in the plane?'

A few raised hands. One asked, 'What model of aircraft?'

'A 747SP.'

'They're very reliable,' the kid acknowledged, the English professor stepping in.

The eldest boy asked, 'Has this flight anything to do with the shooting last night?'

Jimmy hesitated, taking in the faces. 'Yes. The question is ... do you trust me?'

'I do,' the elder boy keenly stated. 'I've read everything about you, all the books, all the newspapers.'

‘Do you think you could persuade the others to take the flight, if we shared a great secret?’

Several of the kids expressed a keen desire to know the secret. Jimmy selected the five eldest children, and led them to a side room with the professor, Cosy and me, the younger children vocally protesting the secrecy – and being left out.

After settling the attentive youths, Jimmy began, ‘You are all autistic, of a kind. You know what that is?’ They nodded. ‘And you are autistic because you were injected with my blood as babies. You know *why* you were injected?’

Cosy said, ‘You all had the AIDS disease when you arrived at the orphanage. I was there when you came in.’

‘We are not symptomatic,’ a girl challenged.

‘You are completely cured,’ Cosy stated. ‘Not only that, you are now immune to all diseases, and you’ll live to be a hundred and fifty or more.’ He pointed at the girl. ‘Where is your scar from where you burnt yourself the other week?’ She examined her hand. ‘Is that normal?’

The youths exchanged looks.

‘You were injected with my blood, and my blood has abnormal qualities, kept secret.’

‘Jimmy is ... special,’ Cosy stated.

‘The Americans, Russians and Chinese leaders all talk to you,’ the girl noted. ‘Is that because of the blood?’

Jimmy lifted his head to Cosy. Cosy stated, ‘You remember Mary, who founded this orphanage?’ They did. ‘In the Second World War Jimmy saved her life.’ They puzzled that. ‘He is more than a hundred years old.’

The professor was surprised by that, but obviously knew some of the detail.

Jimmy explained, ‘I injected you to save your lives. But, one in three hundred children injected will go on to develop autistic characteristics, high IQ, which is why you are all here and not with the others. You are special, and as you grow older you will become a lot smarter. I have you here to help me to fix things, to fix Africa. If others knew about you, they might want you to help them invent other things, maybe even weapons.’

‘Will we stay together ... if we go?’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy said with an encouraging smile. ‘Which is why I want you to persuade the others. If not, I’ll drug them and take them anyway ... for their safety.’

A boy lifted his head towards the professor. ‘Will you be coming with us?’

‘Yes he will,’ Jimmy cut in with. ‘To a new house with unlimited facilities, and great safety.’ Jimmy stood, gesturing the youths back to the main group. Facing the professor he said, ‘Get a needle and syringe, please.’

With the needle handed over, Jimmy said, ‘Take off your jacket, roll up your sleeve.’

The professor glanced at me, hesitating before doing as asked. ‘I’ll ... live a long time?’

‘A hundred a fifty, in perfect health,’ Jimmy assured him.

Cosy extracted the blood and injected the professor. ‘You’ll run a fever for a day or so and your pee will smell. After that, eat protein and exercise.’

The professor stepped into the main hall, rolling down his sleeve. I could hear the kids asking if he had been injected, realising that their tutor was now “one of them”. We sat for half an hour as the kids debated the issue, being able to hear some of it. I think the clincher was the elder youths and the professor saying that they were going anyway, the youngest not wanting to be left behind. When Jimmy joined the debate he informed them that all of their personal possession would be transported, and their study projects. Everything. That clinched it, they would now come with us.

Cosy arranged for an empty coach to drive to Nairobi under heavy guard, then handed us pistols, the kids stating the make and model of the pistols, how many rounds they carried, muzzle velocity, the works. At 1am we boarded another coach with basic effects and clothes for the kids, and no escort for the short drive to the airfield.

Driving through the black night I was nervous, wondering who was out there. I was also angry that this had come about, determined that someone would get their arse kicked. At the airfield, a Chinese 747SP stood being attended, having landed under false pretences: a minor fault. The gate guards halted the bus, the children hiding themselves. Jimmy stepped down, the guards stiffening and saluting. He exchanged a few sentences in

a local dialect, then discussed the plane, saying it was Rescue Force supplies for Mawlini, and we'd save some time by getting a ride up there. He gave them a hundred dollars each, the guards very happy and saluting again as he boarded.

We drove straight around to the steps of the plane, just the one local attending a generator. The kids poured out, lugging their cases up the steps and inside, the plane's engines starting immediately.

Jimmy approached the bus driver, handing him ten thousand dollars. 'You were never here, you saw nothing.' Wide-eyed, the man thanked Jimmy, driving off into the night.

We lugged our own cases up the steps, the door closing, the generator unplugged. The professor settled the kids, checking their seatbelts as Jimmy ordered the plane to take off, regardless of tower permission; he would sort it. We taxied around the small apron and to the runway, powered up and accelerated down the runway. Lifting the nose, the pilots were told to head for Mawlini. After a hundred miles we turned hard right and North East, over Somalia and soon over ocean, enough fuel to reach Shanghai since the cargo was simply the kids and three adults.

Eleven hours later we landed at a military airstrip outside of Shanghai, Han meeting us in a coach. We loaded the curious kids and their cases, a short drive to a military complex with high fences and numerous guards, soon negotiating an inner cordon. The coach navigated around high trees, seemingly placed to hide the facility within, and we opened to pleasant gardens, finding many ponds and waterfalls, footpaths and swings. Halting, I got my first glimpse of the new college, the house designed and built to resemble that of the old colonial house at the farm.

Jimmy addressed the kids, 'Grab you cases and then follow me.'

In the foyer of the large house, which looked more like a hotel on the inside, a reception desk housed two Chinese ladies on the right, both fluent English speakers.

Jimmy ordered, 'Put your cases down here, we'll come back for them. First, a tour.' He led the group off, and I was just as curious as the kids.

The first room was a lecture theatre, heads poked inside. The second room was a canteen, several sofas with coffee tables off

to one side, room for fifty people at least. Opposite the canteen sat the computer room, a variety of the latest computers, perhaps forty in total. Through that room we walked, a set of glass double-doors revealing a library and study area, all the books seemingly in English. Back in the foyer we climbed wide stairs to the first floor, the first room being a TV lounge, but with many individual compartments. I figured that each kid could watch a separate channel, and puzzled it. Next came a games room, making me smile. They had everything a teenager could want; pool table, arcade games, chessboards and computer games. Through that room the kids trailed behind, now chatting amongst themselves, their initial shock gone as we entered a dormitory area. The first room offered three sets of bunk beds, the second three single beds and plenty of shelving, the other rooms similar. Across a landing to another door we found individual rooms, similar in many ways to the rooms at Mapley.

When I turned around we only had three kids left on the organised tour, Jimmy smiling widely.

‘Let’s leave them to it,’ he said. We returned to the lower level, kids running up the stairs with their cases, laying claim to rooms. We sat in the canteen with Han and the professor. Jimmy explained, ‘Right now, back at the farm, Cosy is removing all traces of the kids. Their possessions are probably already on another flight, the house being stripped. He’ll move in Zimbabwean farming students, claiming that the security breach was about them.’

Two kids burst in and grabbed trays, pointing at what they wanted, the Chinese ladies behind the counters serving them.

‘Kids are kids,’ the professor said. ‘They’ll adapt quickly.’

Han asked, ‘Do you know who was behind the breach?’

Jimmy shook his head. ‘It could be one of three. I’ll investigate. But, now that this lot are here I’ll bring the other kids here direct.’

‘There are more?’ the professor puzzled.

‘We have an orphanage with twenty thousand kids in the Congo,’ I informed him. ‘And this lot could probably work out how many brain-trusts that will produce.’

‘Another fifty,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Oh, labs around the back, and a bunker underneath us full of goodies.’

‘Should he not know the truth?’ Han suggested, meaning the professor.

‘Now that he’s been injected, yes,’ Jimmy agreed.

Han informed the curious professor, ‘Mister Silo is a time traveller.’ I enjoyed the look on the professor’s face. Han added, ‘His mission is to prevent a series of future wars and conflicts, as well as plagues and other problems.’

‘The kids!’ the man realised.

Han softly explained, ‘They will, hopefully, help to assist in research projects that may assist the safe development of this planet.’

‘My god!’ the professor whispered.

Jimmy glanced at Han, addressing the professor. ‘I apologise, but you, sir, are a prisoner in a nice cell. *You will* ... help me use the kids to save this planet. Hopefully, around 2010 you’ll be released, most of the work being completed by then. If you stick it till then, I’ll put a few million pounds in your pocket. Since you’ll live a very long time, the money will help.’

‘I would have stayed anyway, I knew there was something special going on.’

‘What did Jimmy first tell you?’ I asked.

‘Just that he had a genetic aberration in his blood, and that it caused autism in some. Then he offered a lot of money. But it’s not about the money. I’ve worked with autistic kids all my adult life, but some of this lot are off the scale. Not only that, you can converse with these kids, give them projects without temper tantrums.’

‘Your first project is a hybrid electric car. Concentrate on the battery science, it’s the key.’

‘Time travel, huh. Now that would be an interesting project!’

‘And one that you are banned from discussing,’ Jimmy insisted.

The rest of the kids piled in, the canteen soon bustling. Jimmy and I had a plane to catch, a plane back to Kenya and home from there, a long trip. If we flew straight back to London it would look odd, very odd. On the plane I asked about the American unit that monitored us, figuring they may put this all together.

We landed back at Mombassa, right into some awkward questions about the unscheduled flight. Jimmy explained that, en-route up to Mawlini, he got an urgent message from Hong

Kong and diverted the plane – all his fault. We left the officials in Mombassa wondering about what to do, and fearing upsetting us. We checked the farm with Cosy, the Zimbabwean students in place, and drove to Nairobi, using our open tickets to catch a flight home without further incident. At the house, Han was already back, Jimmy calling Keely outside.

‘Well?’ he demanded.

Keely took a moment, finally handing over a sheet of paper with three names on. ‘What’ll you do?’

‘They killed and wounded Kenyans,’ Jimmy reminded Keely. ‘Where are they now?’

‘Stateside.’

‘I want the President’s highest representative here. Tomorrow. If not, I’ll take a large chunk of change out of the American economy and give it to Cuba, enough to make his fucking eyes water!’

Art Johnon’s National Security Advisor, Shoneberger, arrived the next afternoon, his visit kept secret. The “M” Group met, but had not been fully briefed, certainly not on the children.

In the lounge, Jimmy explained, ‘A few days ago a facility of mine in Kenya was penetrated by three CIA agents.’ He handed over the names. ‘They killed one Kenyan guard, wounding two others.’

Han piped up with, ‘My Government wishes an explanation for this.’

‘As do we,’ Jack echoed, Michelle and Ivan adding their voices of complaint.

Shoneberger took a moment, clearly angered, but at who was not clear. ‘The President has taken steps to investigate the matter.’

Jimmy held his hands wide. And waited.

‘We’ll let you know what we find.’

‘And until then all bets are off, no co-operation between us. If that means terrorist attacks go ahead, then it’s on your head. And every day you delay I’ll take a chunk of change out of Wall Street and make a charitable donation to Cuba. So don’t take too fucking long.’

‘Is it appropriate ... for you to threaten us?’

‘Is it appropriate for you to spy on me, to kill and wound my staff? Men with families?’ Jimmy pointed at Keely. ‘You have your man here, and he can ask any question he likes. Why shoot dead my people?’

‘The move was not sanctioned, it was the CIA ... freelancing. Our administration apologises. But ... but the CIA have been trying to convince the President that there was something going on there.’

‘There was, and there is *something going on* at many facilities I have, all so sensitive I can’t risk them getting out – not even to you!’

‘I thought we had transparency.’

‘If I tell *your administration* things, you’re out of office in two years and some other idiot takes over, not being bound to keep their traps shut. If you had a more secure system of government I could tell you more. As it stands, the next guy in the White House is a right arsehole. You want him to know everything? The first thing he’ll do is to try and have me arrested, tortured for information! Don’t forget, numb nuts – I know the future.’

Shoneberger took a moment. ‘I’ve been asked ... to ask what was going on there?’

Calmer, Jimmy stated, ‘Genetically modified crops, the Chinese helping me.’

Shoneberger glanced at Han. ‘For what purpose?’

‘If it works, it will feed Africa. A controversial subject.’

‘Why ... controversial?’

‘Why do you think?’ Shoneberger shrugged, Jimmy adding, ‘Feeding Africa would cause a population explosion and migration problem. In years to come we’ll disagree on African policy; I’ll feed them, you *and others* won’t want me to. Contact your Ambassador in Kenya, send him to the farm today, examine the research, I’ll arrange access.’

‘The tomatoes are huge,’ I put in. ‘Marrows weighing three hundred pounds. It’s part of a secret project in the Congo.’

‘With the blood, and the food, the population growth would be unsustainable,’ Jack noted. ‘So I guess it will cause a lot of problems in the future.’ He faced our visitor. ‘But, knowing Jimmy’s fondness for Africans, he’ll try and feed them all.’

Jimmy wagged a warning finger. 'I think, maybe, I should try and get the Republicans on board. I should make a donation.' He turned his head to me. 'How much do you think is appropriate?'

'Got to be at least two-hundred and fifty million to make it worthwhile, especially if they're going to be difficult in years to come.'

Shoneberger left without even so much as a cup of tea. By time his plane landed the New York Times had news of alleged CIA involvement in the assassination of the Guinea President, several African nations up in arms, as well as the UN. Kenya had issued international arrest warrants for the three CIA agents that had broken into the farm in Kenya – naming them only as "US citizens", the US news somehow matching their names to the CIA. The American news was full of it, Art Johnson now under pressure. The next morning the New York Post opened with a very detailed story about CIA involvement with a failed military coup of the Venezuelan President. Los Angeles TV stations were also investigating an old story about ex-President Harvey – and how much Art Johnson knew at the time. News was also running the story of Jimmy making a hundred million pound tourist development loan to Cuba.

Ex-President Harvey flew into London and we met him with the UK Prime Minister, Jimmy insisting that the head of the CIA must go, or we'll ramp things up. Leaving the meeting, I realised we had just threatened the US President, shouting at the previous incumbent.

There was a time, as a kid, when I was in awe of parents, they could fix anything. Then, growing into a young man, I believed our political leaders knew what they were doing, and were honourable people. Now I knew differently. They were just people, only worse; their policies were set by their popularity. Katie Joe would have found the job of being a politician an easy transformation. Driving through the streets of London, I remembered what Jimmy had said: how would you react if you met a President? At the time I would have been terrified. Now I had nothing but contempt for them all.

Driving back, Jimmy called Senator Pederson, some sharp horse-trading conducted, oil and mining concessions offered.

Harvey flew straight back to the States, another revelation about the CIA being released that evening, Pedersen and his

gang calling for the head of the CIA to go – as well as Art Johnson. Johnson had no choice; he sacked the head of the CIA and ordered an investigation, several lower grade CIA managers suspended. The story ran for a few days, eventually fizzling out, Art Johnson inviting his special envoy to the White House.

Three days later we were again on the blue carpet of the oval office. So far, the US press had not linked us to the incident in Kenya.

I shook the hand of the Chief of Staff. ‘So, how’re your ratings?’ I testily asked.

‘Not good,’ he admitted, being reserved.

Johnson stepped in five minutes later, as we sat having a coffee. We didn’t bother to get up, the move – or lack of movement – noticed. He sat opposite us, straightening his tie, and I could not figure out if he was angry, afraid or resolute. He took a moment to compose himself. ‘I’d assume that it was you who leaked the details of the CIA activities to the press.’

‘And you’d be right,’ I told him.

He heaved a sigh. ‘This was all one great ... mistake; I can see that now. They should have asked you about the facility, not snuck around – and certainly not shot anyone. For that, we apologise. And your *demonstration* has registered where it should.’

‘Payback is a bitch, huh,’ I said.

‘I would like to ask ... that terrorist and disaster warnings be resumed,’ Johnson humbly requested.

‘They will be,’ Jimmy confirmed.

‘Can we ... move on from this?’ Johnson asked, his hands wide.

‘We can,’ Jimmy confirmed.

‘We’ve got the Joint Chiefs assembled in the Situation Room as you requested.’

‘We did?’ I puzzled, Jimmy confirming to me with a nod.

Ten minutes later we were led to the Situation Room, Johnson not in on this meeting, the military brass sat waiting, a variety of uniform colours, much braid and brass displayed. It was a frosty reception.

‘God bless all here,’ I joked. ‘Who’s round is it?’

Jimmy took off his jacket, placing it over a chair. ‘Gentlemen, your dear President has agreed, finally, to this treasonous

meeting, a meeting *without* his presence, although I'm sure he'll get a full report.' He patrolled around the table. 'The CIA made a mistake, one that you should learn from. If you have a question, come and ask me. If you kill innocent people, men with families, there will be a penalty.' He stopped. 'And just think what that penalty would be if you harmed someone I cared about.' He let them think about it. 'If Paul and I were killed – by you, detailed documents would be sent to Russia and China, potentially putting the US at a massive disadvantage in the decades ahead. If you lot don't understand the nice way of doing things, we can do it the hard way.'

He let them think about it. 'Now, let's be realistic. You sit there with your arms folded –' a man unfolded his arms. '- sour-faced and sceptical, because the only the way that this would work to your satisfaction is if I was tied to a chair in a cell, only answering to you, helping to make the US of A as great as you'd like it.'

'You forgot the shackles and hot poker,' a man said without looking up.

'Don't worry, the next guy in the oval office will have the hot poker ready.' Jimmy patrolled the group. 'Your job ... is to defend the US. Well, your job is to try and advance your own careers and play with models on a board, to invent threats from time to time to justify your salaries.' A few angered faces looked up. 'My job, is to try and save the planet. Although the US is part of that planet, my job is not to save the US at the expense of all other nations.'

'What you *learn-ed* gentlemen don't realise yet, is that in the future the planet becomes very globalised, both a blessing and a curse. Corporations grow and become truly international, crossing all borders. In the future, it is those corporations that hold the power, not the politicians, and they do a good job of preventing wars – because no matter what country is involved in a conflict *they* have a financial stake in it. Those corporations are huge, stakes in China, Russia and the US. So the Chances of a conflict between the US and those nations are extremely limited; if you fire off a nuke you hurt your markets and shareholders. Beyond 2015, the chances of a global conflict are extremely remote, the military downsized. To some, that would be seen as a good thing.'

‘Not to this lot,’ I suggested.

‘No, not to this lot, because they judge their own self worth, their own pride, on the prowess and abilities of the shiny toys. And war is good for them, it proves that the toys works, it justifies their salaries – even with a lot of casualties.’

‘That’s crap,’ the Admiral stated. ‘You paint us as war-mongers.’

‘Ah, now raise your hands all those who wish to see a system of world government where the US takes third place behind China and Russia.’ No one raised a hand. ‘By time you get to 2025 that’s exactly the situation you’ll be in, gentlemen, fewer shiny toys to play with at a time when we’ll all be fearing the worst.’

‘Knowing the 2025 problems, we’d never disarm,’ a man scoffed.

‘Who pays for the military?’ Jimmy waited, his hands held wide. ‘The taxpayer. And when there’s been no war for a decade or two, certainly not a successful one, and the peace campaigners get ahead, and the economy is struggling – the world dominated by super corporations - what view will the taxpayers take on the military?’

‘You’re saying we’ll be ill-equipped to fend off the Brotherhood?’

‘Not really, because as you already know, General, shiny toys won’t be much use against them. Your navy will keep your shores safe, but jet fighters and tanks will be useless.’

‘How many troops will we have at the time?’

‘More than enough, just not in the format you think. You see, between now and then, a bright spark over here will keep a careful eye on that troublemaker, Jimmy Silo, and learn from his example. From his examples on how to fight wars in far off parts, cheaply, effectively, and without any US or UK casualties.’

‘The Rifles?’ they puzzled.

The Admiral said, ‘They’re low paid, injected with the blood, they know their own terrain, speak the language – and the folks back home don’t give a shit if they take casualties. So ... when we’re having our budgets cut by the politicians, we’ll use proxy soldiers. A throwaway army.’

A chorus of whispers broke out, quite a debate. I had not realised they'd go that route, but it made perfect sense. Jimmy smiled smugly towards me, helping himself to a water as they debated the matter.

Finally, he called order. 'Gentlemen, there *are* some advantages to having someone like me around - you get a route map to the future. Now, let's talk about the arseholes in the CIA. They, like you, have a budget that they'd like to see maintained, or even increased. Problem is, with me around, you don't need them so much. They feel ... threatened, useless, less important in the grand scheme of things. They feel like they need to be justifying their salaries. And, in the years ahead, they will make a point of trying to discredit me. Every time they do I'll strike back – because I am only human, with human emotions. Every time I strike back it will hurt the US, we may even see US casualties. We will, definitely, see me withdrawing my services. If that happens at a time when someone is trying to sneak a nuke into New York, it could go badly for you.'

'Will someone try and sneak a nuke into New York?'

'Yes,' Jimmy affirmed. 'But, because I have business interests there, I would be foolish to let it go off. You see how this global corporation thing works? I'm British, but I don't want anything to happen to New York because of my business interests there. Some day very soon, the Russians and the Chinese will also think like that, so too the Cubans and others.'

'You'd never let a bomb go off,' a man said. 'Not even a small one.'

'You think you know me?' Jimmy asked the man directly, holding his gaze. 'Let's hope you're right. Just don't say that I'd never bring down a US President, I'd make a liar of you.'

'You'd bring down a government?'

'Not a government, a President,' Jimmy corrected the man. 'And that brings us nicely onto the next matter. Some things are certain, such as future economic crisis –'

'If we know about it, why can't it be avoided?'

'For the same reason the CIA are sneaking about: because you're political paymasters are too stupid to listen to me. They hear the words, but they don't believe them. Besides, someone else will be in office by then – it's not their problem. So you'll suffer an economic problem, several in fact. And then, a certain

future President will suggest that, given the size of your military – with all its shiny toys – that something could be done before the US loses its place at the top. He'll try, at least, to persuade you to attack Venezuela, and China. Both campaigns will be disasters. You'll also be urged to invade Afghanistan, a disaster waiting to happen.'

'So what are you suggesting - that we shouldn't follow orders?'

'No, I'm assuming that you are smarter than that, that you could present plans that have far higher costs and casualties than you think, and that you think about your exit strategy before your invasion strategy. You need to say to the President: yes, we can invade and win the war quickly, but then what? Are we there for regime change, or nation building? Are we there to build schools and change the politics? And what about the attrition casualties, daily roadside bombs in some far off hellhole? And what happens when you leave? Do they go back to being a nuisance state, or do you patrol the streets forever? Vietnam was easy to get into, but where was the exit strategy? Your biggest problem in the future will be quick victories, followed by a lot of people sat around thinking of an exit strategy, soon realising that there isn't one. You'll withdraw in poor order, the communist nutters taking back their country and declaring victory.

'Now, in the years ahead, some of you will approach retirement close to crisis points. As such, you could accidentally go public and condemn the plans.' They glanced at each other, wide-eyed. 'What you would have to balance up, is if your reputations and remaining few months in office are worth the lives of tens of thousands of soldiers. Who here thinks that the seat they occupy is worth a thousand dead soldiers?'

No one raised a hand.

'Give it some thought gentlemen, treasonous thought. Would you sacrifice the end year of your career to prevent bloodshed, or ... are you more interested in moving pieces around on a battle board, regardless of the casualties.' Jimmy sipped a fresh coffee.

'You're asking us to try and influence policy!'

'No, I'm asking you to think beyond the battle. I'm asking you to make proper plans, and to not let the politicians ask you for just a way in. You need a re-construction plan, a civil order plan, and an exit strategy. Otherwise, once the battle has been

won and the incumbent is happy with his ratings, you'll be picking up the pieces as the man in the White House moves on to things that he finds more interesting.

'You'll probably be involved in a war within five years of now, a quick initial victory followed by heavy daily losses, the folks back home losing interest, followed by an exit-strategy that looks like you lost – when you actually won the battle. But if the aim, the political aim, was to remove the regime, and they come back a year after you leave – what will you have achieved? You'll have dead American soldiers ... and for what? To teach them a lesson? Don't do it again! The Vietcong didn't harm the reputation of the US and its military, public opinion did that. When you go to war, gentlemen, keep one eye on the enemy, two on the politicians, and three on public opinion. Ask yourselves: what value was the quick military victory if the nutters get back into power, the folks back home blaming you?

'Consider this: next week, the President calls you in and says you should invade Venezuela and remove the government, go make a plan. What I would expect is that you say to the President: what comes after the invasion, sir, we holding onto it? What about the exit strategy? And, if the President suggests that you think about that at some later point, that you dig your heels in, that you ask: how many years will we occupy it, sir? And after we leave, then what? Is the mission to destroy their government? Is to grab their oil – which it will be. I'd expect, gentlemen, that you present a plan that spells out the cost of holding onto the territory for five years: five thousand dead a year, twenty thousand wounded a year will be your actual figures. And then, when you leave, an even more hard line government takes over.' He stopped patrolling. 'So why the fuck did you get in there in the first place? You may argue, quite correctly, that it's not your concern. Now, how many of you, able to go back in time, would say to the then President Johnson: Vietnam, great idea, sir, leave it to us. We'll show those commies!

'You're in a unique position, in that you have the benefit of hindsight – in advance. Venezuela will make Vietnam look like a walk in the park. Afghanistan will set Pakistan ablaze, leading to a war between India and Pakistan – a nuclear exchange and the rise of the Brotherhood from the refugees. Attacking China will

result in a nuclear exchange and you'll lose California.' He stopped again. 'You get many warnings from me about terrorist actions, plane crashes, and you believe them all, and you act upon them all. But when I tell you about the big mistakes you're about to make, you just sit there looking dumb.'

They glanced at each in silence for a moment, Jimmy suggesting a coffee break.

A man asked, 'What *was* at that secret facility in Kenya?'

'A bunch of clever people, many Chinese, experimenting with genetically modified crops under my guidance.'

'Why so secret?'

'Why not?' I asked. 'Do we want the public to know what we get up to?'

'That facility, gentlemen, is one of dozens, all projects that have some relevance to the future, none of them a threat to you, or of interest. Many of those projects involve future technology, items that would be hard to explain at this date. Many are involved with alternate energy and, before you ask, the arseholes in your oil industry *will* try and block their design and use it to line their own pockets – till it's too late and there is no oil. Then the lights go out.'

'We've got GM crops here, out in the open. Why the big secrecy?'

'Because the world is not yet ready for maize that grows at a foot a day, reaching twelve feet tall.'

'Shit...' someone let out.

'And that flight you took to China?'

'All the research has been handed over to the Chinese.' That stirred them. 'Because I know that they can keep it under wraps.'

'You trust them more than us?'

'Yes, much more.' They didn't seem to like that, Jimmy adding, 'They wish to survive and prosper, you wish to lead and to dominate. There is a subtle difference. You want what's best for *you*, I want what's best for ... Africa, Asia, South America. And, in the future, the conflicts we'll have – you and me - will all come down to that premise: how many African lives is an American life worth? A hundred? A thousand? One? Are African lives worth less because they're not educated or cultured, not productive in the world? My students at the orphanage are passing degrees, on par with American students. All they needed

was a chance. Always keep in mind, gentlemen, that to me, the survival of the planet is important, not America, or Russia, or Britain. Now, who wants to tell me why I'm in the Congo developing its infrastructure?'

'To stop the Brotherhood moving south?'

'I could do that with an army, why an elaborate infrastructure?' They puzzled it. Jimmy explained, 'After 2015 the Congo will have a GDP as large as the rest of Africa combined, busily buying American goods. Beyond 2015 Africa is an important market for American goods, because by then they'll have a few dollars, a house and a car, and a desire for a larger TV set. And it will all be down to me.' He took a moment. 'You're welcome.'

We left them to think about things. Back at the hotel I opened the door to my room to find Helen and the baby.

'I don't have a woman in here, babes,' I quipped, giving her a hug.

'Jimmy sent for us, Cat next door, flight to Los Angeles.'

'Oh. Fair enough. Get your clothes off.'

'No time, hotrod, flight in an hour or so. I packed for you.'

'I'll have a quick wash.'

We were on the plane to LA in two hours, the flight delayed, and staying at a plush mansion that Po owned, his family using it sometimes. It came with ten Chinese servants.

I cornered Jimmy. 'OK, what we here for, what's the big secret?'

'I have a bit part in a Star Trek episode.'

I stood and stared at him.

'I play the part of a time traveller, a name similar to Magestic.'

I continued staring at him.

'In a few weeks the CIA will release details, claiming I'm me.'

'Ah, and with the show shot they'd look like twats.'

'Hopefully. Celebrity charity bash tonight, TV interview first.'

The doorbell went and I answered it, wondering how they got past the security. I found Oliver Standish and his wife, cases in

hand. 'Five dollars to carry your bags,' I told them, holding the door.

'Is the baby with you?' Oliver's wife asked. I nodded. 'Dying to see her.'

Half an hour later we sat around the pool drinking, Cat sat in the shallow end of the pool with Shelly, our daughter shrieking with delight. When Cat sharply called our names we all stood, Shelly performing a fast and confident doggy paddle across the pool, Cat her behind ready.

I asked Helen, 'Has Cat been giving her lessons at the house?'

'I don't think so. Cat! Does she swim at the house?'

'No!'

We all sat. 'She was the same with walking,' I said. 'Once up, no stopping her.'

'You taking her on the show later?' Oliver joked.

'No,' I said.

'Yes,' Jimmy said.

'Yes?' Helen queried.

'They're expecting her,' Jimmy suggested. 'Feed her first, she'll be fine. Really.'

Two hours later we sat on a sofa facing the interviewer, Shelly giggly and adorable, the audience loving her. They asked about the upcoming wedding, when we had finalised it, followed by Pineapple records and our stars, some about Africa and Rescue Force, nothing controversial. Jimmy mentioned the Star Trek role, the time traveller. Cat took Shelly home with the security detail, and we enjoyed the black tie charity gala.

The next morning Pineapple's New York lawyers called. An LA paper was running a story that Shelly was Jimmy's kid, Jimmy expecting the move. We issued a writ straight away, Jimmy holding a press conference, making jokes about the situation.

Within an hour, three of the best LA labs had taken blood from the four of us. Jimmy headed off to the studio, to dress up like an alien and say a few lines, whilst we sat around the pool. Jimmy returned to the studio the next day, another eight-hour session in make-up. By time he had returned our lawyers had held a press conference, releasing the results of the three respected labs: Shelly was not Jimmy's. We invited in a TV crew

and they filmed us enjoying ourselves around the pool. The paper's owners offered to settle out of court, but we were having none of it; we wanted fifty million dollars in damages.

A week later Jimmy had finished filming, the offer from the paper rising. Then Jimmy suggested he would accept stock, the paper readily agreeing. The lawyers sorted the deal quickly, twenty million dollars of stock signed over.

Sat in the lawyer's office, Jimmy, Helen and I signed to say that we were settling. Having done so, Jimmy said to the papers sub-editor, 'Oh, by the way, I bought some of your shares a month ago.'

'Yeah?' the man puzzled. 'How ... many?'

'With these, enough to launch a bid.'

The lawyers began salivating: they could handle that for us.

Standing, Jimmy gave the lawyers the go ahead. Facing the sub-editor, he said, 'I guess there may be some job losses. Tell me, do you wish to stay on, and get a pay rise?' The man just stared back. 'Where did the story about us come from - *employee?*'

The man took in our faces. 'Britain, we bought it from a man supposedly working in your intelligence services.'

'We'll need all the details, in this office, inside the hour,' Jimmy insisted.

Oliver stepped in. 'You were after me, Jimmy?'

'Yes, I'm taking control of this gentleman's paper. So, from now on ... all stars give interviews to it first. You'll be on the board, after you've opened some offices down here.'

Oliver shook the man's hand. 'Welcome to the Silo team.'

I smiled so widely I must have looked like an idiot.

Jimmy faced Helen with a grin, 'Issue a press release around the States, Miss Money Penny.'

A lawyer said, 'I thought that was just a joke name in the Bond movies.' We all stared at him.

On the flight back Shelly was restless, so I took her for a walk. It was late, the lights low, not many people awake. In Business Class, people recognised me, smiling widely at Shelly. Coming back around the other side of Business Class I got tapped on the arm. Turning, I recognised a man from McKinleys, stopping to chat in a whisper, lifting Shelly for his wife to see her. The

stewardesses made a great fuss of Shelly, and I eventually climbed to the bar, where Jimmy accepted her off me; she always settled for Jimmy. With the flight crew coming out in turns, we talked flying – and crazy helicopter stunts.

At Heathrow, in the mini-bus, Big Paul reported, ‘They arrested that guy, Sykes has him.’

‘For a while back there I thought we’d nudged him to say it,’ I admitted.

‘No need,’ Jimmy sighed. ‘There’ll be plenty of those in the future.’

Back in the UK, our solicitors suggested we had a very good case against a handful of UK papers that had not only repeated the allegations of Shelly’s parentage, but embellished upon the accusations as well. We gave the vultures the go ahead, writs issued.

It was just odd timing that the three-monthly event at the club, “Snappers and Scribblers”, was due. That Thursday the club was full of reporters and photographers, including many of those we were suing. I even bought one a drink, telling him what I was going to buy with the money I took of his paper.

None wanted to settle out of court, so we’d have to fight them, which was the course that Jimmy preferred.

Re-organising

When we got back to the house, Jimmy called a Rescue Force “Shura” at Mapley; a meeting of elders. Mac, Doc Hoskins and a few others came up from Mawlini, the senior staff from Tanzania, DRC, Ghana and Namibia and all other RF units. Po and Hancock from Hong Kong turned up, Han always interested in the operations, Hal and Hacker lending their weight of experience. There were a lot of familiar faces at the HQ building, much hugging and greeting, nothing getting done for the first two hours. After lunch in the canteen, Jimmy called everyone to the lecture theatre, the only room that could hold us all. Helen and I sat off to one side, Helen taking notes.

‘OK, settle down people, you’re not in Mawlini now,’ Jimmy called, people laughing. ‘Hands up those who have had volcano training from Crusty?’ Half raised their arms. ‘Let’s make that all of you, and soon.’ He faced Crusty. ‘Split yourself into three and get around them all.

‘OK, when I was in American, in California, I spoke to a man about wildfires. Since then I’ve been thinking that maybe we should attend wildfires in some regions: Southern France suffers from them, Greece, and Australia. To that end, I want some sort of wildfire training and plan of operation. Bob, add it to your list. I would guess that we could offer helicopter rescue, jeep rescue and medical care for people suffering from smoke inhalation, a lot like the Goma volcano deployment.

‘OK, next. I’ve allocated funds for Sir Lanka, India and Sumatra for an expansion of their teams with a view to offering non-emergency village medicine, a bit like the flying doctors. We already get involved with that in Africa, so let’s think about it in the countries I mentioned.

‘Next, as a direct result of our actions in Sierra Leone, we shall now create a unit there, so ask around for anyone who wants to head it up. Unfortunately, doctors and nurses are thin on the ground there. That mission will also be about village medicine as much as anything else.

‘OK, Congo. We’re pushing west, into areas that haven’t seen a doctor since Doctor Livingstone.’ They laughed. ‘I want any spare bodies in your units that are not gainfully employed or training to be sent to the front line there. We can absorb as many people as you can send, so let’s use it as a good training ground. There are plenty of gunshot wounds, and lots of nice tropical diseases.

‘OK, annual national games this year they will be held in Mawlini in September. Mac, close the bar a week before.’ They laughed at him. ‘This year, contestants will be limited to fifteen people. That’s fifteen only, or the base will run out of beer. Oh, while I think of it, we need ten volunteers for Ghana, for remote village medicine. Bob, over to you.’

Bob Davies hobbled out, still using his crutches for some support. He went through a long list of things, some question and answer time, Jimmy then calling up Coup and the training

standards guy. When they were done, Jimmy took the floor again.

‘OK, we’re here to think about the direction of Rescue Force, and get some input from you. So if you think you know what direction we should be going, or have a question about that direction, raise you hands.’

Jimmy pointed at the first man, and worked around the room, suggestions made and taken on board, some points disagreed with, some points refused because of money. Then Mac raised the question of Cambodia and Vietnam, and their mine clearance efforts.

Jimmy faced Hal. ‘Did you leave some ordnance behind?’ People laughed.

‘A lot!’ Hal confirmed.

‘Yes, Mac, it’s a good idea, mine clearance with our medics behind them – just in case. Bob, talk with the UN and the countries directly, let’s think about a training centre over there, one in each country, funded by us.’

Hal asked, ‘We won’t be flying over Vietnam in a large formations of Huey’s, will we?’ Everyone laughed.

‘No,’ Jimmy quipped. ‘That would scare them a little. Po, Han, I’d like you helping on that project; it’s your backyard. Right, I’ll be making a little more money available for the training budget in certain areas. First: jungle training in the Congo, a crashed helicopter scenario – headed up by Hal.’ They laughed at him. ‘Second: long range navigation by jeep and foot, Namibia, plus survival training.’

Doc Graham raised a hand. ‘What we doing about the Supplemental Group? Some people want a second year.’

‘Their bosses have to authorise it. If they quit their jobs, sign them up, but under no circumstances been seen to tempt them away. I don’t want the Prime Minister whinging.’

‘What about numbers?’ Doc Graham added.

‘Again, it’s down to the PM. Write him a nice letter.’

‘He’s agreed the Civil Emergency Unit Training,’ Doc Graham informed us.

‘Yes? Oh, in that case get started on it straight away. I’ll buy some more land, the area over the road. I think it’s almost as big as this place. They’ll want short courses spread throughout the year, some compacted twelve week courses.’

‘What is that unit?’ Mac asked.

‘For the British Government, just like the Supplemental Group; in the case of a national disaster they’d be called up. Think of like part-time Supplementals.’

Doc Graham said, ‘They’ll train on the weekends, so think of them as Sunday Supplementals!’ The group laughed.

‘Have you been making good use of the place in Scotland?’ Jimmy asked.

Coup said, ‘It’s busy through the summer, partly in the winter. The Army and Marines make use of it as well.’

Finishing up, we arranged to meet at a hotel in Swindon at 7pm for a meal, a few families attending. The next morning a display of new equipment was organised, various suppliers demonstrating equipment to us – and hoping to sell the items, followed by an NGO session, the NGO’s meeting us and discussing joint ventures, even requesting some training for their NGO staff. We met in the lecture hall at 4pm for another question and answer session before the group broke and headed back to their home nations.

Oil and sand

At about the same time that we had asked the Somali Government to allow a Chinese oil company into Somalia, Jimmy had discretely asked the Kenyan Government the same questions – but would they keep it quiet for now. I think they agreed before the confirmation fax had arrived with them. The Chinese crew had sunk a well just across the border from Mawlini, and struck oil, the find kept secret for now.

A week after the Mapley Shura we flew down to Nairobi with the gang and Shelly, and enjoyed five days on the beach. And on this trip Big Paul brought his other half and teenage boy, their first time away with us. Flying up to Mawlini, all now suitably tanned, we took a ride in our newly delivered Dash-7, a commercial pilot flying it. The usual mix of UN and NGO staff were aboard, a sprinkling of RF staff, all making a fuss of Shelly. Booked into the RF hotel, we left Helen by the pool and took Big

Paul and his lad up in a Huey, Jimmy letting Big Paul fly us to impress the lad. Five miles across the border I had to look twice as we circled an oil well.

‘Is that ... is that an oil well?’

‘Yep,’ Jimmy replied. ‘Chinese.’

‘That’s damned close to the border,’ I said. ‘Any oil this side?’

‘Let’s go have a look,’ Jimmy said, directing the Huey back across the border and to a place just six miles north of Mawlini.

On the horizon I could see an oil derrick standing proud, quite a small camp around it. Closing in I could see a fence, many small wooden huts similar to those we often used. Jimmy asked Big Paul to land nearby, and we blew up a sand storm. Winding down, we walked across to a Rifles jeep that had driven out to meet us, their colleagues guarding the helicopter as we drove to the well site.

Stepping down from the jeep I pointed at the discoloured sand. ‘What the fuck’s that?’

‘Oil,’ Jimmy stated. ‘Why’d you think I put the base so close all those years ago, Dumb Fuck.’ Big Paul and his lad stood staring up at the tall derrick.

‘How much oil?’ I asked.

‘Enough. More than enough.’ Jimmy led us into a hut, meeting a British engineer with a Scottish accent.

‘Jimmy, you missed it by a few days,’ the man said as he stood and shook our hands.

‘Missed what?’ I asked.

‘The discovery. The oil!’

‘How much is down there?’ I asked.

‘It’s a good pressure, so enough to make you very rich. Sorry, I forgot, you’re already very rich.’

Jimmy explained to me, ‘I funded the site myself, this is our oil to sell, taxes back to the Kenyan Government.’

‘They don’t know yet,’ the man said with a grin.

Jimmy lifted his satellite phone. ‘Rudd, Jimmy. Issue a press release: we’ve struck oil north of Mawlini. Thanks.’

‘That’ll make the news, first oil found in Kenya,’ the man stated with a smile.

‘Shit...’ I let out.

Jimmy playfully told the man, 'Get a move on, get it pumping and to the coastal refinery. You're in for a bonus.'

Back at Mawlini, we entered Mac's office, Jimmy sounding the alarm for a few seconds. He lifted the tanoy microphone. 'All staff, all staff, this is Jimmy Silo. A few weeks ago I arranged for an exploratory oil well to be sunk just a few miles north of the base. A few days ago they struck oil, so the drinks are on me.'

'Fucking 'el,' Mac said. 'Oil? That you're oil?'

'Yes,' I said. 'Help to pay your bar bill!'

'Be oil workers flying in now?' Mac grumbled.

'Lots of them, hopefully,' Jimmy replied. 'I want our Hercules running trips for them from Nairobi, but charge them a reasonable fee. It can bring kit up as well, helping to pay the Hercules fuel. Have a medic or nurse team of two people up there on shifts, in case of injuries. Rudd will build another hotel and bar, outside the fence, for the oil workers. We don't won't those hard drinking ruffnecks in here, our ladies may hurt them.'

Laughing, we stepped out into the heat, driving around to the Rifles base for a visit, Big Paul and his lad on the shooting range. I was amazed by how far the base had come along, many more buildings visible now, the camp just as busy as ever. Signs on the buildings denoted different groups, specialities, training centres: 3 Group, 16 Section, Bravo Company, HQ Company. We drove into the helicopter compound, the signs displaying "2nd Air Combat Wing, 1st Training Wing, Mechanical Support wing." A dozen hangars formed a long high wall and we drove along the apron in front of them, a variety of aircraft sat around or being worked on; Hueys, Cobras, Pumas. At the pilot's lounge we stopped, taking off our sunglasses and stepping in.

'Jimmy! Paul!' came an American accent, one of Hal's buddies, the Kenyan Pilots all standing. Greetings exchanged, we accepted cold fantas and sat, catching up on operations and gossip. The helicopter wing was busy in Sierra Leone and the Congo, plenty to do. At least these days they had enough pilots. They reported a Huey downed in Sierra Leone, minor wounds only, another down in the Congo in a storm. Given the number of Hueys we had sat around we were not concerned; we were amazed that the old Hueys kept going.

‘I’ve got a batch of spares coming in,’ Jimmy informed them. ‘But these are brand new, from the manufacturers, I worked a deal: we get a good price, they use us for advertising.’

‘We received another shipment of avgas from the States,’ the American pilot informed us.

Jimmy and I exchanged looks. ‘That’s ... nice of the White House,’ I commented, puzzling the move.

The celebrations began around 4pm, people finishing early and heading to the rooftop bar. With Cat minding Shelly by the pool, the rest of us enjoyed a cold beer in the heat, talking of the oil strike. An hour later, with the bar filling up, various government ministers started to call, Jimmy suggesting a groundbreaking ceremony at noon the next day. We drank till late, the Kenyan RF gang as boozy as ever, many carried out and put to bed.

The next morning we kicked people up and out of bed, we even sounded the alarm. At eleven o’clock a snaking line of white jeeps drove out the gates followed by another twenty jeeps from the Rifles, the base warned that the President may be inspecting. As the convoy was leaving, the President flew in aboard one our Dash-7’s, a bus ready to take his party to the oil well. A second bus would ferry the press, landing now in a second Dash.

Outside of the oil well’s fence, we lined up the jeeps either side of the access road, making an avenue. What Rescue Force and the Rifles had to do with the oil well beat me, but we laid on a show anyway. Everyone was stood in a line by their jeeps as the President’s coach pulled in, the oil managers stood waiting. Being a politician, the President waited on his coach till the attending press set-up ready at the compound gates. Now being filmed, he stepped down, greeted by Jimmy, Helen and me, and introduced to the site manager. He peered up at the tall derrick and the surrounding machinery, asking questions of capacity and timescales. Jimmy informed him that we would now sink another three wells nearby, and that the first crude should reach the refinement plant near Mombassa in a week or two.

It was all great news to the Kenyans, and I’m sure they figured their economy would be significantly boosted by this small find. Still, Jimmy suggested that they would be boosted by a hundred million a year to start with. The Energy Minister

handed Jimmy a document, Jimmy later explaining that it gave us the right to sink a well wherever we damn well pleased, even on the front lawn of the Presidential Palace.

We drove back to Mawlini behind the President, a quick tour made of the base, people introduced, the Rifles turning out in force and being inspected from the back of a jeep. He took time to stop and talk to the British military instructors before inspecting the education block and its complement of British teachers. At the UN hotel the Somali Government were waiting in the rooftop bar, the Kenyan delegation led that way. The two groups greeted each other, tables and fanta shades arranged, cold drinks of fruit juice dispensed.

The reason for the meeting was simple: could Somali crude from across the border travel down Kenyan roads to Mombassa and be refined, the petrol returning to Somalia. A document was signed, the Kenyans obviously better off from the deal. A second document was duly signed, on training co-operation between the Kenya Rifles and their Somali counterparts. That concluded the President's visit. Little more than thirty minutes after his plane had climbed over the rooftop bar, a second Dash landed, this time bringing Han and a Chinese delegation. We met in the restaurant downstairs, the room affording us some token privacy.

Jimmy laid out a map for us to study. With a finger in Mawlini, we discussed the oil capacities and reserves, the same for the Chinese run oil well across the border. The aim was simple, and a direct parallel to the Congo: oil to be used locally to aid the ore extraction and transportation process. Revenue from the crude sales would also be used to improve roads, consideration given to a rail track across Somali and to the coast, the shortest route. Jimmy then tapped the map, the northern region of the DRC, where a great deal of oil could be found. The problem was one of distance. We even considered shipping it across Southern Sudan, where they already had a good oil infrastructure.

Han explained that the Chinese would visit the oil well across the border, and that they would then fly over the region and onto the Congo to study the roads north from Forward Base towards the mentioned oil fields. After insisting that he greet Shelly, Han flew off. With news of the oil strike settling in people's mind,

several senior staff came and cheekily asked for extra bits and pieces, “fuck right off” used a few times.

The next morning, Tubby flew us down to the safari lodge. I sat right seat most of the way, needing the practise, whilst looking out for ash clouds from nearby volcanoes. At the main lodge we booked in, Shelly introduced to some very small Cheetah cubs, but she just pulled their fluffy manes sharply. We gave the cubs a respite after five minutes. I carried my daughter to the roof and showed her the views. Turning, I met Katie Joe and her mum.

‘Jean. Katie,’ I stumbled. Jean took Shelly. ‘You, er, here with the fiancé?’

She showed me her hand, and ring finger. ‘We did a quicky on holiday in Bali, save the fuss. You need to read the papers more.’

Helen stepped up and gave Katie a big hug, inspecting the ring and chatting. I slipped away and found Jimmy and Big Paul in bar.

‘Katie Joe and her mum are upstairs,’ I reported, lifting my eyebrows.

‘She’s fine, nothing to worry about. Like I said, she’ll sing at your wedding next week.’

I sat, frowning hard. ‘Next ... week?’ Big Paul laughed.

‘Helen will suggest it tomorrow, *don’t* ... disappoint her!’

I shrugged and held my hands wide. ‘What about the planning? The guests?’

‘Will be flown down, relax.’

‘We haven’t bought rings!’ I whispered.

Jimmy handed over two gold rings in a translucent packet, already engraved. ‘It would be *wise* to make it believe that you organised the rings and their engravings.’

I pocketed the rings, and blew out. ‘Bloody hell.’

‘There are a lot of people packed and ready, so don’t disappoint them.’

‘Pipe and slippers next, mate,’ Big Paul helpfully mentioned.

I stared out over the savannah. ‘Oh, well.’

‘That’s the spirit,’ Jimmy encouraged. ‘But, you know, be a bit more enthusiastic with Helen, she has a hell of right hook.’

I downed a beer before taking a walk around the lodge, bravely climbing the stairs to Helen and Katie, a false smile

offered. I met Katie's husband, an executive that worked for us at Pineapple. Grabbing beers, we walked to a quiet spot.

'So, how's married life?' I asked him.

'Fine, apart from her travel. I have some responsibilities for her concerts, so I go on some of the trips.'

'Where you living?'

'Wimbledon, nice big house my parents left me. At today's prices it would be over a million.'

'Much of a commute in?'

'No, I hop on the tube.'

'I used to do that every day, working at McKinleys, me and Jimmy.'

'You've come a long way. And now oil in Kenya. Will that boost their economy?'

'Not by much, it's not a major find. But it all helps.'

'I was reading somewhere that you account for twenty percent of *all* their tourism.'

'It's beaches and safaris, so not a massive industry.'

'Four hundred people a week here; we had a look at the large hotel. A bit busy for us, this place is just about right.'

'Jean any better in the heat?' I knowingly enquired.

He gave me a look, glancing over his shoulder. 'She suffers it to be with us.'

Jimmy walked out as we returned to their table. Sitting, Jimmy pulled Katie onto his lap. 'Mike, how much for an hour of fun with your wench?' Katie slapped his arm.

'I was about to say you couldn't afford her, but in your case... I'm sure you could.'

Jimmy faced Jean. 'You any better in the heat?'

'I have cold showers a few times a day,' Jean admitted.

The next day we organised a combined safari-picnic, a table of food pitched on a flat expanse in lion country, Shelly held on a firm leash and looking cute in her large hat, many photographs taken.

Back at the lodge, and with Shelly asleep, Helen and I lay on the bed, both tired from the heat. 'Why don't we get married down here?' Helen asked.

'OK.'

She took a moment, then lifted up onto an elbow. 'I mean, here this week.'

‘Oh, you ... er ... must have read my mind.’ I produced the rings.

She stared at them. ‘Did Jimmy tell you I’d suggest it here?’

‘Jimmy? What the fuck does he know about anything, eh? It’s not like there’s five hundred people at check-in as we speak.’

‘What!’ she whispered with a smile.

‘Golf complex, five days, wedding of Mister and Mrs Holton. RSVP.’

‘My god, he’s invited them all?’

‘No, he’s waiting for us two to decide if we want to tie the knot down here. Then ... he’ll invite them all down, all five hundred of them.’

‘Well I ... want to ... if you want to.’

‘I do. And ... *I do*. And apparently, Katie is supposed to sing.’

Two hours later, with the rooftop bar full of guests sat eating – and swiping away flies, I stood on my chair. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, your attention please, we have an announcement to make. After putting up living with me, and the pains of childbirth, my long suffering fiancé, Helen, has finally agreed to marry me, at the golf complex in five days time.’

The groups cheered and applauded sedately, a camera flashing. I eased back down to find a reporter and photographer closing in, many snaps taken, quotes written down; Jimmy had organised them. A few people wandered past to offer their congratulations, Jimmy organising free champagne for each table. Right on queue, Katie offered to sing at the ceremony, and afterwards at the reception.

At Mapley, our communications office launched a new computer program, invites issued to a great many people, faxes sent out. Jimmy had laid on two extra 747s, so no one should have a problem with tickets, sixty seats reserved for the press. Jimmy had also reserved all the rooms at the hotels in advance; it would be just the wedding party.

The next day we packed and headed off to Nairobi, a few suits to hire, a dress to find, Jimmy giving Helen a list of suitable shops. That evening we stayed at the usual Nairobi hotel, giving a TV interview about the wedding, and the oil – and odd mix. Arriving at the golf complex we found it empty and quiet, Pathfinders diligently searching each room, explosives sniffer dogs doing the rounds. We booked in, Katie Joe and her group

allocated rooms. Rudd and Cosy turned up and sat going through the small detail with Jimmy, Helen and I banned from knowing. The “M” Group from the house turned up that evening, Michelle in a separate room to Jimmy in case the press got hold of it.

Han flew in from the Congo the next day, along with our senior staff from the corporation and RF DRC. Coup arrived with his assistant to help out, followed by Mac and the Old Dogs, Hal and Hacker, Doc Hoskins and other senior staff. From the UK, Bob Davies, Doc Graham and Hildy arrived with all of the national RF liaisons, quite a crowd. Helen and I were told to stay in our rooms, even to eat there.

The next day was rehearsal day in the huge marquee, Jimmy organising with Sharon - over from the UK. We had already received a set of vows by Jimmy, short and to the point. Dressed casual, we attended the “walk-through”, an actual Bishop conducting both the real and practice services. Standing at the head of the seats, we turned and took in the vast marquee and its neat rows of empty seats.

‘That’s a lot of people,’ I said.

‘And TV cameras,’ Helen noted.

‘They’re not live, we have editorial rights – apparently,’ I explained.

‘Who’s in the front row?’

‘Politicians, apparently.’

‘Which ones?’ Helen puzzled.

‘It’s a surprise, but probably the Kenyan President or Prime Minister.’

Returning to the hotel, our ever-present security in tow, we spotted my parents and dragged them to a quiet corner for a ten-minute chat. Back in our suite, we closed the door on the bustle and sat with Cat and Shelly, ordering in lunch. When a knock came on the door, I found the British Prime Minister and his wife stood there. I held the door and invited them in, arranging chairs. They stayed and chatted for ten minutes, Shelly clambering all over them and pulling at their noses.

Jimmy popped in an hour later as we remained imprisoned in our suite, the three of us sitting on the balcony and observing the fuss below. Everything was sorted for the wedding the next day and the weather should hold, chances of a shower tonight. Then he asked if we were going to take a honeymoon. Neither of us

were that fussed, but Jimmy suggested the Seychelles, him and Michelle coming along with Big Paul and his family to act as babysitters. We took Jimmy's advice, Jimmy then firmly ordering me to move my stuff to another room; it would be bad luck to see Helen before the ceremony. Whinging about the superstition of that, I packed and moved, Katie Joe now assisting Helen with the dress. I found myself sat in a room by myself, my suit hung up, my shoes shined, the rings checked a dozen times. I watched a little TV, ordered food and drink, and sat staring at the wall a few times, Jimmy eventually returning.

'Nervous?' he asked.

'Bored,' I said. 'Stuck in here.'

'Soon be over, then you can call her "the misses" and she can call you "hubby".'

I don't remember much about the wedding, I think due to amount of alcohol I drank. What images I do have of it came from the video and from the very large photograph album.

Jimmy checked me over in the morning, since he was the self imposed Best Man. He led me down with an escort of Pathfinders in smart suits, maybe to stop me from running away. In the marquee, I walked down the isle with Jimmy, checking I still had the rings, and past almost five hundred people. I remember recognising a few of the faces. Stood waiting with Jimmy, I caught some of the people on the front row: the British Prime Minister, The Kenyan President, President Kimballa Jnr, my parents. I clocked the TV cameras, all three of them, then broke with tradition a bit as I watched Helen walk down the isle, Katie Joe singing from somewhere unseen; I'd never seen a lovelier sight.

I did, apparently, get the vows right, and did not drop the rings. I remembered the rice and confetti, my mum in a big hat, and what seemed like a million photographers on the grass. They snapped us at length, then with Jimmy and my parents, then the Prime Minister, the Kenyan Ministers. I saw Sykes and Jack at one point before standing with the Rescue Force staff, Sharon and her husband; we must have been there an hour. The reception was in the same marquee, tables brought in, Jimmy making a long speech, which saved me saying too much. After the meal, and the cake cutting, we did the rounds, meeting and

greeting everyone. And that process went on and on, and I drank more and more, not remembering being put to bed.

The next morning I felt a little rough, despite the blood, and Helen and I ordered in a huge breakfast, taking it easy. Jimmy knocked around noon, asking if we could do the rounds and thank people. There was, apparently, a mountain of gifts here, and back at the house, and Jimmy handed us a list of who gave what.

After a shower, and leaving Shelly with Cat, we patrolled the rooftop bar and thanked people. We found Po and his family, but I did not remember them from the wedding. Our gift from them was an apartment in Hong Kong. Hancock from RF Hong Kong was there, Ratchet, Spanner and Dunnow asking about having the wedding after the kid was born, and being suitably rude. We greeted a relaxed looking Prime Minister, thanking him for the gift, wandering down to the beach hotel to repeat the process, adding a third session at the second hotel.

That evening we packed our bags, leaving early from Mombassa for the Seychelles. Reality kind of kicked back in as we got there, and the next few days were quiet, plenty of time just spent lying around or swimming. Two bodyguards kept their distance, but besides that we rarely saw the others. Towards the end of the week we met up with them for meals, back to normality and starting to miss the work. And we when arrived back it was into a storm, a media storm.

Exposed

As anticipated, a former CIA officer went public and claimed that he had the story of the century: Jimmy Silo from England was a time traveller advising the White House. At the house, Sharon was behaving a little odd, saying little, everyone else making a joke of it in the presence of non “M” Group staff. Jimmy drove over to Mapley and to the communications centre, offering interviews to anyone who wanted them. The first interview was for the ABC network in America.

‘Mister Silo,’ they asked. ‘What do you make of these very strange claims by a former CIA agent?’

‘I think he read the script from my recent filming of a Star Trek episode, and persuaded a few idiots in the media to part with some money.’

‘Star Trek?’

‘A month ago I had a role on a Star Trek episode, playing an alien time traveller called Magico. Now some nut, or a reporter, thinks it’s real. Guess the guy must be from Los Angeles.’

‘Will you be taking legal action?’

‘I don’t know if I could, it’s not such a bad label really. If I could go back in time it would probably be to the 1970s, to the height of disco in New York. There’s also a few actresses I wouldn’t mind meeting before they were famous.’

‘And what of the claim that you advise the White House?’

‘Oh, if I could influence the White House I’d definitely force them to bring back disco.’

‘Any predictions for the future?’

‘I’m predicting that Art Johnson will finally get a bill through the Senate, but that he’ll be so surprised by it he spontaneously explodes, the carpet in the oval office needing to be sent out for a good clean.’

‘I don’t think anyone over here would believe such an outlandish prediction as Art Johnson getting a bill passed!’ the reporter joked.

Back at the house, the “M” Group met to discuss the event, Jimmy calm about it.

Keely informed us, ‘They’ve arrested the guy, possession of restricted materials, but are obviously saying that the stuff about Jimmy is a fake. Art Johnson made a joke of it, suggesting that he had been told that he would win a second term, and that everyone should vote for him.’

‘After 2005, exposure will be a problem, coming to a head around 2009,’ Jimmy explained.

There was nothing more that we could do other than wait, and judge the fallout. In the meantime, we decided to keep a low profile by organising a “time traveller’s ball” at the club, the Red Room hosting groups from the seventies. We even advertised it across the tabloids. The US tabloids ran the CIA story, and according to the White House our ratings actually went up, but

that was down to the wedding photographs more than anything else.

The following week came the second wave of attack, a claim that we had a hand in the deaths of four CIA agents in Kenya, Potomo and his gang. This was more of a worry for me. But no sooner had those allegations surfaced, this time our lawyers in the States issuing writs, than the Tanzania Government issued details of Potomo and his mates being involved in child sex trafficking. A former CIA agent, working in Africa at the time, then came forwards in the States and made the same claim about Potomo, very damaging for the CIA – and Art Johnson. They both got the same message at the same time: if they threw mud, we'd throw some right back.

A few people actually believed that Jimmy had killed the men for their child sex activities, especially around Africa. And they applauded him for it. In an odd move of solidarity, the French Government said that it had investigated Potomo's links to child sex rings in Africa many years earlier. Everyone forgot the claims about us, the story overshadowed by the sex allegations, Art Johnson on the defensive.

In the office the next day, Sharon asked Jimmy if he would kill men involved in such a child sex ring. He answered "yes" without any hesitation, Sharon not commenting further, just getting on with her work. A kind of normality returned, but Sharon had changed a little. She was not stupid, she had run the office a long time and she could see the power Jimmy wielded, strange at the best of times, downright weird the rest of the time. Then a home grown problem surfaced, one that angered me greatly.

A local family had written to us many times, but our mail was intercepted and checked for bombs, further checked for junk mail – so we did not see the junk mail; begging letters would never get to us. This family had, apparently, written to us about their little girl without any luck. Now they had gone public, claiming that we had ignored their letters and would let their daughter die. The local papers ran the story, then the local Welsh TV station, Jimmy issuing writs against them all for damages. The tabloids picked up the story, but were careful how they worded it, staying just inside the line. Jimmy drove up to London straight away and gave an interview to the BBC, which started bad and got worse.

‘Mister Silo, why have you ignored this families plight?’

‘You should have checked very carefully with you legal department before asking me that question, I will be suing the BBC for damages.’

The interviewer blinked, before composing himself and touching his earpiece.

Jimmy continued, ‘Let me make something clear to you: I have given more than a million pounds to the children’s hospital in Cardiff. If they wish to pass a hundred and thirty-two thousand onto this family then that’s their choice – they know more about the case than I do. And *no one* in this country has given more to charity than me. Those white helicopters you see flying around, they’re all paid for out of my back pocket, millions each year. I will not be told where I should spend my money, nor will I get involved in individual cases.’ He said to the interviewer, ‘In the UK’s top five hundred richest people – where do I sit?’

The man said he did not know. ‘I’m at three hundred and sixty. So why are you trying to harm my reputation when there are three hundred richer people above me?’

The interview was cut short, a minute of static screen before the normal news programme continued, and as if nothing had happened. Our solicitors had the writ against the BBC ready in record time and handed in. The next day the tabloids were full of the story, a debate about whether we should or should not help the family. And it dragged on and on, the family getting plenty of coverage, and plenty of sympathy. After all, why did we not just give them the money? Jimmy dug his heels in, challenging the family to a live televised debate, a very odd move, and one that I objected to – very loudly.

Jimmy went live in a Cardiff studio, the interviewer careful in his choice of words. ‘Mister Silovich, you’ve volunteered to be here today, and to discuss this matter with the Lewis family. May I ask, first of all, how much you have given to the children’s hospital in Cardiff?’

‘Including Medical Genetics, more than a million pounds.’

‘And no stipulation on how that should be spent?’

‘None, it’s up to them. I have, today, spoken to the children’s hospital, and they say that the Lewis family were advised that their daughter’s condition was not operable – and that they

would not fund further operations. That's the NHS speaking for the taxpayers of this country, and it's their choice, not mine.'

'Mrs Lewis, why do think Mister Silovich should pay for you child's operation, when the NHS says a further operation is pointless?'

'We've spoken to a French surgical team, and they think there's hope for our Lucy, and we'll not give up on her.'

'But why pursue Mister Silovich?'

'He's very rich, and always giving money to charity, but charity begins at home, here in Wales, not in Africa.'

Sat at the house watching the TV, I eased up. 'Fucker!' I cursed at Jimmy. 'He knew.'

Jimmy reached into his pocket, and produced a cheque. 'This is a cheque for two hundred thousand pounds. If I spent this in Africa, on vaccinations, I could save one life with every two pounds I spend: a vaccine is just two pounds. So that could be a hundred thousand African babies saved, or your daughter – who the doctors tell me will never lead a normal life. What *do you* ... think I should so with it?'

'Well ... I think you should spend it in Wales.'

'Are Welsh babies more important than African babies?' Jimmy asked the woman.

'Well, aye, because they're closer like, family like.'

'And does the fact that I come from Wales mean that I should spend my money here before Africa?'

'Well ... yes.'

'Is that because babies in Africa are black?' Jimmy asked her directly. I was on my feet again. She did not answer. 'Is it not true that you have a conviction for a racially motivated slander of your *black* African neighbours?'

The woman did not answer, the programme cut. When Jimmy returned I shouted at him, wanting to know just what the fuck he was doing.

He calmly answered, 'That's just the first of many. In the future people will sue us for not helping their particular charities or kids. And if we did, we'd have to help them all, bankrupting ourselves.'

The next morning I drove out early and grabbed all the papers, sat reading them with Helen over breakfast. For the most part the

coverage was balanced in our favour, several tabloids displaying a set of weighing scales: African babies versus one white baby. Many ran with the woman's racist tendencies and our African work, but some were still critical of us, which angered me greatly.

When the phone went, it was Oliver Standish from Los Angeles. 'Paul, Oliver, I couldn't reach Jimmy.'

'What's up?'

'What's up? Fucking media going crazy over here.'

'About what?'

'The interview Jimmy gave, that cheque and the woman.'

'Shit. What they saying?'

'They loved it! Huge debate, you got more air-minutes than anything else, some news slots gave you fifteen minutes out of thirty. There's no one over here that wouldn't recognise Jimmy now. You got more coverage than the President, you shadowed his latest speech.'

'I'll let Jimmy know, thanks.'

It was a strange turn. We put the TV on and found CNN, sat watching for half an hour before Cat turned up.

I found Jimmy in the office. 'You seen the American news?'

'Yes,' he calmly replied. He lifted a fax for me to read.

'The African Union ... wants to vote on making you ... a Hero of Africa recipient.' I lowered it. 'Well, at least someone appreciates us.'

Sharon lifted her head from a file. 'They've name a school after him in Kenya.'

Jimmy stood, 'Pack a bag. States. Sharon, tickets for today please.'

When we touched down at JFK it was getting dark, Oliver arranging security and a van. We slipped out of the airport unmolested by the press, but went straight around to a TV studio; they had been nagging Oliver all day. In a cheeky move, they wanted to put us on live instead of our employee, ex-President Harvey. Jimmy insisted that the three of us go on together and, after the make-up chair, we all walked out together and received a warm welcome from the audience, making me wonder if we shouldn't live over here.

The interviewer began with, 'So, Paul, how come ex-President Harvey was not invited to the wedding?'

'He was,' I said. 'So long as he ditched the security.'

'I couldn't make the date anyway,' Harvey put in with a smile.

'It was a spur of the moment thing?' the interviewer asked.

'Yes, we decided when we were over there, then invited who we could.'

'Now, Jimmy, these crazy claims by a former CIA agent.'

Harvey cut in, 'I was President when the agents went missing, and Jimmy was never a candidate. First I knew about this ... was this week.'

'And now you work for Jimmy's foundation,' the interviewer stated. 'Did the White House check-out Jimmy before you accepted that post.'

'Of course they did, and these allegations are ridiculous. Jimmy is all about saving lives and helping people.'

The interviewer asked Jimmy, with a smile, 'And the time travel stuff? Could you demonstrate that for us in the studio tonight?'

'Sure. You're going to be discovered in a hot tub with two young sisters...'

The audience laughed, the interviewer biting his bottom lip and holding up crossed fingers. The interview said, 'I agree about the 1970s and disco in New York.'

'Hey, I was there!' Harvey said with a smile. 'Great era.'

'And this woman in England giving you all the grief, how did that come about?'

'All rich people and celebs receive letters asking for money, you can't avoid it. If you give to one, you'll never hear the end of it. So I give money to the hospitals and they decide how it should be spent. But this one woman, with convictions for racism, went to the press and pretended that her sick daughter was somehow my fault. But she picked me because I give a lot to Africa, and she hates Africans.'

'What percentage do you give away?'

'Close to ninety-five percent,' Jimmy answered.

'Wow,' the interviewer said. 'You put the rest of us to shame.'

‘Charity is individual. No one should be pressured into choosing how they spend their money.’

‘And you give money to the Veterans Association over here.’

‘Yes, a couple of million to the Vietnam Vets, it’s a subject close to my heart.’

‘How so?’

‘I feel they got a raw deal from the American people.’ He wagged a finger. ‘Soldiers don’t make wars - politicians make wars. The way they were treated after Vietnam is a national shame, and one you still haven’t sorted. You sent them over there, then criticised them when they came back. And how many ended up living on the streets? And how many are still on the streets?’

‘You don’t think the government did enough for them?’

‘No, you need a day when Vietnam Vets could march and be cheered. They didn’t start that war, and they shouldn’t live with the damn guilt. And what message are you sending to today’s troops? Get involved with a war that the folks back home don’t like – you get shunned when you return? Not a very good recruitment poster, is it.’

‘It’s a deep subject, and one that we’ll be wrestling with for some time yet I suspect. Let’s talk about Africa and your work there. What’s your take on the problems in Africa?’

‘There’s only one thing you need to keep in mind: Africa has enough minerals, and enough oil, to make it the world’s richest continent. All it needs is a helping hand. But at the moment, some mining corporations favour the conflicts in Africa because they can mine the ores cheaply. The western world has been raping Africa for a long time, but I’ve put a stop to that. My corporation in the Congo produces a billion dollars a year, and it all goes back into local infrastructure: roads, schools, and orphanages. I take nothing out.’

‘Are you entitled to take that money?’

‘Yes, that’s the agreement I have with the Congo Government. That’s my money.’

‘You leave a billion dollars a year ... for local projects, and you could pay yourself that?’

Harvey said, ‘That’s just the Congo. His other projects in other countries are the same: all the profits stay local.’

‘We just discovered oil in Kenya,’ I put in. ‘The revenue will go towards road projects to start with.’

‘And the money from the very successful hotels and safari parks you run?’

‘It all stays in Kenya,’ I said. ‘We don’t take a penny out.’

‘And how many kids do you now have in orphanages?’

‘Over thirty thousand,’ Jimmy answered.

‘Thirty ... thousand ... kids? What’s it like trying to get them to brush their teeth and get to bed?’ The audience laughed.

‘We have a loudspeaker system,’ I suggested.

The interviewer pointed at Harvey, covering his mouth in pretend secrecy. ‘Is he a good worker?’

‘His expenses come in late,’ Jimmy said.

‘And his secretary, Sharon, shouts at me,’ Harvey said with a smile.

‘So, Jimmy, how did you feel when you hired a new secretary, and Paul here makes her pregnant - then marries her?’

‘I gave him a written warning, and told him not to do it again.’

The interviewer faced me. ‘You got the boss’s secretary pregnant!’

‘It was a wet Monday, nothing on the TV,’ I said with a shrug, the audience laughing.

‘And your wife is still Jimmy’s secretary, going on business trips with you. How does that work? I mean, if Jimmy shouts at your wife?’

‘He wouldn’t, she has a mean right hook.’ The audience laughed. ‘But seriously, we all work hard and believe in what we’re doing, so there’s no egos or conflicts. The fight is out there, not at home or in the office.’

The next day our ratings were excellent; we could have got elected to Congress. We toured the Pineapple offices, meeting a number of very freaky singers with tattoos, catching an evening flight out.

In the mini-bus, driving down the motorway at 9am, Jimmy said, ‘I’ve been thinking about something. We’ll need the Republicans on board, helping to counterbalance the next US President and, in years to come, super-sized corporations are the norm – even necessary and a good thing. So ... so if we built up

a company around the Congo corporation, tied in Kenya, Somalia and others like Sierra Leone, it would be huge.'

'And very influential?'

'Yes, the bigger the better for influence in the States.'

'Why the change in strategy?' I probed.

'Well,' he sighed. 'There has to be an easier way of handling the next problem, a hard line US president, invasion of Afghanistan, clashes with us. But that I can deal with. What I've been thinking about is 2025. What we've been doing in Central Africa provides a counter-balance to the Brotherhood. But ... but what if they could do more than just sit and take it?'

'How? It'll take decades just to get the Congo sorted.'

'Decades with plan "A",' Jimmy emphasised. 'But if the process could be accelerated...'

'They'd be well positioned to fend off the Brotherhood,' I noted.

'And what if they went further?'

'Further? Attacking north?' I gave it some thought. 'Would save the West having to get involved in the southern regions of the Middle East, or North Africa.'

'The West could hold the Northern Mediterranean. That would save them half a million troops.'

'So how would you change your plans?'

'I'd have to speed up the development of Africa, whilst tying in the Americans. But, if we created a super corporation - involved in mining and oil - it would extract more oil and ore, more money for the governments of Africa, but less money for us - we'd have to pay out dividends. Our cut would go on roads and schools, as now, the money paid to the various local governments probably being squandered.'

'Ending up in Swiss banks.'

'Then we'd have to sell no more than forty percent of the stock, getting a few other companies tied in. But I'd like a lot of other companies tied in, especially American.'

'What about what we did with the property company?' I posed.

'Not sure we could do that for oil and ore, I'd have to check.' He lifted his phone. 'Sharon? I want a meeting later today at the house: solicitor, accountant. And ask the solicitor to find a few

experts on the oil and ore industry, plus a solicitor expert in international company law.'

In the house, I found Shelly asleep and Cat sat reading a novel. After a quick shower and change I joined Jimmy in the office, a mountain of paperwork to go through.

At the big meeting, at 3pm, Jimmy began. 'I want to start a new company in Africa, involved in oil and ore, and tying in a large number of investors, but ... but we wish to retain full control, never losing it. We also want a structure that is *acceptable* to overseas investors.'

'What's wrong with a majority share of a Plc?' they asked.

'We could lose control some day,' I countered.

Everything pointed towards a Plc, an international listing, as the best way to get many companies involved, but there was the risk that the biggest block could take over. The solution seemed to be the sale of non-voting stock on the open markets; but that would simply raise money at the outset. We wanted a dozen large corporations tied in.

They debated the issue for fifteen minutes, agreeing that a floatation would be better offered later, than sooner. The main purpose was to tie in US companies, but we could not label it as that. We also wanted the maximum cash for infrastructure projects.

After much scribbling on a notepad, Jimmy said, 'How about this: we create a limited company for now, with us retaining twenty percent, our Hong Kong associates fifteen percent, our Russian associates ten percent, five percent to the UK Government and the rest available to be sold by us at convenient times, principally to those US companies that we wish to tie in. That means that we would always have the largest influential block, twenty percent. I would then *sell* blocks to those US and European firms we wanted involved.'

Our solicitor cautioned, 'You may be criticised if the Congo corporation *allocates* concessions to your own company.'

'Our cut goes to charity, so I think we'll be OK,' Jimmy suggested. 'OK, gentlemen, you have a go. Take that company we created to mine the Kenyan oil and restructure it. Start recruiting, I want a management structure quickly, experts in oil and minerals. Find us some London offices, plenty of room for

growth. I want a major pow-wow in four weeks, I'll organise the investors.'

We sent them off rubbing their hands and salivating. Jimmy informed Han and Ivan, asking them for discreet investment. We called Pedersen and informed him of the planned launch, asking him to arrange a meeting in Washington in five weeks time, but only of Republican Senators or Congressman, making it his deal, and his deal alone.

Four weeks later we held the big pow-wow in London, in the bare offices rented for the new company, a Chief Executive and management team hired, very highly paid for a company with no furniture save a few seats. They understood it would grow quickly, our reputation enough to make them keenly interested in working for us. The UK Government sent down a man from The Treasury and we gave them five percent of the shares. Yuri and Marko transferred a hundred million pounds, to make the deal look respectable, Po's company paying in two hundred million pounds, the money all ours technically. We made a director's loan of it back into the company. The Russians sent two members of staff, so too the Chinese, Jimmy asking the new CEO that he open a small office in Moscow, one in Beijing, and one in Washington within six weeks. As for Kenya and the Congo, Jimmy wanted offices inside of two weeks, the recruitment target for the Congo being a hundred staff in two months, our facilitators down there helping out.

The new gang posed for the press, the launch of CAR, Central Africa Resources Ltd. The floatation to the public was delayed, many keenly awaiting it, not least McKinleys, who would handle any floatation.

We flew over the Atlantic to the second part of the meeting, the important part, a week later, meeting Pedersen in Washington, Art Johnson most keen for a meeting with us afterwards. Pedersen had been belle of the ball, holding the invites to the meeting. I think a little horse-trading had gone on. Either that, or large herds of horses were being traded. He had assembled thirty men, including twelve senators, ten congressmen, and a few friends. Jimmy, Helen and I greeted the group, re-acquainting ourselves with Ted; the oilman with a loud wife and big hair.

After fifteen minutes of polite chitchat, Jimmy called order. ‘Gentlemen, *and* politicians.’ They laughed. ‘You’re here today because I have a long-standing relationship with Chuck Pedersen, and he assures me that you are the right people for this deal. This new venture that we’ve started, will capitalise on one fact: the Africans love me.’ They laughed again. ‘And they like to give me oil and ore concessions, already worth a lot of money.’

‘Now, this small company will grow very quickly, not least because I get to say who drills in the Congo. This is about being in on the ground floor, in at the start. But it’s not money we’re looking for, so much as partnerships with companies that can bring something to the table. We will not, initially, sell to individuals, only to oil or ore companies. We will then look to allocate those companies concessions whilst the main company is being built up. And, when we have a good working relationship with those companies, there is the matter of other concessions around Africa, maybe Cuba and other places.’

They asked questions, and Jimmy expanded upon a few things, but the premise was simple. And they knew we held the concessions. Jimmy singled out Ted’s firm first and offered five percent of the shares for a hundred million dollars, a bargain, a handshake given. Two other companies were called out, the same deal offered. That left those smaller companies that wished to be a part of the deal, two signing up for three and two percent accordingly. A brash Senator, with a family mining interest, then bought ten percent for two hundred million dollars. That left twenty percent, Jimmy asking the men to talk to their boards. Pedersen brought out the champagne and we spoke of Africa, and Art Johnson’s chances of getting a bill passed.

From our hotel on Massachusetts Ave, the blacked out vans whisked around to the White House, a familiar journey, but the first for Helen. The Chief of Staff welcomed us again.

‘How’re our ratings?’ I asked him, the man expecting just that line.

‘We’re just hoping your not running for office.’

Art Johnson stepped in a minute later, greeting Helen and asking about the wedding, and Shelly. He cheekily asked for a photograph, and we posed together, the four of us. Sat on the sofas, he began with, ‘So, how goes the new corporation?’

‘Sold most of the stock,’ Jimmy informed him.

‘And ... in years to come...?’

‘The corporation will have a great deal of influence in many places,’ Jimmy informed him. ‘And before you ask, yes ... we are trying to influence US lawmakers, in particular Republican ones.’

‘You’ve taken over a newspaper as well,’ Johnson noted.

‘First of many,’ Jimmy told him. ‘You see, the problem is this: we could tell you what the future holds, and how to fix it, or we can try and fix it ourselves knowing all the while that you won’t listen to us.’

‘I listen, and I act,’ Johnson insisted.

‘You, sir, are not the problem,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Those that follow you ... are the problem.’

‘Hence you bedding the Republicans.’

‘It was just oral,’ I put in, getting a look from Helen.

‘There are a great many unhappy people around here for the attacks on the CIA,’ Johnson broached.

‘Wait till I get going,’ Jimmy threatened. ‘They mess with us, we’ll mess with them, it’s as simple as that. You push, we push back.’

‘Which is odd really, since we’re here to help save your arses,’ I put in.

‘The Government, and Washington, is an octopus with many legs,’ Johnson tried to explain away. ‘Hence my *inability* to get bills passed.’

Jimmy asked to see the head of the Joint Chiefs if possible. Ten minutes later the Admiral stepped in and sat.

Jimmy began, ‘I was thinking the other day, about 2025. What if ... a sub-Saharan African army did more than just hold its own against the Brotherhood.’

‘More ... how?’

‘Taking North Africa west of Suez ... and holding it,’ Jimmy suggested, the Admiral shocked.

‘Take and hold that entire region?’

‘Its sparsely populated, wide open spaces that are easy to cut lines into, and hold,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Think about it. In the meantime, I’m going to proceed on the assumption that it’s a good idea, at the very least an extra piece on the chessboard. If sub-Saharan troops take North Africa, it will free up a lot of soldiers from other nations.’

‘It would,’ the Admiral admitted, a glance at Johnson. ‘And if that army was big enough, a footprint around Yemen and Oman would box-in the insurgents.’

‘First I have to develop the Congo, then raise the army,’ Jimmy said. ‘Hence my new corporation.’ He faced Johnson. ‘We’re going to ramp things up a bit. So anything you can do to help industrial development in the region will help.’

Back in the UK, Jimmy went into overdrive, keen to get the new company pushed along. First thing in the morning, last thing at night, he could be found in the office making plans; it was consuming him. And for at least four hours of the day I was helping with those plans.

Through the DRC corporation we allocated ourselves concessions, then appointed companies within the group to mine the areas or sink oil wells. Pedersen, and Ted the oil man, were granted oil-drilling rights to an area in Northern Congo straight away, a Chinese firm allocated oil rights near the existing finds south of Forward Base. APAC, the mining company taken over by Yuri and backed by the Russian Government, were granted wider areas under license. By using proxy companies we received a fraction of the revenue, but at least the areas were being developed; in order to reach the areas in questions the licensed companies would have to improve the roads. There was also the corporation’s rule on local development, each concession meaning a certain number of schools or hospitals had to be built. Our existing corporation itself also made more money; CAR Ltd would be paying its taxes, split with Kinshasa.

With the first international airport nowhere nearing completion, we took the odd move of commissioning five regional airports from the same French company, some of the budget for road projects allocated towards them.

Po came over for a business meeting with his partners, meeting us at the club in London, in the computer room. We had a shopping list: fertilizer, seeds, agricultural tools, cheap second hand cars and motorbikes, radios, TVs and a long list of cheap household items. In return, we’d offer oil or mining concessions. Po’s family were already shipping ore, and had a part-stake in a mining concern in Papua New Guinea. They agreed to increase the stake, after which they would be receiving a mining

concession in the Congo or Somalia. They also got a gentle nudge towards getting their own small oil exploration and drilling company, easy enough considering that the Chinese Government would loan them whatever they wanted.

Reading from a long list, we ordered goods from Po's family, everything from detergent and clothes pegs, to plastic sheeting and buckets, blankets and umbrellas, many villages in the Congo having next to nothing. They gave us a good deal on radios, and we bought a hundred thousand of them, Forward Base now offering its own radio station. The buckets filled with goodies were always popular around Africa, many a housewife happy to find one dumped on her doorstep overnight.

After the business was over, and we were sat around chatting, Jimmy mentioned that we would open another three orphanages in the Congo, each with a capacity for ten thousand children. We were not just trying to be kind and helpful, we were recruiting the soldiers of the future.

After the meeting, and before joining them later for food, we drove around to the Foreign Office to meet Sykes and the PM. We explained the ramp up, and the reasons why, then asked for more help in the Congo, a few more facilitators working on the projects, offering to get British goods into the region when it expands. Jimmy asked for cattle farmers, rather "cattle farming tutors", and help with hydroelectric projects. The PM was happy to help, not least because the UK taxpayer had a five percent share.

Tsunami

One sunny September day, sat in Bob Davies' office in Mapley, Crusty the earthquake man suggested that we look at the tsunami warning system.

'What's that?' Jimmy asked, pretending he didn't know.

'It's a warning system in the Pacific, early warning of tidal waves. Where there's an oceanic or coastal earthquake there can be a tidal wave.'

‘We have units in Sumatra, India and Sri Lanka, so why not set-up a system there, and test it,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘We’re not in the Pacific yet.’

‘I’ll put together some ideas,’ Crusty suggested. ‘What ... er... what budget would I have?’

‘What would it cost?’ I asked.

‘Well, to set-up a software warning system is easy enough, just the staff to load the details,’ Crusty explained. ‘Then, like here, when there’s an earthquake we send out emails and faxes to every coastal region, local government, TV and radio, hotels and schools. There’s also the question of an air-raid siren type of warning system.’

‘That sounds expensive,’ I said. ‘Stringing out sirens around a thousand miles of coastline.

‘How about just towns and villagers, or put them on the roofs of police stations and hospitals,’ Crusty added.

Jimmy nodded. ‘As for the first part, go ahead and get involved, running the operation out of here, couple of staff local to each country loading the database – after their governments agree to it. Then, lets think about an education process, TV campaigns, so that people know what we’re talking about. Arrange some wandering tutors to go to each school and give a talk. Then, starting with Sumatra, sirens on police stations to start with. Bob, give him a good budget. Oh, what’s that island north of New Zealand that gets a lot of earthquakes?’

‘Samoa?’ Crusty asked.

‘Yeah, them. Bob, start a small unit there, twenty people, plus part-timers.’

‘New Zealand sent us a letter,’ Bob Explained. ‘They want their own unit, jealous of the Aussies.’

‘Fine, get someone on it, but see how much funding they’re willing to put in,’ Jimmy said. He turned his gaze toward me. ‘Get Helen to fix us a trip, New Zealand and Samoa, around Christmas, we’ll do Hong Kong afterwards.’

A long time after making friends with the President of Zimbabwe, and after numerous truckloads of medicines were “misplaced”, and with us having a growing reputation around Africa, the Zimbabwe authorities finally offered us the tourist concession on Victoria Falls. We offered to fly down and meet at the famous falls, to hold a press conference and ceremony. We also offered to put pressure on the British Government to ease their punitive sanctions against Zimbabwe.

With the news of the concession making the headlines, we came in for some criticism from the UK press. In response, Jimmy pointed at the hardship that the people of Zimbabwe were suffering. We flew down to Nairobi, swapping flights for Lusaka, the capital of Zambia, for two reasons: first, to talk again with the Zambian Government about mining and development, and second to discuss the burgeoning Zambian Rifles. We also could not fly direct to Harare without upsetting a few in Downing Street.

Lusaka was not exactly the garden city of Southern Africa, a hot a dusty place with terrible traffic; it made Nairobi look civilised. We stayed the night in a reasonable hotel, only for rich “white folk” visiting, and met the Government in the morning, a polite two-hour talk about the Rifles and mining. They kindly provided us an escort after lunch, and we journeyed southwest to the tourist town of Livingstone, a few press vans in tow. Booked into a nice boutique lodge on the Zambian side of the border, we glimpsed the famous falls before sunset by helicopter.

The next morning we confirmed the arrangements with our contact in the Zimbabwean Government and crossed the border with a line of tourist coaches, across a bridge used for bungee jumping. Pulling into a large lodge in its own grounds, we were stopped by the Presidential security and checked, even frisked. We were, thankfully, machinegun free, and passed under a wooden arch and inside to the cool interior, meeting the manager of the lodge that we hoped to fill with tourists. Sat waiting in the bar was our host, surrounded by his cronies and a few army officers looking a bit warm in their thick tunics. Without standing to greet us, he waved us over and welcomed us, drinks ordered. He asked about Rescue Force, the orphanages and the Congo, and we made polite conversation. Getting down to

business, we explained that we were confident that we could boost numbers, on condition that most of the tourists book through our tour operators, those we used for Kenya. We would also offer split-location trips from Kenya and Tanzania. It was a done deal, the document signed and handed over, a promise of a quick progress from us, and a further meeting in a month from them.

What I did not realise at the time was that the Zimbabwean delegation had flown into Livingstone Airport, the only airport nearby. Or that for the past four years a team had been casing the joint, infiltrating it and bribing both technicians and refuelling truck operators – just in case either was needed. Now that team was in action, the President's plane the object of their interest. As we sat enjoying a cold beer, in the bar of the hotel we had stayed the night in, the President's plane lifted off and headed east towards Harare. If the doctored fuel had not caused the plane to falter, the small explosive device in the fuel tank would have.

Jimmy checked his watch. 'Be prepared for a mild shock, and don't react.'

'What?' I puzzled.

'I think the President's plane may have ... met some trouble.'

I eased upright, remembering what Jimmy had said about dispatching the guy. I just did not realise it would happen so soon, or in this manner. It was a mild shock, but at least we were on the Zambian side of the border. A reporter came and found us an hour later, asking us if we had heard, and would we like to comment.

Jimmy said, 'If his plane went down, it was probably tampered with.'

That was the only comment we were prepared to make, packing up quickly and being escorted back to Lusaka. At the airport we were besieged by the local press, Jimmy now holding a mini press conference in the concourse.

'Africa has lost a man who fought for the rights of blacks over white colonialists. If for nothing else, he deserves recognition for that. We don't know the cause of the crash yet, but I suspect that the plane may have been tampered with. The matter should be thoroughly investigated.'

Boarding a flight for Nairobi, I was glad when they shut the doors, even happier when we touched down safely in Kenya, air

disasters on my mind. Jimmy repeated the speech at Nairobi airport, the Pathfinders blanketing us and whisking us away to our hotel. That evening, the Zambian police would find two airport workers dead; they'd never talk about what they did. The Kenyan TV news was full of the story, some hint of blame aimed at London. But the one group they could not have blamed was us two, not after getting the tourist concession. In London, we exited the airport without being spotted, whisked away to a quiet lane near Windsor and a meeting with Sykes on the way home.

'I had kind of forgotten about him,' Sykes admitted. 'That was till his plane when chasing rabbits.'

'Faulty maintenance; can't get the parts with all the sanctions,' Jimmy suggested, Sykes shooting him a look.

'And what, pray tell, do you see as the future of Zimbabwe now?'

'I see myself helping to reform them as much as I've done in the Congo, starting with tourism, then mining. It will be a little unsettled over there for a few weeks, but should calm down. And his own people won't investigate the crash, they're damn glad he's gone.'

'Who'll take over?' Sykes asked.

'His Defence Minister. Followed by some political upheaval, and the MDC getting a foothold. Give it time. Oh, his Defence Minister may have had some links to the airport workers, so relax, no one blaming you. Well, no one who matters.'

'A well executed manoeuvre,' Sykes applauded. 'You're in the wrong trade.'

'My dear Mister Sykes, I've been in your trade – and better at it – since long before you were born. And talking of which, we need to think of British instructors training soldiers of the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, as they did during the Russian occupation. We also need to smuggle some munitions in, some Mi24s.'

'Pakistan will notice, and the Russians would never co-operate.'

'Not normally, no. But it's me, remember, and the Russians owe me a few quid. So ask the PM. We've two years before the guy in the White House thinks about invading Afghanistan.'

'Will he?'

Jimmy forced a breath. 'I have enough dirt on him to wreck his career now, but we need him to screw up and help the next Democratic leader in. Problem is ... a war in Afghanistan; hard to avoid unless the Taliban take a kicking.'

'What will you do?' Sykes asked, Jimmy staring out of the window.

'Let's meet with the PM and go through the options, soon. You arrange it.'

Sykes stepped out, and into his own vehicle.

Getting home, I hugged Helen tightly before lifting Shelly up onto me as we sat. Very glad to be back, I didn't tell Helen what had happened – what we had done, but I wanted to. I wanted to tell someone what we had done; what Jimmy had done. He had downed a plane with thirty people on board, for the greater good. Somehow I could not see it. Fixing Zimbabwe was a small part of fixing Africa, which may or may not have had an effect on 2025.

It wasn't the first time we'd killed people, far from it. Potomo and his men had been a shock at the time, but we risked exposure, a direct threat to the mission. This was different. This was a detail in the corner of a page, no threat to us. I was mad at Jimmy, but needed to talk, and so went and sought out Jack, finding him in a lounge by himself.

'Got a minute?'

'Sure,' he said, putting down his file.

I eased back and took a breath. 'How do you feel ... about taking a life?'

'Not something I've ever been involved with, not directly. But, in the past few years, I have helped Jimmy to target some people – which I know disappeared.'

'Does it bother you?'

He studied me for a moment. 'Some, yes. If not, I'd be like Sykes. He could shoot someone without a second thought. So could Jimmy I reckon. They have ... a clarity of purpose that I lack.'

'You're on the team, a trusted member...' I posed.

'Well, yes. But if the question is ... could I kill someone that threatened the project, then I'd say *I hope so*. In some ways I feel very sorry for Jimmy, for all he's seen and been through. In other

ways, it has changed him – of course it has.’ He crossed his legs. ‘One evening, sat here, he told me about Canada after the war. I couldn’t have done it; I would have taken my own life. But he struggled through, knee deep in dead bodies every day, some he cared about. Considering what he went through – and we don’t know the half of it – he’s very well balanced and calm. And compassionate still.’

I stared out of the lounge door.

Jack added, ‘Paul, what would you do to save Shelly’s life?’

I stared back for a moment. ‘Anything.’

‘And if someone broke into you house with a knife?’

‘Yeah, I kill them, I don’t doubt that,’ I admitted.

‘And 2025, if Jimmy can’t get it sorted? How many people, Paul? How many would perish? What you feel for Shelly, he feels for us. And as for *Zimbabwe*, how many people died unnecessarily because of the idiots in power? How many will now live if Jimmy gets their economy turned around? How many has he already saved in Africa?’

‘I just wish ... that there was another way.’

‘There isn’t, and according to Jimmy it will get a lot worse in the years ahead. You have a great lifestyle and a perfect family, but I don’t envy you. We’re in a war, Paul, a real war. And the only thing that’s going to give your girl a chance of a future ... is the big guy ... and his *clarity of purpose*.’

A few days later the Zambian authorities pointed a finger towards the Zimbabwean Defence Minister; we were in the clear and I felt a little better, if only in the practical detail of not being blamed. We organised tourist flights direct between Nairobi and Livingstone and advertised them heavily through all of our usual outlets, subsidising tickets to members of the club, McKinleys, or investors in the businesses. The lodges on the Zimbabwean side of the Zambezi started to fill up. The former parliament speaker in Harare took over as interim president, elections called for within six months. In an unrelated move, at least I hoped it was unrelated, several high-ranking army officers were killed in car bombs, several others shot dead, something of a bloodletting.

With tourism at the front of our minds, Jimmy called in the owners and directors of African Express, the company we put

our Kenyan hotel business through. It was a lovely day when they arrived; Helen, Shelly and I sat having a picnic outside. We packed up and walked inside, Cat taking Shelly as we welcomed our guests and showed them to a lounge, two men and two women, a pair of husband and wife teams.

Jimmy began with, 'We're looking to increase our tourism footprint in Africa by quite a lot, and to subsidise a few flights. As such, we've toyed with the idea of creating our own travel company.' Their faces betrayed their fear and trepidation; we were their biggest customers by far. 'But before we look at that possibility, we thought we'd talk to you first. How do you feel about selling us some shares in your business?'

The husband and wife teams glanced at each other. 'How many shares?' a man asked.

'Fifty one percent,' Jimmy answered. 'That would give us control but, as with Pineapple, we would not get involved on a daily basis.'

'We'd ... be selling out,' the other man timidly stated.

'No, you'd be junior partners to us. And, out of respect for what you've already done to help us, we're making you this offer. Forty-nine percent of a very large amount is better than losing all of our business, because we're not going to put ourselves in the situation where we're dependent on you – without influence at board level. That's just being prudent.'

'What ... plans would you have for the company?' the first man asked.

'A massive increase in turnover; I want a thousand people a week heading south to Africa within a year, followed by increases year after year: Kenya, Gambia, Tanzania, and the Congo Rift Valley. I aim to hire two 747s every week and pack them out.'

'It's a good deal,' I encouraged. 'You get guaranteed throughput. And ... you get our overdraft facility to help with expansion. The alternate ... is that we work around you because we're certainly not going to subsidise flights – to help Africa – and have someone else benefit from it.'

Jimmy eased forwards. 'Fifty-one percent of your shares are worth only four hundred thousand pounds, we've checked; and without us - *a lot* less. We'll offer you a million for them, and

guaranteed employment for six years. We'll also leave you alone to get on with it, just monthly meetings.'

'Guys,' I said. 'There are distinct advantages to being partners with us pair of troublemakers.'

'You're not leaving us much choice,' they grumbled.

'Sometimes,' Jimmy began, 'the easiest, and best choices, are those that are made for you.'

They asked innocent questions for ten minutes, matters of practicality, before Jimmy suggested they take a walk around the grounds, insisting we'd need a decision today. In the end they had no choice, they would go bust if we switched our business away from them. Back inside, they agreed the deal, but they did not look pleased. The papers had already been drawn up, a man from our accountants down for the signing. He had been hidden away till now. We handed over two separate cheques, a third cheque for another million - a director's loan into the company, then asked them to open a small office at Forward Base, the DRC, as well as in Berlin and Moscow. Without me knowing about it, Jimmy had bought several lodges in the DRC, mostly around the rift valley and its unstable volcano. He now asked them to add the lodges to the advertising literature, flights into Forward Base for now. Totalling up the lodges, I realised they could handle five hundred people a week. With the Victoria Falls business, we would be moving a lot of bodies south, Jimmy explaining that direct flights from Russia would begin soon.

Other lodges in the DRC, now under consideration, totalled two thousand people, Jimmy explaining that our property business would be buying them. Rudd had also put in offers for two more lodges around the Serengeti and one more beach hotel, boosting Kenyan and Tanzanian tourism if we could fill them all.

After our visitors had departed, Jimmy grabbed Keely and myself for a chat. Sat in the lounge, he eased back and crossed his legs. 'As you know, the next US President is a handful - he'll want to go into Afghanistan, which is ... inevitable. I have a solution or two for dealing with Afghanistan, whether he goes in or not, but ... in an ideal world it would suit us better if he was *restrained*.'

'You said that you wanted the next guy in - and doing a bad job - to help the next Democrat,' Keely puzzled.

‘Yes, but ... but I’ve altered a few things in recent years. You see, there’s getting to 2025 in good shape, or ... there’s *getting ahead*.’

‘Like an African army not only holding its own, but fighting back,’ Keely noted. ‘Our best estimates say that Africa could not develop quick enough.’

‘You may be right,’ Jimmy admitted. ‘But it all helps.’

‘So what’s the question about the next guy?’ Keely pressed.

‘The question ... is one of *could we do better*? Could we do more than just bump heads and let him make mistakes.’

‘You have dirt on him,’ I put in.

‘You do?’ Keely asked. ‘How much?’

‘Enough to send him to prison for life,’ Jimmy said, his eyebrows lifted.

‘And screw up the US political system to boot, and our reputation abroad. You’d really have a serving US President arrested? Jesus, even the people that like you would turn against you!’

‘If it stops the war ... yes,’ Jimmy affirmed.

‘There has to be a middle road,’ Keely insisted. ‘Why not just hint you have the dirt?’

‘That could just piss him off,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘He may figure that *removing* me might help him.’

‘Then trip him up now, two years ahead of the next election,’ Keely suggested.

‘The alternative candidate is no better, and if I trip *him* up, we get an unknown. And *they* are very dangerous.’

Keely eased back, ‘Then ... you meet him after he’s nominated, *soon* after, and let him know that you know – but that you want to help him.’

‘A little horse trading,’ I suggested. ‘He’s a politician.’

‘And how would Art Johnson see that?’ Jimmy knowingly asked.

‘He’d not be happy, but you can channel money through the oil companies, Johnson may not link it,’ Keely suggested.

‘Perhaps,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘It all comes down to that meeting. I might just spook him, because he’s not “M” Group.’

‘What happens when he gets his Magestic briefing?’ Keely asked.

‘He freaks out, then tries to control me.’

‘The solution, would be to get him a Magestic briefing when he’s nominated,’ Keely suggested. ‘Beside, I don’t think Johnson will run.’

‘No?’ I asked.

‘No,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘Why run, when I say he’ll lose.’

Jimmy suggested, ‘So Johnson can’t object to the briefing. Then you meet to this next guy and chat ... and squeeze his balls. At the end of the day the fella’s got no choice.’

‘If the CIA found out that I had blackmailed a US President?’ Jimmy posed, his hands wide.

‘They may try and use it against you, yes,’ Keely admitted. ‘And if it came out ... be bad for you. When you chat to the candidate, do so alone.’

‘Can I rely on your discretion, Mister Donnelly?’ Jimmy asked.

‘You tell me, you know what I do in the future.’

‘Still, I like to give people choices,’ Jimmy said with a smile. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a rough diamond the size of a large peanut. He handed it over. ‘Bury it somewhere, for when you retire.’

Chad

With Jimmy describing the upcoming conflict in Darfur, due to kick off next year, we called a meeting in Mapley with all of the senior staff, many up from Mawlini. After the usual hour of greetings, mock insults and chitchat, we settled into the lecture theatre, a slide of Central Africa displayed on a large white screen.

Jimmy began with, ‘Chad is suffering from a small Sudanese refugee problem, nothing serious at the moment, but the tensions in the Darfur region could increase the numbers. Chad is a very poor nation, and the border with Darfur is lawless to some extent. My sources tell me that the conflict in Sudan could escalate, and soon. I don’t have a strong desire to send our

people into Darfur, but we should *at least* set-up camps on the border and deal with the humanitarian fall out. After all, it's on our doorstep.'

Mac asked, 'Jimmy, we going in as Rescue Force ... or we going to fucking invade?'

'This is a humanitarian mission –'

'So was Somalia to start with,' Mac pointed out. 'And we invaded!'

'Sudan is not Somalia; they have a large and efficient army, an air force, and close links to my Chinese friends. So no ... no military aspect to this. And as for Somalia, look how that turned out.'

Mac pressed, 'We providing security for our people?'

'If it becomes necessary; then yes, of course. Bob, put together a team, send someone to Chad and ask for permission to operate along their border, make a security assessment. If the Rifles are necessary, ask for permission to use them, get the Kenyan Government involved. I'll talk with the Sudanese via my Chinese friends to see about permission to operate *inside* their border. In the meantime, let's start collecting all the information we have on the border region and the troubles inside. Mac, find us a base with a runway nearby, maybe even inside Darfur.'

'A base inside the border?' Bob questioned. 'Will we be in the thick of the fighting?'

'We've operated in war zones before,' Jimmy pointed out. 'But here, we'd have bases on the Chad border, popping over for humanitarian and rescue missions.'

'What about the Southern Sudan authorities?' Coup asked.

'Yes, contact them and ask is we can put teams on their border with Darfur.'

'When?' Coup questioned.

'Straight away,' Jimmy said. 'We need information, eyes-on information.'

'If the Chinese are dealing with the Sudanese Government, could they not spearhead this?' Coup asked.

'They will have a role because, as you said, the Khartoum Government won't want to upset them. Now, let's take a break and make some calls. Bob, call you old contacts and get an opinion on the situation. Mac, Coup, find out what you can about

the region and bases, talk to the Red Cross and others. Let's meet back here in thirty minutes and make some plans.'

With the gang on the phones, we toured the base and met members of the Supplemental Group, sitting in the pilot's lounge as they diligently awaited an emergency somewhere on the UK's motorways.

'So, what you up to?' I asked.

'We've been running a study. The lady doctors average two point five cups of coffee before they need a pee, the men three point one cups, but Nick is the odd one out because he can go five cups before a pee.'

'Guys,' I said. 'Your spending too long in here.'

Back in the lecture theatre, Bob said, 'There's already fifty thousand refugees on the border, and the word is that it will get a lot worse – and quickly.'

Mac said, 'There's as many as that again in Southern Sudan. Seems like the Arabs are trying to push the blacks out. There's one big camp already set-up, UN in there.'

'Bob, ask Doc Hoskins to dispatch twenty people, tents and supplies to the Southern Sudan camp straight away, a second team for the camp in Chad. They can make on-the-ground assessments. Then let's get some international teams in there; Hong Kong and China.'

Mac put in, 'My contact says there could be half a million people on the move if the fighting hots up.'

Jimmy gave it some thought. 'Bob, ready all the tents we have in Africa, do an inventory, get some more if necessary. I'll sanction a good budget on this if the numbers are going to grow.'

I asked Coup, 'How many Kenyan and Tanzania nurses on the reserve list?'

'Two hundred plus.'

'Well,' Jimmy said with a sigh. 'Is Darfur going to go tits up, that's the question? Do we ready ourselves now ... or wait?'

'Wait till they're desperate?' Bob scoffed. 'There're already enough people in the camps to justify our participation.'

Jimmy took a moment. 'Show of hands, please: those in favour of a substantive ramp up now ... *just in case*?'

I raised my hand, followed by Mac, Coup and Bob, Doc Graham, a few others not seeing the need just yet.

‘OK,’ Jimmy said. ‘Bob, use our communications set-up: thirty from Hong Kong, fifty from China, another hundred from somewhere – but not Supplementals. Coup, hire those nurses - I’ll call Rudd and sanction the budget. Bob, tents. Let’s meet in the map room in an hour, someone find a map of the area.’

Jimmy called Rudd and transferred fifty million pounds to RF Mawlini for the operation. In the map room we studied the area, Mac pointing out a lonesome airstrip on the border. A meeting was then called of all RF representatives, in the command centre, the UN and Red Cross invited over, the brief given, RF teams asked for – but for long term placements, at least eight weeks at a time. Jimmy asked for a plan of action by the morning, and we left them with some midnight oil to burn.

The next morning they presented a call-up plan, a deployment plan, a long-term plan for the camps involving many Africa nurses. The total deployment would be almost three hundred RF staff for a year at least, thirty jeeps, six Hueys, weekly re-supply by Hercules from Mawlini. It was an expensive operation. Jimmy signed it off and gave the go ahead, the deployments issued by email and fax, Helen issuing a press release.

Leaving the command centre, I recognised a face, a young lady doctor. ‘You look familiar.’

‘We met at a hotel in Kenya, years ago. I was on holiday with my parents. It was when your people parachuted from a Dash-7... and when your bodyguards shot dead two assassins.’

‘Ah, I remember. So, you joined up.’

‘You left an impression,’ she said with a coy smile.

‘How long have you been here?’

‘Ten weeks, we finish here soon. I can drive a truck, and I’ve callous on my fingers from climbing the damn wall.’

‘There’s a big deployment to Sudan, maybe you’ll be on it.’

‘I’ll ask about it, I’m off to Mawlini next week.’

Jimmy closed in. ‘Cassie.’

‘You remembered my name,’ she said, very impressed.

‘I always remember a pretty face. You off to the Sudan?’ Jimmy asked her.

‘I just heard about it, so maybe.’

We left her with a huge smile. Driving off, Jimmy said, ‘She has a good future. Well, it’s good for Rescue Force advertising

anyway. I've just put her on a course to meet her future husband.'

Arriving back, Sharon said there was a fax from the White House.

Jimmy nodded, none too concerned. 'Book us flights to the States for tomorrow, three of us.'

In Washington, the next day, we met with Senator Pedersen and his gang, now partners in our oil business, and discussed mines and oil. The conversation was then steered towards Liberia.

'I'm trying to persuade Art Johnson to get involved in Liberia, West Africa; it has a lot of oil. Problem is, the warring factions. If I persuade him to send in the troops, be nice gentlemen and back him would you.'

Back at the hotel, the blacked out vans turned up in the car park and transported us the short distance around to the White House, the place now appearing a lot smaller than my first visit. We received tea and biscuits as we waited, soon joined by the Chief of Staff, a minute later by the President, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and three generals. We stood and greeted them.

Sitting again, Art Johnson said, 'Thanks for popping over, we know you're a busy man. And now a major deployment of Rescue Force to Darfur. Is that area going to implode?'

'Yes,' Jimmy affirmed. 'Two million refugees, lots of TV minutes in a year's time.'

'Is it something we should be involved with?'

'Not if don't want to upset the Muslim world,' Jimmy said. 'It's a minor civil war, no clear aggressors, but the Muslim forces will get backing from Sudan, jet bombers attacking civilians.'

'We'll keep an eye on it. Anyway, we've decided we should be more involved in West Africa. We'd like you to hold off on any plans you have for Liberia, we're going to take an interest. Save you some money – as you said the last time. Besides, we founded the nation, we should help.'

Jimmy opened his case and handed over a thick document: How to deal with Liberia. 'That's a blow by blow account of what you should do, what you should avoid, and how it will turn out.'

Johnson skimmed through the detailed document. ‘You ... anticipated we’d make that move,’ he said in a resigned tone, the generals glancing at each other.

‘Will you use your own troops, or raise an army?’ Jimmy posed.

‘Raise an army,’ the Admiral stated. ‘Get some practice of using proxy armies.’

Jimmy opened his case and handed over a second document, even thicker than the first. ‘That’s everything you’ll need on raising an African infantry regiment. You’ll find some very specific requirements in there, some differences to western soldiers.’

‘Should have figured that,’ the Admiral wistfully stated, flicking pages of the document.

‘What’ll I do after retirement?’ the Air Force general joked.

‘Spend some time with the daughter you don’t know you have,’ Jimmy said with a straight face, holding his gaze on the man.

Everyone stopped. ‘What?’ the Air Force General asked.

Jimmy took a photograph and handed it over. ‘She’s studying in New York, and you’d best retire soon – like tomorrow – or it will get out eventually. Better to make the choice, than have it made for you.’

The man stared hard at the photograph, pocketed it and stood. ‘If you’ll excuse me, Mister President, I hereby tend my resignation before ... before I cause any embarrassment to the service.’ He stepped to the door and out, people calling his name.

‘What the hell was that all about?’ Johnson loudly asked.

‘He made a mistake twenty-four years ago, and it would have hit the headlines next year. Better he resigns now, with dignity and praise. No one will go after a *former* general.’

‘Is there a security matter here?’ the Admiral asked.

‘Not really,’ Jimmy replied. ‘The Russians sent a honey trap to him, but he didn’t declare the affair. That was his only mistake.’

‘And the daughter you mentioned?’ Johnson pressed.

‘A nice young Ukrainian girl, now studying at NYU. And no, she was not about to blackmail him, she just wants to meet him.’

‘Jesus,’ the Admiral let out.

I asked the Admiral, ‘Did you ever...?’

‘No, unfortunately; guess they never thought I was important enough.’

‘The daughter will stay in the States, and he’ll look after her,’ Jimmy put in. ‘I do like happy endings. So, Liberia: if you try and work with the existing regime you’ll get nowhere, *and* you *will* find yourselves being tainted by the association. Any money you give them will disappear quickly, maybe ten percent being spent on the projects you want the money to go to. If you remove the regime it will set every African government against you, because they’re all corrupt, and don’t want big bullies like you kicking them out of power just because they’re corrupt.’

‘So what do you recommend?’ Johnson asked.

‘First, you need an excuse to go in; such as more conflict internally, and with their neighbours. Then, if the regime was... blown up by rivals, you’d be playing the good guys and riding in to help.’

‘Not sure I like the sound of that,’ the Admiral stated.

‘How would *you* do it?’ I asked him.

‘We would work with the existing government, calling for free and fair elections.’

‘Free and fair elections? In Africa?’ I repeated. ‘Good luck with that. Tell us how it works out for you.’

The Admiral gave me a look.

‘You’re saying we’ll come undone if we go in,’ Johnson noted.

‘It’s a minefield,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Literally. You’ll be damned if you do, and damned if you take a half measure. If you work with the existing cronies they’ll taint you. Remove them and you’ll pay the price. There is a path of least resistance to your aims, which is to allow me to assist you. You can then ride in on a white charger and save the day, looking good around Africa.’

Helen’s pager went. ‘Sorry.’ She checked it quickly. ‘A bomb’s gone off in ... Liberia of all places.’ She glanced at Jimmy from under her eyebrows, the generals stiffening. ‘The President and his staff are all believed to have been killed. Fighting has broken out on the streets of the capital.’

‘Anyone got a white charger?’ I testily asked.

Johnson eased forwards. ‘And what will history record as the *cause* ... of that blast?’

‘A disaffected army general will be blamed, who will now take over... and start executing aid workers. Including American aid workers.’

Johnson glanced at his generals, forcing a breath. ‘Gentlemen, I don’t think we can just standby as our brothers in Liberia are calling out to us for assistance.’

‘No, sir,’ they agreed.

Johnson ordered, ‘I want the Navy off the coast, airborne troops flown in straight away. I’ll handle the State Department.’

‘And I ... will get Africa on your side,’ Jimmy offered. ‘As well as Senator Pedersen and his friends. And, if you desire a UN resolution, I can arrange that as well.’

‘It’s not a bad idea,’ Johnson admitted. ‘Will the Russians and Chinese back us?’

‘Yes. And the British and French,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘I’ve already spoken to them. And, before you even set foot in the jungle, we’ll hammer the bad guys into submission for you.’

‘That the operation we launched yesterday?’ I asked Jimmy.

He nodded. ‘Anything else we can do for you, gentlemen?’

The generals smiled, shaking their heads.

Hal had been back and forth to Sierra Leone, now back with the Cobra squadron and pounding rebel bases just across the Liberian border. They had been given a list of targets, a long list, and were working through it, airborne raids by the rifles to mop up. But three days after our meeting with Johnson, Hal had a mission well inside Liberia, a rebel base in the north just within fuel range.

He took off at dawn with four other Cobras and six support Hueys, one white RF Huey providing medical cover, Ratchet at the controls, Dr Jane Hicks in the back. Having struck the rebel base, Hal’s old lady suffered a simple mechanical fault, but she picked a bad spot; Hal went down into dense jungle, losing his props on the way. Fortunately, he hit water, he and his gunner getting out and waving up at the circling Hueys. Ratchet hovered over the downed Cobra, but found the trees too high for the winch. Seeing an immediate and practical solution, Hal and his gunner started climbing up a tall tree, Ratchet sending all but one other Huey back to base, not least because they were low on fuel.

Ten minutes later, Ratchet had a choice to make: to wait for the men below to reach the treetop, or to leave them. He could wait another ten minutes, then set down at the border crossing, getting a fuel truck sent out. As it stood, he would not make the base with his current fuel status. He remained overhead.

Hal and his gunner made it to a high branch, the winch lowered. In a daring move, and a dangerous move, Hal grabbed the winch, got himself inside, linked his arms around his gunner and jumped off the branch. They were winched up, grabbed in the doorway and pulled inside with huge smiles. Ratchet nosed down and headed back. He had gone two miles when fifty calibre rounds penetrated the Huey, killing the co-pilot and a rescuer in the back. With alarms sounding, warning lights flashing, the Huey lost power and nosed down into the dense jungle.

In New York, Jimmy glanced at his watch. The satellite phone trilled a few seconds later. Jimmy listened. 'OK, keep me posted.' He glanced out of the window, then turned to face us as we sat eating the apartment. 'Hal has crashed into the jungle.'

'He alright?' Helen asked.

'He was winched up, by Ratchet actually, but Ratchet's bird was shot down. We got a mayday signal from them; two dead, two wounded. They're down and running, rebels in the area. Paul, get yourself on a plane to Sierra Leone, probably need to fly into Ghana.' I stood. 'Helen, prepare a press release, I'll get what other details we can. We're staying here, we can use the US Navy to locate Hal.'

'No stupid stunts!' was the last thing I heard from Helen as I grabbed the security detail and headed towards the airport.

Helen released the details of the rescue to all US press agencies, reminding them of the books that Hal had been made famous by. The same detail was, oddly enough, sent to all the veteran associations. Jimmy was up to something. And as I headed to the airport I wondered why he was staying put.

Later that day, as I flew across the Atlantic, Jimmy and Helen headed to Washington, to be seen to be asking Art Johnson for help from the US Navy. As they left their aircraft in DC, Jimmy gave a quick statement to a lone TV crew, briefing them of the situation in Liberia and the planned rescue of Hal the veteran. By time he reached the White House, Associated Press, Reuters and

CNN had the story, the story receiving prime time viewing at 6pm.

A surprised Art Johnson welcomed Jimmy and Helen back into the White House.

‘Need your help, Mister President,’ Jimmy began. He relayed the story of what had happened, making a formal request for assistance if there was an aircraft carrier nearby. There was, it had been dispatched days ago and was due to be part of the Liberian operation. The US Navy were notified, the aircraft carrier put on alert, jet fighters scrambled to scout the area. Ratchet possessed a radio and a satellite phone, so it was just a case of them using the radio at the right time, since the satellite phone could not be zeroed in on.

6pm in Washington, it was midnight in Liberia, Hal and the survivors hunkered down in a hollow, covered in mud and soaked through; and completely lost. The sound of fast jets caused them to scratch their heads, because the Liberians did not have any, not least any that worked these days. They tried the radio, Hal knowing the standard emergency frequency.

‘Downed Cobra pilot to fast jet overhead: copy, over?’

‘Navy E3 to downed Cobra pilot, confirm lead pilot name.’

‘Navy E3, this is Hal.’ Hal and Ratchet exchanged looks through the dark.

Navy E3 to Hal, we have your position, extraction at dawn. How are the neighbours?’

‘Hal to E3, neighbours are close, and unfriendly to anything that flies, over.’

‘E3 out.’

The sound of tree frogs reclaimed the dark, the odd gunshot report in the distance; the rebels were shooting at shadows. If they got too close Hal and his gunner had their pistols, what good they would be. Soaking wet, cold and hungry, they huddled for warmth, Doc Hicks treating the wounded, her backpack the only one retrieved from the Huey before the rebels opened fire, causing the survivors to run. Now their jungle training would be put to the test.

Sat against the tree, Hal rubbed his hands in the mud and over Dr Hicks back, making her white jacket brown. ‘How many accidents have you had now?’

‘This is number ... four. You?’

‘I lost count a long time ago,’ Hal whispered.

In Washington, Jimmy gave a lengthy – and passionate – interview, hanging around the studio and giving updates till 10pm.

An hour before dawn a hell of a storm blew up, Hal staring up through the canopy. ‘Be unlikely to come for us in this.’

Dr Hicks stood shivering, Hal rubbing her arms, and took in the swaying branches. ‘Best share out the rations now, we’ll be here a while.’

‘Stay here, I’ll scout around a bit, we could be near a road ... or a rebel base.’ He trudged off, soon knee deep in water as the wind howled through the trees, the rain taking the mud off Dr Hicks white jacket and cleaning it.

With the dark night surrendering to a grey dawn, Dr Hicks was worried, Ratchet reassuring her of Hal’s abilities. When they heard a noise above the wind they hid, the Kenyan gunner readying his pistol. Hal’s image solidified through the raindrops, carrying something over his shoulder. He dumped a wild pig at Dr Hick’s feet.

‘You killed a pig!’ she said above the roar of the storm.

‘I shot it. No fucker going to hear it in this storm.’

‘Did you find anything?’

‘I did a complete circle, and nothing – just jungle. There’s a stream heading north west, we could follow that.’

‘Should we not stay here?’ Ratchet challenged.

‘With this storm, the rebels may give up for a while. But if this lasts a few days, no helicopter is coming for us. That means more rebels moving in for their prize.’

‘Prize?’ Dr Hicks questioned, rain pelting her in the face.

‘Ransom. Anyway, let’s eat,’ Hal suggested.

‘Should we risk making a fire?’ Dr Hicks questioned.

‘In this storm, they could be the other side of this fucking tree and not find us!’

Hal hung up the pig, bled it and carved pieces off, holding them over the small fire they had made, soon offering charred ham to the survivors, much needed protein. With their stomachs full, they made the decision to move out, and not wait for

company. The two wounded needed helping along, shivering as they progressed. In the streambed, the group found a stable footing, and it could not have made them any wetter than they already were. By nightfall, Hal figured they had covered at least a mile or two. And, walking down the stream, the rebels would not find their trail.

Ratchet eased off the backpack, Dr Hick's backpack. She foraged around inside, pulling out a bright orange emergency sleeping bag, basically a large and sturdy plastic bag the size of a normal sleeping bag. With a knife, she slit one side and the base, making several holes. Grabbing thin vines, she wound them through the holes, soon erecting a shelter just big enough for the six of them to sit under. Hal broke branches and placed wet leaves on the muddy forest floor: their bedding for the night. From Dr Hick's pack he pulled out a leg of the pig, soon roasting pieces over a small fire. The meat did not go far, but it helped.

'Haven't heard any aircraft,' Ratchet noted.

'Not in this storm,' Hal agreed.

Ratchet took out his satellite phone, turned it on and struggled to see the battery levels. 'My battery is low.'

'Mine too,' Hal admitted. 'I forgot to charge it. Pointless in this weather anyway. Save it.'

Ratchet put his phone away, lifting a giant millipede and tossing it away. 'Not exactly camouflaged, are we?'

'If they're close enough to see this ... we're dead or captured,' Hal insisted.

An hour later Hal woke with a start, nudging Dr Hicks.

'What is it?' she asked.

Hal composed himself. 'Sorry. I was dreaming.'

'What about?'

'I was in a filthy stinking jungle after a helicopter crash in Vietnam, being hunted by guerrillas.'

Ratchet could be heard laughing, soon followed by Dr Hicks.

'Haven't you had enough of this?' she asked above the sound of the storm.

I was in Seirra Leone by this time, at the forward helicopter base, and feeling pretty useless. There was little more to do other than check the same weather reports over and over. I called Helen, and assured her I was OK, and nowhere near a helicopter. She

informed me of Jimmy's news conferences, one of which was with President Johnson.

The survivors suffered a second cold and wet night, the combined effect of their wet clothes, a lack of food and a lack of decent sleep starting to have an effect. In the morning, no one much felt like moving, the rain continuing.

Hal had to do something, or they were in trouble. He stood and cut down the shelter, getting incredulous looks from the group. 'Sit there losing body heat and you'll die. We need to move.' He helped them up one by one, soon taking point as they again tackled the stream.

An hour later, with the storm easing off a little, Hal thought he could smell smoke or cooking. He grabbed his gunner, and they both checked their pistols. They moved forwards together, the rest of the group hidden in the undergrowth. The wind was coming from direct ahead, so that had to be where the cooking was coming from, maybe a house or a farm. Finding a clearing, they eased down and crawled ten yards, lifting their heads over a tree root to find a hut, its chimney betraying the cooking activities within. Hal put a finger to his lips, gesturing for his buddy to crawl around behind the hut. With the Kenyan gunner soon becoming just an image of a bum in motion, Hal rubbed mud across his face for added camouflage.

A man stepped out of the hut, ran across to a large tree and took a pee, running quickly back inside. The AK47 the man wore labelled him as rebel, not farmer. Hal eased upright and around the tree he had been sheltered behind, stepping slowly to the hut, no windows on the side that he now approached. With his back to the wooden wall, he signalled his gunner up, the man stepping quickly across. Hal pointed to a nearby trench, the gunner running and diving into it, his pistol trained on the hut's front door. Stepping slowly and quietly, the storm masking any sounds, Hal stepped around to the rear of the hut, finding a wooden slat propped open. Peering through he could see three men sat around a cooking pot and jabbering away. He need only kill two of them. He turned his head to the right, picking out a thick tree root. Turning back, he stretched out a leg towards the root. At little more than six feet away from the earnest cookery

students, he pointed, aimed, and fired twice, ducking quickly behind the root.

Nothing happened for ten seconds. Then a burst of fire came through the hut wall and into the tree that Hal now sheltered behind, a second burst sounding as if it was aimed out of the front door. Hal eased up his pistol, his hands and finally his face over the tree root, trying to see through the rain. He waited, squinting as water irritated his eyes. A good three minutes later, two shots sounded, too quiet to be AK47, they were pistol shots.

Hal held a flat hand to the corner of his mouth. 'Did you get him?' he shouted.

'Yes!' came back.

'Stay there!' Hal moved forwards, and to the edge of the hut, again peering inside. He could see two bodies, one now with his clothing alight. Moving around to the front he could see another man face down in the mud. They were three for three. In the doorway he poked his head inside, the small hut offering nowhere for a man to hide. He stepped inside and grabbed an AK47, checking it quickly. Emerging, he said, 'Get the others down here!'

The gunner trudged off. Hal slung the AK, lifting the second from the mud and shaking it before slinging it over his head. He grabbed the dead rebel by the wrists and dragged him towards the stream, dumping the body into undergrowth. He tackled the second man, his clothes smouldering, and gave the first body some company. As he dragged the third man out the gang appeared, Dr Hicks aghast at his handiwork.

'Get inside, get warmed up!' Hal shouted over the roar of the storm. With branches covering the bodies, Hal returned to the hut, giving Ratchet his AK, cleaning and checking the second rifle. Finding a suitably waterproof poncho, Hal threw it over his head and readied his weapon. 'You got two hours before we swap. Eat the food, warm up, dry your clothes.' He stepped out. Across from the hut, and in view of the trail that led up to it, he stood against a tree and focused on the dark green foliage for any unwelcome company, figuring that no one would come till the storm eased off. Three hours later, not two, Ratchet stepped out of the hut in a green poncho, AK ready, Hal waving him over.

'Stand here, watch that trail. If the rain stops, warn me.' Inside, Hal eased off the poncho, accepting a bowl of warm stew

from his gunner. Sitting on a bunk, he could now see could clothes hung up and drying, even a bra, the wounded sleeping peacefully.

Dr Hicks said, 'We got pot and cocaine if you want some?' She lifted the drugs that the previous occupants had been planning on using.

'Been a while since I smoked pot. I think the last time was ... in a wet steamy jungle, after a helicopter crash, with guerrillas armed with AK47s hunting us.'

Dr Hicks laughed. 'About time you fucking retired, Hal.'

'Never. I'll die with my boots on, not in some old folks home.'

The rain did not ease off all day, Ratchet toughing out a four-hour stretch before being relieved by the Kenyan gunner. Everyone got some sleep.

An hour before dawn Hal was awake, stoking the fire before he realised the rain had stopped. Grabbing the AK, he stepped out and sloshed through the mud to Ratchet, now on his second tour of sentry watch. 'I'm going to get everyone up, make a move at dawn. Stay there.'

Back inside the hut, Hal nudged people awake. The last of the stew was apportioned to the gang, mostly to the wounded. Cold and aching limbs were stretched, people stepping out in turn for a morning pee. The walking wounded were issued ponchos, Dr Hicks putting on a green jumper a few sizes too big for her, a few hats pilfered. Hal looked the ragbag patrol over, leading them away from the easy to navigate trail, and back into the stream, everyone soon up to the knees in cold water and complaining.

As the day warmed up, the weather improving, the patrol slowly plodded along. When the stream grew too deep, they struggled up a muddy bank and followed the stream's course from an ill-defined animal trail, till they could hear the rush of water. Breaking through the dense foliage, they could see large boulders exposed in a fast flowing, but shallow and wide river.

'They can get a Huey in there,' Hal said. 'Come on.'

Ratchet lifted the radio and turned it on. 'Any air mobile, this is downed Rescue Force crew.' Nothing. He repeated the message several times.

Hal took out his satellite phone and turned it on. He dialled the RF emergency number and placed it to his ear. All he got was low-battery bleeps. 'It's dead.'

Ratchet tried his. 'What position do I give?'

'Found miles north west of previous, river bend, rocks,' Hal instructed.

Ratchet hit the green button and waited. 'Hello?' came a woman's voice. 'This is Ratchet in Liberia, we're four miles north west of previous position, river bend, rocks in river. Got that?'

'Yes, I got that.' The bleeps started.

'She said she got it,' Ratchet reported, turning off the phone.

'Hide yourselves,' Hal ordered. 'At least two hours to reach us.' They sat down and settled in.

Stateside, the TV news channels were in a frenzy for fresh information. When the rescue co-ordinators were given the press went into overdrive, relaying the launch of the helicopters. I was getting more information from Helen, now watching CNN in Washington, than from our people on the ground. I relayed the good news. I was also sorely tempted to jump into a Huey and rush over there. I'd be divorced afterwards, but we'd have Hal back.

Thirty minutes after our troop of survivors had settled themselves in the muddy undergrowth, jets screamed overhead.

Ratchet tried the radio. 'Lost sheep to Shepard. Anyone on?'

'Lost sheep, please give a reference.'

'Turn around; you went straight over us. Bend in the river, big rocks, over.' The jets could be heard approaching again. 'Keep coming ... keep coming ... overhead!'

Back in the states, the news now reported that US jets had located the survivors. It was happening live, Jimmy making sure of that.

An hour after the jets had fixed the survivor's position, helicopters could be heard, spirits lifted on the ground.

Ratchet turned the radio on. 'Lost sheep to Shepard, we can hear you. No visual.'

‘Roger that. Standby.’

Hal led the survivors out, ponchos and green jumpers discarded, rifles made ready. Coming up the river bend, two American helicopters could be seen, stalking in low. Dressed suitably in white, Dr Hicks stepped out across the rocks and waved; they could not have missed her. Flaring, the first Naval Seahawk slowed and descended, its crew leaning out of the doors and relaying instructions to the pilots about clearance and height. With two wheels on a large flat rock, crewmen waved the survivors over. Hal’s gunner discarded his rifle into the water and boarded, followed by the two wounded, Dr Hicks and Ratchet, just Hal left on the rocks.

The pilot waved and pointed upstream. Hal turned to find two gunmen on the riverbank, too far away to do any damage unless they were the marksmen from hell. In a move worthy of Hollywood, he aimed and fired, scaring them off before jumping aboard the helicopter, his AK47 tossed out.

I was already on my way south in a Huey, heading to the main airport. An hour after being picked up, I expected the survivors to be dumped at the airport, or maybe the hospital full of Cubans. But no, the US Navy was having none of that, they were welcoming Hal aboard the aircraft carrier to a heroes welcome, the US news still in a frenzy. Jimmy and Art Johnson held a press conference, Johnson loving the positive attention, for a change.

I spent the night in Freetown, Hal and the survivors getting the best of care aboard the aircraft carrier, Jimmy and Helen on a plane to the UK. The next day the US Navy flew the survivors across to Freetown, our two wounded handed to the Cubans, the rest getting another heroes welcome, a great many RF staff at the airport, plus the Rifles, and even more reporters. Rudd had been busy, flying Kenyan, Tanzanian and DRC reporters to Freetown and paying their hotel bills. We even had a BBC crew.

I gave several interviews before Hal arrived, being filmed hugging him and the others. We gave an extended interview stood in the airport, before moving to a quiet room for a joint interview with BBC and CNN. I don’t know about the others, but I was exhausted at the end of it. We arranged rooms for the three of them in Freetown’s best hotel, explaining that they were now officially on leave for two weeks and ordered back to the UK

with me; Jimmy was going to milk the episode for all it was worth.

Arriving back at the house with Hal and Dr Hicks, I left them to attend my family, finding Helen sat reading a movie script.

‘Jimmy’s going to fund the film of Hal’s time with Rescue Force. He’s written the whole thing himself.’

With Shelly asleep, Helen cooking, I flicked through the script, wondering who would play me. And Helen. And Jimmy. Later, we carried Shelly across to the house and joined the festivities in the lounge, Hal, Ratchet and Dr Hicks relaying their tales, Bob Davies and Doc Graham over from Mapley. Our daughter was a flirt, and never happier than in a room of grown-ups spoiling her. She favoured the men, especially Jimmy and Han, and ignored Michelle.

Keely reported that Johnson was very happy with Liberia, the American press behind him; he had finally done something popular. ‘Tell me about this movie,’ he said to Jimmy.

‘Script around here somewhere,’ Jimmy informed Keely.

‘Who’s going to play Hal?’ Helen asked.

‘Play me?’ Hal queried.

Jimmy explained, ‘I’ve written a script about your adventures with Rescue Force, prior to this episode, but I guess it could be added in. You’re going to be even more famous.’

‘A film? About ... me?’ Hal questioned.

‘It’s not just about you, it’ll help to promote Rescue Force, but its main thread is you joining up, then your accidents and adventures, a lot about Scorpion Base. I’m going to fund it so that I have some editorial control.’

‘This be a cinema movie?’ Hal asked.

‘No, TV movie,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘But around Africa it will be shown in the cinemas I guess. Probably straight to video, shown on prime time TV in the States.’

‘Dr Hicks is in it,’ I joked. ‘She falls out of helicopters a lot.’ We laughed.

‘Am I in it?’ she queried.

‘Yes, bit parts,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘But I’ve been thinking of a larger role for you, if you don’t mind.’

‘Ya didn’t ask me if I don’t mind,’ Hal pointed out.

‘Don’t want to be famous?’ I asked him. ‘You might get laid after all these years.’

Helen glared at me, Hal waving a threatening finger toward me.

Jimmy explained, ‘Legally, we don’t need you permission, but you can sue us afterwards if we portray you in a poor light. Read the script, then decide.’ He faced Dr Hicks, adopting a serious, fatherly expression. ‘Your life has not been a bed of roses. Would you want that out there?’

‘It’s in the bloody book already,’ she said with a sigh. ‘Besides, since it all came out I don’t dwell on it anymore. Africa has given me bigger things to worry about. Like Hal’s flying.’ We laughed.

‘What’s wrong with my flying?’ Hal protested. ‘We crashed due to mechanical faults.’

‘And that time in Mozambique when you said we were on fire, and told me to jump into the swamp, then flew off!’

Hal smiled. ‘Ah, well that was because you were being a pain in the arse.’

‘You flew under power lines just to make a point!’

‘They probably had no power anyway,’ he countered, making us laugh.

We chatted into the night, many drinks downed, Shelly fast asleep on Jimmy by 9pm. The next day, Hal sat quietly and read the script, getting half way through by our planned evening meal. He had no objections, nor corrections, and even seemed quite moved by it. Jimmy explained that Dr Hicks would be written in, the movie culminating with the recent crash.

Hal and Dr Hicks were sent off to London to offer interviews to anyone who wanted one, spending a few nights at the club. In the meantime, we watched the American deployment in Liberia with some interest, not least because they were following Jimmy’s route map. Our friends in Africa had applauded the US “assistance” in Liberia, a UN Security Council resolution passed granting the US the right to stabilise the country. Relations with the US military had never been better, the only wrinkle being the condition Jimmy imposed: British and French warships joined the US Navy and assisted in what small way they could, setting up field hospitals in two locations.

New year

Looking forward to a beach holiday, we flew off to Australia in early December, Cat and Shelly in tow, and enjoyed a week in Sydney. We did the tourist bit and saw the sights, the iconic opera house and famous landmark bridge, but mostly just lounged around the hotel pool in the day and ate at the best restaurants at night. The Aussies knew who we were, very proud of their own Rescue Force unit, Dunnnow something of a minor celebrity “down under”.

Tanned now, a long flight north took us to Cairns and the RF unit, an inspection they had been expecting since glimpsing our faces in their society papers. Dunnnow showed us around the Spartan base, not much to see since most training was conducted off base and most of the staff were deployed either around Australia or overseas. Out of forty staff, just eight were in residence, some in Chad already, one team in Sierra Leone. We caught up on the gossip, problems and gripes, Jimmy then informing Dunnnow that they had a budget now for up to eighty staff, a doubling of the unit size, two extra Hueys arriving within days.

Back in Sydney, we made plans to travel to New Zealand to officially open their RF unit, then on to Samoa to inaugurate their RF unit, finally heading up to Hong Kong. But the next day Dunnnow rang us, an eye on a large bush fire near Canberra: most Aussie RF units were abroad, and could they be recalled? Jimmy called Mapley HQ and ordered all Australian units to Canberra unless they were new recruits in training. We watched the bush fire on the TV News, Jimmy informing us that it would get out of control. He called the fire chief for the Canberra area and asked if Rescue Force could help, and not just the Australian unit, the man more than happy to receive our assistance since they were stretched, fires now spreading over a wide area.

Helen power up her laptop and emailed Mapley HQ. The NZ unit were to fly over with their jeeps, experienced staff only. British and French Supplemental units were to mass deploy,

Mawlini being ordered to use the large IL76 aircraft to fly jeeps over; six per aircraft, twenty-four requested. Other vehicles could be hired locally.

The New Zealand trip was postponed, not least because they were coming over to us, and we journeyed to Australia's capital, Canberra, by road, enjoying some of the countryside and beaches en route as part of a two-day journey. By time we booked into our hotel in Canberra the news was reporting the mass deployment of RF units. With Australia being a signatory to the RF charter we did not need permission to bring units into Australia or transit through, but now arranged to meet the emergency planning teams and the Prime Minister for formal permissions.

They showed us around the control centre, the Prime Minister touring the facility with us, then offered cold drinks in a lounge as we informally discussed their particular needs. Those needs were to backup the small town medical centres in the path of the fire, and to assist with evacuations – those residents leaving it to the last minute to abandon their homes. The first Aussie units had returned from Africa, more on the way, some flying down their jeeps from Cairns courtesy of Australian Air Force Hercules aircraft. Jimmy suggested that the international RF units might cause people to ask questions, such as why use foreign rescuers instead of your own. So we arranged a TV interview that evening.

Jimmy said to the interviewer, 'In each and every major deployment of Rescue Force there has been an Australian unit at the front, or an Australian pilot at the controls of our helicopters. You have helped us, so now we're going to return the favour by bringing over rescuers from several nations. That doesn't mean that your own emergency services cannot cope, it means we'd like to lend a hand to those who have helped us so much in the past.'

It did the trick with the Australian public, the French and British Supplementals landing in force at the airport that evening and being filmed by the TV News. An army base was made ready, barrack rooms organised, supplies bought locally. The jeeps started to arrive the next day, an Australian put in charge of each vehicle, the vehicle's crew made up of English, French or New Zealand rescuers. And overall deployment control was

given to the local fire chief, the head of RF Australia working under him, the national group leaders under them. With the army base in a good position, west of the fires, teams were sent out the next day. We toured the base that evening, finding that our people had treated a dozen locals for smoke inhalation, some for minor burns, and two suspected heart attacks. They now made plans for a mass evacuation of a small hospital, our distinctive white jeeps already a regular feature on the news.

Having remained for three days, the daily routines of the rescue teams now settled, we flew directly to Hong Kong, re-arranging the trips to Samoa and New Zealand for the New Year. Po picked us up in the Rollers, a security detail provided, and we booked into his hotel, Shelly soon swimming across the pool. When I picked her up and threw her across the pool she loved it, coming back for more, Helen and I getting looks from other guests by throwing our daughter across the pool to each other. Bored of that, Helen and I sat, Shelly climbing out off the water by herself, running and jumping with a shriek. When Jimmy turned up in the pool with an unknown leggy beauty we exchanged looks, agreeing not to mention French Michelle. Shelly swam straight to Jimmy, inspecting the new face with him. When Jimmy launched Shelly across the pool his new date was horrified, our daughter soon swimming back to him and wanting more. I grabbed her away, giving Jimmy some time to be with his new woman, whoever she was.

The leggy babe joined Jimmy for a meal with Po and us, but sat too far away from me to interrogate. By the end of the night Helen and I were dying to find out who she was, were they at it, and did Michelle have a gun back at the house. Sharing a car to the casino, I asked Po if he knew. The useless bugger just shrugged. At the casino I decided to find out.

‘Jimmy is too rude to introduce us, so I’m Paul.’

‘Not ... good English,’ she came back with.

‘Anya is from Croatia,’ Jimmy explained. ‘So unless you speak some Serbo-Croat it will be a hard conversation.’

He neglected to tell me she spoke German and Russian. I reported back to Helen, none of us knowing where the hell Anya came from. Ling eventually turned up, greeting Anya as if they knew each other. We cornered Ling.

‘Who’s the woman?’ I asked.

‘She’s a model. Jimmy saw her picture in a magazine and made contact, inviting her here,’ Ling reported.

Helen and I exchanged looks; it was not like Jimmy. There had to be an angle, someone Anya knew, or was related to. We spent an hour scratching our heads, the mystery woman driving us nuts.

At the bar, with Anya powdering her nose, I closed in on Jimmy. ‘OK, the suspense is killing us. Who is she, and what’s the connection?’

Jimmy smiled. ‘In ten years or so she will have a role to play.’

‘I knew it!’ I explained it to Helen and we both relaxed, making up scenarios for her, some very bizarre.

Doc Graham turned up the next day, which was odd, because he was supposed to be in Canberra.

‘Doc Graham?’ Jimmy asked.

‘You ... sent for me?’

‘I ... sent for you before I left Canberra.’

‘What?’ He took in our faces.

‘You turned left at Singapore,’ I said. ‘Should have gone right.’

Jimmy shook his head. ‘Now that you’re here, do a review of the Rescue Force branch on my authority. Make it thorough, then get on a plane for Oz. Oh, while in Oz, use emergency funds to help the displaced people, make a big show of what a nice chap I am. In the meantime, book-in, grab a shower, join us later.’

‘I’m going to buy you an atlas,’ I told him.

Muttering under his breath, Doc Graham booked in.

The next day, with Doc Graham inspecting the local RF unit, we flew to Shanghai for a quick visit to the brain trust kids, just Jimmy and myself. Our 737 landed at the military strip again, and we were whisked away in a coach to the military compound that encircled the kid’s college. In the foyer of the college we met Han.

‘They all settled in?’ I asked.

‘They have adjusted very well,’ Han reported as he led us on. ‘None have requested a return to Kenya.’

‘No family there, that’s why,’ I commented. ‘The only family they know are the other kids.’

We entered the computer room, a few faces turning up to us, many just ignoring us, the various computer screens holding the attention of the kids.

I glanced at one screen, a schematic of a car displayed. 'Electric car?' I knowingly enquired.

'I dedicate three hours a day to the project,' the young lad informed us. 'My area of interest is the primary shell, dynamics and safety.'

'It would go a lot faster if it had furry dice hanging from the mirror and flames painted on the side,' I told the lad, making him laugh.

Han reported, 'The project is being mirrored by a team in Beijing, but the youth here have already outsmarted our team.'

Jimmy led us away from the studious kids. 'Han, I have a project for you. Inject some of the kid's blood into ordinary pigs, wait four weeks, then extract the pig blood and inject into soldiers and monitor the results for both endurance and immunity to disease.'

'The DNA of a pig is, I believe, ninety-eight percent compatible with that of a human,' Han noted. 'Does the pig's physiology ... *filter* the blood?'

'This would be no fun if I told you everything, now would it?' Jimmy teased.

We toured the remaining rooms, taking time to speak with as many kids as we could, asking if they needed anything. They had a few weird requests that we agreed to help with, some Han would facilitate. Overall, they seemed interested only in their own little worlds and their small circle of friends. We gathered the senior students - the elder students - and sat having a coffee for thirty minutes. Their only gripe was one of workload; they were not pressured enough and desired more projects. Jimmy explained the importance of the electric car, but offered a tougher project or two if they made good progress on that. We left them feeling wanted, needed, and appreciated.

Only on the way out did we finally bump into the professor, the man rushing up from the labs in the basement. 'Sorry, critical experiment with battery acid.'

'How's it going?' I asked him.

'Making good progress,' the professor enthused.

‘Make good enough progress and I’ll give you some tougher projects,’ Jimmy offered before we departed.

Han accompanied us back to Hong Kong, staying a night at the hotel, Shelly happy to see him. If she could have stopped calling him “Ham” that would have been great. Still, she called Jimmy “Jilly”, which we did not try and correct.

The next day we reclaimed the 737 and took Helen, Shelly and Big Paul up to Beijing. Another coach transfer delivered us to the same concrete buildings that we had first visited, but now I felt like an honoured guest and not one of the condemned. At first the government stiffbs did not know how to treat Helen and Shelly, glancing at the boss before making suitable noises and offering fingers for Shelly to grip. Helen decided to be bold and get it over with in one go. She approached the Defence Minister and presented Shelly. It took the man a few seconds to melt the hard façade. He grabbed a large piece of paper, coloured marker pens and placed them down for Shelly on a side table, Helen watching our daughter as she keenly scribbled over the paper.

Jimmy stood at the white boards, for thirty minutes of questions, mostly about small detail, before getting to the main point, the alterations of his plans that had upset the detailed Chinese time line. He said to the group, ‘It was always my intention to develop the sub-Saharan states so that they could defend themselves from the Brotherhood. But let’s not kid ourselves: the real reason was to absorb and contain the Brotherhood with the lives of African soldiers.’ He let them think about it for a few seconds. ‘But what if we developed Africa beyond that point? What if ... they could push north? What if they could grab and hold the Suez for us, freeing up Western soldiers?’

He attended a map board and described scenarios, the Chinese making comments.

‘They will take heavy casualties,’ the Defence Minister noted.

‘And what casualties will they take if they defend their borders for ten years?’ Jimmy posed, people exchanging looks.

‘Could they be ready in time?’ a man asked.

Jimmy took a moment. ‘They could with your help. And I can accelerate the discovery of oilfields; some relevant to Africa, some relevant to you. But first, let’s talk of India: when the Brotherhood attack east, India acts as a buffer for you. If we say

that North Africa and Suez is down to me, and the African armies, then your armies need only worry about your western border, and supporting India. The Russians can worry about their Southern Caucuses, Europe draws a line at the Bosphorous, and America defends Israel, the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. If American forces *do not* have to hold North Africa then they have a lot of extra men and resources.'

The Defence Minister posed, 'And if an Africa army landed in South West Pakistan and held that area...?'

'They would absorb The Brotherhood by taking a lot of casualties,' Jimmy noted.

'Would you hold back using them?' the Minister asked.

'No,' Jimmy replied. 'Because if they fail ... the Brotherhood take Africa and kill their families, then destroy the planet. So no, I won't hold back when the fight comes.'

'So ... if Africa developed enough, they could do a lot more than hold their own borders,' the Minister stated. 'And now America is raising a local army in Liberia.'

'Yes, with my guidance – where they take the advice, that is.'

'Then we should look at a similar approach?'

'No,' Jimmy adamantly stated. 'My proxy army ... is your proxy army. If you support me ... then I will grow the army. But we must be careful. If they grow strong, and their political leaders get greedy, they may cause local wars in Africa. It is a slow and deliberate process.'

'Then what should we do towards the aim of a large African army for 2025?' the Minister asked.

'Help me with infrastructure; roads, and railways, hydroelectric projects, some coal-fired power stations, schools and hospitals. For the African army to be capable of attacking north it must be able to feed itself for many years. And that is down to an industrial base. In the short-term, we need only try and accelerate our plans for the Congo, everything else will follow.' Jimmy paused. 'I want you to consider what additional help you will give the Congo if I give you an oilfield in the India Ocean, one that is so big OPEC will be unhappy for you to access it.'

'How big an oilfield?' they pressed.

‘Larger than the find in Cuba.’ A flurry of whispered conversations broke out, Jimmy adding, ‘But there will be a political price I’ll be asking for. And that is Iran.’

‘Iran?’

‘Yes. They’ll try and develop nuclear weapons before 2013, leading to an American military strike.’

‘We will need to discuss that,’ the Minister stated.

‘The oil discovery will mean that you don’t need Iranian oil,’ Jimmy pointed out, letting them think about it.

‘And Liberian oil?’ they asked.

‘Will boost the US economy, which means they buy more goods from you,’ Jimmy answered with a shrug.

‘And the Indian Ocean oil field?’ a man asked.

‘Almost as big as the entire West African field.’

We left them to think about things, flying back to Hong Kong and an ever-curious Po, who did not know why we were so popular with the People’s Republic. The news awaiting us from Bob Davies was that the wildfires were still spreading like wildfire, Doc Graham reporting that our people were flat out busy. We sanctioned extra bodies from the UK and Kenya, but only “white” rescuers from Kenya, not wishing the rural Australians any opportunity to show any prejudice towards black Africans. RF Israel was asked for a volunteer team, and RF Hong Kong complained that they were not being included, but we explained the racial issues of Orientals rescuing people in rural Australia.

Helen and I inspected the apartment Po had bought us as a wedding gift, staff from Pineapple now using it for a holiday, before enjoying a day shopping. Christmas eve was spent at the hotel, Rudd and Cosy and their families flying in that morning. Christmas day was spent at Po’s home, a strange house built into the side of a mountain and spread over six floors. Ling was now pregnant, but unmarried, her sister married with two kids already. Hancock from the RF unit popped over for lunch, still unhappy at not deploying to Australia.

The next day, with the wildfires still a problem, Jimmy altered New Year; we were all going to spend it in Sidney, Australia, Po invited along. Everyone packed up Boxing Day, and we all hopped onto the same 747 southbound the next day, managing to find a hotel with rooms. In reality, Jimmy had pre-booked a

block of rooms, but we had to maintain the public façade of being mere mortals. Big Paul's family were already waiting at the hotel, as were Ricky and Rob from the house - they were off shark fishing; "man fishing" as they put it to Helen.

Our arrival back made the Australian news, and on the second day we flew over to Canberra to meet Doc Graham, getting a firsthand assessment. A third of our staff were acting as paramedics to the fire fighters, the rest busily evacuating homeowners - who always hung on to the last minute before fleeing. A few locals had now been killed, many burnt, a few of ours suffering burns and smoke inhalation injuries. The number of homes destroyed was also rising rapidly, Doc Graham busy arranging temporary rented homes and issuing grants from us; we were becoming popular "down under".

Back in Sydney, Jimmy invited Mac and the senior Kenyan staff over for New Year, a bit of a working holiday since they could pop to Canberra and help out as well. Without me knowing it, Hal had been on a mission to California, to round up experienced fire fighters; he landed with a team of sixty, kit and all, Jimmy only mentioning it when they arrived. Hal and Hacker joined us for New Year, both itching to get into Hueys and help out, but both ordered to stand down by Jimmy.

Hal had not only been in California to recruit the fire fighters, he had spoken to a film director about the script Jimmy had written. When he mentioned that we would be funding it - as well as supplying all the extras and helicopters for free - it was a done deal; location scouts were on their way to Kenya. Hacker would also feature in the movie. They had not known each other in Vietnam, but had served in the same unit, so Jimmy had been a bit creative with the script.

New Year's Eve was spent at a restaurant in Sydney, the roof garden of the building offering a view of the Sydney Harbour Bridge and its famous firework display. New Year's Day was odd in the fact that we were swimming on Bondi beach, calling people back in chilly England and winding them up about how warm it was; I was applying suntan cream on New Year's Day. Not even Kenya was this warm in January.

Mac and the guys soon headed over to Canberra to help out, and to chat to old friends. The local Australian helicopter pilots had all read the books, making our aging and veteran pilots very

welcome. Keen now to move on, Helen fired up her laptop and made plans to get us to New Zealand and Samoa, the New Zealand team rotated out before New Year. We had also rotated out a number of British and French Supplementals that had families, and were unhappy to be away for the Christmas duration. They were in a minority, many opting to stay put and help out.

We left Australia having achieved what we wanted to achieve: everyone in Australia now knew our faces and Rescue Force was both popular and respected. Landing back at the house, Jimmy handed Helen a pregnancy kit. I stopped and stared at her, and she looked back a little sheepish.

‘Jimmy said it was time,’ she offered, deflecting any criticism of my lack of input, other the obvious biological input.

Jimmy sat and checked his emails. ‘You can’t have just the one child, and we all know you’ve discussed that, so be happy. It will all work out fine.’

‘Another daughter,’ Helen informed me. ‘Lucy.’

I wasn’t quite sure what I felt as I stood there. I should have been mad at Helen and Jimmy for conspiring, but the thought of another Shelly was secretly delighting me. ‘I wanted a boy,’ I said as I sat behind my computer.

‘You did?’ Helen puzzled.

‘No, he did not,’ Jimmy said without looking around.

‘Best go pee on the stick, Dearest,’ I told Helen.

She came back five minutes later, smiling widely.

‘So ... Lucy then,’ I let out with a sigh. ‘Best do some work to cover the cost. Kids aren’t cheap, you know!’

‘I think you’ll cope,’ Jimmy mentioned.

The next day a fish tank arrived, since Jimmy said it coincided with Helen’s pregnancy. We scratched our heads about that all day, having been told to stay out of the lounge. Finally, we were summoned. And what a tank! Ten foot long, four foot tall on a strong metal stand, the top was over Jimmy’s head. Along with the “M” Group we stood and stared, since it seemed empty.

‘You need some goldfish,’ I suggested.

Jimmy ordered the curtains pulled, the lights turned off. We closed in, our eyes adjusting to the dark. Small flickers of light caught our attention, becoming brighter, soon distinct patterns of

fluorescent jellyfish, and quite beautiful: red, blue and white flashes of light streaking along the jellyfish. I lifted up Shelly and she fell silent, staring through the glass at the display of light and colour.

Whispering, Jimmy said, 'What do you think she'll be when she grows up?'

Helen and I exchanged looks. 'A ... biologist?' Helen asked.

'A marine biologist,' Jimmy informed us.

We studied the jellyfish with renewed interest, our daughter staring in silent appreciation of the spectacle, others closing in for a better look.

Countdown

On January 12th, Jimmy said it was time to begin the countdown.

I stood rigid and worried for a moment. 'Count ... down?'

'To a major quake in 2004.'

'Oh. How ... major?'

'Three hundred thousand dead.'

'Ah. That major. So, where is it?' I asked.

'Sumatra.'

'Straight forward enough,' I suggested.

'It's offshore, causing a tidal wave that spreads out and slams into about three thousand miles of coastline.'

'Ah,' I loudly let out. We'd be a bit stretched.'

'And we risk being exposed.'

'By putting our people in there first,' I surmised. 'Can we use Crusty and his software?'

'Yes, but it will still seem ... odd, to the world. There'll be a lot of questions afterwards.'

'Where does the wave hit?' I puzzled, thinking what country had a coastline that big.

'Sumatra, Thailand, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka,' Jimmy listed off. 'It'll even touch Kenya and East Africa.'

'Any damage in Kenya?' I asked. We had a beach hotel – on the beach!

‘Some, a five foot wave, a bit damp afterwards. Crusty will have to join “M” Group first, or he won’t play ball. And that means soon. We’ll need a few minor successes in the old earthquake-prediction game before 2004.’ He lifted a sheet for me to read. ‘We’ll discuss it at the first formal “M” Group meeting for world leaders.’

‘African Industrial Development Conference?’ I read aloud.

‘It’s in Paris, in three weeks. We’ll hold the “M” Group meet afterwards, and showcase Africa at the same time. CAR Ltd organised it just before Christmas, I’ve notified the “M” Group nations I want a formal meeting.’ He lifted a second sheet.

‘Cuban Industry Fair?’

‘It’s four weeks later, in Cuba, just to give the Yanks a nudge. Remind them of the opportunities, now that oil is flowing.’

Crusty came to the house for “a chat”, but walked into an “M” Group meeting, Sykes in attendance. Crusty took in all the faces, puzzling the meeting, not least because Big Paul had his jacket off and shoulder holster visible.

‘Come in, Dug,’ Jimmy urged, gesturing our earthquake expert to a seat. ‘There are some things we need to discuss, but first I need you to sign a disclaimer, otherwise known as the Official Secrets Act.’

Sykes presented Crusty with a series of forms to sign, handing him a pen.

‘And what has this ... to do with me?’ Crusty asked.

‘As you know, I work closely with many of the world’s governments, and some areas of that work we’d now like you more involved with. It also comes with more money for you personally, and a bigger budget for your software and tsunami warning system.’

‘Oh. Er ...’

‘And if you don’t sign we sack you, or shoot you. Or both,’ Jimmy added.

Crusty decided to sign all the documents and hand them back to Sykes.

‘So, let’s start at the beginning,’ Jimmy said. ‘There exists a very powerful clairvoyant called Magestic, but not one of the fake Magestic psychics you find at Blackpool Pier. This Magestic predicts many things with pin-point accuracy, which is

why many of the world's governments listen to him.' Jimmy gestured around the room. 'Deputy Direct Sykes of MI6, Keely of the NSA, Han of the Chinese Government, Jack from the UK Government, David from Israel, Michelle from France, Ivan from Russia. And in case you're wondering, I make a lot of money from the stock markets because I get told what stocks will rise and fall.'

'Bloody hell,' Crusty let out. 'This clairvoyant ... he's on the level?'

'He ... predicts earthquakes, and other disasters.'

Crusty stared back, wide-eyed. 'Rescue Force! Always in the right place at the right time.'

'Exactly,' Jimmy stated. 'But we have a problem. In the years ahead there are going to be some very large earthquakes, a lot of damage and death, and we're going to help. The problem is... how do we evacuate a place without revealing our sources?'

Crusty smiled. 'With earthquake prediction software that's been rigged in advance.'

'Well done,' Jimmy offered. 'For the next few years I'm going to tell you when earthquakes will appear —'

'And I'll massage the data,' Crusty said, nodding. 'Going to have every scientist on the planet pouring over the data.'

'Which is why we'll keep it secret and secure,' Jimmy suggested. 'You may need a bodyguard at some point.'

'When's the next major quake?'

'Christmas, 2004, a sub-ocean quake off Sumatra —'

'There've been plenty of those throughout history,' Crusty put in.

'This one will create a tsunami that slams into eight countries, killing three hundred thousand. Unless...'

'We convinced the world we're right, and evacuate the beaches,' Crusty finished off.

'You will, unfortunately, be closely monitored from now on, your phone tapped, your movements noted,' Jimmy explained. 'Nothing to worry about, it's just that we very much need you to assist us with this project.'

'If it saves lives, I'm in,' Crusty said with some conviction.

'Good man,' Jimmy responded. 'Now, get to work on that software, and your budget for the tsunami education and warning system will be dramatically increased next week.'

The French President was reportedly delighted to be hosting the first formal “M” Group meeting, and more than happy to assist with the African Conference as well. Security would be a nightmare, what with Art Johnson coming over, the Russian President and the Chinese Premier. But that was down to the French, and not our headache. We booked rooms in a top hotel, three whole floors of rooms. Staying with us would be the executives from CAR Ltd, all of them, our facilitators from the corporation in the Congo and our people at the Foreign Office in London, plus senior Rescue Force staff. Rescue Force had nothing to do with the conference, but it was a chance to showcase the group and boast of successes, not least the recent Australian deployment.

We flew from Bristol Airport to Paris, less than an hour, and were met by a small fleet of mini-buses courtesy of the French Government, then stop-started through Paris traffic to the hotel. Booked in, we knocked on doors and greeted our people, each given a mini-briefing on what we wished to achieve in the next few days; people to meet and nudge, some to drop hints with, some to wind-up. Dining at the restaurant downstairs that evening, I recognised a face at almost every table. All our enemies needed was just the one bomb and we’d all be gone. And this being France, I was nervous.

Shelly always behaved well at meal times, since she would let nothing get in the way of stuffing her face till she burst. The hotel staff found a high chair for her and she munched away, listening to the grown-ups talk about the upcoming events. Rudd and Cosy had travelled up for the show, since they were heavily involved in the Kenyan aspects of CAR Ltd, and both tickled Shelly from behind as they passed. Cosy even stopped to help feed her, a process that simply involved putting food within a yard of Shelly and watching it magically disappear. We checked that no spoons were missing afterwards.

The first day of the show, held at a purpose built conference centre, was for politicians only, and the various groups and their bodyguards now toured the stands. The CAR stand was by far the largest, some twenty of our people stood ready to take questions, or to illustrate answers by pointing at the colourful charts and displays behind them. Our Congo team stood in front

of a large map of Eastern Congo, many photographs depicting all of our good work. The Russian mining and oil companies that we partnered had stands, Yuri and Marko stood with their teams. The Chinese Government had a large stand, hoping to get some business from the conference, as did French and British mining companies. British Aerospace and Airbus had stands, as did a variety of European manufacturers that had wished to attend.

We toured the various displays, the walkways jammed with groups of African leaders, the various world leaders well blanketed by their security as they toured around. We stopped to greet all of the Africa leaders, even those we had not met previously, and stood in a corner for ten minutes with Art Johnson and his team, coffee in plastic cups and French doughnuts. He was keen to meet with the leaders of Sierra Leone, Liberia and Nigeria, but expressed a wish to avoid the new government of Guinea, making me smile. The Chinese were busy trying to do business with countries they did not have a presence in, and they also wanted to meet with the leaders of Sierra Leone and Liberia. The Rescue Force stand received plenty of attention, information packs handed out to those Africa nations that did not yet have their own units. Mac, Coup, Bob Davies and Doc Graham stood in their white jackets with six members of RF UK, plus another six from the French RF unit.

‘Mac, you’ve shaved,’ I said as we neared.

‘Had a bath and washed the sand out as well,’ he retorted.

‘Any business?’

‘Aye, they all want a fucking unit,’ Mac grumbled. ‘Why wouldn’t they.’

Bob said, ‘New Zealand got wind that you doubled the size of the Australian unit. They’re whinging.’

‘Let them whinge,’ I said. ‘When we’re ready ... we’re ready. Besides, Jimmy said the next one would be Papua New Guinea.’

‘Papua?’ Bob questioned. ‘I suppose, they get earthquakes.’

‘How’s Darfur?’ I asked Bob.

‘Getting worse, those camps are growing,’ he reported. ‘We’ve pulled people from all over, got two hundred up there, more on the way.’

Jimmy approached. ‘Bob, while I think of, I’ve sanctioned an increase in the Sumatra unit.’

‘How much of an increase?’ Bob queried.

‘Up to two hundred bodies.’

‘Two hundred?’ Bob repeated. ‘That’s more than double.’

‘They’re cheap,’ I mentioned.

‘How about New Zealand?’ Bob asked. ‘They’re not happy.’

‘How many bodies does their government fund?’ Jimmy asked.

‘They fund twenty, we fund twelve.’

‘Tell them we’ll match their funding if they wish to go to forty and above. And send them all to Darfur, show them what it’s really all about.’

After lunch, the various African leaders continued to wander around the trade stands, whilst the “M” Group countries met upstairs in a private room. The explosives sniffer dogs had been around, the room checked for bugs. Jimmy walked in as if he owned the place, everyone waiting his attendance around a large circular table. He adjusted a set of white boards and maps, and faced the group as I smiled towards some of the “M” Group members who lived at the house.

All of the people I had met were now in attendance, odd to see the “M” Group members from the house sat behind their political paymasters. Art Johnson’s team was the biggest, an Admiral and General sat near.

‘First of all, can we all consider just who ... we have brought with us, and whether or not they are security cleared for this meeting?’

The leaders glanced around at their translators and assistants. No one volunteered to leave.

Jimmy pointed at a man to the right of French President. ‘In years to come he will breach security. I’m afraid he cannot be here today, Mister President.’ He waited.

The French President seemed most put out, but sent the man out after a few seconds thought.

‘Thank you, Mister President. Welcome to you all, this first official “M” Group meeting of world leaders. I hope that it is harmonious and productive. First, since we are all here, I would like to discuss an earthquake. I have started to make plans to attend an earthquake, but such actions will risk exposure to some degree, certainly a lot of publicity.

‘Around Christmas 2004 there will be a large earthquake off the coast of Sumatra, not uncommon for that region. That

earthquake will create a Tsunami, a tidal wave that will strike Indonesia, Thailand, Bangladesh, India and Sri Lanka, causing a lot of damage and a great loss of life. Rescue Force will be deployed *before* the quake, because getting their twelve hours later will achieve little. I will also be issuing a public warning.'

People glanced at each other.

'Between now and that date we shall make known that we have computer software that accurately predicts earthquakes, and – as you can imagine – that software will have many successes between now and that date, giving us credibility.'

'Why risk exposure?' Art Johnson asked.

'Simple. Three hundred thousand dead, two million homeless.' He waited.

'The project ... is more important,' Art Johnson suggested. From the looks on various leaders faces, he had support.

'True. But I will not sit by and watch these people die, nor the millions that will die for various reasons between now and 2025. There is no point in saving humanity ... if we lose our humanity along the way.' He let them think about it. 'And after this earthquake, there will be others, some in populated areas in Western cities, some in China. Millions will die. If we send in Rescue Force afterwards, millions will still die. What say the Chinese Government?'

The translator said, 'We will not stand by whilst millions of our citizens die needlessly.'

'And, knowing that a major America city will be destroyed, killing millions, what say the Americans?'

Art Johnson took a moment. 'We'd want to evacuate ahead of time, of course.'

'Such an *evacuation* ... would only be possible if our predictive software was trusted. Since both China and America have a lot to lose, I will proceed with the project. Do the other nations have a problem with that?'

The leaders glanced at each other, no one raising a voice.

'OK, let's consider Africa ... and its role in 2025.' Jimmy drew up the scenario of a Middle East falling apart economically, politically, and then the rise of the Brotherhood. He then illustrated various sub-Saharan armies holding the line and moving north, holding Suez, and even invading Western Pakistan. A line was drawn on the map where he expected Russia

to hold its southern border, the same for China, the Europeans holding the Bosphorous Straits, the Americans patrolling the oceans.

Art Johnson raised a finger. 'There's no mention of US land forces?'

'If the Africans did not hold North Africa, then your land armies would have to, right up to the Israeli border. If they're not needed, then it is down to you where they would be.'

The Russians and Chinese asked where the Americans would be, an academic question without the Americans knowing the circumstances at the time.

Art Johnson said, 'They'd be where most of the fighting was.'

Jimmy explained, 'That would be one of two places: either the Israeli border, or Greece.'

Sykes raised a finger, Jimmy gesturing towards him as he sat behind the British PM. 'The Greek Army would not last five minutes. Nor would the Bulgarians or Romanians, nor Montenegro or Cyprus.'

'A good point; there is no strong military power in that area. But don't overlook the civilian population. Consider Malta.' He attended a map. 'It would fall very quickly if North Africa was lost. But what if you landed a thousand troops, but with fifty thousand rifles, plenty of ammunition? The Maltese population are not going to sit by and be slaughtered; they'll fight back with vigour. And, if the civilian population of Sicily and Southern Italy, and Greece, we so armed ... they would fight. Not only that, they would absorb the Brotherhood's fighters.'

'And take heavy civilian casualties,' the British PM noted.

'And what casualties will they take after the Brotherhood impose Sharia Law?' Jimmy posed, his hands wide. 'Half would be killed in the first six months. In any future conflict of this nature you must consider an armed civilian response, possibly some training beforehand.'

'And what of Israel?' Ben Ares asked. 'How many soldiers to defend our borders?'

'More than you'd have alone,' Jimmy remarked. 'But, if the Kenyan Rifles set-up a kill-zone in the deserts, no insurgents would get through. Of course, the Kenya Government might expect some ... remuneration for their efforts.'

'No doubt,' Ben Ares quipped.

‘One way to deal with the Brotherhood, is to play to their weaknesses. They want to attack Israelis and Americans. So, if you set-up bases in the desert they’ll come to you in droves, like flies to a fluorescent light. If such bases, American bases, were set-up in areas of flat desert you could absorb and kill a large number of them, slowing up any advance into Europe and elsewhere. And, by 2025, you’ll have technology to use such as automated lasers; they’ll blind anyone approaching. The problem will be one of economy and cohesion. We are all here today, getting along well, but that will not be the case in the future. There will be problems that prevent American, Russian and Chinese leaders sitting around the table together. That will not prevent you from defending your borders, but you will lose effectiveness by not working together. Then there are a number of economic problems to face. So, ladies and gentlemen, tactics for 2025 are only valid if we get there with some money to spend, and talking to each other.

‘One point that you can *all* agree on, is Africa. If you help the economies of the African nations, I will raise an army and try and take North Africa. That will benefit you all, whether you like each other or not. And I’m confident that by 2025 I could offer you an army of three hundred thousand men, all trained to the same standards as the Kenya Rifles.’

‘We have been studying the Kenya Rifles,’ the French translator said for his boss. ‘They would hold their own against five soldiers of any nation represented here. An army of three hundred thousand would do a lot more than just hold the line!’

‘You sound almost ... cautious,’ Jimmy noted. ‘Rest assured that the Africans will never consider invading anyone, but may war with each other. To that end, I know where the flash points are in the future, and my corporations are creating important links between nations to prevent any single African army being a threat to its neighbours. And such an army will not have tanks and aircraft, nor ships. They are infantry.

‘Now, whilst we are on Africa, there will be significant oil discoveries in years ahead that will help to keep oil prices low for us all. But ... OPEC will try and get involved, to our detriment. If oil is sold outside of OPEC, and not necessarily in dollars, it will be cheaper ... and not subject to political control. Saudi Arabia will be a problem when oil starts to flow.’

The French asked, 'Will OPEC drop the dollar?'

'Yes, before 2025,' Jimmy answered. 'It depends on a few factors, but most likely around 2019.'

'And the effect on the American economy?' Art Johnson asked.

'Would be terrible ... without advance knowledge,' Jimmy suggested. 'But, since such a move would also harm many of the people around this table ... I think we'll come up with some plans ahead of time. Such as ... keeping African oil in dollars.'

'Would that be enough?' Art Johnson asked.

'By time we get to 2025 Saudi oil is well past its peak, Iraq oil going strong, so too Iranian, but African oil will equal Gulf oil. The Gulf will not be in trouble in 2025, but well past its peak. And there will be some countries oil free.'

'Oil free?' our PM asked.

'Sweden and Norway will be oil free by then,' Jimmy explained. 'They'll use hydroelectricity and electric cars. France will go all-nuclear, making good use of electric cars, and sell electricity to many other nations. China will be mostly oil free by that time. The main oil consumers will be the US, South America, India and Asia.'

'We don't move away from oil?' Art Johnson puzzled.

'No, because those that follow you are too stupid. America will suffer the consequences. Your great savoir, in the decades ahead, will be China.'

Art Johnson exchanged a look with the Chinese Premier.

The French President had been making notes. 'We sell electricity? To who?'

'To the UK, Holland and Belgium, Germany,' Jimmy listed off. 'Many countries.' The French President seemed pleased with the news, almost proud. Jimmy asked him, 'I would like France to assist with commercial air traffic to the Congo, direct flights from Paris once a week or more. I am also opening up the area for tourism, the Rift Valley north of Goma. Russian and British workers can fly to Paris and change flights for the Congo, sometimes flying direct.'

'OK, let's talk about Cuba. There'll be a trade conference in Cuba in four weeks time, similar to this one. I hope all here, except the US of course, will send senior representatives and your industrialists. Cuba has a lot of oil, and there will be many

lucrative contracts in the years ahead. Whether US companies are involved or not ... is entirely down to the US. Some American corporations will be involved indirectly via my company, CAR Ltd. I would like the Russians and Chinese to help ensure that my company gets some concessions in Cuba, which will then give our partner US companies some exposure in Cuba – helping towards a peace between America and Cuba.’

‘And if there is no progress?’ Art Johnson asked.

‘Then you’ll lose out on good trade opportunities, and Cuba will end up rich – and hostile. The opportunity is there to normalise relations, a costly mistake if missed.’

‘We are making progress,’ Johnson insisted.

‘Perhaps ex-President Harvey could visit,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘The first former US President to do so.’

‘We’ll ... discuss that,’ Johnson hesitantly offered.

‘On the subject of the Caribbean, I would like Russia and China to keep in mind that Venezuela is run by a nutcase, and will end up as a poor and war-torn nation ... unless assisted. It’s President cannot, and should not, be supported by anyone. The chaos in that country is achieving nothing for the world, or the advancement of the world. And, in years to come, they will deliberately provoke a US President, leading to a war if we are not careful, a costly war for America. That is to be avoided, due to the damage it does to the American economy, and to the dollar. It is the key trigger event that takes OPEC away from the dollar.’

People started making notes.

The French President unhelpfully put in, ‘If OPEC switches, it will be the end for America.’

‘Not the end,’ Jimmy quickly got in, ‘but a serious economic crisis, mass unemployment, and the rise of right wing elements in American politics.’

‘Can a switch be avoided?’ the UK Prime Minister asked.

‘With a great deal of hard work, yes,’ Jimmy replied. ‘But that *hard work* would mean a significant shift in US fiscal policy, something that is unlikely to be palatable to any US President in the future. Which leads us to the current economic crisis.’

‘What crisis?’ Art Johnson asked.

‘The one boiling slowly away in western house prices. Between now and 2007, house prices will rise due to a booming

world economy, and the more they rise the more investors will buy additional properties. From 2005 onwards, US and European bankers will invest heavily in the property and mortgage market, in particular in the mortgages for poor people. Chinese investments into those banks will fuel the rises, causing a peak and a snap-back, leading to a severe economic crisis. The money markets will freeze and need bailing out, so much so that the US deficit reaches a dangerously high level. That crisis *will* be avoided, not least because Russian and Chinese investors are already aware of it, and I am taking direct steps to help counter its effects. In Europe, the British and French Governments must do all they can to regulate the investment branches of their banks, and keep capital reserves high. They should also avoid investing in Icelandic banks, putting that country on a lower credit rating if Iceland continues to invest heavily in the US sub-prime mortgage market – starting now.

‘The US will suffer when the crisis hits, but those affected the worst will be Greece, Spain and Portugal in Europe, plus Iceland. In the UK, six principal banks will go bust and need government bailouts.’

‘We’re confident that *will not* happen,’ the UK Prime Minister insisted. ‘We are keeping a very careful eye on it.’

Jimmy nodded, ‘Unfortunately, there is only so much I can do to affect the US markets, so it will be down to the Chinese to avoid investing in the US mortgage market to stem the crisis.’

‘We are taking steps,’ Johnson insisted. ‘No nation should be cautious about investing in the US markets.’

Jimmy countered with, ‘Between now and 2006, all nations should be cautious of US property investments.’

The Chinese Premier said, ‘We will take Mister Silo’s advice on the matter.’ The Russians echoed that sentiment, clearly annoying Art Johnson.

Jimmy explained, ‘The economic crisis of 2008 is far worse than what you may perceive as lost investments between now and then. But, the Chinese should have no problem with investing in business property, or quality housing projects, up till mid 2005. A point, sir, at which *you* may be out of office.’

He took a sip of water. ‘OK, next ... India. Between now and 2009, a number of terrorist attacks will take place in India, organised by Pakistani Taliban fighters and other Pakistani

groups. Those attacks will bring the two nations close to war. I would like the US and the UK to assist India with developing a dedicated counter-terrorism force, the details of which I will supply soon. I would then like China to appoint me as mediator to the Indians over disputed border regions. I will require China to be the big man, and to concede to the Indians a few miles of border. Thereafter, we need to see China ease tensions with India, improve trade and co-operation, towards the goal of supporting India – should it be attacked by the Brotherhood. China needs to keep in mind that India is the buffer between the Middle East and its own territory: the better India does in the fight, the less China has to do.

‘OK, Sri Lanka. The Chinese will assist the Sri Lankan Government in their fight against the Tamils. No one ... should criticize that action. The Chinese will then build a port in Southern Sri Lanka. I would like that port extended so that it could facilitate a US naval fleet.’

Jimmy illustrated a map of the Indian Ocean. He drew a line from Sri Lanka to Kenya, then from Sri Lanka to Australia. ‘Those lines, are the lines that the US Navy has to maintain in order to prevent the Brotherhood spreading themselves around Asia. The Key port is Sri Lanka, the only one that can be trusted in a time of crisis.’

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the Admiral that we had met, asked, ‘What about the port in Somalia?’

‘That port is useful, but you can’t take on supplies there,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Not even water. In years to come a new port will be built in Kenya, also by the Chinese, and that would be an important forward base.’

The meeting dragged on for another thirty minutes, becoming a question and answer session, before we broke for the day. But breaking for the day simply meant that we travelled around to the embassies of each nation and had a private chat with the respective leaders. We left Art Johnson at the US Embassy to the last, arriving at 8pm. With him were his team; his Chief of Staff, his National Security Advisor and the Admiral.

‘Not sure I like our dirty laundry aired in public,’ he began with.

‘You don’t have to attend these things,’ Jimmy countered. ‘And if there are some subjects you want kept quiet, let me

know. Besides that, be happy that all those nations are talking, not fighting.'

'You're holding back countries from investing with us,' he complained.

'Get your house in order, and I'll reverse that,' Jimmy said with a false smile.

'So if I asked you for a detailed plan on *how* to avoid the crisis, *and* get the investment, you could give us that?'

'I could.' Jimmy took out a thin document and handed it over.

'This my homework?' Art Johnson asked.

'It is. And you need only stop fraudulent mortgages.'

'Fraudulent?' the Admiral repeated.

'Yes, fraudulent. At the moment, people have to prove income and possess a good credit rating to get a mortgage. In years to come your unscrupulous American mortgage re-sellers will grant mortgages to anyone who can sign their own name. That leads to a spike in prices, followed by millions of defaults. All you need to do, to avoid the crisis, is to apply the same standards that mortgage brokers applied ten years ago. Simple.'

'That whole crisis ... is caused by that?' the Admiral asked.

'Yes, just that. And last week the Chinese signed off on building many low-cost homes in the States, a massive investment. Those homes will, however, be rentals and not sold. That building project should help to keep prices to a suitable level. If you then do your *homework*, we'll be fine.'

'So, in effect, you're working around the administration,' Johnson noted.

'That is how things are done in your country, isn't it?' Jimmy teased. 'Free enterprise and all that.'

Johnson smiled, shaking his head. 'That medical insurance company is doing well, saving us a lot of money. The way it's growing it should be number three in less than ten years.'

'Taxing the rich,' I said.

'Taxing the rich?' the Admiral repeated.

'It takes money out of Wall Street,' Jimmy explained. 'Away from short-term investors, who have the money to lose. It'll also be involved in some low-cost property building.'

'Quite ... *socialist*, for Senator Pedersen,' Johnson noted.

'Yeah, but he hides it well,' Jimmy said. 'Oh, we'll need him inside the "M" Group next year.'

‘We will?’

‘Yes, got some projects for him, and we’ll need his help with your replacement.’

‘You don’t feel like helping me stay on?’ Johnson teased.

‘Three Democrat terms? The voters are tired, that’s all. It’s not you or anything you’ve done, just a desire for change that will swing the next election.’

Back at the hotel, after our meal, Cosy came and found us. ‘Got a minute?’

Jimmy gestured him to a chair.

‘The first batch of nurse students will graduate in a few weeks, they’re in a work placement at various hospitals at the moment. Some have applied for jobs in Kenya, but they’re unlikely to find work, even with an Ebede qualification.’

‘Not many nursing jobs?’ I asked, Cosy shaking his head.

Jimmy told him, ‘Any that wish to work in a hospital should be helped and encouraged. Anyone wanting to work in a hospital or clinic in the Congo – that’s fine. The rest can be offered work in Rescue Force, I want none of them out of work.’

‘There’re are sixty of them,’ Cosy warned us.

‘That’s OK, we’ll make use of them,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘What Rescue Force foundation work have they done?’

‘Jeep driving, fitness, map reading, self defence,’ Cosy listed.

‘Be a quick work-up period at Mawlini,’ I realised.

‘Warn Mac they’ll be coming his way,’ Jimmy told Cosy.

‘What about the boys?’ I asked Cosy.

‘There are ten boys in the nursing class, the other seventy will complete their military apprenticeships at the same time. Twenty have been selected for Officer Training, a few sponsored for degrees by the Army.’

‘If any wish to pursue a degree course ... we’ll sponsor them,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Especially studies in oil, geology and business.’

‘The rest go straight into the Rifles?’ I asked.

‘To the Junior Leaders course,’ Cosy explained. ‘It’s separate to main body. Many go on to officer training or helicopters.’

‘Good,’ I commended.

‘Next years sixth form starters number three hundred,’ Cosy warned us.

‘Expand the college,’ Jimmy said. ‘Whatever it takes. How’s that cadet movement?’

‘The Army Cadets have four hundred, aged from thirteen to sixteen. The Rescue Force cadets have two hundred.’

‘Increase the Rescue Force cadets, please,’ Jimmy ordered.

The trade show started properly the next day, African ministers and businessmen touring the stands with invited guests, plus the trade media and those people who wanted to visit, people with business interests in the sub-Saharan region. The halls bustled with activity, the staff on the stands kept busy. We put in an appearance, meeting several groups that we were interested in awarding contracts to in the DRC. Many cups of coffee were downed, many bagels chewed. We did not get back to the hotel till 4pm and I felt exhausted, mentally exhausted, flopping onto the bed, Shelly jumping onto me. Helen and I managed to have a quiet evening, food in our room, and simply sat on the bed watching cable TV.

The next morning we packed early, Helen and Shelly sent back to the house, Jimmy, myself, and many of the CAR staff off to Africa. CAR had booked a 747SP as normal, the plane stuffed with goodies for the region. Travelling with us were senior staff from the French company that had built the international airport, this being our first flight into it; the new airport had only opened a week ago. I made them laugh by warning about a smooth landing, and was their tarmac any good?

I glimpsed the now dormant volcano north of Goma as we descended, and we did manage to touch down smoothly. Stepping down from the plane, I glanced up at the tall and impressive control tower, the controllers inside offering a service to neighbouring Uganda and Rwanda, plus aircraft transiting our airspace. The terminal was impressive, if not way too large for the passenger numbers now scuffing the shiny floor, hairy oil workers in boots. We found Passport Control to be smooth and efficient, the officers well presented.

With our luggage dumped in a secure room we began a tour with the French builders and the airport manager, the man also French. I stepped through the scanners, setting them off, before adjusting my metallic content till they stopped bleeping. They seemed about right. The baggage carousel was switched on and

observed for five minutes before we tried a meal in the departures lounge, just a handful of passengers present. The restaurant offered its patrons a pleasant view of the runway, the full size of the place now dawning on me. Across the runway, I could see maintenance sheds, awaiting an airline or two to park their planes, next to them cargo sheds, finally a high fence with armed guards patrolling. The airport even had a permanent detachment of twenty Congo Rifles - just in case.

In the basement of the control tower we stood behind operators attending orange radar screens, transiting aircraft being advised of other traffic, one Huey passing nearby and being directed away from the airfield's control zone. From the glass tower I could appreciate the entire span of our new airfield, and the size of the undertaking; three miles long by two miles wide. A hotel sat inside the gates, used by transit workers and our staff, alongside a standalone restaurant and a bar. All we needed were some passengers.

I spoke too soon, a German Airbus coming in to land, stuffed full of tourists bound for the new lodges along the rift valley, the flight subsidised by us. It landed smoothly, taxied around and was met by the stairs, passengers soon stepping down to a purpose designed apron coach, the Germans dumped at Arrivals.

'Tomorrow we've got a flight from London,' Jimmy mentioned. 'More tourists, some workers; six international flights a week at the moment, five to Kinshasa, plus a couple of UN flights.'

'Keeps the place ticking over,' I commented.

With our 747SP refuelled, we boarded with the French party, a quick one-hour flight to the second airfield that they were involved with, this one incomplete. We circled the field to let them know we would land, and touched down without permission, taxiing around to a half built terminal. With little ground support save steps, the engines would have to idle, the monstrous engines whining as we stepped down. The workers picked us up in a coach and transported our party around to an unfinished tower. In the breezy tower, glass free, the French pointed out things of interest, displaying a map of the regional "airport-to-be".

Back aboard the 747, we flew south to a third airfield, but this time just circled it to get a view. We landed at Forward base two

hours later, the sun down and night claiming the sky. The facilities at Forward Base were as good as our new airport and we all booked into the hotel. The chitchat at the meal that night was of aircraft, airfields and interesting facts about Charles de Gaul airport in Paris, which these guys built. At least the new terminals they built, since I figured that the original had been there a while.

In the morning we said goodbye to the French and spent the day with our corporation managers, the detail of many projects poured over, money moved around from one project to another depending on their level of priority. The Congo Rifles were still growing, as was our new police force. That police force operated along the same lines as the Rifles; we paid and fed them, trained and equipped them and ultimately influenced them. They had been named as National Police, to differentiate them from their local counterparts, who could only be trusted to direct traffic. Their weapon training was on par with the Rifles, and they took no crap, one of their roles being to monitor local police officers – and to arrest them if necessary. They had their own distinctive jeeps and travelled in groups of at least four. According to the reports in front of us there were now four hundred of them.

The orphanages now reported over fifty thousand kids, but that figure was distorted by the fact that we offered day schooling to locals. Since the kids got three meals a day, locals were onto a good thing by getting their kids in. Feeding those kids was down to the Farms Manager, the man controlling the clearing of forests near the orphanages and the planting of crops, the local farmers given seeds and machinery, but made to sell the produce back at a reasonable rate. There were also dozens of state farms, some of them huge, and within a year we aimed to be net exporters of food.

At 3pm we visited the RF unit, greeting old friends and familiar faces, dining with them that evening and catching up on all the gossip. The rooftop bar had not changed much, the waiters remembering us. The following day was again all paperwork, this time with CAR Ltd and the partner companies, Russian and Chinese. We poked at maps and discussed mining and oil for hours, tightening security where it was needed or requested. A few roads needed to take priority, two bridges needing to be built quickly to save long road journeys. When the hungry industrial

machine had been satisfied, Jimmy ordered revenue directed toward Darfur, two field hospitals of Cubans to be set-up.

Our final meeting regarded Zambia. The Zambian Rifles unit had been launched and was coming along, a few clinics had been built over there, some roads repaired, their RF unit recruiting its first thirty staff. Jimmy was happy enough with the progress so far, agreeing a budget increase for the Rifles now that we could see some tangible progress.

Arriving at the apron, Tubby stood with folded arms, tapping his foot. 'Nice of you to grace us poor humble pilots with your presence.'

'Fuck off,' I told him with a smile. 'And get to the gym, fat bastard.'

'Charming,' Tubby said. 'We be needing parachutes for this trip?'

'No,' Jimmy said with a smile.

Our dated pilot flew us to Kigoma Airfield in our dated Dash-7, a quick hour flight skirting around Burundi airspace. And Rwandan airspace! We landed in the dark, met by a jeep for the very short journey to the RF hotel, now used mostly by the UN. Having booked in and dumped our luggage, we climbed stairs to the rooftop bar and peered down at the floodlit airfield. Nothing seemed different. RF staff called out to us and we joined them at their tables for food, joking the night away under the stars.

Since we had met most of the RF staff the night before, we skipped an inspection of the unit in the morning and took a jeep the short distance to our hotel up the road. The road seemed cleaner somehow, more shops and businesses dotted along it. The hotel manager welcomed us and offered cool drinks in the bar, nothing in particular to report; year on year it plodded along and just about broke even.

Driving through the bustling ferry port area we turned south, taking the lakeside road down to the old refugee camp, now home to a company of Tanzanian Rifles, six green Hueys sat idle. The senior officer welcomed us, the men turning out for inspection, the base having been warned of our arrival the night before. We played like royalty and inspected the lines, talking to the men and the officers at length, trying to make them all feel needed. The officers mess was now a stone building, not the tent I had first seen, and they made us lunch, informing us about day-

to-day operations along the border, and their on-going battle with smugglers of all sorts along the lake. It seemed that an interesting day around here involved chasing pig smugglers in a Huey.

Tubby flew us over to Nairobi that evening, landing late and booking into our usual hotel, and with our usual compliment of Pathfinder bodyguards. A message was waiting for us: CAR and Tanzanian officials arriving in the morning. Rudd and Cosy were back in Kenya from Paris, and met us early, a quick chat about local matters before the main meeting, to be held in a function room of the hotel.

Since discovering oil in Kenya, the Tanzania Government had been encouraging us to sink wells in their country - the risk and cost all ours, of course. Jimmy had resisted so far, wishing them keener on the idea, and more generous on concessions. Our visitors arrived on time, the CAR senior staff welcoming the guests and bringing them in to us. I knew most of Tanzanians from previous meetings, and they all remembered me as I helped to arrange chairs for them.

Settled, they quickly got to the topic of oil exploration. Problem was, they did not have two pennies to rub together. Jimmy was in devious mode, and took thirty minutes to torture them, finally agreeing on offshore test wells, but only if we had a guaranteed concession if oil was struck. That was not a problem, the relevant documents having been brought along, the Tanzanians keen that CAR have rights to all of Tanzania's oil, if there was any. CAR signed, we signed, and the Tanzanians signed, our Kenyan solicitor witnessing and signing. Champagne was brought out, an optimistic gesture.

Then, in an odd move, Jimmy informed our guests that a Chinese rig on its way to Somalia could be diverted to Tanzania. CAR were dumfounded by the move, not least because we knew where the oil was in Somalia. Jimmy reassured them that he would smooth it with the Chinese, and that we had not yet got a CAR concession for Somalia anyway. The Tanzanians left happy, Jimmy telling CAR where he wanted the test drilling to take place, the southern end of Zanzibar Island. Since the rig belong to the Chinese company that we partnered it was not a problem, it was all in the family, the Chinese on their way to Zanzibar anyway.

We thanked everyone for their efforts, Cosy driving us to the airport, where Tubby waited to whisk us up to Mawlini. I made sure our pilot was suitably insulted as we boarded, and took right seat from Sue. Approaching Mawlini, we circled low and slow, Tubby pointing out a new barrack block for nurses in the RF compound, followed by the hotel at the top of the base for oil workers, a new terminal building to handle civilian flights – paid ticket flights – and finally a small town being constructed north of the base for oil workers and families. A little out of practice, I landed us smoothly enough, getting a dollar from Tubby; pocket money for “being a good boy”. It was not like I had ever been rude to him.

Mac picked us up in a jeep, grumbling already about all the extra work, the construction and the extra nurses coming his way. We passed a group of New Zealanders, trainees sweating in the midday heat, their work-up before Darfur. After a cold beer, and a whinge from Mac, the senior staff assembled in the lecture hall, Doc Graham down to take charge of Darfur, virtually all of the regular UK rescuers now assigned to Darfur. We greeted everyone collectively, sitting as Doc Graham gave a presentation on the situation.

It was bad, getting worse, and believed to be about to get much worse. Short and sweet, I considered. We told him about the two Cuban field hospitals, agreed to let him pull in Cuban regulars, and suggested that budget was not a problem. Doc Graham was told to deal with the issues, we’d worry about the money. Mawlini was designated regional command centre for the Darfur operation, the small airstrip in Darfur we had chosen to be named as Forward Base, no permissions from the Sudanese yet. A helicopter-refuelling base had been created in Southern Sudan and already manned by the Rifles, fuel trucks ready. All was set for a minor invasion, and a major operation.

Ten small camps had been set-up along the border with Chad, consisting of white RF tents and detachments of Kenyan Rifles. They already had refugees flocking to them, and Jimmy suggested that they would now grow quickly, food convoys being arranged, not least from our people in the DRC. Looking at the overhead slide for deployment stats, I could see that this would be our biggest deployment to date; we would be stretched.

Taking a break from the meeting, and downing a cold beer, Jimmy said that this would be the making of Cassie, the lady doctor we had met all those years ago in Nairobi. She'd meet her husband, but would also make the movie screen. He also mentioned that we'd lose some people.

'This going to get out of hand?' I asked.

He glumly nodded. 'Big time.'

Back in the meeting we agreed to just about everything Doc Graham asked for, agreeing for him to pull people off other assignments. The new Kenyan and Tanzania nurses would boost numbers, two hundred and fifty of them ready to deploy. Still, it was not a big number for a million refugees, and more than twenty camps.

Back in the damp British weather, at the house, Jimmy turned the lights on in the basement, setting up a command centre for the Darfur operation. When Keely brought down satellite photographs of the area I knew it was serious; we were about to go to war again.

Cassie

Twenty-six year old Doc Cassie landed in Chad with a bump, her Huey blowing up a sandstorm. With the rotors winding down, the engine whining as it lost power, she stepped out with her head down, dragging her two heavy backpacks; her personal kit and her extended-stay RF pack. She took one look at the camp she had seen from the air and wondered what the hell she had let herself in for. She struggled to get her rucksack on before grabbing her second pack, walking towards a waiting jeep and kicking up sand with her boots as she progressed. She noted a broken down bared-wire fence, the bleached bones of a dead animal, and a scorpion, and little else. Sitting down on the jeep's tail, she offloaded her backpack, already sweating. The guys helped to push her pack inside and she grabbed a seat behind the driver, correctly recognising him as Kenyan Rifles as issuing a

Kenyan greeting. She got back a toothy smile in the mirror. Five minutes of bumping along ill-defined tracks delivered her to a large green tent behind a large white tent, faded “UN” initials stencilled onto them.

A large and muscular nurse in a t-shirt greeted her. ‘Ladies: in this tent. Put your kit on a bunk then report to the front of the white tent. And get a bloody hat on!’

Cassie dumped her kit on an available bed, trying not to wake the sleeping occupants. At the front of the white tent she met her team, its team leader checking they were present and correct. Since he only had four to worry about, it was not a difficult task.

With a Huey roaring past, the same nurse appeared. ‘I’m Nurse Sheldon, but they call me “Butch”.’ Cassie resisted a smile. ‘This is Triage Tent One, initial drop off point for wounded or sick. Follow me.’ She turned on a heel. At the next tent she labelled it as Triage Tent Two, then Three; so far, it was not complicated.

‘The accommodation tents for the staff who work these tents are right behind them. You’re newcomers, so you get fuck all sleep for a while. We have a policy of burning out newcomers.’ Cassie blinked. ‘OK, behind the accommodation tents are regular staff tents, be quiet around them or you’ll get a boot up your arse.’ She led the team through. ‘Ablutions hut and ... facilities,’ she said with a dismissive wave. ‘They’re not very private, but who cares. When you are tired as you will be - you’ll not give a shit when you leave a shit.’

The smell hit the group.

‘Yep, it smells, so don’t forget to cover your waste with sand; it then gets burnt with oil. We have locals who do that, plus RF staff who screw up.’ Butch led the team to the left. ‘Food tent: the most important place in the camp. Eat often, even if you’re sick with the shits, keep hydrated or you’ll drop.’

She led the team up a small rise of sand. Standing at the top, the team looked out over a vast expanse of tents and makeshift shelters, most of them blue plastic sheets with “UN” labelling.

Cassie put a hand over her eyes and squinted at the tents, the camp stretching out to the horizon in all directions. ‘How many people are there here?’

‘Sixty thousand, we recon.’

‘And how many of us?’

‘Forty. You work it out. But there’s a UN centre on the far side, Red Cross, and food shipments come in regular from base. You do what you can, and you don’t let it get to you.’

Butch led the team back to the tents, leaving them at Triage Tent One. ‘Get to work, you’re on day shift, which is hot; 8am to 7pm. Lunch is whenever you get a break.’

Cassie and her team stepped inside, to a stink of rotting flesh, the sounds of crying kids and adults in pain.

‘You just arrived?’ a middle aged man asked.

‘Yes,’ Cassie answered.

‘OK, stand outside and make assessments of the newcomers. Turn away the minor wounds or treat them there, get your packs. If it’s life threatening – shout!’

Having retrieved her pack and opened it ready, Cassie sat behind a wobbly trestle table with her team, some shade afforded by the tent. For thirty minutes they waited in the heat, swatting flies, before a dilapidated coach pulled up. A woman stepped down, carrying a newborn, the umbilical still attached and visible. Cassie swallowed.

The same man stepped out from the tent. ‘Lay out a blanket, attend her off to one side. This aint London, love.’

Cassie assisted the woman, whose face remained hidden behind a purple veil. It was a shock, the lack of basic hygiene or medical care. Ten minutes later, satisfied that she had done what she could, Cassie grabbed a man with an infected gunshot wound. She led him inside. ‘Gunshot wound!’ They took him off her. Back outside, Cassie found a man with a deep laceration, and decided to stitch it herself, right there in the sand on her knees, wondering what her previous registrar in St. Barts, London, would have made of it.

At 7pm her team was relieved, Cassie heading straight for her bunk. Butch intercepted her. ‘Eat first, drink, then sleep! Never ... put you head down hungry or thirsty, you’ll wake up feeling like shit and be no use to anyone.’

With what energy she had left, Cassie stomped through the sand to the food tent, finding it bustling with life.

At the counter they said, ‘Heaters packed in.’ The woman gave her three tins of meat, a bottle of water and two cans of lager. Cassie cocked an eyebrow at the lager, before sitting in a free space.

‘New here, love?’ came and Australian accent; Dunnnow.

‘Yes, boss,’ she said, noting the rank insignia on the shoulder.

‘Call me Dunnnow.’

‘Ah, the infamous helicopter pilot. I read the books.’

‘Don’t believe a word of it,’ he said with a smile. ‘I’ve never crashed a Huey, just landed hard a few times.’

‘You a Brit?’ came an American accent, the man sat opposite. He appeared to be around thirty, tanned and unshaven, yet attractive.

‘Yes, I’m Cassie. I didn’t now there was an American unit.’

‘There isn’t yet, I volunteered to join the Kenyan unit. I’m Anton Schapp from New York.’

‘Swiss parentage?’ Cassie asked.

‘You’re good,’ Anton commended. ‘My Grandparents were Swiss. Any specialities?’

‘I can put a peanut on my nose and eat it,’ Cassie offered, making those sat closest laugh.

Two hours later, Anton walked Cassie the short distance to her tent; he was next door. ‘Get rest when you can around here, every minute counts.’

Cassie saluted her new friend, soon fast asleep. In the morning she woke to find a mosquito tent over her.

Sitting up, a woman told her, ‘Don’t forget your mossie tent, or you’ll be bitten to fuck.’

‘Thanks. It was my first day.’

‘Welcome to hell, doc. Wash what you can, stuff your face, drink some water and get to it.’

Cassie grabbed her boots from where she had hung them up, standard RF practice. She looked inside, then checked again with her hand, finally putting them on when certain there was nothing unwelcome making a happy home inside. The second day was even harder than the first, a solid twelve-hour shift with a ten-minute break for lunch. In the mess tent she found the cookers working, a hot meal appreciated. If she could have identified what it was, that would have been a bonus. She sat with her team, but close enough to Anton and Dunnnow to chat.

Six days later she woke to find that she had a day off, and enjoyed a leisurely breakfast, getting to know some of the other doctors. She even had time to make a cup of tea, her first one. Back at the accommodation tents she found a hidden square

walled by tents, a group of nurses sunbathing, several topless, a male doctor sat chatting to one. 'Very Swedish,' she muttered, deciding to catch some sun, down to her bra and knickers.

An hour later someone tapped her foot. 'Fancy a ride?' Anton asked, the nurses making rude noises.

'That's a bit forwards,' Cassie joked.

Anton smiled widely. 'In a helicopter.'

'Ah,' the nurses collectively let out.

Cassie lifted up onto her elbows. 'And where is this helicopter ... heading?'

'Local town; supply hunting, some shopping, cold beer.'

'Cold beer, eh?' Cassie repeated as she stood, dusting off sand and pulling on her trousers. She carefully checked her boots again, and stamped them on, pulling a t-shirt over her head. 'OK, I'm ready. How'd I look?'

'Rough,' Anton said.

'Charming. Typical bloody Yank.'

Ten minutes later, Dunnnow blew up a dust storm and lifted off, soon cheekily setting down on a football pitch in the local town. With two Kenyan Rifles minding the Huey, Dunnnow led the group to the town's café, cold beers ordered. After a cold drink the group split, Dunnnow and two doctors off hunting for fresh fruit and working batteries.

'Fancy a proper shower?' Anton asked.

'First you offer me a ride, now a shower,' Cassie teased. 'Don't I get dinner?'

'Not around here,' Anton said, laughing. He stood, 'Come on, I'll show you pleasures like you've not had for ... a week or so.'

Stood in a hotel room with a wobbly ceiling fan, and gesturing towards the bathroom, Anton said, 'You first, I'll order us some fruit.'

Cassie stepped into the bathroom, enjoying a cold shower a few minutes later, washing out seven days of grime. Back in bra and pants, a towel around her midsection, she thumbed Anton towards the bathroom. 'Wash it, Yank.'

Anton stepped past her. 'Don't eat all the good fruit, it cost ten dollars.'

'You know how to spoil a girl.' She sat, grabbing a melon and cutting it open, savouring the juices.

Ten minutes later Anton appeared in just his trousers, his physique impressing Cassie as she munched and slurped melon. 'Is it tasty?' he asked her.

'A bit, yes,' Cassie responded with a teasing look. 'This is all very forwards - you know that. And you're a New Yorker, which means you're a bit ... you know, *pushy*.'

'It's nice to be in the position where I still feel human, still able date a girl. It's ... been a while.'

'No conquests at Mawlini, that hotbed of alcohol and sexual intrigue?'

'I don't like girls with muscles,' Anton said, grabbing some melon. 'I like women who are slim, petite, and with a cool Brit accent.'

'Careful, you may turn my head. Besides, I haven't asked you the relevant questions.'

'Such as...?'

'You well paid?'

'Nope.'

'Secure job?'

'Nope, downright dangerous.'

'Good working hours and holidays?'

'No, they're terrible. How am I doing?'

'Not good, I'm afraid. Are you great in bed?'

'Not had a lot of practise. I'd need a book or video to get it right.'

Cassie glanced over her shoulder at the bed. 'You reckon it's clean?'

'No, but cleaner than where we're at now.'

'Will they gossip at the base?' Cassie teased.

'Definitely. You'll be known as the whore of Triage Tent One.'

'Oh, that's nurse Denton; she's done all the doctors there. I'd have to make do with second place, I suppose.'

'Then I'm hoping you remember what goes where.'

She leant in. 'I have medical training,' she whispered.

Anton from New York, and Cassie from Brighton on the south coast of England, became an item, sitting together for meals. Everyone knew, and no one cared, they had their own daily battles to get through. Once a week they would try and catch a

flight to the town; twelve dollars for the room, ten dollars on fruit, twenty dollars on the black market for a pack of condoms.

Four weeks into her tour, Cassie got a five-day break at Mawlini with her team, a Huey flight to the nearest airstrip, then a three-hour ride in the Dash-7. Anton had used up a favour or two and swapped shifts around, accompanying Cassie back. And for the next five short days they lounged around the pool, drank heavily and ate well, catching up on much needed sleep, a few days spent in bed, food ordered in from the rooftop bar.

Cassie had only been back on the front line three days when an incident occurred. She had treated a thirteen-year-old girl for a serious vaginal infection, but noted the cut marks. Using an interpreter, she quizzed the family, the father not willing to talk with a “female”. Cassie soon realised that the father had sold the daughter into marriage, not uncommon for the region, but had to take her back when the would-be forty-year-old suitor was unable to get his marital rights of a cold night. The father had then tried a common approach in the region, that of a little DIY surgery with a rusty razor.

When the father finally admitted his actions, by no means illegal in Africa, she kicked him swiftly in the balls, then the face, knocking the man out. She was packed up and put on a Huey within an hour. Back in Mawlini, she had a night to stew over things before a disciplinary hearing. Anton used up another favour and got through to the barracks, a nurse fetching Cassie. It was a brief chat, Cassie doubting her suitability for Darfur.

In the morning Jimmy rang Doc Graham. ‘You got some problems with Cassie I hear.’

‘How the hell did you know that?’

‘I hear things. So?’

‘Yeah, she beat the crap out of a local,’ Doc Graham explained.

‘Why?’

‘Like a lot of fathers up there, he did a bit of DIY female circumcision, or something like that.’

‘What do you have planned for her?’ Jimmy asked.

‘It’s a serious matter. If it reached the press we’d have a problem. I don’t approve of it anymore than anyone else, but it’s their country.’

‘True. Send her on a ten day jungle survival course in the Congo, then back to Darfur.’

‘That’s all?’ Doc Graham challenged.

‘You’ve seen her scorecard; we need her more than she needs us. So that’s all.’

‘Are you taking away my right to discipline those under me?’ Doc Graham pressed.

‘No, I just want the good staff kept in. Teach her, convert her, and lead her ... rather than risking her leaving. And how many times have I challenged your decisions to date ... on matters like this?’

‘Well ... none, really.’

‘Then do as I ask, and *next time* you can ask me if I’m interfering. Bye.’

Doc Graham sat Cassie down and told her how disappointed he was, how much he disagreed with female circumcision, but that it was a serious matter. She was sentenced to ten days jungle survival, starting immediately, after which she would go back to Darfur.’

Cassie apologised for her actions, and said she would do better in the future. Anton called again, and she explained that she would enjoy ten days of rain whilst he suffered in the heat of the desert. She was not bothered by the course at all, and quite looking forward to the challenge. She had attended the Greenhouse in Swindon, and therefore did not need to attend this type of field survival course within three years of joining. Flying off to Forward Base in the DRC, she realised that she could lose Anton, and that was the worry. As for Rescue Force, she had enjoyed the hard basic training greatly and wished to stick at it, but Darfur was hell. The long flight afforded her time to think things through, not least what her parents would say if she left.

At Forward Base, Cassie checked her email at the RF unit, a note from Jimmy Silo himself: “Hope you stick at it. Personally, I would have killed the man, but we can’t judge other people’s traditions ... too much. PS. You’re a dirty stop out, girl!” Cassie smiled widely before deleting the message.

After an arduous seven-hour jeep drive in the dark, bumping along uneven tracks, Cassie and the new recruits arrived at the training ground. Stood up to their knees in mud at the side of the track, the driver said, “I left my cigarettes back at base, I’ll be

back.” He drove off, leaving the group with no leader as the dawn light fought its way through the high trees.

‘What, no instructors?’ a woman complained.

‘It’s a test,’ Cassie pointed out. ‘OK, first things first: running water. I suggest we backup along the track till we find some, then make a camp in sight of the road, leaving a marker on the road. He may not be back for days, so we need shelter – because it *will* rain – and possibly some local food, which we’ll have to catch.’

‘Sounds like a plan,’ a male doctor approved, a giant of a man at six foot five. He led the way in the dawn half-light.

Three days later the instructors arrived, Cassie having organised a dry and efficient campsite. They were most impressed. She had even caught a wild deer and a pig. For the next two days they taught the recruits the best ways to set traps, jungle map-reading, tracking animals, jungle pathways, and how to identify a few edible plants. That led on to jungle medicine; which plants and mosses could be used to cover wounds. They made a number of stretchers from branches and vines and lugged each other around through the forest.

On one particular day they walked two miles to a river and found a small waterfall, all being ordered to jump over, which they found great fun. Downriver, they fashioned ropes from vines and practised rescuing each other. They had to sleep rough that night, little more than their packs and some plastic sheeting, the next day spent fishing by line, spear and improvised nets. When Cassie grabbed a snapping turtle she was told to put it back. Not deterred by that, she swam down and speared a giant catfish, three people needed to haul it to the bank; they ate well that night, joined by the Kenyan Rifles that had been watching them all along. They had never been in any danger, the Rifles sometimes within yards of them and not noticed.

For Cassie, it seemed to end too soon, and she realised that she would seriously miss fun like this if she got kicked out. The return Forward Base meant hot showers and decent food, and time to reflect, soon on a direct flight back to Darfur. Arriving at 7pm, she dumped her bag and entered the mess tent.

‘Here comes trouble!’ someone shouted, cat calls and wolf whistles issued.

She gave a regal bow, and joined her team and Anton. ‘Miss me?’

‘Where you been?’ they asked.

‘Didn’t they tell you? Ten days punishment: a jungle survival course in the Congo. And it rained ... every day.’

‘Lucky bitch,’ a nurse said.

‘Wet, damp, cool, glorious rain,’ she teased, getting bread rolls thrown at her. ‘What’s new here?’

‘Camp has got a lot bigger,’ they reported, ‘but more of us. Another thirty, plus twenty Kenyan nurses.’

Anton explained, ‘Those nurses walk around and do the births, pre- and post-natal. Saves us time.’

The next day Cassie reclaimed the front of Triage Tent One.

Spies

Landing at Mawlini, the base seemed quiet, at least the areas I could see. Mac picked us up and drove us around to the lecture theatre, where Coup and Doc Graham waited for us, four new faces sat in whites two rows behind everyone else.

‘OK, listen up,’ Jimmy began as Mac took a seat. ‘The four gentlemen in whites are ex-SAS troopers.’ Doc Graham glanced around at them. ‘They are in whites because they’re in disguise. This meeting is off the radar, no mention to anyone, or you’ll feel my boot up you arses. These men will be going into Darfur to collect evidence of the fighting, and the killing - by Sudanese Government troops. If they get caught they’ll claim they’re with us, and the Sudanese won’t shoot them as spies. To that ends, you will give them the manual, put them through all of the courses very quickly, get them up to speed on practices, lingo and bad habits. They must be able to pass for some of ours.’

Mac told them, ‘Start drinking heavily.’

‘I think they already have that down,’ Jimmy told Mac. ‘You’ve got four weeks to make them fit it, then add their cover names to the books, fabricate dates, make sure they know all the characters ... and what they look like.’

‘Tubby is the fat pilot,’ I told them. ‘Doc Adam is the loud Christian black guy with six girlfriends!’

Jimmy explained, ‘As far as our people are concerns, these gentlemen are all ex-Army medics, which – technically – they are.’

‘We got all the Pathfinders on the Sudanese border,’ Mac noted. ‘We expecting trouble?’

‘Where we can we’ll get evidence of the slaughter and the ethnic cleansing, and get the UN beating up the Sudanese. I’m also trying to volunteer various African armies as peacekeepers, but so far the outside world is not aware of the problem, not to any degree anyway. The lads behind you will take a few pictures. I’ve also asked a few reporters to come down and embed themselves, to get the conflict better known around the world. We’ll be organising a meeting of African leaders in Nairobi in a few months.’

Coup asked, ‘Can’t we just take a pop at the Janjaween? You invaded Somalia, why not give these guys something to think about.’

Mac did not agree.

‘Mac’s right, the Janjaween have the entire Sudanese Army behind them. That includes tanks and modern jet fighters. Now, for those of you who are not stupid, you will – eventually – have figured out that I’m arranging arms shipments to the rebel fighters, plus food and fuel. So if you see suspicious consignments, that’s because they *are* suspicious.’

The long walk

As Jimmy and I landed at Mawlini, Cassie was adjusting to her new role as part of a Huey team. Anton was not happy, despite the fact that he had also transferred to Hueys; they were going over the border and dropping supplies to the needy, often bringing out wounded aid workers. The Sudanese backed fighters took shots at them and the Sudanese Government said they were not welcome. There were squadrons of Kenyan Rifles on the border if things got out of hand, but each flight was a risk

in itself. Nightly arguments of “risk-taking” between Cassie and Anton led to pleasant “make-up” time behind the tents.

With a report of an attack on aid workers reaching Cassie’s flight, two Hueys took off at 9am on a hot Darfur morning, disappearing through the sandstorms and heading due east. It was a sixty-mile trip, fuel enough on the Hueys. Cassie and her mate sat on the floor, feet out the door and safety rope employed, and enjoyed the breeze and the view as they raced across parched earth. Camel herders were waved at, interesting features pointed out. They passed a few green valleys and climbed as hills and ridges were crossed. The features below gave the impression of river valleys, but each riverbed was dry. Still, green vegetation persisted around the dry riverbeds.

Approaching the pick-up point, radio contact was made with the aid workers, who informed the Huey crew that fighting had caused the wounded to be bussed north, twenty miles. The Huey changed direction and began covering green savannah, Cassie pointing out a lonesome herd of four elephants, a rare sight this far north.

Cassie’s ride suddenly banked hard left, dropped like a stone and banked hard right, throwing her around. The Huey levelled off, Cassie staring at the backs of the crew for a clue as to what might be wrong. A MIG fighter passing at little more than a hundred yards labelled the problem well enough. As Cassie watched the plane in horror, glad that it was turning away, the bright flash registered out of the corner of her eye, a searing burning pain in her leg causing her to scream unheard and grab for it. The Huey began to spin out of control, pinning Cassie flat to the cabin floor. She struggled to get up, rolling onto her side. Feeling herself being pulled out of the open door feet first, she grabbed her rucksack. A bang followed a jolt. She found herself outside of the Huey, holding onto her rucksack straps, watching in horror as the Huey span and descended, the tail clearly missing.

She had no concept of where the ground was, she just knew that they would hit hard, and she hung on. What happened next took her breath away: the rucksack slipped under the rope. Images flashed through her mind of falling thousands of feet to her death, not registering that they were at little more than a hundred feet when they had been hit. With her eyes closed, and

expecting the worst, she slammed into the flat top of an Acacia tree; a thorny tree favoured by the elephants that were now mostly missing from these parts. Her bodyweight broke a branch, and the branch helped to break her fall. With the thorns tearing flesh on her face and hands, she tumbled down to a hard landing, still gripping her backpack.

The second Huey had ducked into a valley, the missile aimed at it missing. It flew at just six feet above the ground, the pilots now eye-level with the Acacia trees. Rising over a crest, they came upon the burning Huey, no sign of any life nearby. They doubled back around and flew past slowly at little more than ten yards away, the dead crew clearly visible – and alight, burning bodies visible in the back, the fuel tanks roaring. They checked the immediate area, certain that no one had got out in time, and headed back at low level.

Doc Graham took the message, then came and found us in the rooftop bar. He stopped at our table. ‘A Huey has been shot down in Darfur. No survivors.’

We stood. ‘Are you sure there were no survivors?’ Jimmy pressed.

‘Hit by a missile, burst into flames, crashed and burnt,’ Doc Graham reported. People within earshot stood.

‘A missile?’ I queried.

‘Sudanese jet fighters,’ Doc Graham reported.

Jimmy gestured him towards the door and we headed quickly for Mac’s office. Inside, Jimmy met Mac’s angered stare. He said, ‘I want a Huey to go in at night, check the downed bird for survivors, bring the bodies out. Do it tonight, then suspend flights inside Darfur.’ He faced me. ‘Call Helen: I want everyone in the world to know about this.’ Facing Doc Graham, he said, ‘I want the crew list. Names.’

‘That young lady doctor, Cassie ... was on board,’ Doc Graham reported.

Jimmy stared out of the open door, taking a moment. ‘Inform Bob Davies. Tell him to send a general broadcast about it. I need to make some calls.’ Jimmy stepped out and called Rudd, asking him to contact all African TV stations with the story, and to contact the various governments, asking them to condemn the Sudanese.

Back inside, Coup asked Jimmy, 'We pulling back the mercy flights? If we do that ... then they win!'

Jimmy grabbed a cold water and sat. 'And what would you do?'

'Go in at night and fetch people.'

'Low level night flying ... is just as dangerous as dodging missiles,' Jimmy said without looking up.

Mac sat on the side of a desk. 'So we sit around the edges and pick up the pieces?'

Jimmy lifted his head. 'You want to take on the Sudanese Army?'

Mac looked away, frustrated. Turning back, he said, 'You must know a few people with surface to air missiles.'

'Sure. Then what?'

'If they lose a couple of aircraft they'll fuck off and stay out the area.'

Jimmy glanced at me. 'And if they decided to send in a tank battalion?'

'Last time I checked, we had a few dozen anti-tank helicopters sat around,' Mac sarcastically stated. 'And the Rifles will make sawdust out of 'em.'

'Let's think about this with cool heads, not when we've lost people. Let's not start a war that will kill more people than we've just lost. Six are dead, losing another sixty *just to make a point* ... is not wise.'

Cassie opened her eyes. In front of her an ant laboured along with part of a leaf. She stared at it for a whole minute. Lifting her head the pain registered, her memories resurfacing. Turning her head side on she could see the smouldering helicopter, an urge to get up and get to it. Problem was, she could not remember where she put her arms. She had to make a conscious decision to force her arm to move, finally getting a hand in front of her face, the skin torn from the tree's thorns. Her other hand came forwards, similarly scribed with bloody cuts. Only then did she register that she lay face down on top of her rucksack. Lowering her head, the dark red and black bloodstains registered, a stark contrast to the white of the fabric. She pushed her hands into the sand and lifted up onto her knees, her shoulders complaining. Bringing a knee forwards, she balanced herself and lifted upright, a hand to her

nose. A lump of stringy blood and mucus came away in her hand, Cassie now realising that the blood on the rucksack was from her nose. She felt the ridgeline: not broken.

Looking herself over she figured nothing was broken, nothing important anyway; she moved her arms in and out like a demented robot. They worked; pivotal joints and rotator cuffs functioning. Standing was a different matter. Her legs seemed to want to co-operate, but she fell over twice. Middle ear damage, she self diagnosed. Grabbing a branch, she lifted up and made a three-point stable platform. Despite feeling giddy, she advanced towards the smoking wreck; stick, left foot, right foot, stick.

At five yards she halted, noting the burnt and blackened bodies: pilot, co-pilot, and three in the back. They were all accounted for. With acrid smoke filling her nostrils, tears welling up, she turned and surveyed the pleasant green savannah. ‘Get a grip, girl.’

She knew from her briefings that most of the wild animals here had been hunted to extinction long ago. She would have to very unlucky to chance across a lion or hyena. Lifting her head, she figured on two hours of daylight remaining, and considered her options. Staying close to the Huey would be the normal procedure, but there may be government troops or Janjaween nearby. And, given the jet fighters, would they send a rescue? All of her options, she realised, came down to her two legs. She bent and flexed her knees, ignoring the pain, then imitated dancing “the twist”. If she ignored the pain, which might pass - she hoped, she had full motion available. Tossing away the branch, she gritted her teeth and walked forwards, gaining speed and balance as she neared her rucksack. Turning at the base of the tree, she headed back to the Huey, picking up the pace, each movement of her legs easing the pain and increasing the available range of motion.

Returning to her rucksack, she pulled out her water bottle and downed a few swigs. She dropped the bottle onto the rucksack and walked around the tree, soon walking around the smouldering Huey in a wide circle. That led her back to the tree, and to decision time. Her legs worked well enough, she had no trauma or significant blood loss. The middle ear disruption would pass, her nose bleed was not serious. She put a hand over her eyes and stared west, the prospect of a sixty-mile walk to the

border facing her. Hell, she had walked that far in basic training, she realised. It was four days marching, seven allowing for rough terrain. So the problem would be food and water.

She again faced the Huey, and made a choice. Walking forwards, she reached into the back of the Huey and dragged out a charred backpack. Opening its lower pouches she found a water bottle and numerous tins of meat intact; warm, but intact. Dried biscuits in their wrappers fell out. Leaning over the remains of her friend and colleague, she pulled the second rucksack out. Ten minutes later she figured she had enough supplies for the trip, the personal supplies of four people, designed for two days each.

From her own backpack she pulled out her spare boots and tossed them away, so too bra, panties and a towel. A spare jacket was not much use, but the nights were chilly. She tossed it away. The compass was checked, a plastic sleeping bag kept, the basic first aid kit retained, the larger kit thrown away; she'd not be delivering any babies anytime soon! Spare batteries were chucked, but they caused her to take a sharp breath. As fast as she could she raced to the Huey, struggling to open the co-pilot's door. Eventually smashing out the already-cracked and blackened glass, she taped the co-pilot's chest pockets, finding a lump, a lump shaped like a satellite phone. Pulling it out her spirits sunk, the face plastic melted. She tried in vain to switch it on before throwing it over her shoulder. Running around to the pilot's side, she eased his body back and checked his pockets, finding them empty.

She stood back a step and cursed, fists on hips. 'OK, what am I forgetting? Think, you stupid bitch, think!'

After a minute staring at the wreck, she clambered into the back and reached under the pilot's seat, finding a first aid kit in a metal box. Under the co-pilot's seat she found another metal box, this one Velcro-fastened to the floor. She lifted the Velcro strips and opened the tin, finding a pistol. With a small "thank you" to a god she did not believe in, she tucked it inside her jacket.

Standing back from the Huey, she again tried to remember her basic training. She knew where the life vests were, spare oil and a toolkit for the helicopter, and blankets. Besides that, were there any other compartments? Satellite phone, pistol, first aid. No, that was it. Retrieving her rucksack, she eased it on, wincing, the

extra food and water weighing it down. Still, it would get lighter day by day. Turning, she stared at the wreck, wondering if she was doing the right thing. And did they even know where the Huey went down?

‘Sixty miles, I can do this. One foot in front of the other.’

Facing the setting sun, navigation easy enough, she put one foot in front of the other.

At 1am the report came in, all of us sat in Mac’s office and awaiting news of the rescue mission: five bodies, kit has been ransacked, possibly one survivor, but captured by local fighters.

‘Well was there a survivor or not?’ Jimmy barked. ‘Get back to them, find out. I want a Kenyan Rifles bird there just before dawn, looking for tracks.’

Mac ordered the Rifles’ mission launched.

Cassie had reached a dry riverbed at sundown and decided to keep going, the valley she was in heading west. She had fixed the moon as the sun had set, and the clear night sky offered up the distinctive Orion constellation for a southerly reference point.

The pistol had proved a challenge. She managed to release the magazine, but then had to backup and bend down to get it back. Blowing sand off it, she managed to re-load the pistol, then pointed ahead and pulled the trigger. Nothing had happened. She knocked the safety switch off, that was easy enough, but still nothing. Remembering all the movies she had watched over the years, she finally struggled to pull the slide back and release it. Pointing ahead again, she fired a round, pleased with the achievement. Clicking the safety back on, she kept the pistol inside her jacket, just in case.

The riverbed was surprisingly flat, if a little soft to plod along, and snaked west, the light coloured sand easy to follow in the moonlight. The occasional animal noise could be heard on the breeze, and at one point she thought she might have heard a helicopter. At dawn, she found a wide savannah ahead of her, crossing now a little used track. Tired, but resolute, she plodded on, finally deciding to save water by sleeping through the heat of the day. Selecting a suitable Acacia tree, one that was both easy to climb, and seemed to offer a suitable nesting branch, she dumped her rucksack and climbed up. Selecting a suitable

branch, and getting comfortable, a hissing sound caused her to lift her head. Across the tree, crouched on a branch, a young Leopard snarled at her.

‘I have a gun!’ she told it. ‘Besides, you’re too small for a punch up. Come back when you’re big enough, because I’m knackered, and I’m not moving.’ She closed her eyes and lay back. ‘Just hope your mums’ not around here.’ Remembering her small silver digital camera, she took it out, zoomed in on the cub and took a snap.

Three hours later, a jet roaring past caused Cassie to open an eye and lift up onto her elbows. The cub was still there, still staring, but seemed drowsy itself; so far, no sign of mum. Needing a drink, Cassie climbed down, the cub hissing. Rationing her water, she took just a few small gulps before moving the rucksack into the shade of the tree’s trunk, grabbing a tin of meat. Climbing back up, she opened the tin, spooning a small amount out and placing it within reach of the cub. Back on her own branch, she quickly downed the tinned corned beef. Lying back, with a hand behind her head, she observed the cub take a whole thirty minutes to approach the meat, sniffing it at length before wolfing it down.

‘You’re welcome.’ Cassie eased back and closed her eyes as the temperature rose.

Lying there, the day hot, but offering up a pleasant breeze, she stared through the branches at the clear blue sky – and considered just how beautiful it was. If this was death, it was not so bad. Not so bad at all.

Rested, Cassie eased up and stretched as cat-like as her unhappy companion across the tree. ‘No sign of mum yet?’ Considering if the cub looked old enough to be independent, or if farmers had killed the mother, she climbed down. Checking the horizon in all directions, Cassie heard the cub land. It darted away a few yards and circled around, sniffing the ground.

‘It’s called cupboard love: I feed you, you pretend you like me.’

After five minutes of picking large blackened lumps from her aching nose, Cassie felt sorry for the leopard. She opened a tin and spooned its contents onto a flatten tree root. After a swig of water, another snap taken of the cub, she sat in front of her rucksack, did up the straps, and turned on her side, easing up the

tree with the added weight. Three hours to sun down, Cassie took a breath and put one foot in front of the other.

After a hundred yards the cub ran past on a parallel course, soon falling into step. 'So much for instinct, little one. If you were clever, you'd run away now.'

The cub was not listening. It kept its distance, but tagged along to the source of food, Cassie taking the occasional snap of it whilst photographing the savannah, a record for anyone finding her – should she not make it back. They plodded on together, the cub occasionally flopping down ahead of her, but getting up and catching up after she had passed. Nearing dusk Cassie spotted wild goats, but figured she could never have got close enough to shoot one with a pistol. And, for the moment, food supplies were fine. With a beautifully surreal orange sunset ahead of her, Cassie plodded on.

The cub stopped and jumped to the side, hissing at something directly ahead. Cassie stopped and took out the pistol, approaching the long grass carefully. Noting where the cub was looking, she could see the tail of a snake, and skirted around it. 'Useful bugger, you are,' she told the cub.

A mile further on the cub again stopped, focussed on the tree line ahead. It backed up, and ran around behind Cassie. Taking out the pistol, Cassie decided to skirt the trees, walking to a small rise and up it. The other side of the rise, another dry riverbed headed in the roughly the right direction. Stood on the rise, and looking back, Cassie could now see large animals amongst the trees, but couldn't determine what they were. Losing the daylight rapidly, she decided to feed the lonesome cub before trying to lose it. Dumping her rucksack on a tree stump, she spooned out a tin for the cub, wondering if that was the exact wrong thing to be doing. With the cub stalking the meat, she lifted her pack and picked up the pace, reaching the riverbed and turning west. The sand was hard and she managed to hike along at a good pace. With no sight, nor sound, of the cub, and head down, she plodded quickly along with determination.

An hour after dark she could smell smoke. It stopped her dead. Smoke could mean farmers, hunters or rebels. It was fifty-fifty if they would help her, or shoot her. Stepping quietly, she advanced with caution, sniffing the air as diligently as the cub had done. Around a bend in the river she could now see a

flickering light in the distance. With no choice, she broke left and walked up the gentle valley side and through sparse trees, soon cresting a round rise and down the other side, turning right to get back on track for a westerly direction. The report of a distant shot inspired her to pick up the pace, soon at a brisk walk and perspiring, the sweat on her brow registering in the cool evening air. Feeling fit, and confident, Cassie walked all night in a westerly direction.

At Mawlini, the reports were still confusing. The kit had been ransacked, no tracks approaching but one track leaving, heading west. We poured over maps of the area, and scratched our heads as to who had survived, and which way would they walk. The border seemed logical, but not as logical as any one of a hundred UN or NGO stations in the area. We sent messages to all NGOs in the region to watch out for a survivor – conveniently dressed all in white. Besides that, there was little more we could do other than pace up and down, Jimmy plotting and scheming with the Rifles officers.

Cassie met the dawn with a shock. She had thought the village deserted, but nearing it she could see bodies; the Janjaween had paid a visit. Stepping cautiously through the huts, she could see charred bodies in each, parents and children alike. Determined to make a record of it, she snapped the bodies with the digital camera. The village well lifted her spirits, but peering down it revealed several sets of feet. She turned west as the sun put in an appearance on the horizon behind her, and plodded on.

In the distance, through the heat haze, she wondered if she was hallucinating. As she progressed across a parched brown patch of what appeared to have been crops at some point, a donkey came into view, complete with backpack and a dangling rope. It lifted its head and stared at her as she approached. Walking right up to it, the grey donkey did not budge, stood firmly rooted to the spot. She stroked its neck. ‘All alone?’

In the backpacks she found straw, handing some to the animal. It was munched quickly. Taking out her water bottle, Cassie dampened the next handful of straw and fed the hungry animal. With half the straw gone, Cassie lifted the donkey’s tether and led it west a hundred yards, the donkey happy to plod

along. Halting, Cassie lifted off her rucksack and placed it on the donkey, careful to keep one hand on the tether, one of her rucksack. She tied the rucksack to the backpack and took a step back, gripping the tether tightly. The sedate donkey did not become a bucking bronco. 'OK, ass, follow my ass.'

With the tether tied around her wrist, Cassie walked on, the world's gravity suddenly seeming a lot less. She kept up a good pace, stopping every hour to feed the donkey, not a clue as to what was appropriate or not. Finding a lush green patch of vegetation she led the animal forwards and allowed it to select what it liked, green shoots pulled up. She snapped it with the camera. Spotting the dust trail of jeeps in the distance, Cassie turned north around a ridge dotted with Acacia trees. At the top of the ridge, and well hidden, she stared out at the dust cloud. Whoever it was seemed to be on course for the village, maybe the people who had killed them. And the jeeps did not look like UN. She turned, leading her ass onwards, wishing to find a suitable place to sleep.

A tight gorge looked suitable and she led the donkey along a narrow path, through bushes and past large boulders. Easing between two large grey rocks she stopped. And began crying. There, nestled between large overhanging rocks, lay a strip of crystal clear water. The air hung still and warm, not a sound disturbing the scene. After a whole minute of just staring, she led the donkey to the water and let it drink, testing the water herself and finding it cold and pure; spring water. She quickly gulped down what little warm water remained in her bottles and re-filled them. Tethering the donkey in the shade, she stripped off and eased into the cool water, kneeling on a flat rock and splashing refreshingly cool water over herself. Clean of baked-on blood, and cooling down, she clambered naked up a smooth rock, into a pleasant breeze that acted as a hairdryer. For five miles in any direction she could see savannah, and nothing else. Back in the gorge, she washed her clothes and laid them out on a rock to dry in the sun. Placing down the plastic sleeping bag in the shade, she lay naked in the humid and still air, soon asleep.

As dusk fell, Cassie sat eating from a tin, thinking about what course of action to take. Staying here and hanging out a sign for aircraft was an option, but she risked being spotted by the

Government backed forces. There was no food here, no fish; she could survive five days if she took it easy on the tinned meat, simply eating and sleeping all day.

She stood. It was time to go. Retrieving a plastic bag from her kit, she filled it with water and placed it amongst the donkey's straw. With the gorge photographed, she took several gulps of spring water, filled her bottles to the rims, allowed the donkey a last drink and set off into the setting sun, another beautiful orange sunset being laid on for her tonight.

The flat savannah gave way to ridges and valleys after a few hours, so she followed those running on a southwesterly course, soon kicking up dust in dried riverbeds. Her faithful companion plodded along without complaint, woman and beast in harmony. At dawn she stopped to feed the donkey, splashing water onto the straw first. Climbing a ridge, she stood and stared into the grey images created by the struggling dawn light. A village. It was on the right course, but hard to move around since it was backed by a steep ridge. It could be avoided with a southerly course. With an hour to full sun-up, Cassie picked up the pace, hoping to pass before the cock crowed.

Nearing the village, and moving south, she could now see bodies on the road. She stopped. 'They're home,' she told the donkey, 'but they won't wake from their sleep.'

A dog barked, causing Cassie to move off at the trot, leading the co-operative donkey onwards. Past the village, and now sweating, Cassie glanced over her shoulder, a dog trotting along behind her. She stopped and turned, touching the pistol in her jacket. The dog trotted up, sniffing and whimpering as it reached her. Kneeling, she held out a hand, the dog licking it, its tail thrashing quickly back and forth. 'All alone, little one?' She retrieved a tin, the donkey not at all phased by the small pooch. Using her fingers, she fed the dog a suitable chunk of corned beef. Standing, she said, 'You're no leopard, but your nose and ears are better than mine. Welcome to the team, this is my ass.'

Now three, they plodded onwards, the rising sun behind them. Cassie kept an eye on her shadow as she progressed, keen to keep it in front of her, her own dark outline pointing her west. After a mile she happened across an isolated farm, its roof burnt off, the smell of burning hanging around. Checking the horizon, Cassie edge forwards. She snapped the image as she approached,

snapping the family as they lay in line in the dirt, the youngest just a baby. A cry caught her attention and she ran towards it. Inside a pen she found a young goat. Untying the animal, she lifted it out. With one saddlebag empty now of straw, the kid fitted perfectly inside. Cassie pulled free some of the string used to fasten the make-do saddlebags. She tied the goat to the donkey's harness. 'Sorry, little one, but you're tomorrow's lunch.' Leading the donkey onwards, the dog following, she commented, 'No such thing as a free ride.'

As the day heated up, Cassie needed to find shelter, and to rest. All the good ridges, those that may offer up some shelter, were to the north, the south and west flat. And being caught out in the open was the problem. She figured that she had come at least fifteen miles, maybe twenty, but the carnage at the last village dispelled any ideas that she was nearing the border, or safety. She turned north, to the edge of the hills, a hot hour's slog to reach a gully. An isolated tree offered protection from being viewed from above, the gully walls from being viewed from the ground. The land in the immediate vicinity did not look used; there were no paths or litter. Tethering the donkey, and letting down the kid to feed whilst tethered to the tree, she fed the dog on tinned meat, pouring water onto her hand for it to lick off. Fed and watered, she lay down with the dog in the shade, the poor pooch panting in the midday heat. With a hand on the animal, she dosed off.

Two hours later a bark awoke her. She grabbed the dog and closed its mouth for a moment before rushing up the ridge and peering over. Lying down like a sniper, she crawled over the rise and peered out. Nothing. She lifted up, put a hand over her eye and scanned the horizon. 'What is it, stupid dog?'

Back in the gully she slumped down, needing more sleep, the dog now focused on the head of the gully. Lying there, Cassie watched the head of camel become a body, then a line of camels. In no particular hurry, the large animals plodded slowly towards her. Thoughts of capturing one and riding it out crossed her mind, soon followed by thoughts of falling off and breaking her neck. She snapped them with the camera. With no particular regard, the camels plodded slowly past Cassie, all watching her from under giant eyelashes, Cassie holding the dog firm. Like

slow moving ships, they eased past, depositing dung nearby. 'Thanks for that!' Cassie offered them as they moved away.

Back on the trail, the sun low, Cassie had no choice but to head southwesterly, the ridges becoming angry small cliffs with sharp edges. If someone spotted her she could run and climb up them, but she'd have the leave her travelling companions behind.

Unknown to her, events fifty miles east had been unfolding at a pace. Spread out along a ridge in eastern Darfur, the Kenyan Pathfinders had waited, camouflaged and invisible. The first fly to approach the spider's web had been a Government Mi8 helicopter, ferrying weapons to the Janjaween. As it crossed the ridge a missile streaked upwards, impacting and exploding within two seconds, the Mi8 plunging into the ground and bursting into flames. Two hours later, a small propeller driven reconnaissance aircraft flew slowly towards the ridge, possibly looking for the missing Mi8. A missile streaked up and impacted front on, the small aircraft spinning earthwards out of control, its wreck creating a small bush fire.

The next day a dated Russian Mig was shot down, followed by a second Mi8. When a flight of six Migs were scattered by three missiles, one finding its mark, the Khartoum Government realised that the rebels had surface to air missiles. The Pathfinders had disappeared back across the border, moving at night without being spotted. The Sudanese then acted in the way that Jimmy had anticipated, they sent tanks and infantry in, a week after promising the African Union that there were no Sudanese soldiers in the area. The remaining pathfinders, hidden on ridges, photographed the advancing army, the digital images uploaded to a satellite and sent to the African press. The Sudanese had just moved a chess piece in response to Jimmy's first move. Unfortunately for the man in Khartoum, Jimmy knew his every move.

The anticipated response was a mass movement of refugees west and south, the camps swelling. But this migration was different in that we had all the world's media filming it, the story making the nightly news. Our ex-SAS troopers, disguised as RF medics, were busy filming the Janjiween slaughtering villagers, some very graphic images making it out.

At Mawlini, we watched the crisis grow, and accelerate in ferocity, Jimmy suggesting that it was best that three years of conflict be played out in a just a few months. The size of the RF presence was increased, RF Hong Kong deploying en-mass, a Chinese unit now being stationed in Southern Sudan. Tents were being shipped out every day by Hercules aircraft, plastic sheets by the tonne, plus wheat and grain.

Following the downing of our helicopter, the Sudanese President had been astonished by the level of complaint, and its ferocity, not least the complaints issued by the Chinese and Russians. With Jimmy pointing at oil off Zanzibar, the Chinese were less inclined to worry about Sudanese oil. The screws were turned. The Kenyans, naturally, kicked out the Sudanese Ambassador, as did the Tanzanians.

And whilst all that was happening, General Abdi flew over to Mawlini to meet us, at his request. We greeted his team in the downstairs restaurant of the UN hotel.

‘We have not expelled the Sudanese Ambassador, as you requested,’ Abdi stated.

‘This is not your fight, my friend,’ Jimmy told him. ‘You need good political and economic relationships with Sudan, your important neighbour.’

‘Always thinking of what is best for us, old friend,’ Abdi responded with. ‘But if you are in this fight, it would be rude for me not to offer to assist.’

‘And your assistance is appreciated, if only diplomatic.’

‘We are applying what pressure we can,’ Abdi assured us. ‘They were greatly mistaken to shoot down a Rescue Force helicopter. And now, many of their own aircraft are being shot down. A very great accomplishment for the ... ill-equipped fighters in Darfur.’

‘Indeed,’ Jimmy said with a hint of smile.

‘We are ready to assist if called upon,’ Abdi insisted.

‘When you look in the mirror,’ Jimmy asked him, ‘what do you see? A black African, a Muslim African, or an Arab?’

‘We do not see ourselves as Arabs, we are black Africans; Muslim black Africans, as are many of those being pushed out of Darfur.’

‘And some Christian,’ Jimmy added.

‘As are our Kenyan brothers.’

Jimmy took a moment. 'If we accepted your help, it would not be in your long term interests – in your relationship with Sudan.'

Abdi shrugged. 'We have our own oil, minerals, and we grow stronger year by year. Maybe they will need us more than we need them!'

Jimmy smiled. 'A good approach. When the time is right, and your forces can help, I will call upon you. But first, we must try and solve this problem through the African Union.'

'I think, Jimmy, that you favour the direct approach more than sitting and talking with old men.'

'Timing ... is everything,' Jimmy told our guest. 'It's all in the timing.'

Cassie hand fed the kid, realising that it was a bad idea; it would make killing it more difficult. Still, she planned on reaching help before that day came. She plodded on with her travelling companions, the dog alerting her to any sounds beyond her normal acoustic range, and any strange smells in the soil.

The night became a boring slog, little of interest to note, the occasional animal calls of little interest now. Dawn offered grey light over the barren landscape, her compass suggesting that the unhelpful ridges were forcing her southwest. Millions of years of erosion had schemed against her. Still, camp was southwest, and so was Anton. A chill went through her: what if his helicopter had been shot down? She forced the image away and plodded onwards, figuring she may travel by day in future if she could find enough water.

A sound caused her to turn, the damned dog ahead of her and in a gully. She cursed it as focused on a lone jeep approaching, a white Toyota pickup bumping along the track. Fortunately, the track was rough enough for her to run away whilst the jeep slowly approached. She scanned the ridgeline, picking out a crevice. She could make it, but Dobbin the mule would have to be abandoned. In the matter of just a few seconds she had heard the jeep, spun, untied her rucksack and thrown it on, now rushing towards the crevice. The dog finally barked. 'Now you see it, ya useful mutt!'

She made the base of the ridge at the crevice and started to climb, hands on the edges, boots wedged against rocks. At the top, panting now, she turned, the jeep stopping next to the

faithful donkey, who just stood there. The dog tucked itself between her legs and peered out at the visitors as Cassie took out the pistol.

Two men stepped down from the jeep, locals, the second man armed with an AK47. That did not label him as a Janjaween, but it did label him as dangerous. Cassie dropped her backpack, certain they could catch up with her if they wished to. They inspected the donkey and the goat with toothy smiles before walking towards the ridge, Cassie making herself visible at the top. The second man checked his AK47, not the actions of a would-be rescuer. At the base of the ridge they stopped, little more than thirty yards below her, beckoning her down. When that failed to move her, they raised their voices, angrily waving her down. When that failed, the second man raised the AK47 and fired a warning shot into the rocks, Cassie ducking down.

She glanced over her shoulder at the terrain, certain they could catch her unless she ditched her backpack; her food and water. She'd have to stand and fight, with just the one chance of success: they thought her unarmed, probably a UN nurse. The sounds of displaced rocks permeated the air as the men climbed up to her, Cassie moving unseen to one side and staying low. The first man reached the crest with his head down, concentrating on holding on and not falling backwards. He did not even notice Cassie. The second man appeared, the AK47 now strung around his back so that he could climb. Whoever these two were, they were not the brightest pupils in the class.

Cassie leant over, took careful aim at the head of the second man and shot him dead, putting around through the stomach of the first man as his buddy rolled down the rocks. With the dog barking at the wounded man, Cassie lifted up and rushed forwards, the pistol to the man's face, a round fired. 'Never do half a job,' she whispered to the limp and lifeless body.

Scrambling down the rocks, she retrieved the AK47, wondering if she could figure out how to fire the damn thing. In the back of the jeep she found straw and building materials, some plastic pipes. Sitting in the driver's seat, the key in the ignition, she started it up, noting a quarter tank of petrol. 'Enough for thirty or forty miles, boys.'

With the engine running, the door open, the dog jumped in. Cassie stood and stared at the donkey and the goat for many

seconds, finally letting the kid go before un-harnessing the donkey. Free of its backpack and harness, the donkey just stood and stared. Cassie snapped a shot of it, one of the ridge and the bodies, another of the jeep before climbing in and slamming the door. With a final look back at the donkey through the jeep window, she found the clutch and gears, and pulled off, not a clue where she was going. After suffering a mile on the bumpy track, she found herself on a half-decent tarmac road. Problem was, it ran north to south. South was better than north, but not by much. She pulled off and put her foot down, soon cruising at fifty miles per hour and smiling widely, the countryside shooting past.

At Mawlini, that morning, Jimmy suggested that we fly up to Chad and encourage the staff. Tubby flew us north with Doc Graham and a planeload of scheduled staff replacements. We landed in Southern Sudan, and spent the day at the largest camp, flying onto Chad at the end of the day. Accommodation was rough, just tents in the desert with the rescuers, but the cold cans of lager they offered us were much appreciated. We sat in the mess tent after sundown, chatting to the staff, and even to Anton. At the time I had no idea who he was, just that he was keen for news about Cassie. The bodies had all been identified and flown out, Cassie's missing, everyone certain that she survived and walked off, as much of a hope as anything.

Sat there in the mess tent, Jimmy checking his watch, screams and cries went up from someone unseen, someone else bursting into the tent.

‘She’s back! Cassie’s back!’

Everyone poured out, bumping shoulders in the mad scramble through the tent, no respect for the two of us in the mad dash. We all ran after the others, everyone heading towards the heliport, surprised to find Cassie slowly driving towards us in the jeep, arm and face out of the window, smiling and waving, a dog leaning out of the opposite window. She pulled up when her headlights illustrated us.

Easing out, people firing hundreds of questions at her whilst patting her on the back, she said, ‘Reporting for duty, boss.’

‘You’re late,’ Jimmy told her.

Anton squeezed past, holding Cassie by the shoulders and looking her over.

'I'm fine, I'm fine,' Cassie got out before having the breath squeezed out of her by Anton, the dog at her feet, its tail wagging excitedly at all the strangers.

'What the hell happened?' Anton asked.

'Missile took down the Huey, fired from a Mig. I went out the door and landed in a tree.'

'You fell out?' Anton queried, everyone keenly attentive.

'More like spun out. When I came too the bird was burnt, everyone ... dead, which I guess you know. So I started walking west. Anyway, are the cookers working? I'm starved!'

We led them back inside. Jimmy said, 'Cassie, you've got some time off due. We'll take you back with us.' He lifted his satellite phone and dialled Cassie's parents.

Cassie held the phone to her ear. 'Mum?' She held the phone away from her ear as her mother screamed. 'Calm down! I'm fine! I'm back with Rescue Force.' The call reduced her to tears, the phone finally handed back.

A press photographer squeezed in, Jimmy waving him over. 'OK everyone, kneel down, sit down and line up,' Jimmy ordered. 'Let's get this moment frozen in time.'

Everyone squeezed together as several shots were snapped.

Anton asked Jimmy, 'Any chance of moving some holidays around?'

Jimmy turned to Cassie, then back to Anton. 'You get two weeks leave from next year brought forwards. You can fly back with us to the UK.' To Cassie he said, 'Now, get some food inside you young lady, you look thin.'

'Apparently, my boyfriend likes them slim,' she replied, her eyes still moist. 'Oh,' she grabbed the camera. 'I kept a photo diary. There're images of villages wiped out.'

Jimmy took the camera. 'I'll make sure the images get to the news papers.'

Within ten minutes every news outlet in the world new about Cassie's walk to freedom, Jimmy playing it up a little in the press. I felt a book coming on.

We flew Cassie and Anton out early the next morning, a quick chance to shower and change at Goma International Airport, a press conference organised for the African press, Rudd flying

them in. Cassie gave details of the helicopter incident, Jimmy and I sat either side for support. She detailed some of the walk she made, mentioning the leopard cub in the tree, the donkey and the dog. She then went into detail about the burnt out villages that she had found along the way, whole families being killed. The press then moved their attention to Jimmy, who was ready for them and in speech mode, criticising the Sudanese Government at length, urging the UN and the African Union to get involved – before it's too late. Our hired 747SP took us north in comfort, Cassie sleeping a lot of the way, snuggled up to Anton the remainder of the time.

'This pan out as you expected it?' I asked Jimmy, out of earshot of anyone else.

'There are always variables. But, overall, as I expected.'

'We get a book out of this?'

'Definitely. Publicity is our lifeblood and, for the projects ahead of us, essential. Publicity ... is power and influence, more so that money, and certainly more than political office. Between now and 2005 we need to conquer America, and the way to do that is to appeal to the people directly.'

'Hollywood ... directly?' I nudged.

'Yes. And in years to come, social media.'

'What the fuck's that?'

'You'll see. It's as revolutionary as the internet itself.'

Before we landed, Jimmy told Cassie that her parents would be at the airport, bags packed. They were all invited to the house, not least because of the small army of reporters camped outside Cassie's parent's house. We slipped out of a side entrance, into two coaches, and headed off, Cassie's reunion with her parents witnessed only by Anton.

At the house they were allocated the best rooms whilst I hugged my wife, getting plenty of ear bashing for the long trip away. I took off my jacket and sat on the floor with Shelly, soon colouring-in the Telly-Tubbies. I was reasonably sure that one of them was not green with red stripes, but who cared. Jimmy made a fuss of Cassie's parents, showing them around the grounds as Anton and Cassie strolled hand-in-hand.

Then next morning, over breakfast, Jimmy got around to the book, copies of the photographs from the camera laid out for

Anton and Cassie's parents to view. 'Cassie, when you're up to it, I'd like you to write down your experiences, we'll turn it into a book quickly, a Rescue Force book.'

'Me? Write a whole book?'

'Start with diary notes, then flesh them out. All you need to do is describe in great detail what happened, hour by hour. We'll do the rest and detail the rescue operation, and your poor parent's time spent worrying. It's important to get the book out there, because it highlights what's going on in Darfur. And I'll make sure it goes right around the world.'

'Don't they take years to publish?' Cassie queried.

'Not for me they don't,' Jimmy emphasised. 'You'll get help with it, professional help. It will take less time than you think, a matter of weeks. It's also good advertising for Rescue Force. Some young lady doctor will read the book, as you did with our other books, and some day think about joining up.'

Cassie's parents encouraged her to put pen to paper.

'OK, I'll start with a diary outline.'

'Leave nothing out, not even Anton,' Jimmy suggested.

'Oh, there's some things I think we should leave out,' Cassie joked, a glance toward Anton.

'Your romance will be an important part of the book – a human interest story,' Jimmy told her. 'Then there's the UK press, who'll be annoyed if we delay any longer.'

'When do you think I should talk to them?' Cassie asked, a glance at her parents.

'Do a combined press-conference later today, get it over with,' Jimmy suggested. 'Then hang around for an hour and answer questions.'

'Here?' they asked.

'No, we'll drive over to Mapley, the press can drive down from London.'

They were all in agreement, following Jimmy's lead. He made a call to Helen and she fired off the faxes and emails: 4pm, press conference, all welcome, food and drinks afterwards. At the news conference, copies of the photographs were given out, hard copies and on CD, Cassie sat on the podium with Anton, her parents and Jimmy. It dragged on a bit. We mingled with the press afterwards, making sure everyone had what they wanted, Jimmy very keen that Sudan stayed in the news week after week.

He was plotting something, but he first needed the publicity. Around Africa, Rudd was busy, Sudan kept at the fore in many countries, the stories evolving into its simple core truth: Arabs were trying to push black Africans out of Sudan.

Three days later, and with Cassie sat behind a computer at the house, Anton helping, we flew off to Nairobi for an emergency meeting of African Union members. Helen and Shelly accompanied us, or I would have been divorced by my return. This meeting was unusual in that only certain countries were invited, those of the Sub-Saharan nations, none of the Arab countries – who protested at length the legitimacy of such a meeting.

For the first day of the meeting we skirted around the edges, meeting various governments in private and scheming. The Tanzanians were revelling in their oil discovery, and we could do no wrong in their eyes. At the end of the first day they voted on allowing us to speak the next day, an almost unanimous approval. In the morning, Jimmy took the microphone, a long applause given just for him being him.

‘I thank all of you for allowing me this opportunity to address this body, regarding the situation in Darfur. What started as an internal matter has widened into something bigger, and more sinister. We now have a million refugees in Chad, Southern Sudan and other countries, a great burden on those nations. I am doing what I can to support those countries financially, and to assist the refugees. But let’s not dress this up: this is Arab against black, the Sudanese Arabs desiring to remove blacks from Darfur. The Khartoum Government has long denied that it supports either side, but we can all now see the evidence: there are no Arabs in the refugee camps!’

The audience applauded.

‘The Khartoum Government has sided with the Janjaween, and armed them, the evidence is clear. They have also sent fighter jets to shoot down our medical helicopters, a criminal act. The Sudanese then complain that their aircraft have been shot down over Darfur, aircraft that they said were never in Darfur to start with. I guess the Sudanese aircraft shot down were ghosts. Now we see tanks and infantry entering Darfur, on the premise that they are there to restore order, the order of Arabs burning the

villages of blacks, having first killed men, women and children – even livestock.

‘We do not say that Darfur should be independent of Khartoum, we just want the fighting to stop, and for the refugees to return to their homes without fear. I call upon the African Union to create a peacekeeping force with the assistance of the UN, and for Sudan to allow the peacekeepers in.’

He stood down to great applause. Sat off to the side, we listened to various governments echo Jimmy’s words: Kenya, Somalia, the DRC, Ghana, Seirra Leone, Zambia, Mozambique, even Zimbabwe. What the outside world did not realise, was that we had offered to fund the peacekeepers within certain nations. Since we were already funding the Rifles in those nations, it was no extra cost to us.

The meeting broke that evening, the delegates having voted in favour of a peacekeeping force. Even without the Arab countries, they had enough votes. The UN was asked to form a peacekeeping force, which would take the form of an official request for troops.

In the east of Darfur, meanwhile, the tank columns were not having much luck, some cheeky bastards planting anti-tank mines everywhere the tanks went, tracks blown off every mile; it was as if someone knew their movements. Infantry trucks and jeeps triggering mines fared badly, the casualties mounting quickly, and without so much as a shot being fired at their unseen enemy.

That evening Jimmy took a call: a column of Sudanese tanks was heading south towards the border with Southern Sudan – and the refugee camps. When I heard the words “Cobra standby” I was worried.

‘A column of Sudanese tanks are heading south,’ Jimmy informed me after the call.

‘And we’ll attack??’

‘No, we’ll defend the border if necessary,’ Jimmy insisted.

‘And will it be?’ I pressed.

‘Yes, because the tank commander can’t read a map. And ... the other routes are mined.’

‘You’re herding them!’

‘I’m not, the rebels are.’

At 1am we were still sat in the rooftop bar, Cat minding Shelly in our room, the hotel awash with bodyguards and police. Jimmy's phone went.

After listening, he told me, 'That tank commander has crossed the border, and at night. He's following a tarmac road to avoid bombs. And, as we sit here, the authorities there are requesting the kind assistance of the Kenya helicopters nearby.'

'What choppers?' I asked.

'Twelve Cobras, six Mi24s.'

'And the outcome?'

'Thirty tanks destroyed, twenty support vehicles,' Jimmy calmly stated. 'All inside the border. Just.'

'Southern Sudan has never fully broken away from the rest of Sudan,' I puzzled, Helen agreeing.

'No, but they're semi-autonomous, and oil rich. They'll be independent in a few years.'

We woke to the news that Sudan had invaded Southern Sudan, the attack repulsed by Kenyan attack helicopters. There just happened to be TV crews nearby, filming the aftermath - and the clearly marked border. The African nations protested the attack at length, the Sudanese President scratching his head as to who ordered the incursion; plus the loss of his tank regiment. His position was now in jeopardy.

Jimmy held a press conference and condemned the attack, an attack that was labelled as the chasing of refugees into the camps. 'Who attacks refugee camps with tanks?' Even the Arab states were annoyed at the move. Having achieved our aims, that of stirring up a hornet's nest, we flew back, commercial flights now diverting around Darfur, and Sudanese, airspace.

In the house we found Cassie typing away, already a detailed outline of the document, Anton helping. Her parents had stayed for four days, the most they had seen of their daughter in years, the press hoards having now dissipated.

'How much time off do I get?' Cassie asked us.

'As far as I'm concerned, that book is RF work,' Jimmy told her. 'Keep at it. Anton returns next week, and I've ordered him off of Hueys for now.'

'You have?' Anton challenged.

‘Yes, because Cassie’s been sick in the mornings,’ Jimmy told him, walking off.

I smiled widely at him, tapping him on the shoulder.

Cassie faced Anton. ‘It’s probably a bug.’

‘Are you late?’

‘Two weeks.’

‘That could be malnutrition,’ he offered.

‘I’m kind of hopping it’s not.’

They stood and stared for many seconds.

Anton closed in and hugged her, kissing her forehead. ‘If we had jobs in a hospital somewhere...’

‘I know. But there are always Rescue Force desk jobs, and hospitals.’

‘You’d come to New York?’

‘Love to. That an invite, or ... an invite?’

‘I don’t know, my head’s spinning,’ Anton admitted.

‘You can’t just knock-up a poor helpless English girl and run away, Yank.’

Anton laughed. ‘You? Helpless?’

Cookie’s wife, Sandra brought in a pregnancy tester, handing it over without saying anything.

‘Best go pee,’ Cassie suggested.

Ten minutes later she rang her parents with the news, before the happy couple approached Jimmy and me. They sat opposite us in the diner.

‘So, what happens now?’ Cassie asked.

‘I could get you a medical book,’ I offered.

‘Career wise.’

‘I’ve paid some money into your account, compensation for your ordeal,’ Jimmy informed her. ‘As for your career, that’s up to you. You can stay in Rescue Force, picking your assignments, or doing a desk job. Maybe a teaching job.’

‘What do you think you’ll *want* to do?’ I asked.

‘Anton’s invited me to visit New York,’ she explained.

‘We’re flying there in a few days, you can come with us,’ Jimmy suggested. He faced Anton. ‘You’ve got family there?’

‘Yes: mum, dad – second wife, two brothers – both orthodontists, younger sister in college.’

‘Christmas must be fun,’ I suggested.

Jimmy asked Cassie, 'Do you want a temporary release from Rescue Force?'

'The truth? If I wasn't pregnant I'd want to go straight back to Darfur. This ... changes things.'

'Of course,' Jimmy agreed. 'But our door will remain open for you. Tell your parents to pack a bag, they should meet Anton's parents.'

Anton agreed, and suggested it would all be a shock, his parents not approving of him joining Rescue Force.

With the happy couple gone, I asked, 'What are the parents like?'

'Oh ... billionaire media moguls ... I think.'

I laughed loudly. Standing, I said, 'You are such a sneaky bastard.'

The gang flew over to New York first class, Cassie's parents sleeping most of the way, the mother not a good flyer. We stayed at the apartment, Anton, Cassie, and her parents off to a big house in the Hamptons – and a big shock at how rich Anton's parents were.

The next day they called us and invited us over, Pineapple's security driving us out to them. It was a nice house, and large, but nothing compared to our monstrous palace. Dressed in Tuxedos for dinner, Helen looking stunning in a little black number, we met the father, Ted, on the steps. He reminded me off a character in Dynasty, Blake something...

'Nice house,' I offered.

'I've heard yours is ... not bad.' We shook, Ted greeting Helen. 'And you're the famous Jimmy Silo.'

'How's the TNC takeover going?' Jimmy asked Ted as they shook.

'How the hell did you know that? It's secret!'

'I'm a man of resources,' Jimmy informed our stunned host.

We stepped inside and met Anton and Cassie, both dressed smartly, and Cassie's parents, finally being introduced to the brothers - a clear family resemblance.

The first brother told me, 'I read up on your dummy in New Scientist.'

'I trained on it,' Anton put in.

'Damn thing creeps me out,' I said.

We settled down to dinner, Ted and Jimmy all business and politics, the brothers eyeing Helen's cleavage, Anton and Cassie in their own little world, her parents looking a little lost. At one point the father asked about newspapers in Africa.

'I could put your papers into ten countries,' Jimmy offered, very matter of fact. I could see the father's grey matter working away. 'In fact, our region in the Congo has no paper. We were thinking of doing our own.'

'I've heard a lot about the area, it's growing very quickly. You've built a few airports there?'

'Five.'

'Five?'

'It's a region six times bigger than Texas. But if I was going to create a paper I'd call it African Times, and have it sold across Kenya, Somali, the Congo, Sierra Leone, Tanzania – right across the central region.'

'You'd get licences?'

Anton laughed. 'Jimmy doesn't ask for licences, dad, he tells the African leaders what he wants – and they do it.'

'I have ... some influence,' Jimmy emphasized.

'Any experience of the newspaper business,' Ted asked.

'None at all. Perhaps you like to help?'

'And the funding?'

'I'd fund it all myself, I don't like bank loans,' Jimmy said.

'A pan-African paper like that could cost two hundred million dollars to set up.'

'That's what I make in a month,' Jimmy informed our host. 'So if you want to run it, I'll fund it.'

'That's a hell of a deal ... to be discussing at the dinner table,' Ted stated, everyone now focused on him.

'Not really, I did my research on you before we flew out. The deal's yours if you want it.'

'And you can get the licences?' Ted pressed.

'Already had a word to that effect, but only nine countries so far.'

'Only nine,' Ted sarcastically repeated. 'It's a start, I suppose.'

Jimmy took out a sheet. 'Those are details of my lawyers here, they've been briefed – encase you decide to contact them.'

Ted read the detail of the page. 'You always go out loaded?'

‘Research and timing ... are the keys to success,’ Jimmy said. ‘Research ... and timing.’

After dinner we stood chatting in the lounge, drinks in hands. Helen spoke with Cassie’s parents whilst I deflected the odontologists from my wife’s cleavage.

Ted stuck to Jimmy. ‘You act almost as if you’re Cassie’s father. This deal is a hell of a dowry.’

‘As a member of Rescue Force ... I care for her, yes. But if she had not got together with Anton then you, sir, would not have appeared on my radar. And what you have to keep in mind is this: Cassie is writing a book about her ordeal, but also of her romance with your fine son. The publishers are fighting over themselves as to who gets it, and I’m in talks with all the major Hollywood studios as to who will make the romance story, which I’m sure will be of great interest to you and your dear lady wife when it’s shown in cinemas all of the world. Of course, it needs a happy ending. Be unfortunate if the story ended with Anton’s father not approving of the heroine of the piece.’

Ted stared back, wide eyed. ‘Dear God. You’ve backed me into a corner, tied my hands and stuck a gun to my head!’

‘And don’t forget the rather large bribe,’ Jimmy said with a grin.’

Ted stared across at his son. ‘I’d best go give me son a nudge in the right direction.’

The African Times had been born, offices and printing presses already standing by. And Jimmy had an input to the layout from the get go. The front page would cover international news, plus important stories from around Africa. The following pages would then each be national, one page for each country, the major stories, covering at least eight pages. There would follow a business section, a technology section, and oil and ore section, entertainment and adverts, the last few pages dedicated to sport.

The editors were hired, and given firm guidelines about not criticising any of the tin pot dictators that may read the paper. Quotes attacking the various leaders were OK, but the paper itself would never criticise anyone openly. It was neutral; our brand of heavily biased neutral.

Cassie and Anton flew back to Mawlini after a week, now engaged. Anton went back to Darfur, Cassie given a desk job and training role, plus plenty of time off to finish the book.

Crusty

Poor old Crusty, the earthquake man, had been given a poison pill in his assignment. He had made two earthquake predictions, both panning out, but had also claimed to have made a dozen more previously. The academic community immediately called foul, since the data had not been presented ahead of the various quakes. Crusty then claimed that he had warned both Rescue Force and the Chinese Government of the predictions. Much to annoyance of the academic community, we then issued a statement saying that we had received the warnings in advance. The Chinese followed suit, and soon Crusty had a hundred angry scientists wanting to see all of his data.

Since the software was proprietary, and may have some commercial applications some day, he declined. That caused more of an outcry, but we stood by him. After all, he was entitled to recoup the cost of his efforts in researching the science behind the software. He was interviewed several times, always being careful to mention that he was on our payroll – if anyone had a problem. His software was hailed as a major breakthrough by the tabloids, and found support from many “M” Group governments, the world’s academics about to explode with fury and frustration.

As promised, Jimmy supplied a bodyguard for Crusty and his family, not least because numerous eminent scientists, far better than Crusty, wanted him dead. They even created their own working group to try and debunk the software. Problem was, they could not even get along with each other, let alone formulate a coherent plan of action against Crusty. They did, however, spend hundreds of hours coming up with the slur: “Crusty the Clown”, a character off the Simpsons cartoon show. And that was just about all they managed to agree upon. Our strength, was in their lack of unity.

Zanzibar

The local town council on the island Zanzibar did not seem happy with the oil find. At least, they were not happy with the money going to Tanzania. They were part of the country, not far off shore, but considered themselves somewhat detached and independent. They were also more devoutly Muslim than their mainland counterparts, some criticisms issued of the money being made. I don't know where that left Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, and Iran, but these particular Mullahs were not in favour of oil.

In reality, they just wanted more money for themselves, so we swamped the small town councils with gifts and money for projects, religious sensitivities aside. They adopted the Vegas Mormon approach to things, and helped the oil industry – whilst condemning the avarice at Friday prayers. Bank balances, and souls, were soothed in equal measure.

A third and forth rig soon turned up, one from CAR and one Chinese, work beginning on an onshore terminal and berth for oil tankers. No sooner had the foundations been cut by the Tanzanian President than various religious schools on the islands received money from Saudi Arabia, the offer of religious tutors following the “oil generated evil western concept of cash”. We were ready, a quiet word with the Tanzanians, who became worried that fanatics on the island would disrupt the oil. An army brigade, of Tanzanian Rifles, set up shop on the island, near the oil terminal, the Tanzanians having a quiet word with the town councils: screw with us and we'll dump you all in the fucking ocean! The councils did, however, get extra money for various projects.

OPEC then approached the Tanzanian Government, and dangled various infrastructure projects ahead of a chat about the new oil find. OPEC wanted to survey the area, and for Tanzania to consider joining it if their oil was plentiful enough. The Americans were keen for them to join OPEC, since it meant

more oil dollars floating around the world – hot off The Treasuries printing press! We had spoken to the Tanzanians first, and reminded them of the concession they signed. OPEC was afforded plenty of time, a few cups of tea, followed by non-committal noises and promises of further meetings.

The Chinese then dumped a huge project onto the Tanzanians, a new port facility and extended railroad into the Congo – provided they did not court OPEC. A prominent Saudi then sent us an invitation to visit that was worded along the lines of “we could squeeze you in for a few minutes, and you’d be lucky and grateful!” Funnily enough, we declined, telling them that the dates clashed with a holiday to Israel – just to be rude. It would not be the end of OPEC’s interest in us.

Liberia

The small country of Sierra Leone had been sorted very quickly, the main gangs dead and buried, literally, a few left rotting in the jungle. The RF presence had been wound down with the end of major operations, and the start of the Darfur ramp-up. The Cubans remained in Freetown, flying the flag for us.

Hal and his buddies had pounded the rebels in Liberia before his fateful mission, and now the Americans were landing at Monrovia Airport and setting up bases inland. The new, and unelected President of Liberia, an Army Major, saw the American helicopters overhead and thought better of it, heading inland to start what could have become a guerrilla resistance to the “Yankee invaders”. Unknown to him, our people were watching and waiting, and as he rallied his troops and drove them north one night, his column was strafed at length by our Cobras and Hueys, the good Major killed, his soldiers scattering. That left yet another vacuum in the Presidential Palace, something that the building and its staff were quiet used to. An exiled politician, with about as much claim to the job as my mum, had been living in the States, and now sat behind the Presidential desk, cocaine and gold-enamelled pistols still in the drawers. He did now, however, have a US Army pistol pointing right at his temple. To

aid any discomfort from the barrel, he had a large budget for aid and reconstruction.

The US Marines secured the airport, then the port. As far as Liberia went, that was most of it bar some nasty mosquito infested swamps and jungle. Whoever controlled Monrovia, controlled the country. America had deep pockets, and now made use of its fiscal strength by bringing in a ship full of goodies, starting with wheat, which was distributed freely to Monrovia's poor. That was followed by a delivery of our special buckets, those filled with household goodies, and each housewife in the small capital received one. Seemed like the Yankee Invaders were not so bad after all. Corrugated sheets turned up overnight, and all idle teens and men were given work cleaning up the capital. It was not great pay, but it was pay – and regular.

Signs went up asking people to sell old weapons to the US Army, and to collect rewards for information about gunmen. Rusted old AK47s were soon being handed over, gunmen turned in for a few dollars.

Outside of Monrovia, the Marines left the clearance operation to the Kenyan Rifles, whom the new Interim President had called in and sanctioned. Anyone holding a weapon was shot dead on sight. Roadblocks were set up, searches made, harsh and immediate sentences carried out at the roadside. In the area run by the gangs, the Rifles hid and waited, picking off anyone with a weapon, sometimes calling in air strikes. With a thousand Kenya Rifles in-country, the gunmen were soon as endangered as the scarce local wildlife.

But as Darfur heated up, we reduced the numbers of Kenyans in favour of Congolese Rifles, who took to their work with fervour, soon a high body count that was unseen by the world's press. Liberia was not a large country, and when most of the gang areas had been swept, the Rifles pulled out and left the Americans a more peaceful countryside, having provided a function that no American officer – nor President – could have ever sanctioned.

War in the desert

The months dragged on, and Darfur seemed to be getting worse, not better. The camps were not getting any smaller, the atrocities mounting. But as the body count was rising, so too was the publicity around Africa; we made sure of that. We wanted the sub-Saharan nations on our side before moving, but if anything, we were in danger of going to far, permanently harming relations between Sudan and its southern neighbours. That was not the aim. The aim was secret, even to me, and Jimmy said that the time was right in June.

With advance permission and co-operation from the various governments, the Rifles were mobilised in force and sent to Chad and Southern Sudan, along with most of the helicopters we could muster. Following the ill-fated tank patrol, Sudanese heavy armour had been pulled back to the northern and eastern edges of Darfur. Looking at the dispositions on a battle board in the basement of the house, we seemed to be greatly outnumbered. Jimmy said that it did not matter; victory over Sudan was not the aim.

When I noticed our troop dispositions, I queried some of the flags. Nigeria, Ghana and Somalia were listed. They joined Kenya, Tanzania, the DRC and Zambia. Nigeria and Ghana did not have Rifles units, so these must have been regular soldiers. Jimmy was not being very forthcoming, adding a flag for Zimbabwe to the board. We even had a unit of fifty soldiers from Mozambique. With Jimmy informing me that the operation would begin in a few hours, I checked my paperwork and warned Helen. She was not happy at being left out, so we called Cat back to the house and settled into the basement with many others, curious members of the "M" Group stood observing. I spotted Kenyan Army uniforms, British officers, and a few spy types.

Jimmy checked his watch then addressed the Kenyan officer. 'Launch Insert Alpha.'

The man made a call. This night insert, by Huey, was a reinforcement of the Rifles already dug in and hidden around the region. For the past two weeks the Rifles had been feeding back intel' about the Janjaween, an accurate picture of their movements, bases and identities. We even had people outside the Darfur region, all passively watching, but never being seen. That intel' was now being illustrated on a large map, many small toys

indicating movements. It was good job Shelly was not here, she would have had them away, some eaten.

An hour later reports came back, various insert teams now landed, some turned back due to mechanical faults.

Jimmy checked his watch again, so I pointed at the large clock on the wall. 'Begin Operation Wake-up Call.'

The same Kenyan officer made another call. What he was initiating was the remote detonation of almost four hundred individually placed explosives, many now near vehicles, some alongside compounds or houses. Each had a radio receiver, and the nice men in an American AWACS now boosted the signal and let rip. Ground reports soon flooded in of explosions heard or seen. Upwards of a thousand members of the Janjaween were dead, that many again wounded, the rest just rudely woken up.

Fifteen minutes later, the nice people in the AWACS sent the second signal. Explosives that had been strategically placed to catch the curious, those curious about the first bomb, detonated. Upwards of five thousand Janjaween were now injured, which just about covered half of those actively involved in ethnic cleansing operations.

Jimmy ordered, 'Eyes on, twenty-four hours.' People started to stream out, some to a room next door fitted with camp beds.

'That it?' I asked.

'We'll now observe for a day,' Jimmy explained. 'Our strength, is in small numbers of inserts, observing at length, and doing little – and only then when sure.'

We went upstairs for a cup of tea and some cake in the diner before heading off to bed.

The next morning, the Khartoum Government began receiving reports of an all out invasion of Darfur, presumably by the Rifles. Sudanese television showed mass casualties streaming towards Khartoum for some decent medical treatment in the capital. Confused, and with poor intel', the Sudanese Army mobilised. After all, there was nothing else they could do. Their jets and helicopters flew over Darfur, not reporting so much as a stray camel, let alone a large-scale attack; no jeeps, no tanks, no nothing. Migs screamed over the region all day, and reported nothing upon their return. By nightfall, and with the Army on its way south, the President was scratching his head.

The mass deployment, of infantry and armour, halted at the border and took up positions as Jimmy ordered “Operation Desert Storm”, which he said was poignant, but I didn’t understand why.

All the next day the Sudanese Army sent probing convoys and aircraft into Darfur, glimpsing only burnt-out villages and lone camels. Nothing was reported, causing much frustration back at Army HQ. The soldiers bedded down for the night. They did, unfortunately, bed down where Jimmy expected they would. The nice people in the AWACS returned, and sent another signal, to explosives that been buried many weeks ago. The Sudanese soldiers, sat about the campfire and complaining that a soldiers lot was not a happy lot, got blown up en-mass.

Dawn threw a grey light over death and misery for the regular soldiers, a mass evacuation organised, some ten percent of their number killed or injured. All the stops were pulled out, more units mobilised and sent to Darfur, passing the wounded as they headed to the region. The nature and timing of the explosions were a cause of great concern, and greater confusion. No incoming rounds had been heard, no enemy soldiers seen, no helicopters or planes. The desert had just exploded in twelve places at the same time – right where their columns had halted for the night.

Jimmy ordered the Rifles to form up and move twenty miles into Darfur, toward pre-planned positions, under the cover of darkness. At dawn, we made sure – through the media – that their presence, and their position, was known. As per Jimmy’s plans, no jeep was closer than a hundred yards to another, and all soldiers had dug slit trenches. It was noon when they figured out why, Migs coming in to strafe them. A lot of ordnance was expending by the Migs, but only two soldiers were killed, a few wounded.

As darkness fell our RF Hueys fetched the wounded, taking them to a field hospital that Jimmy called “The Melting Pot”. He would not explain why, he just smiled, so I called him names.

The next day our troops advanced another ten miles, their previous positions being taken by second line replacements. The Migs came in again, killing three and wounding a handful. Again they were flown out. With such a clear provocation, the Sudanese finally put a foot on the gas and moved into Darfur in

force. They formed a wide line, and faced-off against our troops, a gap of some ten miles between the two sides. Our troops moved again that night, to their final positions, and dug in, being re-supplied by helicopter.

At dawn the Sudanese advanced towards our positions, running into mines five miles short of our lads, some of their vehicles destroyed. Tanks had tracks blown off. As they advanced on our positions they soon figured out that our lads had chosen their spots well. It was as if some forethought had gone into the positions. The Sudanese had no choice but to bunch up in natural funnels, where they ran into more mines. By the end of the day, only five of our positions were engaging the enemy, the rest were still facing each other at some distance. All that night our positions were probed, but not too seriously, our casualties light considering the amount of expensive ordnance lobbed towards our positions.

Unfortunately, a company of Somali Rifles got bored with the standoff and burst out, engaging the Sudanese at point blank range. It meant heavy casualties on the Sudanese side, but also many casualties on our side, some from friendly fire. They were ordered back.

The next day became something of a sniper duel, in that we had the snipers and they didn't. Their supply lines were clogged, being hampered by the Pathfinders, and we were re-supplying at night. As dusk fell that third night, our helicopters went up with simple instructions: keep them awake. They approached from the west, our positions illustrated by red and green lights that could only been seen from the west. The pilots knew that as soon as they flew over those lights they could fire at anything that moved. All night long the helicopters pounded the well-defined Sudanese positions, the Sudanese unaware that our forward positions were being abandoned.

At dawn, the Sudanese were hurting, and tired, but bravely attacked in force, finding just mines and booby traps. They lost hundreds of men, morale now an issue. Jimmy called the "M" Group countries, and they petitioned the UN, all pressing for a ceasefire and pullback. The African nations involved all agreed to the ceasefire, so did the weary Sudanese. They had sent thirty thousand soldiers to face three thousand, and took a beating.

Several days of talks resulted in the Sudanese pulling out of Darfur, our troops pulling back to the border immediately. We packed a bag and flew to Washington to update Art Johnson.

In the situation room, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs asked, 'How many men did you have on the front line?'

'Less than three thousand,' Jimmy calmly stated.

'Against thirty thousand, and tanks and planes?'

Jimmy shrugged. 'Good planning.'

To incredulous stares, we sat.

Art Johnson started with, 'I guess you're going to tell us what the big picture is, and what part this small war plays in it.'

Jimmy pointed towards the Admiral. 'You're a smart man. Why don't you tell me what it was all about.'

'Been trying to figure that for a few days; lot of effort just to stem a refugee crisis. And you said Sudan does not sponsor terrorism or The Brotherhood.'

Jimmy took a set of enlarged photographs out off his briefcase, handing them over. 'Tell me what you see.'

The Admiral, and others, glanced at the pictures. 'These are your troops, the Rifles.'

'Shoulder badges,' Jimmy nudged, gesturing the Admiral on with a wave of his hand.

'These are your Rifles ... from many countries.'

'Keep going.'

'These are your Rifles ... from many countries ... fighting together?'

'And when was the last time they did that?' Jimmy asked.

The man glanced at each other.

'Never,' Jimmy answered. 'So, for the first time in African history, seven countries fought shoulder to shoulder. Seven sub-Saharan Christian countries, fought shoulder to shoulder, against a common Muslim enemy.'

'By god, it was a dry run!' the Admiral stated.

'A dry run for 2025,' Art Johnson put in, many small conversations breaking out.

After a minute, Jimmy added, 'Plus one additional benefit. Four men, injured, sat in our medical tent together for three days. They made friends. A Kenyan, a Tanzanian, a Nigerian and a man from the Congo. And, in just about fifteen years time, they'll all be in positions of power in those countries.'

‘Blood brothers, born in battle,’ a General said. ‘You’ve knitted them together.’

Art Johnson started laughing, shaking his head, soon followed by the others.

‘You’re welcome,’ Jimmy offered them with a smirk.

We spoke about Liberia, that was going well, and the mood was a good one for a change. I felt quite relaxed. And, with the group in a good mood, Jimmy suggested Senator Pedersen should be converted: get it over with. The group discussed it for five minutes, no major objections raised since Jimmy indicated that Pedersen was a “player”. The good Senator was invited over that evening; 5pm.

Entering the Oval Office, Pedersen was surprised to find us there, and in the company of several of the Joint Chiefs.

Art Johnson welcomed his adversary, then began with, ‘Senator, we’ve invited you here because we wish you to be *involved* ... with a few matters, matters of national security. Do I have your assurance that what we discuss will not get out ... to anyone?’

Pedersen glanced at us. ‘I guess it involves Africa, since Jimmy and Paul are here. Yes, of course I agree.’

‘Then we will need to you to sign these documents to that effect first, please,’ Art Johnson explained.

Pedersen stood, and signed four forms. ‘Project Magestic?’

‘We’ll come to that,’ Johnson said. ‘First, I’d like to make it clear that what we will now discuss is classified Top Secret, and that any disclosure would mean a prison term for certain.’

Pedersen took a moment. ‘I’m a patriot Art, you don’t need to read the book to me.’

Jimmy put in, ‘We know you’re a patriot, it’s why you’re here, and why I’ve been dealing with you all along.’

‘May I ask, Jimmy, why you have such a high level of clearance?’ Pedersen broached.

‘Because Project Magestic is about ... Paul, me and others.’

‘About you?’ Pedersen queried.

Jimmy held up a hand. ‘Let me say two things first. To second what Art said about security, this is the single most important conversation you’ll ever have. A security breach would be serious for you. And second - and I have to say this and mean it,

Chuck - should you breach security I would do *everything* ... within my power to harm you.' He let Pedersen think about it.

'OK, ya'll got me worried.'

Jimmy faced Johnson, who gestured Jimmy on. 'There exists a very powerful clairvoyant, codename Magestic. I'm his right hand man, Paul assists me.'

'Clairvoyant? This fella wouldn't be good with the stock markets, would he?'

'He'd be one hundred percent accurate,' Jimmy confirmed. 'He'd also be accurate with plane crashes, terrorist attacks, wars, elections, earthquakes and erupting volcanoes ... and major events decades ahead that will just about wipe out mankind.'

'Jesus,' Pedersen let out.

'He also knows where all the best oil finds are,' Jimmy added with a grin.

'Which'd just about make the fella the richest man on the planet!'

'He's not interested in money, he's interested in saving the planet,' Jimmy suggested. 'We're facing a global war, where most people on the planet may die, hence the Top Secret nature of things here today.'

'We're planning ahead,' the Admiral put in.

'And my medical insurance company?' Pedersen puzzled.

'Has a small role to play in a large game.'

'That why I'm here?'

'No. You're here because you have a future, a predicted future, one I knew about a long time ago.'

Pedersen faced Johnson, but pointed at Jimmy. 'Fella just about bribed me to enter politics.'

'He knew,' Art Johnson said with a shrug.

'We need your help on the hill,' Jimmy said. 'We need you, possibly some others, to know what's ahead, and to help us plan for it.'

'And the stuff you're doing in Cuba?'

'They have enough oil to strategically alter the region,' Jimmy stated. 'You can make friends, or come out fighting.'

Pedersen nodded to himself. 'I trusted you before I signed those papers, Jimmy. Might have been a little money in there, but I seen what ya'll up to around the world.'

‘I know. And I’ll soon need your help with the Republican Presidential candidate.’

‘He’ll get in?’

‘Yes. I have dirt, but ... there may be a better way of dealing with him.’

‘Dealing ... with him?’

‘He’ll do a lot of harm,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Even knowing what the future holds. He’ll see me as an ... opportunity, not a route map. If he makes a mistake, you go to war. And lose.’

‘You aint never been wrong so far, Jimmy,’ Pedersen admitted with a sigh. ‘I was starting to think you got insider information.’

‘I do,’ Jimmy admitted with a false smile. He eased forwards. ‘This is serious, Chuck. We’re talking global war, billions of lives. Directions need to be taken now, some serious planning ahead.’

Pedersen took in the faces. ‘I’m on the team. Wad’ya need?’

‘For now: an hour or two of your time, for a full briefing on the next twenty years. We can do that downstairs.’

Pedersen was driven out two hours later, looking pale and worried, making me concerned for him. And he now had a new perspective, one that would keep him awake all night.

We pulled our troops out of Darfur, and arranged numerous parades through many capital cities, with representatives of each nation parading through the other’s capitals, something else that had never been done before. Rudd oiled palms, and the news coverage was great, that of a united Africa. We then placed Rifles from many nations into each other camps, more so than in the past. Members of the Congo Rifles were based at Mawlini, together with Tanzanians.

A month after the Darfur conflict officially ended, but with the refugee crisis still getting worse, we set about organising the first annual Rifles competition at Mawlini. A hundred of the best men came from each nation and competed against each other in their teams: shooting, running, jeep driving and maintenance, ordnance skills, the assault course, a written test. It was all good humoured, carefully staged and carefully monitored, much drinking after hours. We were careful not to have a road race that

could be timed and monitored, since their record breaking times would have been hard to explain. These men had all been injected, and could run like the wind.

The Kenyans won this first event, the Kenyan President being joined by the Tanzanian President to award medals and thank the participants. It was one of the first stories for the African Times, launched in nine countries. A front-page picture displayed soldiers from each participating nation, and their national flags, under a banner of “United Africa”. We had our mouthpiece, and we were not about to be quiet.

Apartments

After much nudging from the Kenyan Government, we began to tackle a number of farms that had defaulted on their taxes, plus a few safari estates. We grabbed two estates straight away, simply paying their taxes, and built lodges, adding them to the brochure. Near the existing super-farm, we took over small farms and made them outposts of their larger brother, managed from there since they were all within twenty miles. All in, the acreage of suitable farmland increased by a third, and it cost less than a hundred thousand pounds.

Meanwhile, at Goma International Airport, our flagship airport that lacked passengers, Jimmy had built a block of decent apartments, ten stories high and in their own grounds, complete with pool and parkland. It looked very nice. With photograph in hand I went and found him, and asked him if he was crazy!

‘The block will be grabbed by companies that have workers and managers in the area. It was cheap to build, reasonable for people to buy or rent. The airport manager and his staff have rented there, several mines have bought there already, and some of the richer locals from Goma have bought. It’s all sold bar one.’

‘Oh.’

He dug out another photo. ‘Apartment block two, down the road.’ Then he showed me a sketch, making my eyes widen. He explained, ‘The future of Goma City.’

‘It looks like New York!’

‘It’s a good investment for the property business. The apartments cost ten thousand pounds to build, twenty to sell. In the long term, they’ll be worth much more.’

He showed me a second sketch, this time of a large square apartment block, shops on the ground floor. ‘For rental, for workers: two hundred apartments. It’s on the road to Goma. From there it has bus links to the closest mines, the smelting plant and the oil wells. We’ve got a half decent bus service running now. I’ve just agreed to a college near it, a school, kindergarten, public swimming pool, parks.’

‘Home from home – in the jungle.’

‘It’s where the jobs are. There’s also enough food, cheap fuel, and plenty of land that costs nothing.’

‘It’s also close to the airport, so any enquiring journalist will see it on approach,’ I noted.

‘You’re not stupid, are you?’

‘What about the roads, they’re taking ages?’ I pressed.

‘I’ve ordered concrete made locally, lots of it. We’ll use concrete for now, tarmac them over later.’

‘What’ll ore lorries do to concrete?’

‘Crack it, but it’ll be good for a few years. By then we’ll have tarmac over it. I’ve bought up all the spare concrete from Rwanda and Uganda, which should have an effect. We’re using concrete for a few bridges: cheap, but effective. I’m also paying Rwanda and Uganda to improve their road links to us, plus a decent motorway through Burundi to Tanzania.’

‘What’s the corporation making at the moment?’

‘In pounds: one point three billion annually. Plus ... extras.’

‘CAR?’ I asked.

‘An extra four hundred million a year in it. Plus more if OPEC don’t go to war with Tanzania over Zanzibar island.’

‘They noticed the reports have they?’ I asked with a grin.

‘Right now they think the deposits are a quarter size of Saudi deposits.’

‘And...?’

‘And think what they’ll be like when they realise the deposits are as big!’

‘They visiting tomorrow?’

‘Yes, the President himself. So shine your shoes.’

The next day I was grinning as we met the Tanzanian delegation at the front of the house. I knew what was coming, and I always enjoyed shocking people. Unfortunately, the old boy didn't look like he could take too many shocks. We allocated rooms for them, our guests amazed by the house, and the quality of their rooms. We made them lunch, and sat about the dining room table chatting about things of little consequence.

After lunch we retired to a lounge and lifted our note pads. Their delegation had ten members. Opposite them sat Jimmy and me, Helen and Han, plus our Chief Executive from CAR.

'First of all,' Jimmy began, 'I would like to say that we are happy to increase the size of the Tanzania Rifles from two thousand five hundred to five thousand – if you are happy.'

Silly question, I thought. They were more than happy, a document signed for their honorary Colonel in Chief.

'Next, we would like to increase the number of oil rigs off Zanzibar Island, moving some to the north.'

Another silly question; the old boy had the pen in his hand before Jimmy had finished.

'Next, and in recognition of the revenue we expect from the oil in the next four years, we are paying you one billion pounds *upfront*.' Jimmy handed over a cheque with a lot of zeros.

I wondered if the old boy would make it through the day as his team leant in and peered at the cheque. The old boy pocketed the cheque, leaving me hoping he would not put his clothes through the wash before he banked it.

'Next, the Chinese Government have consider the request you made for a development loan. They have agreed a loan of three billion dollars, at zero percent interest.' They stared back as Han laid out a form to sign. The old boy duly signed, so too his ministers, witnessed by us and Han. Jimmy added, 'The money will be transferred to you within a week.' He poured the old guy a glass of water.

'Next, we'd like to discuss the Zanzibar oilfield. We feel ... that OPEC countries, especially Saudi Arabia, may be a problem in the future when they realise the size of the oilfield.'

'Size of it?' they puzzled.

‘We believe, from our recent surveys, that the oilfield could be half as big as the Saudi oilfield, making it one of the world’s largest oilfields.’

Now I was sure the old boy would keel over. They took a while to digest it.

‘One of the world’s ... biggest oilfields?’ the old boy questioned.

‘Making Tanzania as rich as ... Dubai and Kuwait put together,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘You, sir, will see your country grow to be very ... very rich. As such, we’ve borrowed some inshore patrol boats from the Chinese, and they’ll be delivered to you soon to patrol the oil rigs – to keep your investment safe.’

The old boy had a new swagger about him that afternoon as he wandered around the house and grounds; he was walking on air. As such, Jimmy, being the sneaky bastard that he was, brought in the UK Prime Minister for a business meeting with the Tanzanians. We sat again in the lounge and had tea, the PM soon offering oil equipment, oil experts, help with building terminals and a local refinement plant on the mainland. The old boy, his head spinning, signed up straight away, the costs offset against future oil revenue. It would all be done for no upfront cash, a deal worth over a billion for British companies.

Meanwhile, Crusty was in China. His software had predicted a modest quake, and RF China and Hong Kong were on full alert and deployed, along with British and French groups. The academic community watched in a state of shock as Crusty gave interviews to Chinese TV, making his pinpoint prediction.

On the day in question nothing happened, so they waited. The next day, at noon, the ground shook, buildings tumbled, people were injured and killed. And the academic community turned red with anger, its old men pulling out what little hair they had left. Crusty, and his two ex-SAS bodyguards, toured the Pacific region, making friends and promoting his software.

A month later he made a prediction of a minor quake in Sumatra, the authorities taking a mixed approach to it. We mobilised the local RF unit and sent over the Aussies and the Kiwis, who sat around for two days after the quake should have struck. It hit on the third day, minor damage, a few fires, some people trapped. We had several TV crews in place, the pictures

streaming back to western news programmes. Crusty was becoming a celebrity, his increasing popularity judged by the number of death threats he received. Since the threats were all spelt correctly, and sometimes penned in Latin, we did not take them seriously.

His budget for a tsunami warning system was increased, and he toured those regions subject to earthquakes, granting money for air-raid style sirens attached to police stations, hospitals, schools, and government buildings. He also produced a cartoon, which was dubbed into ten languages and regional dialects. It depicted kids playing on the beach when the water suddenly went out, rushing in and killing those kids that did not run inland. Every school received a copy. They also received posters for their walls: when the water goes out quickly, run! Twenty-five thousand posters went out, in a variety of languages.

The road to Damascus conversion

US Presidential races started a good year or two before the election itself, something I found odd. Well, I found most US politics odd, but this early start seemed even more odd. UK politicians began kissing babies and lying to the public little more than two months prior to an election, not two years.

But Hardon Chase, Republican candidate, was getting in there early, eighteen months or less to the elections. His opponent, in the Democratic Camp, was considered weak. Even by Jimmy, who avoided the pretender to the throne.

The day we landed in New York, the news broke about the death of a Republican Congressman in China, stabbed by a man who was then shot dead by Chinese police. The incident occurred at a hotel, the dead assailant from a remote region, and with an odd list of gripes, plus time spent behind bars for assault and mental health issues. The news was full of it, but it was an open and shut case, the Chinese very apologetic about the incident. The dead man was, however, known to me, and the Chinese. He would have gone on to be principal architect behind

the plan to attack China in 2015. None of the briefings that Jimmy had given had ever listed the names of future leaders; they had always been given numbers. No one in the “M” Group had a clue that this man would have gone on to be President some day.

We did the rounds in New York, a visit to Pineapple, photographs with the stars, a TV interview. The next morning we flew down to DC, to meet with Haddon Chase at the White House. He had received his Magestic security brief yesterday, a four-hour briefing, and so was fully prepped for us before we arrived. He met us in the Oval Office – for effect, but without Art Johnson present. For company we just had the Admiral; the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs. Chase shook Jimmy’s hand with a keen expression that said, ‘This is an opportunity.’

We sat and squared off to each other. Jimmy took a long time before saying, ‘So, how did you find the briefing?’

‘Still wondering why I was given the briefing in the first place. They were not so ... forthcoming.’

‘You were briefed about someone who can predict the future with pinpoint accuracy ... and you’re a presidential candidate.’

Chase’s eyes widened. ‘You saying I win?’

‘You win. And then go on to do a bad job as President.’

‘How I do ... is none of your concern. You’re not even American.’

The Admiral piped up with, ‘I’d suggest caution ... when talking to Mister Silo. He is ... more capable than you realise. And he knows what you’re thinking before you do.’

Chase took a moment, an indignant glance at the Admiral. ‘It’s the will of the American people who gets in. Then, as such, I will be the legally elected President. And since I know how close you are to the Russians and the Chinese, let alone the Cubans, you’ll not be welcome in the White House.’

I handed Jimmy ten dollars, the Admiral hiding a smile.

‘What?’ Chase asked. ‘You bet I’d say that?’

‘I bet, that you’d be just as difficult as I predicted,’ Jimmy calmly explained. ‘So tell me, how much of yesterday’s briefing did you believe?’

‘Well, the military believe it.’

The Admiral put in, 'We've had more than five hundred predictions over fifteen years, none wrong. We've averted terrorist attacks, plane crashes, you name it.'

'I'll make my judgements when I sit at that desk,' Chase said, thumbing over his shoulder.

'You believe our prediction then?' I asked. 'That you'll get there.'

He took a moment. 'I'll get there with or without you.'

'You'll get there if I let you get there,' Jimmy told him, the now Admiral seemingly uneasy.

'That a threat?' Chase asked.

'The thing about knowing the future, is that you know what will happen. I knew, in the summer of 1983, that you would be President. I knew, and so I was at the cabin on the lake, collecting evidence to use against you.'

Chase looked horrified, trying to hide his reaction in front of the Admiral.

Jimmy continued, 'I've had twenty years to collect, and even to fabricate, evidence. And, unfortunately for you, all of the witnesses gave written and videotaped evidence, and then very recently met with less-than-discreet accidents. The accidents, which occurred as you were nominated for Republican candidate, would be linked back to some CIA gentlemen. So, if anyone was to investigate the matter, it would appear as if the CIA had silenced all of the witnesses. If such an investigation were to take place after you entered office, it would look ... odd.'

'I'm gong to pretend I didn't hear that,' the Admiral stated.

Chase poured himself a glass of water and loosened his tie. He took several sips of water, composing himself. 'I guess there's a *reason* why I'm not in prison right now.'

'The reason is this: I wanted to sit and face you, to see if there was a spark of humanity in you. To see if you could be the man you'd like to be.'

Chase took another sip. 'You saying there's a way out for me?'

'You may end up President. It depends on the next ten minutes.'

Chase stared back, now just a wreck, not a confident and brash presidential candidate. ‘If I get in ... you’ll have a hold over me.’

‘I have a hold over the current incumbent, and did over the last one. I did not use that hold, that’s not how I like to do things.’

‘I can vouch for that,’ the Admiral stated. ‘We’ve had no pressure or threats, nor any asking for money. And if Jimmy wanted to, he could easily be the world’s richest man.’

‘So what do you want?’ Chase asked.

‘I want you to be the most successful president in the history of the States. I want them to build statues of you and name schools after you.’

Chase sat staring back, his eyes widening. ‘You’d ... help me?’

‘What do you think I’m here for?’ Jimmy posed, his hands wide. ‘Why do you think I was chosen for this task?’

Chase glanced at the Admiral, at me, and back to Jimmy. He shrugged and held up his hands. For a presidential candidate, a slick operator, he was a bit slow.

‘My job, is to help the world fix a long list of problems, and to get it ready for a calamity that strikes in 2025. I can advise you every step of the way about all the pitfalls, but I will not interfere in internal politics, nor party politics. If you ask me a question about a foreign government, I’ll answer it. You get the benefit of foresight. In the minefield of politics, you get a map that shows you the way through.’

‘And in return?’

‘And in return ... nothing. I’m here to help, not to ask for things.’

‘You make yourself a lot of money,’ Chase noted.

‘Ninety percent goes to charity. The more I make, the more I can support various charities.’ Jimmy waited.

‘If you’re just there to advise the President, why the blackmail?’

‘Some presidents, and residential candidates, are too stupid to listen to good advice. My advice, is not the ... take it or leave it kind. If I tell you that a quake will strike - then you act, you don’t take it under advisement. My advice, is to be acted upon,

or it will be withdrawn. And, where I see you doing something to the detriment of another nation, I'll advise them as well.'

'Like the Russians and Chinese.'

'Very much so. They ... listen.'

'You talk with their leaders?' Chase puzzled.

'All the time; they already know every aggressive move you'll make in the years ahead. Should you ignore my advice, and make those aggressive moves, they'll be ready for you ahead of time.'

'You're playing God!'

'And you, sir, may end up making decisions that cost thousands of American servicemen their lives. As President, that's your right. It's my right to stop you, and send you to prison.'

Chase took another sip of water. 'I ... made a mistake a long time ago. Since then ... since then I've tried to do a good job.'

'I know, I've been following your career with some interest. Your record is not a bad one, and I don't think you're a bad person. We just need to find the real you, the one that looks at end of his life, then turns back along the path he has trodden, and asks: did I do a good job? Could I have done better? Did I need to start that war? What I'd like you to do, is to consider what you may think on your deathbed, about what you did in your life. And what you may do as President. Will you look back and be proud? Will they name schools after you?

'As it stands, my knowledge of the future suggests that you'll leave office with the lowest approval rating since records began. You'll make Nixon look like a great man.'

I asked, 'If you know that you'll be so unpopular, why run? You're just beating yourself up for four years? And the pay aint great!'

'Being President is a ... calling,' Chase suggested.

'They're calling you an arsehole,' I helpfully put in. 'You won't be doing the after dinner speech bit after leaving office. So why bother? Want your name in the history books? Is that it? Hardon Chase, number forty-four, what an arsehole.'

'It's a good point,' Jimmy agreed. 'We know you'll be very unpopular at the end. So why go ahead with it?'

Chase eased back, taking off his tie. 'If I got in, and took your direction, it would compromise my integrity – and my right to choose. Not sure I could do that.'

'That's the first sensible thing you've said,' Jimmy stated. 'And a good point.' He faced the Admiral. 'How does Art Johnson do it?'

'He takes what you say, then we discuss it, do some research, and then he chooses a course of action.'

'Have I, in any way, taken away his right to choose?'

'No.'

We all faced Chase. And waited.

'And if you don't like the choices I make?' Chase posed.

'I'll try and counter balance them of course, especially if I know that they are very bad choices. But when you do make a choice, I'll explain exactly what the consequences will be, and in great deal. If you still decide to go ahead, knowing that you'll fail, then you have no right to be in the big chair. If I tell you that ... New Orleans floods, and you do nothing, I'll make it hurt, I'll make it hurt a lot. But it's still your choice to ignore my advice.'

'Why would I ignore a warning about a flood?'

'Why would you ignore any of my advice?' Jimmy countered with.

'Let's play ... Presidents and advisors,' I said. 'Here's a scenario for you, Mr President. Cuba had just discovered oil, and we're telling you they have enough to alter regional politics and make themselves very rich. What do you do?' We waited.

'I'd need more information,' Chase timidly admitted.

'OK,' I said. 'Choice number one: you ignore them. They develop their oilfields, get rich, buy lots of Migs and modern weaponry, and start offering cheap oil to Central American countries if they'll spit in your eye. Choice two: you kiss and make up, buy their oil, sell them TV sets, and try and gently steer them towards democracy.' We waited, the Admiral seemingly keen on the answer himself.

'There's a third choice,' Jimmy put in. 'You attack Cuba, steal their oil. Unfortunately, every South American country turns against you, along with Russia and China and ... well, most everybody. You fight a long war, you lose a lot of people, and the Democrat that replaces you pulls the troops back. What have you achieved? And when you look back on your life, what will

you think of your screw-up? What kind of chapter will it be in your memoirs?’

‘And the answer?’ Chase asked.

‘Is to do what’s in the best long-term economic interest of this country,’ Jimmy stated.

‘Kiss and make up, buy oil and sell them goods,’ Chase repeated, his head lowered. Lifting his head, he said, ‘Chuck Pedersen has business interests with you guys, and you’re in Cuba. You courting votes?’

‘I have twelve of your Senators willing to either assist you, or block you.’

‘To stop me from making bad choices,’ Chase wistfully stated

‘Minefield. Map,’ I put in. ‘Your choice. But it’s not just you crossing the minefield. There’re a few others there with you: two hundred million odd.’

‘You could just get rid of me with what you know, support another candidate,’ Chase posed.

‘I will always try, as far as I can, not to interfere in your domestic politics. I had intended dropping you in it, but I thought I’d talk to you first.’

Chase stood and walked to the window, then took a long moment to stare at Art Johnson’s chair. ‘I do want to be President, but I don’t want to be an unpopular president. I don’t want to regret it; I’ve met too many former presidents, and had nothing but pity and contempt for them. I don’t want to join that group.’

‘Then make a choice,’ Jimmy nudged.

Chase stepped back across to us and sat. ‘I won’t be bullied, nor have my hand forced by anyone, but I will listen to what you have to say and try and follow the route map. That’s the deal, take it ... or throw me to the press.’

Jimmy stood. ‘I’ll take it.’ He offered a hand, and they shook, surprising me. I would have thrown him to the wolves. Jimmy invited him to Africa and London, to do some electioneering. I guessed we were going to endorse the candidate. But I kept my fingers crossed.

Water babies

Jimmy walked into the house, a week after getting back from the States, and lifted up Shelly. 'I'm pinching the kid for some swimming, join us in half an hour.'

With Shelly gone we puzzled the odd move, since Jimmy had not taken Shelly swimming before.

'He's probably got some lady to impress over there, wanting to come off as all paternal.'

I rang and checked. No lady visitor. We had a cup of tea, scratched our heads, and changed into swimming costumes, throwing tracksuits on over them. We arrived early, twenty minutes after Jimmy had suggested we join him.

At the pool entrance we could not see anyone, then noticed bubbles.

'There's a diver in the pool,' I commented, and we walked along the edge, peering down. And we stopped dead.

'Oh my god!' Helen gasped.

Exchanging looks, we tore off the tracksuits, placed on our goggles and dived in. There, alongside Jimmy, was Shelly, swimming along with a air tank the size of a pop bottle, tiny pink flippers and a small mask and mouthpiece. Seeing us, Jimmy turned her around and she swam towards us, our daughter breathing naturally and blowing out air. As she passed us she waved, but kept going, finning along at quite some speed. After five minutes of observing her, Jimmy lifted her up and onto the steps, easing her mask off. Shelly spat out her mouthpiece and coughed a little, smiling widely.

'You had it made for her?' I asked.

'What every budding marine biologist needs.'

'She's two and a half!' Helen said, but with a smile.

'Scooby-do div-div,' Shelly told us.

'Scuba diving, yes,' we agreed.

Jimmy eased off his equipment and gave it to me. 'Have fun. But keep her out of the pond, eh? And out the jellyfish tank. Given half the chance, she'd be in there!'

Five minutes later I was back underwater, Shelly swimming up and down without any fear. She even found her lost hair band.

Mogadishu

We landed at Mogadishu International Airport on a British Airways flight, the airport quite busy these days. It appeared clean and efficient. We were met off the steps and nudged into a black Mercedes, part of an escorted convoy, and soon speeding out of the gates. The roads seemed well maintained, and the houses all appeared bullet-hole free and painted.

It wasn't a long drive to the Presidential Palace, and we pulled up to find a long line of smartly dressed Somali Rifles. They stamped to attention after orders barked by a sergeant. Playing like royalty, we spoke to a few and enquired about the Sudan, most having been deployed there. Inside the palace we were led along white-marbled floors and walls, cool after the outside heat, and into a reception room where the President and his staff awaited us. I noticed that the photographer was from the African Times. He snapped us shaking hands with the President, General Abdi and a few others.

We sat and talked about the Rifles, the Sudanese problem, and oil exploration; a full hour. On Jimmy's request, we had a guided tour of the city by Abdi, to see how it had come along. I had nothing to compare it to, just photographs, but Jimmy said he knew what it should have been like. The city centre and port bustled, and from where we stopped we could see the harbour full of ships, more anchored outside. We dropped in on the main hospital, finding it as good as anything Africa had to offer. Next came a RF clinic on the edge of a poor area, time taken to speak to everyone there and get their input on conditions. Those conditions were improving day-by-day, month-by-month.

As we drove around we could see a great deal of building work still going on. It was not an attractive city, certainly nothing in the way of colonial structures or gleaming office blocks. What it was, however, was relatively safe. Police and soldiers stood on every street corner, and the crime rate was low.

On the outskirts of the city, we popped into the Rifles base and spent a full two hours greeting soldiers and chatting away. We even visited their clinic, chatting to some of the wounded from Sudan, many of whom had never been injected with the

blood. Pulling into a nice westernised hotel, Jimmy said it was ours, finished recently and paid for by the property business. Abdi followed us in and we sat and had coffee, inconveniencing the guests with Abdi's bodyguards.

'I hear some bombs have gone off,' Jimmy said.

'Yes,' Abdi admitted. 'A dissident group from the north.'

'My information says that they are al-Qa'eda: Saudi nationals and religious extremists.'

I pricked up my ears.

'You are well informed, Jimmy,' Abdi admitted. 'But they are small.'

'I hear that they are growing, and trying to disrupt your country because you do business with the west.'

Abdi took a moment. 'That is ... most disturbing. Do you know where I may find these people?'

'They're scattered far and wide, but their headquarters are in Afghanistan. They have training camps there.'

'Afghanistan? I must research this country. Why do they support these men?'

'The country is split in half, north and south. In the north are the Northern Alliance, who fight against the Taliban in the south. The Taliban were funded by the Saudi Government after the Russians left that country, so that they would not be communist, but Muslim. Now, the Taliban accept the help of Islamic fighters, Arab fighters, in their war against the Northern Alliance.'

'The Northern Alliance, they are not Muslim?'

'They are Muslim, but with different values to the Taliban.'

'What do they want with us?' Abdi puzzled.

'They wish to harm the west, and anyone doing business with the west. They want Somali to be an Islamic state with Sharia law.'

'We are Islamic, and we have Sharia law,' Abdi puzzled.

'Yes, but you do not make them your leaders,' Jimmy explained. 'They are Saudi; they feel you should bow down to their ... greater closeness to the source of Islam. They see you as children to be guided.'

'I will kill any of them that sets foot here,' Abdi insisted. 'We will rule our own land, not the Saudis.'

'You need to secure the northern waterways, Yemen is but a short boat ride,' Jimmy suggested.

‘It will be done.’

At the hotel, I asked for clarification.

Jimmy took a moment. ‘I just put Somali on a collision course with al-Qa’eda.’

‘Why?’

‘Because they’re the only black-African Muslim state that could be used as a buffer.’

‘So al-Qa’eda won’t get a foothold here.’

‘Correct.’

There was another reason, but I did not realise it at the time.

Magestic

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Part 6

Lucy

The autumn chill brought the birth of our second daughter, Lucy; we used the name Jimmy had suggested. She was a month premature, another “C” Section at a private clinic. Sykes’ Government doctors performed the operation in London, save us having to try and explain to regular doctors why Helen had no scar from the first “C” Section.

Lucy popped out with little fuss, and I soon stood there with a little red bundle, marvelling at how much hair she had. Sitting with Jimmy and my parents in the corridor, Shelly was very puzzled as to what it was. We had to explain that it was not another cat for the house, the last moggy eventually getting fed up with Shelly pulling its tail and hitting the road. Still, for the first few days Shelly said ‘puss puss’ at her sister.

Back at the house, two days later, everyone made a fuss, even Keely, and Cat moved into our house for a few weeks. There was no major crisis on the horizon and so we took it easy, Helen completely recovered in little more than four days. During that period, when Shelly had a strop on, we’d dump her with Uncle Jimmy, who she always behaved for, or we’d give her to Han. Unlike most people in the house, Han would get down on the floor and play with Shelly, an undignified position for a stiff Chinese diplomat. Without our permission, and a little annoying, Jimmy bought Shelly a pink bike with stabilisers, complete with a pink helmet, and let her tear up and down the long corridors in the house, chipping wood and paint as she went. He also bought her a small yellow dinghy for the pool and it occupied our daughter’s attention for hours when we wanted some peace. Finally, a month after the birth of Lucy, Jimmy arranged a nursery teacher, someone Sharon knew. The lady had her own three-year-old girl, and the two girls would spend hours a day colouring or finger painting. Helen went back to work part-time, which was probably what Jimmy was after all along.

Zimbabwe

Attempts at reconciliation between the ruling party, Zanu PF, and the opposition MDC were short lived, soon rioting on the streets of Harare. Jimmy suggested that the time was right, and then informed me that I was sworn to secrecy; not even Helen was allowed to know what would happen next. When I knew what was about to happen next I was horrified, and voiced my opinion. Jimmy gave me the talk about surgeons and arms, but I was still horrified. I then got the talk about killing ten to save a thousand. What Jimmy had planned was murder; a few hundred lives now to save thousands later. We ended the conversation without agreeing, and Jimmy said that this next year coming would offer up a high body count.

The Zanu PF party headquarters, a tall office block in central Harare, caught fire on the next Monday morning, the fire starting on the ground floor. Unfortunately, most of the party workers were in it at the time, and few survived. A few days later, at a hotel retreat in the country, the ruling party met to make plans and to discuss the election of a new leader, beyond the current interim president – who no one really liked. As they assembled in the hotel grounds, in a spacious marquee, a bomb – buried under the grass many months earlier – received the correct radio signal. The party's senior members perished, along with their wives, the ladies sat at the time in colourful dresses and big hats. Zimbabwe was making the news again.

A few days before the explosion, the Army's Commander had called the interim president "corrupt", which was rich considering what we knew about the commander. After the explosion, fingers were pointed, but not at the interim president, who all agreed could not blow up a paper bag. In traditional African style, the Army's top brass met a few days later to plot a coup. They had downed little more than just their first cup of tea when the room that they were in exploded. None survived.

The interim president had a nephew who was an Army Major and, after the explosion, few officers of higher rank left to consult with. He promoted the major to a general and appointed him head of the Army at just thirty-eight. Calm was restored. And the major, he had studied in Kenya, in Mombassa, working part time at a beach hotel to make extra money. Jimmy showed

me a picture and I recognised the guy; I'd taken him scuba diving a very long time ago.

The new head of the army contacted the Kenyan Rifles and asked for Pathfinder bodyguards, twelve of them, for both himself and the President. Permission had been granted immediately by the Rifles' Colonel in Chief, who had then asked to visit. We packed our bags, I said goodbye to the baby, and we flew direct to Harare from Frankfurt.

At the airport we were afforded honoured visitor status, a car whisking us out of a side entrance and straight around to the Presidential Palace, the Interim President waiting with his nephew. The President was a quietly spoken and unassuming man, and watched with great curiosity the reaction of his new head of the Army, Solomon Beke. Solomon greeted Jimmy like a long lost relative, explaining to the president about his studies in Kenya, his part-time work and the kindness we had displayed towards him. We sat and enjoyed a refreshing tea, making small talk. Jimmy explained that the bodyguards would not cost them anything, and that the men's neutrality and loyalty was assured.

'I miss the beach in Kenya some days,' Solomon admitted. 'Here we have no beaches.'

'You are welcome to visit the new hotel any time you like, as my guests.'

'I followed the crisis in Darfur with some interest, Mister Silo,' the President stated. 'They say you spend a lot of your own money on these things.'

'Yes, Mister President. Darfur cost me three hundred million pounds.'

At the time, that was about ten times the entire GDP of Zimbabwe.

The President digested the numbers. 'And how goes the tourist area?'

'We are sending as many people as we can down to you. I believe they are operating at around eighty-percent capacity, which is good – given the problems here.'

'Indeed,' the President admitted. And I'd have to admit that I quite liked the old guy.

'I have a proposition for you, Mister President,' Jimmy said. 'How would like your own Rifles Brigade?'

Solomon could hardly contain himself.

‘You would pay for them, as you do elsewhere?’ the President queried.

‘Yes, we would pay for them. We will equip and train them, but they will be loyal to you. In return, we may ask for them in situations like Darfur. And we thank you for those soldiers that you did send to us.’

‘They were not allowed near to any danger,’ the President noted, eyeing Jimmy carefully.

‘They were there for African solidarity. The aim ... was one of unity; political unity and military unity.’

‘I will be happy to see your newspaper sold here,’ the President suggested. ‘It is, perhaps, the only unbiased paper in Africa.’

‘We’ll begin circulation straight away,’ Jimmy offered. ‘What of the Rifles?’

‘We will be happy of your assistance,’ the President suggested. ‘But the recruits must be young men, no one who has yet developed a taste for corruption.’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘Young men with ... fresh minds, and good hearts. And Kenyan instructors. But may I make a suggestion. How about we train them in Kenya and the Congo, and then give them back to you when they are fine young soldiers? Say, one year away?’

‘An excellent idea,’ Solomon agreed.

Jimmy added, ‘You need only assist us with recruitment, the rest will be down to us. We’ll hand you back a thousand good men.’

‘A thousand?’ the President repeated.

‘No point in a smaller group, and some will drop out, wishing their mother’s skirts,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘Your are ... abnormally generous,’ the President noted.

‘No, I have my own selfish reasons. I aim to unify all African armies some day.’

‘I did not think you a dreamer, Mister Silo.’

Jimmy smiled widely. ‘We all need our dreams.’

‘Indeed. And mine is of a peaceful Zimbabwe.’

‘I can help with money and resources,’ Jimmy responded. ‘Starting with a few schools, and a rather large orphanage.’

‘Your orphanages are legendary around Africa. How many will this one total?’

‘Let’s start with twenty thousand ... and work up, shall we?’

‘You may build as many orphanages as you like, but food supply is a problem.’

‘If I have your permission, then the orphanages would grow their own food with the help of our staff from Kenya. We would then look at helping your farms, if you are willing to sell farm land to me.’

‘If you were to buy such land, would not your *white countrymen* have a problem with just whose land it used to be?’ the President posed.

‘I will make contact with the former owners and offer them a settlement.’

‘You will be buying it twice!’

‘I am kind of hoping that you will be ... *generous* in your pricing.’

The old boy smiled. ‘Indeed it should be generous, if it feeds the people.’

Solomon escorted us back to the airport and we sat chatting for an hour. He wanted to visit again Kenya and the beach hotel, but dare not leave for fear of what might happen whilst he was gone. We promised to send recruitment staff, and he promised every assistance to find young men. Given the employment scene in Zimbabwe, it would not be difficult.

Before we boarded the flight, Jimmy rang Mac. ‘Mac, Jimmy. How’s Camp Delta coming along?’

‘Almost there, couple of weeks. It’s a big spread, so who’s gunna be in it?’

‘The new Zimbabwean Rifles.’

‘Zimbabwe? You fucking mad?’

‘All fresh faced teenagers, no prior experience, blank sheets of paper.’

‘Oh. Aye, that might work.’

‘There’ll start arriving in three weeks, so make sure the water pipes work and the canteen is ready.’

‘Kenyan Army says they got some more tanks.’

‘Yes, another twenty. And I got thirty for Somalia, and twenty for Tanzania. It’s not much, but it all helps.’

‘Rumour has it the Somali Rifles are ramping up?’

‘Yes, towards twenty thousand men. Keep the Ethiopians off their turf.’

‘Jimmy, is there wuz going ta be a big campaign somewhere... you’d tell us well in advance, wouldn’t ya?’

‘Mac, you’re always the first to know,’ Jimmy teased.

‘Like fuck. Didn’t know about what ya had planned for Darfur till the last minute.’

‘It’s called ... secrecy. Sometimes, I don’t even tell myself what I’m planning.’

Noodles

We’d been back for a whole day when Jimmy opened up the basement command room. I was worried as soon as I was told, Helen and me rushing over. On the table lay a map of Northern Somali and Yemen.

‘Oh my god. Suez,’ I let out.

‘You’re not wrong,’ Jimmy checked his watch.

‘There are eight fucking clocks on the wall!’

‘Six.’

I stopped to count them. ‘There’re six clocks on the wall!’

‘Yes, now shut up and listen. I’ve just tipped off Abdi about al-Qa’eda operatives crossing from Yemen. He’s sent men north to the coast.’

Han stepped in. ‘Good afternoon, Paul. How is Lucy?’

‘Fine, thanks’.

Han faced Jimmy. ‘The boats will arrive soon.’

‘Boats?’ I queried.

‘The Somalis have bought four inshore patrol boats from the Chinese, and they’re just about to be delivered to the harbour being built by the US Navy.’ He tapped the map. ‘Here.’

‘Is it ready?’

‘Some of it is. The patrol boats will be fuelled by the US Navy and sent out with Somali crews to patrol the area.’

‘And these Somali crews...?’ I posed.

‘Have about as much seamanship as your daughter in her little yellow dinghy – if not less.’

‘So ... how are they going to find the bad boys?’

Keely stepped in, dumping reports onto the map. 'The US Navy will put crews aboard.'

'So ... let me see if I have this right. Chinese made inshore patrol boats – with all the instructions written in Chinese – plus Somalis with no sea legs, and gung-ho Americans.'

'Have faith,' Jimmy suggested.

'Have faith? They're likely to shoot each other!'

Han put in, 'The Chinese crews are not armed for this venture.'

'Ours will be armed to the teeth,' Keely quipped.

'You trying to start a war?' I asked Jimmy.

'They have a common purpose,' Jimmy responded, showing me a picture of one of the craft. Ninety feet long, they had a crew of twenty and a single fifty-calibre mounting forward.

A fax churned out of a machine, Han checking it. 'They have arrived, and are being fuelled. Their escort cruiser is returning.'

'This should be good,' I said, grabbing a seat.

The US Navy boarded the craft, along with four members of the Somali Rifles that could speak to anyone apprehended, presumably in Arabic. The four inshore craft set off on a prescribed patrol route, Jimmy suggesting that small launches would cross from Yemen in a few hours. We paced up and down.

Two hours into a dull patrol, the US Navy hands aboard the Chinese craft were hungry, breaking open ration packs. The Chinese stared at the meagre American rations and scratched their heads. Where the Americans just being unsociable? They decided not to enquire, and got the stoves on, the galley soon full of the smell of cooking, and making the US Navy a little jealous. Thirty minutes later, the Chinese sat with their meal, noodles tonight. Being the polite individuals they were, they offered to share. The Navy deckhands required no prompting, and tucked into tasty noodles; rice, beef and black bean sauce.

In the basement, Keely put small grey models of ships onto the map board.

'What are they?' I asked.

'Five destroyers.'

'Destroyers? With bloody great radars up bloody great towers?'

‘Yep.’

‘So why aren’t they searching for the bad boys?’

‘They are,’ Keely said with a grin.

‘So why the patrol boats?’ I puzzled.

‘Try and figure it out.’

I stared at the map board, not figuring it out. The bloody great task force, with its huge destroyers, tracked the small launches every inch of the way. They then directed the nearest patrol boat onto an intercept course, and right up to the launches, who immediately opened fire. The Somalis returned fire and killed every last one of the occupants on the launches, taking several hours to fish up the bodies for identification. Back ashore, a lone wandering TV crew, a thousand miles from anywhere, filmed the Somalis offloading the bodies. The story made the news in Somalia, Yemen and the wider Middle East.

And the US Navy, full of tasty noodles with black bean sauce, had been taken off the patrol craft earlier. There was only one group that would get blame for the intercept, and that was the legitimate Somali Government. I finally had it figured out.

Upstairs, I checked a few faxes and decided to call it a day, laughter catching my attention. I popped my head out of the office to catch a glimpse of Jimmy with Anya, the Serbo-Croat speaking lady, climbing the stairs with Michelle the other side of Jimmy. As they climbed, Jimmy had a hand on both arses. I ducked back in before they saw me, my mouth opening. ‘The dirty bugger.’

I rushed around to Helen. ‘I’ve just seen Jimmy going up the stairs with Anya and Michelle together, a hand on each arse!’

‘Ah, I heard a rumour.’

‘What? And you didn’t think to tell me?’

‘Ah, not jealous are we?’

‘No,’ I protested, less than convincingly. ‘It’s just that...’

‘What? Just that you’re married now. With kids.’

‘No, no, I didn’t mean that.’

‘Then what?’ Helen teased.

‘Well, we don’t get to gossip much about the big guy.’

‘I’ve thought about what he’d be like in bed,’ Helen admitted.

‘What?’ I demanded.

‘He’s over a hundred, been around. Must have picked up a few tricks.’

I stared, my mouth opening. 'Uh, excuse me ... wife! You think about what he's like in bed?'

'Not in that way, just curious.'

'Not in that way? What other way is there?'

'I'd like to watch what they do.'

'You can't say that. You're married with two kids! Married to me.'

'And I wouldn't change a thing,' she said soothingly, a hand on my cheek. 'But I'd still like to see them at it. Wouldn't you?'

'No. I have no desire to see his hairy arse going up and down!' I said defensively.

'But you wouldn't kick Anya and Michelle out of bed ... either.'

'Well, no'.

'What do you mean ... no?'

'Don't start that, wench. I only have eyes for you.'

Helen looked away. 'I wonder if they'll use toys.'

'Christ...' I whispered. I shook my head. 'Bet he don't even like sex.'

'No?' Helen puzzled.

'No, he knows how it'll turn out.'

The silver screen

Everyone had been co-operating with the studio making the movie about Hal's time with Rescue Force. At Mawlini, people had been tripping over themselves to be helpful, as well as hoping to be extras. The director had been afforded as many Hueys as he desired, as much fuel, and as many big bangs in the desert that he needed. Progress was rapid.

With most of the editing complete, we flew down to Mawlini to play ourselves. They filmed us nagging Hal to hang around, Hal teaching me flight manoeuvres, then three scenes at Scorpion Base. But since we had built all over the base they had to get in just certain angles and had to avoid the new buildings - with all mod cons.

I shouted at Hal for volunteering the mission and came over as caring. The two final scenes of Hal and were shot at studios north of London, indoor shots, water sprayed onto our faces to simulate sweat. The film was ready. Jimmy and I reviewed it, happy with the outcome, and the director was tipped a bonus. No one apart from Jimmy figured it would be worthy of the cinema, but the director said he'd try it anyway. And even Jimmy pretended that he was in favour of just TV syndication.

It opened in the States, mostly in small towns, and received a modest attendance, getting good reviews, not least because it was a true story, current and topical. The director then moved it to the larger towns and it received an even better audience, the pollsters pointing towards an older generation, veterans plus servicemen. All told, it covered the costs twice over, but that was not the point. Millions around the world were now seeing Rescue Force as a sexy and exciting occupation – despite the crappy pay.

Cassie had finished her book, and Jimmy had edited it in just a weekend, a professional editor then taking over before handing it back to Cassie for a sign off. It hit the bookshops in record time, launched first in the States, and plugged heavily by Anton's father through his media empire – a wedding planned. We bought twenty thousand copies and shipped them around the world, most to Africa, where they enjoyed a good love story. And the guy who directed Hal's film, he got to work with hardly a rest from the last project.

Doc Graham called a few days later, our recruitment applications through the roof. Mac also called, complaining about "Yanks" just flying in and wanting to sign up. Jimmy allowed four to sign up straight away, recognising their names, turning away a few others. One of those signing up, a man from Denver, had a future, Jimmy hinting that it was a milestone passed, another box ticked.

Sat in the diner, chatting about American recruits to RF Kenya, Keely stepped in and sat.

'Joint Chiefs would like to put a team of observers at Mawlini, to observe the new Zimbabwean recruits.'

Jimmy responded with, 'The building for them will be ready in two weeks, I'll meet your team down there and brief them.'

Smiling widely, shaking his head, Keely lifted up and left us.

‘They snooping?’ I asked.

‘Not really, they can see the potential of the proxy armies, so they’re making plans.’

Two weeks later we landed at Mawlini, a direct flight aboard a hired 747SP stuffed full of oil equipment and great big hairy oil workers in boots, none of whom wanted my autograph.

At the base, we had just enough time to dump our bags before being whisked around to the new US Army building, positioned just inside Camp Delta. That camp offered no recruits yet, but a lot of builders finishing things off. The American’s building was solid concrete, square, and looked big enough to house maybe twenty people, plus some offices. Oddly enough, it offered no windows on the ground floor. There was no sign over the door, but the Stars and Stripes were already up and fluttering in the breeze. We stepped inside with Mac and Coup, finding many men in uniform moving boxes.

‘Where’s your CO?’ Jimmy asked the first man.

‘I’ll fetch him. Who’re you, sir?’

‘I’m your landlord.’

The man fetched the CO, a Major with shortly cropped silver hair. ‘Mister Silo. I’ve heard a hell of lot about you.’ They shook.

‘It’s all true,’ I said as we shook.

Jimmy said, ‘Why don’t we get the briefing over quickly, then we can have a cold beer. How about you get all of your men to the roof and save me having to repeat myself.’

The major shouted for everyone to down tools and follow us up the roof. We found a small corner bar, a barbeque set, and many tables and chairs with Fanta shades.

Jimmy waved the men into a line. ‘OK. My name is Jimmy Silo, and I own and run this airfield – as you probably already know. You’re here ... as my guests, to observe the Rifles, in particular the fledgling Zimbabwean Rifles, who will occupy Camp Delta in a week or two. They will be taught by instructors from the Kenyan Rifles, and by the British soldiers here, who are nearly all ex-SAS – our special forces and similar to your Delta Force. In fact, your Delta Force was modelled on them.

He pointed. ‘That is Camp Delta.’ He pointed the other way. ‘That is the Kenyan Rifles compound, although they have bases

elsewhere in Kenya and training grounds in other countries – which you are welcome to visit. Beyond that compound is the helicopter compound, where you’ll find some very familiar Hueys and Cobras – most of which are older than you are. You’ll also find some dated American pilots, who have no intention of showing you young bloods any respect at all. They’re not officers, but around here the Kenyans salute them out of respect for what they’ve done. Anyone seen the film about Hal Becker?’

They all raised their hands.

‘He’s here, and he’s grumpy if you don’t buy him a cold beer.’

They laughed.

Jimmy pointed at the RF compound. ‘That is the Kenyan Rescue Force compound, but it also doubles up as an international training centre for new recruits to Rescue Force. It’s also known as the “pussy compound”.’ They laughed. ‘Nurses are plentiful! Also some nice lady doctors. But let me warn you now: they’re all fit, tough, and undergo martial arts training. Kiss them off and it *will* hurt. One or two are built like Sherman tanks and will drink you under the table, carry you home over their shoulders, and ravage you all night long.’

‘He aint joking,’ Mac put in.

‘If you like Kenyan nurses, fine, they’ll like you. They’ll also like a little money and a promise of marriage. Be ... careful. Now, the local town is just about off limits, apart from driving through and buying things. If you stop to drink in a bar there you’ll be drugged, robbed and stabbed. And that’s just the women!’ They laughed again. ‘If you shag one of the local prostitutes you’ll pick up diseases that medical science has not yet identified. Let me make this clear: if you drink or shag in the town I’ll have you shipped out.’

He let them think about it. Pointing the other way he said, ‘That’s the UN hotel. Some nice UN ladies in there who’re not martial arts trained. They are, however, very prejudiced to military types; in uniform you have no chance. Tell them you’re an admin clerk or an English teacher here, or no nooky. Beyond the UN area is the main airfield, and at the top end are UN storage warehouses. Beyond the UN sheds, outside of the base, is a public hotel for oil workers. Their bar is to be avoided unless you like a good punch-up. Over the road from the main gate is

the public clinic, full of refugees, and behind it is what's left of a Somali refugee camp.

'Now, out in the desert are live firing ranges, mortar ranges, helicopter target ranges; we'll provide you with a map. You're thirty miles from the Somali border, which is very quiet these days. But a word about Somalis. If you insult the men it's a fight to the death. If you insult their women it's a fight to the death. If you look at their women, or make a comment, it's a fight to the death. Disrespect their religion and it's a fight to the death. Clear? If I find anyone here disrespecting them you're out the door.

'Now, let's talk about the Rifles, those *black* soldiers, and your attitude towards them. The Rifles have a hell of a reputation because they're pushed hard twelve hours a day, and each and every one of them is trained to your Green Beret standards. They *are not* infantry. They get up at 5am and run twenty miles every morning, often with backpacks.'

'Twenty miles a day?' someone queried.

'Every fucking morning,' Mac confirmed.

'They're all fitter than you, that I would bet my life on. They're also trained to fight hand to hand, to kill quickly and efficiently, and they've had training on every weapon the world has to offer: M16, AK47, and a dozen other rifles. They're all trained snipers, they're checked out on mortars, they can maintain and drive a jeep. Their annual allowance for ammunition is four thousand rounds per man and they will all fire off at least a hundred rounds a week on the range, every week.

'In the compound, you will see sergeants. Most of them got to be sergeants after they were tested in battle. Most of the sergeants here have spent months under fire in the desert and the jungle, and they have all killed dozens of men. Some of the sergeants here have seen action every year for the past twelve years; Somalia, the Congo, Sierra Leone, Zambia, and Darfur. They have confirmed kills in the hundreds. Personal ... confirmed kills. When you fine gentlemen are attempting to give them sage advice about how to be good soldiers, just keep that in mind. Their experience ... is a hundred times yours.

'Now, the soldiers here have no concept of white on black racism. Call them a nigger and they'll puzzle what the word it

means. If you insult them in a racist manner they'll simply be confused by it. But because you're white folk, they'll respect you a great deal from the get go, often saluting you by mistake. And the penalty for attacking a white person is often a hanging, so they won't be starting any trouble. You, gentlemen, need to be careful that you don't accidentally get them involved in anything that they should not be involved with, because the penalty to them is severe.

'Now, my hotels on the beach are available to you at a subsidised rate, and you can often find a few babes down there. Forget Nairobi and Mombassa, and don't wander around looking like American Servicemen. I also have safari lodges that you can stay at, and there are always groups of Rifles off to the Congo - so you can tag along. You can even join in a few deployments or exercises. Before we get you some cold beers, any questions? No? Right, officers and senior NCOs, follow us.'

Moscow

We flew into Moscow for a quick visit, Yuri picking us up at the airport. It took a whole five minutes for Irina to ask if Jimmy was seeing other women.

'Many,' Jimmy replied. 'Sometimes several together.'

'Three or four,' I helpfully added.

Irina pretended to be annoyed, but just ended up looking curious and turned on, Yuri laughing at her. We spent a quiet evening at a restaurant, no one recognising us, and met the Russian Government the next day. Jimmy tipped them off about action in Chechnya and Moscow bomb attacks, and we moved onto discussing the mines and oil, and finally Cuba. That brought us to a puzzling proposition from Jimmy. He asked if he could open a couple of coffee shops in Moscow, and I puzzled it as much as our hosts. They had no objections, Jimmy saying that he also wanted to buy some farmland and improve Russian agricultural output. They liked the idea of that and offered to supply state farmland and good rates, Jimmy asking for a lot of

hectares. It was a project for next month. For now, he was focused on coffee shops.

Away from the meeting, Jimmy told Yuri and Marko that he would use CAR for the coffee shops. Somehow, Central Africa Resources coffee shops in Russia seemed a bit odd. He handed over a document, outlining what he wanted done, and Yuri got to work.

A month later we returned, the weather cold, collars done up. The first four coffee shops were ready. They were all painted a uniform green and had a distinctive logo, wrapped around “Moloko” – the Russian word for milk. And yes, they served hot milk with all sorts of things added, or sprinkled on top. They opened with little fanfare, and attracted shoppers during the day and youngsters at night. They offered a few computers for internet access, a TV in the corner playing the state news, and free newspapers. Prices were reasonable, tourists finding them cheap.

Happy with the four shops, Jimmy asked them to create twenty more inside the month, using the exact same basic model and layout. Certain that there was a buck to be made – somewhere - they got to work. They appointed a national manager and created a centralised store where they could buy in bulk and feed the coffee shops. And Jimmy, he simply said that he was giving something back. No one believed him, the “M” Group poker night alive with wild speculation.

We grabbed the farmland, without viewing the frozen soil, and hired a farm manager. We gave him a big budget for western farm equipment and he flew to Germany to buy second hand machinery. He also hired half a dozen British farming experts. Fortunately, Jimmy was forthcoming about the farmland, saying that if farmed properly Russia could produce half of Europe’s food, if not more. It was a big number.

A month later we returned, now very damn cold, January snow on the ground. We inspected three of the near-identical coffee shops, the warehouse, and then spoke to the national manager and his growing staff. Given that there were now ten shops, the cost savings were starting to force a wedge into profitability. Jimmy reported that he was happy, and to go ahead and open another thirty in Moscow, twenty in St. Petersburg, and then to roll out twenty a month in towns and cities around

Russian till he said to stop. Yuri and Marko were curious, but not afraid of big numbers. The national manager, however, was terrified. He was asked to hire ten deputies, and to create regional managers.

Before we left, Yuri did his sums and fed his computer. If we bought in bulk and sold through the coffee shops, and the number tipped over a thousand, we could clear five million pounds a month in profit. I was starting to think that it was just about profit, but all the way back to London I was puzzling it. They were just coffee shops, their individual profits small. There was something else, something I was not picking up on. I knew Jimmy well enough: there was a far-reaching meaning behind everything he did. But what hell was it?

An American in Africa

Hardon Chase, presidential candidate, took time out from making false promises and flew into London, driving down to the house with his bodyguards. He was very impressed by our hotel-come-house and allocated a corner suite. He knew about the household “M” Group, but still found it fascinating that we opened our home to the national representatives.

We enjoyed a meal and a chat, Chase meeting the “M” Group members over dinner, and the three of us had a private chat afterwards. The next evening we all drove to Heathrow as planned, where a hired 747SP sat waiting, as full as ever with hairy oil workers, our politician flanked by four bodyguards. Goma International Airport came into view just after dawn, Chase viewing our creation from the air, plus the apartments and the construction work. He was most impressed with our airport, our group boarding a Dash for the short flight to Forward Base. That Dash flew low and slow over Forward Base, the Congo Rifles Base and other compounds, Chase quite shocked – if not disturbed - at the scale of it.

At Forward Base we were soon in the corporation offices and poring over maps and statistics, Chase taking it all in. The

figures made him sit up and take notice, not least the projected reserves of minerals and oil.

Jimmy laid out a map of Africa for him. He tapped it as he illustrated various places, and their significance. 'West Africa: as much untapped oil as the Gulf. The DRC: a quarter of that. Tanzania: as much again. The Gulf: OPEC controlled petrol dollars. In 2017 they drop the dollar, America has a coronary - a potentially fatal fiscal coronary. Africa has more oil, and could be non-OPEC potentially, under my influence in many places. OPEC, dollar, Africa.' He tapped the map. 'OPEC, dollar, Africa,' he repeated with emphasis.

'You're planning ahead ... to prop us up!'

'You're welcome, Mister President.'

'Why?' Chase posed.

'Why not? You fall - you take many with you, in particular the western banking system and stock markets. I'm not doing it ... *for you* ... I'm doing for everyone. Always keep that in mind: cause and effect.'

Chase studied the map. 'An OPEC switch would be a disaster. This could help.'

'Along with Cuban oil. Perhaps you should try and keep Cuba out of OPEC,' Jimmy teased. 'There are also oilfields in the Mexican Gulf that I know of that will make your eyes water.'

'Could it counter-balance OPEC?'

Jimmy made a face and shrugged. 'Not without some damage. The only way to be sure, is to attack OPEC bit by bit as the years roll on. And to start planning for it ... yesterday.'

A long hour's drive took us to our super-sized orphanage, twenty thousand clean and well-fed kids marching about in groups, neat parallel lines maintained with military proficiency. And all in blue! We drove down the main avenue to the very end, Chase staggered by the size of the undertaking.

In the camp's clinic we met Anna and Cosy, since they had some influence and control over the orphanages here. They had a room full of sickly kids waiting for us. Jimmy took off his jacket, making the bodyguards wait outside, Chase puzzling that move. Anna extracted blood and began injecting the kids, Chase observing with a frown; he had not been briefed on the blood.

'What the hell are you doing?'

Jimmy explained, 'Mister Magestic developed a few drugs, using future know-how, and we were injected. We can pass on the benefits by direct blood transfer, so the kids will be cured.'

'Cured of what?'

'Everything. AIDS, TB, Cancer, you name it.'

'There's a cure?' Chase whispered.

'Of a sort, but it will be kept under wraps for now.'

'Why?' Chase demanded.

'Population explosion, for one.'

Chase considered that. 'Well, yes, here in Africa it could be a problem.'

'They would live to be a hundred and fifty,' Jimmy explained. 'Doubling the population every eighteen to twenty years. Soon - famine and war.'

'You have a cure ... for AIDS?'

'Yes. Plus Cancer, dementia, and diabetes. You name it, we have it.'

'Why aren't our scientists working on it?'

'They are, and have been for many years. Unfortunately, neither they, nor us, understand it - and cannot reproduce it. So unless you intend injecting sick Americans with our blood it will stay hidden for a few years yet.'

'There's also a downside,' I put in.

'Downside?'

'Yes. An increased appetite, rapid weight-gain if people eat junk food. Your population would all go to thirty stones in a week, but none getting a heart attack.'

'They're heading that way now,' Chase admitted with a sigh. 'Medicare is becoming Fattycare.'

'So you see why *you* ... will not be mentioning it,' Jimmy told him.

Chase agreed with a nod.

We shoved him aboard the 747SP and headed towards Kenya, landing in Nairobi at dusk and booking into the usual hotel, security tight but discreet. Chase was tired, and went to bed early. In the morning, after a quick breakfast, Jimmy suggested a walk, the first time ever down here and making me puzzle the move. The bugger was up to something.

Jimmy led us out, asking for just four Pathfinders, Chase's own bodyguard detail not happy bunnies with the unscheduled

walkabout. Fact was, down here no one had a clue who he was. We strolled past another hotel, someone taking a snap of us. At the next corner two police officers stopped and saluted.

‘They salute you around here?’ Chase puzzled.

‘They’re just being polite,’ Jimmy suggested, getting a curious look from Chase. On the next block we entered an indoor shopping centre, busy with Kenyan housewives seeking bargains, as well as size eighteen floral dresses. As we progressed, Jimmy acted as a kind of magnet, people ahead of us being pushed invisibly to the sides and around us, not a word said to anyone. They just moved. And half way in I realised that the magnet was scooping up bodies as he went; we had a crowd following us.

A child ran out and Jimmy grabbed the girl, lifting her up and asking her in a local dialect where her mother was. He reunited child and mother and chatted for a minute, the crowd quietly observing. Pressing on, the Red Sea of Kenyan housewives parted. Outside of one shop, two men approached, issuing Kenyan calls, “Honoured Colonel!” They stamped and saluted; off-duty Rifles. Jimmy shook their hands and exchanged a few sentences in the local dialect. We pressed, very slowly, onwards.

A group of German tourists were greeted, and yes, they were at one of our lodges, Jimmy exchanging many sentences in German. The husband snapped Jimmy with his wife. And I noticed the balcony, a solid line of faces now staring down at us. I spotted a group of Russian tourists on my side and engaged them in reasonable Russian. They were, again, at one of our lodges.

Making it to the end of the shopping centre we opened to an enclosed courtyard, a café laid out with many seats under the shade of a large tree. The crowd was still behind us, some of those previously seated jumping up and peering our way. I spotted an oddly dressed elderly couple that appeared to be on a safari – in the middle of the concrete jungle.

‘Hardon Chase!’ came an American accent. They trotted over. ‘And Jimmy Silo! My God, what ya’ll doing here.’

‘Fact finding trip on Africa,’ Chase explained, shaking their hands. I looked around for a baby for him to kiss.

‘We’re from Colorado.’

‘I was born there,’ Chase informed them.

‘We know. We know where you went to school,’ they excitedly got out.

‘Are you here on safari?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Yes, well we were, but we lost our passports and some travellers cheques, so we we’re all having a time with the Embassy.’

I hid a smile. Bingo!

‘I think I could help with that,’ Chase offered.

‘Let’s get you out of here,’ Jimmy suggested, and led the couple towards the exit, the crowds parting and encircling the magnet that was Jimmy Silo. By time we reached the road a fleet of four jeeps were waiting, somehow by magic. I smiled and shook my head as we boarded.

At the Embassy they recognised Chase, and let us through the tight security, Chase soon kicking the cage of the Ambassador on behalf of the couple. The temporary passports were nudged along, Jimmy saying that he could get the couple on a flight that afternoon, First Class to London, and then the States. By time we reached the airport a pair of tickets had magically appeared at check-in, passport control waving our guests through, salutes given. And it just happened that a wandering TV crew filmed the whole damn thing, Chase making a statement.

Jimmy invited the TV crew along, Canadians, and they accompanied us to the Presidential Palace, Jimmy calling ahead to let them know we were coming. Not to ask if we could visit, just to tell them to put the kettle on. By strange co-incidence, the Tanzanian President was visiting, the meeting about to start. The Kenyan politicians welcomed us like family, so to the Tanzanians, and we settled about a table.

Jimmy began with, ‘Gentlemen ... and politicians, this is Hardon Chase, most likely the next President of the United States.’

The Kenyans and Tanzanians sat upright; US Presidents did not, very often, visit Africa. And for forty minutes Chase listened to their concerns for the region, their needs and gripes, and suggested a closer working relationship, especially regarding Tanzanian oil. Chase promised that when he became President he would make his first overseas visit here, a bold move, almost unprecedented. And Jimmy jokingly suggested that he would hold him to it. Or else. The three of us knew that Jimmy meant it.

The two African Presidents, and Chase, gave a ten-minute interview to the TV crew. Lots of words were used, little said; they were all electioneering.

Leaving the African politicians to chat, we returned to the hotel, packed, and boarded a flight to Mawlini. Flying in low in the Dash, Chase was again staggered by the base, the various compounds being described for him by Jimmy. Someone must have tipped off the base, because the American observers were waiting, jeeps and salutes for Chase. Our VIP didn't even know that there were American servicemen stationed here. They took us around to their building, more salutes given, and we climbed to the rooftop bar, now with a Hawaiian theme and quite cosy. The Major in charge pointed out the various compounds as Jimmy and I sat with cold beers, the two men eventually joining us.

'So what's your remit here?' Chase asked the Major.

'Observers, sir,' the man answered, sounding guarded.

'Proxy armies,' Jimmy stated. 'I make good use of African soldiers. They're fit, strong and excellent soldiers – but cost very little. Also, when they get killed or wounded, the folks back home don't give a shit. If, at some future juncture the US deems it suitable, they could copy my example when needing to fight wars in far off places.'

'That what's going on in Liberia?'

Jimmy nodded, taking a sip. 'Using my blueprint. Behind you we have the beginnings of the Zimbabwean Rifles, all starting from scratch and being trained *our way*.'

'And when they're trained?' Chase posed.

'Would be happy to deploy where I send them, even overseas,' Jimmy explained. 'So, if there was a conflict in ... say, the Middle East, they could go in. They cost a lot less than GIs and, as I said, the voting public back home don't get to watch their bodies returning home draped in the Stars and Stripes.'

The Major said, 'Loyal, cheap, expendable.'

The future President sat back, his grey matter firing up. He now knew about African ore and oil, but also its military potential.

Before we flew off we met Rudd, allocating an additional forty million to the Somali Rifles, and Big Paul flew in with a

bunch of twelve ex-SAS soldiers. They were also heading towards Somalia, and I was concerned.

Back at the house, a few days later, we lost Jimmy for an hour, finding him in the basement. I was concerned immediately and stepped down. On the battle board he had an elaborate miniature model laid out, small model soldiers and vehicles. I recognised the terrain and buildings. I also recognised the national flags. Pointing at the model, I just stared, a question in my look.

‘It has to be done.’

‘And the casualties?’

‘Modest, considering the action. Modest on our side, that is.’

‘When?’

‘Within the year.’

‘Who knows about this?’ I pressed.

‘No one, for now. They need ... plausible deniability.’

‘Jesus,’ I blew out. I returned to my family, and hugged them.

Tsunami

Crusty’s notoriety had increased, as had his bodyguard detail. He had predicted another minor quake in China, the TV crews all over it, and followed up with a minor quake east of Papua New Guinea, the action recorded live. The world’s academics, seismologists and vulcanologists, were still furious, but also curious and jealous: the evidence spoke for itself.

What happened next justified Crusty’s extra pay, and his expensive bodyguard detail. In June, Crusty predicted a future major quake off the west coast of Sumatra, a quake which would result in massive loss of life in Indonesia, and one which would probably cause a tsunami that would affect many countries in the region. The academic community were stunned into silence for a day, then rubbed their hands at the chance to discredit our Crusty.

The press went into overdrive in the region, some elements of the Indonesian Government considering having Crusty bumped

off, others praising him. His prediction was for January 2005, plenty of time to plan ahead, and we began playing a very dangerous game, the “M” Group countries nervous.

We called a meeting at Mapley of all senior staff and all national directors, finding accommodation for them in the nearby hotels. After a morning of greetings, hugs, rude comments and a lot of winding up, they settled into the lecture theatre after lunch. The difference this time was that of a TV crew in the corner, our own video guy off to one side, everyone puzzling their presence. The quality of the language used improved as people noticed the cameras, posh accents adopted by the doctors.

Jimmy and I stepped in a few minutes later. ‘Welcome,’ Jimmy began. ‘I guess this is first time that all of the various national directors have been in one place at the same time, so I hope your various body-clocks have adjusted. We’ve decided to combine an annual meeting of senior staff with a discussion on the ... unprecedented prediction of an upcoming earthquake that Douglas has made. Right, normal Rescue Force matters will be discussed in two days time, as well as down the pub later.’ They laughed.

‘As you all know, our man – known affectionately as Crusty – has a clever bit of computer software, and some science behind it that baffles the likes of me, and has had some great success with his predictions, which makes our lives easier. We’ve attended a handful of earthquakes where we managed to get there *before* the quake struck – a great advantage. We can be sure that we saved lives, not just from being close at hand, but from scaring the crap out of the local population first.’ They laughed. ‘When you tell someone a quake will demolish their house the next day ... they sit up and pay attention.

‘On that, I’d best mention that we are being sued by an island in the Pacific. We sent an aircraft with three distinctive white jeeps for an exercise, a joint Australian and New Zealand exercise. The locals, seeing out distinctive white jeeps, fully believed that the local volcano would explode, and that their island would sink into the sea. They evacuated in a panic.’ People tried, and failed, not to laugh. ‘There is a lesson to be learnt from that, so I expect – Bob – that we advertise our presence better in future.

‘OK, the Sumatra quake. Crusty is predicting a major quake, possibly the biggest for a decade or two, and a massive loss of life. By that, he means hundreds of thousand, perhaps millions.’

The room fell silent.

‘In order to deploy ahead of time we would need to make some plans, and such a deployment would be very expensive. We estimate it would cost twenty-five times more than the last ten deployments combined.’

A gasp went around the room, whispered conversations breaking out.

‘So you can see why we’re here to discuss it, and we’re seeking your input.’

‘Is that budget available?’ Doc Graham asked.

‘I will make a special budget available for this operation.’

‘And what effect will that have on training and deployments for the future?’ Bob asked.

‘I aim to increase your budgets twenty percent this year, cutting them ten percent for two years after.’

More whispered conversations broke out.

‘This deployment may be to the detriment of training budgets,’ Jimmy admitted. ‘But what price are we putting on the lives of the people involved? Are we willing to go on one large deployment, to save a lot of lives, and then limit other operations afterwards?’

‘What if he’s wrong!’

‘Then, we’ll have wasted a third of the deployment budget for a large training exercise. As in previous situations like this, I’m now going to give the floor over to various speakers. Anyone with a strong objection, or strongly in favour, can speak. If you are undecided, then wait till tomorrow.’ He sat, calling up Bob Davies.

Bob took a moment. ‘It all comes down to the accuracy of Crusty’s prediction. What we’re saying, if Crusty is correct, is that we save ten lives now instead of one a year for ten years to come. The problem is ... what if there’s a major quake somewhere else in a year’s time, maybe a built-up area.’ A whispered debate broke out. Bob added, ‘So far Crusty has been correct, but his data and his predictions only cover the past two years or so – not long in Earth geology. Still, a million lives is not a risk I would wish to take. I’d rather have our people sat

around doing nothing in Sumatra. Hell, they can always do a little village medicine while they're waiting.'

Jimmy stood, standing next to Bob and addressing the group. 'Crusty is predicting an offshore quake, a repeat of one that happened in Sumatra some time ago. That resulted in a tidal wave a hundred feet high. Crusty is suggesting that the tidal wave created would slam into Sri Lanka, India, Bangladesh, and Thailand. Not just Sumatra.'

'How the hell we going to cover all them?' Mac loudly asked.

'With a lot of money, and a full mobilisation,' Jimmy answered.

'How many would deploy?' Bob asked.

'Everyone,' Jimmy said with a shrug. 'People dragged off all other projects.'

A chorus of indignant whispers echoed around the room.

Jimmy called down the representatives of Indonesia, India and Sri Lanka, lining them up at the front facing the group. Jimmy said, 'Try and imagine a wall of water slamming into their heavily populated coastlines, and tell them it's not worth it.'

No one said anything for many seconds.

Jimmy added, 'Their coastlines are populated by millions living in shacks, many on the beaches themselves. What chance will they have?' He asked the three representatives to sit down.

'Why not just warn those countries?' a man asked.

'We will. But most will be ineffectual in clearing their beaches, especially in outlying areas. They'll then have a problem with regional hospitals being overloaded. So we could just tip them off, or we could attend regional hospitals, or deploy in groups to assist the wounded village by village – which is what we're good at. No other group can do that. No other group can get to the remote areas, treat the wounded and survive. So even if the countries involved issue a warning – will people listen? And what if Crusty is a day out.'

'He always is!' came back.

'So if they issue a warning and nothing happens, it's Cry Wolf - and the people drift back to their shacks. But the debate here ... is one of how much we get involved. We could send a few, or a lot. If we send a lot it will affect future year's budgets.'

We left them to the debate, knowing fully that the real debate would take place over a few drinks later. We toured the airfield

and observed various displays, taking time to sit with the police aero-med teams. At 5pm we sat in Bob Davies' office with Mac and Doc Graham.

'It's a big fucking risk,' Mac grumbled. 'And if we mass deploy – and no quake, we look like idiots!'

Jimmy blew out. 'We could always put our people in regional holding areas, away from the press; close at hand, but not driving up and down the local tourist strip. Plus all second line staff at the end of an eight hour flight, sat ready on the tarmac.'

'Could have 747s at Mawlini,' Doc Graham suggested. 'Sri Lanka is six hours or less in a 747.'

'If the runway there is still in one piece after the quake,' I pointed out.

Bob said, 'There's got to be a cheaper solution, a mixture of on-the-ground, regional bases and planes stood ready.'

'Those planes will cost me the same if they go or just sit on the apron,' Jimmy explained. 'We pay no matter what - when we hire them. Might just save a bit on fuel.'

'Moving the Hueys will cost,' I pointed out. 'IL76 transports, a dozen of them, and days in advance.'

'They're the problem,' Jimmy agreed. 'And our people are no good without their jeeps, which could go by ship, couple of days sail from Kenya.'

'I'll put a team and a plan together, a variety of options, and price them all up,' Bob said.

'Could you do that in a month?' Jimmy asked.

'With some help, yes.'

'You'll have the help. We'll have another meeting in a month. In the meantime, work out some basic plans for tomorrow, give the delegates three choices and let them vote on it.'

Thanking them, we left them to it and drove home.

On the way I said, 'We need a ship offshore, that we can move around and deploy people and helicopters from.'

Jimmy nodded absently.

I wagged a finger. 'We need a fucking aircraft carrier!'

'Have you got one tucked away?'

'I don't, but we know a few people who do.'

The next day Bob Davies presented three options. Option "A" would involve a mass deployment. Option "B" would see

deployments ahead of time to assist in village medicine, regional centres created where staff sat around playing cards, and reserves sat waiting at their home bases, aircraft ready. Option “C” involved just regional centres, our staff basically hidden away, plus secondary teams sat near aircraft in home countries.

They voted for option “B”, as being the best compromise. Bob put together a team from various national representatives and would hurry to cost it up, and to plan the logistics in great detail. A team of twenty were allocated the job, and they’d be pushed. Next came the hard part.

We drove up to London to see the Prime Minister. After explaining what we wanted, he stared back, asking, ‘Are you mad?’

‘The alternate, Prime Minister, is that British tourists get killed. If, at a later date, they pointed towards the warnings given - by us to you – they may wish to sue. Or argue criminal culpability.’

‘Jesus...’

‘It’ll turn out OK,’ Jimmy assured the PM.

‘You never told me this before. I can see why now! But if you warn off British tourists from those countries at Christmas, then those countries will want your head. It’ll be a busy time of year for them.’

‘All we need is a warning, to cover your governmental arses,’ Jimmy explained. ‘You issue the warning, however gentle you want it to be, that covers you.’

‘The publicity! You’ll have every news crew in the world at your gate.’

‘It’s a big gate. Now, I’m going to talk to the various Ambassadors, and I’ll need your backing as to the accuracy of the earthquake software.’

‘We can only offer a backing based on the results, not on the data, since there isn’t any. We can offer no more than that.’

‘It’ll be enough. And I’ll need to borrow the Navy.’

‘The Navy?’

‘One of those helicopter carriers that the Royal Marines use,’ I said.

‘You’ll get some good publicity from it,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘It’ll take months just to sail there!’

‘Make it look like a natural deployment, then divert it at the last minute to us. We’ll fly our helicopters off it, use it for re-supply.’

The PM made a face, suggesting he’d co-operate.

‘And then I’d like a few Hercules, and your Tristars.’

‘That all?’ the PM quipped.

‘Sat at RAF Brize Norton and ready to take bodies and kit over there, something you would do anyway – after the quake strikes.’

‘We’ll be ready.’

‘December 26th,’ I informed him.

‘Oh, great. They’ll love that – working over Christmas!’

Next came the really hard part. We met the Sri Lankan Ambassador at his embassy, and sat talking about their RF unit for ten minutes. Then we dropped the bombshell.

‘Mister Ambassador, we have an expert on earthquakes who predicts them with his clever software.’

‘I have read about it,’ the Ambassador commented with a polite smile.

‘Well, he’s predicting a major earthquake in Sumatra in January, one that will be very severe, a great loss of life.’

‘You want our Rescue Force unit?’

‘No, and we can deploy them without your input, Mister Ambassador. No, the earthquake is predicted to be off the coast of Sumatra, which is common for the region. But because it is offshore, it may well produce a tidal wave -’ The Ambassador’s face dropped. ‘- and we think that the tidal created may affect your eastern coastline.’

‘Affect it how?’

‘Our earthquake expert suggests that a tidal wave, maybe a hundred feet high, may slam into your coastline ... killing everyone up to a mile or two inland. That was the result of a similar earthquake a hundred years ago.’

The Ambassador put his teacup down with a clatter. ‘Do you know what you are saying?’

‘Our prediction software has the backing of many governments, including China and Britain, even America. Besides, we may be wrong, it may never happen. We just wish to plan ahead in January.’

‘Plan ahead ... how?’

‘A warning to tourists –’

‘Out of the question. It’s one of our busiest times.’

‘Mister Ambassador, if we issued a public warning and you ignored it, and many died, then you and your government may face the anger of your own people.’

The Ambassador did not like that one bit, but controlled himself.

Jimmy added, ‘There’s also the question of compensation for western tourists, should they be hurt. We’ll be issuing a warning worldwide and if you ignore it there will be ... problems and claims.’

I eased up. ‘May I ask, Mister Ambassador, what is more important to you: tourist dollars, or the lives of a hundred thousand of your people?’

‘How dare you! This meeting is ended.’

And that was that. For a change, Jimmy failed with his diplomacy, but did not seem too bothered. We travelled around to the second meeting, with the Indian Ambassador, and did not fare much better. He did not throw us out, but also did not see the need to do anything until such an earthquake struck.

‘You’d have six hours,’ I pointed out, but he still did not see it.

The next day we visited the Indonesian Ambassador, who received us warmly and listened at length. ‘Tell us exactly what you need, and we will provide it.’

We modified our approach.

The Chinese President was due to visit Sri Lanka, so we flew over to Beijing for a chat, then flew down to Colombo with him, meeting the Sri Lankan President. The Chinese dangled some large carrots, then suggested that they consider what we had to say. We repeated our concerns for the earthquake in January, and asked for a speed-up with the early warning system. Since we were paying for it all, what could they object to? We also made sure Crusty’s cartoons were viewed in each school.

Our TV interview was toned down, since we feared not getting out of the country. We explained the earthquake software, the possible tidal wave, and the January date. Little more.

Before leaving Sir Lanka, we bought two hotels in the south, which puzzled me greatly in the timing. Not to mention the bloody positioning!

Autumn

Bob Davies had received extra funds, and all junior staff began receiving extra training. Fitness was pushed, and earthquake response was at the fore, many deployments made from Mawlini to the fake village and back. Recruitment was up anyway, and so we accepted more keen beginners than normal, Mawlini buzzing.

The only dampener on the horizon was Somalia, suffering at the hands of al-Qa'eda in the north. They had also suffered two car bombs in Mogadishu itself, a setback after all the progress the city had been making. Abdi flew up to see us, counter terrorism advice sought. We met in secret in the basement, sat about the map table, Abdi and one of his trusted officers.

Abdi began with, 'We need to deal with al-Qa'eda. But they cross our long borders and we cannot find them, or stop them.'

'We could get you more boats for patrols in the north,' Jimmy offered.

'They come across from Eritrea and Ethiopia,' Abdi admitted, sounding downbeat. 'We have offered large rewards for information, but still they set-off bombs.'

'I'm afraid I have very little information about their activities in your country. They train in Afghanistan, then journey through Pakistan to the coast. After that, we don't know where they go.'

'The Iranians shelter them?' Abdi asked.

'No, the Iranians are enemies with the Taliban. In the southeast of Iran the tribal leaders align themselves to the Pushtan, not to the Tehran Government. The Iranians fight with these men, and lose twenty soldiers a year killed from drug smugglers on their borders. If you ask the Iranians, they may help you with information.'

Abdi eased back, thinking. 'The Iranians, they are enemies to the Taliban,' he noted. 'And the Taliban host al-Qa'eda.'

‘It can do no harm to talk with the Iranians,’ Jimmy pushed. ‘The enemy of my enemy is my friend.’

‘You are wise, Jimmy,’ Abdi said with a smile. ‘But is there no solution other than catching flies on the meat?’

‘Do you wish to strike at their hearts?’ Jimmy asked.

‘I wish to cut out their hearts and eat them!’ Abdi angrily stated.

‘When dealing with such matters a cool head is always the best.’

‘Day by day we suffer,’ Abdi complained.

‘A great cause of concern for me also, my friend. I wish to see your country do well.’

‘No one in my land doubts that, old friend.’

‘There may be a ... solution of sorts. Well, not a solution, but a way of striking back at them. It would be dangerous and foolish, casualties high.’

‘Fools and heroes,’ Abdi said with a smile. ‘Fools on the attack, heroes made of those that survive.’

Jimmy smiled. ‘Yes. But what are you prepared to sacrifice to strike back at them?’

‘I am prepared to risk myself, and do so happily for my people.’

Jimmy took a moment, nodding to himself. ‘If the Iranians were to co-operate with you, they may allow you a small force to enter Afghanistan. That force could reach the al-Qa’eda camps with good luck, and a miracle!’

‘We saw the miracle in Darfur, my friend. If you plan such a move, it will have the luck of Scottish.’

‘Luck of the Irish,’ I corrected him. ‘Luck of the Irish.’

‘I have been studying your history of England. You did much, but were only a small country.’

‘A lot of time thinking, before doing,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘Will you help us?’

‘The Iranians must never know that I am assisting you. If they do, they will not help. This must be a Muslim fight only.’

‘We will make it so.’

Jimmy eased up, and found a large sheet of paper, just about five foot square, and laid it out on the map table, coffee mugs used to hold its corners down. Jimmy then drew a map of Kandahar airport and town. I swallowed.

An hour later Abdi and his colleague were as excited as my daughter at Christmas. It was hard to contain their enthusiasm.

‘First things first,’ Jimmy said, straightening. ‘You must go and talk to the Iranians. Fly to Tehran and ask only for information about Al-Qa’eda, nothing more. But, if the opportunity arises, offer them help with the patrol of the border with Afghanistan, saying that if it hurts the Taliban you are happy to help. Go and see the Iranian Ambassador in London tomorrow, then fly to Tehran and petition the Revolutionary Guard for a meeting. And Abdi - be very secretive about this. Come back in four weeks if you have any assistance from the Iranians. In the meantime, I will make some plans.’

Abdi left us with a skip in his step, and I needed a walk around the grounds to clear my head. If this went wrong...

The next day we sent twenty Somali pilots to a small Russian town with an airfield, not far from the Antonov factory itself. They began intensive training, bonuses in pockets. They could spend it at our coffee shop; the town already had one.

In a secret meeting with Han, we made plans to ship further arms to the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, but the timing had to be right. Han knew what Jimmy was up to, and had more faith than I did.

In another secretive move, we flew down to Mawlini direct and across to Scorpion Base, where the Pathfinders were training the Somalis in earnest. Tubby let us off, and parked up to be refuelled as I marvelled at the base’s transformation. Scorpion Base? More like Beverly Hills these days. In the Officers Mess we met Kenyan Pathfinders and Somali officers and chatted at length. We then grabbed a Major, Ngomo, and led him to a quiet spot.

The man was a legend in the Kenyan Rifles, and a hero to the men, a man who had worked his way up through the ranks and had seen action in every campaign the Rifles had been involved with. Ngomo had been recruited just six months after the first Rifles, his service a long one.

‘What we are about to discuss is secret,’ Jimmy began with. ‘No one must know, not even you own politicians.’

Ngomo nodded conspiratorially.

‘There may be an operation launched by the Somalis at the end of the year. It will be overseas, against an enemy of Somalia, not an enemy of Kenya. The operation will be very risky, very difficult technically, and with high casualties if it goes wrong. It will be a difficult battle unless planned properly and timed well. Those going on the mission, if killed, would not be acknowledged. We would say that their plane cashed into the sea.’

Ngomo blinked.

‘If people knew that Kenyans fought in this battle they may wish to strike back against Kenya, and we cannot allow that.’

Ngomo nodded in agreement.

‘If Kenyans go on the mission, they will be fighting and dying for Somalia, not for Kenya.’

Ngomo eased back. ‘Do you say that the mission - that it is a just cause, sir?’

‘Very much so.’

‘I do not believe that any of the men would need more than that, sir,’ Ngomo said with some conviction. ‘Nor would I. If you ask, we go.’

‘Major, I want you to plan an ... exercise for me. Assume that an ... airfield in Eritrea needs to be seized and held for a few days; insert by air, re-supply by air, extraction by air. Find a disused airfield and practice. But practice with five hundred men inserted. Assume your enemy has no tanks or planes, but RPG, AK47, Dushka, some rockets, no helicopters. I’ll send our Hercules and hire some other planes for you in a few weeks. A great many blank rounds will be arriving shortly.’

‘And the aim of the insert, sir?’ Ngomo puzzled. ‘We won’t be holding the airfield?’

‘The aim, would be a punch on the nose, maximum enemy casualties.’ He handed the Major a sheet of paper. ‘That’s a sketch of an airfield scenario to work to. You have an unlimited budget. And next month you’ll take delivery of more 81mm mortars, and M82 sniper rifles, plus more anti-personnel mines.’

‘Should I put two and two together, sir?’ Ngomo asked with a hint of a grin.

‘You should, but quietly.’

Ngomo eased back. ‘This mission, if it happens, will be volunteer only, sir?’

‘Yes. And you must keep in mind that it will be very difficult. You *will* lose people.’

‘Then, sir, we’d best make sure that the plan is ... as perfect as Darfur.’

Jimmy and Ngomo exchanged smiles.

Outside, we accepted a lift in an open-top jeep, driving through the dust and the heat to a firing range a few miles away. We were greeted by a number of ex-SAS troopers, who pointed to the sand. I could hear the reports of outgoing rounds, but could not see the snipers. I had to walk closer, till I eventually recognised a pair of sand coloured boots. The sniper waved. Walking back, I was startled by a patch of sand just lifting up and saying hello, dust falling off the man’s camouflage netting.

At the jeep, I asked sunburnt, and hot looking troopers how the recruits were doing.

They wiped their brows with sleeves. ‘They get far more practice than their western counterparts, and a lot more ammo to play with. All round, they’re fucking excellent.’

Jimmy asked, ‘How many Somali Pathfinders?’

‘At least two hundred who would hold up against the Kenyans. We’ve had them in the jungle, and they love it. Some of these boys aint never seen rain!’

We laughed.

‘They all checked out on mortars?’ I asked.

‘Yeah, they get a lot of practice.’

‘And mine clearance?’

‘Yeah, one of the first things they do.’

‘They’ll be some new kit arriving for you soon, Russian instructors,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Short range rockets.’

Abdi had met with a keen and attentive Iranian Ambassador in London, and then been invited to Tehran as an honoured diplomatic guest. In Tehran, the Iranian leadership listen to the complaints of the Somalis, and their plea for information about al-Qa’eda. A second meeting was scheduled, for two weeks later, the Iranians sensing an opportunity, and not just the chance to get into the good books of the Somalis.

Two weeks later Abdi returned to Tehran, flying direct from Mogadishu on a chartered flight. After much small talk, promises

of intelligence material to be handed over, Abdi asked about the border with Afghanistan and the opium trade. The Iranians now had the chance to whinge about their own problems, not least a high casualty rate amongst its police and soldiers on the border. Abdi was bold, and offered five or ten thousand soldiers for the border, since it will hurt the Afghan drug traffics, so in turn the Taliban. Neither Jimmy, nor the Iranians, had corrected Abdi on that assumption, or the fact that the Taliban had been busy trying to stamp out the drugs trade, which was down to independent warlords, mostly from the north. The Iranians now seriously considered the offer, since the Somalis could take the casualties, not them. Still, it would be unseemly for a poor country like Somalia to be helping out the Iranians. They suggested that if the Somalis wished to interdict the drug traffickers that they could do so across the border, on Afghan soil.

Abdi agreed with that statement, but mentioned re-supply, and asked when they could get permission to cross Iranian airspace. The Iranians again went away to think about things, another meeting arranged for three weeks time.

This time, Abdi had a proposal for them, a strike at Kandahar, after which the Iranians could deny granting them permission, thinking the aircraft UN flights from Dohar or Dubai. The Iranians were surprised. An airborne assault on Kandahar? It was brazen, but they liked the idea. After all, all they would have to do is to mistake the identity of a few aircraft. And the Taliban would lose face. Abdi had a provisional go ahead, telling his Iranian hosts that he would make plans for an attack in a few month's time.

Abdi and his staff came to the house a month later, with Major Ngomo and his staff, and we opened one of the rooms on the basement. The map board of that room now offered a scale model of the Kandahar area, tiny models detailing the features with great accuracy.

Jimmy welcomed Ngomo. 'How goes the airfield *exercise*?'

'We have made two attacks, sir, and learn from each.'

'Add to it a parachute insert, a distraction.'

'I will, sir.'

They collected around the table and viewed the model, accurate in every detail. Ngomo took compass bearings,

approach paths and distances. He measured off four hundred metres and marked it on a small pointing stick, then marked the model where the four hundred yard point ran around the airport walls; the killing zone.

Jimmy then organised a slide show, images of the airfield taken from the ground, finally handing over enlarged versions of the black and white images. A new face stepping in and introduced himself as a member of the Rifles who had been in Kandahar for the past three months, clearing mines. He gave a thirty-minute briefing on the airfield, the dispositions of the Taliban fighters, and remaining mines. Fortunately, all the remaining mines were outside of the walls. The man then suggested that Rabbit would not be happy with his mine clearance skills. He had not so much been clearing mines, as moving them and attaching radio detonators to piles of them. He now detailed where they were on the model, a few nasty surprises for the unwary.

I thought back to when Jimmy had sent the mine clearance boys there in the first place, all those years ago, I thought he was being helpful to the Taliban. But they were clearing the airfield and mining the perimeter. I shook my head. And years before that we had adopted the mine clearance school. The symmetry was perfect; it was as if he was working to a plan.

Keely dropped in a file of A4 black and white satellite photographs and we poured over them, confirming the average number of men stationed at the airfield. From what I could remember there were no more than twenty.

Problems

The press had got hold of the earthquake warning and were interested, if not cynical to some measure. Still, they knew we'd jump all over them if they went too far. With the weather turning cold, and the desk diary turning to November, Jimmy gave a TV interview.

‘We’ve had a lot of success with our earthquake prediction software, and we regularly deploy Rescue Force when we think there may be a quake.’

‘And yet the academic community has poured cold water over the idea of predictive software? At the last international symposium of earthquake experts they voted by ninety-five percent that the software did not work.’

‘The results speak for themselves. Twelve predictions, twelve quakes, most attended by us. So they can carry on trying to discredit it, I’ll carry on saving lives. And that’s the difference between us, and those so-called academics. We save lives, they write books and play with themselves.’

That made it out unedited. At the house, everyone roared.

The interviewer composed himself. ‘And the latest prediction is of a massive earthquake.’

‘Yes, an undersea earthquake off Western Sumatra. The damage from the quake itself will be limited, but the chances of a tidal wave are good, and that tidal wave may spread out and hit Sri Lanka, India and Thailand, as well as Sumatra itself. I’m advising all tourists to avoid those countries over Christmas and New Year.’

He said it.

We talked about it, discussed it, and argued at length. Bless the big bastard - he said it, putting a hundred companies and a dozen countries on a collision course with us, and our solicitors. He would not risk the lives, so he said it. He damn well said it. I turned to Helen and exchanged a look.

The lounge fell silent, some staring at the floor, others breathing out loudly. In London, the Prime Minister sat ashen faced at the news, Sykes sat with his head in his hands.

The next day the media ran the story, the story of every travel company except our own threatening legal action. The Thai Government were not happy, and faxes came through from many sources, the machine running out of paper at more than one point. Jimmy went for a walk around the grounds, and I spent time with Lucy, Shelly oblivious to the storm brewing as she painted with her fingers.

The Russians and Chinese, true to form, advised their citizens not to travel to those countries. The French and British Governments stopped short of that, but acknowledged that the

predictions were very accurate, and that travellers should use caution in certain countries at certain dates. Art Johnson made no comment, few Americans typically visiting those countries over the holidays. Bookings from Europe plummeted, Jimmy pleased with the news.

Three days later the first sniff of legal action arrived. And thereafter, it kept coming. Our solicitors were frank: no earthquake and Jimmy would be bankrupted. Some of the legal action was pointed towards Rescue Force, so Jimmy had the solicitors direct it towards himself, since he had made the statement, not Rescue Force. The Kenyans, bless them, advised their citizens not to holiday in the affected countries, not that the Kenyans could have afforded trips to those countries. We told our solicitors to push back all claims to after New Year, at which point they would be academic. And the tabloids, they ran stories of people crying over ruined family holidays, money spent and now wasted. It made for good copy.

Everyone at Rescue Force, and the house, got over it quickly and got back to work. We had plans to make and two hurdles to cross, both of them major. Under the pretext of another meeting about African industrial development, the “M” Group countries met in Paris, a similar event to the previous. I took Shelly up the Eiffel Tower the day before the event started and she loved the view, a long time spent just staring down at the detail below.

We attended the trade show on the first morning and wandered around, CAR and our corporation attending again, as well as Rescue Force. After lunch we occupied the same room and welcomed all of the national leaders, Art Johnson winding down his time remaining in office, Hardon Chase awaiting the big chair. After ten minutes everyone settled.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, and politicians, welcome again,’ Jimmy began. ‘We are here, close to the end of this year, because we are close to a turning point. The events of the next two months will run the risk of exposure, and may be a turning point.

‘First, earthquakes and our software. The predictive software is essential, not so much for now, but for the future. If the Christmas earthquake was not warned about it would be just about three hundred thousand lives lost. In the future, you will be lucky to have an earthquake totalling less than a million dead,

and in populated areas. In the future, the Chinese and the Americans will suffer massive quakes, millions dead. I will not stand by while that happens, and I will not stand by now. We need the predictive software, even if the academic world disputes it. Otherwise, how will we evacuate say ... Athens.' He held his hands wide.

'There are many people taking legal action?' the French asked.

'Yes, but they won't have a case after Christmas. Mostly, they're British companies.'

'I have decided to make a statement about it. I will back you,' the French President offered. That left the UK Prime Minister in an awkward position.

'We will do what we can,' he lamely offered, and my look towards him made sure what I felt about it.

Jimmy said, 'I ask for all nations here - that have suitable surface vessels - to send some to the area, on any pretext you like.'

'Our aircraft carrier, the Charles de Gaul will be there,' the French offered.

'As will Ark Royal,' the Prime Minister countered with. I wondered if they'd get their dicks out and measure them.

'We have a group heading there from the Philippines,' Art Johnson added.

Jimmy pointed at him. 'If you can concentrate on Western Sumatra, the British and French will be off Sri Lanka. We'll need a lot of fuel for our Hueys. Russia, we'd like to hire as many IL76s as you have, plus AN12s.'

'They will be ready,' the Russians insisted.

'For the rest of it ... you need only act like caring nations, and win some political capital from the countries suffering. OK, Afghanistan. First of all, this is what would happen if Somali does not attack. The number of al-Qa'eda attacks against American interests will increase, and Art Johnson's successor, Hardon Chase, will invade. That will be a disaster.

'If Somali go ahead with their operation they'll strike a blow at the Taliban, making them think twice about hosting al-Qa'eda. If al-Qa'eda moves out of Afghanistan they will, to some degree, cause problems for Pakistan. That we can deal with, since our Americans friends will never invade Pakistan. Al-Qa'eda will

also wish to hit back at Somalia, and we'll create a killing ground in Northern Somalia, killing as many as we can over the years to come. All nations should then assist Pakistan to fight the Taliban and al-Qa'eda.'

'And the aim of the Somali action?' Art Johnson asked.

'To weaken the Taliban, first and foremost. They'll lose face and lose ground to the Northern Alliance. Second, to make them pay a heavy price for hosting al-Qa'eda. That will be made clear during peace talks afterwards. The Pakistanis have had some successes recently and the supply routes have been tightened up a bit.'

'And the Iranians will co-operate?' Art Johnson pressed.

'They think that they're being clever, using the Somalis to strike back at the Taliban. They're doing little more than turning a blind eye to a few UN flights, and will deny all involvement.'

The meeting dragged on for half an hour, some talk of Hardon Chase.

Countdown

A week before the Somali incursion into Afghanistan, I realised something. The earthquake would overshadow events unfolding in Afghanistan. With the "M" Group countries suppressing news as well, the Somali incursion might go unnoticed. Afghanistan rarely made the news anyway, so I had my fingers crossed. When I asked Jimmy if the timing was deliberate he just stared at me.

The air insert was the tricky part of the operation, but Jimmy had it all worked out in great detail. The aircraft would take off from Somalia and fly across Yemen and Southern Saudi Arabia, their flights logged as transport aircraft for Iran. When over Iranian airspace they would turn east and head to Kandahar. Since the airport possessed no functioning radar, and a lone air traffic controller, the Taliban would not see the aircraft till they landed. And then it would be too late. Hopefully.

Now, in Somalia, the pilots were practising steep approaches. They'd fly in at two thousand feet, then throttle back and stall, nose down to a steep angle, powering up and pulling back at the ground neared. If the Russian company that had leased the Somalis the aircraft had known what their aircraft were being used for...! One already sat on the apron at Scorpion Base, its undercarriage smashed; the Somali pilots landed like Dunnnow in a Huey. It would be reported as an accident after New Year.

Time was now split between the massive logistical challenge that was the tsunami deployment, and staring at the battle board in the basement. The Indian and Sri Lankan Government were still being less than helpful, the Thai Government down right hostile, not least because their beaches and brothels were missing a number of old European men. On December 21st, Jimmy revised the warning to that of December 27th, and issued a press statement to that effect, sending it to the press agencies of all European countries. He also went live on the BBC and urged all UK holidaymakers to stay away. More legal action was threatened, this time European.

Ignoring the pile of writs, we drove over to Mapley. In Bob Davies' office we met the planning team.

'All set?' I asked, no joy in my voice.

'Damned if we do, damned if we don't,' Bob wistfully answered.

Jimmy addressed the communications officer. 'Ready your software.' The man checked his computer screen. 'In reference to all Rescue Force units worldwide, all supplementals, reserves, former members on the reserve list and linked rescue NGOs – send the following message: standby for overseas deployment.'

The message went out, pagers bleeping and knocked off.

'Issue the following movement orders. Move the Cubans – and African units, to Mawlini, the Chinese to Sri Lanka, and the Russians to India. Move the British and French to India. Move the Aussies, Kiwis and the Samoa Group to Sumatra. Move the Kenyan unit to Sri Lanka. Move Hong Kong to India.'

The orders were dispatched, taking ten minutes.

'Move six Hueys from Mawlini by IL76 to Sri Lanka, with their pilots. Move six more Hueys from Mawlini to India, a final six to Sumatra. Move the Aussie Hueys to Sumatra. Action them to travel tomorrow.'

We received a call, informing us that the Prime Minister was about to make a statement about the deployment in Parliament. We all moved to a lounge with a TV, and sat waiting.

‘In relation to the planned mass-deployment of Rescue Force personnel, both British and foreign, we have decided to fully back that deployment. The Royal Air Force will be assisting in what capacity it can, and we have ships heading to the area. Despite the speculative nature of the deployment we have decided to assist Rescue Force, since they have given a great deal to the British people over the years. Jimmy Silo has made a decision to risk deploying on the chance that there will be an earthquake. I learnt long ago that Mister Silo does not take these things lightly, nor does he make hasty or foolish choices.’

‘Not too bad,’ I said. ‘Better late than never.’

Michelle rang half an hour later. Seemed like the French President was going public, to show how much they supported us, more than the UK Government. It made me smile.

Ivan and Han had nudged their governments, and they had faxed the Indians and Sri Lankans, asking them to co-operate with us: better safe than sorry, they urged.

In a move guaranteed to boost our standing, or write our epitaph, two-dozen camera crews were embedded with our units. Two US teams were stuck like glue to Hal as he got ready to deploy to Sumatra: where Hal went, a story followed. In an unusual move, the Germans offered direct assistance, and Jimmy accepted. Could they fly out tents, water and food to Sri Lanka? They could, and would, with some fervour. They were courting favour and we were happy to accept it.

Helen came over with Cat and the kids at 5pm and settled into an apartment, the presence of the apartments useful forethought on Jimmy’s part. We all worked to the early hours on logistics and problems, airports and permissions, trucks broken down and aircraft in the wrong place.

Then next morning Keely turned up.

‘What you doing here with us workers?’ I asked him.

He grabbed Jimmy and me, and we walked outside. ‘I’ve been *ordered* to assist you.’

‘By Art Johnson?’ I puzzled.

‘No.’

‘Oh,’ I realised. I made a face. ‘He won the damn election, he don’t need to be electioneering!’

‘He’s been beating up Art Johnson,’ Keely explained. ‘He wants the surface ships off Sumatra trebled, Air Force on standby. There are C5 Galaxy aircraft heading to some base in Gloucester.’

‘Fairfield,’ Jimmy put in. ‘Well, we may as well make use of them.’

Jimmy dialled the base commander at Brize Norton and cheekily asked for a liaison for the next week or so. The man was down to us inside the hour, not a long drive. Bob diverted trucks full of goodies to Fairfield and cancelled a commercial 747SP, saving us money; our Uncle Sam was helping out. Well, Chase was showing off his new power. But who cared, it was lives that mattered, not the size of Hardon Chase’s dick.

By 4pm a US Air Force officer had turned up, welcomed in, and joined Keely. Michelle turned up with a team of six French diplomats and facilitators. I was starting to feel all warm and glowy as I found them space and accommodation. Jimmy then called the local police and asked for six men and three patrol cars for the duration, already a few idle spectators at the gate instead of preparing for their family Christmas. He then stood down our motorway patrols and called in the Welsh and Scottish teams.

At 5pm we met with Mackey.

‘How many people could you get at maximum?’ Jimmy asked.

Mackey seemed apologetic. ‘It’s Christmas in a few days, Jimmy. I have a list, but...’

‘Get me the list of those not wishing to take part, names and home numbers. Now please.’

Mackey fetched the list, a computer printout. Facing me, Jimmy said, ‘Call Pineapple, get a few stars, and Katie Joe.’

I made the call. We then split the list between us.

‘That Robert? Jimmy Silo, down at Mapley. Was wondering if you’d join me in saving some lives. Good man, see you when you get here.’

Some were still refusing, due to family commitments, and we did not push it.

The next morning we put a keen and determined Katie Joe on the phones, along with some other very sexy singers. I invited in

a TV crew, and they filmed Katie Joe asking for rescuers to help. That did the trick, our trickle becoming more of a flood. At lunchtime Katie changed a nappy with Helen, the two sat gossiping for ages. Seemed Katie had just become pregnant herself.

23rd December

We had enough rescuers to justify a plane and sent them off with new equipment and supplies, and new jackets, reminding them that it was cold here but warm where they were headed. Boots and woolly hats would not be needed.

Hardon Chase then issued a call to all US citizens to evacuate Sumatra, Thailand coastal regions, Sri Lanka and Indian coastal areas. The heavyweights were moving. In Sumatra, families were starting to pack up and leave, especially near the coast. Seeing that the exodus had already starting, Jimmy ordered the RF teams already there to the coast to assist, and faxed the Indonesian Government, asking them to broadcast an evacuation of the coastal area. We got no response, unaware if they would or not.

We then brought forwards the expected earthquake date again, this time to the 26th; Boxing Day. All RF staff were updated. We also faxed the various governments, the TV screens now full of planes disgorging white lines of rescuers in various countries, thousands of them. But on the Indian coast it was business as usual for the locals as our jeeps drove to their dispersal positions. Fortunately, the rumour mill worked better than TV and radio in Indian coastal regions. Our RF staff explained why they were there, and people discreetly packed up and moved out. They told their friends, who told relatives and neighbours, and on the 24th many were on the move. The TV finally kicked into gear, reporting the exodus and suggesting that it was not necessary – all was well. Having viewed that news, and been reassured by the newscaster, everyone decided to pack up and get out. Roads were clogged and we were not popular with the Indian authorities.

And if there was no earthquake we'd be hunted down like dogs and killed. I secretly considered South America, and a beard and moustache.

Christmas Eve was a hive of activity at Mapley, and no one thought about Christmas, save one man with a Santa hat on. Shelly asked when Christmas was, and we told her it was a week away, not a day away. I had not slept well the on the 24th, and Jimmy had paced up and down all night. We both felt rough on Christmas Eve.

That evening, Jimmy insisted everyone take a break, and we held a mini-celebration in the canteen. People had a little to drink and plenty to eat, catching up on a few missed meals. Most went to bed early that night. In the morning we offered each other seasons greetings, but could not find the right mood. Trucks were still moving, aircraft were dispatched, and bottlenecks were still being dealt with.

The TV news showed empty beaches in Thailand and Sri Lanka, and we all realised how serious this was. If Jimmy was wrong we'd be finished. It turned my stomach. Various politicians in the affected countries were calling for us to be arrested, and getting plenty of air minutes. A dozen more TV crews turned up, from all over the world, and we were under the spotlight. To keep the hounds at bay, Jimmy gave an interview, competing with the Queen's traditional Christmas Day speech.

In the media centre, Jimmy arranged the cameras. 'The beaches of many countries are empty, hotel bookings down. That we don't regret. We obviously wish to assist the tourist trade in the affected countries, but first of all we wish to save the lives of the local people, many of whom have moved away from the coast already. If there is a chance, even a small chance, that a major quake will kill many – then we will act. I would rather be wrong than be viewing the dead on the news. The tourist trade has been affected, but if the quake strikes, then the tourist trade will be set back years. We are taking a gamble with dollars, not with people's lives.'

'How much of your own money has gone into this deployment?' a man asked.

'So far, four hundred million pounds.'

The man asking the question paused. 'And if there's no earthquake?'

‘A lot more in legal action. Thank you, that’s all for now.’

An hour later I caught the news, and the Queen’s speech. She finished with, ‘Our thoughts are with all those deployed overseas at this time of anguish and waiting. God speed Rescue Force.’

I stood, my mouth opening. I pointed at the TV set and faced Helen. ‘Did she just say that?’ Helen nodded. I went and told the gang, who took a moment to face each other, and to reflect.

That day was not easy, but I felt better; after all, the Queen was on our side. People came and went all day, a few flights in and out, a few people bussed up to Brize Norton. The US Air Force were busy flying tents and supplies into various countries, and busy being seen to do it, camera crews on the aircraft. And the world’s seismologists were hoping and praying that we would be proved wrong as they ate turkey and pulled crackers with their families.

A long way away, in Somalia, soldiers were handing over ID cards and any personal items, moving in lines towards waiting aircraft. My thoughts were with them as much as anyone else. The tension was mounting, and I felt terrible. I grabbed Jimmy and led him to the roof, braving the chill wind.

‘Some words of encouragement might help at this point, my guts are turning. This could all go badly wrong.’

‘It could. But look at this way: just how much are you prepared to do to save this planet?’

‘I’d hope, almost anything. But I’m not you. And right now I can’t think straight.’

‘Then you need that which kept early mariners going for centuries. You need hope, and some faith in what we’re doing.’

‘I have no doubts about what we’re doing,’ I said, and I meant it.

‘But you don’t have a hundred percent faith in what will happen tomorrow, in either zone of death and destruction.’

‘I don’t like sending the Rifles off to fight.’

‘That’s good. It shows you care, and that’s not a bad trait. Problem is, a surgeon needs to cut off an arm to save the body, and not hesitate or beat himself up over it. Focus on 2025, not on the people here and now. Focus on that, and fight with a determination to get there.’

‘The Somali inserts are going to take a beating,’ I reflected.

‘If it weakens al-Qa’eda ... I’d sacrifice them all.’

‘Yeah, well I’m not up to that, not yet.’

‘I know.’

I took in the airfield, and the grey sky. ‘Sure you picked the right assistant?’

‘Not always?’

‘What?’ I asked, turning to face him.

He laughed at my expression.

‘Fucker,’ I cursed.

‘Tomorrow will be better. It’s now our eleventh hour, but tomorrow is a fresh start.’

Downstairs, Crusty turned up with his bodyguards.

‘You better be right,’ several people uttered.

‘Merry Christmas to you too.’ Looking tired and drained, he fired up his laptop and opened a web page that displayed quakes, minor and major, then just sat and waited.

At 5pm Jimmy told people to get food and a few hours sleep, suggesting that Crusty’s prediction was for late tonight. Puzzling the accuracy, people got some rest. So did I, and I still felt terrible. At ten o’clock Jimmy checked his watch, a glance my way. Exhausted, people sat around saying little, the buzz and energy gone. It had been a hard few days. Now all they had to do was to wait. At ten thirty Jimmy checked his watch, stood up and stretched, standing next to the base alarm switch. I could see it in his look, but no one else could. Then the world changed forever. Every phone and fax machine came to life at the same time.

‘Earthquake!’ Crusty shouted. ‘A big one, off Sumatra!’

Jimmy threw the alarm switch, everyone jumping up. With the alarm off, Jimmy faced the communications officer. ‘Communications officer.’

‘Yes, sir,’ came back very polite and respectful.

‘Sound full emergency recall, full emergency deployment.’

The man typed furiously and sent the message. ‘Message gone.’

Pagers came to life and were knocked off without being viewed.

‘Helen,’ Jimmy calmly called over the bedlam. ‘Press releases please. Crusty, launch your software, warnings to governments first.’

Crusty typed away. ‘Sending signal to remote servers, messages ongoing, faxes outgoing.’

Jimmy faced me, and took a moment. 'We've spent fifteen years building up Rescue Force. We've ... done what could. Now we'll truly introduce Rescue Force to the world, our work almost done.'

A long way off, our sirens on police stations and hospitals started to wail. Tourist hotels received faxes: Tidal wave heading for you. Evacuate!

Jimmy excused himself and went for a long walk around the airfield. I helped out for an hour before turning the TV on, suddenly glued to the reports. The lounge offered three TV sets, all deliberately tuned into various news services, the sound turned-up only on the BBC at the moment.

In the morning the news again grabbed my attention, and held it, as it did for most people around the world. The images of the waves coming ashore astonished Helen and me as we sat watching them, Shelly oblivious to the remarkable events, Lucy asleep. It was one thing to predict the events, to know that they would happen, but to watch it rammed home the realism. And every image seemed to have a Rescue Force medic or helicopter in view, the teams now being referred to as "Jimmy Silo's" Rescue Force. Anyone watching the news would assume that we had a thousand helicopters and a million medics; they were everywhere. Camera crews had been embedded with teams and were now sending in reports of the waves, plus heroic rescues. On CNN they were showing an interview with Hal, making me smile. I figured, and hoped, the lawsuits would go away, and that the various governments would stop whinging now.

In the command centre I found thirty warm bodies all trying to talk at once. Checking a board, I noticed that Rescuers had landed in Thailand, in Phuket, despite the threats from the Thai Government.

Turning, I noticed the Prime Minister, now dressed casual. Well, it was a holiday. 'Courting votes?' I asked.

He cocked an indignant eyebrow. 'How's it going?'

I shrugged and held my hands wide. 'Your guess is as good as mine. We warned them, they evacuated by rumour, lives saved. Got no stats yet.'

Bob said, 'Still a lot dead. The wave reached inland in estuaries and up rivers, slamming into villages a few miles upstream. Many killed in Thailand – they didn't evacuate, and

Bandar Aceh has been levelled, whole town gone. They evacuated though. We'll be popular in Sumatra, they're hailing us as heroes already, and the Sri Lankans very happy with us.'

'Small miracles,' I said. 'Can't please everyone, but it would be nice to please some of the fuckers now and then.'

The Prime Minister nudged me outside. 'Queen has asked about Jimmy a few times. I think she knows.'

'Knows ... what? I puzzled.

'She's very well connected; old boys in the intelligence service keep her informed. So I think she may know.'

'She wished us luck Christmas Day.'

'She asked about an honour for Jimmy, but I told her he wouldn't accept one.'

'Why?'

'That's what he said: to deflect any honour.'

'Oh,' I puzzled, making a face.

'Anyway, you got every TV crew in the world at your gate. Best you say something.'

'Why don't we ... say something. Get you some votes, eh?'

'Cheeky bugger.'

We found Jimmy downstairs, dressed smarter than the rest of us.

'It's a holiday,' I said. 'You can lose the tie. We doing a few TV interviews?'

'Yes, get them over with.' He led us to the communications centre.

'Bloody hell,' I said, the words caught on camera. 'How silly are you lot,' I told the TV crews, twenty jammed into a space for perhaps eight.

Jimmy called order. 'We'll get through interviews faster if we have some semblance of order. I'll play like a Prime Minister and point to interviewers for questions. And yes, you can have more than one. And ... Merry Christmas.' He pointed at the first lady.

'Do you feel vindicated?'

'Let's not have silly or inappropriate questions, shall we. I do not feel vindicated, as you say, since this was not a game, nor a competition, nor about anyone's ego. This was about saving lives, and I don't care who gets the credit. Give our man Crusty a

golden crown and put him on a pedestal, it matters not. What matters, is what's happening in the Far East.' He pointed.

'How much did you spend, personally spend?'

'Again, not what we're about. But to answer your question, I will be asking the bank for a loan next week, because I'm now overdrawn. By time this deployment has finished it will have cost around seven hundred million pounds.'

'Have you emptied your bank account?'

'Yes. I'll be getting a letter in red from the bank manager.'

'Will this special software be available to everyone?'

'It is now: we get predictions and we tell you, and that saves you pushing the buttons.' He pointed again.

'How many rescuers were deployed?'

'The total is around six thousand, but we don't know what tally the reserves came up with.'

'Was Hal deployed?'

'Yes, he's in Sumatra, being pestered by American news crews and getting no work done.'

'How many nations sent rescuers?'

'I believe ... thirteen, many other nations helping out.'

'Who sent the most?'

'China.'

'Are you still being sued?'

Jimmy smiled. 'If I am, they'll have a hard time convincing a judge that we were wrong. Besides, I'm broke.'

'Paul, how come you're not out there?'

'I'd love to be out there. But I have two kids, and a wife with a mean right hook.' They laughed. 'If I went, I'd be divorced upon my return. Besides, who do you think does the paperwork around here?'

'Prime Minister, what was the British input?'

'We've worked very closely with the British contingent of Rescue Force all along, at this base, and provided RAF transports for rescuers to fly out the affected areas. We also have surface ships in the area, and an aircraft carrier flying Rescue Force helicopters into Sri Lanka.'

Jimmy put in, 'I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Prime Minister and the UK Government for all the support we've received, especially behind the scenes with diplomatic problems. The Prime Minister took a gamble by backing us, a

big gamble, and his support gave a lot of people around here the courage to do what we did. But what touched some people here more than anything was the message from the Queen. Small gestures like that go a long way.'

'What about the Americans?'

'I've been in almost daily contact with the new President, Hardon Chase. He's not in office for a few days yet, but has been working behind the scenes to get people in place. He also took a big risk and he moved half of the US Navy into place before the quake struck. The suffering in Sumatra has been greatly eased thanks to Hardon Chase kicking butt before he even takes office. As I saw in Kenya, he's a man of action. He can't stay up late drinking with the rest of us hard men, but he's OK – for a Yank.'

'Will you be flying out?'

'Hope so, but plenty to do here. Besides, the Thai Government might shoot me for taking tourists off their beaches. And may I take this opportunity to thank the German Government for their massive logistical support. They don't have a Rescue Force unit, but they helped out greatly. And Israel, they sent twenty people, their whole unit just about. And if the French Government is listening, I've been thinking about a welcome home parade for all the national rescuers in Paris, it's central.

'On a more serious note, I would like everyone - everyone in the world - to look at the images of the rescuers in action, and to look at the flags on their arms. Britain, Russia, China, Africa, even Cuba and America working together. You see ... there are some things that we all agree upon. There are some things that can bring nations together, instead of them shouting at each other in the United Nations chamber. Now, it's Christmas, so we have some food and drink for you in the canteen. No silly hats, but we have some sherry.'

Kandahar

As the sun set, Major Ngomo stepped out to the waiting Antonov; combat clothing, webbing, weapon slung. Across the tarmac sat seven other aircraft, quite a sight under the floodlights. With the roar of propellers in his ears, the smell of

aviation fuel, he turned with his adjutants and waved goodbye to Abdi. Boarding the plane, the door closed. He ordered the operation to begin.

His An12 taxied around, lined up on the runway and powered up, soon turning north through the dark night sky. Ngomo and his men settled into a tried and tested routine, all the men familiar with long flights. Ngomo opened his novel about the Napoleonic Wars and found his page, switching his brain off as his men spoke about family problems, models of cars and putting the world to right. In front of the Major, two men argued about the cost of speedboats, should they ever make enough money to own one. Smiling, he turned the page.

Eight hours later they entered Iranian airspace, labelling themselves as UN flights that had got lost en-route to Kandahar, and turned east, soon over Afghan territory. Ngomo peered down as the dawn arrived, now flying into the sun. The land below appeared sand coloured, a good omen; it looked just like Somalia. The mountain ridges below reminded him of the mountainous regions of North and Western Somalia, where they had been training extensively for the past six months. The men now referred to themselves as mountain goats. A few beards had been grown off the chin and into a point, and bleached white.

Ngomo's adjutant handed over two tins of meat; breakfast. Ngomo tucked in, the basic meal washed down with hot sugary tea.

Returning from the toilet, a man said, 'I just shat, and flushed, so al-Qa'eda has some shit already.' The men laughed.

'It freezes on the way down, sir,' a man told Ngomo.

'Freezes?'

'The shit and water, it freezes. Hits the ground like a bullet.'

'Then we may have already killed a goat herder by mistake,' Ngomo said with a grin.

Just over an hour later, Ngomo stood and stretched, using the toilet before he made himself ready. He tucked his beret away, and placed a blue cloth UN waistcoat over his webbing, a blue cap on his head. It would not hold up to any close inspection, but at twenty yards it would buy him and his men a few seconds of confusion. The pilots reported twenty minutes to landing.

Landing in the dark had been the first choice of insert, but Kandahar airfield lacked runway lights or available illumination.

In fact, Kandahar offered a runway, and that was it. So a brazen daylight insert had been opted for, the aircraft painted with huge UN letters on the tail. Since most of the UN flights were An12s, no one on the ground would suspect anything. Hopefully.

Ngomo got his team of ten men ready, blue UN waistcoats and caps, M4 assault rifles with silencers tucked away. With everyone peering intensely through the windows, wondering if they would live or die in the next few hours, the An12 touched down without permission, the lone air traffic controller getting back static. It was just another UN flight, just like any other day.

The plane taxied around to the apron, the pilots smiling and waving at ground controllers. All was normal. The aircraft halted where directed by a bored looking man who could hardly be bothered to wave the orange wands. Low steps were brought out as the engines wound down, a pilot stood in the open doorway, dressed like any other pilot in his white shirt with gold braid on his shoulders. With the steps in place he stood on the top and made himself visible for a minute. An official walked up the few stairs and the pilot shook the man's hand, gesturing him inside. As the official ducked in and lifted his head a silenced shot hit him in the chest, the pilot pushing him forwards. Ngomo waited ten seconds, then walked down the steps, blue UN hat and blue UN waistcoat, his men behind him. As he neared the waiting jeeps he counted twenty-six men in view. It would be interesting. Ten yards from the first man, Ngomo noticed the odd looks he was getting. He lifted his M4 and fired at a surprised individual, soon cutting down the four men in front of him. His men broke left and right, opening up on the other men, all running forwards and firing as they went, a great many rounds sprayed around. Ngomo sprinted past the jeeps and fired as he went, knocking down other men, soon to the terminal doorway. He burst through and fired as he went, at anyone and everyone that was not one of his group. Changing magazines, his back to the wall, he heard a long burst of fire. The game was up. He pulled two grenades and threw them into the terminal, secure in the knowledge that no innocent UN staff were about.

Two weeks before the insert, the UN had been alerted to the fact that Northern Alliance were about to launch a major attack, and so withdrew many of their staff. The Northern Alliance were also

rumoured to possess more Mi24 helicopters than they actually had, part of the Silo rumour mill. In reality, they had one helicopter that worked, and one that needed parts. It was all news to the Taliban, who scratched their heads at the UN withdrawal. The front lines were a long way off, and the Taliban were the ones advancing. So this alleged push south by the Northern Alliance had them confused. Still, they sent extra men north to bolster their positions. All that remained of the UN mission were two-dozen keen UN mine clearance workers; all Somalis who had arrived just a few weeks ago.

Then, yesterday, a report had come in of paratroopers landing in the west, something that had caused a lot of raised voices. Still, regional commanders in the west had been attacked and killed by someone. The reports arriving that evening were of men dressed as Iranian soldiers, sixty miles across the border into Afghanistan. Men had been dispatched from nearby areas, and from Kandahar itself.

Ngomo's grenades detonated, killing and wounding very surprised gunmen. He spun in with his adjutant and sprayed the room, running forwards and firing as he went, soon to the other end. Peering through a glass door he could see his men running off the plane, the ground handlers lying dead on the apron, orange wands no longer needed. He turned towards the gate. Circling around, and killing an innocent floor sweeper as he went, Ngomo came at the men on the gate side on, the men running towards the terminal. He and his adjutant dropped to their knees and fired carefully, two rounds for each man. Lifting up, they sprinted to the gate, firing from the hip as they progressed. At the gate they slammed their backs against a wall and threw grenades at the men outside.

Four Pathfinders in blue UN waistcoats reached the opposite gate buttress and fired. Ngomo nodded a signal, and they all spun into the gate, running and firing at startled men, soon knocking them down. Ahead of them lay a straight road flanked by fields, an unhindered view out towards the main road north/south that led to Kandahar, the town a few miles northwest. A lone Toyota pickup trundled towards them, possibly just an airport worker. To the sounds of machinegun fire behind them, Ngomo and his men fired at the driver and passenger, smashing the windscreen

and killing them both. Ngomo ordered the jeep recovered and brought inside.

From behind him, a large empty truck trundled forwards, soon blocking the gate once the Toyota was through. Overhead, the remaining aircraft circled, now ordered down as bodies were moved. Ngomo threw off his cap and waistcoat, placing his beret on as he strode towards the terminal. At the front of the terminal he asked for a casualty report. None so far, came back.

The second An12 landed, soon followed by a third, the first now being refuelled by the pilots themselves. Twenty minutes later Ngomo had just under five hundred men on the ground, each unit running to a pre-planned part of the perimeter and digging in, the unit commanders assembling around Ngomo. The final An12 unloaded just cargo, rations for the mission, a dozen large pallets that were pushed out. On the tarmac, the heavy pallets were pushed and nudged towards the terminal.

Ngomo lifted his satellite phone and sent a message: 'Fox in the chicken coup, chickens all dead, no casualties, transport leaving when ready. Out.'

They had done it, they had taken Kandahar airfield off the Taliban, a great loss of face for the old men that I had met – yoghurt and mint paste coming to mind when I heard the report.

With the aircraft taking off, Ngomo readied his wake-up call for those old men in the civic centre of Kandahar. A Russian rocket system was wheeled out, twenty tubes loaded with rockets. When ready, the operators stood and faced Ngomo, who waved a hand. The short-range rockets were launched towards the centre of Kandahar, soon raining down on unsuspecting citizens as they went about their business on this chill, but fine morning. Marketplaces erupted, buildings crumbled or caught fire, and the old men sat wondering if it was an earthquake. The blasts soon labelled the problem as something else, something far more sinister. Thought of the Northern Alliance came to mind, and the rumours of those Mi24 helicopters.

With buildings on fire, roads blocked, panic gripping the citizens, reports came back in. The Northern Alliance were nowhere near, they were hundreds of miles away, and no helicopters had been seen. But strange reports came from the area near the airport, sounds of gunfire. The airport was called on a landline, answered by a Somali.

‘We are the Somali Army, and we have taken the airport. We have come to fight al-Qa’eda, who make war on our lands. Thank you, and have a good day!’

Ngomo waited fifteen minutes, enough time for the crowds to gather and help the wounded, or to put out fires, and launched a second salvo. The old men of the Taliban leadership were debating the odd phone conversation with someone at the airport, when the building they were in shook. Outside, many were caught out in the open, the casualties mounting. The leadership dispatched as many men as they could to the airport, as expected.

Along the approach road to the airport jogged a group of Somalis in mine clearance gear, sweating and panting as they reached the gate.

‘What kept you?’ the men at the gate asked.

‘We stopped for breakfast!’ came back, the men puffing a little. Stripping off their mine clearance gear they squeezed past the lorry and found Ngomo.

‘Did you do a good job clearing the mines?’ Ngomo asked.

‘No, sir. We should all be flogged for the job we did.’

Ngomo smiled. ‘How safe is that approach road?’

‘It should be OK after ten, fifteen years of mine clearance, sir.’

‘Get your weapons and kit,’ Ngomo ordered with a grin.

Fifteen minutes later a column a mile long appeared on the north road, white Toyota pickups weighed down with armed men. Ngomo waited until they were three hundred yards away, and flicked a switch, a radio signal sent. A hundred and twenty mines detonated along the roadside, covering a length of six hundred metres. When the dust cloud cleared there were but a handful of men staggering around.

‘Open fire!’ Ngomo ordered, the men soon picked off and knocked down.

Back in the terminal, Ngomo set-up his HQ in a side room. On a desk he laid out a detailed map of the airfield and surrounding area. On it his adjutant marked in red the blocked road.

‘Make sure everyone gets something to eat in the next hour,’ Ngomo ordered. ‘It will be a long day, and they’ll come at sun down.’

A man stuck his head in. 'Sir, we found a few trucks, UN supplies inside. Wheat.'

'Excellent. Stick a few men on it, and start baking. Use it before the other rations.'

'Second truck has artificial limbs, sir. They're from Mister Silo.'

Ngomo and his men took a moment. 'Leave them somewhere safe. After today, I think they'll be needed in the town.'

A Captain took a radio signal. 'Sir, they are firing towards us from ... seven hundred yards.'

'Seven hundred? Idiots. Let the boys with M82 s find their range.'

On the terminal roof, painted white unfortunately, the snipers lugged up sandbags, creating four fire positions. They dumped their kitbags behind themselves, placed on ear defenders, issued chewing gum, and settled down. They zeroed-in on the road, observing for a minute the men with AK47s firing ineffectually toward them.

'Eight hundred,' a man said.

'Seven,' was a counter claim.

'Factor in our height.' They adjusted their sights, reducing the range for their elevation.

The first man said, 'White truck at the junction.' He fired, his colleagues observing the truck with their sights.

'Low,' they said in unison.

The first sniper adjusted his sights, and fired.

'Wheel!' they called.

A final adjustment was made, a round fired.

'Driver!' they laughed.

'And passenger!'

'Set seven twenty-five,' the first sniper suggested. 'No wind.'

They all made the adjustments, and fired at the men on the road. Startled individuals saw their friends cut down by fifty calibre rounds, gunmen knocked off their feet. The gunmen took cover, unaware of the power of the rifles they faced. Gunmen were hit in the face, a terrible mess made.

'Hit the jeeps,' a man called. 'Before they leave.'

Engines were targeted, Toyota pickups disabled. After twenty minutes the road was cleared of danger, the jeeps driving off, men running. The snipers halted, sat up, and issued more gum.

‘Road clear,’ was reported to Ngomo.

‘OK, put four spotters on the roof with binoculars. Rotate them every hour, eyes get tired from staring.’ He sat with his Somali counterpart, a Captain, a chocolate bar shared. ‘They have rockets.’

‘Take a day or so to move them,’ the man suggested, none too concerned. ‘Tonight they’ll try and sneak up.’

‘Question is – how long till the Arab fighters get here?’

With downtown Kandahar on fire, casualties filling the hospital, the convoy to the airport massacred, the old men called back their fighters from the north and west, but also called in their fighting brothers, the Arabs.

Sixty men had parachuted into the west, two hundred miles from their colleagues, the Iranians not appraised about that part of the plan. The group had landed, formed up and marched towards the nearest town. There, the lead men had donned Iranian uniforms, and shot up the town from a distance before leaving. The Iranian uniforms were discarded and buried, but Iranian berets were tossed onto the roads, where they could be found.

The column then began its long march to an isolated airstrip, where they aimed to be picked up in three days time.

At Kandahar airfield it was quiet; chilly for the Africans, but quiet. No one else had tried to tease the snipers, a few Taliban fighters taking up position south and north, in view, but at a thousand yards out. The Kenyans stamped their feet and jumped up and down to stay warm. The warm clothing they had brought was suitable, but remaining still for hours on end chilled them. Their unit commanders rotated them every two hours to keep them sharp.

In Kabul, a Chinese commercial transport landed, several tonnes of weapons and ammunition offloaded.

At sundown, hard to judge through the low cloud cover, Ngomo increased the number of snipers on the walls. They switched optical sights to thermal sights and made ready, each allocated an

arc of fire. An hour later, keenly awaited movement was finally spotted.

Along the north road, that led to Kandahar, jeeps pulled up, their headlights out. Fighters jumped down and walked to the west, along the course of a brisk stream, the water they were near very cold this time of year. They spread out and approached the airfield using a small wall for added cover.

At four hundred yards the snipers opened up, cutting down twenty of the men, wounding others. The fighters ducked behind the wall. Up on the roof of the terminal building, Ngomo scanned the men with a thermal sight for a minute. Seeing that the fighters were, unfortunately, exactly where he figured they would be, he flicked a switch and sent a radio signal. The culvert and wall exploded along a two hundred yard stretch. Those few stragglers that survived limped back to the road.

The second probe came an hour later, this time from the open spaces of the west. Foolishly, the drivers followed the track in the dark, their headlights out. The first Toyota hit an anti-tank mine and split in half. The column dismounted, several stepping onto anti-personnel mines. In disorder, the survivors ran away.

Back in Kandahar town, the old men could not believe, nor grasp the numbers of casualties. As such, they sent even more men to the airfield.

After an hour of calm in the dark, movement was again spotted. More jeeps pulled up behind the previously abandoned vehicles, the fighters stepping down and running forwards. They spread out and started crawling.

‘Finally,’ Ngomo commented. ‘Some men with brains. Try the mortars.’

The 81mm mortar crews were fed the co-ordinates. They adjusted their tubes, selected anti-personnel rounds, and lobed four rounds, the shells slamming into the ground between the fighters crawling forwards, several injured. Next, the mortar crews tried a starburst illumination shell, one fired. It lit up the area, exposing the men crawling. The snipers opened up, picking off several. When darkness reclaimed the battlefield, the snipers with thermal sights complained, at length. It took them a while to reacquire their targets. At three hundred yards they opened up, all of the fighters crawling forwards picked off.

Dawn brought a light drizzle and low clouds, reduced visibility across the killing fields. Ngomo surveyed the scene from the front gate, steaming coffee cup in hand. He stood wondering where the Arab fighters were.

At 2pm, the spotters reported seeing trucks, and men dressed in black. The newcomers were across the stream, and forming up.

‘Now we see,’ Ngomo told his adjutant. ‘Will these brave fools attack in daylight? Will their anger and determination get the better of them?’

The new batch of fighters disappeared behind houses and compounds, being glimpsed approaching the stream two hundred yards to the west of their drop-off point, now almost due north of the airfield. They crossed a pipe over the stream on their bellies, disappearing behind a low wall.

‘Sir, they are at the north approach,’ came a report.

‘They are not stupid,’ Ngomo noted. ‘Let them get across, count their numbers.’

Half an hour later, thirty-five fighters had crossed the pipe with some degree of professionalism. They spread out into three groups, men with long rifles seen in the group moving further west. The two other groups followed walls south, keeping themselves out of sight.

‘Mortars,’ Ngomo ordered.

The mortar crews checked their bearings and range, then lobed four rounds, hitting the banks of the stream next to the pipe. The compound next to the pipe took a direct hit, and started to issue smoke. A second volley of four rounds hit the concrete support of the pipe and demolished it, the pipe disappearing into the fast flowing water.

‘If they want out, they get cold,’ Ngomo noted. He lifted his radio controller for the mines his men had planted during the night, and flicked the switch. Twenty-four mines detonated, taking down most of the two walls that the fighters were behind, a huge plume of smoke and dust created. A minute later and another mine detonated, but this time from someone standing on it. Men could be seen retreating towards the third group. That group, armed with AKM sniper variants, opened up on the airfield walls, ineffectual at seven hundred yards. The snipers on

the roof opened up, their combined distance to their targets almost a thousand yards. The enemy snipers got the message.

RPGs were fired from behind a compound, none landing closer than a hundred yards to the airfield perimeter. Then a rocket landed, smack on the runway.

‘From the town,’ Ngomo suggested. ‘Blind shots. But still ... they could kill if they are lucky. Fire four rockets to the town.’

Some semblance of normality had returned to the town centre, people going about their business, as the four rockets rained down, scattering the crowds. The Taliban leadership now called in as many fighters as they could, even from Pakistan.

In the west, the parachute troop had settled about a road junction the night before and set-up traps. Dawn brought them a column of ten jeeps. The driver of the lead jeep was killed from five hundred yards, Somalis moving position – and giving away their position. The jeeps halted, the men pouring out, focused on the Somalis ahead. From the sides, the rest of the troop took their time and picked off each man, all killed in less than two minutes. They rushed down from their positions, grabbed headgear off the dead men, finished off a few wounded, and took possession of ten jeeps. The jeeps were turned around, and pointed towards Kandahar.

In the basement of the house I studied the battle board, then the white board that detailed the various actions. Five boxes had been ticked, all right on cue. Small red soldiers indicated the dead fighters, and were scattered over the model. Jimmy explained that a stealth night attack was next, Big Paul pointing out the probable approach routes.

As night fell, the Arab fighters moved into position, three separate groups. They figured that there could not be many men in the airfield, and so would split the fire. The main group crossed the stream using long ladders tied together side on, making a small bridge. Fifty crossed over. A further fifty walked around to the east, a further fifty trying again the low wall northeast, that area still littered with bodies.

This would be the most determined attack so far, and Ngomo checked his section leaders. But the snipers on the roof were

relaying the detail in real-time, there would be no surprises. They were then surprised by a rocket attack, a rocket landing on the roof and injuring one man. Four rockets had landed, no serious wounds inflicted. And the rockets kept coming, one every ten minutes. It made movement around the airfield interesting.

From the rooftop the snipers concentrated on the rocket launchers, spotting the flashes coming from a compound. They took a compass bearing, judged the distance, and radioed the mortar crews. A shell was lobbed; short and left. Settings were adjusted, another round lobbed. It hit the outside of the compound wall. Slight adjustments were duly made, four rounds lobbed. The compound disappeared in a cloud of dust, no more rockets forthcoming.

Meanwhile, the three groups of fighters were on their bellies and hidden from view, crawling forwards inch by inch across freezing cold ground. The group to the northwest reached to within four hundred yards unseen, and fired two RPGs over the perimeter wall. They exploded without injury caused, a futile gesture. The Somalis readied their own RPGs and fired down at the wall that the fighters hid behind, eleven rounds fired, the wall disintegrating. The fighters scattered. A starshell was lobbed their way, a dozen men picked off by snipers.

From the east, the next group followed a culvert, reaching an abandoned mud house and using it for cover. Allowing the men time to get inside and take-up position, Ngomo detonated the explosives inside and around the house, thirty fighters killed or wounded.

To the northeast, the fighters crawled along what was left of the low wall. In order to make them believe that they were making progress, the snipers fired over their heads, or into the ground. The fighters pressed on, reaching three hundred yards. That put their axis of approach right in the sites of a hidden machinegun, which now opened up, strafing the group from the front and killing the twelve leading men, injuring more. That route was abandoned.

But the Taliban were not without a few extra cards to play. From across the stream a mounted DSHK fifty-calibre machinegun opened up, rounds slamming into the airfield. The defenders had to duck, two men injured by ricochet. No sooner had the DSHK fired, it moved position by two hundred yards,

and fired again. So far, it was doing the most damage. From the northeast a second DSHK opened up, a hailstorm of rounds landing inside the perimeter. From the south, a third and fourth DSHK opened up, rounds now pinging off the terminal, and coming in from four different angles. The defenders had no choice but to get undercover. An unlucky shot killed the first Somali, hit in the head.

In the basement, the news was not good, Big Paul positioning four small cars to symbolise the mounted DSHK.

Ngomo had fetched the snipers off the roof before they got themselves killed, their old sandbags being torn-up by incoming rounds. For an hour the DSHK fired intermittently, but regularly, all the while Ngomo wondering about their ammunition levels.

The three groups of fighters, seeing an opportunity, had crawled forwards. After the first dozen had tripped mines, they realised that the approaches were all mined, and pulled back. All night the DSHK fired into the base, no way to know if they were achieving anything. An hour before dawn they fell silent. Ngomo put the M82 snipers on the roof with the spotters just before dawn. They stared hard through binoculars and spotted one of the mounted DSHK, at just about a thousand yards out. The four M82 snipers all aimed for the vehicle it was mounted on, and fired away, two rounds each. They were certain they hit the Toyota, and relayed the co-ordinates to the mortar crews. A round was lobbed towards it, landing short, but close. Four more went over the wall, the Toyota destroyed.

The one to the south was spotted easily, and ten rounds fired, the Toyota hit several times. Four mortar shells flew over their heads, the Toyota disappearing in a cloud of dust. The third and fourth DSHK could not be seen.

Ngomo now directed the mortars towards a bridge over the stream, some sixteen hundred yards out. They hit it after five shells had been lobbed, the bridge now out to vehicles. It was a good morning's work and Ngomo settled down to breakfast, secure in the knowledge that the planes would return that night.

A reporter in Kuwait had got hold of the story in Afghanistan. Actually, he had first reported that Iranian soldiers, possibly

chasing drug smugglers, had crossed fifty miles into Afghanistan. He had then been tipped off about the Somalis. He reported the Somalis as mercenaries acting for the Iranians against the Taliban, which was not too far from the truth. The Iranians denied it. Unfortunately, the left hand did not know what the right was doing, or had done, and a high-ranking Iranian accused the Somalis of an incursion into Afghanistan. The western media was focused on the tsunami and the amazing images coming out of the affected regions. The news of the incursion did not make it to a wide audience.

Another Iranian spokesman then accused the Somalis of breaching their airspace, an odd move considering that Somali was a long way off, and had no air force. There was then the matter of the large Iranian Air Force and their potent surface to air missiles. A third Iranian spokesman then suggested that the Somalis had entered Afghanistan under the pretext of being six UN flights. The reporters then asked how they knew it was six aircraft? They must have seen them?

Abdi was not much of a diplomat at the best of times. Without his President's say-so, he went on TV.

'The Iranians are dogs!' After that, it just got worse. 'They suggested to us that they help us fight the al-Qa'eda terrorists in Afghanistan, and allow in our soldiers. It was their plan. Now they are found out and want the world to think they did not have a hand in it. They have no honour, they are dogs!'

The outburst made Kenyan TV that evening. Rudd called the house, Sykes just happening to be with us and horrified at the turn of events. Jimmy told Rudd that he wanted the story all over Africa, and that the African Times should show an interest. Then the Prime Minister called, greatly concerned at the situation.

'It is necessary, and will be necessarily messy. From bad, it will go to worse, then much worse. But have faith.'

When Jimmy had finished the call, I said, 'They're cut off, no way out.'

Jimmy took a moment. 'I was once threatened by a group of men on a train. When I stood my ground they reminded me that there were ten of them. Yes, I said, but the isle is only big enough for one at a time. And I took off my jacket.'

Sykes nodded. 'A choke point. And a small unit can hold a choke point for a long time.'

Jimmy told me, 'They're Rifles, Kenyan and Somali; they have fighting in their blood. And in their blood – is my blood. Besides the obvious *physical* advantage, they're the best men the Rifles have to offer, most with ten years combat experience. And unlike their western counterparts, shooting at paper targets, that means killing - by gun or by hand. Each of those men is a qualified killer ... and they like it. They've had more training than ten of their Western counterparts, they're well armed, they have an excellent position, and they have a plan that I gave them. It's not the Rifles you should be concerned for.'

'You knew they'd get cut off,' I surmised.

'Who do you think tipped off the press?'

'You did?' Sykes puzzled. 'You dropped them in it!'

'Did I?' Jimmy posed. He waited.

'They're stuck,' I began. 'So they'll be even more aggressive. They have to fight their way out.'

'What did the Somali contingent do in Darfur, on the line?' he posed.

'They broke ranks and charged,' I said.

Sykes put in, 'So they'll go at the Taliban.'

'The Somalis told me they wanted to punch al-Qa'eda on the nose. Well, that punch should be a good one, because if al-Qa'eda is not ... *trimmed back*, the world goes to fuck. It's not Somali wanting to get back at them, it's a few other people that I knew - and buried. The blow about to be delivered is my blow, with as much power as I can get behind it. And no event of the past twenty years is as important, or as risky for the future of this planet. This is the heart of the fight, this is the real me. Rescue Force is what I do on my day off.'

The six An12's taking off from Dohar were refused access to Iranian airspace, and turned back, Ngomo receiving a call on his satellite phone. He was isolated in a foreign land, with no extraction coming, limited supplies, and a war on his hands. He called Abdi, and Abdi called Jimmy, who promised to try and arrange planes from China or Russia.

Ngomo called together his officers and NCOs. He took a moment to take in their faces, and their expectant looks. 'The Iranian Government had betrayed us. They are refusing to allow our planes for extraction.'

The officers and men glanced at each other.

‘I have spoken to Mister Jimmy Silo in England, and he will try and get Russian or Chinese aeroplanes here for us. Till he can do this, we stand and fight; we do the job we came to do and kill as many as we can. But I want all men on half rations till I say. And go easy with the ammunition. Make every round count. Please go and inform your men.’

Ten minutes later, the remaining two DSHK opened up intermittently, forcing everyone to keep their heads down, and to run the gauntlet when moving about the airfield. Another two men were hit and seriously wounded, the terminal building now hosting eight wounded men. Ngomo patrolled the line, finding the men in high spirits, despite their injuries.

Back in his office, Ngomo stared hard at the map of the airfield and surrounding area. Lifting his radio he said, ‘Fire one rocket every hour at the town.’ A single rocket flew outward, soon impacting a building in the town and reminding the Taliban leaders that they had not won this battle.

To the west, the Toyota convoy approached a crossroads, another convoy converging with them. The two convoys were soon on the same stretch of road, heading towards each other. The Taliban convoy’s lead vehicle slowed, a wave given. The Somali convoy did not stop, they sped up, opening fire at point blank range, a shower of outgoing fire hitting the unsuspecting Taliban fighters. Moving beyond the last vehicle, the Somalis swung around, driving through the sand and circling back, still firing. They halted, their soldiers jumping down and lying down, soon firing at those left alive in the Taliban convoy. It was a short battle. Running forwards, the Somalis finished off any and all survivors in the Taliban convoy, double checking bodies. Four of the jeeps were in reasonable condition and so were liberated, blood washed down. Fuel from the others was syphoned out, fuel cans pinched. The Somali column now consisted of fourteen vehicles. They continued towards to the east.

At the next town they noticed a concentration of fighters, and so turned off to circle the town, and ran straight into another convoy. The fighters in the town were suspicious, and opened fire from a good five hundred yards away. That made the approaching convoy halt, its fighters jumping down and taking

cover. It gave the Somalis no choice but to abandon their vehicles and seek cover. In their squads, eight men each, they split and circled mud walled compounds. There started a ten-hour battle, close quarters, and sometimes hand to hand.

Ngomo had studied the map all day, trying to figure out where the next attack would come from. He was certain that the DSHK would be used to keep their heads down, and that rockets would be fired. That would be his signal, the signal that the attack had begun. And he figured they would wait till nightfall.

Only the north offered approaching fighters any cover, the south and west was open country. He tapped the map with a finger. Calling the command team together he made his plan. It was not an ideal situation, but circumstance was driving this, not him. With his mind made up, he called Jimmy on the satellite phone.

‘Mister Silo, sir. Can we talk?’

‘Of course. How’re things your end?’

‘For the moment, it is OK, sir. But they pin us down with the Duska, and tonight they will come in force.’

‘Probably from the north.’

‘Yes, sir, I think this too. My idea is to go out and fight close, to cause many casualties and withdraw.’

‘It will make them think twice about attacking, yes. But be careful that you do not shoot each other. Create a distraction first, then move out very slowly just after dark. They will come an hour or two after dark. How are your supplies?’

‘Enough for three days, more on half rations.’

‘Then tomorrow night, if you have not heard from me, break out to the southwest and walk. I am trying to get you planes. I am also giving money to the fighters in the north to attack south. That will split their forces. I hope to have aircraft in two or three days, you will need to hold out till then. But I don’t think the aircraft can land where you are now, you will need to reach another base, and one without fighting.’

‘I understand, sir.’

‘Before you withdraw, set booby-traps, and fire off all excess ammunition.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘And good luck.’

‘Thank you, sir.’

With the Kenyan press alerted to the presence of Kenyan soldiers in Afghanistan, the Kenyan President made a statement.

‘The al-Qa’eda terrorists from Afghanistan have been setting off bombs in Somalia, and have tried to set off bombs here in Kenya. We sent a small detail of the Rifles to assist our brothers in Somalia, to go and fight these terrorists who come from Afghanistan to attack Africa. The Iranian Government helped and assisted in this venture, but have now changed their minds. Our soldiers are trapped and cut off in Afghanistan. I will bring you more news when I have it.’

The result of that statement was predictable. Coming soon after the successes in Darfur, the various governments began offering troops to go and fight in Afghanistan, the African media now full of the story. Across North Africa and the Middle East, the Iranians were now feeling the heat for the error in judgement they had made by allowing the mission. Within hours of each other, two Iranian spokesmen made two distinctly different statements:

‘We would offer them safe passage out if they throw down their weapons at the border.’

‘They are mercenaries and invaders!’

We made sure that the African times ran both quotes on the front page.

At dusk, a group of forty Pathfinders and Somalis made ready. The teams selected were lightly armed, grenades and rifles, and nervous. They knew where they had planted mines, but were not a hundred percent sure.

With the men starting to move through holes in the walls, machineguns fired out towards the stream, and the compounds the other side. Mortars flew out towards those compounds, keeping down the heads of the people there. Stepping carefully, the Somalis crept out in their squads, soon stepping over bodies and body parts, some wounded still in place and groaning. Boots on necks silenced them. The ex-filtrate group reached the stream without incident, finding no fighters close by, mortars still landing ahead. Using the makeshift ladder-bridge, they crossed one by one, soon all across. The spotters, using their thermal

sights, saw the crossing and altered the mortar angles, a sporadic lobbing of mortars now two hundred yards beyond the stream.

One group split left, one to the right, the main body moving slowly up the centre, a course that would take them due north. The lead men all carried M4s with silencers, their AK47s slung. At the first compound they noticed a flickering light coming from the bottom of a set of stone steps, the sounds of men talking and the smell of food labelling the activities in the underground room as dinner. Two grenades were pulled and thrown down. Dinner was interrupted. From the smoke that escaped the stairs, two men staggered out, cut down with silenced rounds. No further sounds came from the room.

The group that had moved right, to the east, now approached a compound that had been hit by a mortar earlier, the damaged walls evident, and they caught glimpse of a DSHK on a Toyota. The Toyota was now being fixed, the other side of the compound wall, and hidden from view of the airfield. They encircled the compound, and took down the erstwhile mechanics with silenced rounds. Voices could be heard inside the compound, grenades, thrown in. They exploded with dull thuds. The Somalis moved inside, firing as they went, a handful of men wounded by the grenade being finished off. Back outside, a Somali had an idea. He slung his weapon, loaded the DSHK and checked it, his colleagues wondering what he was up to.

‘Push the car back!’ he whispered.

His colleagues pushed the Toyota back a few feet.

‘Stop. Good.’ With the DSHK pointed up at an angle of around twenty degrees, and facing the town, the man let rip.

In the town, fifty calibre rounds slammed into houses, cars and buses. The man’s colleagues looked at each other, then searched the compound for more ammunition, retrieving several belts and helping to feed them, soon hundreds of rounds covering the town.

The firing had a beneficial effect, many Taliban fighters coming out from compounds and from their hidden positions to see what was up, and getting themselves cut down. With their presence now known, the soldiers charged forwards, lobbing grenades into compounds, firing at shadowy figures. The confusion caused many fighters to emerge, only to be cut down in the crossfire.

Almost a mile from the airfield, the soldiers came across the main body of fighters getting ready, soon exchanging fire at close quarters. With the main compound identified, mortar fire was brought to bear, a densely packed compound trapping the fighters as they digested their evening meal. Fire co-ordinates were adjusted accordingly, and the force waiting to attack the airfield was decimated. Still outnumbered, the soldiers tucked themselves into dark corners and picked off the fighters, a battle that dragged on for two hours.

With ammunition low, the soldiers picked up AK47s from the floor and carried on, the withdrawal order given several times. Back at the ladder-bridge, the senior men counted their teams across, noting ten men missing. With everyone across, they blew whistles, searched around as long as they could, but had to pull back. They clambered across the make-do crossing covered by their men, and slowly retraced their steps, mindful of the mines.

Almost a mile further forwards a group of eight Somalis had lost sight of their mission, their orders and their discipline; the fighters were falling back, so they were going after them. With the fighters disorganised, and not knowing who was who, they were now being cut down from behind. When they did turn and fire they often hit their own people.

With the lights of Kandahar in sight, the team leader said, 'We will create a distraction for the others, we will be heroes.' They charged forwards through dark fields and soon found themselves running past houses in dark alleys. Reaching a brightly lit bazaar they opened fire, cutting down dozens of civilians. Charging on, they crossed a wide intersection, firing at cars and lorries as they went. At the other side of the intersection they ran unmolested along a straight road, no lights to give them away, and focused on bright lights nearby. Turning a corner they found a set of high gates, many guards stood around. Without slowing up they fired as they ran, cutting down the guards. Guards on the roof opened up, killing two of the soldiers. Through the strong metal gates that they found, they fired at groups of startled guards, a great loss of life inside the gates. Grenades were thrown over the gate.

Inside the gates, the old men of the Taliban were being ushered out of the back, a great shock to them all.

The soldiers grabbed magazines from the dead guards and ran to the right, the road opening to an intersection with several

shops and stalls. Shopkeepers were cut down, lorry drivers killed, taxis sprayed with rounds. From behind, guards opened up, killing another two soldiers. The final two soldiers, wounded now, turned right and ran forwards, throwing grenades as they went. They reached a brightly lit indoor bazaar and opened fire indiscriminately at spice merchants. Limping on, and losing blood, they rounded a corner to find fighters coming towards them. With a scream, the final two soldiers ran forwards, firing from the hip, killing many before being cut down. Kandahar was now in a state of shock. But that shock was nothing compared to what the old men in the leadership now felt.

Ngomo welcomed back his men, getting the report of ten missing, presumed dead. 'We have bought ourselves a day or two, with the lives of these brave men. Tend to the wounded.'

Unknown to Ngomo, the Northern Alliance were making use of the confusion, and the thinning of the lines, to attack south. It was something the old men of the Taliban would have to face in the morning.

A hundred miles to the west of Kandahar, the parachute troop were now driving east, but just forty of them, many of those carrying fresh wounds. The battle had lasted all day and into the night, the Somalis fighting in small groups, and killing anyone they came across. They had cleared the compounds and killed most all of fighters in both convoys, pursuing the stragglers into the town. There followed a massacre. With their blood up, their colleagues dead and wounded around them, the Somalis flipped. Now driving away in a column of Toyotas, they left behind more than six hundred dead; men, women and children.

The next morning, the Taliban leadership received reports of the carnage that had befallen Kandahar; some three hundred wounded, eighty civilians killed, three hundred and fifty fighters dead or wounded. And laid out in the courtyard were the bodies of just eight Somali soldiers. The town had been searched, as well as the area north of the airfield, and the evidence was there on the floor. Eight bodies. From the west, the reports were horrific, reports of whole towns and villages being wiped out, wild reports of tens of thousands of Somali soldiers converging

on Kandahar. And now the Northern Alliance were attacking in many places. Just to make a point, a lone rocket impacted a building not far away, the blast reverberating around the room.

The leadership now had a war on three fronts, and struggled to come to terms with how this had come about. Messages were sent to all fighters in other provinces of the invaders, a call to arms to defend the motherland. That was when Jimmy decided to turn the screws. He launched an operation that few were aware of, certainly not me. As the Taliban leadership argued about how to deal with the mess, explosions caught their attention, a dull rumbling sound resonating. The explosions got louder, the men thinking of evacuating to a cellar.

From the north, Mickey and Yuri opened up as they bore down on the town centre and the civic buildings. From behind them, three other Mi24s opened up, the townsfolk now in abject panic. The civic buildings were pockmarked, holes blown into roofs and walls as rockets rained down. And at the airfield, the soldiers stood up on the walls and stared wide eyed. The Mi24s radiated out from the town centre, firing at anything they noticed on the ground. In a line, they flew down the north-south road and strafed vehicles on it. Turning hard at the end of their run, they approached the airfield with a roar, setting down in a line on the runway, their engines soon winding down.

Ngomo and his senior staff met Mickey and Yuri on the apron.

‘This where the action is?’ Mickey asked, putting a cigarette on his lip.

Ngomo shook his hand. ‘Where did you come from?’

‘The Chinese had them, so flew them to the Northern Alliance. We snuck in on a UN flight a few days ago.’

‘We were planning on breaking out tonight.’

‘New orders: stay put. Should have some supplies tonight. So, got the kettle on, ‘av we?’

That evening, not long after dark, an An12 landed, its pallets pushed out quickly, the wounded removed. It took off to the south, but circled around to the north as it climbed.

In the pallets the soldiers found food, ammunition, mortars and rockets. One pallet contained ammunition for the Mi24s. Fuel for the Mi24s was not a problem, several fuel trucks lying

around the airfield. Ngomo took the rockets, had the tubes loaded, and fired a salvo of twenty-five rockets at the town – just to remind the Taliban that he was still there. To the south, he sent out two separate patrols and captured the DHSK, killing their operators. Back in the airfield, they moved the DHSK to the northern perimeter and fired towards the town intermittently. The good citizens of the town would not be getting much sleep this night.

An hour before dawn, Mickey and the Mi24s took off, and flew to their maximum range, pounding Jalabad at dawn, a rude awaking for the citizens there. On the way back they strafed Kandahar centre with what ammunition they had left, and landed in time for breakfast.

With radio contact made, the parachute troop coaxed their jeeps into the airfield. They had found no fighters nearby. The soldiers greeted and hugged each other, the wounded taken into the terminal.

At noon a jeep drove out from Kandahar with a white flag. It slowly crept along the approach road, and finally stopped a hundred yards out. The driver eased nervously out, waving his white flag, and walked forwards. He was searched at the gate and let through with an escort. Ngomo met the man in his office, but just sat and stared at him.

Speaking in Arabic, the man was translated by a Somali officer. ‘We wish to know who you are, and why you are here.’

‘That is simple, my friend,’ Ngomo began. ‘Al-Qa’eda makes war on Somalia, setting off bombs, killing women and children. You make war on us, so we are here to make war on you.’

The Afghan was a little puzzled. ‘We are not al-Qa’eda.’

‘They have their headquarters here, their bases, in the east. Don’t deny it, we know.’

‘There are Arab fighters here, yes, but we are not them.’

‘You are the Taliban?’ Ngomo pressed.

‘Yes.’

‘You are the government of the south, al-Qa’eda is in the south, so you support them.’

The Afghan made no comment, but asked a very odd question. ‘How long will you be here?’

Ngomo blinked, and glanced at his adjutant. He took a moment, sensing an opportunity. 'Till our reinforcements arrive from the north. We are only five hundred men here.'

'Reinforcements?'

'Yes, we have flown in five thousand men. More in the west.'

The white flag holder was stunned into silence for a few seconds. 'And what is your aim?'

'To kill you all, and take the country, of course.' Ngomo sent the man on his way. To his adjutant he said, 'They are worried.'

'Mickey says the Northern Alliance are moving south. And we are here, so distract them from their fight in the north. They are spread too thin.'

Ngomo rang Jimmy. 'Sir, the Taliban, they send a man with a white flag.'

'Do they offer terms?'

'No, they asked how long we would be here.'

'Oh. Well, nominate me as arbiter, and I'll talk terms for you. Abdi is here, at my house. Give them a satellite phone, please.'

'Very well, sir.'

Ngomo sent a man after the white flag holder, and gave him a satellite phone, telling the man to give it to the leadership, and wait a call.

When the phone rang at Taliban HQ, our Pushtan interpreter from the Foreign Office asked for the top man. He explained that Jimmy – the man who sends plastic legs – will act as arbiter for both sides, and were they happy with that? They were.

Jimmy began with, 'Have you suffered many casualties?'

'Many thousands, in many parts of Afghanistan; women and children massacred. Towns wiped out by these barbarians.'

'May I ask, why you support the al-Qa'eda attacks on Somalia?'

'We do not support such attacks.'

'Al-Qa'eda travels from your lands to set-off bombs in Somalia.'

'We have no control over this.'

'The Somalis wish that you remove al-Qa'eda from your lands. These are their terms for them leaving Afghanistan.'

'We could not remove al-Qa'eda without a fight,' the old man admitted.

‘There are thousands more Somalis in your country than you realise. Soon, fifty more helicopters. Perhaps you could just tell the Somalis where to find al-Qa’eda. After a year or two they may have killed them all.’

There was a long pause at the Taliban end.

‘This would not be acceptable to us.’

Jimmy explained, ‘The Somalis are brave and strong fighters without mercy. If you do not remove al-Qa’eda they will kill everyone they come across. And then the Northern Alliance will have your lands.’

Another long pause came. ‘The Somalis will not leave?’

‘No, they will stay, re-supplied by the Northern Alliance. Maybe a year. And I warned you before about Arab fighters who make war on the west. Without them, I could get you more money. That is better than fighting the Somalis every day for a year.’

‘We ask for a ceasefire while all tribal elders meet and discuss this.’

‘The Somalis are in agreement, but I cannot speak for the Northern Alliance. The Somalis will wait five days. Turn this phone off to save the battery, back on when you are ready. Bye.’

Ngomo received the news; a five-day truce. He assumed the worst, and started planning for the worst. At dusk that evening another An12 landed, its large pallets pushed out, twelve of them. When Ngomo read the cargo manifest his eyes widened.

New Year

The 27th had been hectic, but on the 28th we had nudged Bob Davies and others to give interviews, and Helen offered hourly updates of facts and figures, plus casualty reports amongst our rescuers. Most of those casualties were down to accidents, and not the wrath of Mother Nature. Jeeps had been involved in simple vehicle collisions, one had overturned, and a few rescuers attempting daring stunts to help trapped people, getting themselves injured in the process.

Sat with Helen in the apartment on the 29th, I picked up a copy of the African Times, available in the UK by subscription. On the page dedicated to the DRC, a picture of six hanged men caught my attention. They were new recruits, and just six months into training, who had gang-raped two women. In addition to the men who had been hanged, every other member of their platoon had been given fifty lashes, their sergeant busted down to corporal, and the officer in charge docked a month's pay. I did not mind the punishments, but to have it in the paper seemed to be doing our dirty laundry in public view.

I followed the story of the soldiers in Afghanistan, what the papers actually knew about it, and could see what Jimmy was up to. When he popped in to play with the girls I said, 'You're driving a wedge between Africa and Afghanistan. Probably a wedge between Africa and the Middle East.'

'Really?' he made a faced. 'Can't think why.' He ignored me and tickled Shelly.

I gave another interview and updated the tired hacks on events overseas. They got plenty of pictures from our people on the ground, streaming video across the internet, and diagrams from our staff. There was little more we could have done to assist the press.

When New Year's Eve came around we drove back to the house and made plans for a party, Po and others now visiting. We dragged Bob Davies and a few others over, but it would be mostly a family affair this year. We told Shelly that tomorrow was Christmas, and stuffed her presents around the tree. She was three. She was confused, but she'd get over it.

New Year was quiet compared to other years, and it would not have been seemly to enjoy New Year with a lavish party when so many of our people were overseas. We enjoyed a meal around the dining room table, some "M" Group members remaining for the holidays.

The next day Jimmy showed me our schedule for January.

'Are we trying to set a record for the most air miles, or what?' I asked.

'If you can see an alternate then I'm all ears, underling.'

I went and showed Helen the schedule, and she uttered a few rude words. But after an hour of writing over the schedule, we

could see little alternative; our kids would have to grow up without me.

On the 2nd of January we began to extract teams, starting with the reserves and linked NGO groups. We left doctors in local clinics and started to remove the less skilled personnel. NGOs were taking over, dealing with food and tents, and our lot were still searching – but not finding anyone now. Our rescuers returned to designated areas, formed up, ticked boxes on forms, and headed towards capitals and airports, sometimes in long jeep convoys,

The Sri Lankan Government turned out to welcome our people to the airport, crowds at the roadside throwing flowers. In India our people slipped out quietly, as they did in Thailand, but in Sumatra the Indonesian Government made a fuss, an impromptu visit from the Government to RF headquarters there.

We had considered a parade in each country that had sent a team, but that was a lot of countries, and a lot of air miles. I was starting to appreciate the suggested parade in Paris; we'd kill thirteen birds with the one stone. The French President had been delighted at the idea and was in overdrive with plans, being relayed now through Michelle. Jimmy suggested that the date should be worked around Hardon Chase, inaugurated on the 20th of January. A provisional date of January 28th was set, world leaders invited, an "M" Group meeting to be held afterwards.

On the 3rd of January we set off for Hong Kong. We'd start in the Far East and work back towards us. Po flew back with us, and his people had been instrumental in arranging a parade for the HK branch. With reserves, they totalled almost two hundred and eighty. We enjoyed a pleasant evening in Po's hotel, taking both girls swimming, albeit with bodyguards close by. And, with Jimmy and Cat babysitting, Helen and I first enjoyed an hour's massage, then a meal alone. Well, as alone as we could be with four bodyguards and everyone in the restaurant recognising us.

The parade the next day was a surprise; seemed that half of Hong Kong had turned out. The jeeps, freshly cleaned and gleaming, drove along slowly, our rescuers walking along behind, Hancock at the head of the column. We observed from the balcony of the Government buildings, Po dressed smart today, and then greeted the rescuers as they walked in, every single one given a handshake. I knew how Prince Charles felt.

They each received a medal from the Colony's Administrator, an envelope from Po containing free stays at his hotel, and even free cinema tickets.

We attended the reception that evening, a black tie gala and fundraiser, and I got used to people thanking us; all six million of the buggers. The next day we flew up to Beijing with the entire HK unit, a chartered flight, and went straight to a welcome home ceremony that dwarfed the Hong Kong parade. Seemed that the People's Government wanted to show off. Ushered onto a podium with the President himself, we waved at the rescuers as they drove and walked past, a few Hueys flying overhead. I wondered about the jet fighter flypast, not least because I had not seen them used for rescue work. Still, we got into the spirit of it. We helped award medals and thank the rescuers, my Chinese pretty good these days. I now not only had an appreciation for what Prince Charles went through, I felt sorry for the bugger, my hand numb.

The reception that night was typically sombre, a large room for people to mingle with senior rescuers and ask questions, a line of easels displaying photographs of Chinese Rescuers doing heroic deeds. Jimmy gave Chinese TV an interview and praised the Chinese rescuers no end, labelling them as the largest contributors. We spent the night in a modern Beijing hotel, and jumped on a commercial 747 heading to Sidney, Australia, the next day. We faxed Samoa, India and New Zealand to apologise; we were running to a tight schedule.

In Sydney we spent the evening chatting to the Prime Minister and other officials, attending yet another parade the next morning. Hueys flew overhead, and familiar line of white jeeps snaked along. At the reception I found Dunnow with his arm in plaster.

'Did you bend one of our Hueys?' I asked him.

'Naw, mate. Got back, got drunk, fell over.'

I shook my head. 'They don't need to know that.'

'I was photographed falling off a balcony.' He shrugged.

'I think they may forgive you, this time. How was the deployment?'

He turned serious. 'Morning of the tsunami, just at dawn, we were flying along the coast – saw it all. We were over Bandar Ache, and we knew that some people wouldn't leave. It was like

a kid's model, toy houses being swept away. We were picking bodies out of trees three miles inland.'

'At least we got the warning out,' I said with a sigh.

'I landed on a Yank aircraft carrier, bloody huge thing. They refuelled us, even did the windscreen. I had a nose inside the cockpit of an F14. Now that's a bird I'd like to fly.'

I nodded. 'My Augusta is nice. But it's not for sloppy drunken pilots like you!'

The next morning we flew up to Jakarta, giving an interview at the airport before travelling on in government coaches to our hotel, government minders close at hand. We gave a formal TV interview, travelling around to a studio, then attended yet another parade in the morning. At the reception we detailed support we'd be giving the government for the affected region; tents, supplies and doctors on rotation. That evening's gala was non-alcoholic, the food tasty though.

From Jakarta we flew across to Sri Lanka, basically to offer help with cleaning-up and reconstruction in a few areas. The bodyguards were ten deep, a coach laid on for us for the short trip into Colombo. The government were very happy with us, and we were welcomed as honoured guests, signing visitor's books at the Presidential Palace. The reception that evening was modest and sedate, the rich and powerful of Colombo society wanting to rub shoulders with us.

The parade the next day was that of four open-top buses. We were in the first with the government, the local rescuers in the trailing buses. We toured around the city and waved as the people came out and cheered. And it turned out that our two hotels were undamaged by the tsunami. I should have figured that. In a move to "assist" the Sri Lankan economy and recovery, we had people looking for damaged hotels to buy up on the cheap.

RF Kenya had been the last group to be withdrawn, and we had only missed them by two days. That evening, we jumped on a flight to Dubai, and changed for Kenya, arriving in Nairobi around noon, the Kenyan passengers on the flight all greeted, and all excited to be speaking to us. Many snaps were taken.

Approaching the arrivals hall we met two lines of soldiers funnelling us through, the crowds kept back – but waved to; the two honoured sons of Kenya were back. We emerged to a crowd

twenty deep and waved, soon boarding a coach, police cars leading us off with sirens wailing. At the Government Buildings we snuck in the back way, and to a meeting with the full Government Cabinet. They stood and welcomed us, everyone greeting us with huge smiles and handshakes. It took fifteen minutes to even get near a point where we could sit and settle.

‘Is everyone back safe?’ Jimmy asked.

‘All rescuers are accounted for,’ they informed us.

‘Good, good,’ Jimmy said. ‘Now we must talk of matters that are not pleasant.’ The mood changed. ‘I am in touch with the soldiers in Afghanistan. Tomorrow, the Taliban will meet to discuss terms, and what they will do about al-Qa’eda.’

‘Will the Chinese or Russians help our soldiers to leave?’

‘I don’t want them to leave,’ Jimmy informed them.

They puzzled that. ‘No?’

‘No, Mister President.’ He took a moment. ‘The Somalis did nothing to attract the attention of the al-Qa’eda fighters. Al-Qa’eda came and set off bombs in Somalia because they wanted to destabilise the country. If Somalia goes back to how it was they can create bases in the north, and launch attacks on Westerners, on tourist coaches and trains. If al-Qa’eda is allowed to succeed, they will bring Somalia to its knees. And what then for your border with Somali? What then will you do when the refugees come south seeking shelter? What will you do when Arab gunmen arrive on the border, and when they walk the streets of our beloved Nairobi?’

‘Gentlemen, we can fight al-Qa’eda in their back garden, or we can fight them here, in your gardens, where your children play. The fight in Somali was a tough one, but now your neighbour to the north is free and strong, and not a threat to you. They live and work as brothers in arms. Who here wishes to see them fall?’

He let them think about it. And what choice did they have.

‘No one wishes our soldiers home safe ... more than I do,’ Jimmy continued. ‘They are all like sons to me. But they signed up to fight for their country, to defend that country in its time of need. Now is that time of need. Our soldiers would rather fight and die in the cold of Afghanistan, then fight here – in the streets of Nairobi. A message has to be sent, a strong message. That

message must be a lesson, a very costly lesson: if we are attacked ... we will strike back.

‘Mister President, there are two hundred Kenyans and three hundred Somalis in Afghanistan, already twenty-five dead and ten wounded. But they have killed more than three thousand, wounding another three thousand. They have denied the Taliban the use of their airport, a great loss of face. They have food and supplies, and I have arranged that the enemies of the al-Qa’eda - the Northern Alliance - re-supply our soldiers. They can hold out a long time yet. And every day that they do, they send a message. What you must ask yourselves, gentlemen, is how many soldiers you will sacrifice to keep the streets of Nairobi free of bombs going off? I love the men of the Rifles like sons. And I will sacrifice all of them, to save Kenya.’

It was heady stuff, the Kenyans a bit shocked, but also certain that a destabilized Somali was a very bad thing for them. No one wanted to go backwards. We left them abruptly, to discuss the turn of events, and would meet the next day for the parade. At the hotel I found a woman in my room.

‘Didn’t I used to have a husband?’ Helen asked.

‘Jimmy lied, people with stems do get jet lagged.’ I hugged and kissed Helen, then flopped onto the bed. Shelly ran and jumped onto me. ‘God, when did you get so big?’

‘While you were away,’ Helen quipped as she lay down next to me.

‘My back is killing me,’ I said. ‘Damn plane seats. I’ve seen enough planes for a while.’

‘Did it all go OK?’

‘Yeah, as expected. We shook hands with every fucker in Rescue Force, all ten million of them. You know, the Chinese had jet fighters flying past.’

‘Making a spectacle of it.’

‘Can we swim?’ Shelly asked.

‘It’s only a small pool up on the roof. But I could do with cool swim.’

We grabbed our stuff and headed up, finding Jimmy sat with Rudd and Cosy. With Helen sunning herself, I cooled off in the water, Shelly collecting coins from the bottom of the pool. Towelled dry, I sat with the gang and made a seat wet, a cold beer appreciated. Seems that the President had gone on air and

rallied everyone to back the soldiers in Afghanistan, and to pray for them.

“We can fight the terrorists in their mountain bases, or we can wait till they walk down the streets of Nairobi,” the President had said. It sounded familiar.

Round two

On the second day of the agreed ceasefire, Ngomo stood on the roof and surveyed his battleground. Somehow, he did not see the Taliban letting them leave, or removing al-Qa’eda. He was certain that Mister Jimmy Silo in England could get planes for them, but Ngomo had a mission: to inflict casualties, and to make the Taliban sorry for hosting al-Qa’eda. And in his conversation today with Mister Silo, they had discussed many things, none of which involved pulling out. He’d also had a call from the President, a rousing call to fight on, something about fighting them here, or in Nairobi, and that all Africa was behind them.

As he stood there, stamping his feet in the cold wind, he could see jeeps coming out with white flags to collect the dead. He ordered his men to fire warning shots, and to move them back. His adjutant questioned that.

‘If the attackers see the bodies, and body parts, they will think twice. Also, if they wish to crawl on their bellies to us...’

‘The place needs a good wash down. It probably stinks over there.’

Ngomo had an idea. Earlier, the men had found a well, in it fast flowing water diverted from the stream. He now ordered a near empty fuel truck to have its final drops of fuel pumped to a second truck. It was then powered up and revved, its pumps used to suck up a tank full of water. With the truck blocking the gate removed, the fuel tanker trundle out, soon spraying water along the road. By time it had finished, a very wet and muddy stretch had been created.

‘It’s not enough,’ he told his adjutant.

That evening his men went out with digging tools, a large amount of explosives. For several hours they dug down next to what was left of the concrete foundations of the damaged bridge over the stream. A hole some six feet deep was carefully excavated. The explosives were placed at the bottom, plastic on top, then earth, the hole gently filled in.

The next morning at dawn, Ngomo stood on the roof with his detonator. He selected a four-digit number, and pressed the red button. A volcanic eruption of mud flew up, the blast heard two seconds later. He selected a second number and pressed the red button, the opposite set of foundations blasting skywards. But, more importantly, most of the concrete and mud ended up in the fast flowing stream. The bridge was gone, stopping people from crossing on foot, but that was not his aim. As he studied the aftermath through his binoculars he could see the water backing up quickly, soon spilling over the banks and spreading out. A thin film of water, little more than an inch deep, spread rapidly outwards, soon creating a damp patch the size of a football field on either side of the stream.

Through a culvert under the road he could now see brown water flowing out. It created a half-circle of moist ground that grew till its diameter topped two hundred yards. Across the road, Ngomo estimated that six football pitches were waterlogged. And in this weather, they would stay waterlogged for many days.

Ngomo's adjutant commented, 'If they want to approach, they will get muddy feet. And no one will be crawling on their bellies - that water is freezing. They will die.'

'We have denied them this area,' Ngomo happily stated. 'So, we must look to other areas, and other areas of attack.'

On the third day of ceasefire, the Taliban leaders left before dawn for a secret meeting in the east with the tribal leaders. But, more importantly, they would meet with the Arab fighters and the tribal leaders from across the border. They journeyed all day to a town north of Jalalabad. Meeting them were six thousand fighters, a mixture of Arabs and Pakistani Taliban fighters. They were none too keen on the weather this time of year, but the road south from Jalalabad was clear, and they would not be fighting in the mountains.

The size of the force meeting the leaders forced their hands. Trying to send them back off home would have been difficult. An hour was spent greeting old friends, and enquiring after absent friends, before everyone settled down and the Shura got underway. The opening speakers had just started to describe the situation when a shout rang out. The room they were in disintegrated a second later.

Mickey and Yuri banked away, the trailing three Mi24s roaring in and firing rockets at the compound, a hail of fire streaking up towards them. In little more than four minutes the Taliban leadership had been killed, their deputies and their guests. More than three hundred perished. The Mi24s returned to base, and reported to Ngomo only. Job done. They had not attacked the fighters on the ground; they wanted them tempted out to the airfield.

Ngomo put his hands on his hips and peered up at a clear sky, the day crisp and cold. 'Fire five rockets at the town. I'm breaking the ceasefire.'

Sixty miles to the east, young hotheads were rallying the fighters, the leadership all now dead. They mounted up and headed west as expected, all six thousand of them. With them they brought RPGs, short-range rockets, mortars and ten DHSK with plenty of ammunition. Two columns, both more than a mile long, headed towards Kandahar; one taking a northerly route, the other coming up from the south.

Ngomo warned his men that they would be attacked the next day. They were ready. They were dug in, warm and well fed. They had also been planning ahead; approaches had been mined.

Late that evening a DHSK opened up on them, unseen in the distance. Besides that, they saw no movement close by. At dawn, Ngomo was stood ready on the roof with his officers, the men focusing the binoculars on what looked like thousands of vehicles in the distance.

'They are marshalling were we expected them to,' Ngomo's adjutant suggested.

'They have little choice, given the terrain. And they are not army generals,' Ngomo pointed out. Lowering his binoculars he could see that large areas were still waterlogged. He turned to the west, raised his detonator control, punched in a number and pressed the red button. The bridge supports, of a bridge already

damaged, blew at the same time. Mud flew high into the air, the blast registering with them a second later. The concrete foundations fell into the stream, the water soon backing up and spilling over the banks. Soon a glistening reflection of the sky was created, the water spreading out rapidly. Within fifteen minutes a wafer thin lake the size of four football pitches was created, a shimmer blue lake whose depth was less than the image suggested.

A DHSK opened up, the men ducking into a sandbag position, well prepared ahead of time. Sitting on sandbag seats, they peered through slits with their binoculars. And they waited.

Half an hour later, Ngomo said, 'I think they are all grouped.'

'Yes, sir. They are stood around making plans.'

He eased out of the sandbag pillbox and straightened, thinking what a beautiful day it was for a second. He tapped in a four-digit number, looked to the west, and pressed the red button.

The group to the west had occupied an obvious position, an empty compound at about twelve hundred yards due west. Hundreds were already inside, forty jeeps around it, some men moving out as if to start a patrol. The C4 explosives placed in twelve positions blew, the anti-tank mines they were next to detonating. The compound disappeared, engulfed in smoke and mud. Ngomo did not hear the blast, he felt it, a slight wobble on his feet. When the smoke cleared, no movement was seen.

Ngomo turned south. A mile away, on the north-south main road, a large convoy had pulled off the road and to the only place they could park and form up, a clear area behind a small compound and a row of trees. The officers observed the group as the group clambered up onto their jeeps to see what had exploded. Ngomo punched in a number and sent the signal.

The line of explosions reminded him of the blasting that he saw at mines in the Congo. This blast pattern was, however, circular. The pressure wave wobbled him again, and he was certain that everyone in Afghanistan heard that one. Lifting his binoculars, he could see no movement, but more vehicles approaching from the south. He turned northeast. Across the blue lake that he had created a day before he could see a gathering of jeeps behind a large compound, at least a hundred in his estimation, perhaps more. He pushed the detonator switch and

watched an angry brown monster raise up, then fall back. The cloud created spread out four hundred yards in all directions.

Turning due north, he could see a snarl up at the road junction. He radioed down to the rocket crew and they fired a single rocket on the pre-planned bearing. It landed short and left. Adjustments were made, a second fired. That one hit a jeep, sending it into the air, two others destroyed. He ordered twenty-five fired, the rockets screaming outwards and pummelling the crossroads. They adjusted their aim a degree to the right and fired five additional rockets. Three degrees to the left they fired another salvo of five rockets, Ngomo happy with the mayhem caused. For good measure, they lobbed five at the town.

Two miles northeast, a convoy crawled around a bend and halted on a rise. They surveyed the damage with interest, then hastily set-up their own Russian rocket systems, three of them. A lorry pulled up, rockets soon being unloaded and stacked by a hundred men. Four hundred yards from the rise, two Somalis lay unseen at the end of a wire. They glanced at each other, pulled faces, and pressed the detonator button. A large quantity of C4 blew, sending the rockets, the lorries and jeeps, plus their operators, through the air.

Ngomo saw the smoke rise. He turned to the Mi24s and waved them up. Mickey lifted up, nosed down and stalked forwards. Banking right, he had the south road in his sights in seconds, a line of white Toyotas making for an easy target. He opened up and strafed the road at length, making two passes. Across the stream, he spotted a mounted DSHK and blasted away at it leaving the Toyota on fire. Turning east on the main highway he found trade straight away, many passes made as his colleagues found suitable targets in every quadrant. They could hardly fire without hitting a suitable target. Mickey returned and re-armed, ten men keenly waiting with their arms full, Mickey feeling like a Formula One driver. With a “thumbs up” from the men he lifted off again, his colleagues landing to be re-armed in turn.

He flew east along the highway, finding vehicles stretched along it, Yuri taking his time and not wanting to waste ammunition. The soft-skinned jeeps were shredded as they fled.

Four hours later, all of the Mi24 ammunition was gone, Mickey and Yuri on the ground, Mickey putting a cigarette on his bottom lip as he approached Ngomo.

‘Report,’ Ngomo ordered.

‘Got to be five thousand dead out there and a thousand jeeps damaged. No one’s coming to dinner tonight, it’s just us again.’

‘Good work, get some rest, some warm food.’

Aircraft engines could be heard. As part of their promised assistance in negotiations, the Pakistanis sent over a plane to observe. The plane, a small An24, had Pakistani officers with video cameras and still cameras, binoculars and human eyeballs. With Ngomo and his officers wondering who it was, the plane flew low and slow over the area several times, leaving to the east. The massacre had just been witnessed. Not only that, it had been filmed and photographed at length.

In Nairobi, sat at the bar, Jimmy remarked, ‘You don’t fight a terrorist war on their terms, you play to their weaknesses, their arrogance, and use their anger against them. In Somali we stayed out of the towns and used our advantage. In Afghanistan, we used the advantage of distance, and some careful forethought. They came out to us. History teaches ... for those who are paying attention.’

The Nairobi Rescue Force parade was huge, a jeep convoy a mile long and twenty Hueys overhead. The Rifles marched as well, to lend their support, and because it was an excuse to show some national pride.

We met the gang at the reception, catching up on stories of near misses and mishaps, and funny tales. Somehow, Ratchet managed to get a snake in his cockpit and nearly crashed. The US Navy thought he had lost control and would crash – into them. He slammed it down on to the deck and jumped out, trying to explain to the bewildered deck controllers it was a snake. The Marines were called, and used a fire extinguisher to freeze the damn thing, chucking it over the side. Ratchet came in for a little ribbing, a snake painted onto his bird overnight by the US Navy.

The next day, as we relaxed at the hotel, reports came in of the massacre at Kandahar, pictures on the wire. Jimmy called Rudd and made sure every news service in Africa was updated.

He then called the house and asked the “M” Group to run the story – everywhere. A special edition of the African Times was organised, an extra five pages on just this story. The propaganda machine was given a good kick.

Arriving in Dar es Salaam, the early edition was out. We met with the Tanzanian Government and discussed many things, mostly oil and business, then got around to the parade. During a break someone brought in the paper and we scanned the pages, many aerial photographs displayed of burnt out jeeps, bodies strewn around. The paper detailed four hundred members of the Somali and Kenyan Rifles at the airfield, ten thousand dead, and that number again wounded. It was an exaggeration, but not by much. Jimmy then sent a fax to the UN Security Council members and pleaded for an intervention to stop the bloodshed. They met that afternoon in emergency session, Afghanistan in the news right around the world.

The Tanzanian parade was modest, and we flew over to Forward Base that evening, spending the next day going through corporation business. We could have done with a week. Meanwhile, UN staff drove over from Pakistan and found a scene of carnage of biblical proportions, a health risk declared due to the rotting bodies. They weaved around the burnt out jeeps and down the airfield access road and into the base, welcomed with a hot meal and cup of tea from the well-stocked defenders. And Ngomo, he told them he had come for a year, so they’ll stay for a year. Or until al-Qa’eda agrees to stay out of Somalia. The UN staff were thanked for the visit, and sent on their way.

We held another parade in Kinshasa, a bit sick of the sight of Rescue Force by this time. Arriving back in the UK, I was welcomed by a pleasantly familiar chill wind. I filled my lungs. Back at the house we were warned we had two days rest only, a few rude words uttered. After lunch, I fell asleep on the sofa, the first time that I could ever remember doing that since being injected.

And in Kandahar, Ngomo fired a rocket at the town, just to make a point.

That evening he received re-supply, plenty more ammunition for the Mi24s, and a message from England. Before dawn the Mi24s lifted off and flew towards the border with Pakistan,

blowing bridges. Where they spotted narrow tarmac roads they blew holes into the road. Returning to the Kandahar region they followed all roads that led to the town and blew small bridges over culverts. The town was cut off. Refuelled, they set off to blow holes into the main road to Peshawar in Pakistan, a vital support route. It would be a tough winter in the Pushtan tribal regions.

The town's folk had already fled in droves, but now the remainder would have to walk out. With no re-supply of food or fuel, life in the town was becoming hell itself.

Stood on the roof, and thinking of the town's folk, Ngomo again considered the steam. His men had reported an offshoot and several pipes upstream. It seemed that the town water came from the pipes. That night he ordered the pipes blown, and at dawn he lifted his detonator and blew rubble into the path of the steam just below the offshoot, a wake-up call for the local population. Mickey flew over the town an hour later and reported pools of water in several places, a handful of streets flooded. The stream's barrier was soon worn-down by the force of the water, and the water level in the offshoot dropped, the town now without piped water. Ngomo fired a rocket and went down for a cup of tea. Walking around the front of the terminal he could now see some thirty Totoyas, recovered by the men at night. Besides the bullet holes and smashed windscreens, they worked.

His adjutant pointed at them. 'One careful owner.'

Back at the house, in the basement, I was looking at plans that made my stomach turn. 'It's mass murder I whispered.'

'Some things come with a price, some come with a high price, and some ... if allowed to, cost the earth.'

Ngomo sent the Mi24s up the next day, but this time to pound positions in the north, the positions that the Northern Alliance were feeding to us through various middlemen.

With the weather poor, the nights freezing, and snow on the ground in the high valleys, most of the fighters were tucked up warm in compounds, occasional sniper fire exchanged. When the weather was good, and the sun warming up the afternoons, the two sides might come out to exchange fire. Besides that, the

front lines were as static as trenches in the First World War. As in that war, attrition was a factor.

Warm and cosy in their compounds, the fighters sat about the fire, wondering what the distant rumble was. The Mi24s flew in, fired on the exact compounds they were required to hit, and flew back out again. Dozens of compounds were hit. The Northern Alliance then made half-hearted attacks which, given the retreat of the wounded Taliban, often just meant moving their bed roll from their compound to that vacated by their enemy. Blood could be cleaned up, holes patched, and the front was advanced a few hundred yards.

Casualties were high, and all on the Taliban side.

Party Season

Having travelled the world and pressed the flesh, and received and read a million faxes and telegrams, it was time to thank the UK rescuers and get ready for Paris. We organised a party at a large hotel in Edinburgh and flew up. Mackey, many of his instructors, and some three hundred men and women who had deployed were greeted and thanked, a free meal and a free bar. Groups were photographed, followed by everyone being photographed by a guy up a ladder.

Helen and I worked the room, and listened to the tales of damage done and heroic rescues, meeting the men's wives and girlfriends. Jimmy made a long speech and thanked everyone, a few mentions of particularly heroic rescues. By time we had finished everyone had met us and been thanked, many mentioning the personal calls they received from us, Katie Joe or other celebs. Some were apologetic for not wanting to deploy at the first call.

Back from Scotland, we planned a bash at the London club, Mackey and a few others attending that as well. On the Thursday we drove up to the club and booked in, running a function that night for NGOs, the UN, and those that had helped out with equipment or particular problems, the Prime Minister putting in an appearance and thanking the various groups.

The next day, the Friday, most all of the UK Rescue Force regulars and Supplementals turned up, along with the RAF personnel who had helped out, a contingent of US Airman from RAF Fairfield, Gloucester, plus the Ambassadors of the nations contributing and involved. The Prime Minister again put in an appearance, leaving me wondering if it was an election year. In the Red Room, large displays on easels detailed much of the work done by our teams. There was also a section of photographs taken by the rescuers themselves, now blown up and covering a wall to a height of some six feet.

I greeted Bob Davies and the HQ staff, all of the national representatives and many familiar faces. Thanking the RF teams, I was genuinely interested in what they had got up to. More funny stories emerged, and I was jealous at being left out, longing for dangerous flights in Hueys. I didn't tell Helen that when she enquired, I would not have dared.

War without end

Two weeks after the ceasefire had broken down, deliberately so, the Taliban and al-Qa'eda rallied as many fighters as they could, many fighters travelling down from the mountainous east, a difficult journey in the winter. With Keely's NSA satellite taking snaps of a particular junction, we had the advance warning. The Mi24s took off fully fuelled and fully armed, but flew to an isolated area and landed. And sat waiting. At Kandahhar, the poor beleaguered residents reported the helicopters flown off to the north, and not seen for a day or so.

The Mi24 was not just a gunship; it offered a cabin in the back where ten soldiers could be squeezed in. When Mickey had flown off he carried six soldiers in each helicopter, and enough mines to seriously worry him. If he crashed, it would be over quickly, the hole left behind a big one. Those soldiers were now moving under cover of darkness towards a distant road. They walked all night as it snowed, and hid during the day. The next evening they dug into the hard frozen soil and planted mines,

anti-tank and anti-personnel. Having planted the seeds of death and destruction, the men moved to a high ridge and dug in. They found a small cave and got a fire going, soon warming up as they waited.

The next day they observed lone jeeps driving along the road, but nothing worth firing at. But as the light faded, and the snow began, a massive column was spotted moving west. The leader of that column was not stupid, he was travelling at night, and then only when the weather was terrible. He also figured that to fly in this weather would have been crazy. He'd not met Mickey. The soldiers above the pass radioed the movement back to Mickey and the Mi24s wound up. Mickey and Yuri donned the night goggles provide by US military and their world turned a grey-green colour. Knowing exactly where they were going was an added benefit.

Little more than twenty minutes later the dull resonance of the approaching helicopters could be heard by the soldiers above the pass. They switched on red and green lights and placed them at such an angle that only the helicopters could see them. Approaching from the west, Mickey could see the lights, the headlights of the jeeps now distinct.

With the front of the convoy passing the mines, the soldiers threw a switch and blew a large hole in the road, taking out the first three jeeps. Trailing jeeps turned off the road and across the mines, soon splintering and rolling away. The convoy halted, men jumping down, but blinded by the driving snow. Then their predicament got worse; Mickey opened up. The Mi24s strafed the convoy front on, and kept going, following the convoy as it snaked back almost a mile. At the tail end of the grid locked convoy Mickey turned and made a second pass with his small squadron, as much as they dare in this weather. He set a compass bearing and flew off, knowing exactly the lay of the land on that heading. When his GPS system told him he was where he was supposed to be he radioed this buddies and set down, invisible in the storm.

At the convoy, jeeps and fighters intermittently set off mines. The road was blocked to the front, little room to turn around or back up, communication poor with the tail end of the convoy. From high above, the soldiers opened fire with their sniper rifles and thermal sights; single, well-aimed shots. The storm was so

bad that the men in the pass could hardly tell where the firing was coming from. Seeking shelter, they moved towards the rocks and set-off anti-personnel mines.

Dawn brought a clear and crisp day. The twenty-four soldiers got themselves ready, switched to optical sights and zeroed their weapons on live targets. Fire was returned, but the soldiers were well hidden, cloth over their muzzels to help hide the flashes. Inside an hour, close to a hundred fighters had been hit, vehicles abandoned and men scattering down the valley, some climbing up towards their unseen enemy. Those brave fighters climbing up tripped mines and claymores, being on the receiving end of grenades tossed down. One fighter got to within a few feet of a soldier, shot in the face with a pistol at less than ten feet.

Mickey had flown off at dawn, the weather better. After a very quick re-fuel and re-arm he lifted off again, soon back to the trapped convoy and strafing at length up and down the road. Several DSHK opened up, but were picked off, nowhere for them to hide. The remaining fighters scattered into the rocks, their vehicles destroyed or burning.

At 2pm, Mickey returned a third time and strafed the convoy, and the nearby rocks hiding the men. He then returned to the same spot that he had occupied the night before, and lit a cigarette. As dusk fell, the soldiers packed up and climbed down, sniper rifles slung, AK47s lifted. They crept through the charred Toyotas and dead fighters without incident, and adopted a reverse course, back towards Yuri. They reached him just before dawn and were back in time for breakfast.

‘They’ll have a long walk in the cold,’ Mickey informed Ngomo.

‘Good work,’ Ngomo commended before lobbing a rocket at the town. He sat in his office and studied the map. An hour before dark he called in his officers. It was time to make life for those people left in the town unbearable.

After dark, a hundred men crept quietly out across frozen ground and ice. They made it to the makeshift ladder bridge, but had brought their own. The first men across secured the area, the main body following. All across, they split into three groups and headed off in different directions. Approaching the edges of the town, they used their noses to decide which huts and compounds were in use. Grenades went over walls. When men broke out of

the compounds they were cut down. And that pattern continued into the town, cold and hungry townsfolk hearing the firing and fleeing north. Within an hour the soldiers were at the main road and tucked into walls. Passing vehicles were shot up till the roads were blocked, bodies lying in the streets.

Halting at the south side of the road, the soldiers waited in the shadows as fighters to the north rallied. Those fighters hid behind familiar walls and took up positions, exchanging fire with the soldiers for some two hours. That gave the soldiers that the fighters had not seen time to move around behind and spread out. That force, the main force, now moved south. They reached the fighter's positions, killing quietly with their silencers, and now picked off the fighters from behind. By dawn, the soldiers had no fighters left to shoot at, and set fire to the civic buildings, and other buildings that appeared to have a function other than a dwelling. They pulled back in the dawn's grey light and regrouped at the stream, teams counted off and checked as they crossed the water, little regard for fighters. Walking back into the airfield casually, they got the stoves on.

The Pakistani Red Cross was now putting a figure of twenty-five to thirty thousand on casualties, and they may have been right, the final tally would never be known. That evening Ngomo got a call: expect planes to take you out in two hours, get ready. He rallied the men and got them lined up ready for a quick departure. The rocket launcher and the mortars were moved to the far side of the airfield and wired to blow. Excess ammunition could not be destroyed, and so was left. Jimmy had told him not to wire the terminal with booby traps because the UN would land. Ngomo left his map of the area, the mines that they had laid clearly marked.

The first An12 landed from Kabul, mercenary pilots at the controls, and taxied around. With its ramp lowered a hundred soldiers ran on, the plane soon taking off again and heading north. With the next four planes loaded and dispatched, Ngomo and his officers approached the final aircraft, certain that no fighters were about to overrun the airfield. With his men on board, Ngomo pressed the red button on his detonator control and blew the abandoned weapons. Tossing the device over his shoulder, a look back at the terminal, he boarded the plane, the

ramp lifting. The Mi24s lifted off and returned to Kabul, where they would be handed to the Northern Alliance.

A long two days later the soldiers landed in Mogadishu, the whole city turning out for their return. The media filmed the arrival, and counted off the soldiers, four hundred and seventy returning. Abdi and the Somali President welcomed back the soldiers, but kept the fanfare down as Jimmy had requested.

A day later, in the officer's mess at Scorpion base, Ngomo opened his paperback, now almost to the end of the Napoleonic Wars. When Jimmy slipped in next to him, Ngomo lowered the book. 'Hello, sir,' Ngomo said with a smile.

'Did you punch them on the nose, my friend?'

'We did, sir. They will not forget.'

'And the world has more respect for what you can do. And ... fear. Unfortunately, the Somali Rifles are now seen as blood thirsty killers.'

'If I said otherwise, I would be a liar, sir.'

'I've sent five thousand Rifles to the north, to patrol the border. Al-Qa'eda will want its revenge some day soon.'

'They will not learn, sir?'

'No, my friend, they will not learn. You cannot educate the snake, you must kill it; over and over. But the Taliban will not wish to host al-Qa'eda after this, and few other countries will. When they leave Afghanistan they will travel to Yemen, and we will be ready.'

'Yemen will be easy to reach, sir.'

'Indeed it will.' Jimmy handed over a wad of dollars. 'Some day, when you no longer wish to be a soldier, but a politician, you will have my backing, and my money behind you.'

'That is good to know, sir. And will I also get ... tactical and timely information?'

'You certainly will.'

Paris

Jimmy arrived back from Africa in time for Paris, but only just. A quick wash and a bite to eat, and we were back out of the door.

We drove to Cardiff airport and boarded a flight to the French capital, a quick flight. No sooner had we climbed than we began our descent into Paris. They let us off first, the security tight, and whisked us to the same hotel, the same floors pre-booked and now stuffed full of RF staff. We bumped into Mac and Coup in the corridor.

‘What’s Mawlini like?’ I asked.

‘Quiet. Those that aint here is on holiday,’ Mac replied. ‘Should ‘av seen it when we deployed - two of us in the bar. We went and had a drink in the UN hotel for some company!’

‘I think we’ve booked every spare hotel room in Paris,’ I said. ‘Had to limit the Chinese to a hundred people.’

‘They say the Frogs is going to lay on a band and some soldiers,’ Mac cautioned.

‘It all adds to the spectacle. In China they had fighter jets overhead. Anyway, easy on the pop tonight.’

‘Yes, mum.’

In our room, we changed the baby and settled down, Shelly opening all of the cabinet draws and examining what she found. The hotel had kindly laid on a cot for Lucy and a small bed for Shelly. But lately, Shelly was often found in our bed, our eldest going through a period of nightmares. When the dreams got bad Jimmy would come over and sit on the sofa, Shelly asleep on him, and he would read a paperback all night. There was almost nothing he wouldn’t do for Shelly, Helen and I often wondering about our daughter’s future role in things. Considering the amount of time he afforded her, it must be something important.

We had paid for many of the teams to fly over to Paris, and paid their hotel rooms, and called all senior staff together that evening for a meal and a chat. And to check on the French plans for the parade, just in case. Those plans had been listed for us and seemed very thorough. Fortunately, the parade did not start till 11am, so the drunken arseholes we called Rescue Force Kenya would be up and smelling the coffee.

At dawn I peered out of the window and noted a clear sky. It should be a good day. Jimmy emphasised to me that the parade was important, a milestone, and that from here on things would change gear. He did not elaborate on that; gear up or gear down. We had an early coffee together, which finished with me still questioning what we had done in Afghanistan.

A car came for us at 9.30, and the three of us travelled around to the Presidential Palace for a coffee and a chat, a Rescue Force chat and not an “M” Group chat. We were then led down long corridors to a wide and high ceiling room that overlooked where the parade would pass. We’d be playing like royalty and waving off the balcony before meeting the rescuers later, Jimmy explaining that the TV spectacle was the main aim.

What we couldn’t glimpse from the balcony was being relayed to us on TV screens, and the crowds looked twenty deep, many with their own national flags. I saw an Australian flag on a lamppost, Kenyan and Tanzanian flags. Paris hosted many Africa and foreign students, and most of them now seemed to be on the streets, cheering for their national teams as if this was the Olympics.

Turning, I noticed Hardon Chase and Art Johnson walking in, behind them our own Prime Minister. I shook hands with the President and ex-President. ‘Didn’t sit on Air Force One together, did you?’

‘We did,’ Art Johnson confirmed. ‘I showed him around, his first time aboard.’

‘Family with you?’ Chase asked me.

‘Kids at the hotel, Helen on the balcony.’

‘All the politicians are in the room opposite,’ Chase informed me. ‘Like the UN in there.’

‘I best go network then.’ I eased past them and shook our Prime Minister’s hand, a brief smile before I greeted the Australian and New Zealand Premiers, thanking them for their contribution. The dusky gentlemen in the corner appeared Indian and Sri Lankan, vaguely familiar, but I recognised the Chinese Premier and practised my short vowels. That was followed by breaking into Russian, dabbling in German, then switching back to English for the Africans, the leaders of many nations here, even President Kimballa Jnr of the DRC.

‘You court the powerful of the world,’ Kimballa noted.

‘They need us to make themselves look good,’ I whispered, making him smile.

‘The road from Kinshasa is finished,’ he informed me. ‘We have buses now from Kinshasa to Goma.’

‘Not a pleasant trip.’

‘No, three days,’ Kimballa reported.

‘We should build small hotels on the route.’

‘You already have.’

‘Well, there you go. We do things now without even raising the phone.’

I recognised the Cuban flag on a lapel, but I did not recognise the face. Introducing myself, it turned out to be the Cuban Ambassador to France. I thanked him for all his teams, and his doctors in Africa, but he insisted that he was in our debt. Turned out that many South American and Caribbean countries were considering RF units based on the Cuban model, and he introduced me to the Ambassador from the Dominican Republic. I didn’t even know their team had deployed.

With the military band now passing, we moved out onto one of four available balconies, those politicians that wished to be seen waving to the crowds below. I stood next to Jimmy on one side, our own Prime Minister the other, Helen tucked in behind me. The band had passed, soon followed by the start of the RF groups in white, the national leader of each carrying a large flag on a pole. First came France, it was their country after all, followed by the RF teams in the sequence in which they had been created. Mac carried the Kenyan flag, giving the balconies a regal wave as he passed us. Cheeky bugger. After the African teams came Hong Kong, then the UK and China. The Cubans walked proudly past, Israel, Australia and New Zealand – leaving me wonder which was created first.

At the end of the teams came the UN, various NGOs and civilian rescuers that had attended, but an American flag caught my attention. I smiled widely as Hal came into view with the handful of American rescuers in white, plus the pilots, some of whom only flew Cobras. And I’m sure he saw me on the balcony.

‘Did we have any Cobras in Sri Lanka?’ I asked Jimmy, getting back a look.

Following Hal came another American flag, this time airmen, followed by sailors and marines, behind them British and French military teams, mostly navy. Jimmy had them all here, making a point, and milking the opportunity for everything it was worth.

After the parade had passed we all walked downstairs to meet the teams in the courtyard, thirty minutes spent wandering around and greeting people. Most of the politicians greeted their

own teams, all conveniently caught by the wall of TV cameras. Both the politicians, and us, drifted towards the long line of cameras and answered questions.

‘Paul, no more crazy helicopter stunts?’ a man asked, Helen at my side.

‘I need written permission these days.’

‘Are more countries signing up to Rescue Force?’

‘Yes, a few I think.’

‘Thirty-six,’ Helen helped me with.

After a formal state lunch, the “M” Group countries met for a meeting upstairs, the French very organised, and seemingly very pleased to have the honour to host the meetings.

With everyone settling, Jimmy began. ‘Ladies and gentlemen - and politicians, welcome to this “M” Group meeting. But first, let me thank all those who took part in the deployment to the Far East. We worked in concert, and we achieved a lot. Lives were saved *and* political image was greatly enhanced. On that note, there will be no major deployments for a while, teams can relax and then rebuild.

‘OK, Afghanistan: the main reason for this meeting. To recap, if no intervention had been made, either previously or in the latest military adventure, then al-Qa’eda and other Arab fighters would have collected in Afghanistan, sitting about the camp fire of an evening thinking of ways to attack the West.’

He pointed at Ben Ares, now the opposition leader in Israel. ‘And others. They would have also destabilized Pakistan. As a result of supplying the Northern Alliance with weapons – for which we all thank the Chinese – the Taliban have been kept in check. And this recent military adventure has done more than just keep them in check, it has knocked them back ten years or so. Many of their leaders are dead, their instructors and their best fighters. They have suffered around twenty-five thousand wounded or dead, a fact that will not be soon forgotten. And it was done with Muslim African soldiers, so no one can blame the West. Had our new President here, Hardon Chase, invaded, he would have lost a lot of soldiers in a campaign that would have dragged on fifteen years. And such an American invasion would have helped to unite Islamic fighters against the West.

‘In addition to those fighters killed in Afghanistan, many bridges and roads were damaged or blown, making food and fuel

supplies hard to move around during a cold winter. The suffering for the Taliban has not ended; it will be a very long and hard winter for them, many more will die.'

'Civilians?' the French President asked.

Jimmy took a moment. 'The Taliban allowed al-Qa'eda into their country, they provided them a base.' He wagged a finger. 'And they knew what al-Qa'eda was doing around the world. Some things come with a price, some a terrible price. If the Taliban had not been trimmed back, then that region would have gone on to produce the greatest threat to this planet in the future. That threat was not dealt with by American boots on the ground, but by the Northern Alliance, the Somalis – and we even managed to get the Iranians some blame. No one will be attacking the West in revenge.'

'Will al-Qa'eda attack Somalia?' the British Prime Minister asked.

'I'm counting on it. They'll move some of their bases to Yemen, and they will try and attack Somalia – who are making ready as we speak. I've deployed five thousand Rifles to the north of Somalia, and their purpose is to kill as many gunmen as they can. They are ... acting as a magnet to the fighters. And, whilst those fighters are busy in Somalia, they're not in London or New York.'

'The Chinese People thank and commend Mister Silo for such an effective strategy, brilliant in timing and audacity.'

Jimmy bowed his head.

Hardon Chase said, 'Our military is jealous as hell. Five hundred soldiers against ten or twenty times that much. Remarkable. But let me ask a question: if *we* had sent the soldiers, would they have got the timely intel' in the same manner?'

'A hard question to ask, since I would have done whatever I could to prevent you going in – for your own good. But, if you did embark on such an adventure I would have to weigh up the options. It would have been like a friend getting drunk and causing a fight. Do you help or not? I would hope that we never get into that situation, since forethought is plentiful around here.'

'Will al-Qa'eda re-group in Afghanistan?' Chase asked.

'Yes, and a few years from now I'll drop a few Somalis in to send another message. You see, al-Qa'eda is an idea, not a

person, nor place in time. It is the idea that the Muslims are pushed around and will fight back. In reality, the Muslims are oppressed by their own governments, yet some wish to strike back at the west for its support of Israel, and for helping to prop-up dictatorships – like the Saudis.'

'We get a lot of questions from the Saudis ... about you,' the British Prime Minister put in.

'Us as well,' Chase added. 'Perhaps you should talk to them.'

'The Saudis are far more dangerous than you realise, and they'll be a serious problem in the future. They'll fund terrorist groups that attack the oil interests of other countries, such as Tanzania. And they're currently funding terror groups in Iraq, because they don't wish to see Iraqi oil reach its full potential. They'll also go a long way to pressuring the West to keep up sanctions against Iran – again to reduce oil output. I will, soon enough, go head to head with them. Before 2025 they'll go to great lengths to try and kill me.'

The leaders glanced at each other.

Jimmy added, 'They'll lose revenue as I discover oil fields around the world, and they won't like it one bit. After 2017 they will probably drop the dollar – so don't go doing them any favours – and then in 2025 the Middle East stops producing oil. You need to keep that in mind. Saudi Arabia's days are numbered, and they will not go quietly. The Chinese, heavily involved in Tanzania, will suffer terror attacks in Zanzibar, the terrorists funded by Saudi Arabia. That will start next year.'

Chase said, 'We can't go accusing the Saudis – even if we know they're guilty!'

'No, you can't,' Jimmy agreed. 'You'll just have to pretend. It's like being married and cheating: you know, she knows, but no one says anything for the sake of the kids.'

A few smiles broke out.

'May I ask,' the French President began, 'how many terms Mister Chase will serve?'

Chase raised his eyebrows at the French President. Jimmy said, hiding a grin, 'He was only ever supposed to serve one short - and very painful - term. But, since the good President has agreed to co-operate with me, he may just go on to be the most successful president in history.'

‘Is that not interference in domestic matters?’ the French asked.

‘If it saves the planet, I don’t care. I would not normally get involved in domestic policy or party politics unless it’s necessary. And it’s necessary that America is on board for the next four years - there are some difficult problems ahead.’

‘The Germans keep asking about you,’ the French put in, the British Prime Minister seconding that.

‘I will meet with them soon. Who ... would like the credit for being seen to persuade me?’

The British Prime Minister graciously gestured towards the French, making the Americans smile.

‘Are you as short of money as the media says?’ Ben Ares asked.

‘Yes, but I have a good salary. The hole will fill in quickly enough. OK, next problem. House prices are rising, but are being kept in check to some degree, and China has tightened up its loan policy. May we ask if the Americans are tightening mortgage rules?’

‘It’s on my desk,’ Chase said defensively. ‘I just got into the White House, give me time to check the mail.’

‘You have two years,’ Jimmy informed him. ‘Time enough to open the mail, and avoid a crisis.’ Facing the French team, Jimmy said, ‘In years to come, when certain European countries struggle, large American banks will do a good job of making a lot of money by trashing Portugal, Spain and Greece. Unless steps are taken, those countries will leave the Euro.’

The French were shocked. ‘Leave the Euro? Pah!’

‘Perhaps, all of those here could take steps to rein-in large banks, and their activities. Unless altered, at one future date two large American banks fold ... and take the American economy with them.’ He faced Chase. ‘You should get the CIA to run a scenario: the banks will do more damage than any enemy attack could. And whilst we’re on America, and acknowledging that the incumbent has not been in the hot seat long, not enough is being done to strengthen the Mexican border or to repatriate illegal immigrants. It’s a disaster waiting to happen.’

‘That’s on my desk as well,’ Chase admitted.

I said to Chase, ‘And don’t forget your promise to visit Tanzania. It’ll keep the Saudis happy.’

‘I’ll be visiting Africa,’ Chase told us, making it sound like a threat. ‘Not least because I’d like to see American companies in the Congo.’

‘We’re ready when you are,’ Jimmy told him.

‘Got a new road from Kinshasa,’ I put in. ‘It only takes a week by bus.’

‘We’ll fly direct to Silo International Airport,’ Chase said with a smile.

Jimmy said, ‘I’ll be running direct flights from New York soon. Tourist flights, subsidised a bit.’

‘I will be holidaying there soon,’ the Russian President informed us. ‘Is the volcano quiet?’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy said with a smile. ‘Very quiet now. But I’m afraid you’ll have to put up with some German tourists.’

‘And if African GDP develops? Then what?’ Chase asked.

‘Then you all get to sell goods to African consumers,’ Jimmy explained. ‘After 2020 it’s a very important marketplace for you all.’

‘That on track?’ Chase asked.

‘More than on track, we’ve accelerated our plans. What of Liberia?’

‘Stable enough, from my briefings,’ Chase stated. ‘That small army is coming along as well. Some three thousand young men in it. First oil rig offshore as well.’

‘Well, let’s hope that the oil revenue benefits the people – and makes consumers out of them.’

‘If it doesn’t, then I’m sure I’ll get a nudge from you,’ Chase noted.

‘Indeed you will,’ Jimmy said with a dangerous smile. ‘Now, Guinea, West Africa. As you know, a tinpot dictator has taken over, a former army officer. I would like all of the nations here to try and pass a UN resolution that suggests he is not a legitimate leader, and that the African Union – and its armies – should remove him and hold free and fair elections.’

The various leaders exchanged looks.

Chase said, ‘By *armies* – you mean *your armies*.’

‘Indeed. But more than that, it would set a precedent in Africa, one whereby dictators could be selectively removed.’

‘They’re all crooked!’ Chase quipped. ‘Where would you end?’

‘We can’t stop African leaders from being crooked, but we can remove the worst of them and develop their countries. Remember: oil and consumers.’

I said, ‘Guinea is a small country. If a couple of thousand Rifles turn up they’ll run away!’

Jimmy slowly clapped, a message to the others, who all collectively realised at the same time. They made notes and promised a UN resolution.

Jimmy fielded questions for half an hour more and we wrapped it up, various groups holding meetings about trade and international relations. The RF teams met up in a hotel function room, bigger than the Red Room at our club, and we mingled, drinking and chatting till the small hours.

Back in my hotel I let out a sigh. ‘God, if I never shake anyone’s hand again it’ll be too damn soon.’

‘This is the last function,’ Helen said soothingly.

‘Where’s Shelly?’ I puzzled.

‘In with Jimmy; she had a dream about monsters, so he’s going to send them away for her.’

‘Monsters wouldn’t dare go near Jimmy.’ I took a moment. ‘You think she needs a shrink?’

‘Jimmy said that they’ll last a year or so. I used to get terrible nightmares, used to sleep in the wardrobe. It’s quite normal.’

‘She going to run to him instead of us?’ I said as I undressed.

‘Apparently yes, every time we shout at her. Good cop, bad cop. Anyway, parents can’t be friends; she’s lucky she has him. I was shipped off to boarding school.’ She took a moment. ‘I’ve never forgiven them for that.’

We eased into bed and cuddled up.

‘I was a good little boy, can’t really remember any problems at home.’

‘I left boarding school with *repressed anger* according to a psychiatrist I dated briefly. I was quite violent sometimes.’

‘Yeah, well according to Jimmy I’m not violent enough.’

Helen took a moment. ‘Could you order someone killed?’

‘I doubt it. I can order soldiers to shoot, and shoot back at people – I learnt that at Scorpion Base; I killed hundreds. But to send a spy off to top someone, someone with a bad future... well, I wouldn’t find it easy. And I wouldn’t have sent the Somalis to Afghanistan.’

‘And if Jimmy wasn’t around?’
‘I’d have to face it, and hope I could do it.’
At 5am I knocked quietly on Jimmy’s door. Inside, I found Shelly in the bed, Jimmy dressed and ready. ‘She OK?’ I whispered.
‘I told her a story, she went right off,’ he whispered.
‘Read her a story...?’
‘No, told her one ... about my past.’
‘And that didn’t give her more nightmares?’
He smiled, shaking his head.
‘Thanks anyway,’ I offered, deciding to leave Shelly slumbering in the giant bed.
‘To tell you truth, she helps me sleep.’
‘She does?’ I whispered.
‘When she cuddles up, and I tell her stories, it reminds me of... well, when I had a daughter of my own. A long ... long time ago.’
I knew who he was referring to. Well, I thought I did.

The long voyage

2035. I heard the submarine’s normally quiet manoeuvring planes clank. They were not loud, certainly nothing to worry about, but this damn sub was so quiet most of the time, with its nuclear power plant, that I often forgot we were under way and at a brisk thirty knots. Taking a breath, and issuing a sigh, I grabbed the keyboard, now hoarse from dictating, and deciding to record ‘The Long Voyage’. I had put down the story of Kandahar and felt that some aspects of Jimmy’s psyche needed explaining, so I thought back to Jimmy’s original life, that of 2012, and World War Three.

We were at the new house, not long after moving in, and I had not yet met Helen. Jimmy explained to me, ‘When the war got to the point that the Americans were thinking of re-taking the Gulf oil fields I got a bad feeling about where things were headed.

The economy was already fucked, the UK Government calling up Dad's Army – anyone who had served within the last hundred years – and the rest of us were being recruited into the Reserve Civil Defence Force, or Amateur Stasi as they soon became known.

‘Stasi?’ I queried.

‘Famous East German secret police. One day I was passing idiots in the street, the next they had a uniform and an armband and were telling me to *move along there*. And these idiots were seventeen-year-old ex-druggies with acne and gelled hair. Coming across people I knew was always a problem – had to hold my tongue because they had truncheons and guns, plus about six hours of intense training.

‘Several got caught raping girls at gunpoint, others caught looting, and they were all into the black market. It was all covered up of course; Government didn't want it in the papers. By then the “Paki Wars”, as they had been labelled by the lower elements, were mostly over bar the odd bomb or shooting. Half of the UK's Pakistanis were dead and the other half were in internment camps – along with the Indian population – plus anyone else unfortunate enough to have tan skin.’

‘How many died?’ I probed.

He made a face. ‘They said around a quarter million, mostly London and up north, where the worst of the fighting broke out. Not much trouble around South Wales, except the Somali population; they went off on one after the Americans bombed the hell out of what was left of Somalia. In fairness to the Yanks the Somalis did join The Brotherhood early on and attack south into Kenya.

‘The odd thing about the Pakistani uprising – predictable really – was that they spent a few months attacking Indians, then got bored of that and started attacking the police and army. Our police, poor sods, were trying to keep the two sides apart, just like in Northern Ireland, and ended up becoming the target of both sides.

‘For the first few months the UK economy was shaky, but holding in there. Then the Indians nuked Pakistan, and vice versa, and the world economy dropped like a stone, worse than the 1929 crash by a long way. So just as the tribal in-fighting here was heating up - the economy was shutting down, the

Asians being blamed for it by the tabloids. Outcome was inevitable: white folk without jobs went on the rampage to attack innocent Asians, usually getting the wrong race altogether and killing people from Singapore, or even South America. British skinheads never were that good with geography.' He turned his head and lifted his eyebrows.

'I was ... what ... forty eight, doing OK up to that point, working as freelance computer programmer. But when the economy *and* the security situation both blew up ... well, work dried up. No one was spending money, and half the middle classes were fucking off to Australia; anyone with money and sense was getting the hell out of Dodge City. Can't blame them, I would have done the same if I had had the money at the time. Bars were closing down; nightclubs, restaurants. No one was wasting money and everyone had bottled water and tinned food under the bed, pickaxe handle by the door.'

'Crime went up?' I knowingly asked.

His expression suggested that things were worse than he was describing. 'You barricaded your door at night and kept a knife in your pocket when you went out.'

He took a sip of a cooling tea. 'I sat doing fuck-all for a month, spent a lot of time with my mum. My dad died ... and that was hard; quick cremation and ashes handed back. *Here's your loved one, now fuck off quickly!* My brother lost his job as well at about the same time and my mum nagged me to move in with her. I knew that ... that if I moved in I would never move out again until she was dead. She was always dependant on me – when my father was old – and would be if I moved in.

'I did want to move in though, to save costs and to protect her. She had already suffered two attempted break-ins in a month, barbed wire around the back garden after that.' He sighed. 'And that was the start of the decline, here in the UK. I watched the news all day, sod all else to do, and I could see what was happening here ... and in the war. We'd already suffered months of news about the Asian rioting, people were pretty miserable. So I joined up.'

'Joined up?' I queried. 'What ... the Army?'

He nodded. 'Told them I was good with first aid and got assigned straight away to a Cardiff unit as medic; modest pay, plenty of black market goodies – which caused me a few

sleepless nights – but got me a pistol and rifle. When I went to Newport to visit my mum I made sure that I was in uniform, and armed, and stared hard at the local kids to let them know what would happen if they tried to break into my mum's place again. Even pointed my rifle at a few. Stuff like that ... no one would have given a shit if I had even shot one of them.

'I spent a year with that unit, trying hard not to be sent to the front – which for the Brits was Turkey by then. The Brotherhood took six months to organise themselves amongst the refugee camps around Basra, another six months to go on the rampage. I guess ... I guess you could say that ... *a year and a half* after the war between India and Pakistan we knew that *we* were at war - properly at war. The one good thing the rioting had achieved was to call up and train all the reserves. When Turkey became the front line the UK was already under de-facto martial law and mobilised, more so than other countries in Europe.'

He creased a cheek sarcastically. 'And we had the good old English Channel, which has been protecting us Limeys for hundreds of years.'

'How did that help?' I asked with a confused look.

'Suicide bombers got caught mostly trying to cross the Channel, ending up blowing themselves up amongst French police, poor sods. Calais police lost five hundred men in six months.'

'Why didn't you want to go and fight in Turkey?' I delicately probed. 'You went to Canada to join up.'

'Two very different sets of situations. First, I hated what the UK had become - the people, and just wanted to get away. It's not easy to understand, but think of it this way. I felt, along with everyone else, that the UK was screwed, along with Europe and the rest of the world. It was ... a lack of hope for the future that turned your stomach.'

'First the Pakistan-Indian war, then the rioting, then the economy and martial law, now the Brotherhood rampaging across the Middle East and setting off bombs all over the place, all over Europe and some in the UK. And things that I saw done by the Amateur Stasi ... well, I shot dead two of them without getting caught.'

'Jesus,' I blew out. 'How bad had things got?'

He gave me a look. Turning away he said, ‘Some of the stuff you could ignore, like a body search of teenage girls queuing for food. Other stuff, like rape and murder, you had to grin and bear it. Hardly anyone got prosecuted, not from within our ranks. I always played along, smiled and nodded when the dickheads boasted about what they had done, then dealt with them as best I could later. I was a good shot, a marksman, and I killed a guy on guard duty from five hundred yards. No one would have believed that it had been me since I was such a helpful fucker to everyone. And I was important too; everyone wanted the best medic when they went out on patrol or behind the lines in a riot.

‘So I hated the people ... ended up hating the cause, my own side and what we had become. To go and fight and die in Turkey would be to fight for the very same scumbags I was killing back here. One day ... one day an old guy in my unit said to me *you can't put the egg back together once it's broken*. He was referring to society, here in the UK, but also to the war and the Middle East. Then he blew his own brains out.

‘I knew what he meant ... and I felt the same way. I felt that I was washing the deck of the Titanic as it sank: *what the hell for?* Where was our future? Where was the hope? And everyone hated the politicians here; no one had any hope that they'd fix things. Nightly news was always about a *widening war* and *tougher times ahead*. Shit, they were tough enough already. Suicides were fifty a day in Cardiff. Old people died in their homes and no one noticed for months.

‘You know, I thought about suicide a lot during those times. Life was cheap, and no one would have noticed my absence except for my mum. She spent her days sobbing, and hoping that she'd die quietly in her sleep. I just couldn't take any more. One day I came across an old friend, a solicitor in his sixties – we used to go sailing together. He told me that he was taking his boat out in a few days and sailing down to the Cape Verde Islands, where he would end his days on a deserted island eating coconuts.’

He faced me and smiled. ‘And you know how I feel about deserted islands. I went round to see my mum, but I didn't have the heart to tell her I was going. I used up all my favours and got as much black market food as I could, such as tins of meat, and

gave them to her. I gave her an old pistol, unloaded, and told her to wave it toward burglars.'

He heaved an almighty sigh. 'Driving away that day was the hardest thing I've ever done. I left a poor, elderly ... defenceless woman to an uncertain fate. I left my mother behind.

'There was no way I could have got her onto the boat, or that she'd have survived such a journey. I drove to where the solicitor, Nigel, was living and told him I wanted to join him. He was delighted, since you need two people to sail a boat, even a small one; if you fall sleep you can run aground or go around in circles. He also knew I could probably pull a few strings and get us some kit, which I did. Day we were due to sail off I robbed several people at gunpoint, not giving a shit about getting caught, and pilfered a few weapons and rations from the army. We were well stocked.

'But trying to leave the lock gates the operators told us we had to register the journey with the police and wait for them to check us out. I had been hiding away in the galley in uniform, not wanting anyone to see me. I jumped up, up the ladder and into the control room. I stuck a pistol in the neck of the operator and told him that I was popping over to Southern Ireland for some black market stuff ... and that if he talked I'd burn him alive. Since it was quite plausible, unfortunately, about the nature of the trip, he let us out.

'I remember ... as the land started to fade in the distance the clouds broke and a shaft of light hit the area around the boat, bright like a summer's day. It was ... like being re-born. I told Nigel how bad I felt about leaving my mum behind, and he was understanding, but we both had a uncontrollable urge to get away from the UK.'

He faced me and made eye contact. 'That was the start of a nine month voyage. Shit, if I'd known at the start ... I may have had second thoughts about it. And I would have definitely had second thoughts if I had known about his snoring, the cramped beds and his damn cooking!'

We both chuckled.

'Is that the guy I met?' I asked.

Jimmy nodded. 'In Cardiff Bay. Crazy old bastard, but a great zest for life. He lifted my spirits on more than one occasion. And

I saved his life two dozen times as we sailed down to Tenerife - he fell overboard almost every day!’

‘Tenerife?’ I queried.

‘On the way to Cape Verde, needed to stop for supplies and fresh water. The weather was good; we were lucky. Very lucky. Bay of Biscay is a bitch at the best of times, and we crossed it in October! North of Tenerife we were becalmed for a few days, so caught up on some sunbathing, then arrived at night. I knew exactly the layout of the island and the location of the marina where Gareth had his boat: Solaner.’

‘*Our* Gareth, yeah?’ I suggested, meaning our IT manager.

Jimmy nodded. ‘He had divorced the missus and settled in Tenerife, living off his savings. Got his Yachtmaster certificate just as the troubles started. Of course, tourism down there died a death quickly, but he stayed. Sold his apartment and lived on his boat, along with a shit load of other Brits and Europeans getting away from it all. Frigging marina was packed. We motored slowly along with a torch looking at the names on the backs of the boats in their moorings and found his quickly. I stepped over and tied off as he came on deck, scared the crap out of him. He was, to say the least, completely fucking stunned to see me. And he had met Nigel before.

‘We broke open the booze we’d brought down with us and Gareth invited some of the other boat crews that he knew ... and we had a bit of a party, first time in probably two years that I had had a drink and a laugh.

‘The journey down had been both tough, but also a joy. I had to *learn the ropes* ... literally. I got seasick a lot, but just about got my sea legs when we neared the Canaries.’ He raised a pointed finger. ‘And we discovered how important sauces are on food. Day after day of corned beef is a drag if there’s nothing to put on it. And fish, cooked away which way you can think off, still tastes like fish.

‘Approaching Tenerife held its own risks. I was, after all, a deserter of sorts and there could have been NATO ships patrolling. As it turned out the population of Tenerife were up in arms because of the influx of Muslim refugees, coupled with mainland Spain abandoning them to secure the Straights of Gibraltar. By time we reached the sunny volcanic isle The Brotherhood had blown up most of the oil wells in the Middle

East. If the economy had not already been fucked it sure was now. Something like eighty percent of the world's oil supply had been cut off in just about two months.

‘Anyway, next morning we got a shock. Well, bad timing really. The local cops came along and said that all non-residents would have to leave within a week or be arrested. *And ...* that their boats would be impounded. Brits didn't like that, but what can you do? What we didn't fully appreciate at the time ... was how bleeding lucky we were. We were on boats, catching fish and buying cheap fruit off the locals – who were even poorer than we were by this time. What we also didn't know was that the Americans had put together an armada to secure the Saudi oil fields, something they're obliged to do by treaty, and now that armada of two hundred ships was about to enter the Arabian Gulf to invade the oil fields.

‘The Chinese and Russians had already warned against the Americans taking control of the oil fields, the Chinese firmly believing that they'd get no pigging oil – which was probably true.

‘Odd thing was ... what was going on around the Middle East ... was that the various governments were fighting hard to battle the growing Brotherhood. Apart from Somalia, and maybe Sudan, no other country was actively supporting the Brotherhood. And there was talk of Pakistani nukes ending up in the hands of the Brotherhood. It was one big powder keg waiting for a trigger. And those next four or five days were the worst the planet had seen so far as we listened in by radio.

‘On day one the Brotherhood had been superb in their planning and audacity. They sailed two cargo ships stuffed full of suicide bombers into the Russian naval base in Sebastopol in the Crimea and overran it quickly, literally within hours. They killed most of the Russian sailors and seized at least ten large destroyers. The West wanted to know if they were nuclear armed but the Russians wouldn't tell them. Next day a nuke goes off in Chechnya, Southern Russia, destroying a large Russian base. Everyone suspected it was a Pakistani nuke. Now everyone is *real* scared because they're sure that the Brotherhood has nukes, at least a couple. Israelis can't nuke anyone because the various Arab governments are on their side - fighting for their own survival.

‘So the Russians fire a nuke at Southern Pakistan – stupid thing to do really - but they had to show their people that they were fighting back, and there was nowhere else to hit. All they did was roast a lot of Red Cross workers. Meanwhile, the Yanks nuke the Russian surface fleet, now in the hands of The Brotherhood.

‘Jesus,’ I blew out.

‘Russians can’t do much because they’ve already threatened to do the very same thing if they can’t get back control of their ships. Fair to say that they were pissed at the Yanks. And the Chinese are threatening the Yanks about the oil, and sat listening to it on the radio we all expected the worst. A missile is fired – the next day – from Iran towards Oman, presumably towards the gathering US fleet; just a conventional long-range missile. No one believes that the Iranians have lost control of their missile bases and so Israel acts first and nukes Tehran, plus other principle cities and military sites, and their nuclear reactors. Russians and Chinese are not happy, *very* ... not happy. How are the Chinese going to get oil from Iran now?

‘Another conventional missile hits Israel this time, a lot of damage in downtown Tel Aviv. The Israelis had tracked the launch and fired another nuke into Iran. That causes all other Arab states to declare war on Israel – if only in name – since there was fuck-all they could actually do.

‘Anyway, on the last day another nuke goes off in Southern Russia, so the Russians fire a salvo at Pakistan again, just as the US fleet is steaming through the Straights. At the same time, more or less, several aircraft – it was later determined – not missiles, fly towards the fleet at low level and detonate several nukes close in to the fleet, roasting their chestnuts. Yanks think it was the Russians and go all out – full nuclear attack against Russian and China at the same time whilst Israel destroys every Middle East capital. In, what, the space of an hour ... something like a hundred million people die, more dying later from their burns. And me? I’m sat on a boat, getting a tan, eating fruit and fish...’ He took a reflective moment.

‘What happened to the boats? With the Tenerife police?’

‘Fair to say that the local coppers were just as despondent as us lot listening to it on the radio. The weekend deadline came and they didn’t move us on, but came back a few days later and

issued the same warning. Problem was, Gareth was planning on sailing back to the UK to see if his family was still alive. He took it hard, as you could image; three lads in their twenties and a couple of grandchildren. He figured he'd sail up the Bristol Channel, up the River Usk when the tide was right, moor up near the town bridge and walk to his old house – just a couple hundred yards from that bridge. Not a bad plan, and something I always regretted.'

'What?' I puzzled.

'That I talked him out of it. One of the larger boats had a short-wave radio geared up to a generator and we listened in to boat traffic around the UK, and people in West Wales and Cornwall who had radios. Cardiff had been nuked at least once, that was certain, but Newport was twelve miles away and people there could certainly still be alive. Thing about a nuke, is that it just destroys an area about a mile around. To destroy somewhere like London with a nuke you'd need ten or twenty of them. You know, it was only years later I found out that a stray nuke had hit Newport directly, killing everyone we knew in an instant. Back then I didn't know for sure.'

'He would have found no one alive...' I nudged.

'That's true, but he should have – at least – tried. By sailing off with us he died inside ... and felt like a coward. Which was how most of us felt ... if we were honest. Surviving World War Three has its own pain to bear in your soul ... and in your every waking moment: you're alive, they're all dead. Hell of a feeling.'

'I would have been working in London,' I mused. 'Probably would have been quick.'

Jimmy focused on me, a strange look, almost sad. 'You stayed with your family in London, even knowing what would happen. *You* ... could not do what I did the first time around.' He held his gaze on me. 'Try and image this: you're in Cornwall when London is nuked. What do you do? Try and get there, or get on a boat and fuck off?'

We stared at each other for a few seconds before I turned away.

'I ... I couldn't leave without knowing if they were alive or not,' I finally stated.

‘And that thing you’re feeling in your stomach right now ... that’s how I felt for the first hundred years. Give it some careful thought, because it’s a choice you may have to make again.’

Jimmy took a toilet break and we grabbed two pints of beer from the kitchen. Continuing, he said, ‘So we had a difficult choice to make, made easier by the local police wanting to get rid of us. Nigel was just about to continue his journey towards Cape Verde, so he was in no quandary at all. He was as upset as everyone else about what had happened, but was also resolute that he’d end his days on a small island, feet in the water and bum in the sand. Actually, he cheered us up with his determination.

‘I spent a lot of time with Gareth, trying to talk him out of what we all considered was a suicide trip. If he did make it back to the UK he would have to find his family, whilst hoping no one stole his conveniently parked boat, getting them and extra supplies on board and setting off again on another perilous journey. And then there was the question of his ex-wife. Surely his lads would not want to leave her behind, but even he was in two minds about taking her along.

‘And where would they go? They couldn’t come back down to Tenerife. So where? Caribbean? Would they be anymore welcome than Tenerife? Across to Canada? Around to Australia to his relatives there – a four-month voyage on limited supplies and a rather cosy boat? He could see it was futile and eventually agreed to sail south with us, the more boats the better in case of problems. I would sail with him. I thanked Nigel, told him that Gareth and myself might try for Australia and his family there.’

‘How did Nigel take it?’

‘Not a problem at all. Another boat had too many people and one stowed with Nigel. Perfect. So we set sail, about six boats at the same time, all roughly heading towards Cape Verde – two weeks due south in reasonable weather. Even had something of an ... air of optimism. Gareth was a pain to start with, telling me how to manage *his* boat, what not to do, etc. In fairness, it was his home, not just a boat. Sharing was not something he had done for a while and there was a bit of an atmosphere. Not so much between us, but about what had happened, his family, the world; two miserable bastards in a tin can getting by on four hour sleep rotations.

‘I spent a lot of time fishing, caught more than enough to eat. Even caught some tuna as we sailed along, most days not more than a handful of words spoken. One time we came close to an African refugee boat – guess they hadn’t heard about Europe going up in smoke. It looked like they were armed, but so was I, and I made a point of standing on deck with my rifle – UK Army issue no less! They looked us over and fucked off.

‘We kept in radio contact with the other boats and Nigel, losing sight sometimes. Then, on the fifth day, we got a garbled radio message, which I thought was Nigel’s voice. We couldn’t raise him and so turned toward his last known position. It took about an hour to get close enough to check his boat with the binoculars – UK Army issue again. There was no one on deck, which was unusual, and the twenty minutes it took us to close the distance didn’t reveal any movement. We radioed the other boats and they came in closer.

‘Boarding Nigel’s boat we found no one aboard, which shocked us. We radioed the other boats and, with me on Nigel’s boat, we backtracked the course he had taken to see if we could spot them in the water. Two hours of searching revealed nothing before sundown, after which we’d have no chance of finding him, the wind picking up. Through the night we could have gone right past him without seeing him. We did search a while into the night, wondering if he had his lifejacket on with a flashing water-light. They’re powered by contact with seawater, but only good for eight hours.

‘We didn’t find him or the other crewman ... and that lowered our spirits even more. We discussed sailing on with two boats, but figured one was safer with alternate people on watch.’

‘You abandoned his boat?’ I questioned.

‘No, one of the other boats came in and they put two crew on it, leaving two on the original. And off we sailed again. Ten days later we stopped at a small island at the north end of Cape Verde, finding it deserted, but with a jetty for mooring and some fruit trees and coconut trees. It was good to run ashore and we stretched our legs. I remember it rained like hell that first night, which was great -’

‘Why?’

‘Fresh water. We could see the storm clouds and so hung up a spare sail and collected enough water for all four boats to be

fully stocked.’ He took a moment to think back, and to reflect. ‘Nigel would have loved it.’ He faced me. ‘You see, simple decisions you take – left or right, forwards or backwards – they all have consequences.’

‘Yours more than most,’ I pointed out.

He nodded before sipping his beer. ‘So we sailed off after a few days, most boats heading for the main islands whilst me and Gareth decided to avoid people. We figured they’d be just as hungry as us, and not so happy to share.

‘We stopped at a few islands, every other day or so, but only if we thought they were unoccupied. One time we did find someone living there, a native, but the guys rusting machete was out trumped by my SA81 rifle. We made friends and showed him that we meant him no harm, and he cooked us a chicken, a relief after so much fish. He asked for a lift to the next island, since he was running out food and someone had nicked his canoe.

Jimmy smiled as he thought back. ‘Funny the things you remember. The fella jumped off a half mile from shore and swam in to the next island, bigger than the one he had been on. We managed to find fruit on many of the islands, and I shot two pigs on the last island before the end of the Cape Verde chain. Bacon for breakfast!

‘Sailing on, we figured we’d rather die than land on the wrong stretch of African shore, so we checked the supplies and headed towards the Cape. Fish kept us going, and we got rain water off the sails, but still needed to stop near Namibia – couldn’t tell you where exactly. I went ashore as Gareth kept the boat at full sail – just in case. I found a small cow, calf I guess you’d call it, and shot the damn thing. Just about lugged it to the dinghy, but the damn thing almost sank me. Bloody animal came back to life and started struggling, so I had to shoot it again at point blank range, right in the head. Still, it fed us well for many days, and we dried some meat and crudely salted it.

‘We did the same thing in sight of Table Mountain, South Africa, a green and lush area. I went ashore again, walked about for an hour and found an abandoned house with a decent vegetable patch. I pilfered as much as I could carry and went back a second time. Christ, we had carrots, green beans and potatoes that night! Bloody luxury! The things we take for

granted today ... God, you have no idea what some people go through.

‘Rounding the Cape, the wind was with us and we had an easy passage, but found an upturned yacht. We didn’t stop to investigate and tried to stay just out of sight of land. There would have been a time when we would have passed dozens of ships, but we saw nothing other than sail boats in the distance.’

‘No pigging oil, that’s why!’ I suggested.

‘And no one paying the crews to move their cargos. Whole damn world came to a grinding halt.’

He sipped his beer. ‘Beyond the Cape we hit a storm and almost capsized. That was a wake up call; we’d been lucky up to then. Solaner was a good boat, but not built for open ocean storm; we had to adjust the ballast position a few times to stabilise her. We sailed up the west of Madagascar and towards the lovely Seychelles – even more lovely with no pigging tourists cluttering up the place. Took us just over two weeks from the Cape, good going. Supplies were replenished in the usual way; me, my rifle, and my pilfering ways. North end of Madagascar I shot a calf and some baby goats.’

‘You’re kidding?’

He shot me a look. ‘Anyway, we had to go that route because we didn’t have the supplies to go straight across to Western Australia – four weeks on a bad day. Besides, Gareth’s brother lived in Darwin, *up the top end* as the Aussies say. Up to this point we only had ourselves for company plus the odd bit of radio chatter. But there was a lucky break and an odd few days ahead.

‘We had spotted this island – which we figured was part of the Seychelles - and had checked it out from a distance, finding a big hotel at the top of a nice bay. No people. So we sailed right around the island, taking a whole day of it. No signs of life. Next morning we docked at dawn, nice deepwater jetty, and I ran ashore with my rifle and pistol. I searched the hotel, empty, some nearby chalets on the beach, again empty, then went back to the boat. I told Gareth to wait out at sea and I went inland and up a small hill, a bleeding banana plantation of all things! From the top I could see all around – no ships and no signs of life. But I spotted what looked like a small village, or houses for the hotel staff. I snuck down, rifle prone, and checked it out. There was no

one about, but enough farm animals running around to feed a small army. I circled around the long way back and checked again, still finding nothing.

‘I signalled the boat back in and we took it in turns to sit on the hill with binoculars as we stocked up. Gareth caught chickens with his bare hands and throttled them, carrying them back past me; first time I had seen him really smile for a while. Then he trudged past with a cone of bananas as big as he was, finally a screaming piglet. ‘*Bacon for breakfast!*’ he screamed.

‘When it was his turn to sit on the hill I went back into the hotel. Apart from clean sheets – which I pinched – there was not much else of use for long sea voyages. A paraffin lamp and spare paraffin seemed useful, so I left that on the dock next to the boat, the piglet screaming from inside the boat.

‘Then I tried the kitchens, not finding much of use, before noticing a trap door. I lifted it, half expecting to find it full of dead bodies, but found the *real* kitchen storeroom. Booze, tinned food, champagne, powdered milk and teabags and jars of coffee – there was enough to reach Australia. I ran up to the hill, champagne bottle in hand and poured it over him. We checked the horizon, any other boat being at least three hours sailing time away, and raided the pantry. Poor old Solaner was weighed down with all the stuff we took. And we most definitely did not forget the sauces, many of which we’d never heard of.

‘We then had a lengthy debate about going straight for Australia, since we now had the supplies. That night we slept on the hill, four hourly rotations with hotel blankets wrapped around us. What you have to keep in mind is that we had been on two or four-hour rotations on watch for almost three months. When you’re sailing you don’t want to take the risk of pirates, especially not in the waters we were sailing through. So we were both permanently exhausted. You get used to it, but it’s still not eight hours of good kip.

‘When the sun came up we again diligently checked the horizon, and I allowed Gareth four hours sleep in one of the chalets. Actually, I gave him six hours because I wanted him to rest. When awake, he continued to check supplies, throwing out old stuff and loading more on board. And we killed and cooked as much as we could, trying to put some weight back on; we were both like skeletons after months at sea. He let me get seven

hours kip after I downed a bottle of champagne, then we figured we'd sail off, possibly stopping for more supplies around Indonesia if we needed to.

'But we knew that Indonesia was both densely populated *and* Muslim, so we charted a course well south of it. We set sail and had gone no more than ten miles when we spotted a sail on a course almost parallel to ours. It was a fast sailboat, a sporting racer, so we called it up on the radio. Turned out they were Germans who spoke reasonable English. They were heading towards Sri Lanka to re-supply, so we told them about the island and all the supplies, for which they were excited like kids at Christmas. We hadn't seen or spoken to anyone since the Verde Isles so we turned around and they followed us back, only a few hours, and we docked again, some of our old junk still on the jetty.

'German fella was sixty odd years old and his two grown up daughters were thirty-eight and thirty-six. They were no lookers, no make-up and weather worn faces like us, but we partied like it was 1999.'

I could not help smiling widely.

Jimmy continued, 'First, it was just great to see another human being and to have a chat, especially a fellow sailor to talk about boats. And the Germans? Jesus, they were so happy with the supplies they could not stop hugging us. We set-up a rota system on the hill - blanket, bottled water and binoculars - and then hit the booze. I was so pissed that first night I couldn't remember which girl I had shagged, not that it mattered, and they didn't care; we ended up shagging both of them in turns.

'We killed the fatted calf, downed five hundred quid champagne and ate like it was going out of fashion. We even swam and sunbathed, but the Germans did get their towels on the sun beds first.'

I laughed out loud at that.

'For a brief moment, as I came out of the surf one day, I saw them all lying on their sun beds and it could have been today. It was as if the war had never happened.'

'Where'd they come from?'

'Kenya ... of all places. They had hung around as long as they could, they had a farm and were pretty well off, but then the troubles started and the Somalis went on the rampage. They fled

to a tourist island, to their boat, but even that was soon under threat. They had sailed down towards the Cape before figuring that Australia was probably the best bet.

‘I tell you, when it was time to set sail we hugged each other and shed a tear like old friends. They were well stocked up, so were we, but their tub was a good ten knots faster than ours – no way we could have sailed together. They had the supplies to get to Australia’s west coast – just – and so did we. So they set off and literally ... sailed off into the sunset.’

‘Did you ever see them again?’ I wondered.

‘You’ll meet them in ... about eighteen months,’ he said with a grin.

I shook my head. ‘Weird ... time travel. And you know *exactly* when you’re going to bump into someone.’

‘It can be a source of amusement, making people feel really bad for not knowing you when you know everything about them.’

‘But ... they haven’t met you yet?’

‘Exactly. Great for winding people up! Consider your future wife -’

‘My what?’ I whispered as I sat upright.

‘What ... you didn’t think you’d ever marry?’

‘Well ... er ... yes, I suppose,’ I fumbled with. ‘You... you know who?’

‘Of course I know who, dummy!’

‘Don’t tell me. No, wait ... er ... should you tell me, you know, in case I ... you know ... react the wrong way?’

‘You’ll meet her in ... oh, couple of years time. So between now and then not too much *putting it about*.’

‘Is there ... you know ... a chance that I won’t meet her?’

‘No. None.’

‘How can you be so sure? She might not go into a particular club on a particular night,’ I pressed, not thinking too logically.

Jimmy grinned widely. ‘We’ll talk about your future wife, and two beautiful daughters, another time.’

‘Two ... two daughters?’ I stumbled with.

‘Yes, no football with the boys for you.’

I took a big gulp of my beer. ‘Bloody hell,’ I let out as I stared into my glass.

‘Don’t worry - you’ll do fine. And you’ll dump the two girls on me when you want to swan off ... which is just fine. I’m happy to baby sit your two girls anytime.’

‘We’re talking about them as if they’re actually here. So ... my wife –’

‘No. Now, shut up about her.’

‘Blonde, big tits?’ I toyed.

‘Blonde, reasonable tits, fit, very intelligent, drop dead gorgeous.’

I smiled the smile of a show-off. ‘Way-hey.’

After a quick snack Jimmy continued, ‘We sailed towards Australia and it wasn’t too bad, just a few nasty storms. Reaching the coastal waters of Australia was a relief, but also a let down as we were intercepted by the Australian Navy, who told us to *fuck off back to where we came from*.’

‘They wouldn’t let you in?’ I wondered.

‘No, place was already full of ex-pats with no jobs and no food. Many were leaving for South America, which had come off best and completely intact. The economies of South America had suffered, but they had bounced back and were trading amongst themselves quite nicely; oil from Venezuela, food from Brazil and machinery from Argentina. They did well, and later on fended off The Brotherhood. Mexico collapsed into civil war and strife, so too a few others, but overall the South Americas did well. It’s fair to say that Brazil became the world’s super-power. We told the Aussie sailors we had family here and they didn’t care – so had everyone else. Gareth even told them we had criminal records – if it would help.’

‘So what did you?’ I asked with a grin.

‘We sailed around the north and stopped at a few islands near Bali, finding large ex-pat boat communities. They filled us in on what had been happening around the world, and that’s where I learnt about the NATO resistance in Canada. Lots of Brits had sailed away from the UK after the nukes landed, most heading for Canada. UK Navy and Air Force headed that way as well, forces from around the world, and the Canadians seemed happy enough to have armed men on their soil. As for the boat refugees ... they gave them small plots of land, a spade and some seeds, and told them to get on with it. The refugees didn’t get state aid,

but land was a-plenty. The American Army, what was left, was just east of the Canadian Rockies, but Vancouver and Seattle were the headquarters - big naval presence.

‘You see, the war with the Brotherhood was still underway, despite the nuclear exchange, and The Brotherhood were not sitting on their hands. The Israelis were in a bind – no America to back them up. *Their* economy reduce to zero in a flash and many Israelis left by boat for America, some to Canada. The Brotherhood, meanwhile, had ten thousand suicide bombers surrounding Israel’s borders. For every ten the Israel’s stopped, one got through and killed twenty soldiers or more. It was a war of attrition that the Israelis soon realised they couldn’t win – they were losing too many people.

‘So after a pleasant week around Bali – swapping stories and spare parts – we set sail towards the Pacific, not least because of local pirates ... and we saw no future in that area. We sailed with two other boats of similar speed for about two weeks then came across a decent island community of all sorts; Brits, Americans, Europeans. We looked for the Germans and heard that they’d passed through; it cheered us to know that they were still alive.

‘This island, part of the Solomon chain, was deserted but for a handful of locals and was big enough to grow crops and raise livestock. There must have been thirty boats and their crews there, some transient, some staying permanently and setting down roots. All the boat crews liked each other – something about sailors. If you were capable of sailing around the world you were not an arsehole or troublemaker.

‘As in Bali, we swapped stories and spare parts, did a little fishing, helped dig some fields for our supper. Even considered stopping there, but news about Indonesian Brothers attacking The Philippines was a shock – we were not too far away. So a bunch of us, the transients, set sail for islands that were further east, well into the Pacific, and towards the Marshall Islands.

‘It was a beautiful place, but not so much on the cultivatable land, and all the good land was occupied. Got some lukewarm welcomes, some downright hostile. Shot one local who came at us. We found plenty of small deserted islands, caught plenty of fish, found coconuts and some animals left behind.’

‘Not enough to sustain a community,’ I figured.

Jimmy shook his head. ‘That was when I persuaded Garth to head for Canada – and some semblance of a western style of life; cities, comfortable beds ... and snow in winter sounded good. We knew that Hawaii had been well nuked by the Chinese, and that the survivors were definitely not friendly, so decided to skirt around the Hawaiian Islands and head for California.

‘We were dab hands by this time and knew exactly what we ate and drank each day. We had the supplies to reach the US coast – just – and would do a spot of fishing on the way. We knew that Kiribati was the last re-supply stop, and other sailors had told us they were friendly enough – they gave us a hand-drawn map of where to land. So we set off with one other boat for Kiribati. It was slow going, not much wind, but relaxing enough. Caught a few sea birds and ate them, worked eight hour shifts instead of four and co-operated with the other boat. It was a good few weeks sail, good in that the conditions were suitable for sailing.

‘At the north end of Kiribati we went ashore on a deserted beach and stocked up on fresh water, fruit and bananas. We didn’t see any locals, but found a compound with chickens and pigs, so did the decent thing.’

‘Decent thing?’ I queried.

‘We left a note.’

‘A note?’

‘Saying *thank you*. Then we nicked all their livestock and sailed off.’

I laughed at that. Even after World War Three, in a life or death situation, there was always sarcasm.

Jimmy continued, ‘We set aside areas of the boat for various animals and gave them some food, killing one each day. What we didn’t eat we salted so that it would last and by then we had the technique down. We sliced the meat into strips, dried it in the heat of the day – lightly salted – then dried it out and packed it in salt. It lasted a few weeks or more and you got used to it. Back at the community they had improved our technique and supplied us with a shit load of rock salt.

‘So we set off north east, by-passing Hawaii – which I guess was due north – and hit a storm that was going our way. We lost contact with the other boat in the storm but joined back up a few days later by radio signal. Then we found the Marie Celeste.’

‘Marie Celeste?’ I repeated with a frown.

‘We found a big old cargo ship just drifting. We tried to contact it by radio, circled it a few times and then went aboard at the rear, its gangway down to the water. Not a soul on board.’

‘What did you find?’ I keenly asked.

‘Lots of stuff, but mostly no fucking good at all. Cars, for one.’

‘Cars?’

‘Yep. We opened these big containers and found cars inside. It was so odd to sit behind the wheel of a car again. The engines started and all. I reversed one onto the deck and we took it in turns driving around a small area, laughing like kids stealing their first set of wheels. Toyotas they were, left hand drive, automatics. We eventually smashed the car up – driving it into things. Laughed liked teenagers, we did.

‘First aid bay had lots a useful stuff, Morphine and Iodine, so we had that away. Found one body below decks; he hanged himself. Couldn’t tell what nationality, but he looked Asian. His head was still in the noose, his body below and well decayed.

‘We had long since run out of diesel, so tried some from the ship’s tanks and it worked great. We had two boats with full fuel tanks, useful in a storm when you take the sails down but try and keep on course. The porn magazines we had away. They weren’t in English, so we just looked at the pictures.

‘In the galley we found plenty of tinned food and powdered stuff, so had that away. We found some battery packs and so got some old MP3 players working; frigging Michael Jackson was all we had. With the wind dying we tied off the boats and stayed on board for two days, stuffing ourselves with the ship’s food. It was drifting with the wind in the right direction so we stayed and stretched our legs for two days.

‘We pinched some tools that could have been useful before opening more of the containers. There was a bunch of tractors, some seeds and fertilizer ... Jesus, if we could have started the ship and got it back to the community...’

He sighed. ‘Still, we tried to get the engine to work, but no joy. What the hell did we know about big cargo ships? Probably an electrical cut-off somewhere. Then, on the day we decided to set off again, we spotted a sail on the horizon. Ship we were on

was clearly visible five miles away so we radioed them with our boat radios.' He rubbed his face. 'It was a mistake.'

'They were hostile?'

'No, no, they were English.'

'English?'

'They were from Taunton, North Devon. They had sailed away day after the UK got hit.'

'Why was that a problem?' I delicately probed.

He forced a big breath. 'They had sailed away, across to the Caribbean, did a lot of island hopping like us, then headed south and around the Horn, making it through; no mean feat. They were an extended family; a mum and dad in their fifties, teenage lad, uncle and another lad, a cousin. Their boat was big enough, but still – frigging cosy! Don't know how they got the supplies to survive. So, they tied up and came aboard. I had my pistol stuffed down my shirt, but they were fine. Better than fine, it was like frigging Christmas and we got the food on, soon swapping stories of epic journeys. The problem was Gareth.'

'Gareth?'

'He was not ... homesick as such, not for the UK, since he'd left the UK and retired to Tenerife years earlier. No, the new family did what he had wanted to do, to grab his family and sail off. It upset him a lot, and it upset me – since we could not have known they were dead; this lot made it out, so why not *his* family?'

'They confirmed that Cardiff had been hit by a nuke, and that Newport was probably hit. Still, they were not sure. We stayed another two days and swapped stories and spare parts again. We told them where the community was and they liked the sound of it, not so much the sound of Canada and the military.'

'It was another round of big hugs and goodbyes. Not that many Brits made it out, so we were all instantly close. As we sailed away Garth was quiet for a whole three days. Thankfully, we came across a US warship. We had a long chat on the radio and they told us that many Brits were still alive in the hills and farmland – guess they meant rural areas – and that US Air Force flights went back and forth to Scotland all the time, also some of their naval vessels.'

'It gave us hope that maybe we'd get some news, or that we could fly over to the UK. It cheered up Gareth a bit. We

discussed going through the Panama Canal, but the Navy said it was closed. Going around the Horn would have taken months, and the Navy had told us that The Brotherhood had landed by boat in the UK and were rounding up and killing people. They also told us that The Brotherhood, from the North African states, had landed in Italy and Southern France and moved north. By time we could have sailed back the UK could have been overrun, and we'd be captured and shot.'

'What did you decide?'

'We continued towards California, aiming to hit land north of L.A. and getting more supplies. Took us almost four weeks and supplies were running down a bit. We passed a few more US naval vessels and even saw some aircraft, the first time since leaving Tenerife. We caught a good wind as we neared the coast and followed it north, trying to avoid the populated areas. We actually hit land near a town called Eureka, putting ashore in what looked like a beachfront hotel complex.

'I went ashore with my rifle and scouted the area as Gareth filled up water bottles from a stream cascading down rocks near the beach. The hotel was empty, but there were signs that someone had been living rough in it. I tried the electricity and phones, just to see if they worked. I kicked in the kitchen door and searched around, but someone else had already had the same idea long before. Place had been well raided.

'When I heard shots in the distance I went back to the boat and we set off, but with no extra supplies. A few hours later, five miles offshore, we passed another sailboat, this time an American and a local. We passed close by and had a long chat on the radio —'

'How did you keep the radio working without fresh batteries?' I asked in my ignorance.

'There's a small wind turbine on most boats, generating enough juice for the radio. Anyway, the news was not good. Basically, he told us that if we set foot ashore we'd be shot and eaten.'

'It was that bad?'

'A post apocalyptic wasteland ... complete with roaming gangs. Still, he said it was better the further north you went and he confirmed the stories about the army in Canada and Seattle. So we sailed north, Gareth getting more morbid by the day. We

sailed into a big estuary near Astoria, south of Seattle and North of Portland. We sailed under a big bridge that crossed the river and found a landing some five miles in, in need of supplies by this time.

‘By then I had made my decision, and I kind of knew what Gareth would do. When we docked I said that I was going on ahead on foot, that I had had enough of sailing and that I would steal a car and head north to Seattle, not a long drive. We sat down and talked about it, quite solemn and morbid. We both knew what the other was thinking. I said to him ... *you’re not coming, are you?* I took some supplies, my rifle and some cold weather clothes and stood on the dock as he sailed off.’

‘And you never saw him again,’ I stated.

Jimmy shook his head. ‘I’d like to think he made it ... somewhere. Back to the UK would have been suicide; one person on a boat. Getting around the Horn by himself would have been impossible.’ He took a reflective breath. ‘I felt as bad as had done when I left my mum behind; Gareth’s fate was my fault. He could have sailed back to the UK –’

‘His family were dead.’

Jimmy slowly nodded. ‘Still, he should have tried at least.’

‘Why?’

‘You have to do what you believe in, you have to follow your heart. There’s nothing worse in this life ... than being persuaded to do something, to sleepwalk into something that you don’t fully believe in. Even if you know it’s futile ... you still have to try.’

We both took a moment and I considered my own indecision over what I was being trained to do. Still, my decision was easy enough to make: help Jimmy or watch the world burn. It was not a difficult choice to make. But I could not even begin to comprehend what pain he had gone through, or how he managed to keep going.

Finally, Jimmy said, ‘I had sailed three quarters of the way around the world, and the journey was only just beginning. I walked for a mile or so and found a highway, which I decided to avoid. I walked parallel to it and saw plenty of pickup trucks with militia types in the back, armed with rifles. Finding an abandoned hut and some abandoned cars, I got some sleep, aiming to set off at night and not risk the roads in daylight. One

of the cars started, but was low on petrol, so I syphoned out petrol from three other cars, finding plenty – filling my tank.

‘At 2am I had seen no trucks for an hour and so set off – driving a left hand American car on the right, fumbling with all the controls. I finally figured out the lights and the wipers, got the parking brake by mistake a few times, then just got on with it. I drove due north and followed the signs for Seattle. I passed another car – and had my pistol ready – but they didn’t stop. At one point some lights came up behind me so I took a corner and floored it, losing the lights behind.

‘Dawn came up on a road flanked by tall pine trees, the one good thing about American highways being the long straight stretches; I could see anyone ahead of me. But it was all quiet and I was lucky, no one tried to shoot me, or eat me.

‘Then my heart leapt as I rounded a corner and found a long line of army trucks parked in a row on my side of the highway. A few soldiers with rifles were stood around and I slowed down. I opened the window and put a hand out, a friendly wave. I stopped at the first soldier and asked him where his C.O. was. He just shrugged and said the first truck. I motored slowly along, waving nicely to the troops and stopped ahead of the first truck, walking back. Their C.O., a captain, was taking a piss on the side of the road.

‘*Who the fuck are you?* he growled at me. *British Army*, I replied. *I just sailed around from England to join up.* Well, should have seen the look on his face. He told me all the Brits were based around Manson and he gave me some directions. He kindly gave me a green jacket and a sign to put on the dashboard, otherwise I’d risk being shot. I thanked him and set off, a right turn and I headed inland, more confident now, my rifle – which was British Army Issue – on my lap.

‘Must have gone an hour before coming off the highway and onto the smaller roads, soon finding a checkpoint of sorts with a teenager half asleep in a truck. He asked me who I was, so I tried the direct approach: *British Army from Manson, what the fuck’s it to you, sonny?* Did the trick, and I drove around him. I used the same technique twice more then got stopped by the US Army. I explained who I was, and what I had done, and they were amazed. They gave me some food and told me Manson was six

hundred miles away. Fucking Yanks, they could have told me that before. To them six hundred miles is nothing.

‘Anyway, they told me I could join up right there and asked me what I was good at. When I told them I was a medic they couldn’t do enough for me. The C.O. came out and said: *Medic? You’re hired, Limey fuck, whether you like it or not.* They gave me a uniform, boots were a bit tight, and a lame two-hour briefing, then shoved a medic armband on my arm and gave me a kitbag of first aid goodies. I was assigned to a doctor, a Major Boggs, who we called *Major Shits* – on account that dysentery was common – and I was allocated a room and a pass for meals. I kept the SA81 for a while, people thought it was cute and everyone instantly recognised me after that. Well, in little over twenty-four hours after leaving the boat I was in the US Army, green combats and boots, cap on my head.

‘My first posting was in a lumber mill, as the resident medic. I had a cosy cot in a room above some offices, warm enough, and I spent my days treating cuts – and a shit load of splinters! Those people, the workers, were all army, not civilian woodworkers, although there was some of the original staff around; most had to learn the job as they went. The mill cut up logs that were delivered to us, the wood used to make barrack rooms around the area.

‘We kept our weapons because you’d find the odd *crazy* wandering around, half starved and well armed. They’d shoot you for some food. If we saw them first we’d shoot them and bury them shallow, away from the mill. It was bit like *Dawn of the Dead*, the movie. You’d hear a shout, then see a half-starved crazy walking down the road. *Head shot!* People would shout.

‘The winter was hard, some people freezing to death, and wounds got infected. Drugs were limited, so I often drove miles to nag for supplies. In the spring I got a promotion to Sergeant, no stop off at Corporal, and moved to a steel mill some twenty miles away. They had a different set of injuries, many cuts and burns. And jumpers.’

‘Jumpers?’ I queried.

‘The molten steel pits were exposed every so often and, if someone was a bit fed up with the hard regime, they dived in head first.’

‘Jesus, what a way to go!’

‘Life was cheap, the regime hard. You slept cold and wet, fuck all to eat, long days of permanent cloud cover. But after my time as medic in the UK, and the hardships of the voyage, I was used to it. I slept in four-hour shifts, just like on the boat, and provided more or less twenty-four hour cover. I got noticed for having a good attitude, often seen shouting at people and encouraging them – which was rare – and transferred after two months to an army boot camp, looking after the new recruits. One day I was pronouncing the executed dead –’

My brow creased. ‘You what?’

‘People were executed all the time: stealing food, deserting, that sort of thing. I had to stand in for the doctor, observe the executions and then pronounce them dead. If they were still alive it was my job to put a round through their heads – which I did once.’

‘Jesus,’ I blew out. ‘I thought the ocean voyage was tough.’

‘Then one day I had a meeting with the C.O. about some incident where medical supplies had been nicked; drugs and stuff. We got off subject and I told him what I just told you about the voyage. He was fascinated about the boat communities, and I could tell that if he had the chance he’d be in the South Pacific and not here. He was a reservist that had been called up; not a happy-chappy at all.

‘Anyway, we became good friends and he treated me like an equal, not like a sergeant. I got better food, even had an input into some of the training plans and how things were run; I organised a first-aid training programme for the new recruits.

‘I finally got moved to Manson, other side of the Rockies, and acted as liaison between the US Army Medical Corps and the Commissioner for British and European Refugees. It basically meant helping the doctors assessing the sick and then nagging for drugs that were never available. One day I said to the Yanks that they were not getting the most out of the refugees and that I could do a better job of it – better than the guy holding the post, a former British Ambassador to Canada. So they made me Deputy Commissioner for British and European Refugees and, all of a sudden, I was a politician without realising it.

‘I did that job for two years, but found the guy above me a pain in the arse, *and* on the make. One day he went fishing and never came back. Bear ate him, I think.’

We exchanged looks. I figured he bumped the guy off.

Jimmy continued, 'So I was now *the man*. I carried a pistol, and when I found corruption I shot the bastard in the knee. People soon realised that someone with a limp was a former black marketer. The US commander applauded my efforts: no mercy. It may sound harsh, but conditions were harsh, you had to keep as many people as you could alive. So if someone was an arsehole, or just in your way, you shot him. I eventually had fifty thousand people to care for. Fortunately, the farm land around the area was good, the fishing good, the wild bison good—'

'Bison?'

'Around 2006 some rich guy will introduce a giant herd of them to the area.' He shrugged. 'He built the herd, so we ate them. And I organised everyone into groups based on skills. We had people specialising in fishing, farming, Bison hunting, horse taming – petrol ran low – and in each town and hamlet I had a sheriff and deputy. I modelled it on the old Wild West and it worked well. My predecessor was still firmly in twenty-first century, not 1850. And 1850s social modelling worked very well. I was given the Jewish refugees to look after, around five thousand of them, and ended up with a daughter –'

'You had a daughter?'

'No, dope, not a biological daughter. The leader of the Jews, Eli, I put in my office and his family in the hotel I lived at. He was sixty something and had a granddaughter with him, six years old, who I looked after when he wasn't around. He died of a heart attack a year later and I was left with the kid, Sarah. It was one of my better decisions, looking after her, because it gave me focus. Plus a lot of fun taking her fishing, teaching her horse riding.'

'How old was she when you travelled back?'

He took a moment. 'She died in childbirth when she was eighteen; she had got together with a young Jewish lad and fell pregnant. I wasn't unhappy, as her guardian, since we needed to rebuild the population. I took her death badly, although it did make my leaving that much easier. She died a year before I stepped into the time machine.'

He got up and walked off without another word, leaving me with my head spinning. All of a sudden I felt very, very tired and I went to my room to lie down.

Magestic

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www.geoffwolak-writing.com

Part 7

Back to work

The post-tsunami euphoria eventually died down, apart from the million requests for interviews, not least from the scientific community, and the governments of those countries that suffered frequent earthquakes. Crusty was packed off to the Maldives for a long holiday with his wife, and his four bodyguards.

Life at the house settled down and we caught up on the mundane, the company accounts and various projects, business problems and legal problems. Oddly enough, we were still being sued for issuing the warning. Since we intended giving many more warnings in the future we would have to practice defending our predictions.

I went right through the accounts for the two clubs and visited both, happy enough with their turnover. That was followed by a meeting of everyone involved in Pineapple Records, now one of the biggest labels in the Western world. It was my job to oversee Pineapple, which freed up Jimmy to concentrate on Africa. Pineapple was making an obscene amount of money, both in the UK and States. International record sales were also good. Po's family made our CDs, and these days most music was CD based. We had also pre-empted Internet music downloads, and ran our own website offering paying downloads at a rate equivalent to seventy percent of the profit we made on a CD; overheads were low, profits good. Our musicians were still playing at the clubs, and still enjoying holidays at our hotels around the world. As part of the drive to help Sri Lanka - after their losses during the tsunami - we encouraged people to visit our hotels in that country, making it seem a moral support mission rather than a holiday. The hotels were full.

The music magazine was also doing very well and had matured into a publication that offered a balanced approach, not just music and bands detailed in its pages. It now offered a news section, political opinion, and interviews with stars and actors. We also competed, to some degree, with the new craze of lads magazines that were basically soft porn; babes with big boobs in bikinis. We had a few of our own babes at Pineapple, the young ladies always keen to be photographed in skimpy outfits.

Aiming to capitalise on our fame, Oliver Standish had bought up hotels in New York and Los Angeles, now secretly converting them to mimic the London club format. They would be ready soon. In the States, our music magazine was now being distributed by Anton's father, the Blake Carrington look-alike, but had an American slant,

some common stories and common artists. Its circulation dwarfed its British cousin by a factor of almost ten.

Having spent the best part of a week reviewing the businesses, I joined Jimmy and moved onto discussing CAR Ltd, and the corporation in the Congo. Mining and oil concessions were being issued faster than the various companies could get in there with their big yellow diggers, and the revenue we earned was soaring. But as we tore down the jungle and industrialised the area, we hit the snag of mines and oil companies dumping waste, and polluting both rivers and the local water table. To help, we set-up a body within our corporation to monitor the situation, and to assist directly. Fortunately, we had a good supply of depleted mines and they made excellent repositories for waste, the offending items covered over with concrete or soil and buried. Anticipating future complains about waste products, we commissioned a number of studies and put a sizeable team on it.

That led us to the problem of economic migration. Within the DRC itself we now found people moving towards the mines and oilfields looking for work, a few squatter camps set up. Where they became a nuisance the Rifles went in and bussed the people out, back to wherever they came from, a few dollars in their hands and a yellow plastic bucket full of household goodies. Still, it was a growing problem. Aside from the internal migration of people, we also had the problem of foreign workers seeking jobs. We had no problem with skilled foreign workers being recruited, but we clamped down hard on people just wandering across the border and looking for work. Jimmy was adamant that they would be repatriated, after a short spell in a camp with little or no food. He explained that, unless sorted now, it would be a large problem in the future. There was also the problem of local violence towards the squatters, especially the foreign squatters. Many were killed. There were no job-sharing schemes in the eyes of the indigenous Congolese people.

The Chinese Army had greatly reduced its presence on the border, that task now handled by a dedicated border force made up of the Rifles, the national police, and former members of each. Still, it was a very long border, most of which was jungle. As in Kenya, we began repairing the fence, and laying new fence.

The regional airports had mostly been finished, and officials and mine engineers could now hop on a plane and take a one-hour flight that would save a twenty-hour trip by bus or car. The planes were full.

The rail link from Tanzania had snaked ever west through Burundi and touched DRC soil over Christmas, the track meeting short sections that we had laid ready, principally from certain mines and oil areas in the south east of the DRC. The first ore train had made its long journey to the coast, much reported in the African Times, and was welcomed at the coast by the Tanzanian Government; the train cut a tape. Actually, the tape was stronger than anticipated and pulled over two flagpoles, dragging track workers along with it. The rolling stock was Tanzanian, as were the drivers, a concession we had made to them. Just inside the Tanzanian border a marshalling yard had been constructed so that trains could pass each other in a carefully co-ordinated ballet.

The ore truck logistics had been subject to much planning, and we now operated an efficient system. The corporation owned the trucks and paid the drivers, and we set-up two yards where drivers stopped to fuel and change vehicles. A group of drivers, all Congolese, would drive the trucks through Burundi or Rwanda and stop at the yard just inside Tanzania. There they would have a bite to eat and sleep the night. The next morning they would be allocated an empty truck that was up from the coast, and take it back to the DRC; they never followed their loads to the coast and back, an eight day round trip at times. Accidents caused by driver fatigue were a real concern, especially to slow moving Tanzanian housewives. So our ore trucks would be touched by three different “fresh” drivers on the way to the coast, three on the way back, the drivers getting to see their families often.

But the cost difference of a truck’s tonne-per-mile to a train’s tonne-per-mile was huge, so we hired as much Tanzanian rolling stock as we could, our trains often a mile long; two engines at the front and two at the rear. The tracks ran past the smelting plants in Tanzania, so ore would be off-loaded there, the trains heading back the way they came after unloading.

The first crude oil train met with much fanfare, reaching Mombassa in Kenya after circling through Tanzania. Other oil trains were dispatched to Uganda and Zambia, the crude sold cheaply. That oil was now being refined at two plants in our area, the resulting petrol and diesel being used internally. It was as cheap as water, and no one in our region much cared about how much petrol they put in their cars. Busses were now free, lauded by the UN, and a first for any country. Next was a plan to refine the gasoline further to aviation fuel standards, a plant commissioned.

The most obvious effect of the cheap oil was cheaper ore extraction, the costs of driving huge yellow machines around mines greatly reduced. Modest increases in wages were seen, and productivity was good, many mines working twenty-four hours a day. In the north, the Chinese had sunk six wells and were now extracting more oil than they knew what to do with. They needed it back in China, but transporting it to the coast negated the benefits. So they refined it, as we did, and provided petrol back to their own mines. They also sold the crude oil to Uganda, Rwanda and other countries, and the price of petrol in the region was falling compared to the rest of Africa. Globally, oil prices were also falling thanks to the new coastal oilfield discoveries.

As a natural progression from the mining of ore and the production of petrol, we encouraged foreign companies to open smelting plants, the first few already operating. That led us to then make use of the steel created by selling it around the region – principally to ourselves. High-rise apartment blocks became cheaper due to cheap steel; less concrete was needed. We then nudged Po's family to open a tin can plant, tin ore bountiful in the region. Farm produce from our region, and that of neighbouring countries, was soon being canned in locally made tin cans, from locally mined tin ore.

The net effect of Jimmy's self-sufficiency master plan was that ingots were shipped out instead of ore, the trucks moving in convoy with armed guards, each truckload worth millions of pounds. Yuri and Marko even flew some out. And our nice new road to Kinshasa developed its first pothole a month after being finished, four hundred trucks a day trundling down it, scaring slow moving Congolese housewives.

By February 2005, our personal income from the corporation and CAR topped three billion pounds a year, growing at a rate of around ninety percent a year. Board meetings were embarrassing; our financial officer kept thinking he had made a mistake. A great deal of money still went back into the local community, the orphanages topping out a hundred and twenty thousand kids, half of whom attended them like boarding school. The Congo Rifles were edging towards ten thousand men, our special police force now reaching three thousand and growing.

We made good on our promise to Kimballa Jnr to move west and clean-out any remaining warlords, the Rifles now running out of people to shoot. The Rifles had almost reached Kinshasa and roadblocks were common, punishments harsh. Each town offered its

own local police unit, but also units of the national police backed by the Rifles. Hangings were common, typically on a Saturday lunchtime – a growing spectator sport. They attracted the crowds. The UN, and various human rights groups, gave us grief over the harsh punishment regime, but Kimballa always made it clear that it was his wish – not ours. Actually, it was Jimmy's wish, but I saw the logic behind it. Many of the people in the Congo had grown up in lawless areas, where whoever was strongest did whatever they liked. Rape was still a problem, and the chances of a girl making her wedding without having been gang raped was slim. Still, things were improving rapidly.

The corporation had moved into Northern Zambia with that government's blessing, and we were both mining the area and policing it, mirror imaging the DRC, a tried and tested formula. And Kimballa, he had lazily granted us rights to anything east of Kinshasa, ninety-five percent of the country. After all, why should he lift a finger when we were doing all the work for him? His palace grew in splendour, the number of wives and consorts increased, and the people of Kinshasa still struggled to make a dollar.

CAR were now spending a great deal of money on oil operations, money that would be recouped in years to come. We now operated six oil wells in northern Kenya, and that many again off Zanzibar Island, the potential revenues huge.

In conjunction with an enlivened and proud Somalia, we began laying train tracks the short distance from the coast near Mogadishu, towards Mawlini, through northern Kenya and towards Southern Sudan, thereafter to turn west and join up with track growing from the northern tip of the DRC and heading east. When finished, the line would be as long as the Tanzanian track, an offshoot passing by Mawlini.

Equatorial Guinea

The UN met to discuss events in Guinea, as we had requested. They passed a resolution that encouraged the African Union to intervene; not to send peacekeeping troops, but to intervene, a dangerous precedent for Africa. As such, a full vote of the African Union rejected it.

That did not deter those nations that we were in bed with. Kenya, Somalia, the DRC, and even Zambia committed troops under the UN remit, a force of some eight thousand soldiers rallying in western DRC, and shown nightly on all TV news channels around Africa. As predicted, the Guinea Army Junta stole what they could and ran off into the hills, our soldiers landing unopposed.

Equatorial Guinea was a tiny country, and it took just a day to seize the territory; we seemed to have more soldiers on the ground than there were members of the indigenous population. Rescue Force set-up camps and began the hearts and minds campaign, the Cuban medics pouring in.

As far as nation building went, Guinea would be very cheap, not least because it was already oil rich. It was fair to say that it took three days to overrun, and to start rebuilding the tiny state. We put members of our corporation on the throne, with a group of Africans from the nations that had taken part, and advertised for presidential candidates to come forwards. That vote took place just two weeks after landing, an existing politician elected. He then had the task of selecting a cabinet and building a democratic country from the ground up. He did, however, have the benefit of Pathfinder bodyguards and a permanent garrison of a thousand Rifles to deal with any problems. It would not be difficult for him. But across Africa, various leaders had watched the events unfold with some trepidation, their own claims to power dodgy at best.

Hardon Chase kept his promise to visit Tanzania, eventually, and dropped in on Nairobi, the Congo and finally Guinea. And we issued contracts to American companies. The DRC corporation bought several Boeing airliners, thousands of computers, and US steel makers were invited in to open up plants. Since we had planned on doing that all along it was no big deal, it just made President Chase look better.

The day he returned to the White House, the first 747 lifted off from JFK, New York, packed full of tourists. It landed at Goma International Airport, doubling the weekly passenger throughput in one go, its passengers bussed to various lodges in the Great Rift Valley, where cute lion cubs awaited those from the concrete jungle.

Everything was going well, even Shelly was doing better with her nightmares. She was also old enough now, just, to play football with, to play catch with a tennis ball, and go diving in the pool with her child-size diving gear. The little lady was growing up quickly, her sister already toddling. And Shelly, she mothered her younger sister, making us very happy parents. We'd often let Shelly feed her younger sister under our careful gaze.

Shelly's features were changing, Jimmy often saying that he could see the older version of our daughter now, the adult within. We arranged a tutor for Shelly, since we did not wish the added security risk of sending her to the local nursery, and Cat taught Shelly basic reading or writing skills, as well as engaging her in educational games; our daughter was already a reasonable chess and draughts player. Unfortunately, pawns were "prawns" and she often took pieces that she liked the look of, rather than for a tactical benefit. She liked bishops and prawns.

Then it happened.

One quiet day in early March, after I had caught up on the day's work, I turned off the monitor of my computer in the main office and said goodnight to Jimmy, soon immersed in my other world, the family world. With Helen cooking, I cleaned and fed Lucy, and spent ten minutes explaining to Shelly why the squirrels in the trees outside did not get cold at night.

Easing up, time started to move slower than normal. I remember the images, but they're distorted. I just remember that time slowed down.

Shelly ran up the stairs to the toilet, slamming the door. A minute later I heard someone coming down the stairs, a very slow walk. Turning, I saw black combat fatigues first, webbing and belt. Boots. Mud stains on the stairs magnolia carpet.

I walked around the sofa, puzzled. At first I thought it was one of the security staff, but I did not recognise the clothing, or the face. Security at the house was based on one single premise – we all knew the faces. No new faces were allowed. This was a new face; a smirking new face, a man in his thirties with muddy boots, on my stairs.

He stepped down to my level. 'You need better security, mate.'

I stood three steps away from the man. Helen had peeked out of the kitchen at the sound of an adult voice, thinking it visitors. At the time I didn't notice her, I was focused on the stranger, and his muddy boot prints. I don't know how long it took, but it seemed like

ages; it seemed to take ages to register the threat. This man had come down stairs with muddy boots, and my daughter was upstairs. He was between me and Shelly, a bad place to be.

His mistake was not knowing about the history, either the blood, or my martial arts training from Jimmy. Still, I was the one who was afraid. I don't remember at which point I made the decision, but I moved. Thankfully, I moved as I had been taught to.

The intruder stood three steps away. Like an amateur, I took a large step, halving the distance, raising my left arm as if to grab him. But that was where my amateur days ended. I slammed my foot down, causing a pause in my movement, and buying me half a second. The intruder moved to one side, as he should have done, fully expecting me to keep going in a straight line, the laws of physics applying. But I had stamped down hard with my left foot and moved all of my weight onto it. He moved to my right, a mistake that anyone could have made. My kick hit him in the solar plexus, my opponent bouncing off the doorframe with a look of abject shock and surprise. Bending my left knee, I slipped forwards, my right arm extended, my hand flat. I fooled him a second time, falling to my knees and slicing up with the inside of my hand, catching him in the throat. It was a lethal blow; I knew that the instant I had landed it.

Helen had seen the man and panicked, hitting 999 on the house phone as I lunged. An alarm was now sounding, followed by an indistinct tanoy message.

I don't know how long I stood there, but it must have taken Jimmy half a minute to get to us, opening the door with the keypad, and to be knelt over the body. He turned the man over and checked for weapons first, opening the man's jacket and patting him down. He then lifted the man's head and checked his face. Checking the man's pulse, Jimmy said, 'He'll be gone a few seconds.'

Standing, Jimmy stamped down on the man's knuckles, both sides. He then lifted the man's face and punched down a moment before Big Paul and Karl arrived.

'Paul, upstairs! Karl, perimeter!'

Big Paul thrust his pistol up the stairs, Karl running out.

Jimmy stood, taking a moment to stare down at the man as the life left him. Turning to me he stopped, glanced at Helen and beckoned her closer. He hit me before I even registered it, and I was soon sliding down the wall, a shriek issued from Helen. He then hit her, knocking her down besides me. Lifting me quickly up by the

wrist he hit me again, leaving me dazed, Helen screaming at him to stop.

Jimmy knelt and faced us. I had a hand to my nose, Helen a hand to her mouth, blood visible. 'Now listen carefully, very carefully. Paul, you've killed him. Self defence, sure, but that could still be seen as manslaughter – seven years in prison. There's no guarantee that this will go away. So this is what happened. You found an intruder in your house, at the bottom of the stairs, Shelly screaming upstairs. You panicked and tried to get past him but he knocked you down, Helen joining in the desperate fight to get upstairs to Shelly. After a struggle, you hit him in the throat, as much by accident as anything else – since you *do not* study martial arts. Don't forget, you *do not* train with me.'

Helen was sobbing by this point, and I was bleeding all over the carpet.

Jimmy continued, 'When the man collapsed you sounded the alarm, but were in a daze, not thinking about an ambulance for him. You rushed to your daughter and the rest ... the rest is a blur.' He stood and lifted the house phone, dialling the police. 'This is Jimmy Silo, we've had an incident at the house, two injured, one looks dead. I'm declaring a terrorist incident, send police and ambulances.' He put the phone down as Big Paul came downstairs.

'Clear! And Shelly, she's on the toilet. He came in the window in her room; there's a mud trail.'

'Big Paul, when you arrived you checked this man and found no pulse. Now, make an attempt at CPR, break a few ribs.'

Big Paul got to work, Jimmy lifting me and Helen up and seating us on the sofa. 'I'm going to get Shelly and distract her for a while. Now, is there any part of that story ... that is not clear?'

We shook our heads, faces covered in blood.

'Remember, it was a blur, you were terrified for the kids, you can't remember much. When the ambulance gets here go to the hospital, and make sure that you're seen to be hurt. The police will want a statement in the morning, so concentrate on that possible jail term.'

He walked upstairs as Keely came in, pistol in hand. He observed Big Paul's half-hearted attempts at CPR before stuffing his pistol down the back of his trousers. Approaching us, he asked, 'Are you OK?'

I nodded, Keely fetching kitchen roll and a damp towel, helping to clean us up as Jimmy distracted Shelly.

Sykes received a call at home.

‘Sir, operations. There’s been an incident at Jimmy Silo’s house: two injured and one dead.’

‘Get me a car and a helicopter, right away.’ He dialled Jack. ‘Jack, what the hell happened?’

‘Someone broke in, got into a fight with Paul and Helen. They’re a bit busted up, but the guy is dead.’

‘Do we know who it is?’

‘They’re saying he’s British; ex-SAS.’

‘Christ. I’m on my way. When you know anything further, I want to know.’ He dialled the Prime Minister at Number 10, Downing Street. ‘Prime Minister, there’s been an incident at Jimmy Silo’s house, an intruder.’

‘They alright?’

‘Paul and Helen have been injured, the intruder dead.’

‘Dead? Who killed him; one of ours?’

‘No, Prime Minister, it looks like Paul killed him, hand to hand. And the intruder is one of ours.’

‘One of ours?’

‘Ex-SAS they’re saying.’

‘Sent by an agency here?’ the Prime Minister gasped.

‘Unknown at the moment.’

‘Jesus. I’m going to call the local Chief Constable, then the head of MI5 and shout a little. Let me know if you find anything.’

‘I’m on my way there now.’

Hardon Chase was in the middle of a meeting with a group of Republican Senators.

His Chief of Staff burst in. ‘There’s been a terrorist incident at Jimmy Silo’s house. Two injured, one dead.’

Chase was up and out the door, the Senators shocked. ‘Get hold of our man at the house, I want a full report. I’m going to try and reach the British Prime Minister.’

Within twenty minutes, US news services were reporting an “armed” incident at the house, one dead and many wounded. That story went right around the world, many of the world leaders we knew calling the British Prime Minister.

Some time later they led us out, lots of flashing blue lights, a helicopter overhead. One ambulance crew attended to us as another rushed into the house. Given who we were, they were taking no chances, an armed officer in the back with us, an escort to the local

hospital. Somehow, Karl managed to get there before us. We jumped the queue in the waiting room and went straight through to a surprised doctor.

‘Paul Holton. Christ, what happened?’

‘Intruder at the house,’ I responded.

Two other doctors stepped in. Lights were flashed into my eyes, and I followed a finger back and forth and up and down, falsely complaining of some discomfort. They put a stitch in my lip, checked my head thoroughly for lumps and bumps and then examined my neck and spine at length; they were taking no chances.

After thirty minutes of fussing, I insisted we were fine and signed a note to that effect, explaining that our private doctors were on their way to the house. I thanked them and nudged Helen out, the smell of hospitals doing nothing for me. We found more police officers in the waiting room than at a football match, and they flanked us as we left, half a dozen local photographers snapping us. The police bundled us into a Range Rover, Karl driving, but a uniformed police officer sat next to him, his radio buzzing.

Fifteen minutes later we arrived back, having gone through two roadblocks already. Four police cars were parked outside the gate, probably ten around the house, the helicopter still overhead. As I stepped down, helping Helen, I could see a dozen police dogs.

Karl said, ‘You’ve got to sleep in the old apartment, kids are in there with Jimmy. Forensics are all over your place.’

We were escorted inside, meeting a worried looking Han in the hall. ‘You are OK?’

‘Just cuts and bruises. Thanks.’

Outside of my old apartment we found one of Karl’s colleagues sitting on a chair with a paperback. He knocked the door as we neared, Jimmy opening it.

Shelly jumped up. ‘You were very silly, daddy.’

I stared at Jimmy, kneeling to hug my daughter.

Shelly added, ‘You must not run fast, you hurt mummy.’

‘I’m sorry, baby. I was ... running too quickly.’

Helen checked the baby, finding her asleep, clean and fed; Uncle Jimmy’s work.

Jimmy lifted Shelly. ‘Come on, young lady, mummy and daddy have baddies on their faces and they want to go to sleep. All better in the morning.’

With the door closed I stood over the baby, suddenly terrified. That bastard could have hurt my family; he could have killed us all. And I wasn’t at all sorry I had killed him. Helen and I had said not

more than two words since it had happened, and now Helen burst out crying, sitting on the edge of the bed.

I sat next to her. 'Sorry.'

'You didn't cause this.'

'No, but I killed him. And if the police want to be difficult...'

'They won't. Look outside.'

'It's down to the courts, and the papers will be full of it. Jimmy can do a lot, but I don't know if he can swing this.' I forced a big breath. 'Come on, hot bath and clean clothes.'

After a long hot bath and a cup of tea we felt better, and sat watching the TV with the sound turned down, still both a little stunned. An hour later Jimmy knocked and I let him in.

'You better?' he asked.

'A bit. Any ID on that guy?'

'Yes, I know him.'

'You know him?' I puzzled.

'He applied for a job with us, he's ex-SAS. This ... was supposed to happen a year from now, and he was supposed to wake me up. It's an aberration in the time line. And he would not have hurt you, he just wanted to show us how clever he was by breaking in. He was after a job.'

Helen and I exchanged looks.

'You think the police will be a problem?' I asked.

'We've never been more popular, so I can't see a jury convicting you of anything. Still, it has to go through the motions. If lucky, Sykes will stick a judge he knows on the bench.'

'You hit me,' Helen softly stated, touching her face.

'Sorry. Had to be done.'

'I have a loose tooth!' I told him.

'At least you have defensive wounds, and the doctors have seen that, so too the police. I've told the police you'll make a statement at 9am, and our solicitors will be here.'

'How many police are outside?' I asked.

'Probably a hundred; roadblocks at a mile, five miles and further out. Prime Minister has been on the phone twice, Sykes and a few others. Even Hardon Chase. There's an SAS counter-terrorism team here as well.'

'News will be bad,' I mentioned.

'Be every reporter in the world here tomorrow. At the moment, every news channel in the world is running the story as a major terrorist incident. A few think you've been shot.'

‘Fucking hell,’ I let out. ‘That stupid fuck ... coming into my house like that. If he wasn’t dead ... I’d kill him again!’

‘Cat’s here. You want her to take Lucy?’

‘No,’ Helen quietly insisted.

A knock at the door preceded a tray from Cookie, Jimmy placing it down for us. We had missed the meal that Helen had been cooking. Now the hunger hit us and we tucked in.

Outside, Jimmy called the house security staff together as blue lights flashed and the police searched the grounds. Lined up were Big Paul, Rob the dog handler, Ricky, Karl and his three police colleagues.

‘OK, gentlemen, no one ... will be getting any sleep tonight. You will, however, figure out how that idiot got in, and track back to see if he was alone. Then, you’ll think of ways to prevent it happening again. Granted, he’s an expert, but we need to be able to defend against such people. So, you are all docked two weeks pay, except Big Paul, who’s docked a month’s pay – because he’s head of security. And that fishing trip you were going on, the one I was going to pay for, that’s cancelled.’ They glanced at each other. ‘You’ll start with the cameras, looking at the time line, and work backwards from there. And gentlemen, you are all now in my bad books, not a good place to be for anyone. If Paul, Helen or the kids had been harmed – then some of you would have been in the ambulance. You will learn from your mistake, and you will plug the hole by end of play tomorrow – or you may not be here. Dismissed.’

At 5am Jimmy knocked, finding us up and dressed, Lucy on the bed and making reassuringly loud and nonsensical sounds.

‘Half the world’s media at the gate,’ Jimmy informed us. ‘They’ve been camped out all night. Good job we have two fences. Thousand faxes downstairs, handful of telegrams, couple of dozen phone messages, and a million emails. The usual.’

‘Nice to know we’re popular,’ I quipped.

‘Not with the Prime Minister you’re not, he was up all night, a few world leaders kicking his arse over lax security. Oh, Sykes is here. Going to be hell to pay because the guy’s British, and ex-SAS. Prime Minister told the head of MI5 that if any UK agency had motivated your attacker... well, it will be ugly in the corridor of powers today.’

‘Have you spoken to the press?’ I asked.

‘I will do, at 8am, at the gate. Can’t say much without the police getting pissy though.’

‘What have the police said so far?’ I asked.

‘They all think the guy broke in and attacked you,’ Jimmy reported. ‘And why wouldn’t they. They only have to look at the way he was dressed. At the fence they found climbing gear, a thermal camera, and a thermal suit to fool the sensors. He even had chemicals to fool the dogs. Big Paul says he crawled in the thermal suit for forty minutes to reach your house, a blind spot where he climbed up. Shelly opened the window, she remembers doing it. Oh, and the trees in front of your house – Big Paul took to them with a chainsaw. It looks like an Amazon logging operation gone wrong.’

‘He could have killed us,’ Helen delicately pointed out.

Jimmy stood. ‘No. I know who the men are that will try and kill you. You have a few years yet.’

He left us with that pleasant thought.

At 8am Jimmy faced the press at the gate. ‘Please quieten down so that everyone can hear what I have to say. Thank you. Last night, at approximately 8pm, a man – a former British soldier – entered the grounds and reached the house of Paul and Helen, where he climbed in through an upstairs window. He then seems to have attacked both Paul and Helen, injuring them both, but nothing serious. They were both seen by the doctors last night and had a few stitches put in. They’re feeling much better now. During the altercation, the intruder was struck about the neck and throat and died before an ambulance arrived, our security staff giving the man CPR. This man - the intruder - was known to us; he had applied for a job as a security guard or bodyguard, and may have gained access to information about our security. That is something that the police are looking into.

‘I would like to take this opportunity to thank the local police for the quick response, and for the thorough job they did of securing the area. Paul and Helen would also like to thank all those who sent messages. Now, given that the police are investigating the matter we can’t say anymore yet. Paul and Helen will be interviewed by the police, here at 9am, and we may have a further statement available after that. Thank you for your patience, and our staff will be down in five minutes with some food and hot drinks for you, especially those who camped out all night.’

He walked off to a chorus of shouted questions and a million camera flashes.

At the 9am interview our solicitors were present, and the police were already stretching the rules a little by interviewing us here instead of at the police station. They asked if we were OK, and well enough to undertake the interview.

Helen and I used the word “blur” a lot, “dazed” and “stunned”, and came across as quite forgetful. After forty minutes of repeating the same story in small detail, they concluded with a few questions that annoyed me greatly.

‘Did you shout a warning?’

‘Did you call the police first?’

‘Did you ask him to leave your house?’

I was on my feet. ‘I was terrified, my daughter screaming upstairs! No I didn’t ask him to leave after he knocked me down, you fucking moron!’

Our solicitor calmed things down and asked the police to conclude quickly or leave. The police thanked us for our time and left, Jimmy taking time to speak to them outside. Now we would have to wait.

An hour later I entered the office, getting odd looks from the staff, and sat at my computer, opening up the emails and flicking through them. When Shelly ran in I sat her on my knee and allowed her to help. After all, all she had to do was press the “DEL” key to delete. When Sharon got ready to go home at 4pm she stopped next to me, a hand on my cheek. We said nothing before she left. I continued to check emails and faxes, responding to a few. I created a generic “thank you” email and cut-and-paste it into many replies.

Jimmy walked in an hour later. ‘Still at it?’

‘Lot of African politicians, even some African schools. Even got some from the brain-trust kids in China.’

Jimmy seemed worried. ‘How did they sign it?’

‘Mombassa farming students studying in China, nothing more.’

He seemed appeased. ‘You holding up?’

‘I think so, but still annoyed as hell. We’re trying to save the fucking planet and ... and all this shit.’

‘Your house is ready. We’ve cleaned it, explosives sniffer dogs have been around, and we checked for bugs. Nothing. He came in through the window and walked downstairs. Do not ... have issues about re-possessing it.’ He stood. ‘Come on.’ We grabbed Helen and the kids and walked around, still a handful of police in their bright yellow coats about the grounds.

Everything in the house seemed the same, the heating on. The meal that Helen had been preparing was gone, the pots and pans

cleaned by Cookie and Sandra. The magazines on the coffee table were where I left them, a book with pages dog-eared. Shelly ran and grabbed her favourite toy, not noticing anything different.

Jimmy got the kettle on as Helen reviewed what had happened to last night's supper. 'Paul,' he called. 'Go check each room upstairs: private stuff, personal stuff.'

I did as asked, not noticing anything different. I even looked under the beds and in the cupboards. Back downstairs, Jimmy handed me a mug of tea and asked if everything was as I left it.

I shrugged. 'Think so.'

He sat Helen and me down. 'Now listen. Some people, after they've been broken into, have issues with the house they live in, often not wanting to return to it.'

'I'm OK being here,' I softly insisted, turning to face Helen.

'It ... feels a little odd, but I'm not leaving.'

'Good attitude,' Jimmy commended, Shelly running and jumping on him, spilling his tea. 'All you need now is a daughter instead of a little monster.' He faced her. 'Tell mummy and daddy what you did.'

'I didn't do it,' Shelly insisted.

'Then how did the orange juice get all over my computer?'

She shook her head and hid behind a cushion.

With Jimmy gone we reclaimed our family life, glimpsing both the police and our security staff through the windows as we cooked a meal. The next day, diggers arrived and tore up the roots of the threes that Big Paul had cut down, the holes filled in and flattened, grass seeds sewn. The house now stood isolated, but also difficult to approach unseen. Three extra cameras had been installed, a few trees near the fence cut down.

The Director Of Public Prosecutions made no case against us, the coroner recording a verdict of "Death by misadventure". So far, I was in the clear. Things returned to normal, a few extra private security guards to be seen dotted around the grounds. And the windows in Shelly's room were modified so that they only opened an inch or two.

A month after the incident at the house, and with me getting a little bored of the daily routine, Jimmy stepped into the office and told me to pack a bag. We flew down to Goma International Airport, then drove the short distance around to the airport hotel that we had built, Jimmy explaining that there was now a conference centre at the rear. And what a conference centre!

‘What the fuck is that?’ I asked.

‘In the future we’ll make this available for African Union meetings. And ... others.’

‘Others?’

‘Wait and see.’

We walked past security guards and into the conference centre, to a side room to meet a delegation from Malawi. I knew where their country was, just south of Burundi down the lake and nestled between the Zambia and Tanzania, at the tail end of Lake Tanganika. It was a small country, and dirt poor; we did not even repair the roads through Zambia toward its border. Our senior people from the corporation were present, as well as representatives of CAR. We had met with them first, in a separate room, before walking in to meet the President of Malawi, a country with a GDP just over what our nightclubs made. We played like politicians and smiled nicely, shaking hands and settling about a brand new table.

‘Welcome to the Democratic Republic of Congo,’ Jimmy offered our guests.

‘Thank you ... Governor,’ their President responded with a smile.

‘How can we help the Government of Malawi?’

‘We are a poor nation, with little to offer in the way of mining or oil, but we can offer road links between Tanzania and your southern region here. And we would be happy to co-operate on a train track across our territory.’

‘That’s good to know. Now, what’s really on your mind?’ Jimmy bluntly asked.

They blinked.

‘Well, we are seeking – obviously – to help develop our country.’

‘We could offer you cheap petrol, I guess that would help,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘It would, yes. And we have areas suitable for tourists, many animals.’

‘Let me be frank. How much help do you desire?’ Jimmy posed.

‘We are ... grateful for any assistance that you could offer our country.’

‘But ... you would like a lot of assistance, yes?’

‘We are willing to ... co-operate on a wide range of matters.’

Jimmy eased back. ‘I’d be willing to invest heavily in your country, but I would expect our interests in your country to operate in the same way as they do here, and in Zambia and other countries. First, you would sign over any and all mining and oil rights to CAR. Then, you would co-operate on raising a regiment of Rifles, plus special police officers. Then I would build safari lodges for tourists, and obviously build many orphanages, schools and hospitals. I would also build roads and rail links across your country. But I would not do any of that unless the security situation in your country was ... as I desired it to be.’ He waited as they exchanged looks.

‘We would ... hand over the security of our nation to you?’

‘Can you think of anyone you could trust more?’ Jimmy countered.

‘Look at the Congo?’ I put in. ‘Free busses, low crime, much new building work.’

‘And you would pay for the police and the soldiers?’ they asked.

‘We would,’ Jimmy replied. ‘We’d pay for all of it. And if we found minerals on your land you would benefit. But I don’t know of much in the way of minerals on your land.’

‘An interesting proposal,’ their President noted. ‘And one that we will consider seriously.’

‘Don’t take too long,’ I said. ‘We have yearly budgets and we’ll spend this year’s in the next week or so. Since Burundi want the same as you ... we’ll have to decide.’

They did not look happy. ‘You are talking with Burundi?’

‘This afternoon,’ Jimmy explained, which was a good guess on my part.

‘And if you decide to go with them...?’

‘Then we would not have much of a budget left to help you,’ Jimmy acknowledged.

‘May we discuss this for an hour?’

‘Of course, use the hotel,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Have some food.’

We broke the meeting and told our people to stay close, but nudged them back into the room we had found them in. Jimmy led me to the main auditorium, a barn of a place with seats for two thousand, desks at the front with computers and translation units - headphones linked to translators sat in unseen rooms. We sat on opposite sides of the aisle, the room ghostly quiet with just us in it, and reminding me of a cinema.

‘Could hold a concert in here.’ I said.

‘They’d wreck the computers. No, this will only be used a few times a year. After I’ve upset the African Union.’

‘Done that already with Guinea.’

After a quick bite to eat we re-convened the meeting.

The President of Malawi offered, ‘We will be happy to have your assistance, and will co-operate fully.’

The CAR staff handed over a document.

‘That signs away your oil and mineral rights to us for twenty five years.’ Jimmy then slid across a separate document, quite a thick document. ‘That agrees to our assistance with the police and the army. It also details the formation of a Rescue Force unit, medical assistance programme, a clinic building programme and the construction of orphanages, roads and railways.’

‘And all of this...?’

‘Will began very quickly after you sign,’ Jimmy nudged.

They signed the documents and handed them back, copies given for them to study. A photographer stepped in, the group posing for a few snaps. He was accompanied by a reporter for the African Times. We sat again, and answered questions about the deal, and what we hoped to achieve. That led us to lunch at the hotel with our team, preparations made for the next meeting, that of the Burundi Government.

We met them in the same room, but they were not as reserved as the delegation from Malawi. They offered all mining concessions in Burundi to CAR and signed the document without even looking at it, then signed the same civil co-operation document that Malawi had signed, a sign-up to the full package. It was quick and simple and ... when could you start? The photographer snapped more shots, and the same reporter asked very similar questions.

The final piece of business was with a team from Kinshasa, and representatives of Congo Airways, who were still flying DC3s held together with string and tape.

‘We’d like to take over Congo Airways,’ Jimmy told them.

They shrugged. ‘OK. When?’

I hid a smile. These guys did not have a clue, or give a shit.

‘We’ll call it Central Africa Airways, and integrate it with the existing aircraft we’re running. The headquarters will be here, Goma International Airport. Flights will come down from Europe, then across to Kinshasa. We’ll use some of your existing aircraft, but lease more.’

He handed over a document, and the airline, what it was, signed alongside the government representatives. We dragged back in the photographer and smiled for the snap, giving an interview to the reporter again. That led to a coffee break, followed by a meeting with officials from Zambia.

‘We’d like to run an airline into Zambia. We’ll fund it, you get nice new shiny aircraft maintained by us here.’

‘Where do we sign?’

I smiled widely, shaking my head.

Next came a delegation from Rwanda, the final meeting for the day. We asked for slots at their airport and they were delighted, they’d be getting subsidised flights around Africa and to Europe.

We stayed the night in the hotel, finding it very nicely decorated and with great facilities. It did not offer a rooftop bar, not least because the area offered a high annual precipitation, but it did offer an indoor pool on the top floor, views out over the airfield. I found the infinity pool disturbing, because it seemed to drop away a hundred feet to the runway. Doing lengths, you felt as if you’d fall off the end and to your death on the concrete far below.

The next morning we entertained representatives from Boeing and Airbus, British Airways, Air France and Lufthansa, welcoming them into the same room and offering tea and coffee. The airfield’s apron now housed four aircraft, quite a crowd for the air traffic controllers. Jimmy produced a map of Africa and laid it out on the table. With a red marker pen he drew a line from the top, down into Goma airport, then out to Kinshasa, to the regional airports, to Zambia, Malawi, Burundi and Rwanda, and further to Kenya and Tanzania.

‘Gentlemen, we have – yesterday – taken over Congo Airways, and it will be integrated with our existing aircraft into a new entity called Central African Airways. That airline has been granted slots at all of the places marked on the map. As far as Burundi, Malawi and Rwanda are concerned, we will have primary slots. I will also be entering into talks to take over Kenyan Airways, Tanzanian Airways, and Somali Airways has already agreed to integrate with us. That leaves Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea, who we believe will join shortly. And, as you may already know, we are just about to open our own aviation fuel producer here.’

‘And if a BA flight lands here, what landing costs?’

‘For the next few years ... none at all. Fuel at half price.’

‘Half price?’ The man laughed. ‘Can we fill up here and fly on to Australia?’

‘If you like.’ Jimmy waited.

The men glanced at each other.

‘You’ll be wanting more stock?’ the man from Boeing realised.

‘Yes, we will. Lease to start, some to buy. Right, anyone who sends down a 747 from Europe will receive subsidised fuel, starting at seventy-five percent off the normal price. That makes it cheap, and viable, for you to bring down tourists – as well as oil workers.’

They seemed keen.

Jimmy pointed at the man from British Airways. ‘Mondays.’ To the French he said, ‘Wednesdays.’ To the German he said, ‘Fridays.’

The BA representative asked, ‘If we land here, and go onto another African destination...’

‘Your fuel will be subsidised. So if you drop off oil workers, re-fuel, and take people down to Cape Town, that leg has a massive fuel saving.’

‘And the return leg?’

‘The same, whilst the agreement is in place.’

‘And internal flights?’ they asked.

‘Are negotiable, but we’ll be trying to conquer that market ourselves, subsidising the costs.’

‘Are you looking for slots in Europe?’ they asked.

‘No, not beyond those held already by the airlines I’ll take over; that’s your area. I’m more interested in the internal flights to and from the hub, this hub. For those of you interested, office space at the airport is free for a few years at least, local staff cheap enough.’

Lufthansa cheekily asked, ‘We can have an office here ... free?’

‘Yes, move in when you’re ready. There are apartments for your staff nearby.’

Airbus asked, ‘What aircraft will you be interested in leasing or purchasing?’

‘We’ll make that assessment soon, and then judge the routes and passengers. At the moment I see a need to lease five Boeings and five Airbuses, then to buy when we know what routes we’re principally interested in. I will, however, wish to hire maintenance teams from both manufacturers and base them here, kind of straight away.’

They offered to price it up and send in quotes. We discussed onward tickets between the airlines and we were happy for joint ticketing for onward journeys. Each airline agreed to open their own check-in desks, and each agreed to help advertise the safari lodges through their holiday outlets. Having made them fresh tea and

coffee, we left them to chat and stepped next door, where the CAR staff waited.

‘CAR will own the new airline,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Get the wheels moving, and get the lawyers on it. Airline staff will arrive soon, as will maintenance staff. We’ll all fly to Kenya in an hour, so go and pack.’

We stepped back into the airline representatives and thanked them for flying down, asking them to have a good look around the airport’s facilities, the main reason for the visit. Packed, we checked onto one of our own flights and took off in an Airbus, turning east towards Nairobi. The plane landed at a very familiar airport at dusk, the usual compliment of soldiers greeting us. There was a time when I was anonymous, and I missed those days. They whisked us around to the hotel, Rudd and Cosy waiting in the bar. Arrangements had been made for the next few days, all in order, and talk turning to families. They stayed for a meal, and we caught up on the mundane and the important, Rudd reporting that the African Times was killing a national Kenyan paper. Since Jimmy aimed to kill many papers, we were not perturbed by the news.

The next morning we met with the Government, and Kenyan Airlines – who were struggling. We got straight to the point and made a hostile bid for the airline. The Government were happy, the airline sitting on large losses and trying to get the best deal they could. When Jimmy offered to wait till they went into administration they caved, a sum agreed. The photographer and reporter did their bit, and the news would hit our paper in the morning.

With the hostile takeover sorted, we met Cosy and Rudd again and drove around to a local college where we had just delivered two hundred new computers. The African east coast fibre-optic cable had been trunked from the offshore Internet cables and Nairobi was now wired up for better access. With TV crews filming, we sat behind screens and called up the African Times, reading the detail of yesterday’s meetings. That complete, our faces on the TV news, we drove down to Mombassa and the orphanage. Outside the main orphanage we inspected the new technical college, also now fitted with new computers and wired for Internet access, three hundred sixth formers attending.

In the main orphanage we greeted Anna, getting an update on statistics; five thousand kids, many day attendees. And twenty-six “special” kids from the Congo had been flown to Shanghai in a roundabout way, on Chinese transport planes, they reported. As a

group, we inspected the farm and its agricultural college, finding several classes of students up from Zimbabwe.

Jimmy and I met up with the CAR staff at the golf complex, and we stayed the night, greeting Kenya businessmen and tourists in the bar. In the morning we flew from Mombassa field down to Dar es Salaam, and met the Tanzanian Government. The news was mixed. The oil production was good, the revenue great, but the locals on Zanzibar were kicking off, provocateurs working out of the religious schools. The oil terminal had been ring-fenced and security tightened, but sabotage was an issue, one small bomb detonating. We made arrangements for supplies to arrive by boat, thereby further isolating the oil operations from the indigenous Muslim population. Beyond that, not even Jimmy could think of anything to do to ease tensions on the island.

We asked about airport slots for the new airline and enquired about two minor Tanzanian airlines, both struggling. The Tanzanians agreed to speak with them and ask about a merger with us. We agreed to another rail terminal and signed a document, soon back on the plane and flying direct to Mawlini, the CAR staff still with us. Coming in to land at Mawlini, I could see several new compounds out in the desert. When I asked Jimmy about them he said it was a surprise.

Mac picked us up in a jeep. 'A railway! They're building a fucking railway up here.'

'Oil transport,' I told him. 'Besides, you'll be able to get the train to ... Baardheere and Mogadishu.'

'Great, I was thinking of holidaying there!'

'It'll run thirty miles north at the closest point,' Jimmy informed him as we drove around to the hotel. Booked in, and luggage dumped, we climbed the stairs to the rooftop bar.

'It's good to be back,' I said as we emerged, finding the bar well attended with RF staff. Most of the new recruits stood, but were waved down by Jimmy. We grabbed a table and ordered beers, and I filled my lungs with the smell of the desert, noticing a familiar and welcoming orange glow on the horizon.

'How's the new house?' Jimmy asked Mac.

'What new house?' I asked.

'There's a new estate south of the camp,' Jimmy explained. 'The senior staff now live there, plus some oil workers.'

'Utopia we call it,' Mac joked. 'Very posh.'

'How're the Zimbabweans?' Jimmy asked Mac.

‘Good, all fresh faced and keen. Not that keen on the desert to start with, but a good bunch.’

‘And our American cousins?’ Jimmy asked.

Mac explained, ‘They made the mistake of joining in a few activities with the Rifles, some hurt, but now they mostly stick to what they’re good at – and teach on a blackboard! Hal and the others drink over there sometimes, at the Hawaiian Bar.’

‘Got the film?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Aye, all set for 7pm in the lecture theatre.’

‘Film?’ I repeated.

‘Lassie come home,’ Mac joked.

‘Cassie and Anton,’ Jimmy explained. ‘This is the unedited version.’

‘They’re here, and the nipper,’ Mac explained.

‘No maternity leave?’ I queried.

‘She’s on leave, Anton working here, so she stays here. Helps out a few hours a day.’

‘I though they’d quit,’ I admitted.

‘They love us too much,’ Mac quipped. ‘But they are looking at hospital jobs in the States somewhere.’

After a cool beer we drove around to Camp Delta, pulling up at the Officer’s Mess. Inside, we found Ngomo, now Colonel Ngomo.

‘What you doing here?’ I asked. ‘Shouldn’t you be in Nairobi driving a desk?’

‘Ah, what burden it is to be promoted,’ he let out. ‘But if I get ahead with the paperwork I can fiddle a trip or two up here.’

Jimmy shook his hand and we sat, a waiter bringing over a jug of water. ‘You’ve come a long way since we recruited you, old friend.’

‘From sleeping on the floor, to fighting in the desert, to the jungle, and now fighting with bureaucrats and politicians. I prefer the snakes of the jungle. And being shot at would be ... refreshing.’

We laughed.

‘And what of Afghanistan and the Somalis?’ Jimmy asked.

‘They have caught some al-Qa’eda men in the north, tortured and skinned alive.’

‘Any problems for the men?’ Jimmy asked. ‘After ... Afghanistan?’

‘Yes, they want to go back and do it again!’ he said with a smile. ‘Now the Somalis want to invade Yemen; they see the fighters coming across.’

‘And how is Abdi?’

‘He grows weary of his President. I think they will ... clash.’

‘Let’s hope cool heads prevail,’ Jimmy said. ‘And what of the living legend that is Colonel Ngomo, now in charge of the Rifles? How many kids now?’

‘Seven.’

‘Seven?’ I repeated. ‘Christ. When do you find the time?’

Ngomo laughed. ‘One wife, one ex-wife, but they both live with me.’

‘Bet you’re glad to go off to war!’ I said, making him laugh louder.

‘How are the young Zimbabweans?’ Jimmy asked.

‘They are making good progress, yes. We will return them in good condition. And your American friends, they ask about ... the detail of the mission to Afghanistan.’

‘I hope that you are discreet.’

‘I pretend to be stupid. That works with the politicians as well! So, sir, do you have any wars for me?’

‘No, sorry,’ Jimmy replied. ‘You have quelled Africa. You must get your portion of danger in your kitchen.’

Ngomo laughed. ‘And in Guinea they ran away, sir.’

‘Your reputation precedes you,’ Jimmy offered him. ‘Anyway, be happy that there’s less fighting. Enjoy the peace.’

We toured the camp, meeting some of the recruits as they trained under floodlights, and returned to the rooftop bar for a meal before the show. In the lecture theatre we found it packed, Cassie and Anton in the front row, Cassie sat with the baby.

‘Isn’t there a rule about babies in cinemas?’ I asked, closing in and holding the baby’s tiny hand.

‘We’re the stars of *Lassie Come Home*, so it’s OK,’ Cassie explained.

‘They haven’t been taking the piss, have they?’ I quipped, shaking my head.

Coup got the projector working and the room lights were knocked off.

Jimmy stood in the beam. ‘I’d like to watch this without howls of derision, so kindly shut the fuck up, there’s good rescuers.’

Everyone settled down and we caught glimpses of our people acting as extras. They flashed back to Cassie’s early life, and her family losses, the room quiet. When the actress stripped naked for the washing scene, in the spring water Cassie had found, the rude comments were plentiful. The film ended with Cassie accepting a marriage proposal from Anton. Everyone went ‘Ahhh,’ the lights turned back up.

I was very happy with it; it was very well made, and due for release soon. Cassie and Anton explained that they were renting an apartment in the new complex Mac had told me about, so we followed them to it.

South from the camp, two miles, we arrived at high brick walls and a gate with two guards. We followed Anton's jeep inside. Immediately inside the gate the road split left and right, the estate basically a large circle, and we turned left. Each house was set in its own grounds and was surrounded by plenty of mown grass, sprinklers working. These first few houses were four or six bedroom, and luxurious by African standards. As we circled around the complex I noted swimming pools at the rear of the houses.

They pulled up next to a three-storey apartment block, the apartments offering balconies, and a park opposite. We followed them up one flight of steps and into an apartment that was cool inside, nearly all white marble, or some similar material. A local woman greeted us, informing us that the food was on, Cassie explaining that all the houses and apartments here came with their own staff.

I peered out of the rear balcony, noting a large communal pool below, grass beyond it leading to a high brick wall, a security guard patrolling. Nosing into the bedrooms, I found them spacious and nicely decorated. 'All mod cons,' I quipped. 'Not quite the base hotel, is it?'

'We'll soften up here,' Anton joked. 'Still, can't have the baby in the hotel.'

'No,' I agreed. 'Those drunken twats will wake the kid at night.'

Anton laughed. 'Drink?'

'Cold beer if you have it.' I sat on a sofa and lifted the baby over. 'Hello little lady.'

'How are yours?' Cassie asked.

'Growing rapidly,' I replied. 'Food in one end, crap out the other, and they grow an inch while they sleep.'

'How old are they?'

'Shelly is four now, and growing rapidly. Lucy just about sixteen months.'

They were being careful not to mention the incident at the house; I could feel it.

'You're going to be famous soon,' Jimmy informed them. 'The film will put your faces out there for a while. Any more thoughts on a future career?'

‘Given the publicity, I’d rather be here,’ Cassie admitted, a glance at Anton and a look exchanged.

‘That publicity ... gets us new recruits for Rescue Force,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘And that saves lives.’

They stared back for a few seconds.

‘Well, after the tsunami, everyone in the world knows who Rescue Force are,’ Cassie suggested.

‘It’s helped,’ Jimmy acknowledged.

‘Any more predictions from that guy?’ Anton asked.

‘No, no yet. How’s your father?’

‘Busy with your paper, we all read it here. It’s a good way to find out what’s going on around our regions. So, you’re buying up every airline in Africa?’

‘Many of them, yes. Be fewer plane crashes then, since we’ll bring modern aircraft in; Boeings and Airbus. And we’ll subsidise them. There’ll soon be regular flights from here to Goma hub, from there onwards to Europe and the States. Weekly flight from JFK now, make it easier for you to visit.’

‘Last trip took two whole days!’ Anton complained.

‘It’s now two hours to Goma, just under, and from there it’s direct to JFK,’ Jimmy explained.

‘Excellent. One more reason to stay here,’ Cassie suggested, getting a look from Anton. ‘Least for a while,’ she added.

‘We’re not paying for this place,’ Anton mentioned.

‘Your movie helps us, so we help you. Simple.’ Jimmy waited.

‘Very kind of you,’ Anton acknowledged. ‘And Cassie has the book royalties. It’s adding up.’

‘Has your father visited this place?’ Jimmy asked Anton.

‘No, no yet.’

‘Invite him, do a tour of Kenya, stay at the hotels.’

‘I will do.’

‘Listen,’ Jimmy began. ‘Your recruitment poster contribution will help us a lot, so I’m flexible on what you do. You can stay here as long as you like, or even think about training jobs at Mapley. We’d like to keep hold of you as long as we can.’

The meal their cook provided was tasty, and there was plenty of it. After coffee we walked around to meet the neighbours, dropping in on Mac, Jimmy explaining that Rabbit and Handy had also moved in. Well, it was a six-bedroom mansion. I rang their bell, the door opened by a local woman.

‘Yes?’

‘Jimmy Silo.’

‘Oh, my lord. Come in, come in.’

From the internal balcony, at the top of the stairs, Mac said. ‘I’m going to get a guard dog. Keep the door-to-door sellers out.’

‘Very ostentatious,’ I said, taking in the place as Mac came down the stairs. ‘Too posh for you fuckers.’

‘Way too posh,’ Mac admitted. ‘But it was cheap.’

Jimmy explained to me, ‘They pay a modest rent, the three young bachelors.’

In the lounge we sat, Rabbit walking in and joining us.

‘How’s the estate?’ Jimmy asked them.

‘Very nice, oasis in the desert,’ Rabbit reported. ‘Two minute drive to work.’

‘Who’s in the other houses?’ I asked.

‘Coup and his mate in one, Doc Hoskins and his lady in another, UN boss in one, six doctors sharing in one, Rifles Major in one - with his family of fifty kids. Hal has an apartment he shares with another flyer, some oil workers in the rest.’

‘Oil workers!’ I mock complained.

‘The mangers,’ Rabbit explained. ‘There’s only three left empty. Oh, Skids and Trev are here now.’

‘They are?’ I queried.

Jimmy explained, ‘They got bored with farming, so they teach the Rifles now. We bought back their land.’

‘I wouldn’t mind a farm,’ Mac suggested.

‘You’d last a week,’ Jimmy firmly told him. ‘Then you’d want to be back where the action is, old man. Learn from Skids.’

Mac faced me. ‘So what happened at your house? Really happened?’

‘Someone came between me and my daughter. He was dead as soon as I realised that.’

‘You were hurt?’ Rabbit asked.

‘No.’ I glanced at Jimmy. ‘The big fucker hit me to make it look like I’d been in a fight.’

‘So what happened?’ they pressed.

‘Ex-SAS trooper snuck in, taking his time, up my wall and in through an open window. Idiot was trying to impress us about how good he was; he just wanted a job. He surprised me in my lounge, so I hit him. A lethal blow.’

‘You fight?’ Rabbit asked.

I faced Jimmy, who said, ‘He’s had lessons for many years. He was never in any danger.’

‘UK police OK?’ Rabbit asked. I nodded. ‘Lucky.’ Facing Jimmy, he said, ‘UN asking for mine experts for Afghanistan.’

‘Don’t send any, they’ll get themselves killed.’

‘How many mines did the Rifles plant around that airfield?’ Mac asked.

‘Two thousand, plus booby traps.’

‘Stories coming out are incredible,’ Rabbit noted. ‘Did the Somali boys go psycho on the locals?’

Jimmy nodded. ‘They lost their discipline, wiped out a few towns; men, women, kids and livestock.’

‘The UN is saying twenty-five thousand dead or wounded,’ Mac posed.

‘I think more,’ Jimmy responded. ‘And they’re having a hard winter, bridges and roads blown.’

‘And those Taliban people still host these al-Qa’eda unhappy chappies?’ Mac asked.

Jimmy nodded. ‘They’ve been crossing from Yemen to attack Northern Somalia. But, so far, all stopped before they could do any damage.’

‘And how long before Abdi tops his President?’ Mac knowingly asked.

‘I would hope that he doesn’t,’ Jimmy responded. ‘But the President is ... corrupt to say the least. Anyway, what did you think of the film?’

‘Aye, nice,’ Mac agreed. ‘Good publicity, and it gets across the Darfur problem – which is still a problem.’

‘How many teams up there?’ I asked.

‘We’ve never got less than two hundred people up there. Camps are emptying slowly ... because we’re feeding them!’

‘Feed them less, nudge them back,’ Jimmy ordered. ‘How’s Doc Adam these days?’

‘Back in that clinic over the road, and that keeps growing,’ Mac reported with a grin.

‘To fit in all his kids!’ Rabbit joked. ‘He has six already, by three women.’

I suddenly realised something. ‘Where does the electricity for the estate come from?’

Mac explained, ‘Two miles up the road is an oil-powered power station. It supplies the local town now, the base, the oil derricks and this place. Not short of oil, they ain’t. We used to get electricity from the town grid, now it all comes from the new power station – thanks to you.’

‘Nice of us,’ I noted.

We popped into to see Skids, a brief visit, and drove back with our escorts, staying the night in the RF hotel. In the morning we caught a lift on a Dash-7 to Goma, landing in time to board a flight to Paris, soon back in the office and facing a mountain of paperwork created by our recent activities. And Jimmy, he informed us that we had three days before heading off to Cuba and the States.

Making new friends

The next day I approached Jimmy. ‘Got an idea.’ He led me to a quiet spot. I said, ‘You told me before, that we needed to get the American public on our side. I’ve got a few ideas so, unless there’s a crisis, I’m taking the family over there. We’ll have a bit of a break as well.’ I stood without waiting for a reply. ‘Been good chatting.’

The following day I took Cat and my family across the pond to New York. I had been saving money, and trading it, for almost twenty years, acting as fall-back banker to Jimmy. The amounts in my trading accounts now added up to a very large sum, hidden by the fact that it was tied up in stock. I suddenly felt like spending some.

Three vans had awaited our arrival at JFK, more security than usual, and they whisked us around to the apartment. There we found Oliver and his wife; they had stocked the fridge and stayed to chat for an hour, Shelly fascinated by the view of the lights and the streets far below. In the morning I met with Oliver again and we poured over figures.

‘The magazine, both versions of it – I’m not seeing any stats,’ I told them.

‘Sales stats you get,’ Oliver reminded me.

‘No, stats on how its used, perceived – demographics. Plus how people use the advertising, tourists especially. Do we know how many people book holidays through it?’

‘Not directly,’ they said. ‘People might see the adverts and decide a year later.’

‘Do a study for me,’ I insisted. ‘Demographics of readership, and if they pay attention to the adverts.’ They made notes. ‘Clubs ready?’

‘Within the week,’ Oliver said. ‘You around?’

‘Yes, we’ll be there.’

‘Jimmy in Cuba?’ they asked.

I nodded. ‘I had an idea. Charity galas for Africa, with our singers at the tables, charge a fortune for tickets – at least let them bid on e-Bay. Make it a series of gala events, right across the States, and a regular event thereafter. And I’d like to see the first one in ten days or so; we’ll stick around. Oh, and get some Rescue Force people in there as well.’

‘Hal coming over?’ they asked.

I lifted the phone and rang Mawlini, and requested Hal be shipped over as soon as possible, requesting Cassie and Anton if they were available.

‘OK, next,’ I said. ‘Can you get me an estate agent, I’m interested in a nice apartment for the family.’

‘Real estate-or,’ they corrected me.

‘Why can’t you Americans just use proper Queen’s English, eh?’

That afternoon the estate agent came around, a handful of sheets detailing various large apartments around Central Park. I found one I liked straight away and showed Helen, soon travelling around in the vans to view it. When Helen said she liked it I made the offer there and then, six million dollars. I guess the lady was on a commission, since she looked very happy.

That evening we agreed to a chat show style interview, a taped interview with the kids present – take it or leave it. They agreed, and we recorded the interview the next afternoon. Lucy was well behaved, but tried to answer the questions in her odd mix of sounds, and Shelly went all shy for a change.

‘So, Paul, the tsunami: it held our attention over the holidays, amazing scenes coming out of that region. And you, of course, sent in the rescuers. How many did you send?’

‘We sent all we had, plus reserves, plus a few on the sick list. We even had part-times and former members over there.’

‘And you obviously saved lives with your earthquake warning. Guess no one will be criticising that now?’

‘We’re still being sued by a few companies for loss of tourist earnings, but we’re determined to fight them.’

‘And we understand that you’ll be running a number of charity galas to raise money for Africa.’

‘Yes, starting next weekend, tickets to be auctioned to the highest bidders. Many of our singers will be there, and we’ll be there. Hal the pilot will be over, and a few others.’

‘And you’ve just started an airline in Africa.’

‘We’ve bought up several airlines and they’ll be formed into one airline, the biggest in Africa. We’re subsidising the ticket costs to try and boost tourism and trade.’

‘And now a weekly flight from JFK direct to the heart of the jungle.’

‘Yes, you can take off from the concrete jungle and land in a proper jungle.’

‘Helen, how are you juggling being a mother of two, and the work that Paul and Jimmy create?’

‘Living next door to Jimmy helps,’ Helen explained. ‘We have babysitters and a nursery nurse, so I have the days free to work.’

‘And your area is communications and the press, right?’

‘Yes, I handled the communications for the tsunami, and the press statements.’

‘Salami,’ Shelly said.

‘No, tsunami,’ I correct her. ‘One is sausage, and one is a big wave.’

Shelly waved at the interviewer, the small studio audience laughing.

‘No, we’re not leaving yet,’ I told her.

‘You’re old,’ she told the interviewer, the audience laughing.

‘Without the make-up – I’m ancient!’

‘Don’t be rude, young lady,’ I told Shelly.

‘And you’ve been house hunting over here.’

‘Yes, we’ve just bought an apartment overlooking Central Park.’

‘Be spending more time here?’

‘I hope so, we like our visits.’

‘I know it’s a painful subject, but let’s talk a little about the incident at your house. You have a house in the same estate as Jimmy Silo, yes.’ I nodded. ‘And someone broke in.’

‘He was a soldier, special forces, and someone who had applied for a job with us.’

‘So he was disgruntled at not getting the job.’

I nodded again. ‘I guess so.’

‘And he broke in and attacked the both of you, in front of the children.’

‘He came down the stairs, and I thought he was one of our security staff – till he hit me. Helen rushed to my aid, and she got hit as well. But I got up and landed a few punches, one hitting him in the throat, which closed his windpipe. Our security staff performed CPR, but he died.’

‘It’s a secure estate?’

‘Very secure, but the guy was Special Forces trained,’ I explained. ‘Besides, we try not to lock ourselves away too much.’

‘So what’s next for you?’

‘Well, we’ll be opening nightclubs, here in New York and in Los Angeles.’

‘Do I get an invite?’

‘No, you’re too old,’ I joked. ‘Yes, of course you do. We cater for the older gentlemen.’

The next day we viewed the new club, a hotel with several large ballrooms that had been converted to offer a modern feel. The hotel had also previously offered two nice restaurants that were typically the haunt of non-residents. Unlike the UK, we figured that the American patrons were not ready for a curry house, so we converted one restaurant to a Chinese and left the other as it was.

The club had a capacity of three thousand, not including the hotel rooms upstairs, one of which had been converted to a bar on each floor. Hotel guests would be able retire to these bars, but club guests could not follow.

That afternoon, with the sky clear, I took Shelly with me for an aerial tour of the city. We both sat in the rear of a Jetranger, the pilot thrilled to have me as a passenger, and we flew a loop around the island. Shelly was delighted. She was never happier than when up high, and looking down at the detail below, not at all nervous. I found myself thinking about her future, and would she ever fly a helicopter. And when she grew up, would they still use helicopters, or would something else have replaced them by then?

Back in the apartment, Shelly ran screaming down the corridor to Helen, rapidly explaining the helicopter flight.

‘She’s got no fear of heights,’ I said as I kissed Helen.

After our meal, Shelly sat down with a large piece of paper and drew the New York skyline, from memory. Noticing it, I called over Helen and we both stood in silence and observed our daughter add more detail than a typical adult could have remembered.

‘She’s autistic,’ Helen admitted.

‘According to Jimmy, she was supposed to be very bright without being autistic.’

‘But that’s incredible for a four-year-old.’

‘She is what she is - we can’t change that. Besides, she has no introvert tendencies. Look at that helicopter flight. Most kids would freak, let alone autistic ones.’

There was only one thing to do. We called an expert, the man coming around to the apartment the next day. He sat with Shelly and asked her questions, gave her mathematical problems to solve, showed her pictures with many coloured dots and asked her how many were there.

After an hour he stepped into the kitchen and found us. 'She's very bright. I'd go so far as to say exceptional. But she exhibits no signs of classical autism. She's outgoing and lively, no fear of strangers or a break in her routine. And she called me a Pillock, whatever that is England.'

Helen and I exchanged looks and hid our grins.

'That's good to know,' I said. 'Not about the Pillock, I mean. Thanks.' I paid him and let him out, explaining just how much legal trouble he would have if he spoke to the press. We felt better, then told off Shelly for using bad words, trying to explain that it was OK for us to use them, but not her. She stuck her tongue out at us, turned her back and carried on drawing, being reassuringly child-like and naughty.

With Senator Pedersen inviting us down to Texas, we hopped on a flight and ended up at a ranch that reminded me of the South Fork Ranch on Dallas. Our security occupied a bunkhouse, some staying at a nearby motel, and we dumped our luggage in a palatial guest bedroom. Downstairs, Chuck and his wife showed us the pool, which was a bad idea. Five minutes later we finally managed to fish out Shelly, who had jumped in fully clothed. Sat around the pool on patio furniture, Chuck and I got around to chatting about the medical insurance company. He gave me an idea and I called Jimmy.

'Jimbo. Senator Pedersen's medical insurance company: how about some CAR shares at a good price. There are seven shares hanging around.'

'Make it ten, some of ours. How's Shelly?'

'Fine. And we're OK too. Bye.' I faced Chuck over the ice teas. 'We'll sell ten percent of CAR to your insurance company at a good price. They'll appreciate at roughly a hundred percent a year.'

'If we have shares in CAR, and they're in Cuba, then we'd be breaking a few laws,' Chuck pointed out.

'CAR is not in Cuba; we sub-contract to our Chinese and Russian partners. So, technically, you're OK.'

'I'll check it out anyway. May be a good first step at lifting sanctions anyway.'

'How many people are signed up to the insurance company?' I asked.

Chuck lifted his eyebrows for effect. 'Coming up to twenty million; we've rolled it out to every major city. We're third nationally.'

'If the investment bank bought property in Central Africa, then it would appreciate very well, especially around Goma airport. That'll be like New York in a few years.'

'Yeah?' Chuck gave it some thought. 'There's plenty of cash lying around. Could invest a hundred and fifty million straight away.'

'I'll arrange it; there's a big need for quality apartments in that area - for the skilled workers. And it's very cheap to build. A hundred and fifty million would get you twenty tall apartment blocks. And the people here would see it as helping Africa.'

'How's Hardon Chase working out?' Chuck asked me.

'I would have thought you knew more than us.'

'Presidents don't much meet with party Senators, it ain't like England.'

'So far he's playing ball.'

'He's chosen a building to house our embassy in Cuba. They'll make the announcement soon.'

'Full diplomatic relations?'

'Well, as close as you could get given the circumstances. Bunch of Democratic Congressmen due to head down there on a fact-finding mission soon. Anyway, what you got Art Johnson doing for ya'll?'

'Global warming and green energy; he heads up a foundation we created. Keeps him close, and out of trouble. And Harvey is pushing a few projects such as the student exchanges. He's also involved in educational programmes in Africa and the Internet connections for them.'

'There's a function tonight in Dallas if you want to attend; a Republican fundraiser.'

'Sure. The more exposure the better. And if you can get us on the local news together...'

'Trying to help my ratings?' he teased.

'I'm trying to help my own ratings. We'll be doing more over here in the future, so may as well get the face around.'

'Most folk already know you. Hey, ya going to that premier in LA, the Cassie girl?'

'Yes, we'll be there. You?'

'No, work. But I'll try that club in New York next week, I'm up there for a fundraiser.'

‘Your party has only just got into power,’ I puzzled. ‘Why the fundraiser?’

‘They go on all year round; chance to posture, plot and scheme... as well as make some money for the party. Way it works... everyone already has their eye on the next election.’

‘In Britain, we start electioneering two months before the polls open. And even then it’s dull.’

With Cat watching the girls, Helen and I dressed up smart and followed Chuck to the fundraiser, causing turned heads as we entered. Chuck introduced us to his friends and they asked all about the tsunami and Africa, but were soon talking oil and money. Well, it was a Republican bash in Texas. My first brush with an oddball came when a woman in her fifties asked me if I was a churchgoer.

‘No,’ I replied, shocking her; or maybe touching upon her lack of tolerance for others.

‘Folks around here don’t much like non-believers,’ she threatened.

‘Some people pray for Africa, lady. I deliver the prayers. How many orphanages do you run?’

She did not like that, one bit. ‘I’m the chief fundraiser for my church district.’

‘How much do you raise?’ I pressed, Helen seeming uneasy out of the corner of my eye.

‘We raised more than a million dollars for the missionary fund last year.’

‘I spend just under five billion dollars a year in Africa. My orphanages have over a hundred thousand children.’

‘And do the children receive a proper Christian upbringing?’

‘They do, and we’re very strict with them. We also try and find all of them jobs when they leave us. So let me tell you what I think Christianity is: it’s about doing, not praying in your little white church full of white folk.’

Chuck was concerned at the tone and stepped in, introducing me to one of his other friends. This new conversation got around to prison reform.

‘Kill them all,’ I said. ‘Don’t waste taxpayer’s money keeping them in prison – it’s inhumane.’

The guy was one of just a few Republicans opposed to capital punishment, and stood shocked at my statement, Chuck again uneasy.

I continued, 'In Central Africa, we hang more than a hundred a week. And some don't make it to the gallows, they get shot in the act.' I shrugged. 'Bullets are cheap enough.'

'And do you not believe in a fair trial?'

'Sure. Before we got there the region offered one judge for every two hundred miles in any direction. So we paid for them to come in, plus lawyers and police. The local people like a good trial, plus a good hanging afterwards. It breaks up Saturday shopping, a good hanging at lunchtime.'

I hadn't set out to be so obstinate, and Helen was glaring.

Chuck led me away. 'God damn, Paul. Around here you'd be further right than ... anyone I've met of late. I thought you English were all reserved and apologetic.'

'I was hired for my straight talking. And to make the tea.' I promised to be a good boy, and chatted about helicopters to a man who owned a few. But it was a political fundraiser, and we got back onto politics again, this time Cuba.

'Don't much like your fondness for Cuba,' a white haired old man remarked.

'That's good, because we're buying up all the good land and hotels. They've appreciated thirty percent in the last year alone. And we've got oil contracts ... and you don't. By time you've kissed and made up with Cuba you'll be buying your oil from me. And as for them being a communist dictatorship – so is China, and you do a lot of business with them. In fact, Hardon Chase is trying to get them to loan you more money. How's that for double standards!'

The man walked off in a huff.

Chuck approached, 'If they ask you to give a speech – don't. Please. I have to get along with these folks.'

Helen led me to a table and we sat, snacks brought out. 'You're in a good mood.'

'I'm ... just a bit pissed off with it all. We're trying to fix things and ... and they're all in their own little world with their set views. Fucking States is a country of two hundred million individuals, all doing their own thing.'

'That's democracy.'

'That's not working.' I heaved a breath. 'So, you think they'll let me stand up and give a speech?'

Helen could not resist a stifled laugh. 'You may as well piss them all off in one go, dear, save working the room.'

I smiled. 'I'm OK. It just seems ... like hard work.'

We chatted to a few people for thirty minutes, and I tried to stay off politics, much talk of the kids and holidays. Then the speeches started; short durations per speaker, and often just party rhetoric. I noticed the man going around and setting the order of the speeches, and grabbed him, asking for a slot. With Chuck and Helen looking worried, I climbed the podium and took the microphone.

‘I hope you can all understand my English accent. My name is Paul Holton, and I’m non-political, in that I dislike both sides in equal measure.’ Helen closed her eyes. I continued, ‘I’ve had a few brief conversations with various people here tonight, and we’ve exchanged frank views. And the one thing that strikes me ... is how set in your ways some of you are, especially in your attitude to countries like Cuba.

‘Well, I get see the oil prospecting charts for Cuba, and over the next ten and twenty years Cuba will become as rich as Saudi Arabia. And while you’re trying to decide if you want to do business with a communist dictatorship – sorry, I forgot – you already do a lot of business with dictators, communist and otherwise. China is now the largest buyer of US Treasury bonds, and without them you’d be suffering. They hold so many dollars they own thirty percent of America. Then there’s Saudi Arabia, a dictatorship that doesn’t let women show their faces in public. They own around six percent of American stocks.

‘So let’s not kid ourselves, you deal with whoever suits your needs, communist or not, dictator or not. So let’s talk a bit about Africa, because it has lots of dictators as well. Africa is the planets greatest untapped resource; it has more ore than the rest of the world combined, more oil than the Middle East. And how often do I come across American companies in Africa? Hardly ever, accept those we invite in. Your greatest potential business opportunity is slipping you by whilst Russian and Chinese companies get into Africa and places like Cuba, because you’re too stubborn to ease relations with Cuba. Communist? Rubbish. Dictator? So are seventy percent of the world’s leaders that you do business with.

‘You can spend a lot of time plotting, scheming, and fighting with the Democrats, and all the while the real fight is out there – and you don’t even know where it is on the map. Well, you can hang onto your prejudices, because those prejudices are making me over five billion dollars a year profit from just one area of Africa. Our industrial area, the Congo, already has the largest GDP in Africa, and an annual rate of growth of close to a hundred percent. In the decades ahead, the population there will be looking to buy goods

with their new high earnings, and where will they buy the goods they need? Not here.

‘There was a time that America was good at building things and selling them around the world. What happened to all that, eh? You’re not so much doing badly in the growing regions, as not bothering to even send sales reps. Well, you can sit here and posture all you like, with your three percent growth in GDP each year, more like minus one in real terms, whilst Russia, China and Africa are growing at ten percent or more in real terms. One day - real soon - you’re going to wake up to find that the rest of the world has left you behind. And they’ll buy goods from each other, because you’re not even trying to sell to them because of your moral high ground and political sensitivities, and because you’re hypocrites who claim that you can’t deal with people because they’re dictators. Fine, sit on the sidelines and watch as your exports fall as your cost of living rises, and blame each other and the other political parties. You’re like two Prairie Dogs arguing, when you should have an eye on the hawk circling above you. And... thanks for listening, you’ve been a great audience. I also do weddings and circumcisions.’

I stepped down to a chorus of hushed conversations, not even noticing the camera in the corner. Chuck was trying, and failing, to hide a grin, and led us out.

‘Well, that was nice,’ Helen quipped as we got into car.

‘Thing is,’ Chuck began, ‘he ain’t wrong. We’re sitting by while others grow strong, and outpace us. Maybe we need a kick in the pants. Just not the shins and groin, which is where Paul was aiming.’

‘Sorry,’ I said with a sigh.

‘These things are normally right dull, so don’t be sorry. They’ll be talking about that for a while.’

The next morning, as we came down for breakfast, Chuck reported, ‘You made the local morning news.’

I picked up a paper, thinking the story to be in it. It was, but Chuck was referring to the TV news. ‘What page?’

‘Channel 9.’

‘TV?’ I queried, wide-eyed.

‘Yep. Texas got its kick in the pants at 7am. But, in your defence, they had you down as tipsy.’ He tapped a paper. ‘Full transcript of your *speech* on page three.’

We sat and ate breakfast, feeding the kids as Chuck took a lot of calls.

‘Be on national TV later. They’ve syndicated it,’ Chuck reported.

‘Yeah? Am I in trouble?’

‘They either love it or hate it, but a bit of a debate raging about some the issues. It’s a healthy debate, not least on the export deficit. And the five billion a year payroll got some attention.’

‘Should I say something?’ I asked.

‘Stick to your guns, Paul. You spoke your mind, so let the debate echo around the country a while. Might loosen some cobwebs.’

After breakfast I rang Jimmy. He listened, then asked how Shelly and Lucy were, suggesting I do something with veterans, and that was about all.

‘Jimmy annoyed?’ Helen asked.

‘No, hardly mentioned it, just asked after the kids.’

With the day cool we stayed indoors and played with Lucy, reading the papers and watching the TV news. At 3pm a national network asked Chuck for an interview and I agreed. Since they were already at the gate, we let them in, allowing them to set-up inside the house. Ready for the interview, Helen sat with Lucy, who was being very well behaved, and I held Shelly, who was not quite so well behaved. Not wishing to seem rude to our host, we invited him to sit with us.

‘Senator, has Paul’s comments caused you any problems?’ the lady interviewer began with.

‘Not at all. Everyone has the right to speak their mind, and for a British fella he’s ... forthright.’

‘Do you agree with what Paul said?’

‘Most of it, yes: we used to make things and sell them - that’s what made this country great. The export deficit is a real concern for everyone.’

‘And the Administrations view on Cuba?’

‘As Paul said, we deal with many communist countries, so we can’t hide behind that any more. Heck, according to the United Nations sixty percent of all world governments are undemocratic. And if we don’t do business with Cuba, someone else will. We’d be cutting our noses off to spite our faces.’

‘And Africa?’

‘I’m already involved with Africa, have been for a while, and shouting the cause for more investment over there. We can’t sit back while China and Russia get the best deals.’

‘Paul, were you drunk?’

‘No, but I had been drinking. Besides, we all tend to say what’s on our minds after a few drinks.’

‘You make five billion dollars a year?’

‘Yes, but it all stays in Africa, spent on orphanages, schools and roads.’

‘All of it?’

‘Jimmy and me, we live off our trading funds in the UK, we don’t take money out of Africa.’

‘But you could pay yourself that money?’

‘Yes.’

‘Helen, would you like to see some of that money?’

‘I have all I need right here.’ She touched Shelly’s head.

‘And I give her a ten dollar a week allowance.’ That earned me a look from Helen.

Shelly pointed at the interviewer. ‘Are you Jimmy’s girlfriend?’

The interviewer blushed. ‘I wish I was.’ We laughed. ‘So, Paul, any plans to get involved in American politics?’

‘I’m British, so no. But I will try and influence some areas, like getting you more involved with Africa.’

‘Will you be meeting the President this visit?’

‘I hope so, but he’s a busy man. Jimmy is in Cuba, and when he’s finished down there he’ll report to Hardon Chase on progress, so we’ll see the President then.’

‘You still work closely with ex-President Harvey, and now Art Johnson. Would you say that you’re a Democrat or Republican?’

I lifted Lucy off Helen and placed her on Chuck. ‘Kiss the baby in front of the cameras, it’ll get you some more votes.’ We laughed. ‘I’m not a follower of either party, I’ll suck-up to anyone who’ll helps us in Africa. I’ll be launching a drive for second hand computers soon, for schools in Africa.’

I was proud of myself; I had made that up on the spot. ‘I’d like schools and colleges to collect them and box them up, and then we’ll organise shipment points in major cities. Most adults in Africa have never touched a computer, let alone the children there.’

With the interview done, they packed up and thanked us. I offered the lady Jimmy’s number, but Helen stopped me.

That evening the phone went: Hardon Chase. ‘So, Paul, how’s your vacation going?’

‘Good. I’m staying away from anything controversial.’

‘You’re all over the news on the East Coast, quite a debate raging. Fortunately, you get my message across better than my own damn speechwriters. You want a job?’

‘I’ve got five jobs as it is now. When’s Jimmy up to see you?’

‘Not for a week or so, but I’m in Texas tomorrow if you’ve got a baby I can kiss.’

‘Send the details, and a speech, and I’ll get you some votes.’

‘Weddings ... and circumcisions?’

‘I didn’t know there was a damn camera there.’

‘Get used to being famous; always a camera around when you least expect it!’

Chuck got the details, a black-tie dinner with the State Governor at his residence. We enjoyed a quiet night in, Chuck off seeing people, and we sat and watched the TV news, and political debating programmes – those we could find. Across the board, my coverage was better than I had expected.

The next evening, at the dinner, Helen and I were both dressed smart, Helen always looking stunning in one of her black dresses. And we were honoured guests, sat two people away from Hardon Chase on the top table. To the side of me was a rich local businessman, opposite us a collection of politicians, the city mayor and the police chief. The businessman was most interested in our oil businesses, the mayor making very polite sleights about my speech. He managed to form the words, saying that he approved, whilst inferring that he didn’t. I held my tongue.

The Governor made a speech, dry jokes and little of substance, before Hardon Chase got up. With everyone glancing my way, he paraphrased my outburst to make it seem as if it was his own policy, and expanded upon the topics; exports and trade. In fairness, he was already pushing the policies where he could. At the end of his speech, the bugger invited me to talk.

I stood, not having prepared anything, and they clapped politely. ‘To all the politicians in the room, I must apologise – we didn’t bring the baby for you to kiss.’ They chuckled sedately. ‘And I’ve not had much to drink tonight either.’

I waited for them to settle and took in the faces. There was a time that I could not have done this, and I was proud of myself in a way for how far I had come. ‘There’s an old saying: many a true word spoken in jest. And I think we’d all benefit from seeing our politicians – in all countries – have a few drinks and speak their minds for a change. Of course, they’d all be out of a job the next day – but we’d know more about them.

‘America is in a race, a race with many other countries, and you’re falling behind. The wages that other countries pay are a tenth of yours, the skill gap closing. And those other countries, well, some of them have vast resources as well. You used to make planes, and tractors, and cars, and sell them all over the world. Then companies like IBM led the way and you dominated the computer market, and

you still do in some areas. But the days are gone of major industrial exports, and in many of those areas you cannot compete.

‘But there are some areas that you lead in, such as film, literature and music, still great exports. If I were the President I’d see Hollywood as an export industry worth assisting, same too for your music industry. But you now buy a lot more than you sell, and that has a limited duration before the deficit drags you down. The kind of things that keep me awake at night, the kind of long-term forecasts that I think about, are known to your politicians, and they’re known to most of you - they have been for a while. The problem is one of a short-term agenda. Which President, from which party, would have the guts to make a decision that is painful for the taxpayers now, but good for your children? Which President will set in motion things now that are good for the long term, but might lose him seats at the mid-term elections? From where I sit, it seems that being popular is more important than doing what’s right. I’d like to see President Chase, and whoever follows him, have a sign over the desk that says “Do what’s right for the long term, and to hell with the next election”. Of course, it’ll never happen, and twenty years from now the same problems will still be there.

‘Of course, if the Democrats had the guts to do something for the interests of the country, and actually shock us all and vote with the Republicans, then maybe the incumbent President could pin that sign up. After all, you did it during the last war. The problem, now, is that you’re not in a war. The problem is ... that your situation now is far worse than it was in 1941. Then you faced a five-year war, now you face a twenty-year slow economic death, sat around blaming everyone apart from yourselves.

‘Well, there’s only one group of people to blame, and that’s yourselves. President Chase can do so much, but only so much. He needs the Democrats to help make some tough decisions, and he needs the American people to wake up and notice the tide coming in. And I’ll make you this bet. Twenty years from now China will be the richest and strongest nation, followed by Russia, then India, then Africa, and somewhere down the line will be America. And you’ll still all be sat around blaming everyone else for the fall from greatness.

‘It’s not too late; it just needs a miracle. And that miracle would be the baby kissers thinking more about their children than their current ratings, or getting back into office. So ... given what we all know about baby kissers, there’s very little hope for you. And ...

you're welcome.' I sat to a shocked and deafening silence, Helen looking terrified.

Hardon Chase slowly stood. 'Sometimes ... it takes an outside point of view for us to see through the fog of politics. And yes, I will be appointing Paul as chief speechwriter.' He began clapping and the rest joined in. 'Unprepared, ladies and gentlemen, and from the heart. Wow.' He gestured towards me. 'If any of you need a speechwriter.'

After the meal we stood and mingled, drinks in hand, Chase sticking close by.

'That was helpful,' he suggested. 'Might get some Democrats on board.'

'Yeah, well here's something else helpful: stop printing dollars and start work on electric cars.'

He took a moment. 'The Chinese have turned down our requests to buy more bonds.'

'And you know why. Boom and bust.'

'We've tightened the mortgage rules.'

'Your banks just invented CDOs, right on cue, and the big banks are going to fuck around. Jump on them, and we'll talk to the Chinese. Around these parts, that's called horse-trading, I believe.'

Chuck closed in. He had been sat at the far end. 'There's no stopping you once you get going, is there?'

'We only have the one planet, the one lifetime.'

Chuck nodded to himself. 'True.'

'We'll be off to Los Angeles tomorrow. You about in the morning?'

'Gotta head back myself.'

'Then you have to come and stay with us soon,' I told him.

'Going to take a few buddies to that new airport of yours, a JFK flight. Have us a good look around and see if we can't find some land to build on.'

'Land is free; you pay for the building. Have a look at the towers near the airport, then just order one up and pay for it, we'll do the rest.'

'Kind of you. And the annual appreciation?'

'At the moment it's about a hundred percent; lots of companies wanting apartments for their staff.'

Arriving in L.A., we were driven to Po's family mansion, finding someone we knew in residence - Han's favourite family, the two daughters now much taller.

‘My god, they’ve grown two feet!’ I said in Chinese.

Shelly was fascinated by the taller and older sisters, and they adopted our daughter straight away, leaving us to chat about work and family. LA seemed to be much warmer than Texas, and Shelly spent a lot of time in the pool, the rest of us sat about the garden. I visited the Pineapple offices, plus a studio they made use of, and flew along the coast in a helicopter, Shelly getting the tour with me. But with the press asking for more interviews, I decided to be bold and agreed to talk if I could co-host my own programme and bring in chosen experts.

With Helen nervous, and wanting to call Jimmy, I reassured her that it would be fine, whilst wondering if we’d get out of the country in one piece. I drove around to the TV studio the next day and we shot the “evening” show with the afternoon sun warm. Inside the studio, a world where the time did not matter, we sat through make-up and settled around a large desk. Assembled about the desk was myself, the interviewer, a Democratic spokesperson, a Republican spokesperson, and three eminent professors: oil, economics and politics.

‘We’re here tonight –’ the lady interview began, despite the sun shining outside. ‘- with international entrepreneur Paul Holton, and a panel of selected political spokesmen and experts.’ She named each and listed their skills. ‘First of all, Professor Gibbs, how do you see Americas position in the race that Paul recently described?’

‘Well, it’s not so much that America is slipping, as that our rate of growth is not as fantastic as some of the emerging countries, and their rate of growth is good because they started from a smaller base. They’ll slow up in time, wages will rise, their middle classes will want more freedoms and rights.’

‘Doctor Marks?’

‘That’s a fair assessment, but we must all keep in mind that we live in the here and now, and getting any satisfaction from China struggling with its middle classes in twenty years time is not going to help us much. Besides, India and Brazil are democratic and have eccentric class structures. In those countries its the poor that will cause them problems.’

‘Professor Smith?’

‘On day one of an economics degree, I like to the use the analogy of a country operating like small business; you have to sell your goods to make money and maintain a high standard of living. You can sell your wife some goods, and your children and cousins, but if you want to succeed then you have to sell your goods to strangers.

American has always had a great internalising marketplace, that's not the problem. China has very little of an internal market place and they would benefit from developing it. In addition to selling to us, the Chinese could have a massive buffer to play with – which would be selling more goods internally. We don't have that buffer, because we're already operating an efficient internal market.'

'Paul?'

'As the professor said, you have to sell your goods to strangers to prosper. But what you've been doing is increasing personal, company and national debt to maintain the internal markets and your standard of living. You've borrowed beyond your means already, and that trend seems likely to continue till it breaks.'

'A Democrat view?' the interviewer asked of the Democrat spokesman.

'Our party did a good job of keeping the deficit down, and we handed over to Hardon Chase a good balance sheet.'

'I'd like to agree with that,' I put in.

The Republican spokesman said, 'We've always been the party of low spending on government and lowering taxes so that people can buy, thereby stimulating the economy.'

'The internal economy,' I pointed out.

Smith put in, 'And that internal economy has a saturation point, of which we're already over a hundred percent due to private indebtedness.'

'Let's talk about the oil economy,' the interviewer began. 'Paul?'

'A few decades ago, America persuaded OPEC to trade oil in dollars, and you thought you were being very clever. Successive governments have bailed themselves out by printing dollars to pay for your oil imports. But because those dollars live overseas, and are not sloshing around the States, it did not cause inflation. The problem comes if, and when OPEC decides to drop the dollar.'

'You think that is a possibility?' the interviewer asked me.

'Yes, and the evidence is in front of us. Other countries, and their currencies, are getting stronger – at a rate faster than yours. At some point the OPEC countries will figure out that your dollars are not worth as much anymore, and they will not wish to hang onto trillions of dollars that are depreciating in real terms. I estimate that around 2017 the balance will be out of kilter and they'll drop the dollar.'

'And what effect would that have?' the interviewer asked. 'Professor Gibbs?'

'Well, it would be a disaster. Our savings and pensions would be worth a third less overnight.'

‘Two thirds,’ Smith suggested, Marks and myself agreeing.

Gibbs continued, ‘Our exports would be much cheaper around the world, which is good in some respects, but the cost of oil would more than double, as well as the cost of food - and all other imports.’

Marks said, ‘It would cause a crash similar to the 1929 crash. It would be devastating.’

I put in, ‘And the one thing that the Treasury could not do, that it’s so fond of doing, is to print more money. That would cause hyper-inflation.’

Marks and Smith agreed.

‘And how likely is that?’ the interviewer asked.

‘I think it’s a certainty,’ I said.

Gibbs disagreed, the political spokesmen also disagreeing and going into party rhetoric mode.

After ten minutes, the interviewer asked, ‘And the solution?’

I replied, ‘Start planning ahead now with austerity measures, improve your manufacturing base, and develop nuclear energy, hydroelectric dams and electric cars – get away from oil as fast as you can.’

The debate went on for another ten minutes, then we had shot enough minutes for the show. Driving back, I thought it had gone well. If all it did was to cause more debate then that was an achievement in itself. The show aired that evening on the West Coast, shown on the east coast in parts during breakfast TV, the full show aired at 7pm.

Hardon Chase rang after the show. ‘Paul, is it *wise* ... to make such predictions public.’

‘You’re the bus driver, and you’re heading for a brick wall. Maybe, if the passengers can see the wall, they won’t mind you changing course.’

‘May I ask if Jimmy and *others* ... planned this?’

‘No, they’d never go public. This was all my doing. And ... you’re welcome.’

In Tinsel Town, my comment about the Government supporting the film industry - as a principal export - went down well; I was popular here at least. The only dark cloud was the President of Venezuela openly calling for OPEC to drop the dollar now, not quite the effect I was hoping for.

The opening of the LA Club was a major event, red carpet, and more stars than I could count. Helen and I, Oliver and his wife, and the Pineapple staff all arrived early and gave interviews, and we got to view the place without the crowds cluttering up the place. It was a

large club, larger than the London club, and backed onto a hotel. Just. They had built a glass walkway across, making the glass tinted as an afterthought. After all, stars and their mistresses would not wish to be seen popping to the hotel for a quicky.

We mingled, and welcomed people to the club. I had made a point of getting hold of a list of actors from yesteryear, and went down the list ticking who I wanted invited along, almost forty of them, many of the actors from the original Star Trek series invited. We were still there at 2am as people started to drift off. They had either sipped water all night and worked the room looking for business, or got drunk and tired quickly – being put in taxis in the hotel's underground car park without anyone seeing them. I received a few propositions, but pointed towards Helen, mentioning the mean right hook.

Hal had landed an hour before the opening and came straight around. I fixed a badge to his jacket lapel: Hal, pilot in Africa. When we decided to call it a night Hal came home with us, and we sat playing catch-up over a cold beer on the patio. The following afternoon we caught an industry insider's screening of the "Lassie come home" movie, its formal title RF12 after the helicopter that went down. Everyone seemed to like it. Now it was up to the cinema audiences.

The next day we packed our bags, Hal complaining that he had just got here, and headed back to New York and the opening of the second club. Hal camped out in the first apartment, and we stayed in the new apartment – our own apartment, a maid provided by Pineapple. Wishing to check on any problems, I rang the house in the UK and spoke to Jack - he had been monitoring some of my projects - and he reported no problems on the horizon. A few more squirrels in his garden, but no problems otherwise.

Hal came over for lunch the following day, Anton and Cassie turning up with the baby just five minutes after Hal.

'You made it,' I told them.

'It sounded like an order,' Cassie puzzled.

'No, a request,' I insisted. 'I don't order people with young families to travel across the world.'

Anton said, 'Hour from Mawlini to Goma, straight here overnight. I went to sleep over Sierra Leone and woke up over New York. Marvellous.'

'How is Mawlini?' I asked, all of us now sat about the coffee table, Shelly fascinated by the strange new baby.

‘Growing,’ they said. ‘From the air you appreciate the size. There’s now another workers compound at the top end, across the road from the oil workers hotel.’

‘Mummy, did you have another baby?’ came from Shelly.

Helen smiled. ‘No, that’s Cassie’s baby.’

‘Where did it come from?’ Shelly asked,

‘Is there a doctor in the room?’ I joked. ‘Shelly, come here, please.’ I grabbed my daughter and lifted her up. To Cassie and Anton I said, ‘Wait till yours is this age.’ I put my mouth to Shelly’s ear. ‘You told the nice TV interviewer that he was old.’

She shook her head.

‘Yes you did. And you asked the nice lady interviewer if she was Jimmy’s girlfriend.’

Anton and Cassie laughed. ‘Where is he anyway?’ they asked.

‘Cuba. Should be here ... soon I think.’

A knock at the door, and Hal opened it, a mock salute given. Jimmy appeared with Michelle.

‘Jimmy!’ Shelly squealed, running across to be lifted up.

‘I don’t get that,’ I told Anton.

Jimmy sat with Shelly still hugging him. ‘So, all the gang here.’

‘All the movie stars,’ Hal quipped.

‘You weren’t in the movie,’ I pointed out. ‘You’re a ... paperback star.’ I faced Cassie. ‘We saw your film in the afternoon, it premiered the night before last.’

‘Its getting good reviews,’ Jimmy put in. He faced Anton, ‘Your father wants a talk, so we’ll all go out there at 6pm - if that’s alright with you guys?’

Anton nodded.

‘And tomorrow is the club opening and the film premier here, so put your silly smiles on for the press,’ Jimmy told everyone.

‘How was Cuba?’ I asked Jimmy.

‘I did a few weddings and circumcisions.’ Everyone except me laughed. ‘In reality, the work only took three days, rest was a holiday, some diving and sailing. A month ago, ships started to arrive, a split between us and the Chinese – who want to look good in front of the Cubans. We delivered a ship load of cement, glass panes, nails, tools and wood – all given out free around Havana for a little bit of a facelift. We then delivered a container ship of Chinese motorbikes and cheap Korean cars – a bit of embargo busting. And finally a ship of corned beef from Brazil, enough for just about everyone on Cuba to have one to two tins each.’

‘The orphanage?’ I asked.

‘Full already, three hundred kids, state teachers and nurses.’

‘Hotels?’

‘We now own thirty-five indirectly, mostly assigned to CAR. And, best of all, Rescue Force el Cuba is now the regional training hub for Central and South America, ten new national teams there. Jamaica, Puerto Rico, Haiti, El Salvador, Chile, Ecuador ... and a few others. Soon have all South American countries signed up. I’m going to create large teams in the earthquake countries.’

‘Switzerland is on board,’ Anton mentioned. ‘And now Canada.’

‘Be all countries soon,’ Cassie suggested.

‘Malawi and Burundi have joined,’ Jimmy informed them. ‘Training out of Forward Base with the Zambians. China was an option as a regional training centre for the Far East, but I’m giving that to the Australians at Cairns. So, Cassie, if you want a desk job there’s Cuba or Australia to think about. Or you could just marry a rich guy and live off his money.’

‘She’s worth more than me,’ Anton joked.

‘Hacker wants to stay in Cuba,’ Hal informed us.

‘Fine, it’s a training centre – he trains,’ Jimmy replied.

‘I fancy a bit of time in Australia,’ Hal added.

‘How’s that girl?’ I asked him.

‘Good, she’s growing. I see her when I can, but the authorities won’t let her live with me. She’s popped up to Mawlini a few times, and we had a holiday at your place on the coast.’ He made a face and shrugged.

Jimmy stood, and handed me Shelly. ‘We’re in a posh hotel, so we’ll scrub up and meet you out in the Hamptons for 6pm sharp. I need to buy a shirt as well.’

After lunch, it was just Helen and myself.

‘Jimmy didn’t even mention your interviews,’ Helen noted.

‘Then he already knew.’ We exchanged looks.

That evening we enjoyed a meal with Mister Blake Carrington look-a-like in his posh house, his two Orthodontist sons still taken with Helen and her cleavage. The only point of business that he wished to discuss was the African Times, and its desired rollout around the rest of Africa. We offered to push its circulation even further, into the large South Africa market if we could, into the buoyant Nigerian market, and then to the smaller nations. Besides that, we discussed mostly the club opening, many of Blake’s high society friends attending.

The grand opening was a bit of a mad dash past queues of nutters on the sidewalk, up the red carpet and into the club. LA seemed to

offer a better class of nutters than these New Yorkers. I had only been in the club half an hour when I got into my first political argument, one of Blake's friends who wanted to tell me to stay the hell out of US politics. I reminded him whose club it was, and asked if he wanted to be the first person thrown out and banned. He went off in a huff.

Apart from that it went off OK. Towards the end of the evening I caught Jimmy alone. 'You haven't said anything about my political incorrectness.'

'You did what I expected, just three years early. You're suffering from a form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, as a direct result of the incident at the house. You're angry inside, and that's making you more forthright on the outside. It's not a bad release. And you being here ... was a subconscious desire to be away from the house.'

'Oh.' I gave it some thought. 'Maybe,' I finally agreed. 'Do you think it'll do any good?'

'Open debate is always a good thing; American Presidents like to keep secrets from the people, especially the oil dollar deficit. It's that one area that no President wants to face up to. That's why you were right to talk about future generations.'

An hour later we tried the New York theme diner on the ground floor, finding the burgers tasty. Sat opposite Jimmy, Helen upstairs with Cassie and Anton, I asked, 'Is there a fix to the US economy?'

'There's a fix to everything. It's having the will to do it, and see it through, that's the problem. Problem is ... US politics is a beauty contest, not a spelling quiz. In Europe the politicians can add up and spell big words, here they're well connected and rich – and smile nicely. They've dumbed down the whole political process, or they would know themselves what the fix is. The reason we're in Africa – is because they're not. We had to lead the way and set the example. But there's no way they'd have ever used the Rifles as we did. Without our intervention the Congo would still be a lawless jungle.'

'So ... do we fix their economy?'

'We'll ... help with the worst excesses of the boom and bust cycle. Beyond that, there's not much we can do. Hard to tell the people in the White House what to do when they think they're superior in every way.'

'And Hardon Chase's future?'

'He's proving a better man than I realised, but only with a gun to his head. He's taken a better view of the long game than even Art Johnson did – which has surprised me. He wants to cut his name into the tree of history, and that's great. We'll use his desire to be

remembered to make some progress. He's doing all the right things ... for the wrong reasons.'

Two days later, Hardon Chase welcomed us into the Oval Office. 'After we chat, the Joint Chiefs have some questions.'

'We're here to be helpful,' I suggested, getting back a quick look.

We sat opposite Chase and his Chief of Staff.

'OK, first: Cuba,' Chase began, notepad ready. 'I'm going to send down the Vice President in a month.'

'Wow,' Jimmy said. 'That's a big jump.'

'You think it's too much too soon?'

'No, I love the idea. It's the knives in your back I'm worried about.'

'Latest pole has fifty-five percent in favour of a reconciliation. And in Congress that's sixty-eight percent.'

'Then you may as well make use of it,' Jimmy suggested. 'Ride the wave of optimism.'

'Will the Cubans play ball?'

'Doubtful,' Jimmy replied.

'Doubtful?' Chase loudly repeated.

'They can see the oil potential, they can see the Russians, Chinese and us wanting to get in there, and they want to kick you in the balls. So ... doubtful. But, I'll get the other "M" Group nations to pressure them to play ball. And, if you can ease sanctions before that time ... it would help.'

'If we send down the Vice President ... will they welcome him?'

'Oh, yes, they're not that stupid. Just don't expect them to be grateful. You take a step back, they take a step back, but you don't smile at each other while you do it. Kind of a begrudgingly acceptable friendship.'

'Well, after all these years what did we expect?' Chase reflected with a sigh. 'And the best way forwards?'

'Inch by inch, with both sides getting used to it. Allow in US tourists. Cut the ice.'

'And this regional base for Rescue Force?'

'Gives Cuba lot to be proud off; a *feel-good* factor. And it helps to lower their guard. Besides, it's cheap to hold the training there, and if Cuba is seen to dispatch rescuers it will help their standing in the region. With that respect they'll lower their guard further and re-join the rest of the world.'

'Will they go democratic?'

'Not really, they'll follow the Chinese example; strong communist government with free enterprise. If you try and nudge

them that way you'll just be wasting your time, as you are with China. Start with the tourists.'

'OK, African oil. The Zanzibar field is mostly Chinese.'

'East Africa for them, West Africa for you. They'll not try and muscle in on the West Africa fields, and you should leave them Tanzania. If not – it's a free for all.'

Chase made notes. 'The DRC oil fields?'

'Are huge ... and a huge pain in the arse. They're so far from the coast that you double the price by moving it. Instead, it'll be used to assist the region to grow, making ore extraction cheaper, and to help Africa develop its GDP – which is good for you in the next decade.'

Chase eased back and took a moment. 'And what if we wanted to *accelerate* that process? Make consumers out of them sooner?'

'If you're willing to assist with infrastructure problems, I'll allocate you land and cheap buildings to buy – a good investment. What you spend on projects now you'll recoup in property price appreciation.'

'For instance...'

'You send us new passenger planes from Boeing, and we'll give you land and buildings for the future. You send us phones and phone lines, fibre optic cables for the Internet, and we'll allocate you mines to cover the cost. You could build a university and staff it, we'd give you a few large apartment blocks and shopping centres.'

'So whatever we spend we'd get back in ... what, ten years?'

'Or less with the mines. But you must be careful not to encourage democracy with the Africa leaders. They're corrupt now, and they'll be corrupt ten years from now. We work around them. Best way to deal with them is like children: put sweets in their mouths.'

'I promised the Tanzanians a few projects.'

'Carry them out, sure, just don't beat them up for oil rights. CAR makes a profit for American companies, and CAR is in Zanzibar. If you want to make a buck, build things in Dar es Salaam. It'll be a boom town in years to come.'

'Any major projects that we should be involved with?'

Jimmy made a face. 'There is one, but it's for the future, and that's a railway from northern Congo across to Nigeria and Liberia and to the coast. It's a long and very expensive project, less so with the local steel we're making. It needs a clever satellite to figure out the best direction for the track.'

Chase made a note. 'OK, what would a ten billion dollar investment get me Africa?'

I blinked.

‘It would get your money back to start with. Besides that, the money is best spent on the equipment that I described. Boeing aircraft – with pilots under contract, cellular phone towers, optic cables, and some clever people looking at the best ways to move around mountainous jungle.’

‘So I could earn some points with Boeing to start with.’ Chase made a note. ‘OK, al-Qa’eda. Are they contained?’

‘Contained ... no. Distracted and misdirected ... yes. Right now they’re sending their best people to Northern Somalia and getting a pasting, the Taliban are suffering and on the back foot, and the Northern Alliance well armed. Détente.’

‘But they won’t go away?’ Chase pressed.

Jimmy shook his head. ‘No.’

‘And the solution?’ Chase nudged.

‘Is to help to build up Pakistan, and to encourage them to attack the Taliban. That will cause the Taliban and al-Qa’eda to attack Pakistan instead of you. That border war will drag on for a long time, wearing down the Taliban and al-Qa’eda, and keeping them off American streets.’

‘There’s no better solution than that?’

‘None. If there was, it would be my top priority.’

‘And if we went in to root them out?’

‘I’d do everything in my power to stop you,’ Jimmy coldly stated.

Chase stared back for a several seconds. Lowering his head he said, ‘OK, Liberian Rifles. Not as good as the Kenyans according to our military.’

‘I’d be happy to assist,’ Jimmy offered. ‘I’ve had some experience.’

‘What we’d like is to know how you did it, and why our people on the ground are not doing it.’

‘I’ll visit and prepare a report for you,’ Jimmy offered.

‘OK, let’s talk about Paul’s movement into US politics.’

‘Not sanctioned by myself or Magestic. But ... I’m not that unhappy with it, since his wartime rhetoric is what you need; a national unity. And the OPEC comments should be something that causes you sleepless nights.’

‘It’s starting to,’ Chase admitted.

‘They’ll really drop the dollar?’ the Chief of Staff asked.

‘It’s flexible, or there would be no point in us making predictions. It could be put back, or avoided if the dollar stays strong – without any bad dollar politics pissing off the OPEC countries. But, you

can't just print dollars forever. Sooner or later you'll have to balance things up.'

'And what role could Africa play?' the Chief asked.

'As you lose market share around the world, I could swing African consumers your way. So if you lose five points, I could get you back three or more. You need to make up the two.'

'How?'

'Next generation nuclear power stations and research, hydroelectric projects, electric cars, better manufacturing and exports. And ... and a slow and gradual reduction of the dollar value towards its true level.'

'Devalue?' Chase asked.

'No, I said a slow reduction over ten years. If you know that you're going to fall off a wall - make the wall as low as possible first.'

'I doubt the boys on the hill would swallow that one,' Chase baulked.

'You never know till you try,' Jimmy suggested. 'And you need to follow Hawaii's example on healthcare, before it becomes seventy percent of the budget.'

'It gets out of hand?' Chase queried.

'Big time,' Jimmy emphasised. 'An older population, obese, lots of immigrants. And some nasty diseases to tackle, some of which will break your health service.'

'Can't they be prevented?'

'No. Some you'll develop cures for, others will just cause people to have ten days off work. But, if thirty percent of the population are off for ten days, it'll cripple the economy.'

'Is that during my term?'

'Depends on whether or not you serve two terms,' Jimmy said with a smile.

'Anything on the horizon to think about?'

'Hurricane Katrina, in August.'

'It's a bad one?'

'Politically yes.'

'Politically?' Chase puzzled.

'It'll swamp New Orleans, a lot of people killed, property destroyed, and they'll all blame you for not moving quick enough to assist.'

'Katrina,' Chase wrote down. Lifting his eyes, he said, 'Fucking Army will be all over it, you can bet on it.'

‘Then you’ll be a popular President. But concentrate on the poor people of New Orleans. Make a big deal of it, go visit as soon as it’s safe.’

‘Should Rescue Force be there?’ the Chief asked.

‘They can’t operate inside the States without risking being sued, and you’d never hear the last of it if foreigners helped ahead of your own people.’

‘Yes, I suppose.’

Ten minutes later we were led down a familiar route and to the Joint Chiefs. At least the reception we got was better these days.

Their first question was, ‘Your opinion on the Liberia Rifles?’

‘White men trying to teach black Africans how to fight like white men.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Meaning ... that you had a manual on what to do.’

‘There are things in there that we could never do, we’d break Army law and civil law here.’

‘Oh, dear. Raising a proxy army of non-Americans to fight and die in hostile jungles on your behalf ... being blocked by civilised America laws looking out for the rights of soldiers. How odd, and what a paradox.’

‘There’s always the Zimbabwean example,’ I suggested to them.

‘What’s that?’

‘They sent us a thousand fresh young faces. When ready, we’ll send them back trained and ready to go.’

‘You could have told us that before,’ they complained.

Jimmy said, ‘Your laws have not changed from the time I gave you the manual ... to now.’

They glanced at each other. ‘We had to try.’

‘I’ll takeover the Liberian Rifles. When ready – trained and disciplined – they’re all yours to play with.’

We got around to the subject of Kandahar.

‘The Somalis were ... worryingly efficient in Afghanistan,’ they posed. ‘Is there not a danger that they could turn on their neighbours?’

‘If there was, then I would not have trained them. Besides, Ethiopia will be a bit naughty in the future, and the Somalis need to be able to defend themselves.’

‘And the al-Qa’eda problem in the north?’

‘Is going well enough; al-Qa’eda fighters are attacking Somalia and getting themselves killed, they’ve lost interest in you. They’re also losing credibility around the Middle East.’

The Admiral asked, 'Let me ask you a direct question. If we put a thousand men up against a thousand Somali Rifles, what would the outcome be?'

'Assuming that they were both infantry and equally matched, a massacre of your people and twenty percent casualties on the Somali side.'

'And the reason for that?'

'You've grown too used to superior technology, which is fine for some types of warfare. But an *up-close and personal war* involves soldiers going eye to eye. Yours, however loyal and brave, want to go home to their families at the end of the battle. The Somalis don't care; they fear losing face, or the respect of their team, more. They don't care if they live to go home. They'll fight you with a gun, a knife, or hand to hand and never back down. Part of that is African culture, part in the training. Your soldiers are nice respectable citizens, educated people who would help a cat out of a tree. The Rifles would bite the cat's head off and eat the damn thing without a conscience. And, since Vietnam, you've designed your strategy around the technology, lowering casualties from face to face fighting. And I said it before: the Brotherhood don't have ships, or planes, or tanks. They only have people with a will to die.'

The men took that in. 'The solution?'

'Make use of the proxy armies, because you sure as hell don't want people like the Rifles walking down American streets. And if you train your boys to those levels of brutality they'll shoot up the local neighbourhood. But I'll give you an example. One war that you were supposed to fight, but did not, you used your Air Force and destroyed a very large army from the air, minimal casualties on your side. I'm not knocking the technology, but it fits a purpose – and that's not counter-insurgency.'

The Admiral said, 'How long does it take to create a proxy army?'

'Three years, ideally,' Jimmy replied. 'So you could start in 2022.'

'And wars before then?'

'Mostly started by you lot. And no, you could not use proxy armies in Venezuela, because the governments of the soldiers would not let you. The Africans will let you use their soldiers in certain circumstances, but they won't just throw them away. They have voters as well.'

'We've collected what data we could about the battle at Kandahar. Basically, you let the enemy come to you.'

‘Yes, we used their outrage and sense of superiority on their own turf to drive them forwards in predictable ways. They ran into mines and sniper fire.’

‘And the reported massacres?’

‘As we’ve just been discussing, the Somalis lost discipline and turned savage. In this case, not a bad thing. But you can only train them so much to be aggressive before they go off on one. Light the blue touch paper and stand well back.’

‘They lack discipline?’

‘They lack an OFF button. When they go ... they keep going.’

‘And against the Brotherhood?’

‘They’d win easily, but would be worn down if they entered town and cities, where bombs would be hidden. If the Rifles were in the desert then no one would touch them or cross their area. The problem comes in the cities, which is where most people live, and where the biggest problems will be. And things like trains. It would be impossible to both search the train, and not get blown up.’

‘No one here has any doubt that the Rifles could hold the Sinai,’ they offered. ‘But Europe would be a different matter.’

‘Part of that solution will be an army of reservists,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Police with guns. Spotting a terrorist landing in Italy is easy enough, the appearance and language. Problem is, as soon as they’re rumbled they go bang - and we lose a few people.’

‘And conflicts between now and then?’

‘Depends on you. If you do nothing, then there’ll be no major conflicts that cannot be dealt with. If you invade Venezuela, Cuba or China, you’ll destabilize the world and there’ll be lots of small wars. It’s down to the guy upstairs.’

‘Paul, what you said about OPEC. If that happens?’

‘You’re fucked overnight,’ I said. ‘More so than any war.’

‘Should the CIA be keeping an eye on that?’

‘They should,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Advance warning is always good. If only the CIA would appreciate us, eh. We give advance warnings.’

‘Any chance of selling the Africans our nice expensive weapons?’ a general asked with a grin.

‘Sure. Decide what you want to get rid off – that may suit – and we’ll buy up some of your old stock. Some old Hercules we could use, some old P3 Orion aircraft for maritime patrols, old Navy S61 helicopters, some Chinooks.’

They made notes. ‘Budgets?’ the same man asked.

‘I think more in terms of numbers that we need than budgets. If you consider Forward Base in the Congo as a hub, we could do with those aircraft there with a few technicians - for which we’d pay. If we can help you by buying up second-hand kit then we will, we have a need for it.’

‘Can we send you the right officer straight away?’ they asked.

‘Sure. Give me a list of what’s for sale. And there’s one regional airport we built with you and the future in mind; it has a very long runway and a high fence. Anytime you’re ready you can use it as a stopover or transit base.’

‘And the local fuel?’ an Air Force General nudged.

‘Cheap and plentiful,’ Jimmy replied with a thin smile. ‘So are the local women, but I would not recommend them.’

The next day an Air Force Colonel and his aide came to our hotel, with a file of equipment that was either de-commissioned, or about to be. We ordered four Chinooks and spares, five S61s - for a mixture of military and civil use, again with spares, four Hercules transports that would have certain bits of their electronics ripped out and replaced, and two P3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft – export versions – that had been ordered and cancelled. They would be delivered to Kenya, but used to patrol the Somali coast. All in, we have just bought a hundred and twenty million pounds worth. They threw in four old Hueys.

Back in the UK, a day later, Helen and I reclaimed the house, and I felt glad to be back. I never quite figured it out, why I liked to travel, but also liked to get back. It was if I had a restless soul. In the diner I caught up on gossip from Big Paul, finding out that Keely was serious about a girl – a sixteen year age gap between them; he was forty-eight, she was thirty-two. There was even talk of marriage.

I went and found Jimmy in the office. Checking over my shoulder I asked. ‘Will Keely marry this British girl he’s dating?’

‘She’s not British, she’s Canadian, and so is he – technically.’

‘Yeah?’

‘His parents were both in the US military, got citizenship. They’re from Toronto originally, and she’s from ... east of there, on the coast somewhere.’ He sighed. ‘Best we have a chat with him.’

‘It doesn’t work out?’

‘It’s a bit more complicated than that.’

We called Keely, in his room, and he came down to a lounge.

‘We need to talk about your young lady,’ Jimmy told him.

‘Really?’ Keely puzzled. ‘You won’t tell Big Paul how his relationship turns out.’

Jimmy took a moment. 'Unless otherwise stated, and altered, the CIA will snare her in around six years.'

Keely stared back. 'To get to me?'

Jimmy nodded. 'She has a skeleton in the closet, and it will not be easy to make it go away.'

Keely looked away, clearly angered. 'What is it?' he softly asked.

'Her father, who she loves very much, has made a number of mistakes – and will continue to do so. She has, in the past, provided a false alibi for him. They'll root it out, and blackmail her, threatening him.'

'The NSA could fix that,' Keely insisted.

'Only to a point. There are ... witnesses.'

'And the answer?' Keely asked.

Jimmy crossed his legs. 'Set a snare yourself, and when the CIA moves we send the detail to the President of the day. Make copies of all the statements, the allegations, and reinforce the statement she made. You've got a few years. If you don't, then they'll try other avenues - because you're here and their man isn't. They need to fall on their faces. Hard.'

Keely stared at the carpet. 'I'll need some time off for a visit to Canada soon.'

'Take your young lady, it will look like a holiday,' Jimmy offered him. 'But don't confront her about it – ever. You'll lose a nice girl. Do what you're good at, and behind the scenes.'

'Did they send her?' he asked. 'Because she's a bit of a find.'

Jimmy took a moment. 'She doesn't know that she was sent. A strange set of circumstances led to her working in Cardiff and meeting you, a ... carefully laid set of circumstances.'

'Who?' Keely asked after a moment.

'President's office.'

'If she doesn't know...?'

'They'll monitor her, to see if you're leaking intel to her. She's the next generation of spy, one that doesn't even know she is spying: they put her next to you, you date her – after checking her nice clean record, and after you've broken up they ask her a few questions. She would never even know that she was being played.'

'Do they trust me?'

'Yes, but they like to play these games.'

'Stupid of me think they wouldn't try at some point,' Keely admitted.

'She safe to bring in here?' I broached.

Jimmy nodded to me. 'Lovely girl. Too good for him.' We stood.

‘Was she drunk when she met you?’ I asked Keely.

‘To quote Big Paul: fuck ... right ... off!’

A few days later we got a tip-off about an American website that had Jimmy down as a time travelling clairvoyant who secretly ran the world. In fairness to the site’s creators, they had a lot of good facts, and I suspected that CIA might have had a hand in it.

Jimmy calmly sent an email to the brain-trust kids in Shanghai and they got to work. Within a few hours the site was operating so slowly that no one could get onto it. The next day it was moved to another url, which again slowed right down. The website’s creators kept at it, soon a third url populated with the allegations. Then the sites all disappeared for an hour, returning with a few subtle changes. Many of the dates had been altered, places, a few photographs doctored. And at the bottom of the page sat pictures of the site’s creators and their contact details, including home addresses and telephone numbers, their minor criminal records displayed for all to see. The originators of the site, a bunch of college kids, took the site down and went into hiding.

Tamil dawn

Jimmy called an “M” Group meeting at the house the next day, the topic Sri Lanka. The Sri Lankan Government had been fighting a small war with Tamil rebels and separatists in the north for a very long time. Now it would come to a head, several years early.

The Chinese desired a port in the south of Sri Lanka, and the US had been persuaded of the need for a naval base there. As a result of the Chinese interest, the Sri Lankan Government had enjoyed the delivery of weapons to fight the Tamils. They had also received money and fuel indirectly from Jimmy, and the campaign against the Tamils was progressing quickly.

Jimmy began, ‘The Sri Lankan offensive against the Tamils in the north of their island will soon end, literally within weeks. There will then be a refugee crisis that will ... tarnish the Sri Lankan Government a little and put tourists off visiting. Rescue Force will be involved.’

‘And the future for Sri Lanka?’ Jack asked.

‘A peaceful one; just a few Tamils setting off bombs now and then. But, for the most part, a complete end to hostilities. So, in the next few weeks the Tamils will be squeezed, some of the Sri Lankan soldiers benefiting from sniper training in Africa.’

‘And the problem?’ Keely nudged.

‘What makes you think there is a problem?’ Jimmy asked.

‘We’re sat here,’ Keely stated.

‘The only wrinkle in the plan is the refugees, who the Sri Lankans would like to round up, some to be shot. All of your governments must put pressure on them not to do so, and to allow Rescue Force into the camps.’

‘They’ll resist?’ Jack asked.

‘To start with,’ Jimmy explained. ‘So start the diplomatic offensive next week.’

With the meeting concluded, some talk of the curious websites, we drove over to Mapley.

‘You awake, Bob?’ I asked Bob Davies at the HQ building.

‘Yes, been busy doing a few weddings and circumcisions.’

I stopped, hands in pockets and looking peeved. ‘I’d been drinking.’

Jimmy sat. ‘Grab the comm’s officer.’ The man hurried in and sat behind a computer. Jimmy told him, ‘In reference to the following countries - China, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand, Britain, France, Russia and Cuba - prepare to deploy alpha teams to Sri Lanka. In regard to African units, and others, we’ll need surgical trauma teams. Send the signal.’

‘Civil war hotting up?’ Bob asked.

‘Should finish soon, then we’ll have one hell of refugee crisis.’

Doc Graham walked in, pager in hand. ‘Back to Sri Lanka so soon?’

Jimmy lifted his face to Doc Graham. ‘Prepare a long-term care programme and the building of clinics in the north. Do you want to head-up this deployment?’

‘Sure.’

‘No more than four weeks in the field for you. If that,’ Jimmy warned. ‘Rotate in and out.’

‘When?’

‘In a week. We’re flying out there tomorrow.’

I broke the news to Helen, who Jimmy rarely took on trips these days, and we flew direct to Delhi with Han, a connection to Colombo in Sri Lanka. Big Paul and two Government minders accompanied us, but in our pockets we had our “get out of jail free

cards”, our new diplomatic passports courtesy of the UK Government. We were both now deputy ambassadors to the UN.

We landed at Colombo airport in the small hours, and were met by a coach and armed police officers, whisked through the quiet city streets and to our hotel. Booked in, we ordered room service, little more than sandwiches and biscuits available, and got some sleep. In the morning, we caused plenty of looks from the other guests over breakfast, and not just because of Big Paul’s table manners.

Our appointment with their President was for 10am, and the same coach took us around to his palace. Big Paul and the minders were directed into a side room as we entered the designated meeting room; a long hardwood table down the centre, brass ceiling-fans whirring. We sat at the end of the table, the President and his aides greeting us warmly.

‘Welcome, welcome,’ the President offered. We all sat.

‘We thank you for the time in seeing us,’ Jimmy offered.

‘How are your hotels?’

‘They suffer a little from the increased fighting in the north.’

‘Which will soon be over!’ the President assured us, a finger raised.

‘Which is why we are here, Mister President. We are concerned about the refugee crisis that such a successful conclusion may bring.’

‘It is under control,’ he quickly assured us.

‘We wish to be ... sure of that,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘Which is why we wish to bring in Rescue Force to care for the refugees, and to settle them quicker.’

‘It is a dangerous area for your people,’ the President said dismissively.

‘Our people are used to danger, they will not be bothered by fighting. I would like to bring the first teams down in a few days, to treat injured civilians leaving the area.’

‘We could not have civilians in a military area, especially foreign doctors at risk.’

‘Mister President, we all wish to see a return to a peaceful Sri Lanka as quickly as possible, both for tourism and other investments. And I wish to buy land in the north, and to bring in mine clearance teams to make safe your jungles.’

‘When the fighting is over –’

‘No, Mister President. We’d like to work to our timescale. If not, then my investments in this country will cease, as will that of the Chinese Government.’

The President glanced at Han, who simply stared back. He took a moment, not looking happy. 'Why are you so keen to be in those areas?'

'We would not wish the world's media to accuse you of mistreating Tamil civilians. That would be bad for business, bad for tourism.' He waited.

Han finally put in, 'The development loans we have discussed would be subject to final approval ... of Mister Silo.'

The President lifted his eyebrows.

Jimmy added, 'And after a peace has been achieved I would look to buy many hotels in the north; an area that contains some of the world's best beaches. But first, it would need to be peaceful, free of mines, and the population would need to be settled and happy. We would also build clinics in the area.'

I decided to be helpful, 'The aid development programmes of Britain and France are also under our influence. Especially here.'

'Do you think we will massacre civilians?' the President growled.

'No,' Jimmy answered. 'And we are not interested in taking sides. We wish only to return your country to a peaceful state as quickly as possible – to help our investments here.'

The President eased back, still seeming angered. 'And what would you like to do, exactly?'

'Our medics would be ten miles behind the fighting, helping with the wounded. They would also provide medical care at any refugee camps created. That's all. We would then bring in mine clearance experts, and afterwards would build clinics and hotels – assisting your economy.'

'I will discuss the practicalities with the Army.'

'It takes time to move our equipment,' Jimmy explained. 'We need to give the go-ahead now.'

The President hesitated.

Han said, 'Is there a problem with our proposal, Mister President?'

'No, it's ... very generous.'

'Then we would like to prepare our teams,' Han added. 'As soon as is practical.'

Our host took a moment. 'The documents will be drawn up today,' he reluctantly informed us.

We stood. Jimmy said, 'Please keep in mind, Mister President, that we are only motivated by your best interests – and protecting our investments in this country. We have no other agenda.'

We were shown out, collecting the security detail. Back at the hotel, I asked, 'Will they massacre civilians?'

'In their eyes they're not civilians, they're Tamils. And, if we don't help, they'll create the next generation of terrorists.'

At 4pm a document arrived, giving us permission. Good job really, our jeeps were already being loaded up. We packed up and reversed our flight to Delhi, staying the night at the Taj Palace, one of those great Indian hotels where guests are not allowed to do anything. A guy took our bags, another opened door, a third pushed the lift button, yet another directed us down the corridor to our room and opened the door, more again following me into my room, turning down the bed and putting the heating on. I ran out of small change for tips.

At 3pm a knock at the door woke me, and I found Helen and the kids stood there. 'I don't have a woman in the room,' I insisted as Shelly ran in.

Helen kissed me. 'Tiring flight.' She put the baby on the bed, a man bringing in a cot for Lucy. The room only offered two single beds, so Shelly would be in one, us in the other.

'I thought we were flying back tomorrow?'

'Security measures. Jimmy changed the plans ... just in case.'

'Oh. Want some grub?'

'No, had a meal on the flight. Shower and bed I think.'

In the morning we lay about the pool, Shelly jumping into the cold water. We soon had several of the hotel staff hovering, everything from newspapers to massages offered. Jimmy joined us with Han an hour later, security detail in tow, Shelly wrapped up warm in a large towel. Han ran his fingers through the pool water and decided against a swim, Shelly nagging him. They sat on sun beds next to us.

'We'll be here a few days,' Jimmy explained. 'But it's a good hotel.'

'I saw an advert for the zoo,' I thought aloud.

'Don't bother, Delhi zoo is a tip. It's a national shame.'

'Oh. How far we from the Taj Mahal?'

'Five hour drive. If you want to visit it we'll travel overnight when the roads are quiet. No motorways here.'

'Helicopter?'

'Possible, but we'd have to check the quality of it first. The train journey is not bad, might try that. Oh, don't walk out of the hotel, not safe and nothing to see.'

The next morning we headed for a pre-arranged meeting with the Defence Minister and the Interior Minister, Jimmy only giving me the bare details of the meeting. From the hotel, we drove through Delhi, the city as bad as Nairobi – or worse, our driver trying his best to hit cyclists. We eventually drove through a large arch and onto a wide road, the old colonial buildings ahead, and quiet spectacular. Inside, driving around to the correct building, the peace and the beauty of the architecture was a hell of a contrast to the rest of the city.

‘Welcome,’ the Defence Minister offered. The room we had been led to offered high ceilings and brass fans, nice cornice work – period colonial, and a very old wooden table. Sitting, they offered us tea.

‘Genuine India tea?’ I asked. ‘Not from a British supermarket, I hope.’

They laughed. ‘The real McCoy!’

Sounds behind us preceded the arrival of Keely’s boss, Host, Michelle’s boss from France, and Sykes. We stood and greeted them.

‘Didn’t go to school here, did you?’ I asked Sykes.

‘No, but my father did. I was born here, on a train, in 1945.’

Everyone introduced themselves to the two Ministers and their aids, more genuine Indian tea poured and sipped as we again settled.

‘So,’ the Defence Minister began. ‘An intriguing mix of gentlemen we have here. And an intriguing request for this meeting.’

Jimmy got straight to the point, ‘Minister, you’ve been receiving tip-offs about terrorist actions on your soil for many years, from a man called Magestic.’

The Ministers all jumped an inch at the same time, clearly shocked. ‘How do you know that?’

‘I work for Mister Magestic,’ Jimmy explained. ‘I’m his right hand man.’

‘And I make the tea,’ I lightly offered.

Our hosts exchanged looks. ‘You work for him?’ the Interior Minister puzzled.

‘Yes, have done for a long time,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Which brings us to the reason for this *intriguing* meeting. We believe that there will be some very serious terrorist attacks against you in the years ahead.’

‘We thought Magestic a Pakistani Intelligence officer stationed in London.’

‘No, Minister, he is not. He is a powerful clairvoyant.’

‘A ... clairvoyant?’ the Defence Minister repeated, a glance at Host, Sykes and the French Intelligence officer. They all nodded in turn when looked at.

‘My god!’

‘So, to business, Minister. In addition to warning you about upcoming attacks, we would like to help you with counter-terrorist measures.’

‘What ... what measures?’ they asked.

‘We’d like to do something unusual. We’d like, with your kind co-operation, to recruit and train a dedicated counter terrorist force here in India. We would pay for the training and the equipment, and we would pay the wages of the units when they deploy to parts of your country. But they would be, obviously, your forces.’

‘What? Like those Rifles you have in Africa?’

‘Not quite like that. These would be dedicated counter-terrorist officers working in your cities.’

‘How ... how many?’

‘Around six hundred.’

‘And who would pay for this?’

‘The money would come through me, from a variety of interested parties.’

‘You’ll pay for, and equip, six hundred men?’

‘And their wages will be twice that of the typical police officer, their equipment modern and well maintained. But we would need secrecy, especially my role. As far as the world is concerned we’re here to talk about Rescue Force matters.’

‘And the training –’

‘Would be from British, French and American Special Forces instructors, the training held at a secret base in Africa. It could start as soon as you’re ready, because we’re expecting many major attacks against you in the next year.’

‘Major attacks?’

‘More severe than those that you have averted with our assistance. Far more severe.’

‘And we’ll be warned about them as normal?’

‘No. This new force will be warned, and they will be sat waiting for the attackers. You’re regular police are ... less likely to survive the encounter.’

‘And these attacks, they are Pakistani Taliban?’

‘You may think that, I could not possibly comment.’

‘We need to discuss this with the Prime Minister.’

‘Of course, we’ll be around for a few days yet. Oh, could you lay on a helicopter for a trip to the Taj Mahal?’

‘Er ... yes, I suppose.’

‘We’d pay the fuel.’ Jimmy stood. ‘Thanks. We’re at the Taj Palace.’

Back at the hotel I found the family around the pool with Han.

‘Show daddy what you found,’ Helen told Shelly.

Shelly displayed a few coins on her hand.

‘Good girl. Did you swim down?’ She nodded. Facing Helen, I asked, ‘Lunch?’ We moved inside.

The nice men from the Indian Air Force offered us an Mi8 helicopter, but I did not wish to risk my family in it. We hired a coach and set off at midnight the next day, a police escort front and back. Now that they knew who we were, who we really were, they were taking no chances.

We arrived at our new hotel at dawn, a stone’s throw from the Taj Mahal, and booked in. Not tired, and keen to see the palace, we took the same coach around to the Taj Mahal, or at least to a coach park. We then jumped into small yellow taxis and formed a convoy as we travelled around to the palace, halting at the entrance. Our police escort waved us in, we did not have to pay, and we found the inside quiet. It was a weekday, and the tourists were yet to arrive.

Shelly chased after wood pigeons and numerous squirrels as we sauntered through parkland towards the familiar white image. Impressive from the outside, the mausoleum was surprisingly plain on the inside. Back outside, we walked around it and to a view over the river, a fine mist making for a good photograph.

The sun broke through the morning haze, warming the first early-bird tourists as we wandered around, tour guide Silo pointing out a few interesting facts. It seems that the corner towers had been built leaning away from the mausoleum at three degrees, so that when they eventually collapsed they would not impact it. A curator of sorts gave us seed for the squirrels, which looked a bit like American chipmunks, and Shelly fed them. We lined up for the usual tourist photograph, one for the album. Having taken the shot, a voice said, ‘Are you Jimmy Silo?’ Jimmy greeted a retired couple from Adelaide, Australia, and I snapped them together with the couple’s camera.

After lunch in the hotel we visited the Red Fort, and I found it more interesting than the palace. This time we had a guide, plus a few tourists following us around, and I got the full history of the

place. It was a long way to come for a quick tour, and after a meal and a shower we set-off, back on the road to Delhi at 8pm.

Our Indian contacts came around to the hotel the next afternoon, and joined us around a table at the poolside. Our project had a green light. Jimmy handed over a document, a proposal that had our contact information in it, and waved over a Frenchman.

‘This is Pascal, your liaison. He’ll remain here, he already has an apartment. We’ll communicate with him, and he’ll talk to you, and we’ll all deny that we have such strange bedfellows.’

They laughed. ‘When do we start?’

‘As soon as you have a hundred men that you think are suitable. And, Minister, secrecy is essential.’

‘Indeed yes.’

They left with Pascal, whom it turned out had also been born here from colonial parents. And, by using the French, Britain could not be criticised by Pakistan if this leaked out.

A month later, Jimmy, Big Paul and myself flew down to Goma airport direct from London, the plane’s passengers a mixture of hairy oil workers, and rich tourists heading towards our lodges. When anyone asked, which they did, we reported that we were inspecting our lodges.

In reality, we caught a flight to a regional airport, then swapped to a green Army Huey, a short flight to a hidden base of the Kenyan Rifles, a plateau surrounded by jungle. Flying in, the size of it surprised me. We landed next to other Hueys, met by a jeep and a Kenyan Rifles Captain, a veteran of Kandahar.

‘Good to see you again, sir,’ the man offered Jimmy as he handed Big Paul a weapon and utility belt.

‘How’s Ngomo?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Wishing he was a sergeant, sir,’ the captain said with a smile.

‘Some are chosen to lead,’ Jimmy lamented.

The jeep halted at a viewpoint, looking down over cleared jungle, many houses having been built in the valley below us, built from grey breeze blocks and red bricks, and looking nothing like an African village. We stepped down to the sound of gunfire, men dressed in black darting about from house to house.

The captain pointed. ‘Close quarter battle, sir. House clearing and street fighting.’

‘Live ammo?’ I asked.

‘Not at the moment, they are learning.’

Big Paul scanned the activity with a keen eye, and possibly some jealousy. We drove down to the mock town. Halting, I could see white faces in green fatigues shouting at tan skinned men, some of the recruits wearing turbans. Stepping down, three instructors came over to us, the nearby Kenyans saluting their officer. Big Paul had a finger on his trigger, which I noticed.

‘How’s it going,’ Jimmy asked the first man.

‘Slowly,’ the man complained.

‘You have a year or more, so use it,’ Jimmy encouraged.

‘They ain’t Rifles, boss,’ the second man said.

‘No, but they have an important job, so make it count. You have a great budget, no limit on ammunition or kit.’

With stun grenades thrown, we observed a house clearing, which I thought went well. The instructor disagreed. Loudly. Back up the on the plateau we stopped at the Officer’s Mess, meeting Doc Adam coming out.

‘How’re the men?’ I knowingly asked him, shaking his hand.

‘They’ve been vaccinated against the usual, so they should be ... OK.’

Jimmy shook his hand. ‘How are you, old friend?’

‘Still following my calling.’

‘Is that to father as many kids as you can in one lifetime?’ I asked, the captain in hysterics.

‘I like to bring life to the world!’ Doc Adam boomed with a smile. ‘And now I go to your very small orphanage to see some new arrivals.’

‘They yours?’ I asked as he left us.

Inside, they made us tea and offered cake as we chatted to the Indian Army officers assigned to the unit. Thirty minutes later we emerged into the sun again, finding Skids and Trev stood waiting.

‘There are lions around here?’ I asked them.

‘Gorillas maybe.’ We shook hands and mounted up.

Pulling off, Jimmy asked, ‘They shoot straight?’

‘If they take their fucking time, aye. It’s the shooting as they move that’s the problem. If we gave them live ammo they’d kill each other – and us!’

‘They’ll get there,’ Jimmy assured our drivers. ‘If not, you don’t get paid.’

‘So,’ I asked. ‘You prefer this to lion country?’

‘Once a soldier, always a soldier,’ Skids remarked. ‘And that ... *incident* took the edge off. After that we wanted to go back to shooting the bad guys. Your legs OK, Big Paul?’

‘Couple of operations, but now they’re fine,’ Big Paul replied.

‘So what did you do with the money?’ I asked. ‘From the farm?’

‘Tucked away for when we’re too fucking old to do this.’

‘Which, considering they used the serum, will be a long time,’ Jimmy pointed out to me, a look exchanged with Big Paul.

‘Yes?’ I asked. ‘How fit are you now, Skids?’

‘Off the fucking scale: I sleep two hours and run twenty miles before breakfast. You?’

‘I could do it, but I’d be divorced. My time is spent with the rug rats.’

‘And I’m playing at family man,’ Big Paul grumbled.

‘And that fucker that you killed?’ Skids asked me.

‘One of yours, a trooper.’

‘There’s a few of them out there that are unbalanced,’ Trev suggested. ‘We’ve come across a few, asking for work down here. They don’t want to knuckle down, they want a quick bit of glory and a paperback book with their names on. They get shitty when we don’t help them find work, so we avoid them.’

Our jeep pulled up next to a very long, and quite thin, firing range carved into a hill, its sides still virgin jungle. The main firing point was concrete, sand in front of that, then mud. The distances had been marked out, from fifty yards to seven hundred yards. Eight men were firing away with AK47s from the kneeling position at man-sized paper targets. With the instructor calling a halt, and the men making-safe their weapons, Jimmy accepted an AK and a fresh magazine. With Big Paul close, and again with his finger on the trigger, Jimmy cocked the weapon, took aim in the standing position and fired ten rounds in quick succession, five targets falling over, the wooden poles at their bases hit.

He made safe the weapon. ‘Instructor. Did you see me damage those targets?’

‘No, sir!’

‘Then the men must have done it.’

‘Right you bastards, press-ups! Now!’

They dropped down and started pushing.

Skids closed in to me. ‘And he’s not ex-anything.’

‘Canadian Army, as a medic,’ I said, getting back a disbelieving look.

The next training station we inspected was simply a large patch of concrete as big as a football pitch. Teams were screeching around in old cars, pulling up and firing blanks as they poured out. Beyond that we penetrated a heavily wooded valley and came across a three-

storey apartment block, not dissimilar to Faulty Towers. Men were climbing up, jumping down, and firing at targets in the surrounding hillside as they went. Driving back up the muddy track, the way we came, we found a swimming pool, and next to it a small pond, men crossing it with their weapons held high, firing at targets on the far side.

The next station I recognised, a sandpit for mine clearance, the trainees now clearing the area with their metal detectors. We sat and had lunch in the main canteen, chatting to some of the men, enquiring about homes and families and discovering that they were here for twelve weeks at time, two weeks at home before returning. I detected a few French accents in the dinner crowd, and we were joined by serving British and American instructors as we had a coffee; SAS and Delta Force. They informed me of the helicopter drills that the men underwent, and the voluntary parachute training that was not quite so voluntary. The men could refuse, but they would not get a full qualification at the end of the course, or the extra pay.

We left them to it, flying off in the Huey with myself right seat. It had been a while, and I missed this. I just hoped that no one would tell Helen, and secretly longed for some danger.

A week later we glimpsed white uniforms landing at Colombo airport in Sri Lanka, the first batch Chinese. Their jeeps had landed by IL76 transport and could now be seen driving around the war zone, tents set up at various refugee camps. Mawlini dispatched a team of sixty mine clearance technicians, all working through a UN remit, but paid by us. The biggest problem that they faced was the growth of the jungle over fields that had previously been mined. What had once been a ploughed field had now returned to its jungle state, making the clearance work harder.

I watched the Sri Lankan campaign in the Tamil regions unfold each day, some items on the TV news, some useful Internet feed, plus intel' reports from Han and Keely. As the Sri Lankan troops moved north, so the civilians moved out of their way, adding to the refugee crisis. The Sri Lankan Army would often give notice that a town or area would be cleared, that statement causing the population to flee en mass, and straight into the camps where our people waited.

With the end of the campaign in sight, the number of casualties increased as the intensity of the fighting increased, and rumours of atrocities emerged. They took the form of executions of fighters,

something that Jimmy was not against. Old fighters made for either the next generation of politicians, or the next generation of terrorists. Having cleared and secured all areas, the Tamil leadership more killed than captured, the gunfire ceased. That just left a hundred thousand people in the camps. We sent food and water, and as many medics as was required, some six hundred in total. The surgical teams had been kept busy, much gunshot trauma to attend to as the fighting had ended. A week after the end of hostilities we began withdrawing the surgical teams; it was now a case of disease, and infected old wounds.

A month after the end of the fighting, the Sri Lankan Government could finally see the benefit of our work; the faces behind the wire looked well-fed and not as terrified as they had been during the conflict. Everyone in the camps had access to medical care, so it was not a criticism that could be levelled at the Sri Lankan Government. Jimmy said that he was satisfied with the outcome, and we closed that chapter in the history of the planet.

Katrina

August came around and Hardon Chase sent in the Marines, taking a personal interest in Hurricane Katrina as it slammed into New Orleans. He deployed large numbers of soldiers ahead of time, and helped evacuate the people – all of the people. After the storm hit he moved thirty thousand soldiers back in and made several visits, not least to complain about the local authority and their lax maintenance of the flood prevention barriers. He was the “prepared and caring President”, and he was not about to let anyone forget that.

We landed back in New York with the whole family on August 28th, and planned on staying a while, a meeting at the UN scheduled for Sept 14th. We camped out at my new apartment, rooms enough for Jimmy and Cat, Big Paul and his family over in the old apartment. We enjoyed a Thursday night at the club, not too busy, and met both a few of our singers, and a few celebs, in the VIP area.

Two days later, Jimmy said that he had a surprise, and we all packed our bags again. In reality, we always travelled in the same manner and expected the sudden moves, suitcases never fully unpacked. Shelly, however, complained about having to repack her little pink suitcase. And no matter what we did, what had come out of it would not go back in. We flew the short distance to Toronto,

Canada, and the gang boarded a train, compartments for all of us, plus the Canadian minders that we had hired. An hour later I was sat with Helen and Shelly in the bubble-glass of a viewing car and watching the beautiful Canadian scenery go by. I hardly said a word to my daughter as she stared contentedly out of the window, occasionally pointing at something.

The way that this special train operated was different to previous generations of cross-Canada tours, Jimmy explained. We'd sleep on the train at night, moving from one location to the next. In the morning we'd wake to find ourselves at a new city or point of interest, such as a nature reserve. We ate together in the evenings as the train pulled off, sleeping through the darkness, and woke to a new location each morning, enjoying walks around small towns, catching tour busses to view local points of interest or to visit nearby animal sanctuaries. Shelly loved the animals, and so did I, adult bears glimpsed through high fences and cute bear cubs fed and stroked.

After six days we approached the Canadian Rockies, Jimmy informing us that we were booked into a hotel, and at the end of our journey. And what a hotel. The Canadians did not build small hotels, they built monsters with four hundred rooms in. This hotel came with mountain and lake views, spectacular views. Our room offered a balcony and we held Shelly tight as we took in the magnificent scenery from our lofty perch.

Jimmy appeared on the next balcony. 'Like it?'

'Superb,' I said, Helen echoing my words.

'Good, because we now own it.'

'We do?'

'We're twenty miles from the time machine.' Helen and I stood rigid, staring at him. He added, 'When you're ready, Paul, I'll show you. Meet me downstairs in ten minutes.'

Ten minutes later we boarded a jeep, security in tow, and set off, Jimmy giving the driver directions. In the heat of the day we wound through pleasant countryside, and came to a small hamlet with a fishing tackle shop. Stepping down, the midday air warm, we left the security detail at the jeep and wandered inside the shop, the doorbell pinging. The shop was like its own time machine; it took you back twenty years as you crossed the threshold. We wandered past lines of fishing rods, nets hung from the ceiling, adverts for favourite baits.

'Can I help you there?' a man in his fifties asked.

‘All the years I’ve been coming here, and you still don’t recognise me, Cole,’ Jimmy told the man.

‘You do look familiar. You English?’

‘Yes, just bought the hotel.’

‘You ... bought the hotel? Well, you’re not short of a shiny nickel then. Will you be needing something for the guests, we stock the best sticks.’

‘Rods,’ Jimmy told him. ‘How long have you called them sticks, Cole, they’re rods. Hasn’t Martha beat that out of you yet?’ Cole stood puzzled as Jimmy closed in. ‘If I used the toilet, and reached up behind the cistern, would I still find a naughty packet of cigarettes that Martha doesn’t know about?’

‘How on earth...?’

‘And you still don’t recognise me, after all this time.’ Jimmy shook his head. ‘Still panning for gold when Martha visits her sister?’

‘Now you’re worrying me.’

‘He does that a lot,’ I put in.

Jimmy put a wad of dollars on the bar. ‘My party will be fishing in the lake tomorrow, so we’ll need some of your best bait, and an assortment of rods – not sticks, would be appreciated, Cole.’

We left the puzzled shop owner with the money and mounted up again. Ten minutes later we passed a farm and halted, Jimmy telling the driver he wanted a look around. We stepped down, wandering across to a brisk stream, the trout visible below the makeshift wooden bridge we stood on. I followed Jimmy across a field and through a line of trees, emerging into another field. He took a few steps, bent down and lifted an old wine bottle, rubbing a thumb across the faded label before handing it to me.

‘What date does it say?’

I read the small and faded print. ‘2023. My god, 2023! It’s from the future!’

‘You’re stood right next to the portal.’

I jumped to one side and scanned the field. ‘There’s nothing here,’ I whispered.

‘Not yet there isn’t. When it’s built, it will be right here. The portal you come through is twelve inches off the ground, four feet in front of you. At least it will be in the future, or was in my past. No guarantee that it will be built again, and I hope it won’t be; there should be no need for it.’ He took a long breath and glanced around. ‘Take a good look around, note the hills and the features. At some

point in the future, should it be necessary, you may need to come here and ... do something. That you'll figure out at the time.

He took the bottle off me and shoved it into the ground, neck first, and stamped it down. Back at the jeep we pretended to be interested in farmland around here, and drove slowly back to the hotel. Big Paul and his son were already in canoes on the calm lake, Cat and Helen sat with the girls on the lakeshore, Shelly wet from a dip. I tested the water and, despite the warm air of summer, it was bloody freezing. Helen had a picnic basket, provided by the hotel, and we sat enjoying the weather and the view, the lake backing onto huge cliffs below a perfect blue sky.

A shout caused me to lift up and open my eyes from where I lay. A man, fishing on a canoe, was shouting at the water's disturbed surface. He was shouting for his son. I jumped up, Jimmy there a second later, and we approached the shoreline. Before I had a chance to do anything, Shelly had moved from where she stood in the shallows and dived into the deeper water. I called her name, but she was gone.

'Wait,' Jimmy said, as he stripped down.

I stared at him, angered, not seeing my daughter anywhere as Helen shouted after Shelly. From the time the boy had shouted and disappeared, to now, was twenty seconds, the father's canoe a good forty yards offshore. A full ten seconds later a head appeared ten yards out. Shelly. Jimmy waded into the cold water and met her half way, taking the immobile boy off her and lifting him. In the shallows, Jimmy lifted the limp and lifeless lad up by a hand on the boy's stomach, the boy bent in two, Jimmy opening the boy's mouth with a finger to clear any water. At the shore, Jimmy held the boy and forced several quick breaths into him, the boy coughing and spluttering a second later, the security staff now running across.

Jimmy held the boy up by the ankles and swung him around three times, grabbing him and stripping him quickly as bystanders rushed over. Helen had grabbed Shelly and wrapped a blanket around her, others offering a blanket for the boy as Jimmy stripped the wet clothes off. The father's canoe hit the shore with a scraping sound and he bound out, finding his son coughing, but OK. Our security detail led them away.

Jimmy faced Shelly. 'Well done, Shelly, good rescue.'

'I saw a big fish,' she said as Helen rubbed her down, Shelly soon trying to wriggle free.

'Was that supposed to happen?' I asked Jimmy.

'No, but I know Shelly's swimming abilities.'

‘She’s four and half!’ I complained.

‘And just swam thirty yards and down to drag up a ten year old boy.’ Jimmy lifted up Shelly. ‘Cold?’ She shook her head. ‘You did very well. You want some sweets from the shop?’ She nodded.

That evening, Jimmy carried Shelly into the restaurant, and my daughter received a round of applause from the guests, Helen and I still a bit shocked, and quietly annoyed at Jimmy. The next day was just as glorious, and we all set off fishing in canoes, Shelly made to wear a life preserver and sat between Helen and myself. We found a nice spot in the shade of tall trees and caught trout periodically. Then we spotted a bear on the shore eyeing us as a potential snack.

‘They come down to the rubbish bins,’ Jimmy explained, none too concerned.

Big Paul and his lad caught several large fish and took them back; they’d be eating them later. We canoed back as a group around 4pm, the air still and warm, the sun glistening off the water, and I was in love with the Canadian Rockies in general and our new hotel in particular. We took Shelly for a swim in the indoor heated pool, to stop her nagging, and enjoyed the next five days, much doing of nothing much. We hiked up the nearest hill, hotel rangers in tow with rifles in case of bears, and photographed our hotel from above, and I took Shelly up in a Jetranger helicopter, getting an appreciation of the area from the air. I was sad when we left.

Back in the bustle of New York, we met with various diplomats at the UN and flashed our IDs at security. In a planned series of meetings, we met with UN Ambassadors from Sri Lanka, the African nations, Cuba and finally the UK – since Jimmy would be speaking to the full assembly, to all the world’s leaders. He had pulled a few strings, and the weight of the “M” Group countries was behind him for this unusual move.

On September 14th our security drove us around to the UN building, the corridors full for a change as the special three-day summit progressed. Jimmy had shown me the assembly hall empty, and now we viewed it full. It was smaller in real life than it seemed on the TV, and Helen and I gazed down at the nations we knew.

An hour into a meeting on international co-operation, Jimmy was invited to speak, receiving a lengthy round of applause. He carried no notes, no speech prepared. When the applause had eased, he began, ‘First, I would like to thank the UN for allowing me to speak here today. I could offer greetings in many languages, but it would take a long time, so I will stick to just English on this occasion. I will, however, try and talk slowly for the translators. I would first

like to report that there are now fifty eight countries offering Rescue Force teams, or that will be doing so shortly, and that number is likely to increase again in the near future.

‘I would also like to take this occasion to report that the UN has now formalised relationships with Rescue Force. As a result of that, a Rescue Force liaison will have an office here, and a UN representative will have an office at Rescue Force headquarters. It is our hope, that aid work and disaster response can be better co-ordinated in the future as a result of this partnership. As you may already be aware, Rescue Force now has several regional training centres where junior countries can train their staff with our experienced instructors, and at our expense. Countries, smaller countries, should not be put off showing an interest in Rescue Force if they are short of money. Those regional centres are Cuba – for the Americas, Kenya for the Africa continent, Australia for the Far East, and Great Britain for Europe. I can report that those centres are doing well, in particular the Cuban centre, which has been generously opened to the South American states, some of which have limited means. I would like to take this opportunity to thank the Cuban Government for its kindness and generosity in its support for Rescue Force, and its good work in Central America.

‘Moving on, many nations have enquired about our earthquake prediction research, and the computer software we use for predictions. That predictive technology is not one hundred percent accurate, and as such we are very careful in its use. We do not wish to evacuate a populated area, or inconvenience the local population unnecessarily. Having said that, I would like to take this opportunity to issue our next warning. We believe that a substantial earthquake will hit the Kashmir region of Northern India in the next two or three weeks, with a great loss of life and damage to buildings. Rescue Force will be deployed, just in case. Let us hope that we are wrong in our calculations.

‘Moving on, I would like to report to the chamber that our operations in Sri Lanka are winding down, and that the displaced persons in the camps are being well tended. Despite claims in some newspapers, our people have not reported any mistreatment of the Tamils by the Sri Lankan soldiers, beyond that expected of a war zone. We have nothing to report that may make a claim against the Sri Lanka Army.

‘Moving west from Sri Lanka, I would like the United Nations to look at the worsening situation between Chad and the Sudan, and the remaining refugee crisis that still blights Chad’s border region.

Some of those refugees have been there a long time, and they need to go home.

‘As most of you know, Rescue Force is a non-political organisation; we don’t take sides. We do, however, take the side of the under-dog, the victims, and whoever is suffering. That is the politics of care. What Rescue Force has done over the past fifteen years, has been to show the world that we have a common human condition, and that no matter how much we may disagree in a chamber like this, when a disaster strikes all sides like to help. When a disaster strikes, all sides put aside their political differences and pull together in a rush to offer assistance. If we had an earthquake each week, then we would see unprecedented co-operation between nations, because we would have a common enemy – and a common goal.

‘So why can’t the people arranged in front of me co-operate on more than just the sick and dying? The answer is somewhere between politicians being stuck in their ways, outdated dogma, and vested interests of big business. Americans, and the British, are just about interchangeable with us, as are Australians and Canadians. We can live and work in each other’s societies without any problems. And if you were to take a holiday in Cuba you would find British, Canadian and Australian tourists, all remarking on how lovely the country is, and how friendly the people are, going home with fond memories. And so would Americans if they were allowed to visit. They’re not allowed to visit ... because of out-dated dogma, and stubbornness.’

‘Oops,’ I said to Helen. ‘I wonder if Hardon Chase has a trap door below his seat?’

‘If you were to take another holiday, this time to the beautiful Egyptian Sinai resort of Sharm-el-Sheik, you would find a lot of British tourists, and some Americans sampling the scuba diving. And, in the evening around the bar, those American men would be discussing just how attractive, and how friendly, the Russian girls are. And if they took the time to chat to some of the Russian men they would find them friendly, and no different to themselves. They all have the same job problems, relationship problems and hopes for the future. Yet back in Washington and Moscow, the two countries still see each other as adversaries, because old habits die hard.

‘On the Indian and Pakistani border there are many divisions of soldiers sat facing each other. Yet, if you were to fly down to South Africa to watch the cricket, you’d find Indian and Pakistani businessmen chatting about the game, not wanting to fire missiles at

each other. So what's the problem? Why is it that the people of this planet can meet each other as civilised human beings, but not their governments? Are we saying that the politicians of the world desire conflict – when we can be sure that the people they govern do not? Or are some of those we elect to office trying to justify their fat salaries by creating problems, so that they look good trying to solve them?’

‘Perhaps he should just throw stones at the audience,’ I suggested.

‘Part of each of us is Rescue Force - wanting to help. Part of each of us ... is the person on holiday who is surprised to find out that the Serbian at the breakfast table is very friendly, and very much like us. And part of us reads the papers, and what our political leaders tell us, and wishing our countries to be tough in the face of provocation from abroad.

‘In Africa, during the Darfur crisis, many Africa countries came together and raised a common army for a common cause, countries that would not have normally been so friendly toward each other. If only there was a common cause that we could all get behind, a threat to the planet perhaps.’

I swallowed, and exchanged a look with Helen.

Jimmy continued, ‘But just how sad are we ... that we would need such a common threat ... for us all to come together and pull in the same direction. For an earthquake, we'll all pull together. For the sake of human development, peace and harmony, our political leaders cannot be bothered to pull together. It's easier for them to cry wolf, and to unite their voting public behind a perceived threat, to help them stay in office.

‘America ... is the world's superpower, and America likes to lead the world, not only in music, film and questionable new financial instruments. If the world is to move forwards, then it is – unfortunately – mostly down to the man in the White House. The Chinese ... they want peaceful relations, without the Americans criticising their well-run country and well ordered society. The Russians want normal relations, and to spend less on weapons. And I'm sure that even North Korea wants a settlement. It's down ... to the man in the White House. And does a very strong country appear weak if it makes the first move? Will America's enemies, who are outgunned ten to one, respect American any less ... if America tries to find peaceful solutions? Will a number of small countries bite America on the ankles ... when they see the superpower lowering itself to open a few doors ... and to make a few peace overtures?

‘There is only one factor that truly influences world peace, and that’s the man in the White House. He could make the first move, secure in the knowledge that after such a move he’ll still outgun his rivals ten to one combined. And for those in the Pentagon bothering to listen to this, talking peace does not make your aircraft carriers any less potent.

‘We often hear American politicians talking about leadership, and of America leading the world, at least what they would label as the free world. Well, all President Hardon Chase needs to do ... is to make the first move, and I’m sure that he will find the Russians and the Chinese very receptive. And if he won’t risk his reputation with a visit to North Korea, I’ll happily volunteer to make that visit. I have no pride to worry about.

‘I’ll finish with this thought: we all keenly come together for an earthquake or other disaster, and none of us desires to see any further wars in the future. So why can we not come together to prevent those future conflicts, which will produce far more casualties than any earthquake ever will?’ He took a moment, taking in the faces. ‘Thank you for allowing me to speak.’

They started clapping, all except Hardon Chase, who looked stunned, or shocked, I couldn’t decide which. And since Chase was talking next, I smiled all the more. Our good friend in the White House stammered a bit to start with, his balls still sore. But when he got going I was quite impressed with the directions he was hinting at. He even paraphrased Jimmy about America’s leadership.

An hour later, the “M” Group countries met in a private room in the UN building, buzzing wands checking for bugs at length.

‘How’re the balls?’ I asked Chase.

He offered me a fatherly, disappointed look as he sat. Still, I was used to those from Jimmy.

Jimmy began, ‘I would like to start this meeting by asking President Chase to speak first. To give us some ... leadership.’

‘Don’t start that again,’ Chase said, looking peeved. ‘You started off well enough, very commendable, then put all the world’s problems at my door.’

‘That’s because they *are* at your door, oh powerful one.’

Chase cocked an indignant presidential eyebrow. He took a breath, and a moment to study the expectant faces in the room. ‘I guess you already know what I do.’

‘Not really. You are an ... *aberration* in the time line,’ Jimmy said with a false smile.

‘If ... within my term, we mend some fences, what do we get out of it?’

‘The glory, for one,’ Jimmy began. ‘A reduced defence expenditure for two, increased trade for three. And, when the good people around this table co-operate on more than just Magestic matters, some benefits of combined actions against people like the Iranians, and Venezuela, and others. Having made friends, those friends would be expected to give back a little. Horse-trading, I think your countrymen call it. So let’s start, shall we. I’ll go first. How about ... America and Russian updates and increases its treaties on the numbers of nukes; a reduction, but not enough to worry the folks back home. American drops it rhetoric about Chinese human rights, and China makes sure that fair trade agreements are ... a little more fair. We’d then like to see China play a large part in turning North Korea into a South Korean look-a-like, a suitable trading partner for the future, not one that throws nuclear bombs towards Japan.

‘Then we’ll look at Russia and China putting pressure on Iran to stop developing nuclear weapons, the good old US of A assisting Russia to modernise its electronics and computers. Britain, France and Europe then welcome Russian tourists – and businessmen alike – with almost open arms. And you all assist Africa to grow into a nation of consumers with some money to spend, because they will spend it, whereas the Saudis and the Chinese put their money under the mattress.’

‘So what would we do the week after?’ Chase quipped, making many of the national leaders laugh, even the Chinese.

‘The week after, we would try and figure out ways of surviving the variety of plagues that will kill a hundred million people in the years ahead. And when that is solved, we might just look at 2025.’

The room fell silent.

Jimmy continued, ‘Now, everyone in this room wants to get to 2025 in one piece, and in the best possible condition. Unfortunately, if you jostle for best position you’ll stop co-operating. And, if you don’t co-operate one hundred percent in 2025, the Brotherhood will find a weakness and exploit it, and then you all lose. So I have this suggestion. Here, in this room, we horse-trade. We look at American GDP, Chinese growth curves, Russian modernisation, and other factors in play, and we negotiate. Maybe the Chinese will modify their growth a point or two, in return for something. Everyone at the table has something to offer, and things that they desire. Now, let’s start simple. How about a US and Russian reduction in long range missiles of twenty percent inside a year?’

‘It is workable,’ the Russian President offered.

‘It’s not a million miles away from what we’ve been discussing,’ Chase admitted.

‘And you both appear good in front of your voters,’ I put in.

Jimmy said to the Chinese, ‘It was always my intention to give first, and ask for favours afterwards. You have the Zanzibar oilfield, which will reduce your oil costs by tens of billions in the decade ahead. How about assisting US exports to you by a few points? And before you answer, consider always that I have more to offer.’

The Chinese asked, ‘What percentage points?’

‘Why don’t you discuss that, and bring an offer to the “M” Group.’

‘In principle we will look at a few percentage points,’ the Chinese Premier offered.

‘Really?’ Chase uttered, seemingly surprised.

‘Next,’ Jimmy began, ‘I could arrange some extra oil finds for America if the Administration did *not sell* arms to Taiwan.’

‘How will Taiwan turn out?’ Chase asked.

‘They’ll choose to join China as part of a confederation when China is doing so much better than you.’

‘Oh.’

Jimmy explained, ‘China needs to act as a big brother, and to guide and lead with kindness, and not to be the angry father of Taiwan. That will get the best results. And Russia, it needs to do the same with the Ukraine – which will fall apart in chaos and unrest.’

‘When?’ the Russians asked.

‘Around 2013. The disruption there will affect you badly if it is not dealt with. You also need to be better bedfellows with the Baltic States; don’t try and ruin their economies. If they fall apart it affects you as well. Europe is your biggest buyer, and you don’t want a wall of broken down countries between you and Europe. So lead, don’t criticise.

‘OK, next. India should soon be brought into this group; they already receive Magestic letters and know of my involvement. In the years ahead there will be several major terrorist attacks on their soil, leading them to the edge of war with Pakistan – something that must be avoided at all costs. All of the nations here should try and boost trade with them, and to make consumers out of their middle classes. If India is strong enough in 2025 they could hold the line by themselves. That would give China and the Far East a buffer. Indian forces could also cross to Oman and meet Africa forces.’

‘Will you talk to the Germans?’ the French asked.

‘In a few weeks, in Paris,’ Jimmy offered. ‘They can join this group, since some of your people have already told them more than they should know.’

The Chinese criticised that breach of security, so too the Russians.

‘The German participation was inevitable,’ Jimmy finally admitted.

‘The Indian earthquake,’ the British Prime Minister began. ‘It’ll be a bad one?’

‘Hundred thousand dead, millions homeless, political unrest in the area.’

‘What about Iran?’ Ben Ares asked.

‘If the nice people here don’t act, then they’ll develop nuclear weapons and use them, causing the rise of the Brotherhood well ahead of schedule. Next year they’ll help Hezbollah provoke you into a war in Lebanon.’

‘And when were you going to tell us that?’ Ben Ares challenged.

‘When the time was right,’ Jimmy responded. ‘If you know too soon you’ll just put back the start date.’

‘Should UN peacekeepers go in first?’ Chase asked.

‘Hezbollah would work around them.’

‘How about African peacekeepers,’ I suggested.

‘They’d start their own war with Hezbollah,’ Jimmy cautioned.

Ben Ares gave a big shrug, his hands wide.

‘If they were used, and opened fire, the UN would not use them again. And ... I have plans for the UN using them at a later date. Can’t play that card twice, Ben.’

‘They’ll fire rockets?’ Ben asked.

‘They’ll kidnap some of your soldiers. Anyway, let’s get back to horse-trading. I would like everyone here to create a list of the things that they most dislike about what the other nations are doing ... for our next meeting. Then I’d like to see a wish list for China, Russian and America, and a trade-off list. I’ll then sweeten any deals with some Magestic magic. Might I suggest that the next meeting is in Hawaii, since China has travelled far many times now.’

‘I’ll be out of office in six months,’ the French President informed us.

‘You would still be involved,’ Jimmy replied. ‘Once “M” Group, always “M” Group.’

‘Do I win the election?’ Ben Ares asked with a smile.

‘We would not have put up with you all this time otherwise,’ Jimmy quipped, causing a few smiles. ‘OK, let’s say Hawaii in three

or four months. Any objections? No? Good. Go out and buy some Hawaiian shirts, and draw up the lists. We'll discuss the lists at my house, with your representatives. That way we will have some definite answers – either way – at the meeting.'

Kashmir

On the way back from the States, driving along the M4 motorway from Heathrow, we dropped into Mapley, since it was on the way and just a short distance off the motorway.

'You awake, Bob?' I asked as we entered Bob Davies' office, finding Doc Graham sat opposite him with Dr Hoskins up from Mawlini.

Having greeted each other, and been suitably rude, we sat.

'Grab the communications officer,' Jimmy suggested, the man trotting in a minute later and sitting behind his screen. 'I want the following countries put on alert for a full mobilisation: UK, France, Russia, Kenya, Australia, China, Hong Kong, Cuba, and Canada. Plus any Europeans that are ready, and the British and French Supplemental groups. Leave the Central Americans, except Cuba, and grab several Cuban surgical teams, and grab the best teams from Africa.'

The man typed away, pagers checked and knocked off.

'Kashmir, right? When?' Doc Graham asked.

'Plan to get the jeeps on the ground on October 6th, a one day drive to reach dispersal points.'

'Who'll be heading it up?' Doc Graham asked.

'You will, with Bob, from here.'

'Here?' they queried.

'It's mountainous terrain, and the radios won't work, and we'll need satellite comm's up. So you may as well be here. Set up a room for it. Right, there are no useable airfields nearby, so Hueys will need to go, but just for re-supply runs. I don't want Hueys back and forth through those mountains in bad weather. Look at the map, make your plans, pick a supply depot and a nearby airport. Oh, and the natives are not too friendly, so hostile territory protocols apply. I want an Indian RF member in each jeep with an Indian soldier.'

'Tents?' Doc Hoskins asked.

‘Lots of them. They don’t build houses very well over there, and it will get cold at night. So lots of tents.’

‘Numbers?’ Doc Hoskins asked.

‘Quarter million homeless to start; pinch the tents off the UN where possible.’ We stood. Jimmy added, ‘We’ll be camped out here from the evening of the 6th.’

Back at the estate, an hour later, we reclaimed our house, finding everything as we left it.

On the 6th of October we packed our bags and drove back to Mapley, settling into the apartment, just one more place we called home. Helen now had several assistants to call upon and got the communications centre ready, already two camera crews settled into the hotel outside of the base. The airfield and the canteen was quiet, the rescuers already deployed, and in the map room I studied the topography of Kashmir, finding it just high hills and deep gorges. Tapping the map, I told Bob Davies, ‘Some of these bridges may go.’

He lifted his eyebrows and nodded. ‘And our people will be cut-off. If the injured are not treated on site – they won’t make it to a hospital through those roads!’

‘How many Hueys?’

‘Just the six for re-supply and emergencies.’

‘Jeeps?’

‘Better part of forty of them, trucks supplied by the Indian Army.’

On the morning of the 7th we gave TV interviews, suggesting that the predicted date was within the next four days. We could have asked people to sleep outside, but the cold in the mountains would have killed just as many as the quake. Still, the Indians themselves had organised a small evacuation and were recommending that people sleep in “safe” buildings, whatever that meant.

The quake hit on the 8th, and I shouted at the national leaders because we had twenty injured staff to start with. ‘The first rule of rescue – is not to become a victim yourself!’ I ordered an investigation in to each injury, fuming. We now had to divert Hueys to grab our people, some badly hurt. They had spent the night in “safe” buildings out of the cold.

The damage caused by the quake was extensive, an estimated thirty thousand dead despite the warnings, but our surgical teams were busy saving people; our supplies and tents were getting through and having an effect. Helen gave numerous updates of facts and figures, all good material to the press. We supplied lists of the

counties involved, numbers and equipment. And, as ever these days, we had camera crews embedded with our RF teams, some live shots of the quake taken. On our advice, the Indian Army had moved many soldiers in ahead of time, and they were now having an affect, a few damaged bridges being repaired.

On the fifth day after the quake we began to pull teams out, leaving doctors in place. Those that could have been dug out had just about been dealt with. Jeeps drove back to the command areas, many remaining with the surgical tents. The Cuban and Chinese hospital teams were there for the long haul, and made themselves comfortable. Our surgical team from Kenya was also dug in, where a local hospital used to be. They would be providing after-care for at least eight weeks.

Despite the early injuries, the deployment had gone well, and everyone at HQ congratulated each other for a smooth operation. Doc Graham had lost some sleep, but had run everything from the command centre easily enough.

Commandos

Jimmy and I grabbed Big Paul, and we jumped onto a scheduled flight down to Goma a week after the Kashmir deployment ended, journeying to the secret base housing the Indians. Skids met us at the heli-pad and assured us of the remarkable difference that the soldiers were showing, Big Paul getting himself “tooled up”. As we drove through the camp we saw the Indians in black fatigues with black webbing, M4s slung. Their berets were black, with a yellow insignia. At the Officer’s Mess we halted and stepped down, meeting Ngomo inside.

‘Let you out of the office, have they?’ I asked him as we shook.

‘I told them it was urgent business,’ Ngomo boomed, grinning.

‘Are they ready?’ Jimmy asked him.

‘They will run down the terrorists and eat their hearts!’ Ngomo confidently reported. ‘Come, we have them ready.’

We drove around to the village in the valley, buildings made of grey breezeblocks and red bricks. Three groups of four men stood ready in their black fatigues, respirators hiding their faces, and M4 rifles slung. I noticed their radios and earpieces as we neared. A whistle was blown, the men splitting right and left and slamming

their backs to the walls. With one team covering the street and rooftops, stun grenades were thrown through windows, the men charging in and firing blanks a moment later.

A man appeared on a roof, the covering team firing. He made a suitable dying sound as he collapsed. The teams advanced along the street, covering each other, grenades thrown, would-be terrorists gunned down as they appeared. With a final whistle was blown, the teams jogged back to us, pulling off their respirators.

‘Well done,’ Jimmy commended. ‘Do you think that you are ready?’

‘Yes!’ they shouted.

‘Good, because you leave tomorrow. We’ve received information about planned terrorist attacks on Delhi in the next week. You will be going to meet those nice gentlemen, and hopefully you’ll kill them all. Carry on, men.’

Skids drove us around to the firing range, but we found only two men. As I stepped down I could hear the distinctive crack of a round being fired, but could not see the man. The instructor led us forwards, soon to a lump of grass that moved, a camouflaged sniper. The man stood up when his name was called, hardly recognisable as a human.

‘Good work,’ Jimmy commended.

Back outside the main canteen, we stopped and jumped down from the jeep. A British instructor was walking towards us, his weapon slung. Jimmy glanced at Big Paul, who fired a round quickly, hitting the startled man in the shoulder. Other men came running as we closed in, Big Paul disarming the wounded man.

With quite a crowd gathered, a crowd of stunned instructors, Jimmy said, ‘He’s about to sell his story to the world’s newspapers. He has you all photographed, and you would have been named. Why don’t you interrogate him, and then search his belongings.’

Two British instructors lifted the man up and led him away, more following.

An American instructor asked, ‘He was going to sell us out? I’ve seen him taking snaps, but so do we all.’

‘Check those snaps carefully,’ Jimmy told the man.

‘You going to warn me next time?’ I complained.

‘He would not have shot you, and I was not sure about his face till then. I had to wait. Some of my memories are ... faded.’

Having shot the man, Big Paul had worked up an appetite, so we sat and chatted to the recruits as we ate. Explaining the spy to the

Indians, they wanted to interrogate the man themselves. I got the impression that our hapless spy would not be leaving the jungle.

Ngomo joined us. 'Problems?'

'A spy,' I explained.

'Have we been compromised here?' Ngomo asked, clearly concerned.

'We'll have to wait and see,' Jimmy told him.

After a quick tour we departed, our 747 refuelled at Goma and now full of tourists that had finished their holiday.

A little over a week later, we sat and watched the news at the house as the new Indian commando force was seen in action, storming buildings and bringing out bodies. Explosives had been found, and a series of major terror attacks thwarted, a few prisoners taken.

The terrorists were Pakistani, but part of our deal with Indians was that the identities of the terror suspects be kept secret, and so the men were labelled as Indian Muslims, even when the men's Pakistani sponsors tried to claim responsibility. A major diplomatic incident was averted.

New year, 2006

We flew over to New York to see-in 2006, staying at the two apartments. The senior staff from Mawlini had been invited over and flew out of Goma, a convenient non-stop flight to JFK. Many from the UK flew out, some came up from Cuba – now being able to fly to Miami and catch a connection.

Two days before New Year we all met at the club for a private function, a fundraiser for Rescue Force, a few people forced to wear their whites and protesting at length. Hal and Hacker re-acquainted themselves with Cassie and Anton, who were still in Mawlini - and still undecided on the future. Mac and the old dogs had been squeezed into black tuxedos and again looked like dog turd wrapped in flannel. Doc Graham and Hildy broke the news that she was expecting, so we all enquired if she knew who the father was, and placed bets on the colour of the baby. Bob Davies was walking unaided, and now engaged to a secretary at the base who worked for an NGO, the lucky lady now introduced to us. Mackey, on the other hand, had ditched his wife and vowed never to allow another woman

across the threshold. I found myself wondering if he kept his hiking boots on in bed.

When Anton's father, the Blake Carrington look-a-like cornered us, he had a suggestion. 'How about a paper here, but a national paper?'

'Sounds like a good idea,' Jimmy approved. 'Produce some figures.'

'You serious?' Blake asked.

'Sure. Seems to be about the right time.'

I put in, 'Will Hardon Chase see that as ... us kicking his balls even more?'

'It's a free country,' Jimmy insisted. 'And Presidents enjoy having their balls kicked.'

'I could raise two hundred million,' Blake offered.

'We'll put in three hundred million. That enough?'

'It'll be a good start, and I can use the existing presses and staff, and distribution channels.'

'As soon as you're ready, we are,' Jimmy told him.

With Blake gone, I asked, 'Is that ... wise?'

'It's something that I would have done in years to come, more out of anger. This will be ... planned and measured. And, if it's impartial, no one can complain.'

'We'll use it to influence people?'

'Christ, yes! There're also a few papers in the UK about to bite the dust. Might grab one of those, just to wake up the Prime Minister.'

Senator Pedersen appeared with some of the CAR executives, all warmly greeted.

'How'd you get past security?' I asked him.

'Slipped them a dollar,' Chuck joked. He faced Jimmy, 'President is winding down the sanctions on Cuba big time. Guess he's showing some ... *leadership*. Also talk of a new arms deal with the Russians, and a new trade agreement with the Chinese. Be nothing for us left to do soon.'

'You'd have to get a proper job then,' Jimmy told him, Chuck laughing. 'And I'm going to North Korea.'

'You are?' I asked.

'Yes, *we* are.'

'We are?' I puzzled, Jimmy nodding with emphasis.

'Oh. Through China?'

'Yes, and with a shit load of sanction busting goodies, just to annoy those Yanks.'

‘They got oil?’ Chuck asked.

‘Don’t think so,’ Jimmy responded. ‘But they are developing nuclear bombs to throw at Japan, and that would be bad for our stock portfolios.’

‘Sure would,’ Chuck agreed.

The gala went well, the food OK, but we did top up in the diner afterwards, huge burgers with extra everything. The next evening was a quiet affair, just the family, building up to the New Year event at the nightclub, many of our singers performing live. At the apartment, Shelly was allowed to stay up late and watch the lights of the street below through the windows.

After the midnight celebration, Big Paul approached, no sign of his partner or son. ‘Can I have a word?’ We led him to a quiet corner. ‘I’m thinking of ... well, going to split with the missus.’

‘You will,’ Jimmy told him. ‘And the boy will visit weekends, and when he’s pissed off with her. The split won’t affect your relationship with the lad, and when he’s old enough he’ll work with us.’

Big Paul seemed cheered by that news. ‘And what do I do, you know, for women in the future?’

‘You bungle along telling them you know me, shag them for a few weeks till they get fed up with your bad habits, and then you find others.’

‘Oh. I don’t settle down with anyone else?’

‘Who the fuck ... would put up with you?’ Jimmy asked him, making our trusty bodyguard grin.

Back at the apartment we found Cat awake, Lucy running around.

‘Couldn’t she sleep?’ Helen asked.

‘No, wide awake and screaming if I don’t let her out.’

I lifted Lucy. ‘Not sleepy, baby?’

She shook her head. ‘No.’

‘You want to watch TV with me?’

She nodded. ‘Telly Tubbys.’

‘I don’t think they have them here; we’re in America. I think its Sesame Street.’ I sat, Lucy curled up on me, and we flicked channels till we found a program about sharks, which seemed to fascinate her. It left me wondering if she would take after her sister, soon to be five. ‘Five years,’ I repeated to myself. ‘God it goes fast.’ At least Lucy still liked to be cuddled, Shelly becoming ever more independent and confident. And my eldest daughter’s favourite word was “no”.

Jimmy had said, 'You're rich, you're right hand man to a time traveller, but when it comes to raising kids it don't mean shit. Your relationship with her will have to be worked at - you can't buy a good relationship.'

And he was right. When we disciplined her she would open the door and run around to the house, tall enough to punch in the right door-code, and would find Jimmy. If Jimmy or Han were not around she would sit in the diner, and Cookie would always make her something nice till we collected her. The only bright spot was her lack of fondness for Keely, sometimes kicking him in the shins and running off.

Hawaii

Three days after New Year we said goodbye to the gang and flew across to Los Angeles, staying at Po's family mansion. We inspected the club, played like managers and moved a few things around, and gave a TV interview. After four days of relaxing in the sunshine, we continued west and boarded flights to Honolulu.

The hotel that had been selected had been done so for its relative isolation in the city, and its ability to be easily defended for an "M" Group meeting. This meeting was described in the press as "three plus two", meaning America, Russian and China, plus Britain and France, no mention of Germany and India. When the title "M" Group had appeared in the press, a quick witted White House aide had labelled it as "Mother's meeting", its unofficial title from the hard working aides that followed their political paymasters around.

We booked into a series of third floor rooms, a view over the pool and the nearby beach, palm trees lining the road. Within thirty minutes I was at the poolside, the Secret Service not recommending it. They didn't have a five year old in tow. Shelly plunged in, and I sat with a cold beer, not a bad trade off. Jimmy joined me with Han, both dressed casual, cold beers ordered, the security staff watching the public road like hawks.

'I think we can get a deal,' Jimmy suggested, sitting back and enjoying the sun.

'Chinese will offer a compromise?' I asked.

‘A ... trade off, I believe the term is,’ Han pointed out. ‘We are not ... compromising.’

‘You’re starting to sound like a politician,’ I warned. ‘That’s not a good thing.’

‘It is my calling,’ Han insisted. ‘And this meeting may be ... historic in its nature, with the catalyst known as Magestic.’

Shelly ran across and made Han wet, standing at his knee. She handed him a coin.

Han said, ‘Let us promise not to take your daughter to Rome.’

We all laughed, thoughts of Shelly swimming around the fountains for coins.

The British Prime Minister joined us, with one of his aides. ‘That looks good,’ he said, meaning the beer, and sat, ordering two more beers.

‘Should have the bleeding meeting here,’ I suggested.

‘A very fine day,’ Han agreed.

I faced the PM. ‘What’s on *your* shopping list?’

‘A bigger slice of Africa, long term oil at ... reasonable rates.’

Jimmy said, ‘If you can get it from the jungle to the coast, you can have it cheap.’

‘It’s only a thousand miles of jungle,’ I put in.

‘I was thinking more of West African oil.’

‘Don’t have quite so much influence there,’ I reminded him.

Ben Ares joined us with Dave Gardener. ‘This a private party?’

‘No, get a beer,’ I told him, shaking hands with Dave, now a less common visitor at the house.

Shelly had returned to the pool, and now a large sea bird landed on the water.

‘Shelly,’ Jimmy called. ‘Swim under and pull its leg.’

With us all observing, she swam down and under the bird, tugging a webbed foot. The bird beat its wings sharply and flew off.

Jimmy calmly mentioned, ‘During the Second World War, fliers shot down over water would sometimes use that technique to catch birds, and then eat them raw.’

The French Prime Minister joined us with Michelle, his nominated interpreter for the moment. No one bothered to stand, another two beers ordered.

‘Those security chaps don’t look happy,’ I pointed out, Helen joining us with Lucy. Han grabbed our youngest and took her to the poolside, to the shallow end. As we watched, he took his socks and shoes off and put his feet into the water, sitting on the side and calling Shelly over. Lucy made large splashes and issued loud

screams as we sipped our beers, but I was a pleased father when Shelly tried to teach Lucy how to swim. The French PM asked if we would make progress, Jimmy being positive and upbeat.

The various groups sat apart from each other at the evening meal in the hotel's restaurant, but a few gifts were exchanged. Since I saw Jimmy with all of the gifts early, a little conspiracy was unfolding before my eyes. The Russians gave Hardon Chase a bottle of vodka and some caviar, and the Chinese issued the other leaders with jade mementoes of the meeting. The French had brought their best wines and champagne, opening them at each table. I was glad the British Prime Minister had not brought a bag of chips and mushy green peas, noticing him giving out snow domes with all of the various leaders accurately caricatured inside as tiny figures. When I shook mine up, to get the snow moving, the French Prime Minister floated around. I showed it to him. Ben Ares presented the various leaders with exquisite small figures carved out of the salt of the Dead Sea.

Arriving just as we were finishing dinner, the German and Indian delegations were greeted by Jimmy. The Germans sat with the French, a large Indian party occupying a table of their own. All told, I figured the mood was a good one, Jimmy suggesting a few wrinkles tomorrow.

The "M" Group met in a function room an hour later, the room checked by sniffer dogs and humming wands. Several square tables had been pushed together, bottled water laid out next to note pads. The various leaders sat around the table, their translators and aides behind them, but there was plenty of room for all.

Jimmy stood up. 'Ladies and gentlemen, politicians, and hard working political aides.' A few cheeks creased. 'I would like to take this opportunity to welcome the German and Indian Governments. They have both had their briefings, so we will not recap on my role, and the role of this group. So may I first ask the Indian Government how its counter-terrorist actions are progressing?'

The Indian Prime Minister said, 'We are most grateful for the unit you have provided us with, and the timely information. It's a bit like an Indian wedding: here's your bride and the cake, now get on with the reception.'

We all laughed, even the stiff Chinese Premier.

Jimmy said 'I'm not sure if the pains and pleasures of courtship quite relate to investigating terrorists, but I guess they both come with satisfactory outcomes. The remainder of your soldiers will be back from Africa soon, and we will begin with a second batch, reaching the figure of six hundred that we promised.'

‘We are most grateful, but I guess that there is good reason for this generosity, one that I am hoping will be explained to us today.’

Jimmy took a moment. ‘As you are aware, we receive information about the future, very accurate and detailed information, and make good use of it at these meetings. One piece of information is the high probability of you going to war with Pakistan, that conflict becoming a nuclear exchange.’

The Indians were shocked. ‘And these terrorist warnings?’

‘We aim to help you defeat the terrorists, without your people pressuring you to go to war.’

‘There will be more?’

‘More, and more severe, some extreme,’ Jimmy explained.

‘So we mop up the milk after its spilt, and we don’t ask who’s doing the spilling?’

‘You can stop the bottle from spilling, no matter how many times it is nudged,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘That is not much of a strategy,’ they complained.

‘The alternate ... is war for you, ruin for the rest of us. Which course of action would you prefer?’

‘We must tackle the source of these attacks!’

‘No, you must be a part of this group, enjoying its benefits and protection. Because if you go to war with Pakistan it will lead directly to a global conflict ... and the destruction of our civilisation. And, you should know that the people around this table take the matter very seriously, and will put pressure on you to co-operate with us, for the benefit of all. I’d like a show of hands as to which countries would put economic pressure and sanctions on India if they do not co-operate?’

All except India raised their hands in silence, the Indian Prime Minister focused on China.

‘You see, Mister Prime Minister, we all believe the predictions of the future, the most dangerous of those being a war between you and Pakistan. So, we will all go to great lengths to prevent such a war, even if that means direct pressure on your country to co-operate with us. Such a set of sanctions, agreed around this table, would cost your economy a great deal.’

‘So we sit and take it?’

‘No, you sit shoulder to shoulder with us, and we all take it, doing what we can to pressure Pakistan in the meantime. You are not alone. Now, it is a matter we will discuss with you later. For now we will move on to other topics. OK, Germany. You will suffer no major problems of any kind in the decades ahead. In geo-political

terms, may I take this opportunity to say how boring your country is.'

'Thank you,' the lady offered. 'I think.'

'I have only one request, and that is – given future threats – we would like to see you increase the size of your infantry brigades.'

'Oh. How much of an increase?'

'Ten percent, year by year, and with training given in Africa so that your men are experienced in fighting and operating overseas.'

'Will there be a future conflict?' she asked.

'Hopefully not, which is why we are here. Beyond that, your only other area of interest will be in the upcoming financial crisis, concerning poor investments in high risk American financial instruments.'

'We're dealing with that,' Chase insisted.

'And we should all be out of Icelandic banks by now,' Jimmy suggested. 'We have, directly, interfered in UK and US house prices and money supply and, although higher than expected, house prices have not rocketed. They should continue to climb steadily. Germany should also be aware that the individual economic outlook for Greece, Spain and Portugal is very poor, as it is for the Baltic States. There will be problems in those countries around 2011. You should also be aware that the Ukraine will suffer, and may even split into two countries after 2013, a north south divide based on Russian language speakers or native Ukrainians. If there was one thing that Germany could do to assist this group, and the future well-being of the planet, it would be to nurture the Baltic States and the Ukraine.'

'OK, moving on. I'm sure that we would all like to rebuke the CIA for sending men to the Indian training facility in Africa – without the consent of the US President.'

'The managers responsible were fired,' Chase insisted, not looking happy at being put on the spot. 'And I apologise to the group. What happened to the men they sent?'

'You don't want to know,' Jimmy told him, holding his stare.

'Is that facility known about?' the Indians asked.

'You would have to ask the President Chase that question,' Jimmy quipped. 'Now, getting down to economics, world powers and horse-trading. China, do you have a figure for America based on your oil benefit?'

'We do. We offer a five percent increase in US goods bought, year on year for five years, thereafter to be reviewed.'

'Good. And the US offers...?'

‘No human rights complaints, no courting of the Dali Lama, the expulsion of various Chinese dissident groups, and a five year freeze on any major arms sales to Taiwan.’

‘Do the Chinese accept?’

‘We do. But we would like the small arms deals to Taiwan to be... detailed.’

Chase did not object.

Britain and France wanted better access to the Chinese markets for their banks, a number of new joint ventures agreed. We were making progress.

Jimmy raised a new project, that of combined research into the next generation of improved nuclear power stations. All sides would co-operate on it. He then handed out a document detailing research on electric cars and their batteries to each nation, suggesting that there would come a time when oil was very short. ‘That document, ladies and gentlemen, will save you fifteen years of expensive research. And let me remind Europe and the States, that if you don’t get a move on then China will conquer the export market of electric cars, Japan doing well with hybrid cars.

‘Next, Israel: and the pain that successive American Presidents go through in trying to halt the building of new settlements. I’m going to make money available to build houses and apartment blocks in the east of the West Bank, introducing a natural pull away from Israel’s new security wall and towards the Jordan River. I would like modest donations from the older members of this group to build many houses, offering them cheap to Palestinians living close to Israel, a kind of pull – rather than a push. Israel *will* co-operate.’

Ben Ares offered no comment.

‘Whilst on Israel, the good gentlemen should note that his country will run short of water after 2013, and desalination plants will be necessary. He should also note that Jordan will run out of water, and that it will cause political unrest in that country. Desalination plants on the Red Sea will be necessary, and it is in the interests of all here that financial help be given. An unstable Jordan is not desired.’

‘And Yemen?’ Dave Gardener asked.

‘Runs out of water and oil in 2013, and goes to war with Saudi Arabia in a small way.’

‘And the answer?’ Ben asked.

‘Is across the water,’ Jimmy enigmatically stated.

‘The Somali Rifles,’ Ben noted.

Chase put in, 'Send them into Yemen - and they'll leave no one alive!'

'The alternate, is the rise of various terror groups in Yemen,' Jimmy explained.

'So you *will* send them in,' Chase stated.

'I won't need to. When Yemen goes to shit, they'll attack Somalia.'

'And Somalia reacts,' Chase concluded. 'There an alternative?'

'Build several very expensive desalination plants in Yemen, and then pay their way for ever more.'

'You sound harsh,' the Russians noted.

'It's a Saudi problem, and they have a lot of money. Let them help the Yemen economy, not us.'

Most of the delegates seemed to be in agreement.

'2013 sounds like a bad year,' Dave Gardener noted.

'It is for those countries,' Jimmy agreed. 'But I would expect the Americans to nudge the Saudis into doing something for a change. OK, let's come back to economics. Russia, do you have a list for America and Europe?'

They handed it out, the French and Germans getting a translation each, and time to digest it.

Jimmy asked, 'Will Russia agree to do more to stop stolen German cars crossing its border?'

'We do.'

'Will Germany take a large and active role in my farming projects in Russia?'

'Sure. But what is the future there?'

'Russia is capable of growing all of the food that Europe needs, and keeping prices down when South American prices rise. It helps the Russian economy, and Europe.'

'We will look seriously at it,' the Germans offered.

'If you spend enough money, I will allocate German mining groups more concessions in Africa,' Jimmy told them.

India asked about oil. Jimmy explained, 'Within three years, China will extract enough oil from Tanzania to offer to sell you some of that oil at a reasonable rate. So will my company CAR. And, if you co-operate with this group, I will tell you where to find oil on your soil.'

'Why can't you tell us now?' they complained.

'Quid pro quo, Mister Prime Minister. And may I request, firmly, that India mends its fractious relationship with Sri Lanka, and criticises them a little less.'

‘China will build a port in the south of Sri Lanka, with a US naval base?’ the Indians queried.

‘They will, and that base is important to us all.’

They seemed to reluctantly agree.

Chase asked, ‘If the Tanzanian field allows China enough oil to be able to sell some, then how will that affect Chinese oil buying from Iran?’

‘A good question. It will allow China, and others, to put greater economic pressure on Iran, and to stop buying oil from them. That could be traded ... for the Iranians taking a step back from nuclear enrichment.’

Chase addressed the Chinese directly. ‘And will you pressure Iran?’

‘It is a more likely option now,’ the Chinese offered.

‘OK, Cuba we’re on track with. In fact, doing better than expected. So, will America and Russia be able to release a statement this week on arms reductions?’

‘We will,’ Chase agreed.

‘Iranian nuclear development; as previously touched upon. Pressure needs to be brought to bear, because the most likely outcome is an American military strike at them around 2013, which will not be as bad as you may think. By then the African oilfields will be doing well, and sudden jumps in oil prices can be absorbed.’

‘How do the Iranians react?’ Ben Ares asked.

‘They attack US ships in the Gulf, they try and bomb Kuwait and Dubai, and attack shipping in the gulf. They also encourage Hezbollah to attack you.’

‘And that by you is *not too bad*?’ Ben challenged.

Jimmy smiled. ‘It could be a lot worse. Besides, they’ll need a reality check at some point.’

‘It won’t escalate?’ Chase asked.

Jimmy shook his head. ‘No. It’ll simmer for four or five years, and the Russians and French will help them with peaceful nuclear technology thereafter.’

The Chinese asked, ‘Can they be persuaded not to develop nuclear weapons? Through diplomatic channels?’

‘Why don’t you, and the Russians, go and find out,’ Jimmy firmly nudged. ‘OK, that’s it for tonight, but your aides can travel around the hotel and try and work deals. Oh, and one more thing, they’ll be a bomb blast on the beach in the morning, around 10am. No panic, it’s not a very big bomb.’

They were worried, and I made a note to keep Shelly away from the pool.

‘Who’s behind it?’ Chase asked, horrified.

‘A disgruntled ex-serviceman, one of yours, with links to ... certain agencies.’

‘Oh, great,’ Chase said, his eyes closed. ‘And you could not have warned us sooner!’

‘Some lessons are best learnt when they are ... painful,’ he told Chase, a hint of a grin. To the assembled leaders he said, ‘OK, please release your press statements tonight, let’s let the world know that we’re doing more than just drinking beer in a nice Hawaiian hotel.’

After consulting with Keely, Chase said, ‘The American delegation would, apparently, like to protest the Chinese delegate at your house encouraging your daughter to kick the aforementioned American delegate at your house in the shins on a regular basis.’

‘Oh gawd,’ Helen muttered as the leaders smiled.

The Chinese discussed the matter. ‘We would like a full vote on the matter of this allegation against us. Those in favour of the American representative being kicked?’

China, Russia and France voted in favour, Israel and Britain backed America, Germany abstained, and Indian wanted to know why they had not been informed of the matter in advance.

I stood. ‘I would like to state for the record that my daughter’s favour could be bought with either mining concessions, a new port facility ... or a bag of sweets.’

‘The French would like it entered into the record that the aforementioned daughter also pokes her tongue out at our representative.’

‘Yeah?’ Chase asked as he packed his notes. ‘I do that to you when you’re not looking.’

In some disarray, we broke for the evening. Chase ordered the beach searched with metal detectors, and they found the bomb. Eventually. It had a few convenient fingerprints and the man was picked up.

After the meeting, the various aides travelled between floors and met in groups, whispering and bargaining. It was, as Jimmy labelled it, the real work. We concentrated on the Indians, who were still being difficult, and further inducements had to be dangled. Given that we were trying to stop them entering a war, it seemed a bit cheeky of them.

By midnight, the Americans had persuaded the Chinese to go to six percent for the first two years, less later. That gave Chase good news ahead of the mid-term elections. In reality, Jimmy had persuaded the Chinese to reduce the mountain of dollars that they held onto, by buying American airliners that would last twenty years, a good investment in nice safe aircraft. There was double-dealing afoot, and Helen could not believe that our daughter's behaviour was a matter of international debate.

At dawn I stood on the balcony and peered out at the beautiful ocean, the beach empty. Actually, the beach was empty because it was taped off, and now the road was closed. Still, it meant that the Secret Service perimeter had been moved back and we could relax a bit around the pool. With the kids awake, and the pool inviting, I took the family and Cat down and we all plunged in. Han joined us half an hour later.

Sat at the tables near the pool bar, we realised that we could order breakfast here and did so, Han feeding Lucy chips with ketchup, her favourite. The Chinese team joined us, all looking odd in their casual shirts and slacks. Then Shelly took my breath away. She approached the Chinese Premier and tried to drag him towards the pool. When he resisted, she said, 'Come on you old stiff,' in perfect Chinese. I was both horrified, and delighted at my daughter's linguistic abilities, and surprised when the Premier took her by the hand to the pool. He had his swimming shorts on underneath, and his aide grabbed a towel. We soon had the Premier in the water with Shelly, a conversation going on in Chinese.

When Jimmy joined us, he told Han, 'I would like to distance myself from any attempt by Shelly to drown your Premier.'

'Noted for the record,' Han responded as he headed back to the pool. Once in the water he acted as translator.

Within twenty minutes everyone was around the pool bar, the breakfast waiters giving up on the indoor restaurant and working out here. Conversations broke out as people ate, aides moving back and forth between various groups, the Secret Service worried. At least the perimeter had been moved right back. Official snaps were taken of various groups, and of the whole group, an image of the leaders relaxed and co-operative.

Shelly sat with the Chinese, rather than her strict parents, and stuffed her face, conversing in part Chinese. I suspected they were also encouraging her to kick Keely in the shins. Jimmy informed everyone that the next meeting would be 11am in the same room, and could they get their thoughts together before then.

At 11am we reconvened, no one dressed smart for the meeting - as requested by Jimmy. He began with, 'China and India have border disputes in a few places, and for the sake of harmony we would like them resolved, or at least quietened down. May I request that both sides pull their border posts back one mile into existing territory.'

The Chinese said, 'We will set-up a working group and negotiate directly with the Indians to resolve this as soon as is practical.'

'I think that would be a good move. Does anyone wish to add anything? Next, the Falklands.'

The British Prime Minister look horrified. 'The Falklands?'

'You'll start drilling for oil in 2010. If you push back that date I'll look at oil concessions that are far easier to reach, and more economical.'

'Well ...I suppose, yes,' the PM reluctantly agreed, the French and Germans nudging him.

'Good. Next, Gibraltar. It's not British, it never was. We'd like to see you give it back to Spain, with a ninety-nine year lease. Nothing changes other than implied ownership and Spanish pride.'

The PM was again horrified, but everyone at the table voted in favour of it, the French and Germans loudly in favour of it. 'Bleeding ambush,' our PM muttered. He agreed to look at it, and we agreed to kick him in the shins if he did not. No sooner had he agreed, than Jimmy suggested that the US Navy should consider it an important base for the future, especially 2025.

We got into the detail of Russian and American co-operation on a wide variety of topics, including airliner leasing. That led us to the lunch break, the next meeting not scheduled till 8pm, when it would be cooler; it would give the aides time to scurry about, and to plot and scheme. The British Prime Minister caught up with us outside and vented his concerns.

'It's simple,' Jimmy told him. 'Ditch Gibraltar and ease back on the Falkland Islands and you get cheaper oil. Everyone is happy.'

'And the future for the Falklands?'

'You'll drill for oil and piss off the South Americans, affecting your ability to sell goods there.'

The PM walked off in a huff, Jack trailing after him, and making me wonder if we would get back into the country. We grabbed sun loungers and ordered burgers, sat in the sun and doing very little for a few hours. Most of the delegates sat around the pool for lunch, the hotel staff now pulling their hair out with the nice three-course meal they had prepared being delivered to the pool bar.

At 3pm, full of beer and relaxed, I heard a light aircraft and looked up, soon wondering why it was diving towards us.

‘Look out!’ someone shouted, Secret Service men darting about. I grabbed Lucy and lifted her, not seeing Shelly and shouting for her. She was in the pool with Helen.

I ran in slow motion, my memories of that day blurred; but I can remember each step. Paving, chairs, a corner of the neatly mown grass. Reaching the pool I looked up, certain the plane would hit. ‘Dive down!’ I screamed toward Helen and Shelly. I was three yards away from my family. I put a hand over Lucy’s nose and mouth and dived in head first, breathing out to reduce my buoyancy as I did. The last thing I saw was Helen’s green bum as she dived down. I hit the water near Helen’s feet, my nose soon protesting the irritating chlorinated water that seemed to be trying to force its way up. I forced my eyes open as soon as I could, seeing bubbles and shades of colour; pale blue, green, blue sky. With the sounds of the splash just a memory, the bubbles gone, mine was a silent world, the little fish that was Shelly approaching me.

Two seconds later I heard the bang echo through the water and peered upwards, seeing only clear sky. I eased up broke the surface and scanned the pool bar, seeing smoke coming from the side road leading towards the kitchens. I let go of Lucy as she wriggled and she breathed again, Helen and Shelly surfacing. ‘Get out of the pool!’

Sopping wet, we ran and grabbed our things and padded barefoot into the hotel, through the security and up to our rooms. From the balcony I could see the crumpled remains of a Cessna 152, the air full of the sounds of sirens. I could not see any casualties, although I figured the pilot would need more than just an aspirin and an incident report to fill in. Part of me figured that it might have just been an accident, but not with all of us here. I went and found Jimmy, and we headed for Chase.

‘Did you know that would happen?’ Chase loudly demanded.

‘No,’ Jimmy calmly replied. ‘You know who it is yet?’

‘Local TV news got a tip-off, a suicide note from some guy who’s being divorced.’

‘Then I suggest that it’s no more sinister than that; an opportunist suicidal pilot. Where does that leave us as far as tonight’s meeting?’

‘They’ll want us gone - the hotel and the local authorities. There’s some damage to the kitchens as well,’ Chase reported.

‘Then I suggest we call it a day. We got most of what we wanted.’

‘You heading back to the States?’ Keely asked.

‘No, Hong Kong,’ Jimmy informed him.

We visited each delegation in turn and asked them to return home, apologising for the disruption. Within an hour we were out, into vans with blacked-out windows and on our way to the airport, flights booked to Hong Kong, everyone still a little shaken up, except Jimmy. At least the kids had no idea what had happened, it was just a game of jumping into the water.

In the bar of the 747 I downed several beers and relaxed a little, Shelly sat on the floor between my knees and playing with her Gameboy. If the other passengers objected – I didn’t give a shit. When Shelly got sleepy, Jimmy took her back down to First Class and she curled up on him, always managing to sleep soundly on the big pillow that was Jimmy.

I didn’t manage to get any sleep on the flight, and we landed in the small hours, a discreet police escort to Po’s hotel. Our room came with two double beds, an odd arrangement, so we put the girls in one. At breakfast we met Po and his family, many other kids for the girls to play with, and we moved away from parental concern, to wanting to strangle Shelly. Normal family life had returned.

For that first day we dumped the kids around the pool and talked business with Po and his directors, increasing their involvement in Africa. They made the CDs that we used at Pineapple Music, and that aspect of production was going well. The next day we inspected the Rescue Force unit, Hancock giving us a rundown of the Kashmir deployment, problems and gripes. Some of his boys had been injured sleeping in buildings, instead of their cold jeeps, and I raised my voice. Team leaders had been disciplined, small fines issued. On the third day Jimmy and I flew across to Shanghai, and around to the military base that housed the brain-trust kids.

Stepping down from our coach we inspected an electric car, not dissimilar to any other car. I made the mistake of getting in with a teenage lad, and we sped away, soon going around the building at speed, stopping and starting and accelerating away, the performance of the car impressive, the driving skills atrocious.

‘Who the fuck taught you to drive?’ I asked.

‘I’ve not had any lessons, but I read a book about it.’

‘Driving cars is like sex: reading about it does not help your technique!’

The lad was in hysterics as we pulled up.

Easing out, I said, ‘Keep him away from fast cars and sharp objects.’ Han led us inside.

In the canteen we sat with the professor and the senior students, the oldest now twenty-one, and a father.

‘A father?’ I queried

‘With a girl here,’ Han explained.

‘I figured that. Aren’t there ... you know, rules or something?’

‘No,’ Han explained. ‘Since Jimmy wishes the offspring.’

I faced Jimmy, and waited.

He explained, ‘One in ten of the children - of those with the blood - could offer an anti-body that’ll be needed in the future.’

‘Hence twelve pregnancies,’ Han informed us.

‘Did you read the book first?’ I asked the elder boys, making them laugh.

‘There are now sixty-two children here,’ the professor put in.

‘From the Congo?’ I realised, the professor nodding. ‘So, you finished with electric cars?’

‘No, that will take much longer,’ the professor explained. ‘But already some good progress, which was easy enough when Jimmy gave us the plans.’

‘So what’s next for you?’ I asked.

‘Nuclear power,’ Jimmy stated.

‘Haven’t they invented that yet?’ I quipped.

‘The next generation of cleaner nuclear power stations, powering lights, desalination plants and water destabilisation.’

‘Water ... what?’

‘In the future, a nuclear process will cause a type of heavy water to be unstable. If it’s then heated up it will split into hydrogen and oxygen, which will then burn like jet fuel, turning back into water.’

‘Clean energy,’ I realised.

‘And it’s perfectly stable till it’s heated. You could even drink it, but I wouldn’t recommend it. Passing wind could be an issue’.

The older boys laughed at that joke. Well, they didn’t get out much.

‘So, desalination plants for Israel?’ I thought out loud.

Jimmy nodded. ‘And other countries, like Somalia, which is where we’ll stick a nuclear reactor; on the coast. Once that’s working we’ll place another in Jordan, if the Saudis come up with the money. I’m not funding it.’

They showed us a new building next door, and the busy crèche, and we made like campaigning politicians and lifted a few babies. They weren’t talking yet, so not so smart.

Back in Hong Kong, we enjoyed a huge meal, Shelly adept at using chopsticks, putting Helen and myself to shame. After the meal

we entered a function room full of invited guests, around a hundred businessmen from Hong Kong and mainland. Since they stood and applauded politely as we entered, I figured it would not be a hostile crowd. Jimmy took to the podium and activated a slide machine, the lights turned down. In Chinese he described the growth of our region in the DRC, the availability of ore and cheap fuel, the low cost of land and building materials. The difference between this meeting, and my first time in the Red Room at the Mandarin Hotel, was that I understood most of it. Jesus, that was 1986, twenty years ago, I realised.

At the end of the statistics, Jimmy clicked the slide machine and displayed an image of Gotham City in the jungle, skyscrapers and monorails. ‘Gentlemen. Who here would have liked to buy land in Hong Kong in 1948? Well, that is the opportunity you have here, to be in at the ground level.’

‘Where do we sign’, their faces said.

Pamphlets were handed out, contact details and a web address that described the corporation in the DRC, and Jimmy took questions for thirty minutes. One man ran a factory that made tractors, another diggers, a third made metal tools; all things that could be sold to the mines. They wanted to build factories near Goma and, with guaranteed low fuel prices, it was a giveaway. They were told to work through PO for advice, direct with the corporation for land. We did, apparently, have a small office in Hong Kong now. And that office, and its staff, would help to build the new Hong Kong in the jungle.

Breaking for coffee, and to have a look at a large map of the area, Jimmy showed me his vision for the area. There would be a lake for water and recreation, a series of canals to move drinking water around and to provide fishing for the locals. And the city would be huge.

‘The key is transport systems,’ Jimmy said. ‘Roads, rail and air. I’m going to build deep canals near the factories, with barges to move heavy goods around; drive on drive off.’

‘It’s like a blank sheet of paper, just empty savannah and jungle.’

‘The Americans have commissioned a number of apartment buildings, a mile from the airport. There are now three cement factories working flat out, and we’re importing more. Hardon Chase has budgeted twenty billion over three years.’

‘Jesus. For that he could build a million apartments!’

‘Some of the money will go on improving the road networks, some on rail, a few aircraft, but most on buildings and factories, some on an American university.’

‘And with investments from this lot as well?’

‘Twelve years of investments in just the one year,’ Jimmy said with a grin. ‘GDP will be off the scale.’

‘Did you order some planes from Boeing?’

‘Twenty-four. Which kinda pissed off the French and British Governments, upset about Airbus. But I explained that it was a grant from Chase. Central Africa Airways will soon have six 747s, six 747 cargo planes, and a bunch of 767s. It’ll be the biggest airline on the continent, the hub at Goma. Since we have the fuel, the other airlines will struggle to compete.’

‘You aiming to cripple them?’ I puzzled.

‘They’re flying out-dated and dangerous aircraft,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘And they crash a lot.’

‘Guess so.’

‘I struck a deal between South Africa and British Airways; they’ll both stop their journeys at Goma now, and the leg down to Cape Town is just about free. People can now have a week with us, and a week in Cape Town, especially Americans.’

‘How much traffic at Goma from that deal?’

‘Twelve flights a week each way, so twenty-four landings. Within a month, Goma will see sixty-eight landings a week. A month after that, over a hundred.’

‘Shit.’

‘I’ve ordered a second hotel at the airport, built with a walkway to the airport, and anyone flying onwards intercontinental gets a free room, up to a maximum of sixteen hours. It’ll have four hundred rooms.’

‘What capacity do we have at the lodges now?’

‘In the DRC? Over two thousand, but they’re all told to keep a few rooms empty. We get people just driving across Africa and dropping in for the night. A company runs jeep trips from Kenya across the lake and Uganda and to us.’

‘Long old trek.’

Po approached. ‘My family build factory to make furniture.’

‘Don’t forget, we’ve imposed a minimum wage for men over twenty-one,’ I told him.

‘Yes, yes. It small.’

‘Next job is the railway link,’ Jimmy said. ‘From Mogadishu, up past Mawlini, through Southern Sudan and into the north of our territory. We’ll run oil and ore trains to the coast.’

‘We growing enough food for all this?’ I queried.

‘We’re keeping up, thanks to the kids in Shanghai.’

‘Yeah?’ I asked, a glance over my shoulder, Po not paying attention.

Jimmy nodded. ‘Congo has very fertile soil, and some things grow well. They’ve spliced a few plants together to come up with huge bloody things. Also got a few large fish farms going, with monster eels and catfish in. The people are getting regular fish for the first time in their history.’

‘What did I hear about Lake Victoria? Water level falling?’

‘Yes, but I’m looking at lakes and dams in the north of our territory and pipes across to the lake. Whatever we pump in, the Kenyans will be allowed to take out on their side. They’ll have a bad drought from 2009 onwards. The river, at River View, will get low.’

‘Bugger.’

Two days later we boarded the plane for Beijing, picked up Han, and headed toward a chilly Moscow. Yuri met us at the airport with a luxury coach and whisked us around to his apartment, plenty of rooms for all of us, Han staying at the Chinese Embassy.

In the morning, I realised that this was the first time I’d been in Moscow without being cold. It was un-seasonally warm. The day was glorious, and we took the coach around to the Moscow White House, a tall white office block that housed the Russian Government. We presented them with the documentation for six BO105 helicopters, kitted out in a similar fashion to British police helicopters; they would be used by the Moscow police. We also donated twelve BMW motorbikes kitted out for paramedics, Rescue Force personnel to operate them from various motorway intersections around Moscow, aiming to be the first on the scene of an accident.

We gave a TV interview that evening, speaking only in Russian, and describing the helicopters and bikes. After the interview, we enjoyed a meal with Yuri and Marko, then boarded the coach for an eight hour drive down to the farm area through the night.

Arriving at the farm offices, we found a large hotel in the middle of nowhere, a large office block next to it. We booked in, soon on the balcony of a top floor room, staring out at fields and a flat horizon. Well, it was a farm project, what did I expect. After a shower, we left the kids with Cat and moved next door, where they

showed us a great many bland charts. Basically, production was increasing four fold every six months, as was the acreage. At this rate, we'd be ploughing the outskirts of Moscow in a few years.

I noticed the logo of the coffee shops, and asked about it. Turned out that the farm produced the milk for the coffee shops, and the wheat for the bread rolls they sold, steak, and even sausages. The rest was mostly shipped to Europe, where it was sold for more than the Russians consumers would wish to pay for it. And, as the money came back, more farmland was taken over, now some six thousand Russians gainfully employed.

I approached Jimmy. 'So, coffee shops.'

'Are ... just coffee shops.'

'Will this all make a great profit?' I asked.

'Not really.'

'Then why, numb nuts?'

'Why not?' He walked off.

I checked with Yuri, and we now had two thousand coffee shops spread across Russia, a healthy profit being made. Finding Helen, I said, 'I still can't figure out the coffee shops.'

'I figured it out,' she proudly stated.

'You did?'

'Yes, because I'm smarter than you.'

I waited. 'Well?'

'Each coffee shop has a TV screen showing the news, plus free newspapers.'

'Yes?' I said after a moment.

'TV, papers - media.'

I waited. 'And?'

She sighed. 'Some day, we'll have a paper and TV channel here...'

'Ah,' I loudly let out. I grabbed Jimmy, Helen close. 'The coffee shops will be a media outlet for us.'

'No.'

'No?' Helen queried.

'The Russians would never allow that. Keep thinking.'

We met with recently arrived representatives of the German Government, made a few plans, and sat with Yuri discussing cows, milk, and grain quotas.

I took the kids into the fields for an hour, the day not too cold, the countryside here very pleasant, and not what I had expected of Russia. The hotel offered a rooftop bar, and we watched the sun set from up there, finding the Russian countryside most agreeable.

The next day we inspected a field of cows. ‘They look just like ours,’ I said after studying the animals.

‘They are, I shipped them in. They’ve been in quarantine for six months, but now we’re breeding them. There’re some British sheep around here as well, but the pigs are Russian.’

‘And the long term aim here?’ I nudged.

‘Cheap global food. At the moment, less than one percent of Russian agricultural land is being used effectively. In years to come German housewives will be buying Russian sausages, Russian milk, Russian wheat, Russian gas to stay warm, and Russian oil for their cars.’

‘I can see a problem with that.’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy admitted. ‘They’ll be dependent. But that works both ways. Russia won’t fire nukes at those who buy its produce, and Europe won’t fire nukes at its supplier. Dependency is a good thing.’

‘British Prime Minister won’t be a happy chappy when we get back.’

‘He needs us more than we need him,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Besides, I’ve got Somalia interested in Hawk jet fighters from British Aerospace.’

The luxury coach transported us back to Moscow, and we spent the night in Yuri’s apartment before our flight home. Back at the estate we found it damp, the Alsatians looking cold and miserable.

I stopped next to Big Paul in the entrance hall as he walked out. ‘You ... er ... sorted?’

He thrust his hands in his pockets and inspected his shoes. ‘Big empty bed, quiet house – just me. Lots of tears from her, shouting from the lad.’

‘It’ll settle down, give it time. Jimmy said it wouldn’t last.’

‘I know, and ... you know, the time with the lad was the right thing to do.’ He showed me a picture of a teenage girl. ‘That’s the girl down in Bournemouth, I made contact.’

‘And?’

She walked around the corner, with a fine forty-five year old woman, her mother. Big Paul introduced us. Seemed that they were “staying” for a while, and Big Paul led them off for a chilly walk around the lake. In the diner I met Keely, and his lady, our first meeting. Sitting, we spoke about Canada and our new hotel. Shelly ran in, but stopped short of kicking Keely when she noticed the strange new face.

‘Hello,’ she politely offered.

The lady knelt and shook Shelly's hand. 'I'm Jane, from Canada.'
'We were in Canada.'
'Yes, I've just been hearing. Did you take pictures?'
'Yes.' Shelly ran out to fetch the digital camera.
'Where are you working, Jane?'
'HSBC bank, Cardiff. Not far.'
'Not in Canadian terms, no,' I said. 'Have you been to Africa?'
'We're going next week.' She showed me the sparkler on her hand.

'Keely, you old fox.'
'Keely?' Jane repeated.
'We call him Keely. Sorry, long Story.'
'I think of myself as Keely now,' Bob Donnely admitted.
Shelly burst in with the camera and data cards, so I led Keely outside.

'You sorted ... the *thing* in Canada?'
'More or less, I got a buddy on it. He hates the CIA, so it's a labour of love for him.'

'Engaged eh?'
Keely shrugged and made a face. 'Jimmy's never wrong. Well, almost never.'

'No, he didn't see that light aircraft. Any news on that?'
'Guy getting divorced – his fucking wife worked at that hotel. When he heard that the world leaders were there ... well, opportunist target.'

I nodded. 'What does Jane think you do?' I whispered.
'US trade representative to Africa.' He shrugged. 'Big Paul's a cheeky bastard; one out, one in a week later.'

'That did surprise me,' I admitted. 'And the girl's mum is nice.'
'She went all soppy when she saw this place. Still, if I looked like him I'd have to make use of an edge.'

'What do you mean, *if* ... you looked like him, old man?'
Back inside, Jane was mothering Shelly, my daughter fascinated by the new face, and describing the lake and the swimming. When Keely made a rude joke, Jane playfully tapped him on the shin. Shelly took that as a cue, and whacked Keely in the shins before running off. When I laughed, Jane was not impressed – at all. I left Keely to explain it.

Springtime

Springtime 2006 was surprisingly quiet for us. After the New Year circumnavigation of the globe we settled down to the same old routine of reports and meetings. CAR was producing a lot of reports these days, and we attended regular meetings in London, the offices now packed with warm bodies. Jimmy was fixated with Gotham City in the jungle, and it occupied most of his time. I looked after the clubs, the property business and Pineapple Music, Jimmy still ticking the list of artists to sign up. Some days I hardly said a word to Jimmy, we just sat working on different things, and attended different meetings. I would hand him a summary and he'd glance at it and nod. Then it was on to the next project.

Blake Carrington came to stay for a few days, most impressed by the house and the lush Welsh countryside. Having our own lakes and prime trout river made him quite jealous. Towards the end of his stay Jimmy dropped a bombshell, that was not quite so bad in reality. The Russians, the Chinese, CAR and others – acting through proxy companies - had been secretly buying up stock in Blake's media empire, of which he himself only possessed twenty percent of the stock. We now held just under thirty percent and told him so, making it sound like a pleasant surprise. After Blake had mopped his brow and sipped a water, we explained that the move was made so that we could support him against the other shareholders. It brought him back from the brink. We explained that we would not be launching any kind of a bid, and that he would now be in a much stronger position at shareholders meetings. We also indicated that we would have some input to programming on the TV news, the magazines and the websites. Naturally. He needed another sip of water.

Jimmy explained that we would be expanding the TV news to cover the whole USA, on cable, and that the news slot would now be almost six hours a day, with regular half-hour topical political debates, and plenty of overseas news items. We asked Blake to instruct the programme makers to be politically neutral, and unbiased. But we did ask nicely.

When May came around we got together to plan the next RF deployment, another earthquake in Sumatra. We dispatched Alpha teams from ten countries, and left the main thrust of the operation to RF Sumatra, Hancock from Hong Kong given operational control on the ground. It went off without a hitch.

Summer at the house was nice and quiet, a few new faces, and I got some fishing time in. Keely's fiancé moved in and they grabbed an empty house. The UK Government were in talks with Spain over Gibraltar, and we were dangling carrots for them, black oily carrots. Cuba and American were playing nice at the moment, and the world was suddenly optimistic as Chase visited Russia and China and signed even more deals. The only hiccup on the horizon was Lebanon.

In July, the Indian counter terrorist force was sat waiting each night in Mumbai harbour, and at various points around the city. On July 12th, a day late, a group of twenty Pakistani fighters came ashore. When challenged, they opened fire, and were cut down, several Indians injured. India played down the incident, and no blame was laid at Pakistan's door. Jimmy ticked a box on the list. That just left Lebanon.

After much debate, some very heated, we dispatched a thousand Kenyan Rifles with blue UN helmets to Lebanon. And there started the trouble. The Lebanese didn't know the reputation of the Kenyan Rifles, and most Arabs considered themselves superior to "blacks from Africa". The Lebanese population did not respect the Kenyans, and insults were levelled, a kind of racism. The Kenyans were well behaved, but they knew they were not welcome.

One evening they stopped a car and discovered a mortar in the boot, which they intended to confiscate. The men in the car were not having blacks tell them what to do, and tried to move off. Their car was blocked in, so they opened fire with pistols, killing a Kenyan. The Kenyans opened fire, the car filled with holes when the Lebanese press inspected it the next day. The mortar tube was displayed, but ignored, the dead Kenyan labelled as having been killed by his own side as they fired on the car. The funeral for the dead men was large, calls for the UN "murderers" to leave.

That evening the UN base came under mortar fire, a few men slightly wounded. The UN then considered pulling out, and Jimmy was not opposed to that; he had not been too happy about the Rifles being there in the first place. He admitted that having them acting as a buffer was better than a war, but still considered that they would be better removed.

The next evening, the Kenyans snuck out and awaited the mortar firing teams. When those teams turned up and made ready they were shot dead, the mortars seized. The UN ordered the Kenyans to stay in their base, and not to go out at night again. Another large funeral for the local men was followed by another mortar attack, this time

four Kenyans killed. Jimmy sent a signal to the Kenyan commander, telling them to defend themselves or leave. The Kenyans snuck out again that evening, in four different directions, and surprised three different mortar crews setting up. They killed them all, including a few teenage boys helping the mortar crews. Fearing the Kenyans being surrounded and cut off, Jimmy shouted down the phone at Ben Ares and dispatched the Pathfinders from Kenya, five hundred of them fully armed. They landed at a military airfield in Israel under the cover of darkness and moved north in buses, their jeeps arriving by IL76 transport. At the border they halted, ready to assist their countrymen if necessary.

Hezbollah dispatched troops south as the UN ordered the withdrawal of the Kenyans. The Kenyan convoy did not get far, roads blocked and mined. Caught out in the open, they came under sporadic fire, Jimmy ordering them south towards the Israeli border. The Pathfinders made ready for a night action to secure the rear of the evacuation.

The Kenyan convoy reached the border, ditching their blue helmets, the Pathfinders moving north on a parallel route. Hezbollah had gone and gotten themselves lost, and its convoy of almost a thousand fighters took a wrong turn, and drove straight towards the Pathfinders, who were trying to find the tail end of the snaking convoy of their countrymen. They met each other at a dark bend in the road, and opened fired.

In the house, Jimmy smashed a chair against the wall and told Dave Gardener to “get the fuck out”. I had never seen him like that, and we all kept our opinions to ourselves as the reports came in.

The Pathfinders dismounted and formed up, moving by squads towards the Lebanese fighters. Using night sights and sniper rifles they picked off the fighters, then outflanked them, coming side on to the long convoy of fighters, most of whom just stood around wondering what was going on up ahead. By dawn, none were left alive, the report relayed to Jimmy by satellite phone. Jimmy had not slept, but calmly contacted the Kenyan Rifles and ordered two thousand men, plus supplies, to be flown to Israel. That left us all confused, if not stunned. I risked asking for clarification.

Jimmy took a moment. ‘The fight should have been avoided. But, once started, there’s no point in making it worse by leaving Hezbollah to attack Israel as planned. If the Kenyans leave, Hezbollah will go straight towards the Israeli border.’

Jimmy contacted the Pathfinders and told them to take defensive positions away from towns and villages, and to await re-supply.

Meanwhile, the original peacekeepers turned around and moved north to join their colleagues. The UN Security Council met and voted for a withdrawal of the Kenyans, but also read a note from the Pathfinders commander that said they were “pinned down” and that retreat would be done so under fire and in disorder. That was a lie concocted by Jimmy, something else that surprised me.

The Kenyans got their re-supply, and more men, soon a buffer zone set-up, which was what the Israelis had wanted all along. And when the first rocket landed in Northern Israel, Jimmy moved the Kenyans forwards, still “pinned down”. Although the Rifles were taking injuries from sniper fire and mortars, they were building up a good tally of enemy fighters killed each day. Hezbollah sent more fighters south, the result a massacre. The Rifles were spread out, and hidden with their sniper rifles. And they took no prisoners.

The next evening, with the UN Security Council due to meet again, and Hardon Chase on the phone during the day, Jimmy ordered a push twenty miles forwards. The rifles would move to the edges of a village, fire a few shots and see who came out armed, any armed men being cut down. Cars were stopped at improvised checkpoints, the occupants typically opening fire and getting themselves killed. At dawn the Rifles moved south and re-occupied their original bases, their blue helmets back on.

Jimmy met with the “M” Group at the house, and each representative sent messages to their governments. The UN Security Council now voted for the peacekeepers to stay put, and condemned the aggression towards them. The alternative was a war between Israel and Lebanon. Hezbollah licked its wounds, and thought better of sending more men south, the Kenyans now occupying a buffer zone some fifteen miles deep, some three thousand of them dug in. An uneasy truce reclaimed the area, and Jimmy took me for a walk around the grounds.

‘That should not have happened,’ he said as we walked, the day warm.

‘But if it stopped the war...’

‘Yeah, I know.’ We walked on, nothing said for a while. ‘Might get away with it,’ he finally said.

‘Get away ... with it?’

‘Hezbollah might try and set-off bombs in Kenya.’

‘Ah. That would be bad for business. But they did start it.’

‘True,’ Jimmy admitted. ‘They may just sit and stew about it. Or they may launch a full attack south.’

‘If they do, they’ll run out of people before the Kenyans run out of bullets.’

‘True again,’ Jimmy admitted. ‘And I was tempted to use the Kenyans to sweep north. At least the Israelis wouldn’t get the blame.’

‘But Kenya would, with no UN remit. At the moment, it looks like a UN mission gone wrong.’

Jimmy nodded as we walked.

‘You blame the Israelis?’ I asked.

‘No,’ he said with a sigh. ‘It would have harmed the cause if they had gone to war.’

‘How long do we keep them there?’

‘If the UN pay ... indefinitely. If it keeps the two sides apart, then that’s not a bad thing.’

‘I think Dave Gardener has changed his name and gone into hiding.’

‘Invite him down,’ Jimmy suggested as we passed Rob fishing in the main lake.

‘I’ll tell him you won’t eat him.’

‘A flashpoint like that could seriously fuck-up my plans. We have to be more careful. I ... have to be more careful.’

The days ticked off the calendar and Lebanon remained quiet, little more than the odd sniper duel reported. Ben Ares flew over and we discussed the situation, Jimmy happy to keep the Kenyans there, most of the pathfinders withdrawn. The UN sanctioned the operation and the money, and the Kenyan soldiers were rotated out after three months. It looked as if we had got away with it.

Gotham city

In October, Jimmy and I made a quick visit to Goma International Airport, the place now deserving of that title. As I negotiated the aircraft steps I could see a dozen other aircraft on the apron, many of them belonging to our airline. Passport control was busy, the arrivals lounge busy, queues visible through the glass walls to departures. We followed the signs for the new hotel, along a glass walkway, and

into the reception area, greeting travellers as we progressed. The lift took us to the top floor and a guard let us out onto the windy roof.

‘Fuck me,’ I let out.

In front of me, the main boulevard stretched out towards Goma, two lanes on each side of a grass divider. On either side, new high-rise apartment blocks were sprouting up, a dozen finished. Beyond them a number of tall cranes attended the huge Lego sets that would be new buildings soon enough.

‘How tall is that far building?’ I asked.

‘Twenty-five storeys,’ Jimmy proudly stated. ‘For Africa, that’s quite tall.’ He pointed. ‘You see that yellow bus?’

‘Yeah?’

‘Two of them go round and round all day, free to anyone, from Goma to here and back. Come on, let’s go see what we can see.’

A small coach awaited us, our bodyguard detail sitting behind us. Pulling off we passed the first hotel that had been built, and then out through the airport gates and onto the boulevard. Four tall apartment blocks flashed by, each sat in their own fenced-off grounds, surrounded by grass with benches.

‘That’s a shopping centre,’ Jimmy pointed out. After passing another four apartment blocks he added, ‘That’s a public swimming pool for locals; workers and their kids. That’s a police station, those are corporation offices, that’s our CAR office – accommodation above them, and that’s our tourist office.’

‘What are those?’ I asked, pointing a row of smart colonial style houses.

‘Embassies.’

‘Embassies?’

‘We agreed it with Kimballa Jnr; we can have our own embassies here. So far, nine countries have missions here.’

The coach negotiated a large roundabout, watchful police eyeing the traffic, and we headed back along the opposite side of the boulevard.

‘That’s the airline office. They have another office at the airport itself. In there is a call centre; customer enquiries.’

We passed the first large apartment block to have been built, its ground level dotted with well-attended shops. Next to that stood the new tall tower.

Jimmy explained, ‘It has offices for rent on the first three floors, penthouses at the top – or at least it will when finished. It’ll have a gym and pool, restaurant and bar. Marko and Yuri have grabbed the penthouses.’

We passed another six apartment blocks, most of them complete, and turned right before the airport roundabout. A mile along the road, the sides of this road littered with new foundations, we found an industrial park, one of ten new such parks in the area. Individual units and factories were now being erected.

‘In here, the various businesses will support the mines and other projects, save having to import it all. Africa doesn’t make much, so we’ll make what we need here.’ We passed a large factory under construction. ‘Po’s place; they’ll make all sorts.’

Two miles further on we came across large cranes scooping up mud, carving out deep canals. Behind them sat a number of smelting plants, steam belching from tall steel chimneys.

Jimmy explained, ‘You have heavy industry here, light industry closer to the town, then the apartments. And free buses go back and forth all day. The locals don’t earn much, but they save on transport costs and living costs, and food is subsidised to a degree, so they do well. A lot of Africans buying apartments here.’

The coach turned right again, away from the airport. Five miles down the road we came across shanty houses, then the start of a modest neighbourhood of uniform houses that all looked prefabricated.

‘These houses are two bedroom, nice enough, but cheap to build. There’re three thousand of them here, a bus route and a couple of shops,’ Jimmy explained.

‘This the poor part of Gotham City?’

‘Not many locals can afford those apartments.’

At a large roundabout we turned right again, soon at the top of the boulevard, signs labelling Goma to be off to the left. Now we passed brick and breezeblock houses, soon two storey houses, then houses in their own grounds and with high walls, finally hitting the roundabout we had circled earlier.

‘Progression,’ Jimmy explained. ‘They start with the small houses, get jobs and work their way up. And they can go as far as they like.’

Crossing the roundabout, we soon approached the new hospital, a huge building, parts of it still under construction.

‘There’re Cuban doctors in there, a Rescue Force unit, and doctors on swap from around the world. When it’s finished it’ll be able to accommodate three thousand patients. At the moment, there’re about sixty patients in there. Most of their work is attending injured workers at the factories and mines, and they have a decent ambulance service – even a helicopter ambulance.’

We turned left and halted, the road blocked.

‘That’ll be the American University; accommodation for three thousand students, pool, gym, library, running track, the works.’

‘Bar?’ I asked.

‘No, this is Africa. They don’t get pissed like western students.’

At the airport, our ride was just about ready. I stood next to a map board and scanned the destinations that were now available. Seemed like we offered flights to every country in Africa. At the next board I checked the prices, finding that a hop from here to Kinshasa was just \$50, Nairobi a \$75 return, and Cape Town was a \$100 return. It was no wonder the flights were full. As I climbed the steps, I could see three 747s from three different airlines. Our hub was now truly a hub, and I smiled contentedly.

‘How much more will this grow?’ I asked Jimmy.

‘Till you can drive for half an hour and not find jungle.’

The 747 lifted off from Silo Airport, on the edge of Gotham City.

2006 ended with many boxes having been ticked, and a strange optimism gripped the world. The various leaders were talking about co-operation, rather than confrontation. Even Jimmy was surprised, because right about now he had been expected to be in a small war against Hardon Chase and the CIA.

The world economy was doing better than we had planned for, and interest rates were nudged up to try and cool things down. House prices were appreciating annually at over twenty-five percent, but we desired less than twenty percent. More new houses were built to compensate, and oil flow reduced to raise prices a little. The regular “M” Group meetings were now largely economic debates, often in small detail and with a little horse-trading going on. What went on in our lounge affected the globe.

For New Year we launched a massive advertising campaign for Cape Town, and flew down for the New Year celebrations, changing flights at Goma hub. Ex-Presidents Harvey and Art Johnson came along, the former French President, the serving British Prime Minister, and senior politicians from the States, Russia and China. Sykes attended with his wife, and many of the senior staff from Mawlini and Mapley joined us. Cape Town was put on the map, the number of New Yorkers visiting it growing rapidly.

On New Year’s Day, 2007, we were sat on the brilliant white sands, in the sun, Shelly trying to feed Antarctic penguins. And I was optimistic for the future, at least the near future.

Magestic

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Part 8

It's quiet, too quiet

2007 should have been the start of a financial crisis, but we had averted the worst aspects of the sharp rises in property prices, and the worst excesses of the banks and financial institutions for the most part. Interest rates had been nudged higher, existing mortgage laws re-applied, hints dropped.

At a dinner in the city of London, a room packed with stockbrokers and bankers, Jimmy had made an off-the-cuff remark about "shorting" Icelandic banks. The next day Iceland went into crisis mode, and had a good look at the reasons behind the sudden run on their banks; they called Jimmy directly. They were overstretched, and bluntly told to pull their necks in. There was also the small problem of many British investors pulling their money out of Icelandic banks, causing a shortage of cash, which highlighted the exposed leverage that the banks had been employing. Instead of a major crash, they suffered a short and sharp minor crash. I put a note in my diary not to visit Iceland for a while.

Besides that hiccup, which was more of a deliberate hiccup, the start of 2007 was quiet. Global politics was giving people the world over a warm and glowing feeling, house prices were steadily climbing, economies were growing thanks to manageable oil prices and supply, and all was well with the world.

The "M" Group countries met in Delhi in February amid tight security, our Indian commandos on hand, and went off without a hitch, its format settling down. We'd hold an opening meeting, where Jimmy would list a few topics and predictions, and then the political aides would scurry around for a day to both make proposals, and to receive counter-proposals, the next meeting discussing the conclusions rather than wasting time with offers and rebuttals. I got involved, and often travelled back and forth between parties carrying messages, the kind of messages that no one would admit to in public, or in writing.

'Like fuck,' Hardon Chase would say. To the Chinese, I would report, 'The nice man is not entirely in favour of that.' My diplomatic skills were growing; I could now lie convincingly. But when Helen asked about a dress, and I said that I was 'Not entirely in favour of that' I got a slap. I also employed our special adjudicator on occasion, Shelly being sent around to someone who

everyone agreed was a complete idiot, and delivering the message in person. ‘You’re very silly man!’ Shelly would tell them, the person in question knowing that such an approach required a majority vote of world leaders to instigate.

With spring approaching we were worried. It was all going too well. Sat in a lounge one day, Jimmy said to me, ‘It’s the calm before the storm.’

‘It’s going too well, something’s bound to go wrong,’ I agreed.

‘Yes, but what?’

‘CIA!’ we both said at the same time.

‘So what could they do?’ I asked. ‘Try and kill us?’

‘As far as they know, Magestic would carry on delivering warnings. Killing us would only be a hiccup to Magestic.’

We gave it some thought.

‘What’s their gripe at the moment?’ I posed.

‘They have less to do, their budget has been frozen – and may even face a cut, because we’re putting the world to right. So they’re pissed.’

‘So they want a war, or a crisis.’

‘Well ... that would give them more to do, but they must figure that I know where all the hotspots are,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Besides, people would see straight through it.’

‘Exposing us would be the easiest way,’ I suggested.

‘Then Hardon Chase would jump all over them. He loves us to bits because we’re helping him to look good.’

I blew out. ‘Then what else could they do? Where are we vulnerable?’

‘Nowhere really; any bomb or sniper in any one place would achieve little, we’re spread far and wide.’

‘So, what do you care about the most?’ I posed.

Jimmy took a moment. ‘That question ... would produce different answers at different points in the time line. It may have been Mawlini at one point, still would to a degree. Then Forward Base, now Gotham City.’

‘You can’t call it Gotham City, that’s my joke,’ I said with a smile.

‘Can’t call Russian Paul *Ivan* or Donnelly Keely, but we do, thanks to you!’

‘So what could they do to Gotham City? They can’t blow it up or cause a fire - it’s huge, spread far and wide.’ I clicked my fingers.

‘The airport!’

‘A problem there would hurt,’ Jimmy admitted. He got on the phone to Sykes.

That following week, a team of sniffer dogs were flown down to Goma with their handlers, a unit of ex-police handlers that would rotate every six weeks. Passengers, and their baggage, would now be sniffed by keen wet noses. The airport already possessed western style metal detectors and body searches, but they were checked, and procedures tightened up. Full background checks were extended for everyone who worked at the airport, or in anyway touched it. All local workers were visited at home, in the nearby apartments or houses, and random searches were instigated.

Sykes had a list of all CAR staff, plus everyone else who worked for us – anywhere in the world, even sub-contractors, and began the process of re-screening them all. We provided funds, and MI5 staff worked on the checks, MI6 making checks overseas. A week into the project they unearthed a CIA mole in CAR. Instead of removing the individual, we recruited the man – work for us or go to prison for twenty years – and fed the CIA information that they would know was being fed to them. His contact numbers were cut, and he was quietly fired by us.

Security at the Pineapple offices was tightened, scanners and sniffer dogs used on occasion, and senior staff were given drivers and bodyguards, homes checked for bugs at random. Our nightclubs were already secure, but procedures were tightened further. And at the house, extra cameras and sensors were installed, the small camera room moved to the basement to accommodate all the screens, two people positioned there permanently. Ahead of schedule, the main gate was modified and a gatehouse built, cameras fitted to the road and angled up so that they scanned the underside of vehicles entering.

The main house was already bomb proof, and any device going off in one section would not affect many people. My house had also been built to be tough, and car a bomb would have achieved little.

We flew down to Gotham City and tightened security further, a ten-man team of Pathfinders now always on duty at the airport, extra Congo rifles wandering about. At the main gate we installed a small tower with tinted glass and holes for sniper rifles to fire out of. The airport could now withstand a direct assault. Cameras were fitted to the hotels, and extra guards posted. The airport already offered a great many cameras, but Sykes sent down a few people to look for blind spots. The final piece of the security puzzle at the airport came

in the form of a batch of radiation detectors. It was a remote possibility, but we were covered.

Forward Base was already heavily guarded, but a few changes were instigated, a special police unit created simply to monitor Americans or Canadians in the country, the detail of their names being fed back to Keely. Mawlini was a death trap for anyone daft enough to try and attack, but we got Mac on the case and gave him a budget. He had cameras fitted, and they took possession of their own patrol dogs for the fence, plus sniffer dogs for passenger aircraft.

Relaxing in the lounge, back from Africa, I said, 'How about ... they blow up the train track?'

'It would be fixed in a day, and it doesn't cross any bridges that they could blow.'

'We have bridges in our region,' I pointed out.

'Concrete! Built to be cheap, and very fucking hard to blow up.'

'What if they got to Kimballa?'

'He's both terrified of us, and loves us, in equal measure,' Jimmy insisted.

'And if they killed him?'

'His replacement would not dare upset us. If he did, the Congo Rifles would cut the country in half and we'd keep our bit. The people trust us more than their own politicians.'

'I reckon their best bet is exposure.'

'Not really. Think it through: they expose us as ... what, time travellers who know the future. Who the fuck would listen to them afterwards? Everyone would ask us!'

'Yeah, I suppose. So they want us gone, and quietly.'

'They still have the problem of Magestic: unknown, unseen,' Jimmy insisted. 'No, what they want ... is the American public against us. At least the American Administration against us, and the idea of Magestic.'

'So how do they achieve that?' I wondered out loud.

'A rift between us and Chase,' Jimmy also thought out loud, staring up at the ceiling.

'And how would they achieve that?'

'They may know that we have dirt on Chase. In fact, I'm certain they do, from the first meeting with that Admiral in the room.'

'Could they find that dirt?' I asked, now worried.

'If they did, they'd shoot themselves in the foot; I've made it all look like *they* covered it up. Besides, whoever replaced Chase would jump all over the CIA and not trust them again.'

'So, they need to use that dirt as leverage ... somehow.'

Jimmy eased back and gave it some thought. ‘Somehow ... meaning that they sour our relationship with Chase who – at the moment – is doing more for me than I could have ever hoped for.’

‘Assassinate him, make it look like you?’

‘No one would believe that, I’d have no reason. And the “M” Group countries would say so.’

‘So they assassinate Chase ... and make it look like the Chinese?’

‘That ... would be a worry,’ Jimmy admitted. ‘But they’re not about to assassinate a President; he’s not Kennedy. And his replacement would just carry on and deal with us. They need ... a lack of co-operation. But, at the end of the day, I designed my plans for the future assuming that the Americans would always be difficult, if not downright hostile. So even if they pull out of the “M” Group it wouldn’t affect my plans. And they would never wish the other countries to have a lead over them, so they’d never pull out of the “M” Group.’

‘They must be up to something,’ I said with a sigh.

‘Keep thinking.’

‘Those coffee shops...?’ I posed.

‘No!’

Plenty aforethought

The CIA made its move a month later, Hardon Chase making a frantic call to us. The two largest medical insurers in the States, Republican Party donors, had received documents from the CIA about us, detailing our support for Senator Pedersen’s insurer – the stock market tip-offs. Chase could not risk annoying them, since they were large donors and well connected. It was a mess for him.

Jimmy asked him to arrange a meeting with the CEOs of the companies in question in a few days, and we packed a bag. In New York we made a point of being seen having fun, not a care in the world. Jimmy made a pass at a famous actress, and she was snapped leaving his hotel in the morning. We had set the tone. The next day we flew down to Washington on a private jet, a Learjet, and allowed ourselves to be filmed getting in and out of it. We were whisked straight around to the White House, a nervous Hardon Chase waiting.

‘This is serious,’ were his first words.

‘Sure is,’ I agreed. ‘No tea waiting for us. I mean, you’re the most powerful man in the world – and the beverages here are crap.’

He stared at me, controlling his disappointment in me. ‘They’re waiting, so I hope you have a rabbit in the hat.’

‘Well, let’s go and see, shall we,’ Jimmy said with a confident smile.

In the meeting room, five sour-faced men waited. They each looked at us like we had driven over their flowerbeds.

‘God bless all here,’ I said with an Irish accent as I sat. ‘Who’s round is it?’

No one bothered to try and shake hands, and no introductions were offered.

Chase said, ‘I assume everyone here knows who everyone else is?’ None of the men opposite responded.

Jimmy took in the faces of the men opposite, smiling dangerously. ‘In just a short while the FBI will be arresting the CIA agents who gave you the files.’

‘They will?’ Chase queried.

‘They will,’ Jimmy insisted, not having taken his eyes off the men opposite. ‘So, why don’t I save us some time and sum up: you’ve been provided with documents from the CIA, top secret documents – the kind not to be caught in possession of – and you think that this clairvoyant known as Magestic has been favouring Chuck Pedersen’s insurance company. Well, you’d be right.’

Chase blinked.

Jimmy continued, ‘But you should have read the files in more detail, and applied your brains a little more. A clairvoyant ... is someone who can predict the future. Predict ... the future, such as meetings like this. As a result of that ability to predict the future, we knew about this meeting twenty years ago. Since that time we’ve had private detectives monitoring you fine gentlemen. Mister O’Leary, that nice man that your daughter married, and recently divorced, was one of ours.’

The man looked horrified.

‘Mister Bankovich, your son’s existing wife is on our payroll.’

‘What?’ the man gasped.

Jimmy reached down and lifted his briefcase, taking out two thick files. He slid them over. ‘We know every prostitute that you’ve ever fucked, every bit of weed or cocaine you’ve ever bought, every insider deal. And, we know which whistle-blower one of you had killed two years ago.’

The men had been scanning the files, but now looked up, horrified.

‘You’ll notice in these photographs of you going back twenty years. Of course, the police, your shareholders, your wives, and the SEC would be interested in some of the detail, if ... it got out.’

‘Jesus,’ Chase let out. ‘I can’t believe I’m in this room.’

‘So,’ Jimmy loudly called. ‘What did you want to talk about today?’

We waited with smug grins, the men sipping water and mopping their brows.

‘Nothing?’ Jimmy asked. ‘Oh well, then I guess we’ll conclude with me asking that you both donate ten million dollars to Rescue Force Kenya and ... it was a pleasure.’ We stood.

‘Some day, we’ll get a good cup of tea in this place,’ I complained.

Chase led us out, staring wide-eyed at the floor as we progressed. In the corridor, he stopped and forced a breath, shaking his head. ‘God damn, boys.’

‘The CIA waiting for us?’ Jimmy asked.

Chase led us on, now smiling and shaking his head. In the bowels of the White House we stepped into a room of CIA directors and managers, a reception even more frosty than the previous. And still no bleeding tea!

‘Please, don’t get up,’ Jimmy told them when they stood for the President. He sat. ‘So, who do we have here? Mister Drake and Mister O’Sullivan, there are some nice gentlemen from the FBI waiting for you upstairs, with proof of your involvement in the Magestic documents that you handed to the medical insurers.’

As we sat there looking smug, the men were led out, their colleagues both surprised and horrified in equal measure.

‘So,’ Jimmy loudly said ‘Here we all are. Now, I won’t keep you long, because you’re going to be busy later today and ... tomorrow. You gentlemen would prefer that we did not give tips about security matters, because that’s your job. Never mind that we’re trying to save the planet, you’re more interested in your own careers.’

‘That’s not true,’ a few tried to argue. After all, they were not about to have that label pinned on them in front of the President and the CIA director.

‘And yet, here we sit, two of your managers under arrest for trying to expose us and discredit us, classified documents handed over to businessmen,’ Jimmy detailed. He waited.

‘They were not following orders from the top,’ the Director insisted.

‘Guess they have no respect for your authority,’ I noted, the man not happy. At all.

Jimmy said, ‘And then there were the other attempts to attack us, and to discredit us.’

‘Those people have been dealt with,’ they insisted.

‘Lame,’ I put in, now even less popular with the Director, Chase oddly quiet.

‘OK,’ Jimmy began. ‘Let’s get down to business. You have – some of you have, yet again gone against the wishes of the President – and the Director – and operated on your own to attack us. So there’s going to be a penalty.’

‘Oh god,’ Chase muttered.

‘Many years ago, the then President Harvey asked us to boost civil service pensions. That gave us access to CIA pensions and welfare funds.’

‘Oh no,’ Chase muttered, dreading whatever Jimmy was about to say next.

Jimmy explained, ‘So we traded that fund, and did quite well.’

‘Very well,’ I put in.

‘Extremely well,’ Jimmy added. ‘Unfortunately, we bought a great many stocks just before secret takeovers were announced, before the Pentagon issued contracts, and before the boys on the hill sanctioned projects. As such, anyone looking hard at the trades might conclude that the CIA – that’s you – had insider information, and that you were making money for yourselves.’

Mouths opened and eyes widened when they realised where this was going.

‘As of – oh – about an hour ago, the detail of those trades went to the Washington Post, the New York Times and CNN.’

Chase put his hands to his face.

Jimmy faced the CIA Director. ‘I’d resign now if I were you. Then there’s the problem of the SEC seizing your pension funds and stopping all payments for former officers, including sick pay. That should take about ... oh ... nine months to iron out.’

‘What have you done?’ Chase whispered.

Jimmy ignored him. ‘Gentlemen, we know what you’ll do ... before you do it. Every time you push, we push back.’ He stood, and I followed him up. ‘I look forwards to your next move, which we were planning for twenty years ago.’

I patted a stunned looking Chase on the shoulder as we left. In the van, I said, 'You knew all along.'

'When I set-up the insurance scheme I figured that the others would be unhappy.'

We met Pedersen on Capital Hill and explained what had happened. He and his colleagues would now be calling for an investigation into CIA activities, but supporting Hardon Chase.

A few days later, Mac called, his bank balance twenty million dollars better off. We ordered the money spent in Darfur, on relocating refugees back to their own villages. The American news was full of the investigation into the CIA, Chase under pressure and not a happy bunny. He had no choice but to sack the current director and appoint another. That director had been in the job just three days when Chase called. Jimmy was not about, so I took the call.

'Home for fallen women, Matron speaking.'

'Paul? Hardon Chase. Jimmy about?'

'No, hence you're talking to the monkey, and not the organ grinder.'

'Are you in the country for the next twenty-four hours?'

'You can't fire a nuke at us, it's against some law ... somewhere.'

'You in?' he pressed.

'Yes, no trips planned. What's up?'

'The new head of the CIA is on his way, military flight to RAF Fairford – on the quiet. He wants to find a peaceful solution, so do I. So I would really appreciate you speaking to him.'

'I'll get the kettle on. How're things across the pond?'

'Settling down, thankfully. But they've suspended the CIA's pension fund. We're having to put money forwards for the payments till this is sorted out. Try and work with Petrosi, eh?' The line clicked dead.

When Jimmy appeared, I relayed, 'The CIA chief is coming over. Guy named Petrosi. Is he OK?'

Jimmy nodded absently, picking up a file. 'As soon as he's gone we'll pop over to Zimbabwe, we just got their airline.'

'Cool.'

Petrosi turned up at dawn the next day, a Saturday. And it was just him, an escort of four RAF Military Police officers. We were in the diner having breakfast when he was shown in, a short and stocky man with thinning black hair and a pockmarked face.

‘Coffee, black, please Cookie,’ Petrosi said as he took off his coat. He sat straight down. ‘Fucking C5 Galaxy flight. Jesus, at least I was tired and slept most the way.’

I stared at him for a moment, then faced Jimmy.

‘I got Bouncy the masseuse coming around in an hour,’ Jimmy told our visitor. I was still staring.

‘Good one, Jimbo. Gagging for a young bird with large hooters.’

Now my mouth was opening.

‘Daughter’s wedding soon?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Fucking yes! And I could do with a few dollars.’

Jimmy took out a dated gold pocket-watch with a chain. ‘Your great-granddad’s heirloom. Have it appraised; should be thirty thousand dollars.’

I was still staring.

‘Nice one, Jimbo. Fucking wife is bleeding me dry.’

‘And I’m Paul,’ I finally said.

‘Hey Paul,’ Petrosi offered. He turned his head towards Cookie. ‘Pancakes, buddy? Thanks.’

I said, ‘Would I be correct in assuming that you have met before?’

‘You would,’ Jimmy replied. ‘I had to get a lot of people sacked to get this reprobate into position.’

Now Petrosi faced me, and with a huge grin. ‘It was ... 1985, not long after I joined the agency. Jimbo introduced himself when I was stationed in London. In fact, I think I met you, Paul, at a club somewhere. Jimmy introduced me as a trader, which I was - it was my cover. Thanks to Jimmy my trading did *very well*.’ He faced Jimmy. ‘I miss those days. I was always drunk, and always getting laid.’ To me he said, ‘Jimbo gave me tips about work, and I got noticed and promoted.’ He stopped smiling. ‘He also told me what was ahead for the planet. Twenty years of predictions – and never wrong!’

‘I was wrong about your wife,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘I figured she leave your fat arse by now!’

Petrosi laughed. ‘She gets money, and peace and quiet away from me. What more does she want, eh?’

The pancakes were placed down.

‘So, how’s Hardon Chase working out?’ Petrosi asked as he drowned his pancakes in treacle.

‘I confronted him when he was nominated and we struck a deal. Since then ... he can’t do enough. I’m well ahead of schedule.’

‘Africa is looking good,’ Petrosi commended, talking as he chewed. ‘Financial crash sorted?’

‘More ... or less,’ Jimmy responded. ‘I think they’ll still go over the top, just a few years later.’

‘I uncovered a unit in the Congo, called their asses back,’ Petrosi informed us.

I shook my head. ‘You rigged ... the head of the CIA.’

‘Get some work done now,’ Petrosi firmly suggested. He faced Jimmy. ‘Can you identify all the shits working for me?’

‘I think so. Keely has a secure link here, so if I can see the names and faces I could probably tick them all off.’

Petrosi nodded as he chewed. ‘Later.’

Keely walked in sat. ‘Mister Petrosi. Sir.’

Petrosi regarded Keely coolly. ‘Later today, I’ll want to use your secure link and show Jimmy some names and faces. See if he can’t spot anyone that may be a problem ... in the future.’ He wiped his mouth with a napkin. ‘I don’t quite buy all this clairvoyant crap, but I have a job to do – and the President is on my case.’

‘We’ll try and be as helpful as we can,’ Jimmy offered, now acting a part in front of Keely. ‘We’re here to help.’

‘Cut the crap, Silo. It’ll take ten years to repair the damage you’ve done.’ He faced Keely and stared. ‘You mind?’

Keely stepped out.

‘He OK?’ Petrosi whispered.

Jimmy nodded. ‘He’ll break a few rules on our behalf in the years ahead. Oh, when you got the pension fund sorted, I’ll trade it up – but in a legal way.’

‘Good of you, Jimbo.’

Jimmy faced me. ‘Helen ... does not need to know.’

‘I won’t be mentioning Bouncy the masseuse either!’

Zimbabwe

Jimmy, myself and Big Paul caught a BA flight to Goma the next day, hopping on a connecting flight to Harare. Peering out of the window as we taxied to take-off, I could see ten aircraft at the terminal, and smiled contentedly. Landing at Harare, we were met by two cars and an escort of Zimbabwean Rifles.

General Solomon Beke, a young man to be the head of the Army, was waiting in the car, a huge smile for us. ‘Welcome, old friends. Welcome.’

‘Those guys outside, they Rifles?’ Big Paul asked.

‘Zulus, they like to be called,’ Solomon informed us. ‘And their reputation is known to all citizens here.’ We pulled off. ‘Mothers tell their children – if you are bad, the Zulus will come for you!’

‘Do you use them as police?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Yes, they patrol lawless areas, and then peace comes quickly,’ Solomon enthused.

We booked into a nice hotel, dumped our bags, and headed off again. On the outskirts of the town we approached one of our new orphanages. Pulling through a high gate guarded by two police officers in blue, we halted next to a new brick building labelled as “Office”. Anna and Doc Adam stepped out.

‘Any of these kids yours?’ I asked Doc Adam, shaking his giant fat paw of a hand.

‘I see them all as my children,’ Doc Adam boomed.

I hugged Anna. ‘It going well?’

‘Yes, we have some good staff.’

‘How many kids?’ I asked as Anna hugged Jimmy.

‘Nine thousand, so far,’ Anna reported. ‘Many were ... unwell, but are better now.’

I glanced over my shoulder at Solomon, who was out of earshot. ‘Got the kettle on, love?’

Anna led us inside, and to the administrator’s office, the man down from Ebede in Mombassa and looking familiar. After tea and a chat we stepped out into the main courtyard and toured the various buildings, the kids all dressed in blue and marching around in neat lines, some chanting and singing as they went. It made me smile; this was Ebede II, three if you included the Congo. We stopped to chat to a group of English teachers that had a better grasp of the Queen’s English than I did.

‘They’re all graduates from Ebede, Kenya,’ Jimmy proudly pointed out.

‘Haven’t had enough of kids and orphanages yet?’ I asked them.

‘It is a calling,’ one responded.

They showed us around a modern school building, complete with gym and swimming pool, tennis courts and football pitches outside. Mounting up, we drove to a second section, finding it identical to the first. Beyond that we found a large muddy field with the foundations of two additional sections in progress. When finished, there would

be twenty thousand kids housed, fed and taught here. The uniforms were uniform, the buildings identical, and the formula seemed to be working.

We thanked Anna and headed back out of the gate, Solomon oddly excited at the prospect of a trip to the Zulu's barracks, an old base that had been improved with a lick of paint and a new fence. Passing through the main gate, I could see familiar formations of men jogging around. At my request, we pulled up at the enlisted men's canteen. Stepping down, all the soldiers stopped dead at the sight of Solomon and saluted. He returned a collective salute as we entered the large canteen. Our presence created its own Mexican wave as men scrapped back their chairs and stood, silence soon gripping the room.

Jimmy stepped forwards. 'Sit down, men.' They sat, but remained nervously silent. 'Carry on and eat, please.'

We sat at the first table, a handful of men halfway through their meals. I pinched a chip. As we asked questions, four meals were brought over and placed down, good timing because I was peckish. The men at the table answered questions about the training, their time in Camp Delta and their fondness for the desert, and characters like Mac and Ngomo. Turned out that some of these were going back to Kenya soon for parachute training.

At the end of our meal we stood, everyone else standing. Jimmy thrust his first onto the air. 'Zulus!'

A deafening roar came back, shaking the building. 'Zulus!' If these guys ever formed their own choir it would be enough to scare the crap out of the enemy before the shooting started. I remembered a Michael Caine film, a few British soldiers holding off thousands of Zulus. They would have had no chance against this lot.

We waved, thanking the men, and mounted up, soon heading back into town and our scheduled meeting with the President, the guy having survived in office longer than anyone would have predicted. Pathfinder bodyguards in plain clothes greeted us at the parliament building and led us inside, part of the reason why the old guy was still alive; two assassination attempts had failed. Outside of the President's office stood two more Pathfinders, this time in uniform, M4s slung. They snapped to attention. Jimmy recognised one and enquired about the battle at Scorpion Base. We left Big Paul there to chat. Inside, we found the short and unimposing President, and several of his aides, stood waiting.

'How are you, sir?' Jimmy asked, extending a hand.

‘Alive, thanks to your men.’ They shook, and we were soon gestured to seats around a coffee table. ‘And the Rifles, known as the Zulus, have returned with a loyalty to me and their country, a respect for law and order, and a fearsome reputation. I fully believe that just the thousand of them is all we shall ever need.’ He took a moment to study us. ‘In Kenya, they studied the history of *this* country, and *our* culture, returning to us as honoured sons – not as strangers.’

‘That was always my intention, Mister President.’

‘We have sent another thousand young men to Kenya, but we believe that within two years we shall be able to train the men here.’

‘We’ll supply instructors when you need them.’

‘You are ... most kind, and an unusual benefactor.’

‘How’s the airline working out?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Very well; Europe has never been closer. I flew to a conference in Portugal – if I pronounce it correctly, leaving in the morning and arriving at night, passing through Goma Airport. I was ... most surprised by the size of your undertaking there.’

‘I aim to fix Africa, Mister President. All of it.’

‘You may just succeed, Mister Silo, from what I have seen.’

‘How are the tourist dollars?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Growing,’ the President responded. ‘I believe that the lodges are at capacity, a direct flight from Livingstone to Goma – which makes all the difference. These days, when us Africans wish to fly, we ask for *your* airline: I fly Silo, or I don’t fly!’ We laughed. ‘How many aircraft do you operate now?’

‘With those we took over ... almost a hundred.’

‘It was something of a shock for my people to be able to board a flight to Europe after all the years of sanctions, and a cheap flight at that.’

‘How are the farms?’ I asked, as much of Jimmy as the old guy.

‘They produce food,’ the President quipped. ‘Which is an unusual use for our land after all this time.’

‘And your currency is now US dollars?’ I asked.

‘Yes, we have stabilised things – to a degree,’ the President explained. ‘The people do not worry so much. And, after another two years, perhaps to return to our own currency.’

‘We’d like to look at mining, and oil exploration here,’ Jimmy told our host.

‘There is no oil here,’ he said with a sigh.

‘It can do no harm to look,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘And your mines are inefficient.’

The old guy nodded, soon handed a document from an aide. 'This grants you the rights, to mining and to oil exploration. Existing mine ownership must be honoured, but you may enter into partnership with them.'

'We will,' Jimmy assured out host. He handed over a bank transfer confirmation for fifty million dollars. 'An advance.'

'You will take many years to recover this,' the President puzzled.

'We are in it for the long term, Mister President.'

I somehow figured we'd be lucky in our explorations, and two hours after our tour began we arrived at the airport with Solomon, farewells made. We boarded our own plane, and headed towards our own airport, in our own region of the DRC.

At Goma airport we left what little luggage we had brought with us at the security desk, Big Paul minding it, and took the control tower's elevator to the top. It opened to a darkened room of orange screens. Passing through, we climbed the stairs to the busy glass tower.

'Jimmy,' the senior man called, a Brit. He stepped over. 'Jesus, when you said this place would grow...!'

'And more to come. How's it going?'

'Fine, enough bodies to cover everything. They've started building work over there.' He pointed. To the right of the huge maintenance sheds a new area was now being prepared.

'What'll go there?' I asked.

The man explained, 'Extended parking area, and more maintenance sheds, capacity for twenty aircraft. A lot of the old stock will come here to be checked over, all done in one place.'

'Boeing and Airbus mechanics?' I enquired.

The man nodded. 'There's fifty of each, plus a hundred trained Africans – from far and wide. Boeing and Airbus have offices here now, it's an important maintenance hub.'

'Where are you living?' I asked him.

'Tower block Four, nice enough pad. Waiting for a house on the hill.'

I faced Jimmy with a quizzical look. He grabbed a large pair of binoculars and handed them to me. 'Hill in the distance.'

I focused the glasses, soon noticing a gentle hill about two miles away, a spiral road climbing up and around it, numerous houses under construction.

'Known as The Spiral,' the man reported. 'Two hundred houses, getting nicer as you climb up; gate at the bottom, bar and restaurant at the top.'

‘That’s all American money,’ Jimmy said. ‘When that’s complete, we’ll start a second one nearby. Other side of the maintenance sheds is an industrial estate, but we only let in companies linked to the airport. Behind that will be apartments and shops, an estate for the workers.’

‘I’ve started fishing in the new lake,’ the man informed us with a smile. ‘Some real monsters in there.’

‘Our security staff said it was good,’ I put in, Big Paul and the others having visited.

‘That the guy who hooked a croc and shot it?’ the man asked us.

Jimmy and I exchanged looks. ‘I think we need to have a chat to Big Paul,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Although I haven’t seen him with a new crocodile skin handbag of late.’

‘There’re crocs in the new lake?’ I asked.

‘It has a canal linking it to the main lake,’ the man explained. ‘They come up it, crawling the last fifty yards across the grass.’

‘Still,’ I said, ‘we shouldn’t kill the wildlife. The locals have hunted the crocs in the main lake nearly to friggling extinction already.’

We inspected dots on orange screens, lots of them coming and going, then boarded our flight, soon heading north, the distinctive shape of the volcano visible to the east. And Big Paul was fined five hundred quid for shooting a croc.

Cyprus

The people and politicians of the island of Cyprus had already made moves towards reconciliation between north and south; the Turkish north and Greek south. We would now use hard currency to move that along.

As part of an existing EU initiative, we paid for a register to be made of people who had fled their homes, either when the Turks invaded, or during the resulting civil war. On both sides of the divide our people hunted around and asked just about every family what they had lost, and who they knew who had lost property. When that list offered up a reasonable number we began the difficult process of tagging people who had benefited, rather than lost. The

biggest problem facing us was that land had been developed on both sides, hotels and apartment blocks built over former homes.

Having identified the worst cases of profit being made on someone else's land, we compensated both sides – on consideration that they assign their old properties to us. Having done that to five hundred families we were twenty-four million pounds out of pocket. With the UN behind us, and the EU, we then suggested that we would take the existing occupiers of the land to court. Unless...

In London, we met with the Turkish authorities, the Greek authorities, and the governments of Southern Cyprus and Northern Cyprus – no love lost between them. The EU, the UN and the British Government sat off to one side.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we are not here to apportion blame. We don't care. What we are interested in ... is in a peaceful and prosperous Cyprus. Turkey has aspirations towards EU membership, something that would be less easy with the outstanding issues of Northern Cyprus. So we would like to use our money and influence to try and find a solution, the solution to those who lost property.

'As you already know, we have compensated several hundred families on both sides of the divide, and they have signed their properties over to us. If necessary, we'll start legal proceedings against the current occupiers of the land to get some of that money back – if for no reason other than to acknowledge that land was lost during the troubles.

'Now, during the troubles, some people moved into vacant houses, houses which are now worth a lot of money. They did not buy the property, nor inherit it; they found them abandoned. We ask that they now try and pay something towards their good fortune as part of the peace process.'

'The Turks have benefited the most,' the Greeks unhelpfully put in.

'That may be true,' Jimmy agreed. 'But Southern Cyprus has enjoyed a great tourist trade for decades, whilst the north has not. Turks living in the south may have gone on to sell their property to a hotel chain.'

'It will be hard to define the land,' the Turks complained.

'Would the authorities of Northern Cyprus sell me land - that which belonged to Greeks - and at a good rate, for the sake of peace?'

'What will you do with the land?' they asked.

'I'll build houses, villas and apartments, then sell them, the profit being paid to compensate those whose land it was.'

‘How much land?’ they asked.

‘Around five thousand acres to start.’

‘That’s a great deal of land,’ they noted.

‘What price for peace, and Turkish entry to the EU?’ Jimmy posed. ‘And do I need to remind you that during your worst earthquake I spent a hundred million pounds to help your people.’ It was not so much a gentle reminder, as a punch in the throat.

The Turkish Government were in favour, their island counterparts not sure yet. Jimmy went around the room and asked for opinions, soon everyone in favour save the North Cyprus Turks, and they would consider it. In reality, it was a good deal for them and they knew it. We offered to send in mine clearance teams to those areas on the border that were affected, and to pay for old barriers to be torn down, and even offered to buy the abandoned properties in no-man’s land.

A month later we reconvened, this time with the Turks from the north in favour. They had come with a prepared list of available land and property. Jimmy scanned a map that they showed us, and asked for a large bay and its surrounding area; all of it, some six thousand acres. That way, we could concentrate our efforts. They had come prepared, and we bought the land for just five million euros, a token amount.

After the meeting concluded we popped around to the offices of our property business, and sold ourselves the same land for forty million pounds. That money then winged its way quickly to Cyprus, as compensation to families, provided that they sign away any future claims. Hundreds of families were compensated, some on the Turkish side. Jimmy handed over the designs of what we wanted built on the land: six large hotels, twenty apartment blocks and two hundred small villas. The bulldozers were already on their way.

Rubber gloves

At the end of 2006, Jimmy had given Han and myself a project, an important one. That project was now just about ready.

In our region of the DRC we now housed a plastics producer, using convenient local oil, and we opened a number of synthetics factories, Po’s family involved. The smelting plants produced steel, and that was shipped the very short distance to factories that utilized

the steel to make general goods, as well as quality instruments for the medical world. Those instruments were tested and inspected, the best of them being sidelined for my project. The rest would stay in Africa.

On a wet Monday, Han and I flew down to Goma and booked into the hotel, setting off the next morning to inspect our hard work and planning. We first drove around to a factory unit near the airport. It was not a big place, but they could produce a hundred thousand medical goggles a year. We inspected the product, placing on the plastic glasses and peering through them at each other. Surgeons and doctors would wear them when at risk of fluid transfer from a patient. We gave the factory boss the go ahead and their first shipment was dispatched aboard a 747 cargo version.

At the next factory unit we tried on disposable surgical gowns, headwear and over-socks, all blue, soon looking quite silly. The items met with western hospital standards, and we shipped them out, all two million of them.

At the third factory we inspected latex gloves that were not latex, but something similar made from oil by a clever German engineer. We tried them on, dispatching eight million of them as we wiped talc off our hands. That led us to some rubber tubing that was not rubber, and bits of plastic tubing that I dare not ask about its applications. They were boxed up by the thousand and shipped out.

The next day we turned our attention to steel, and to scalpels and surgical tools, clamps, and things that turned my stomach. Rescue Force doctors and surgeons had tested them at length, and found them no different to those bought elsewhere. Tens of thousands were boxed up and shipped to the coast by train. Our final visit was to a factory unit that employed as many Chinese as it did Africans, a great deal of new high-tech equipment on hand, and the various finishing rooms sterile; we had to don blue masks and over-socks to enter, our blue masks and over-socks. Inside, we found an assembly line making syringes and needles, tens of thousands of them. Rescue Force had again tested these, and found no problems. A shipment of a million was sanctioned, and dispatched by 747 cargo plane.

Back in the UK, we gave our people in Hawaii the go ahead, and they prepped their medical sales reps - that were not quite sales reps. The reps travelled around to the various hospitals in Hawaii as typical medical sales reps would. But that's where the similarity ended.

‘We’d like you to try some free samples.’

‘How many?’

‘Here’s a year’s worth, let us know how they turn out.’

‘A year’s worth? You mad?’

‘We’re trying to conquer the marketplace, so make the most of it. If you like them, you can have them at seventy-five percent of normal retail.’

‘Seventy-five percent off?’

‘OK, you drive a hard bargain; let’s call it eighty-percent off.’

Within a week we had the medical community of Hawaii confused. The equipment was good, it was not rubbish, and it was free to start with, then damn cheap afterwards. Every hospital and clinic in the islands received a visit from our reps, and got their free goodies, those items that they used a lot of during the week.

When Keely expressed an interest in the project, I explained it. ‘A box of disposable over-socks, or headwear, is say ... ten dollars typically. A large part of that cost is distribution, fuel, salaries and profit. We’re producing the equivalent for less than a dollar because we have the oil and steel, the cheap labour, no salesmen or distributors, no sales staff - really, and no profits to worry about.’

‘So ... why?’

‘Jimmy says that after 2013 your Medicare goes crazy and just about bankrupts you. For every billion your government will send us at the time – in the future, we’ll take nine billion out of your costs – at least for certain parts of it. And Jimmy has a few other things up his sleeve towards saving costs there. Just across the Mexican border, the Cubans have opened a hospital, part run by us. It’s open to paying clients and the first few people from Los Angeles have driven down to have operations they can’t get – or can’t afford - in the States. The doctors are Cuban state surgeons, the medical supplies ours.’

‘Medical tourism,’ Keely noted. ‘That used to work the other way around; rich Mexicans coming up for quality surgery. Does Africa get the supplies cheap?’

I nodded. ‘In those countries where we have a footprint. It’s a massive saving for you, almost ninety percent. We’ve also started making plastic sheets for the UN, for refugees, and tents from synthetics. We even make the tent poles. Rescue Force now receives a shit load from our factories each week, and we’re shipping the stuff to Cuba to support their initiative in Central America.’

‘Cheap surgery,’ Keely noted. ‘I hear it’s making them popular in Central America.’

‘As Jimmy says, most of the cost of these things is profit and distribution. A lot is already made in China, but the price goes up five fold when it hits the hospitals in the States.’

‘So why Hawaii?’

‘It’s socialist,’ I toyed.

‘Socialist?’

‘State run healthcare, different to the mainland. We’re going to set it up as a shining example.’

‘Won’t the medical insurers get pissy?’ Keely posed.

‘Not really, it saves their core costs, while premiums stay the same.’

‘Chase know about it?’

‘I sent him details yesterday, and he phoned me. He’s fucking delighted. I didn’t tell him it was his aid money that funded it, I’ll do that after a year or so. We don’t want people thinking Chase is a socialist now, do we.’

I showed Jimmy the stats, the production costs and schedules.

‘Good work,’ he said. ‘Now treble the output.’

‘There’s no pleasing some people!’ I mock complained, and went to find Han.

A few days later the Prime Minister flew down to see me. He got straight to the point. ‘We want cheap medical kit.’

‘Oh, well ... it’s all earmarked for various projects and people.’ He folded his arms. ‘OK, the way it works, is that for every pound you spend with us in the DRC - it saves you nine up here. We could open more factories in a few months.’

‘The National Health Service is just about our largest cost.’

‘That’s doctors salaries and building upkeep,’ I insisted. ‘How much of that is plastic shoes?’

‘About three billion a year is spent on disposable items.’

‘Ah. OK, how much do you want to ... invest?’

‘Start with a hundred million pounds, then we’ll ramp it up. We’ll make the money a loan into CAR, transferred next week. And the French already know.’

‘For fuck sake - we’re doing all we can!’

‘Do more, and faster.’

I wagged a warning finger as Jimmy entered and sat. ‘He’s trying to bully me,’ I complained.

‘Kick him in the shins,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘He wants medical kit,’ I informed Jimmy.

‘So will everyone else in time,’ Jimmy said with a sigh. To the PM he said, ‘Set-up a small office near our airport; health service procurement team and quality testers.’

‘Be done before you know it,’ the PM threatened.

Jimmy slid his gaze across to me. ‘Been an incident in Somali.’

‘Al-Qa’eda?’ I asked.

‘No, Abdi.’

‘Ah. He topped his President?’

‘No,’ Jimmy began. ‘He’s in Kenya. But the President sacked him as head of the Army, announcing it whilst Abdi was away. So the President’s bodyguards shot him full of holes, along with the new head of the Army. The Vice President has taken over, and re-appointed Abdi.’

‘Or else!’ the PM commented, a disapproving look adopted.

‘Will Abdi try and get the President’s job?’ I asked.

‘Not yet, he’ll wait two years to the next election,’ Jimmy explained.

‘Will he win?’ the PM asked.

‘Yes,’ Jimmy answered. ‘Why else would we have groomed him all this time?’

‘And my successor?’ the PM toyed.

‘Won’t be your Chancellor,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘No?’ the PM puzzled.

‘No, he’s due a heart attack.’

The PM took a moment. ‘Oh. Should you ... should we –’

‘Inject him? No, he’s a pain in the arse,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘Then ... my successor?’

‘You could keep going,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘A forth term?’ the PM considered.

‘Why not,’ I said. ‘You behave well enough.’

The PM shot me a look. To Jimmy he asked, ‘What do you think?’

‘It’s your call, your future, your family that you may wish to spend more time with. But ... but 2013 is ... problematic.’

Big Paul stepped in. ‘Jimmy, you’re dad has died.’

We all stood. ‘Head back,’ Jimmy told the PM, Jimmy and I driving down the short distance to the old house, an ambulance arriving. In the house we found the family doctor coming down the stairs.

He stopped on the last step and took in our faces. ‘He went to sleep, and went peacefully.’

‘Thank you, doctor,’ Jimmy offered. We found Jimmy’s mother in the lounge, her sister visiting. I called the undertakers and made the arrangements, then called Helen and asked her to release a statement to the press.

The unspoken question, on everyone’s lips at the house, was why Jimmy had not injected him. The following day Keely delicately enquired. Jimmy took a moment, and said, ‘I didn’t want him to see what comes next.’ That left us a bit stunned.

Four days later we were stood at the graveside, blessed with a glorious day of no clouds and little wind. After the priest had performed the graveside service, we drifted back towards the cars.

Jimmy stopped, and took in the view towards the village of Caerleon. ‘We used to come up here a lot as kids.’

I took in the pleasant view, the old bridge and the River Usk. ‘Not a bad spot.’

‘Jimmy!’ Big Paul called, his tone a worry.

We turned and walked towards him, Big Paul pointing out a grave as we drew near.

Big Paul read out, ‘Here lies Shelly Holton. Magestic: VAT14:JDI.’

‘What the fuck...’ I began, but could not finish.

‘Get hold of Sykes, seal this place off,’ Jimmy told Big Paul. ‘Then make sure no one sees that grave.’

We walked back towards the main group.

‘What the fuck is that?’ I whispered.

‘A message,’ Jimmy said.

‘A ... message? It’s got Shelly’s fucking name on it!’ I stopped Jimmy, a hand on his arm. ‘Is my fucking daughter in that grave?’

‘I ... don’t know. Possibly.’

‘She went back? Is that why you favour her so much?’ I asked in a strong whisper. ‘She destined to go back?’

‘No. Well, at least ... not to my knowledge. We’ll exhume the body and run a DNA analysis.’

I forced a breath. ‘If she did go back, how old –’

‘Could have been a hundred years old. I have no idea.’

We joined the procession and pretended that nothing had happened, travelling back to the old house as the local police sealed off the cemetery, and we made small talk with the relatives.

At 6pm Sykes stepped in, dressed suitably in black. ‘I’ve removed the item, its here. The grave contains the remains of ... someone.’

‘Perform a DNA test against Paul, his blood is on record,’ Jimmy quietly requested. ‘Then scan every other grave for odd messages.’

Sykes nodded conspiratorially. ‘You know what it means: VAT14:JDI?’

‘Yes.’

‘You do?’ I queried.

‘It’s a message, another one,’ Jimmy explained.

‘Does that mean that 2025...?’ Sykes posed.

‘Not necessarily. The first time machine was built out of desperation after World War Three. If I’m receiving messages, then it’s because of a desperate situation at some later point. Maybe beyond 2025. And ... let’s not discuss this too much.’

‘I have a body to attend,’ Sykes said.

I grabbed his arm before he left. ‘Show her the respect she deserves. Please.’

Sykes glanced at Jimmy, back to me – nodding, and left us.

I did not sleep at all, Helen worried as I paced up and down. I explained that there was ‘a message’ but that I could not say what it was. And I made no mention of Shelly being in that grave. For several hours I sat in Shelly’s room, just watching her sleep. As the sun came up, I felt rougher than I had done for a long time. When cars arrived I rushed around, unshaven and looking haggard.

Sykes stepped down. ‘It’s not a relative of yours in there.’

‘No?’

He shook his head. ‘The gravestone replaced the original. In the grave is a local woman, jewellery on her confirming it, no DNA link to you.’

I turned away and took in a dog patrol. ‘So ... they placed the gravestone there knowing that we’d see it. See it now, this week.’ I led Sykes inside and found Jimmy in the diner. We relayed the detail to him.

‘From this moment on ... no discussion of it. Sykes, make up a story, a ... bomb or something. Bury it deep, no records. If this gets out we’ll have a problem.’

Back at the house I gave Shelly a big bug, despite her trying to wriggle free. That was followed by a hug for a surprised Helen.

‘Shelly,’ Helen called. ‘Go clean your room.’

‘Ah, what for,’ Shelly protested, stamping a foot.

‘Just ... do ... it!’ Helen insisted. ‘J ... D ... I.’

I stopped dead, my heart skipping a beat.

‘What?’ Helen asked after a moment.

‘Nothing.’ I forced myself to look away, my thoughts jumbled.

Later that day I took Shelly out for a drive; she liked the Wye River Valley. I played the dutiful father, and spent a lot of time staring at my daughter as she threw sticks into the water. I found myself wondering what 'VAT14' meant. That, and what the hell were those coffee shops in Russia for?

New faces

The French voting public changed their President, and he attended his first "M" Group meeting in New York a few weeks later; in at the deep end. In an unusual move, Jimmy had sent me and Helen to brief the guy after his own security people had given their briefing. Helen acted as translator, and I answered his questions. Now, we met at the UN building, re-occupying the same room that we had used previously.

In the past two years, the various leaders had met each other more than any of their predecessors had ever done. Previous American Presidents had met with their Russian counterparts little more than twice per term – if that. The current batch of various "M" Group leaders now met at least four times a year, and relationships were good. 'Peace in our time,' the papers had reported. I was still waiting for something to go wrong.

Jimmy began with, 'We welcome the new French President to this group, and we hope that he does not get a kick in the shins in his first year.'

The leaders laughed, the French President aware of the joke. He has even met Shelly. But the good mood did not last long as we moved onto vaccines, and who might produce them ahead of the outbreak of Swine Flu in 2009, and for subsequent pandemics. After thirty minutes we were getting nowhere; each country wanted drugs sales for its own companies, and I could see Jimmy getting frustrated.

'Ladies and gentlemen, the purpose is to save lives, not to make a profit,' Jimmy reminded them. It did not do much good. The idea that drugs would be mass-produced by the cheapest supplier was just not being swallowed, or injected, not even by the British PM. Suppositories came to mind as I listened.

Jimmy finally said, 'I will make my own research available to all at the same time. You may treat your own people as you see fit, and

I'll try and treat those people that fall outside of those warm arms. There'll be an outbreak of Swine flu in the spring of 2009, in Mexico. That will be a start point to a process that will either become cheaper, or will bankrupt you all.

'OK, moving on. Gibraltar has been settled, as has the Indian-Chinese border. I would suggest to the British Government that they take a similar approach to the Falklands as they did with Gibraltar, and consider the benefits of co-operation. Because the South Americans will not let you use their ports, and so the oil and support ships will have a very long way to travel.'

The British PM did not look happy with that idea. More suppositories came to mind.

'Next, the Chinese have made a modest breakthrough in the use of stem cell activation. By this time, I would guess that the Americans have as well, but that they are keeping it to themselves.' We all focused on Hardon Chase.

'We've had some successes, yes,' he finally admitted.

'The progress of that research is not important,' Jimmy explained. 'Quite the opposite: if it appears too soon, and is used widely, it will cause more problems than it fixes – many more. But, in addition to the various governments here conducting their own research into the advanced features of stem cell medicine, there are also various researchers around the world discovering it all by themselves. Do my Chinese colleagues have a statement to make on the subject?'

Han interpreted, and reported, 'We have created a serum from the blood, and can mass produce it. It does not cause strong appetite, and does not repair injuries quickly, but it does cure a variety of diseases. And we will share that research.'

Hardon Chase seemed most put out at being beaten to that announcement.

Jimmy explained, 'That serum could be used for AIDS, TB, Hepatitis and a variety of diseases common to Africa and the southern hemisphere. It will not, however, extend life or make people stronger.'

'When should we ... announce that to the world?' the British PM delicately enquired.

'It will benefit all here if a cure for AIDS is found and used. So let's vote on its release this year in Africa alone. All those in favour?'

They all voted in favour.

‘Fine. China, kindly make the details of your research available.’ To Chase he said, ‘A cure for AIDS is worth billions to you. How much will you save from treating those without health insurance?’

‘A great deal,’ Chase reluctantly agreed.

‘Do we have to buy it off the Americas?’ the French asked.

‘No, because by time the FDA approves the drug you’ll have developed your own with the Chinese research.’

‘Another shopping list?’ the French asked.

‘A small one,’ Jimmy admitted with a grin. ‘Now, that serum, once modified and improved – and mass-produced – will be needed in the years ahead by all of you, and the rest of the world. The 2009 Swine Flu pandemic is not serious, those that follow will be. But keep in mind that once injected it’ll last twenty years, for some people perhaps a lifetime. So that serum could be used now, and your key workers would be covered for later.’

‘Could that vaccine be passed on blood-to-blood?’ the French asked.

‘Yes, but it would get very weak. And it’s not a vaccine - it doesn’t really work like a vaccine – it’s an active agent. It’s best used *after* someone is infected, to keep the potency strong. It will diminish with time.’

The British PM said, ‘So, its best use would be waiting for people to fall sick, then inject them, lowering vaccine costs.’

‘Yes. But some future pandemics will be quick, and by time you reach a person they may be too far gone, or living in remote areas. You don’t want a pilot to fall ill on a long flight, do you? I intend to experiment with it in Mexico in 2009.’

The French listed a number of small conflicts in the Sahara region. And should the Rifles be used?

‘If black African soldiers are seen to be aggressive towards Islamic citizens - too soon - then that may cause more problems than it solves. Most of the countries in question are not key players, and will be cleared of terrorist elements at a later date.’

‘Do we all get cheap medical equipment?’ the French asked.

‘That equipment is earmarked for Africa and America, but for two very different reasons. Africa does not have the money. America has the money, but needs to re-structure its health service before it has less money than Africa.’

‘We have a growing health tourism industry,’ Chase noted. ‘Your doing. Got some twenty thousand people a year heading south for cheap operations.’

‘Which saves you having that headache in Medicare, does it not?’ Jimmy posed.

‘Well ... it takes some pressure off the public hospitals. But it also highlights the problems we have!’

‘Really? Bummer.’

Chase cocked an eyebrow. ‘You want it to embarrass us.’

‘Sure do, old buddy,’ Jimmy said with an accent.

Chase said, ‘Hawaii is saving a lot of money in its annual medical bill. Some people may start going there for some health tourism: get a tan and have a melanoma removed!’

I laughed.

‘Don’t joke about it,’ Jimmy told Chase with a smile. ‘You’ll soon see citizens of Florida hopping into planes to Cuba for operations they can’t afford at home. But that’s not a bad thing, it saves the US taxpayer.’

‘How much of an affect could you have on the health budget?’ Chase asked.

‘My aim is to shave twenty percent off it.’

‘That’s a big number,’ Chase cautioned, as if he did not believe it. ‘Won’t do that with plastic tubes alone.’

‘Wait and see,’ Jimmy enigmatically stated. He checked his notes. ‘OK, whilst on the States, let’s talk about the Mexican border, because you’re *still* ... not on top of it. First, may I suggest that you change the law so that a citizen cannot sell a second-hand firearm unless through an approved exchange, where background checks are made.’ Chase made notes. ‘Then, may I suggest that your weapons manufacturers not make weapons with a view to smuggling them south. If you don’t act, I’ll expose them.’

‘You have a list?’ Chase asked without looking up.

‘I’ll send it to you,’ Jimmy offered. ‘Because by 2012 the Mexicans will be losing twenty thousand a year dead in drug related shootings.’ Jimmy took a breath. ‘Next, we need to discuss a future nuclear attack on Israel.’

Everyone sat upright, Ben Ares and David keenly attentive. They already knew some of the detail, more than the rest of the group.

Jimmy began, ‘As we speak, several senior Indian Army officers – and members of the intelligence community – are considering a way to rid themselves of the Pakistani problem ... forever.’

Everyone was now focused on the Indians, who were horrified. They looked like the guy who had farted loudly in polite company.

‘They will create a very realistic nuclear device that is not designed to go off. It will be made to look like a Pakistani nuclear

device, complete with the correct components and specifications – provided by their spies inside the Pakistani nuclear programme. There will even be a few fingerprints to be had. That device will be smuggled towards Israel by Pakistani agents who think they are working for the Pakistani Government. It will be discovered on the border, and will be quickly followed by a US strike on Pakistan, a conventional strike ... to start with.'

'Indian?' Ben Ares questioned.

'The enemy of my enemy ... is my friend,' Jimmy stated. 'If you get rid of Pakistan, they don't have to.'

'You know who these men are?' the Indians demanded.

'Yes, but if you reveal the full detail of this plot you'll do more harm than good,' Jimmy insisted. 'They need to be dealt with ... slowly, and quietly.'

'This is the attack you mentioned before?' Ben Ares puzzled.

Jimmy nodded. 'Members of Rescue Force Jordan will be involved. Some innocent, some expecting the bomb to go off.'

'When can we know who is involved?' the Indians asked.

'It has to be handled quietly,' Jimmy reiterated. 'So give me a unit of the men we've trained, and we'll decommission some of your senior staff.'

'I can't believe it,' the Indian Prime Minister stated.

'If you don't co-operate...' Ben Ares threatened.

'Gentlemen,' Jimmy called. 'If the Indians co-operate or not, those men *will* be dealt with.'

We broke for thirty minutes, the various leaders a bit stunned.

Ben Ares came up to us as we made ourselves coffee, to a confidential distance. 'Should we allow the Indians to be in these meetings?' he angrily asked.

'Funny, but in the years ahead, many of the people in that room will ask the same about you,' Jimmy illustrated as he stirred his coffee.

'What?' Ben Ares challenged. 'Exclude us? We have a lot to lose in the decades ahead. We have every right to be in this room!'

'The Indians may say the same,' Jimmy pointed out as he lifted his coffee. 'Because they face ending up in a war with Pakistan. So perhaps the person making choices of inclusion or exclusion ... will be little old me, and me alone.' He walked off, leaving Ben glaring at his back.

'Do we blame the White House when the CIA poke us in the ribs?' I posed, Ben turning towards me. 'No. And we don't blame the Indian Government ... because they aint behind it. And without

their help we'll have a hard time dealing with it. To quote Churchill: jaw, jaw, not war, war.'

Back in the meeting, the mood was frosty and formal, a step back after recent successes.

Jimmy took a moment to take in the faces. 'The path ahead for us ... is a difficult one, even knowing what will happen. After 2011 it will get ... interesting, then dangerous, then life or death. All you have to do, is to keep the final objective in mind: that we all get to 2025 in a reasonable condition, and shoulder to shoulder. Because you can be certain that anything less than a united front will lose us the war.

'Now, the men in India - who will be a problem - are known to me, and they will be dealt with ... *with* the co-operation of the Indian Government I'm sure. If not - should the plot succeed - I'm sure some around this table may actually consider a strike against India. The way to proceed, is to monitor those men and - when they meet to conspire - to record their conversations, confront them and make them resign whilst the plot is still just an idea.' He glanced at a sour-faced Ben Ares. 'That way everyone is happy. And please keep in mind that over the next ten years the members of this group will be - at times - downright hostile toward each other. Poke your tongues out at each other if you wish, just keep talking and listening.

'OK, Russia, your internal postal service is a national disgrace. Could you please look at it in the next few years. America: the small country of Georgia, north east of Turkey, wishes to court both NATO membership and EU membership. If they do, then Russia will invade, and that will cause some significant problems for the cohesion of this group. Mister Chase, if you arm Georgia I'll put the Rifles in South Ossetia, just so that there's no misunderstanding. This group exists so that such future flashpoints can be avoided, not blundered into.'

'Will they join NATO?' Chase asked. 'Eventually?'

'I hope not,' Jimmy answered. 'Not least because I aim to undermine their government. Their President is a nutter, who thinks he can put himself centre stage by creating a conflict between America and Russia.'

'I'd like the names of the Indian plotters,' Ben Ares asked.

'No,' Jimmy responded.

'No?' Ben loudly questioned. 'They're planning attacks on Israel!'

‘And need to be dealt with quietly. As will the other - and more severe - attacks on you later. If you wish to talk further on that matter, see me after class.’

Ben got up and walked out, Dave Gardener trailing after him.

‘Moving along,’ Jimmy began before Ben had even closed the door.

‘Do they not have a right to know?’ Chase challenged.

Jimmy took a moment. ‘That information ... I have held for a long time. I’m its custodian, and if you don’t trust me then you have a problem, you all have a problem. The information must not leak out ahead of time. I’ll give you a scenario. A major western city will be destroyed, a million dead, a million or more injured, economic collapse for that country. At what point do you give the warning? Ten years before perhaps? Would people believe it, and how would they react? Would property prices crash, the city evacuated, economic collapse now? Or do they deserve nine good years whilst the people around this table make plans for it in secret?’

He gestured towards Chase. ‘If you knew, for example, that San Francisco would be destroyed in eight years time ... what would you do?’ He waited.

Chase took in the expectant faces. ‘I’d make plans now, sure.’

‘And risk it getting out?’ Jimmy posed.

‘Well ... that would cause people to move, businesses would move. But they’d have time to move.’

‘And they would move because they all believe in clairvoyants?’ Jimmy teased.

‘Well, no,’ Chase admitted. ‘Most wouldn’t move.’

‘So you’d have to force an evacuation ... on what basis?’

‘Well, that would have to be ... discussed with the emergency planning committees.’

‘Who would all have to place their faith in the predictions of an unknown clairvoyant,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘You’d be laughed out of office. So ... how would you do it?’

‘The simple answer is ... I have no idea at the moment,’ Chase admitted.

‘I do,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘I have a detailed plan of action, and a way to move the people. What you have to weigh up and consider ... is how much faith you have in me and that plan, because at the end of your second term – assuming you get one – we’ll activate that plan.’

‘What?’ Chase stumbled with. ‘A major US city is hit?’

‘Yes, but not the one you’d expect. So, like Ben, you have some thinking to do about how much you trust me, and this group.’

‘You’ve not been wrong so far,’ Chase reluctantly admitted. ‘But I guess we’d still like to know.’

‘Not a pleasant feeling ... is it, someone else in charge of your destiny.’

‘Don’t know how you sleep,’ the British PM stated.

‘Will any great disasters befall India?’ the Indians asked.

Jimmy faced me. ‘Do you ever wonder if you’re getting through?’ He faced the Indian PM. ‘I will tell you what you need to know, at the right time, and not before. I could have created your commando force years earlier, but the time would not have been right.’

We got into small detail for an hour, the mood a bit off, and broke for the day. The aides would now do the important work. Jimmy and I had a 6pm appointment at the apartment, and I opened the door to the CEO of Caterpillar and two of his sales directors. I got the kettle on as Jimmy and the visitors introduced themselves.

Jimmy began with, ‘Good flight from Illinois?’

‘Company jet, quick trip,’ the CEO responded.

‘To business, then. Hardon Chase has been on my case to buy some of your equipment for Africa. So, first of all we’d like you to open an office at our airport near Goma, and establish a point of contact with our corporation. The office space is free to start with, cheap apartments nearby. We’ll then want you to open a showroom near the airport, where mine exec’s can come and inspect your diggers. But I’ll want a good stock held there so that people can buy or hire without waiting eight weeks for it to be shipped. I’d like a stock of close to a two hundred machines, a variety.’

Their surprise was clear as they took notes.

‘We’d then like to look at buying machines from you, the detail to be finalised based upon price and availability. Now, you do refurbished bulldozers, eighteen tonnes?’

‘Yes.’

‘We’d like to buy three hundred.’

‘Three hundred?’ the CEO repeated. ‘Would ... have to pull them in from a variety of places.’

‘Next, we’d like a hundred trench diggers, also refurbished. Then eighty front loaders, and two hundred off-road dumper trucks.’

They exchanged looks.

‘That’s year one,’ Jimmy explained. ‘In the second year we would need that again plus fifty percent, third year doubled.’

They stared back. ‘Doubled?’

Jimmy nodded. ‘And I want a yard full of your engineers to maintain them, to offer on-site maintenance to the mines, and to refurbish them when they get a bit worn. Unfortunately, it’s a big area, and so you’ll need engineers in at least six locations, and your own helicopters to get about.’

‘Helicopters?’ they queried.

‘From the farthest mines its eight hundred miles end to end, twenty hours by car. And the mines would probably want help sooner than three days later.’

‘It’s a big order,’ the CEO admitted.

‘The equipment needs to be shipped to Mombassa then put on the train,’ Jimmy explained. ‘It’s a hell of a journey. We’ll pay fifty percent up front, so that will help with your cash flow.’

‘That’s ... very good of you,’ the CEO offered. ‘What timescale are we working to?’

‘As soon as possible, the money’s been allocated. Step one is your rep in the area. He’ll get the formal order once we have prices and timescales from you.’

‘We can release this to the press?’ a second man asked.

‘Yes,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘Right, are you in a hotel?’ They nodded. ‘Meal at my club and a drink afterwards.’ We all stood.

‘Can we wash-up first?’ the CEO asked.

‘Sure, meet us there in an hour, taxi drivers all know it.’ With the men gone, Jimmy said to me, ‘Did we buy some shares?’

I nodded, then answered my phone to Dave Gardener. Ben Ares wanted to come straight around. Jimmy heaved a sigh and nodded. Ten minutes later I opened the door to Ben and Dave Gardener, their security waiting outside. Helen offered them some food, politely refused, but made them coffees. Jimmy had been sat, and did not bother to get up. He just offered our guests a fixed gaze.

Ben composed himself. ‘If something happened to you ... we’d get the right information?’

‘You’d get the right information ... at the right time,’ Jimmy coldly stated. ‘So don’t go bumping me off just yet.’

‘And there are other threats, besides the Indians?’

‘Plenty. It goes with the charming little territory you occupy.’

Ben took a moment. ‘It’s not easy to have someone else hold that information.’

‘Without me, you would never have known,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘And you, young man, will be out of office when these problems hit. As you sit there, you presume to speak for your successors.’

Ben glanced at me. 'And ... when will we know that the Indian plot is dealt with, satisfactorily dealt with?'

'I'll list the men to the Indians within weeks. After that, their careers will be limited, but they won't be released for a few years. But, as soon as the plotters get together the Indian Government will panic and just kill them.'

'You just said they'd be released quietly,' Ben challenged.

'That's the plan. Unfortunately, it involves people, and people are unpredictable and emotional. I fully expected the Indians to make plans, then to panic when *you* put pressure on the Americans to put pressure on them. In an ideal world you would just trust my judgement.'

'You're asking us to trust your judgement on the future of Israel.'

'There's only one thing that stands between you ... and complete destruction, and that's me. And if I told you of each threat too soon you'd alter the time line and a new threat would come around, one that I don't know about, and that's the dangerous one. It's a bit like preventing a plane crash when a passenger is a future terrorist leader. Saving the plane is the right thing to do, but has consequences. I know most of the consequences, you don't. If you kill future terrorists now, you make terrorists out of their brothers – people who may never have taken that course. The timeline is a fickle thing; if you make a move out of sequence you'll create a more severe threat further down the road. Better to hit the bumps that I know about ... and make do.'

'Seems reasonable,' Dave tentatively put in.

Ben took a moment. 'You said before I made it to Canada.'

'Yes, and I helped you. The Israeli refugees were given an area of their own and made a little Israel in Canada, soon building settlements outside of their designated zone.'

I laughed, earning a look from Ben.

'You take these things lightly,' Ben complained.

'I wouldn't sleep otherwise,' Jimmy told him. 'Now, pay attention.' He eased forwards 'We'll deal with the threats, to your country and others, with or without your co-operation, since my plans were always for a world with more of a ... lack of co-operation. Being in the group is a privilege, not your right. If you want what's best for your people, oh great leader, you'll follow my lead.' He eased back and waited.

Ben stared back for several seconds, then stood, Dave following him up. 'We'll be there tomorrow,' he reluctantly got out as he

turned for the door. Dave forced an awkward smile and followed Ben out.

With the door slamming shut, I said, 'You're welcome.' I faced Jimmy. 'Will they be difficult?'

'I doubt it, but you never know. Americans politicians can be difficult, but Israelis politicians are Olympic champions at being obtuse. I think they run courses on it.'

We met the men from Catepillar at the club and enjoyed a meal, Cat minding the kids. They had released the news, their shareholders and staff delighted with our order.

The next day, the "M" Group remained a little sombre, a shame considering how good things had gone in Delhi and Hawaii. I even thought about bringing Shelly in to lift the mood. Some advances had been made overnight, a US pullback from support of Georgia, a few technology sharing agreements, and a Chinese offer of serum sharing with the Europeans for a few favours. All in all it was not bad progress.

Jimmy announced, 'With the groups consent, I will make use of the Chinese serum as an experimental drug in Africa. I'd like a working group of medics from each country, ideally your Rescue Force doctors, to work with me on it in South Africa to start with. Anyone opposed? Any comments?'

'How will it be applied?' the British PM asked.

'Treatment for worst cases, kids, but not a blanket roll-out,' Jimmy suggested. 'Once the results are in you can use it in Europe, claim wondrous successes and save a great deal of money treating AIDS patients in the western world.'

'It's a complete cure?' they puzzled.

'One simple injection, a complete cure; Jimmy explained. 'The cost savings will be huge. Unfortunately, the cured individuals are then immune to most things, and if that gets known they'll enjoy the kind of lifestyle that got them infected in the first place.'

'What effect on sexually transmitted diseases?' Chase asked.

'They'll become a thing of the past,' Jimmy informed them.

'And these people, the cured ones, how do they fair during pandemics?'

'For the most part they'd be immune, but certain diseases will need extra protein and short-term hospitalisation. What would kill a normal person would hit them like the flu.'

Chase said, 'So if all police, military and public officials get an injection ... they'll not be at risk in the pandemics?'

‘Correct. The danger for you is that the drug companies develop an early version of the stem cell booster and sell it to old women with wrinkles, and men that wish to look younger. If that becomes cheaply available you’ll have an obesity problem, and people will live longer – drawing civil service pensions and costing you a fortune.’

‘We can’t deny the benefits of a breakthrough like that,’ Chase argued.

‘True, but adjust your retirement age when you do it, because sixty-five year old men will be as fit as forty-five year old men – and you’re committed to pay pensions till they die. You would see someone working from twenty to fifty-five, then living another seventy years on a pension.’

‘We couldn’t do it,’ the British PM agreed. ‘We have a shortfall now.’

‘And if the poorer nations got hold of it?’ Jimmy posed. ‘A shortage of food would be caused by a population explosion, followed by famine and war. You solve one problem, and create another. You may not like it, but population growth will be a serious issue that you will all have to face in the decades ahead. Growth in Africa can be sustained, because most of its land is not being used. South America will see huge numerical increases, so to India and Asia. But China will be stable, and European and Russian populations will fall. On the matter of Russia, I recommend that you keep capital punishment.’

‘Keep it?’ the British, French and Germans complained.

‘Yes. We’re not short of people, we will be short of resources and money, and thirty years in prison costs a lot.’

‘Are there things beyond 2025 that we should be planning for?’ the Germans asked.

‘An excellent question, and typically German in your desire to plan ahead,’ Jimmy acknowledged. ‘Yes, there are things to plan for – assuming that we win - and we’ll discuss them at the right time. That time ... is not yet with us.’

Jimmy concentrated on the release of the serum, and warned that its release could be volatile, and that no one should under-estimate the impact of the drug. It would change the world forever. With predictions of great cost savings in western hospitals, and the eradication of certain diseases, the mood lifted. This was proper “M” Group stuff, action that would change the world, and everyone felt more important for being a part of it.

We broke on a high-note, talk of huge financial savings and large populations being affected. For the first time in a while I was looking at the direct benefits of future technology now. Back in the apartment, Jimmy gave me a task, another joint venture with Han; we'd be releasing the drug. Jimmy offered me a few guidelines, but suggested that it would be fluid.

AIDS

A month later, Han and I travelled down to South Africa – through Goma hub - and met with their health authorities. I informed them that we had been working on a cure for AIDS for many years, and we'd like to trial it on those victims that were in its late stages. You could have heard a pin drop. I added that, due to copyright technology, we'd not be giving them a description of how the drug worked. After their initial shock they signed us off to operate out of an AIDS hospice, where the prognosis for its patients was a lingering death; they, us, and the poor patients themselves had nothing to lose. A group of Chinese doctors, plus a few senior doctors from Mawlini, set up camp at the hospital. Day one was interesting, and years later I would look back at how stupid I was being.

'You have a cure ... for AIDS?' our RF medics asked.

'Yes. Jimmy and I funded its research over many years, working with the Chinese.'

They stood and stared.

'You have a fucking cure ... for AIDS?'

I was puzzled by their reaction. 'Not just AIDS. If this works, it'll attack a whole host of germs,' I explained in my non-medical terms.

'And it'll help late stage AIDS patients?'

'It'll cure them, not help them,' I corrected our staff.

'Cure ... late stage AIDS patients? Paul, there are thirty million people dying from AIDS in Africa alone, and no fucker has a clue as to how to cure it.'

I shrugged. 'We do. So one injection for each patient, plenty of protein and water, and monitor their condition.'

'Paul, do you realise what you're saying?' they gasped.

'Just do it, and let us know the results.'

We left them with that, and I was being naïve. I had spent years knowing the future and dealing with time travel, so it was not easy to see breakthroughs like this from someone else's perspective.

I made a mistake.

Landing back in London, Han and I were met by the media. The news had leaked. Well, the news had not so much leaked, as spread like wildfire amongst Rescue Force. Since they often had journalists embedded with them it had reached the hacks and snappers. I made a line straight for them, Han slipping by unseen.

After a million camera flashes, and a lot of shouted questions, I waved my hands and asked them to be quiet. The first question was, 'Paul, have you developed a cure for AIDS?'

'We hope so. It's under trial at the moment in South Africa.'

'Does it work?'

'We'll know in a month, but other test subjects were cured.'

'Completely cured?'

'Yes, completely cured. Now, I have no more than that till the trial is complete and the doctors give us the OK.'

'How much did you spend on it?'

'We spent a lot of money on it, as you can imagine, and worked with the Chinese and other governments.' I forced my way through, the police now helping. Back at the house, I found a mountain of faxes and a million emails, not quite understanding the reaction. In the diner I found Jimmy. 'The bloody press are going crazy,' I complained.

He nodded. 'It's an important breakthrough, not least for those infected with it. It'll be an interesting few months.'

I accepted a tea from Cookie. 'I got a question.' Jimmy waited, and I glanced over my shoulder. 'If we cure a lot of Africans, then won't that put pressure on the population growth curve?'

'First, we won't cure everyone; it would be just about impossible to produce enough of it, and to get around to them all. Second, we need Africa's population to jump up and then stabilise; remember, we need a lot of consumers. Third, a few things down the road will thin out the population a bit. One of my main reasons behind wanting its release now ... is to reduce healthcare costs in the western world, so that money can be spent on a few other things I have in mind.'

He sipped his tea. 'The problem with western healthcare, is that the leading edge of technology is always moving along quickly – too quickly. If someone invents something that extends life by a year – just a year, then the patients want it and the damn hospitals adopt it.'

If a drug eases suffering, but costs a fortune, the hospitals must have it. A bed is not a bed, but a £2,500 bed that must meet the latest protocols. And the drug companies are making a fortune out of us taxpayers. If unchecked, western healthcare will bankrupt the western world.'

'How will the drug companies react?' I knowingly asked.

He lifted his eyebrows. 'We'll need to tighten security.'

'Oh.' I didn't like the sound of that.

The next day was Shelly's first attendance at a nursery/junior school, the school located just a few miles away, and a private school that Jimmy had said she would attend. Sat in the headmaster's office, I lifted a sheet of names: Portia, Trixy-Belle, Dizzie, Siobhan, Victoria, Rupert, Gladstone. Christ! This was a posh private school, and I felt out of place. We had more money than the parents of all the other kids combined, but we were not 'blue blooded.'

The headmaster stepped in with a lady teacher. 'Sorry about that. So, this is Michelle, yes?'

'The one and only,' I said, a hand on my daughter's shoulder. 'Although her younger sister may follow in a few years.'

'Well, we're happy to accept your daughter, but you said you had some *issues* to discuss?'

Helen glanced at me.

'Given who we are, and the publicity we suffer, we'd like to offer you a few security enhancements – and we'd pay for them of course.'

'Security? Such as ... what, in particular?'

'We'd like to pay for additional CCTV cameras for you, and a few guards dotted around,' I explained.

'Well ... we've not had any problems up to now,' the headmaster delicately complained.

'We have ... specific threats against us, so we'd either need your help, or teach the kids at home.'

'I see. Well, unobtrusive cameras could do no harm, and I'm sure that the other wealthy parents would not mind such a measure.'

'And a man sat behind them, another at the gate,' I nudged. 'They'd be police officers.'

'Police officers? You ... can arrange that?'

'Yes. And before you ask, the officers dropping her off and picking her up would be armed.'

'Crikey,' the headmaster let out. 'Well, er, do you wish to look around the school?'

‘No, we’ve done our research, we’re happy for her to be here.’

We left Shelly in their care, our daughter being shy for a change, and arranged to pick her up at 3pm, a car waiting up the road. Helen had given Shelly a good talking to before we left: no talk about the house, or kicking the teachers here in the shins. Driving off felt a little odd, Helen and I exchanging looks; it was our daughter’s first day at school. Wasn’t that long ago that I was shocked at the news of Helen being pregnant.

When Shelly arrived home she seemed happy enough, mention of a few new friends. The next morning she dressed in her new uniform, a few snaps taken, and I drove her to school. She jumped down from the car and ran inside, not so much as a look back.

‘Yeah, you have a good day too,’ I shouted after her, a look exchanged with Karl. We drove off. ‘You do your best for them,’ I reflected. ‘Then they find new friends in school and ... off they go.’

Back in the office, Helen asked, ‘She OK?’

‘The little bugger bound out the car without even looking back.’ I settled behind my computer.

‘She’ll be fine,’ Jimmy commented from behind his screen. ‘And the news just hit about early successes of the AIDS trial in Africa. So you two are on press detail for a while.’

I led Helen to a lounge and found Han, and we made plans, to both handle the press and to roll out the trial.

‘Helen?’ a voice called, a woman in the doorway, smartly dressed and attractive. ‘I’m Trish, your new assistant.’

‘You have an assistant?’ I asked my wife. ‘I don’t even have an assistant.’

‘You have many assistants,’ Han pointed out. ‘I am one of that honoured group.’

I wagged a warning finger at the cheeky bugger, Helen greeting her new assistant. I went and found Jimmy. Talking quietly, I said, ‘Helen need an assistant?’ He just stared back. ‘And you know her, she’s OK?’ He held his fixed gaze. ‘She’s not in the know, yes?’ He did not answer. I stood. ‘It’s been good talking.’

Helen and I, and her new assistant, drove over to Mapley and fired up the video conferencing equipment. We called the BBC back, they’d been nagging, and made a lengthy statement about the successes of the drug. That done, Helen and her assistant created a press release and fired it off around the world as I met with Bob Davies.

‘A cure for AIDS?’ he asked. ‘Where the fuck did that just pop-up from?’

‘We’ve been working on it for years,’ I said, and that was basically true.

‘You spent a lot on it?’

‘Of course. And the trial has gone well.’

‘Late stage AIDS patients recovering? Fucking hell, Paul.’

Doc Graham stepped in and sat on the desk. ‘So why the fuck did you keep all this quiet?’

‘Had to test it first. Didn’t want to give anyone false hope or get the press worked up,’ I lied.

‘If you sold it...’ Doc Graham posed.

‘We’ll try and cover costs, but we didn’t do it to make a buck,’ I said.

‘When will it be available?’ Bob Davies pressed.

‘We’re going to offer it at Goma hospital first - to check it out carefully - because over there we can’t be sued. And the South African trial will now be expanded to include a lot more hospitals.’

‘African times has been running the story every day,’ Doc Graham informed me. ‘So has every African TV station. If it works... Jesus, the implications, especially for Africa.’

‘While I’m here, send twenty doctors to Goma hospital for the trial; kind of straight away. I’m having the drug shipped there now. Another twenty to go to Kinshasa to trial it there.’

I had made a plan, but I had not thought it through, and was about to feel the heat. Back at the house I asked my dear lady wife to issue a statement to the African Times, indicating that paying clients could trial the drug in Goma. Jimmy was there when I made the instruction, but offered no comment, no words of wisdom, nor any complaint. The blue touch paper had been lit, well and truly lit.

A few days later, middle-class Africans began flying to Goma on our nice new aircraft, their flights subsidised. They checked into the hospital and paid a modest \$250 towards the drug and their short stay. I then received a call from the head on our airline; they had more people wanting to fly to Goma than we had planes. Thinking it a matter of logistics, I told him to hire additional pilots and fly at night, making better use of the aircraft. A few days later the man was back on. Even flying at night we had too many people trying to fly. I agreed for him to lease additional aircraft and pilots.

That led to the hospital officials calling me direct, and shouting down the phone. They had beds for three hundred – already full, a queue of two hundred people at the door, more calling ahead. I told them to grab beds from Forward Base, and from the Army, and informed him I would arrange more doctors.

I called Mapley. ‘Bob, get me another twenty doctors at Goma hospital, and fifty nurses. Don’t care where they come from, just do it today.’

The facilitators at Forward Base called, reporting a near riot outside the hospital. I sent in the Rifles, unarmed, to keep the peace. And the facilitators reported that we had taken half a million dollars already, all in cash. I told them that the money was to stay with the hospital. The next day a few white faces turned up at the hospital; Europeans. I checked with the hospital, and it turned out that they had flown down. Scratching my head, I went and found Jimmy.

‘People are flying down from Europe to Goma to get the drug. I’m charging \$250 to cover costs, but what do you reckon?’

‘That the trickle will become a flood.’ He held his gaze on me.

‘Oh. Then ... we ask the airlines to put on more planes.’

‘Planes carrying late stage AIDS patients? Hmmm, the crews will love that. Plus the odd law about people not well enough to travel ... not being allowed to travel.’

‘Well ... those that are early stage could fly.’

‘And the rest?’ Jimmy posed.

‘I’ll give it some thought,’ I said, wanting to handle this by myself. I discussed it with Helen, then got on the phone. I ordered two new 747s on ten year leases, and asked our airline to find African pilots and cabin crew, all of whom would get the serum – plus extra pay and many assurances. The airline technicians at Goma were ordered to receive the 747s, to add our typical paint job, and then to remove some of the seats to make room for wheelchairs and stretchers. I asked Bob Davies for twenty RF staff for the flights, labelling them as medical flights, and got a license from the British Government.

When ready, we announced it to the British and European press, pricing the tickets at just over cost price. The first flight left from Gatwick, the second from Munich, both full. Despite the press coverage, the press did not wish to take the flight. Doc Graham, however, did, and set-up base in Goma Hospital, in charge of the advanced trial - as well as riots and shortages. He took one look at an apartment block about to be completed and grabbed it, additional beds moved in, RF staff turning up en mass. The sick, and their families and escorts, were allocated an apartment each, charged a modest rental fee by our property management company.

Over the next week, RF staff injected the dying, and observed the miraculous transformations. And some of the first Europeans to have travelled down were now flying back out on regular flights, not

standing out from their fellow passengers - other than their huge smiles. A few had even stayed for a quick holiday at our safari lodges.

Reading the reports, I ordered other apartments made ready in a hurry, beds brought in. Some apartments offered nothing more than a bed or two, but the sick and dying didn't care. By the end of the second week we were housing some fifteen hundred people in apartments, close to three hundred RF nurses in attendance. Then the next problem hit. AIDS patients from the States were jumping on the subsidised holiday flights from JFK. When it became known, some tourists cancelled rather than sit next to an AIDS patient. I immediately imposed a rule: no one on a flight without a safari booking, or valid reason to travel. Without realising it, I had inadvertently damaged our holiday trade.

Hardon Chase was soon on the phone, frustrated because he could not rush through a trial in the US; it would take two years at least. Without meaning to upset him, I suggested a trial in Mexico or Cuba. It did not go down well, so I consulted with the oracle of knowledge that was Jimmy Silo.

'Go ahead and run the trials in Mexico and Cuba,' he said. 'It's the end result that matters, not US law and procedures. I'll talk to Chase.'

I gave it some thought, then rang the British Prime Minister and explained the situation. He offered to try and arrange a trial here as fast as possible, and would consult with the French and Germans. But, since the technology behind the drug would not be released, he was not hopeful of a speedy solution. Han and I discussed the situation and decided to roll out the drug in Mexico and Cuba. And Jimmy, he admitted that he wanted the US public and lawmakers to re-examine the FDA.

With the release of the news about Mexico, US citizens headed that way, and not halfway across the world. Our tourist flights started to recover. I settled into a routine, now in charge of the drug use, as well as my other duties, and was kept very busy, concerned when we were called to Shelly's school one day. The headmaster was apologetic for calling us out, but was concerned. He displayed for us drawings that Shelly had made in class; they were astonishing in their detail. He listed off her ability to speak some Chinese, Russian and French, and delicately suggested that she may be autistic.

'We've had her tested,' I told him. 'We were just as worried. But the expert says that she's very bright, but not autistic. And as for the

languages, we have Chinese, Russian and French people living with us. She's grown up with them.'

'Well, we have to check these things. We must be aware of any special needs –'

'She doesn't have any,' Helen insisted. 'She's just very bright.'

'How's her swimming?' I asked.

'Another ... unusual set of observations,' the headmaster delicately broached. 'She won the races, all of them, and beat girls a few years older by swimming underwater ... whilst they swam on the surface.'

Helen and I exchanged looks. 'I'll talk to her,' I said. 'Ask her to swim on the surface.'

The headmaster stared back, wide-eyed. 'Oh. Right.'

'We have a pool at the house, and she leant to swim at two years old,' Helen explained.

'Ah, that might explain it. Parents and teachers evening next week if you're available.'

'We'll be there.'

In the car, I said, 'What the fuck is she going to be like on school sports day? Track events?'

'We'll have to talk to her,' Helen said with a sigh.

At 4pm Shelly arrived home with two other girls in uniform, bringing them into the office, a woman trailing them.

'I'm Portia's mother, Gwen,' the woman offered, Helen and I shaking her hand.

Shelly led her friends to the pool, so we led Gwen to the diner, teas organised. And this was odd. It was my first time chatting to another parent, a parent of one of Shelly's friends. We had an instant affinity, and common purpose, soon chatting about schools and curriculum. Did we want Shelly to learn French or German? Gwen had been quite awe-struck by us, but when Jimmy came in and sat she went all wobbly on us, blushing. He informed her of a dinner party that Friday night, and invited her and her husband, plus the parents of the third girl. Half an hour later the girls burst in with wet hair, bags dumped down, and sat at the counter and asking Cookie for ice cream and pancakes.

'Lots for them do here,' Gwen noted, glancing over her shoulder. 'I understand you have a gym, as well as the pool.'

'It burns off the calories after pancakes,' Helen suggested.

The Prime Minister stepped in, tickling Shelly, and ordering food and drink from Cookie as he joined Jimmy. Gwen returned to her previously wobbly state. When I managed to chat to the PM about

the drugs, he hinted at Holland; they would co-operate. The Dutch had always maintained lax drugs laws, cannabis legal, but they also just happened to sit geographically between Britain, Germany and France. I got to work, and contacted the Dutch authorities after Jack had informed me who to talk to. I asked for a drug trial to be run there straight away and they readily agreed, the French and Germans already having discussed it with them.

I found it all a bit odd, why those other countries could not trial it, but arranged the Dutch trial in detail, burning the midnight oil. Their first shipment arrived from Beijing two days later, the news released. The net effect was the cancellation of flights to Goma by Europeans, and a mad rush to Holland. Every hotel room in Amsterdam was booked within twenty-four hours, the Dutch authorities taken by surprise.

Meeting with Han to discuss the drug's roll out, he admitted that his government had been using it for many months, on AIDS patients and others, whether they liked it or not. Drug addicts were forcibly injected, as were prisoners, and anyone with a communicable disease, the results nearly one hundred percent successful. And the cost saving was huge. They had taken to rounding up drug addicts and forcibly injecting them, as a way to stamp out AIDS transmission in the future.

Across the pond I was not popular, not even amongst the sick and dying. I had sent a great many doses to the hospitals on the Mexican border, and the queues heading south were huge, tailbacks ten miles long. Then something even more odd happened. One evening, a drug gang broke into a Mexican hospital and stole twenty thousand doses, soon shipping them over the border and selling them on the black market. Since the drug was not illegal, just not FDA approved yet, there was little anyone could do, the authorities not too fussed on chasing down the dealers. An injection sold for between \$200 and a \$1,000, a bargain considering what it meant to the people who needed it. It gave me an idea, and I didn't bother to consult with Jimmy, I wanted to handle this myself.

I shipped a hundred thousand units to the hospital that had been raided, and told them to sell the drug for \$50 a vial. People purchasing the drug for themselves soon bought boxes of the drug and took them back, customs officials clueless as to what to do; the drug was not listed as illegal, and people claimed that they were for their own use. The drug dealers also bought boxes, bulk discounts applied for at the end of a machinegun, and the vials all ended up north of the border. And the funds created? I ordered the Cuban

medics to perform as many operations as they could free of charge, using the money earned.

With the last batch of drugs disappearing inside of a week, I ordered up more, the TV news full of it. I waited for a call from Chase, but none came. Curious about my lack of a kick in the shins, I went and found Jimmy and confessed all.

He listened, seemingly unconcerned. 'If, and when, the drug is produced by US drug companies, it will cost the US taxpayer a lot of money. You've circumvented those drug companies, and negated much of the cost to the taxpayer, which is what I wanted. Keep it going till it slows up. And in case you hadn't noticed, the same is happening in Holland. Sykes arranged for vials to be stolen, and his friends in low places are selling them around the UK. At the end of the day we want people cured, we don't care how we get to that point. And in Europe, as in the States, it'll save on medical bills. The medical community now knows that it cures Hepatitis, TB, Herpes and a variety of other things - and treating someone for those diseases in a British hospital costs hundreds of thousands of pounds. We've now got doctors secretly injecting people late at night, nothing on the records. One simple injection saves half a million pounds in treatment costs, at least. Someone dying, and taking a year to die, costs the taxpayer a million or two. I aim to shave ten-percent off the UK health budget, more for the States. And those cured ... can return to work and pay their taxes like good little citizens.'

'And the deal with the Chinese?' I asked.

'They got it ahead of anyone else, and they're enjoying the cost savings. They're also using it like a weapon with addicts; after being injected the addicts don't enjoy the high, and typically either kill themselves with overdoses, or go cold turkey. And they have millions of addicts, many more than they would admit to. They've also injected their soldiers and key officials, millions of them. They're all now immune to future threats.'

'Should I ship more to Holland?'

'Definitely. More the better, young man,' he commended.

There was more trouble ahead, and I was still being naïve. A few days later a US TV show displayed "before and after" pictures of a man, a minor celeb' that had been injected. The price of the drug on the black market rocketed, the stocks running out at the Mexican border.

Now Chase called, not least because of gang related deaths at the border. 'Paul, we're rushing through a piece of legislation, and the

FDA will co-operate. We've got the data from the trial in Africa, and we think we can just about get away with it.'

'Don't you need a few years - to see if patients remiss?' I posed.

'Normally, yes, but this is too important, so we're bending a few rules. Our batches are not ready yet, so we'd like some of the Chinese batch sent over.'

'I'll check stock levels. Email me the details of where to send it. But there is one thing I'd like to know: how will it be charged for?'

'It'll go through the public hospitals to start with, that was my deal with the Democrats.'

'I'll get you a batch as soon as I can,' I promised.

As soon as I had hung up, Helen grabbed me and led me outside. 'We're late. Apparently.'

'For what?'

'Shelly promised that we'd go around to her friends for dinner.'

'Oh. OK.'

We drove out the top gate, avoiding the press at the main gate, and to a small estate on a hill overlooking the town of Monmouth. I knocked the door and waited.

A woman appeared, tea towel in hand. 'Paul, Helen, come in.'

We wandered inside, glimpsing our daughter lying on the floor and playing a board game with two other girls. In the kitchen we were introduced to other parents that we already knew, soon stood with drinks in hand.

'So how's this AIDS drug panning out?' a man asked.

'So far, very well,' I said. 'Releasing it was always going to be a problem, a bit of a mad rush, but its been crazy. In Mexico they break into the hospitals, steal it, and then sell it north of the border. But I just spoke to Chase and we'll ship it direct to the States now.'

'Chase?' a woman queried.

'Hardon Chase. Grey haired fella in the White House.'

'You speak to him often?' she queried.

'We're not supposed to say,' Helen cut in with.

They exchanged looks, knowing full well there were many things we did not like to discuss.

'You're Shelly is teaching the girls to swim just like her,' they informed us.

'Shelly's style is ... unusual,' I agreed, our daughter swimming like a Dolphin, her hands out front and elbows locked, her legs straight back, and undulating through the water like the Man from Atlantis off the TV. I found myself picturing the guy, Patrick

something, married to the tasty bird off Dallas with big tits, Pamela something.

We waited for the food to be ready, two of the ladies checking in on it occasionally. I got into a conversation about the property business on the Spanish coast with one of the fathers, since we had properties down there, as well as on the Spanish Isle of Tenerife.

During the meal we discussed Kenya and the safari lodges, Shelly wanting to return. I offered to take the whole group, and we threw around a few provisional dates. Shelly was very well behaved in front of the other girl's parents, and I could detect a few new words in her vocabulary. She was starting to sound posh, and I was not at all unhappy about it. Even her table manners were improving, things getting cut up first and not wolfed down sideways. Driving back, Shelly alive with new ideas and things to tell us, Jimmy rang.

'Your parents are here, you forgot.'

'Shit!'

'I told them you had a teacher/parent thing that you could not get out of, and that you were due back earlier.'

'Thanks. Be back in ten minutes.' I hung up. 'Shelly, darling, Grandma and Grandpa are at the house, so we need to tell them we've been to a parent/teacher meeting, OK?'

She nodded, and I exchanged shrugs with Helen, both of us overlooking their arrival. Shelly greeted my parents quickly, fortunately still in uniform, before we told her to attend her homework. The next morning, a warm June Saturday, my father took Shelly fishing, and I found myself observing them from a distance, thinking about the relentless advance of time. I was forty-three, and I couldn't decide if I felt my age or not. The stems had kept me young, but they did not alter your mind or your memories, and those memories pegged my age for me; I was married with two growing kids, talking with other parents about school curriculum.

A phone call brought me back to the here and now. A new website had appeared, this one labelling Jimmy as a time traveller who had brought back super-drugs from the future. Oh, shit. Sykes, and Petrosi at the CIA, had tracked it down, only to find that it was hosted in the Middle East and beyond their influence. I emailed the brain trust kids and they attacked it, but the web designers had anticipated that. They swapped urls every thirty minutes, hundreds set-up in advance. They also bombarded the world with emails about Jimmy and the new drug, email attachments offering a lot of information, most of which was true to some degree.

Jimmy's unofficial biography had been published years earlier, and he had a hand in its editing. He looked like his brother and father, and his family and school-day friends had been interviewed. No one really believed that he was anything other than himself. Jimmy was not that fussed at this latest hiccup, and said an odd thing to me. 'If you're going to fall off a wall, reduce the height of the wall first.' He had said the same thing to Hardon Chase about US dollar levels a while back, and I puzzled it. Was he thinking of going public?

I went and found Helen in our house. 'Some time ago, Jimmy said to me that it was inevitable that we'd be exposed. And ... it terrifies me.'

'You're not the only one,' Helen admitted. 'We have one daughter in school, another to follow. If this got out we'd have no life.'

'I'm not sure how the world would react to it,' I said, heaving a sigh. 'They may like the idea, or may want to string us up.'

'We wouldn't be able to show our faces in public.'

'No, it would be ... difficult. But I know what Jimmy would say – stop thinking about yourselves, see the big picture!'

'He's not wrong; we're talking about World War Three. Shelly would be twenty-six, maybe with kids of her own by then.'

I hugged my wife. 'Yes,' I whispered. 'We're doing it for them, and their little webbed feet.' Problem was, I was still terrified.

Jimmy gave a recorded interview the next day, and made light of the website claims, again suggesting that he would go back to the days of disco if he could travel through time. Unfortunately, his interview had barely finished when a group of eminent doctors and biologists got together and made their own statement, suggesting that the AIDS drug was like nothing seen on this planet. I stood in front of the TV, hands in pockets and wanting to arrange a hit squad. But Jimmy was ready for them. I just wished he had warned me the earth was about to shake.

The next day he gave another recorded interview, to explain the drug. 'Back during the Cold War, various countries experimented with biological warfare. The Russians came up with a drug that made use of the bodies natural defences, but don't ask me how – I'm no scientist. That information was leaked to The West, but the drug was found to be unstable. It had remarkable qualities, but was difficult to implement. The Chinese then picked up on the technology, from a Russian source that sold it to them in the 1980s. I got involved because of my interest in Africa, and the AIDS

epidemic there. When I heard about the Chinese research I offered funding, on condition that I could buy the end drug at reasonable rates and use it in Africa.

‘Fifteen years ago the Chinese had a breakthrough, as much by accident as anything else. That success was leaked to the CIA, who’ve been experimenting with it all along. Many years ago we tried the drug in Africa, injecting AIDS patients without their knowledge; and it cured them, it cured them all. We experimented with the drugs potency, and finally had a version of the drug that was cheap enough to mass-produce whilst at its best potency. That’s the drug that has swept the world; it cures AIDS, even late stage AIDS, and could act as a vaccine.’

He took a breath, and time stopped. ‘We’ve also found that it cures TB, Hepatitis, Herpes, Dengi Fever, Malaria and a whole host of other diseases.’ The interviewer just stared back, dumbstruck. Jimmy continued, ‘We’ve been experimenting with Cancer patients, and so far we enjoyed a ninety-five percent success rate curing cancer with it. I’m certain that, within a decade, this drug will cure all diseases currently known to man.’

The interviewer just sat there when it was his turn to speak. He, and the rest of the world, held its breath.

I stood with my hands to my face, staring wide-eyed at the TV, Helen stunned, Shelly not understanding the problem with Uncle Jimmy on the TV. ‘What ... what has he done?’ Helen and I exchanged looks for a good thirty seconds, before slumping down, too stunned to speak.

When I had recovered, eventually recovered, I walked around to the house, my head still spinning. I found Jimmy in the diner with Han, Ivan and Michelle. I slipped down. ‘What have you done?’ I whispered.

‘Deflected attention away from us,’ he calmly began. ‘The Russians get the credit, and tomorrow they admit to designing it. China gets some credit, and the money from sales at the moment, and tomorrow Petrosi at the CIA will admit they knew about it for fifteen years, getting previous administrations some heat. Everyone will focus on them, not us.’

I forced a breath. ‘You said you’d cut the US healthcare bill by twenty percent, not a fucking hundred percent! You trying to put the world’s doctors out of work?’

‘Some of them, yes,’ he said with a grin. ‘You know, I wasn’t planning on making that statement for almost six years. I must be getting adventurous.’

‘The news...’ I began.

‘Will rock the world back and forth for a while, yes.’

I didn’t sleep that night, and neither did Helen; we stayed downstairs watching the news as it evolved around the different time zones. The CIA admitted their knowledge of it, and Hardon Chase made a statement, basically saying that they could not get it to work effectively. Russia claimed the credit, but China stated that it was their scientists that did all the hard work to perfect it. And not a single person on the planet believed that Jimmy had brought it back from the future. Unfortunately, every sick person on the planet now wanted some.

Karl dropped off the newspapers when he picked up Shelly for school, and we scanned them, the first ten pages covering nothing other than the wonder drug. The PM tipped us off about his statement, and we watched him live on the news an hour later.

‘Given the extraordinary properties of this drug, we will rush through the licensing of it, and move quickly ahead with large scale tests in this country as quickly as is practical.’

I met Han later, and he reported that just about every country in the world was trying to purchase it from the Chinese. China was selling the drug at a modest rate but, considering how much money it saved, it was a bargain. The People’s Republic stood to make themselves a trillion dollars, but Hardon Chase didn’t care. He was buying it at \$25 a vial, an injection saving him probably a hundred thousand times that much. His cost saving would be around \$200bn a year to start with, and this was a politicians dream - a cut in the largest part of public spending. Pie charts would have to be re-drawn.

Trying to digest what had happened, and the magnitude of it, I took a walk around the grounds, the day glorious, not a cloud visible. Stood staring into the brisk river, Rob the dog handler joined me.

‘OK, Boss?’ he asked.

‘A bit stunned, actually.’ I stroked one of the keen dogs.

‘I just seen it on the news; it’s fucking incredible. You must be popular.’

I slowly turned my head. ‘Huh? Popular?’

‘Yeah, all those people cured.’ He led the dogs off on their patrol, and I realised that I had been focused on being exposed. The drug had already saved tens of thousands, now it would save tens of millions.

All these years, all the problems, all the hiding of the truth, they suddenly seemed insignificant. If we did nothing else, then we had advanced the world and saved a lot of lives. My faced smiled all by itself. It didn't matter any more, even if we were all killed tomorrow. It didn't matter. I headed back, walking slowly through the grounds, and they had never looked better. The sky had never been more blue, the breeze more pleasant. I remembered Jimmy's speech to the UN in Hong Kong, all those years ago, his idea of a connection to the planet, to the earth itself. Well, what we had just done made me feel like I was now on first name terms with mother earth.

I sat in the office for a while, but I couldn't think straight. I grabbed Helen, and then pulled Lucy out of nursery class, and went for a walk, just the three of us. We strolled around the lake, Lucy chasing dragonflies, Helen and I hand-in-hand. It had been a while. Above the lake we lay on mown grass and watched Lucy play with Rob's new Alsatian pup, the rest of the world somewhere else at the moment.

I made a call, and ten minutes later the "M" Group members joined us via the golf carts, Cookie laying out a cloth and placing down strawberries and cream. Jimmy joined us five minutes later, and just lay down, not saying anything. Lucy jumped on him, and used him as a seat as she ate ice cream, letting the pup lick her fingers.

An hour later we were still there, just chatting about all sorts – but not about work. Jimmy stepped away a few times to take calls, but did not trouble us with the detail. It was as if no one wanted to spoil the moment. And when the PM's helicopter landed no one bothered to get up. Our illustrious Prime Minister and his aides walked up past the lake and joined us, offered the last few strawberries.

'Problem, Mister Prime Minister?' Jimmy asked him, squinting against the bright sunlight.

'A lot of out-of-work doctors, if you call that a problem.'

'No,' we all said.

'The cost saving will be huge,' he admitted. 'But we will have to make people redundant in the years ahead, so we're planning for it now, and slowing recruitment and training. A lot of unhappy people, some mixed feelings.'

'There's no pleasing some people,' I said.

'Health Service has been inundated with people asking about the drug. They've left their phones off the hook.'

‘Your first batch of a hundred thousand vials will be here tomorrow,’ Jimmy told him.

‘Tonight, I believe,’ the PM said. ‘And heavily guarded.’

‘How will you prioritise it?’ Helen asked the PM, fiddling with a daisy.

‘Terminal cases first, youngest patients. Then early onset cancer.’

Jimmy idly mentioned, ‘It doesn’t work if someone has a large tumour or cancerous lump.’ Easing up, he led the PM away, chatting as they strolled back towards the house.

That evening, the news was still full of the same story, the various shipments from China being awaited like a drug addicts next fix, the aircraft being filmed landing. Doctors in Holland were filmed explaining their successes with a variety of diseases, South African doctors being interviewed and relaying their dramatic successes with AIDS patients. They had also cured people with TB and Hepatitis. I was waiting for someone to claim it cured male-pattern baldness and premature ejaculation.

The only dampener on the whole thing came when Chinese doctors admitted that the drug was filtered through live pigs. That ruled out the Muslim world, and I wondered it was deliberate. We stayed up late again, transfixed by the news, but slept soundly that night. The next day we drifted back to work, deleting emails by the thousand, binning faxes, and returning a few hundred calls.

Rescue Force Kenya took delivery of twenty thousand vials and travelled down to Nairobi, distributing it to the hospitals in a well-advertised move. I didn’t now if we could have been more popular there, but I guessed we could squeeze a few more percentage points. The next “M” Group meeting of world leaders was due, in Paris, but Jimmy had delayed it. He asked them all to deal with the immediate issues, to make assessments of impact – and the all-important cost savings.

All that week we were never far from the TV, people previously diagnosed as terminal giving interviews, the medical world amazed. They filmed the children’s wards of various cancer hospitals, not least because they were emptying out. It touched Helen and me, and we held hands when the story was being relayed. After everything we had done with Rescue Force, these were direct and tangible benefits of our work – and on a grand scale.

Three days later, Gwen – the mother of Shelly’s friend, called and asked if we could come up; someone wanted to meet us. We jumped into the car with Shelly and Lucy, escorts in tow, and slipped out a side gate, still a small crowd of reporters and spectators

there, but less than the front gate. We lost the cars following us on a country road, the police slipping in and halting the traffic, allowing is to proceed on alone. Above Monmouth, we pulled into Gwen's house, a few other cars already there.

Shelly ran forwards and opened the door, disappearing inside as we held Lucy's hand and walked in. They greeted us in the hallway, all smiles, and we followed them into the lounge. A new couple stood there with their son, as if posing for a family photograph, each parent with a hand on the boy's shoulders.

Gwen began, 'This is my cousin, David, and his wife Jane, and their lad Dave Junior.'

'How you doing?' I asked, shaking their hands. Helen repeated that gesture, the couple just standing there and looking stunned.

Gwen added, 'David has something to say.'

'Thank you for saving me,' the lad formally announced.

'Sorry?' I asked, turning to Gwen.

Gwen explained, 'David Junior was diagnosed with terminal cancer six months ago, chemotherapy not an option. Six weeks ago they took their son to your safari lodge in the Congo, the Rift Valley. A ... final holiday.'

The father cut in, 'While we were there we heard about the wonder drug, so we queued up at that hospital for two days, sleeping rough, and paid for the injection.' He glanced down at his son. 'Doctors say he shows no signs of cancer now.'

Helen went all weepy and wobbly, kneeling down and hugging the lad. I just stood feeling really damned awkward, cursing our host under my breath.

'We didn't invent it,' I quickly explained. 'We ... just paid for some of the research, and the trials in Africa.'

'And without it we'd be without our son,' the wife laid on me, making me feel even more uncomfortable.

The hostess made us tea and we sat, and I steered the conversation towards the safari, asking the lad which animals he liked. We used the excuse of Lucy's bedtime to get out of there, and I was glad to get back into the car.

I blew out. 'God that was awkward.'

'Hits you when you meet people like that - what Jimmy's done. The scope of it.'

'Yeah, well we had the world at our door before all this. From now on it'll be even more difficult. Should we pull *you know who* from school?' I asked, Shelly puzzling the coded references.

'Well ... no, not unless absolutely necessary.'

At the gate I spotted a group of Japanese tourists. ‘What the fuck are we, a circus?’

‘Paul, not in front of Shelly.’

The next day we requested our Agusta helicopter and flew over to Mapley. Greece was suffering wildfires and we would dispatch Rescue Force.

‘Awake, Bob?’ I asked as we entered.

‘Fucking hell, Paul. We aint getting any work done; whole fucking world asking about the drug! And may I take this opportunity to say ... fucking fucking hell!’

Jimmy stepped in. ‘Grab the comms officer, when you’ve finished swearing.’ Bob called the man, who once again attended his computer screen. Jimmy instructed, ‘I want British, French and German units to deploy to Greece to help with the wildfires. They can drive down. Use the Supplementals as well, but no one outside of Europe.’

The signal was dispatched.

When Doc Graham stepped in, Jimmy said to him, ‘Crusty is predicting a quake in Peru in August. Make some plans, but let Cuba take the lead. And no, you can’t go. Run it from here.’

‘Can I go to Greece?’ Doc Graham testily asked.

‘For a few days, sure. How’s the sprog?’

‘Fine,’ Doc Graham responded.

‘Bring the baby to the house,’ Helen suggested. ‘If you can get through the gate.’

‘We’ll fly in,’ Doc Graham joked. ‘An escort of Rifles.’

We caught up on the gossip, answered questions and agreed budgets and deployments, Mackey coming over to discuss training at the base. Two hours later we flew back, and I figured we bought this helicopter a few years too soon. Now it may be used more often.

Paris

When it came time to attend the next Paris “M” Group meeting we drove up to Heathrow in the early hours, through tight security at the rear of the airport, and boarded the waiting Air Force One, the British PM already aboard for the short hop across to Paris. The “M” Group representatives at the house had travelled over the day before,

aboard a private jet. Now we sat with Chase and the PM, discussing the many features of the famous Presidential aircraft as we took off, Jimmy pointing out a few features of the plane that even the President was not aware of.

En route, we discussed NATO matters, East European countries, strategic areas of the world for the years to come, and how western armies could be shaped most effectively.

‘You’ll never get away from fast jets and aircraft carriers,’ Jimmy told Chase. ‘The boys on the hill will never allow it. They’ll see Russia and China as threats for a long time to come. And, to some, extent, your navy is a great asset. As I said before, you have two great big oceans between you and the rest of the world. Your armour could be scaled down in favour of mobile units and infantry, but you have a few years yet.’

‘What medical cost-savings are you figuring on?’ I asked Chase.

He tipped his head and lifted his eyebrows theatrically. ‘They keep revising them up - every damn day! Assuming we get as much of the Chinese serum as we need this year, and produce our own next year, we’ll knock half a trillion off the medical budget over three years.’

‘That’s a big number,’ I noted.

‘Start putting money aside for a disaster,’ Jimmy told Chase. ‘You’ve got nine years.’

Chase slowly nodded to himself. ‘Was thinking about a few tax cuts.’

‘Sure,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘It’ll boost the economy. But also put some money aside for that disaster, or it’ll cripple your successor. Hide it in the military budget for ... emergencies.’

‘How does the release of the drug affect your interest in health insurance companies?’ Chase asked.

Jimmy glanced out of the window. ‘I wasn’t planning on releasing the drug for almost seven years. I changed my mind.’

‘Why now?’ Chase puzzled.

Jimmy took a moment. ‘The drug, and its effects, will cause a few problems of their own around 2025, but will save a great deal of money before then. That money saving can be used for many things. It’s a bit like getting to 2025 well prepared, but with only enough energy for a short fight.’

‘Is that ... wise?’ Chase posed.

‘The year after 2025 is the important one. That’s make or break, not the following decade.’

‘What adverse effect will the drug have on 2025?’ Chase puzzled.

‘A baby boom, starting the year after next. They’ll all be twenty-five in 2023, many born to former druggies, and not raised well. When you help good people, you also help the idiots.’

In Paris, we travelled in the motorcade around to the Presidential Palace, the new French President stood waiting, the man surprised to find Shelly the first out. At least she didn’t kick him; school was having a good effect on her. She even greeted him in French with a curtsy. After posing for a photograph we met the others inside, the same room that we had used previously. Han introduced me to a new face in the Chinese party.

‘Your sister is a goat,’ I told him in Chinese.

Embarrassed for me, he turned to Han, who explained it away at poor pronunciation. The various delegates chatted away in small groups, drinks in hand, and Jimmy got around to them all, enquiring after their families, and the various long flights to get here. He even managed to get a smile out of Ben Ares. At his designated seat, he called, ‘Ladies and gentlemen, politicians, and hard working aides. Please be seated.’

We waited as they settled, notepads made ready, prepared notes taken out. As usual, I sat at the table with the leaders, right hand to Jimmy, Helen immediately behind me.

‘The first order of business is obviously the wonder drug, and the profound effect it is having on the world, on your governments, and on your health budgets.’ Leaders smiled. ‘To answer a question – I had intended only to release the drug for use with AIDS in Africa, not indicating the fuller effects till later, many years later. But, knowing some of the problems that we will face in the next few years, I decided to be bold, and to try and get the maximum benefit of it now.’

‘A little while ago, meeting with the nice man from the White House, he asked me how we could accelerate the process whereby Africans become consumers earlier – rather than later. He then made a rather large investment in those areas of Africa where I have some influence. The release of this drug ahead of time is a parallel move to that, a way of accelerating the processes I had planned. I have asked all of you to consider the implications of cost savings from the use of the drug, with a view to asking you to invest some of the money saved into projects in Africa, thereby making consumers of them much sooner. I will not try and bully anyone over the amounts -’

‘Hah!’ Chase let out, causing a few smiles.

‘- but I will leave it to you. I may suggest a few figures. In particular, I am interested in railways across Kenya, Somali, and road projects across the Congo, south towards Zambia, and hydro-electric projects that you may wish to be involved with there. I would also appreciate investments in Zimbabwe.

‘OK, coming back to the drug. What is not known to the world yet is that its generic properties will cure a very wide range of diseases, far more than are currently realised. There are no side effects, and its potency is limited - someone bitten by a poisonous snake would probably still die. You will find that your doctors will experiment with it, and that none of them will fully understand it, not for a decade, and that people will start to wish to be inoculated with it. If they are inoculated they will avoid catching most of the diseases they could be exposed to, although boosters may be necessary for some diseases. But, if people know that they cannot catch a sexually transmitted disease, they will be less inhibited, and more pregnancies will follow – a lot more.

‘It’s fair to say that those sexually transmitted diseases will reduce in time, and start to disappear, and the world’s population will be healthier – more or less. Unfortunately, all diseases are adaptive, and they mutate, so there is no knowing what’s around the corner. This drug may cure them, or make them worse. And let us be clear about one thing: if this drug was available to all poor countries in quantity, the population explosion would cause great problems. It may sound harsh, but the availability must be managed. If you don’t wish to be that harsh then you can, of course, feed the people of the world and bankrupt yourselves.

‘So I say this: make the drug available for the worst cases, for emergencies, and not to be used as an inoculation yet. And *do not* flood the poorer nations with the drug.’

‘Are we included in that?’ the Indians asked.

‘Yours is a country of contrasts: some very rich, many very poor. How you deal with your own people is your choice. But I will be asking the other nations, the richer nations, not to make the drug cheap for you, because if widely used you’ll have uncontrollable population growth. The drug has benefits, it also comes with penalties. If, in Great Britain, everyone had access to it, then people would live longer – not dying from disease – and the state would have to pay pensions for longer, a serious burden on a country with an old population.’

‘But we would save on health costs,’ the British PM noted.

‘For the first few decades, yes. Then you would get used to the adjustments, and still spend more money than was prudent – just on other things. All of you would be wise to put the health savings away into pension funds, because people *will* live longer, and there will be more of them.’

People took notes.

‘OK, future events – near future events. Next year there will be a serious flood in Myanmar. That will be followed by a serious quake in China. I ask the Chinese to consider allowing in foreign Rescue Force units to show solidarity - peace and harmony amongst the nations represented here. We will then have to consider Georgia. I would appreciate it if the European Union and the United States would look into the matter before its too late. My advice is to leave well enough alone. Next, US elections.’ He focused on Chase. ‘Will you be standing?’

Chase took a moment, taking in the faces. ‘I aim to ... yes.’

‘Then you will have my support, as far as that influence goes.’

‘It goes very far,’ the Indians noted.

‘You’ll endorse me publicly?’ Chase asked.

‘Yes, very publicly,’ Jimmy emphasised.

‘Will there be a shopping list?’ Chase asked. Faces creased.

‘Yes. Shelly and her school friends wish to stay at the White House.’

Everyone laughed.

‘Be wiping the crayon off the walls,’ I cautioned.

The French put in, ‘We’d like to try and find a solution to the Middle East crisis.’

Oh dear, I thought. It was going well up to that point.

‘There isn’t one,’ Jimmy told them. ‘Because the nice man from Israel does not want peace, he wants victory. And why shouldn’t he desire that, he outguns the Palestinians a million to one, and has the every amenable United States to back him.’

‘There will be no solution in the years ahead?’ the French pushed.

‘None that I am aware of,’ Jimmy responded. ‘There will be continuous conflict, ebbing and flowing like a tide, then a gradual turn away from Israel by its friends, followed by economic crisis. Their future is a long and painful struggle.’

‘It’s very good of you to share that with us,’ Ben Ares quipped, not looking happy.

‘Is there a solution?’ Chase asked.

‘Of course, just not the will to implement it. And I will not be getting involved until my good friend across the table needs a boat to evacuate on.’

‘Is there a more practical solution than that?’ the British PM asked.

‘My aim is to wait until Israel is on its knees, then to help, because nothing short of that will get them to talk peace, seriously talk peace, and not just go through the motions.’

‘You’ll let us suffer like that?’ Ben asked.

‘I’m just one person, what can I do?’ Jimmy held his hands wide. ‘You have America behind you, you’re in control of your own destiny, what more do you want? You can’t possibly want guidance from little old me.’

‘You’ll not get involved?’ Chase puzzled.

Jimmy faced him. ‘There are two times to help someone: when they ask for it, or when they are so badly hurt you feel obliged to help. I’m waiting for the later, because only then will they finally listen. And if, before then, they wish to save themselves, they already know what to do.’

‘I’m right here,’ Ben quipped.

Jimmy ignored him. ‘OK, do Russia and China have anything to report on Iran?’

Thirty minutes later we broke for coffee and cake. I brought Shelly in and she worked her magic on the room, practising greetings in many languages, several of them perfect due to a lot of practise at the house. She was even civilised to Michelle and Keely.

When we reconvened, Jimmy started on electric cars, and thumped the table a few times, raising his voice. ‘Oil – limited – going to run out!’

We moved onto an experimental nuclear reactor in China, but one that would have co-operation from all here, a sister reactor planned in Somalia inside of two years. All would benefit from the next generation of cleaner nuclear power stations, technological hints to be provided by Jimmy. That would lead to desalination plants, of keen interest to Ben Ares. When he asked if the use of desalination plants for Jordan constituted helping Israel, Jimmy replied, ‘I’ll help you when you’re desperate, not after you’ve died from thirst. There would be no point then.’

Russia, China and France were putting pressure on Iran to limit its nuclear ambitions, China threatening to half its Iranian oil purchases. They were having some success, not least because Britain and America were not involved. Breaking for the day, we headed off

to various hotels or embassies, meeting up later for a state dinner at the palace. The aides would now work their magic, as well as remove paragraphs, words and commas from communiqués.

The next morning we got into beating up British and American banks, talk of limiting size, and greater scrutiny of risks taken. At the end of the day, Chase had no choice if he wanted Chinese money for bond sales. That evening session was one of the most upbeat we had ever held, many jokes made, all leaders looking forward to massive healthcare savings. And we secured the promise of substantial investments in Africa. A private jet returned us to Cardiff airport the next morning, Air Force One on its way back to Washington.

Jimmy gave me the task of prioritising the investments in Africa, so I figured the best place to think about it was in Kenya, and with a cold beer in my hand. We checked if the parents of Shelly's friends were available, packed a bag and set off a week later. In addition to Cat, we dragged along the nursery teacher that taught Lucy, and her own daughter, so that Lucy would have a friend of her own age.

The other parents found the escort to the airport a bit odd, the room just for us at the airport strange, and the reaction of other First Class passengers a little bewildering. Touching down at Nairobi, we were led off first, just the usual two hundred soldiers to greet us, little more than sixty police officers forming a funnel as we boarded the coach. The other parents were wondering what the hell they had let themselves in for. Our coach followed a police escort, and four hours later we arrived at the golf complex in the dark, no reporters or crowds apparent.

Booked in, we met in the rooftop bar for a few beers and a snack before bed. In the morning we all gathered to have breakfast in the main restaurant, suffering the stares of the other guests, a few photographs snapped. With swimming costumes and beach bags collected, we led the group down to the beach hotel, our Pathfinder bodyguards hovering at a discreet distance. The girls ran screaming across the sand and into the water, Cat keeping an eye on them, as we grabbed sun beds in the shade, soon sat with a cold beer in a warm breeze.

Watching the girls in the surf, I felt very contented, and very relaxed. The release of the drug had been a shock, followed by a growing pride, some relief, and ultimately great wonderment at what we were doing. What Jimmy was doing; I was still Robin to his Batman.

The other parents got over the shock of the airport and soon relaxed, seats moved around so that the ladies could gossip and the men could sup cool beers and talk 'man-talk.' The men had all been scuba diving before, so after lunch I took them out, finding the damn turtle still there, although appearing a little old and slow these days. Returning toward the beach, an elephant swam over the top of us, an usual sighting for any diver. At the dive centre, Steffan and Lotti now off enjoying Cuba, we poked the wall chart of local fishes and asked about the elephant fish, taking the piss at length.

Returning to the families, I noticed Shelly on the back of the older elephant, the animal now in the shallows. She stood up and confidently dived off it, surfacing some thirty yards out. She was growing too quickly, and I wanting to stop the clock. Later, the scuba instructors found her a small wetsuit and jacket and took her diving, the other parents not so keen for their girls to try it. I found a snorkel and mask for Lucy and took her out, finding that, like her sister, she had no fear of the water.

At 4pm the beach was hot, the air still - no breeze off the ocean, and most people on the beach were asleep. Even I felt drowsy. Shelly and the girls were under the trees and chatting about stuff that six year olds chatted about. It was just about perfect, and I sat there taking it in, wondering what might go wrong, then chiding myself for being so negative.

That evening we listened to one of our singers, and then strolled slowly as a group around to the next hotel and up to its rooftop bar, the girls peering out at the twinkling lights in the distance. Two RF staff introduced themselves and I vaguely remembered them, from the Mozambique deployment. God, how long ago was that, I wondered.

After some debate, the other men nagged for a visit to Mawlini rather than just sitting on the beach the next day, so I made a call and arranged the Dash for the next morning. After a quick early breakfast we all drove the short distance to Mombassa field, Tubby stood waiting.

'Carry your bags, sir? It's only a dollar.'

'Got a flight suit that fits you yet?' I asked as we boarded. I took right seat, taxied us around and lifted off, not too shaky considering it had been a while. I caught up on the gossip for twenty minutes, then moved back to the passenger cabin, swapping with Sue. When Shelly walked forwards to the cockpit I was curious; she seemed to be pointing out bits of instrumentation to Sue. I exchanged a look

with Helen. Sue moved her seat right back and put Shelly on the armrest, our daughter fascinated by the numerous cockpit dials.

For the most part, the ladies slept en route, and the men glanced down at parched Kenyan countryside. Arriving at Mawlini, Tubby did his tour guide bit and detailed the various compounds for our party. He flew us over the oilfields, now some twenty derricks spread out, and turned to the border, illustrating what was left of the refugee camp. On the way back he pointed out the various live-firing ranges, a few Hueys passing underneath us.

On the apron, a line of jeeps awaited, Mac greeting us. 'Had the ten dollar tour already then.'

'You weren't kept waiting, were you?' I asked, feigning concern.

'Aye, I was, your majesty.' We mounted up, our Pathfinder bodyguards joining their colleagues in jeeps at the rear. 'You're in a house down the road, there's a big one empty.'

'How many bedrooms?' I puzzled.

'Eight, I think.'

Mac drove us out the gate, turned south and soon entered the estate where he lived, turning right this time and to a large house with neatly mown lawns, sprinklers working and creating mini-rainbows. The girls ran straight for the sprinklers, shrieking and running away when wet. Four locals walked out and helped with our luggage, our party soon in the cool white marbled interior of the house, the patio doors opened. Shelly stripped to her pants and plunged into the inviting blue pool, the other girls soon following, Cat keeping a watchful eye over her charges.

On the patio we sat in the shade, cold drinks bought out, and caught up on the gossip with Mac, the others fascinated by Rescue Force work. Cassie was still here, she and Anton at odds about where to live – still. Dunnow was visiting with a group of Huey pilots, Ratchet and Spanner involved in the airborne exercises. I was jealous. The men folk wanted to play with the boys-toys at the base, the ladies happy enough to sit here all afternoon, so we left them and drove back. On the apron I found Dunnow, hugs given, insults exchanged. He was about to take off, a quick sortie to a firing range, so we caught a lift. The doors were clipped open, safety harnesses employed, and my guests perched with their feet dangling as we lifted off, soon skimming low over the sand, a roar and a breeze. I was now very jealous. At the range we blew up a sand storm as we touched down, spare ammo unloaded by the Rifles as I led my guests forwards.

I spotted Skids and closed in. 'What boys-toys you got?'

He glanced at my guests, and led us to a range, beckoning soldiers over. He handed Gwen's husband a grenade, waving down the soldiers. 'Pull the pin, throw hard towards that target, then duck.'

Gwen's husband pulled the pin and threw. When the rest of us hit the dirt he figured he should as well. The blast washed over us, loud without ear defenders. Standing, and dusting down, we could see a few jagged cuts in the target.

'Not bad,' Skids commended. 'Thing about a grenade – you don't need to be too precise. Grenades are not selfish creatures, they're happy to give everyone a piece.' He made ready an AK47 and handed it over to the same man, correcting the adopted stance. 'Finger on trigger, gentle squeeze.'

A burst of rounds flew out, the muzzle climbing.

'OK, now do that again, but hold it tighter – expect the rise.'

A second burst of rounds flew down the range, less movement of the muzzle this time.

Skids put the weapon onto single shot. 'Single shot: squeeze - release, squeeze - release.'

Gwen's husband put ten rounds into the target, the next man firing another ten. We all accepted weapons, moving onto fresh targets, and lay down, firing carefully aimed shots. Making safe the weapons and walking forwards, we inspected our handiwork. Skids then showed us to a brick wall, a target placed behind it. Standing back, he fired at the wall. On close inspection we could see no holes, but the target was shredded.

Skids explained, 'If you duck behind something solid, and get shot at, the force of the round goes through and chips off bits of concrete or brick, and that hurts a tad if it hits you.'

We moved on to a breezeblock wall, another target placed behind it. This time the rounds went straight through.

Skids said, 'Never duck behind a breezeblock wall. Even if there were two of them, you'd still be hit. And most houses in the UK are fucking breezeblock.'

We stepped up to a jeep and accepted cold drinks, Skids relaying war stories from his days in the SAS, the men keenly attentive. They had read the book about Scorpion Base, and were fascinated when Skids drew a map in the sand and explained his part in the battle. I explained my role, on the control tower with the snipers, before Skids drove us back, a cold beer enjoyed in the NCO's bar in the Rifles compound. Many familiar faces came across and said hello, and we reminisced about battles, dust and heat, and some dodgy flying.

As the sun hit the far horizon, creating my favourite time of day – complete with amber glow – we drove back and found the ladies making dinner. I explained that we'd make a formal tour of the base the next day, to inspire the troops. Over dinner, I brought up the subject of the new money to spend in Africa, my assigned task.

Gwen's husband said, 'Schools. If the people are better educated, they don't need us, do they.'

It set me thinking, and the thought would not leave me. After the meal, with the girls playing a board game in the lounge, I sat on the patio with a cold beer and stared into the night sky and up at the stars.

'Penny for your thoughts,' Helen said.

'Hmm? Oh, just thinking about the new budget for Africa. Schools are a good idea but, well – it's a big old area, Africa.'

'Then we should create teacher training colleges, and they go off to teach in the towns and villages when qualified.'

I nodded absently. 'Doing that already at Ebede, and the Congo.' I grabbed my phone and called Anna. 'Anna, how many kids opt for teacher training?'

'Many wish to do it, but difficult to find jobs afterwards.'

'And if we paid them, but they taught around Africa...?' I asked.

'We could produce five hundred teachers a year. Many former pupils come back, asking about jobs.'

'Hire them, all of them, I have a new budget. Anna, I want as many teachers as you can produce, at Ebede and the other orphanages. We'll sponsor them, they can go and teach in the towns and villages.'

'I'll call back those that are seeking work. Where should I send them?'

'Anywhere that they're needed. Start with Kenya, the Congo, Tanzania, and work outwards. Hire a co-ordinator, please.'

'And the budget?' she asked.

'I have a spare billion or two, don't worry about the cost. Bye.' I hung up and faced Helen. 'Teach the teachers, send them out to produce more teachers.' I called Jimmy and told him, and he agreed it was a good idea. He then hinted at water.

'Water?' Helen queried.

'Water ... clean water for people to drink?' I considered.

Gwen's husband put in, 'We make stand pipes.'

I stared at the side of his head, then glanced at Helen, a secret look exchanged. 'What ... er ... what kind of standpipes?'

‘We used to make them for the building trade, plus pipes. We now produce plastic pipes, but we helped a local charity a year or two back, made standpipes for them to send to villages in India; pumps, simple hole boring equipment. You know, two people stand next to it and walk in a circle, and it digs down to get at the water. It takes a day or two, but there’s no fuel or electricity needed - the villagers do it themselves.’

‘You fancy a trip to the Congo?’ I asked.

‘OK,’ he said with a shrug.

The next day we found the Rifles lined up, and patrolled the ranks like Prince Charles – but without the annoyingly slow voice, questions asked of the men. They marched up and down for us, and Helen and I presented medals, stripes for those being promoted. In the RF compound we observed new recruits performing drills, and issued awards for good years of service and exams passed. We led our guests to lunch in the famous rooftop bar, the gang offered an hour or two in the pool below whilst we caught up on RF work with Mac and Coup. At 3pm we boarded a scheduled 737 full of RF and UN staff, and landed at Goma hub just over an hour later, the sun setting.

The airport concourse bustled, Africans still flying in for treatment at the hospital, and the hotels were packed. So we stayed at Yuri and Marko’s penthouse apartments, our lofty perch affording us a view of the airport lights in the distance, and the brightly lit boulevard below. For the first time here I noticed a lot of yellow taxis darting about, no idea where they came from, perhaps Goma town. The next day I arranged for a coach and escort for the gang, for a visit to the lake, whilst I took Gwen’s husband to the local plastics factory – without explaining why.

After a quick inspection of the facilities and machinery, I asked, ‘Could you make your standpipes and water drills here?’

‘Sure, all the right equipment.’

‘If I gave you a factory like this, only bigger, could you run it for me?’ I posed.

‘Well, I have the business in the UK keeping me busy,’ he delicately mentioned.

‘This would make you more money, a lot more. Basically, the raw materials are a tenth of the cost in the UK, labour costs very low, and I’d be giving you a very large order.’

He thrust his hands in his pockets and made a face, pursing his lips as he blew out. ‘It would be done through my UK business?’ he finally asked.

‘They’d be the parent company, you’d send down a few staff with the right knowledge.’

‘How many units would we make?’

‘How many villagers are there in Africa?’ I countered.

‘A lot, I’d guess,’ he said with theatrical emphasis. ‘So, you’d buy the pumps, wells, and filtration kit ... and give it to the villages?’ I nodded. ‘Be a worthwhile venture as well,’ he admitted. ‘OK, I’m in.’

We shook. ‘You start as soon as you get back. I want as many as you can produce.’

At the lake we found the rest of the gang, photographs being taken of Pelicans, and nudged them aboard the coach, soon on the way north and to the nearest lodge. We stepped down from the coach to a commanding view of the troublesome volcano, a wide valley of savannah stretching out before us, a variety of grazing animals conveniently on display for the paying guests. The manager rushed out in a flap, not expecting us, and I put him at ease; we were only here for lunch.

The lodge rangers brought out a Cheetah cub, and the girls knelt down in a circle to stroke it. When the cub’s mum came out on a lead they shrieked, hiding behind their parent’s legs. The mother Cheetah flopped down, panting in the heat, and allowed the nervous girls to stroke it, many snaps taken of mother and cub. It turned out that the cub did not belong to the Cheetah, but she tolerated it anyway. The rangers offered bottled milk and the girls fed the cub in turns.

This particular lodge was close to civilisation - to Goma and the nearby villages, but it offered one of the best views of the Rift Valley and the distant volcano. With the staff moving tables around for us, we sat on the bar’s veranda for lunch, enjoying the view.

I pointed at the valley. ‘Tectonic plates divide right there.’

‘This an earthquake zone?’ they asked.

‘No, these plates don’t cause earthquakes. Most do, these don’t, because we paid them off.’

‘But that volcano did blow?’

‘Yes, it blows quite regular – in geological terms,’ I explained.

I ordered the Dash for the morning, and we deliberately flew over the volcano, no ash clouds for Tubby to fly though this time, along the north end of the lake and across Rwanda to the southern tip of Lake Victoria, landing at the grass strip at River View many hours later as we continued on our magical mystery tour.

At the larger of the two lodges they now housed a variety of cubs and, after booking-in, the girls were kept busy with furry balls of fun to stroke and feed. The others in the group had already heard about this particular lodge, and now appreciated the views from the rooftop bar, binoculars provided. When I spotted a large pair of ears I suggested to the women that they try the east view, soon a scream let out as a giraffe's head came over the wall, a huge pink tongue displayed. With a larger lion cub being brought out, I dropped to the floor and held it, soon getting cuts on my arms as the damn thing tried to eat me alive. I had missed this, and made a mental note to have more "me" time.

The weather held, and we enjoyed five days of safaris, the girls enjoying the abandoned offspring of many local species, including orphaned elephants. They rode on tame ostriches, on elephants and zebra. All in all it was a great holiday for the girls, and I found myself thinking - that I was thinking like a parent: we were here for the kids, not for us. Still, I got to play with the cubs as well.

Back in the UK I went and found Jimmy upon our return, and detailed my ideas and plans.

'Good ideas, but not what I had in mind.'

'No?'

'No. If you feed a hungry man, he'll be hungry tomorrow. Give him a fishing rod and he'll catch his own food. Give him a hoe and he'll grow his own crops.'

'You wanna get to the bloody point,' I urged.

'Africa cannot produce goods to sell abroad, the quality is not there, so they sell resources – like ore from the mines. That makes them money, and creates jobs. And that's what Africa needs; genuine jobs, not handouts. If you start with the big cities, and help them to create genuine jobs, then those jobs will filter down to the towns, eventually the villages. Give the villages clean water ... and they'll be poor villagers with clean water. So what? Now, what does a factory in this country have ... that they don't have in Africa?'

'Good roads, rail links.'

'Transport infrastructure, yes. What else?'

'Ready markets.'

'Well, Africa is a big place, lots of people, a growing economy. So the markets are there, you just need to identify them. What else do their western counterparts have?'

I gave it some thought. 'Skills?'

'Yes, training and education – as you intend to tackle. What else?'

‘Finance?’

‘Correct, you win a cookie. A struggling factory in Nairobi can’t get the skilled workers, or the finance, or use the transport infrastructure as well as they’d like.’

‘So we tackle all of them,’ I suggested.

‘That’s a big job. So, what do we have plenty of?’

‘Money...?’ I said after a moment.

‘So create a bank, and put branches in each country, then offer venture capital to existing small businesses so that they can do more of what they do already.’

‘Our own bank,’ I stated, considering it.

‘Create a partnership with an existing Kenyan bank, offer them forty percent of the shares. Or just buy them out. Then put a branch in each town, and offer business capital. And, for certain areas, offer mortgages.’

‘In Gotham City,’ I realised.

‘Yes, for mine workers and managers.’

‘What about the water pipes?’ I nudged.

‘Still a good idea, spend some money, just don’t go crazy.’

‘And the teachers?’ I asked.

‘Can never have enough of them. But again, get them teaching adult literacy in towns and cities first; poor villages contribute nothing to the economy. Start with the cities and work outwards.’

I was deflated as I walked the short distance around to my house. ‘Grumpy Guts shot down my master plan’, I told Helen.

‘Oh, it seemed to fit.’

‘We’re going to open our own bank in Africa and offer business capital.’

‘Ah, well that would have a greater effect on their economy,’ Helen agreed.

I joined Shelly as she downloaded images from her digital camera to the house computer. One caught my attention, and I took charge of the mouse. I zoomed in on people in the background of a shot of a cheetah cub, at the lodge in the Rift Valley. A face seemed out of place, and familiar. The man had been frozen in time, an unfriendly stare towards the back of my head. I printed it off and found Jimmy, showing him the image.

‘Where was this taken?’ Jimmy puzzled.

‘That lodge overlooking the volcano. Seven days ago now.’

‘It looks just like the Belgian who set that car bomb at Skid’s place. But he’s dead. Oliver Hest, his name was.’ Jimmy called Sykes, who ran the name. Oliver Hest had a twin brother, Maurice,

also former French Foreign Legion. Jimmy asked me, ‘Your trip to Goma – it was unplanned?’

‘Spur of the moment.’

‘And this was taken when?’

‘Day after we arrived.’

‘Not enough time for him to get into place,’ Jimmy puzzled. ‘So what was he up to? No bombs have gone off, no shootings?’

We faxed his image and details to the airport and Forward Base, putting him on our most wanted. We rang the lodge in question, but no one of that name had stayed as a guest. One Belgian man had stayed for five days, no record of him at the airport or with the border police. We called Sykes and put an alert out for him around the UK.

The next day we got a call, from the security staff at the hospital. Hest had been a patient. Jimmy and I exchanged puzzled looks, then checked his treatment regimen; he had booked in with advanced syphilis and herpes, and was wheelchair bound. And we had cured him; he walked himself out.

I sent the digital image to all of our contacts in Africa, and Jimmy put Skids on the case. The days ticked off the calendar ... and nothing, no one spotted him. Sykes mentioned that our friend was wanted for minor offences in Belgium, so he exaggerated them and added him to Interpol’s list, plus every UK watch list.

Another week went by and nothing happened in Africa; no explosions, no incidents. Our friend had disappeared, which worried me. A wanted poster was emailed to every lodge and hotel that we had contact with, just to be sure.

Setbacks

Things were going well, the world still talking about nothing other than the wonder drug, all sorts of uses being found for it, the rich taking it for supposed cosmetic reasons, and to act as a vaccine. Wrinkly old women were taking the drug and claiming great benefits. In reality, everyone had a few bugs hanging around all the time, and the drug removed them, making people feel a little better, affording them a little more energy in the mornings. It also had the

placebo effect, in that people felt better from a psychological standpoint, Jimmy amused by some of the claims.

The drugs companies, however, were not so amused, a sixty percent drop in their stock values, people made redundant, research projects cancelled. After all, why look for a cure for cancer when one already existed. I asked Jimmy if the drug companies would come for us, but he said no, since the Russians and Chinese admitted responsibility for it. We were just seen as wanting it for Africa, which was typically philanthropic of us. Jimmy had bet the downside of the drug stocks and the markets, without telling me, and made a killing, a few people at McKinleys enjoying a new villa or two in the South of France.

One man in Holland had injected his sick dog and was claiming that it cured the animal, leaving Jimmy wondering if it could, but doubting it. It would, however, cure any ailment that a pig suffered, and was being tested on sick Gorillas in various zoos. I was amused to see that it did not yet cure male pattern baldness.

Then the first athlete admitted to its use, and got himself banned. That ban was over-turned by the courts, since the drug was not known as performance enhancing. Jimmy had a word with the "M" Group, and any athlete testing positive for it would be banned for life, a way of preventing people with the blood from scooping all the medals. That was another shock that the world was yet to endure, and for the moment any talk of the blood was hidden behind the drug, or variants of it. We were safe from exposure for the moment.

Then one of our planes fell from the sky, a 757, no survivors. The manifest listed over two hundred people on board, a flight from Dar es Salaam to Goma hub. Another aircraft, close to the doomed airliner, reported that it was fine one minute, and in two pieces the next. A bomb. The "M" Group met at the house and an investigation was initiated, Sykes sending down forensic teams, plus men to the airport. We moved a hundred Pathfinders in plain clothes to Dar es Salaam, and I had my eye on Zanzibar.

The next day a series of bombs went off, both on the island and in the city of Dar es Salaam, western interests or oil concerns targeted. A claim of responsibility about the aircraft bomb was also made from Zanzibar, a group with links to al-Qa'eda. That just about sealed it, and we tightened security at all airports. The air crash investigators found evidence of a bomb straight away, the device placed in the forward cargo hold.

At the house, I read the passenger manifest, finding that the flight had held many sick people heading towards Goma hospital, ten oil

workers, and eight American advisors to CAR; geologists. Without consulting with us first, Chase dispatched FBI investigators to see who had killed the US citizens. Before their plane had even landed, two bombs went off at two separate mosques on Zanzibar during Friday prayers, the dead and injured in the hundreds.

Jimmy was despondent, worried about the American reaction to the terror attacks, and the damage it could do to the oil industry in that region. We did not need Zanzibar to become a war zone. He also suspected that the Tanzanians were behind the mosque bombings; they were not about to let anything come between them and their growing oil revenue.

We dispatched sniffer dogs to Dar Es Salaam airport, and bought extra luggage scanners for passengers booked onto our flights. Spending money with a purpose, we ordered up extra scanners for Nairobi and Goma hub, additional western security staff sent down to operate them. We also insisted that all transit passengers have their luggage re-examined at Goma hub, and carefully, the sniffer dogs gainfully employed.

Few westerners related the air disaster with African safari holidays, because where the hell was Dar es Salaam, the Middle East? Kenyan tourism was unaffected, Congo tourism still a little down due to the sick flying in. Overall, we did not suffer any bad publicity from the incident. The Tanzanians took to screening anyone and everyone using the ferries and planes to Zanzibar, internal flights now subject to the same scrutiny as international flights. That led to the next incident. A man on a ferry panicked when he saw the guards searching, so pressed the button. He took down the ferry, and two hundred people, western oil workers now growing fearful of Zanzibar.

The Tanzanians put Rifles at the docksides and searched passengers before they got near anywhere sensitive. They also instigated random road searches, and found something that I wish they hadn't. They had stopped a family in a car; mum, dad and kids. In the boot they found explosives, instructions, and documents. Sykes team flew straight over and pinned the explosives handiwork on al-Qa'eda, Afghanistan, but the encouragement and funding on Saudi Arabia. When the man's home was searched they found more links to Saudi Arabia, and the man's relatives offered up similar leads when they were raided. The Rifles "interrogated" the people, getting the names and details of contacts in Dubai, linked to the Saudis.

The editor of the African Times called, worried about running the story. Jimmy told him to go ahead, but to be accurate and impartial.

‘Which part of *impartial* did the editor not understand?’ I asked when I read the story.

Everyone in Africa now blamed the Saudis for trying to disrupt the Tanzanian oil supply, to their own benefit. They also blamed the Saudis for bringing down the plane, various Saudi missions in Somali, Kenya and Tanzania being stoned, its staff evacuated. And Abdi, he had slapped the Saudi Ambassador about the face and booted his arse onto a plane, the story causing Jimmy to put his head in his hands. He had expected trouble on Zanzibar, we had discussed it and planned for it, but this he considered excessive compared to what should have happened. But our problems were nothing compared to those of Hardon Chase, who was now pressuring the CIA to make the evidence go away. The last thing he wanted was the Saudis blamed for the deaths of US citizens. Jimmy made a few cryptic comments about something called 9-11, but I did not understand the reference.

The Saudis denied involvement, and the British and American Governments played down their link. The Chinese, however, just about threatened a war with Saudi Arabia if such attacks continued. They sent extra coastal gunboats to the oilfields, plus four destroyers, and began to look at re-supplying their rigs from Sri Lanka or Kenya.

When Jimmy took his head out of his hands, he said the time was right. He called a meeting of African leaders in Goma, but only invited certain countries, mostly the sub-Saharan countries. “M” Group security ministers were invited, and we flew down with Sykes and the British Home Secretary, the security tight.

The hotels had been cleared of health tourists, and apartments were made available for leaders, plus a few lodges within a reasonable commuting time. The large conference centre had been used twice already for meetings of the African Union, its central location very popular. It had also been used for various other meetings, including the African Football League, and various meetings on co-operation and trade, an international trade fair run every three months. Now Jimmy had an idea.

The first morning of the meeting, Jimmy kicked things off, managing to speak after a ten minute standing ovation. And that was for just turning up. He invited leaders to say their piece on security matters in the region first, the politicians setting the mood. It was

4pm before they were all done on their opening speeches, not much in the way of practical steps to defeat the terrorists.

When Jimmy got back up, and the applause had subsided, he suggested the expansion of a counter-terrorism unit we already made use of, suggesting that it be called Pan African Counter Terrorism, and that all the nations here commit a few men to it. Jimmy would fund it, of course, and we'd bring in experts from Europe and America. He asked for a vote from the leaders, a unanimous verdict given. The new unit would be based here, at Forward Base, with offices in many countries. Its officers would be granted the right of travel about Africa, and the power of arrest, and would be made up mostly of former and current members of the Rifles. He handed out a discussion document, and closed the session for the day.

Afterwards, as we mingled, Sykes asked, 'How big a unit?'

'As big as MI6, and with teeth,' Jimmy responded. 'Get me twenty former officers that are not yet ready for a pipe and slippers. Then ask the PM for ten current officers.'

'This will grow?' Sykes nudged.

'Yes, and be used for counter-Islamic threats ahead of ... you know what.'

The delegates and leaders hung around for a while, chatting in small groups, drinks served. I greeted Abdi, and asked him if he was practising his diplomatic skills.

'I wonder if I am suited for this work,' he said with a sigh. 'I thank people with a false smile - that I wish to shoot between the eyes.'

'How's your northern border?' I probed.

'They come across, we torture and kill them. It is the game we play. But now they are from Yemen, not so much from the camps in Afghanistan.'

'Is that US Naval base finished?'

'Yes, and a runway nearby. It is good to see the large ships there, but they do not discourage al-Qa'eda. They tell us when the small boats come, and we play our game.' He wagged a finger. 'Some day I will land on the beaches of Yemen and see if they like it.'

'Please, let us know first,' I encouraged. 'Besides, the Yemen Government is fighting these terrorists. You can't blame them all.'

'You have a wisdom that I lack, or maybe my anger defeats my wisdom,' Abdi wondered out loud before walking off.

The diminutive Zimbabwean President squeezed through to greet me, Solomon at his elbow and beaming as ever. We caught up on

tourism, and quickly moved onto the wonder drug, Zimbabwe receiving its first batches not long ago and seeing dramatic results.

‘Mister Silo said he would change Africa, and I labelled it as a dream. I think, maybe, I will eat my words. He is more African than we are.’

‘How are the soldiers?’ I asked.

‘They put their regular colleagues to shame, the occasional fight – which they invariably win, quickly and easily.’

I greeted a few other leaders, all happy to co-operate with PACT, and we got into tourism and the wonder drug. Seemed like half these old boys had already taken it, and their wives, some twice. Back at the hotel we held a mini “M” Group meeting in a bedroom, people sat on beds, some standing against walls.

Jimmy explained, ‘The Rifles are a great force here in Africa, and could be used to push north, but they also need to know who their targets are ahead of time. PACT will be their eyes and ears, both for counter-terrorism and battlefield intelligence. All we need to do is to get them up to speed. Here, in Africa, a few dollars goes a long way, so there are a great many potential spies sitting at every street-corner café, behind the wheel of every taxi, in every bar, and in the mosques. I want each of your countries to send a liaison, and we’ll build up PACT quickly. The legwork will be done by the Rifles, because white folk will stand out in back-street bars. And tomorrow, we’ll see if we can’t upset the North Africans.’

Jimmy and I split up after the evening meal, and we worked our way around the delegates, gently suggesting that a new body may be created, a Central Africa Co-operation Group. Oh, and no Muslim nations would be allowed in.

The next morning, Jimmy again opened the conference, detailing what he thought PACT would need, and which areas it would tackle. He then publicly suggested that a new body be formed, since the African Union was not achieving much for sub-Saharan states. He suggested that he would speak to each leader and poll their opinions, offering this conference venue and free flights and hotel stays for leaders who joined that new body. I was sure that they’d all sign up there and then.

An officer of Sykes’ mob took to the podium and worked the slide machine, reporting what they knew about the bombs in Tanzania, little mention of the bombs in the mosques, which we felt were down to the Tanzanian Rifles, officially or otherwise. The Saudi link was detailed, and the propaganda flowed. Problem was,

we didn't make it up - the Saudis were linked, officially or otherwise.

Security Ministers gave speeches, some discussion of co-operation between the Rifles units, and we halted at 3pm, drinks served. Delegates either stood about chatting in small groups, or sat in discrete groups and whispered conspiratorially. That went on till 5pm, when the various groups headed towards waiting planes, and matters of state back home. Bag searches were intense, more sniffer dogs on duty than there were people queuing up. The planes got away without incident.

That evening, the "M" Group representatives drove to Forward Base, the new building ready for PACT. In fact, it had been ready for many months. It offered satellite uplinks, the latest computers, a forensics lab, many offices, and a command centre with real-time streaming TV news from around the region and the wider world. Two-dozen people already worked in the unit, and ex-SAS and Rifles "hit squads" were on call.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' Jimmy called in the command centre. 'Let me say one thing. In the decade ahead, careers will be made in PACT – more so than elsewhere. It will have a large budget, a very large budget, its operatives enjoying the best of everything. Kindly relay that to your colleagues when looking for people that may be suitable to work down here. Bill?'

A man stepped forwards, a colleague of Sykes; stocky, five ten, late forties.

'This is Bill Chambers, the first acting head of PACT. I've selected him ... because I know how he turns out. PACT will report to me, I'll report to the "M" Group, so let's not get jealous of who runs this show. National section leaders, and departmental managers here, will be recruited as soon as we can find them. Now, in addition to problems like Zanzibar, and al-Qa'eda in Somalia, the group will also tackle any and all small guerrilla groups in Africa, rooting them out and using the Rifles to shoot them full of holes. It will be a large task ... for anyone to undertake.'

We toured the building in small groups, finding that the CIA had already taken up station, plus Mossad and MI6. The Pathfinders had an office - a Captain now in residence, as did the Congo Rifles and our border police. The Somalis had a sizeable team here, satellite equipment from us linking them back to Mogadishu. From what I could see, the facility was just about ready to go. Leaving the building, Jimmy explained that the walls were a metre thick, concrete, and that the windows were bullet proof; a small bomb

would have no effect. Even the office doors were blast proof. Whether the children would get along and play nicely together was another matter.

Back at the hotel, I held a meeting with Kenyan Government and Bank of Kenya, my desire being to create a new bank, this new entity imaginatively called The Central African Bank. They liked very much the idea of venture capital for Kenyan companies, and the Government gave the bank chiefs a firm nudge to co-operate. The papers had been drawn up ready and I signed for CAR Ltd, the ultimate owner of the new bank. I offered not to try and take domestic business away from Bank of Kenya, and explained that it was all about providing business capital. Still, the men from the bank seemed a little reticent, no doubt worried about their own jobs. They went off to create the bank, its headquarters in Nairobi – at least its registration there, its de-facto headquarters here. I had even started the recruitment process.

After the meeting, I met with staff from CAR and some of our facilitators in the corporation here, and signed off the building of bank branches in twenty five small towns in the area, positioned to be near the mines so that payroll and wages could be handled for them. Armoured cars had been ordered, plus specially modified S61 helicopters that would carry cash around the region. A central cash repository was to be built at the airport, used as a clearinghouse for foreign currency. The British PM had leant me a few “chaps” from the Bank of England, and they would sit down here for a few months, ironing out any wrinkles as the bank got started. The bank's first customer would be CAR, followed by the corporation, then the individual mines and the privately operated mines. It would handle a great deal of money, the deposits and weekly movements propelling it to Africa's largest bank within months.

International branch offices were planned for London, Beijing, Moscow and New York. That done, I went for a swim, and afterwards enjoyed a lengthy massage from two Thai ladies that had just seemed to appear at the hotel. And from my room's window I could see fifty yellow taxis, still not sure where they came from. Flying back, I mentioned to Jimmy the Thai ladies and the taxis.

‘Civilisation and commerce will always creep in where there is a need. All you need is to create the right conditions. And the taxis, they were provided to an existing company in Goma, that's now licensed to service the hotels, the airport/hospital run, and the conference centre when it's in use. Can't have Gotham City without

taxi. I've also ordered a sports stadium and football pitch, and a golf course north of the airport.'

'People will see it when they fly in,' I said with a grin.

'It'll be a good course, regular competitions – once the hospital has emptied out. The drug is being shipped to all the African capitals, so the people flocking here will ease up and stop. That just leaves us with some extra pilots and aircraft.' He held his gaze on me.

'Extra routes to the US, I reckon.'

'The Russians will give us a slot, as will the Germans, so both 747s will be gainfully employed on those routes.'

'That was my second choice.'

He gave me another look.

End of year

As expected, the North African states did not like the idea of a sub-Saharan group meeting and excluding them. We didn't care. What's more, neither did the other nations involved. The first full conference was held in October, the leaders curious about the new golf course as it took shape. Po and his family came over, a large side-room set-up for them to showcase the products they made, both in Hong Kong and here in our region. Not wanting a long argument, we gave Po shares in the sub-company that would own and run the golf course and its hotel. The rest of the shares would go to CAR.

The meeting went well, a great many topics to discuss. Oil deals were struck between those that had, and those that had none. Roads and rail links would be extended, sections repaired where necessary. The medical equipment company diverted some of its production away from the States and serviced the nations represented, the cost savings appreciated. PACT was coming along, already responsible for a number of key arrests of terror suspects, and the delegates at this conference were left in no doubt about the benefits of brand Silo.

The two hotels at the airport were now four hotels, the second two built outside the airport fence and aimed at the low budget traveller, one of the hotels a whopper at six hundred rooms. American money had been used. On the second morning I grabbed a

taxi before dawn one day, wanting to see what they were like, my escorts in a second and third, and we drove the short distance to Spiral I, an estate that climbed and circled a low hill that was actually the very old remains of a small volcano. The houses increased in size and grandeur as we circled around, many high walls and guards visible. At the top I found a viewpoint opposite a restaurant and bar, spotting a great many blue pools surrounded by well-tended grass. I could see Spiral II across a small valley, some of its houses still under construction. It reminded me of Beverly Hills. Given that much of it was down to American money, it was appropriate.

The restaurant staff came out to see who the three taxis belonged to and let me in to have a nose around. The balcony offered a view of the airport, the golf course, and in the distance you could make out the lake and the volcano. The restaurant offered a rooftop bar and I climbed up dark wood stairs, finding the upper bar all dark wood, and somehow very African. The deputy manager of the restaurant pointed out houses below and labelled who lived in them. Many I didn't know, but I recognised the names of a few of the African Presidents. Seems that they kept houses here, possibly as an investment.

Back at the hotel I inspected a small branch of the new bank, housed just off the main concourse, and chatted to the staff. Turned out they were kept very busy with currency exchanges and the cashing of travellers cheques, taking that task off the hotel staff. The tourists also drew money here. Since there was another outlet in the airport itself, the tourists were now spoilt for choice.

In December, we returned for the grand opening of the golf course and hotel, all of the various national leaders invited, Kimballa Jnr given the honour of teeing off first. Po went second, his handicap improving, and a quick tour of the hotel confirmed to me that it was a copy of the one in Mombassa. Escaping the crowds, my escorts and I drove around to the factory that was making water pipes and filtration systems, thousand of the completed products stacked up outside and awaiting allocation to an NGO for delivery to a remote village somewhere far off.

I pointed my escorts towards the factory that made bits of medical kit, and found that it was now a complex, not a factory, at least ten times bigger than its original, long lorries coming and going. The manager rushed out with his staff and greeted me, and I inspected charts on walls in his office, all of them pointing upwards. I found nothing to complain about. I thanked them and told them to

return to their work, before wandering through the design section, picking up and examining bits of equipment to see what they did as technicians in white lab coats moved back and forth.

Someone moved quickly, I caught it out of the corner of my eye. I felt the jab in my arm and turned. There stood Hest dressed in a white lab coat, smiling contentedly, a syringe in his hand. He had four guns pointed at his head a second later as the Pathfinders rushed forwards, not sure what had happened.

They were too late.

Whatever he had jabbed me with was already in my shoulder, and I found myself wondering what it was that might kill me. I stepped towards him and glanced at the syringe as the guards held him.

‘You’ll be dead in thirty seconds,’ Hest spat out.

‘At least I won’t have too long to think about it then,’ I quipped, making him frown, and puzzle my attitude. ‘What’s in the syringe?’

‘You’ll never get the antidote in time.’

‘Then there’s no point in not telling me then, is there,’ I lightly suggested.

He stared back. ‘Snake venom. I’ve been keeping it for just this occasion.’

‘Oh,’ I casually commented. ‘And you work here?’

‘I’ve endured this place for months, waiting for you or him to return.’

‘Should I be feeling anything my now?’ I asked my attacker.

He looked me up and down, then at the syringe still in his hand. It was almost empty.

I checked my watch, then considered that my shoulder felt a little numb. ‘What time do you have? Silly me, you can’t see your watch.’ I shifted my weight to one leg and tapped my foot. ‘Should anything ... you know, have happened by now?’

My attacker was most vexed. I tipped my head to the bodyguards and they led him outside, a good minute taken to reach the jeeps.

‘Guess your venom has no effect on me, although I do feel it in my arm a bit.’ I made eye contact with a Pathfinder. ‘Take him to PACT at Forward Base, interrogate him.’ They bundled him into a jeep as I mounted mine. At the golf hotel I found Jimmy and led him to one side. ‘That man Hest, the brother, he just stabbed me in the shoulder with snake venom – fella was working at the medical factory.’

‘How do you feel?’ Jimmy asked, concerned.

‘Fine. Arm is a bit numb at the top.’

‘You have my blood, so you’re just about indestructible. Still, worth taking it easy. Grab some protein and drink a pint or two of water, that’ll speed up the recovery.’

I made like a good patient and stuffed my face, drinking plenty of water. The arm felt numb for many hours, but eventually started to recover, like a gum after the dentist. The Thai ladies helped, and I made sure that they pounded on that arm and shoulder, completely recovered by 10pm.

Bill Chambers then called me. ‘Paul, you OK?’ He did not seem to know about the blood.

‘I am now, was just a bit numb where he jabbed me.’

‘It was snake venom in the syringe...’

‘You know that wonder drug we developed ... well I inject myself regular. Had one this morning.’

‘Fucking hell. I’m going to carry some around with me.’

‘What did he say?’ I probed.

‘He wanted revenge for his brother – he knew that he had died coming for you, and when *your* frigging wonder drug cured him he was mobile again. He’s being working at that factory for months, false passport.’

‘And you all missed him...?’

‘The authorities were looking for him everywhere apart from on the payroll,’ Chambers explained.

‘Lesson to be learnt there,’ I nudged.

‘A bit beyond my authority, but I’ll mention it to the right people. What happens to Hest now?’

‘I think the Congo Rifles should see if they can get anymore out of him.’

‘Oh. Well, gets him out of my hair, closes the case.’ Bill did not sound happy at handing the man to the Rifles.

‘We’re in a war, Bill. Don’t dwell on foot soldiers, or individuals.’ I hung up.

Putting down the phone, I stood at the window of my room, my hands in my pockets, staring down at the yellow taxis. I had just sent Hest to his death, and a very unpleasant death it would be, surprising myself. Just when did I stop worrying about the value of a life? Or maybe it was that I cared more about saving lives, no time to dwell on individuals. We had saved millions, we’d save more, and this was too important to worry about an arsehole like that. No, it wasn’t that I had lost sight of the value of a life, I had a greater appreciation of the numbers game. A million was more than one: I could save a

million, so I'll lose the one along the way. Or many 'ones'. Jesus, I was starting to think like Jimmy.

I found myself wondering about 2025, the African Armies and the battle ahead. Now, for the first time, I thought I could send armies into battle, knowing the costs. I went and found Jimmy, and relayed what had happened, and my feelings, over a cold beer in a quiet corner of the bar.

Jimmy had listened patiently, and now took a sip. 'In Canada, when I first started to come across injured, dead and dying, it was hard. Then I got used to it, and stopped caring for a while, quite I while if I'm truthful. But then my attitude changed. I would give people first aid then see them walking around weeks later, all smiles. That act of saving was like an act of creation: here's something I made. After that, I fought to try and save as many as I could, without worrying about the losses, but I was delighted when I could fix a broken body and see them recover, get up and walk around. I've always liked making things, fixing things, and first aid and medicine was like that; making things and fixing things.

'Releasing the drug early was an act of hope; I was rebelling against my own sense of order and timing. I just wanted to shout it off the rooftop, frustrated with all the sneaking around, doing deals and persuading people. I think part of me just wanted it over. Part of me wants to be exposed.'

'I know how you feel,' I admitted. 'It's a constant stress. I was stunned when you made the announcement, but relieved as hell afterwards. Of all the things we've done, the drug has been the most dramatic: you can actually see the results. And no matter what happens to us its out there, they can't take it away from us.'

'Very true,' Jimmy approved. 'It's odd really, but right now we should be in a small war with the CIA and Hardon Chase, and the Americans should be in Afghanistan. My gamble with Chase has paid off better than I could have ever hoped for, and now the drug is out there, so a great many ticks in boxes. Problem is, now I can't see the future so well because I've altered the time line so much.'

'That's a good thing, isn't it?'

'Good in that things are going well, bad in that I can't see next months assassins.'

'Yeah, well there is that,' I said with a sigh.

'It'll take a while to get back into synch, so I won't be trading the markets as much.'

‘Don’t need to,’ I pointed out. ‘CAR is making enough. I see Zambia has offered us the mining rights to just about whole country. Now Botswana wants a deal.’

‘I like Botswana, best run country in Africa,’ Jimmy mentioned. ‘Don’t need police or Rifles there, you can walk the streets.’

We were soon interrupted by delegates, and spent the night playing politician, never quite saying to people what we really meant.

At the end of the evening, with the mere mortals off to bed, we found ourselves again in the same corner, cold beers.

Jimmy began, ‘I was once captured by the Brotherhood.’

I sat up and took notice.

‘I was held in a camp with hundreds of other prisoners, and conditions were pretty harsh – even with my blood full of stems. They didn’t know who I was, they didn’t recognise me, and when I told them I was a medic I got better treatment.

‘Conditions were harsh, in that they made the prisoners play Russian roulette every day, or they’d hack off a limb for fun. One day a guard took a disliking to me because I was big, so he beat me. When I healed quickly he was annoyed, and nearly beat me to death. In the camp’s hospital I recovered quickly, and he was re-assigned somewhere. But I had taken the decision to do something. I stole the food off the terminal patients and eased their suffering, building up my strength. I ran on the spot, did exercises, practised martial arts moves, biding my time till I was ready. On the final evening I killed four patients with no hope, ate their food ration and made my move.

‘I killed the guard in the hospital hut easily, took his weapon and webbing, spare ammo. I killed the second and third guards quietly, but then got spotted, the alarm raised. I shot dead more than ten, and by this time other prisoners were grabbing the weapons of dead guards and firing back. That gave me an edge, because it caused a distraction as I circled around the guard barracks. I killed the camp commander and his cronies, then picked off the rest one by one. It was dawn by time the shooting finished, probably fifty dead on their side.

‘I grabbed what food I could find, water bottles, and walked out the gate and into the woods. I walked day and night for three days, being careful, and reached a river. I found a small boat, and slipped into the water at sun down, drifting quietly along. It then rained like hell all night, keeping people in doors, and I wasn’t spotted. That river, it took me almost thirty miles overnight. In the morning I grabbed branches and waded to the bank, walking for a day before I

spotted a NATO patrol. They knew who I was and whisked me out of there.

‘So you see, when you consider Hest, and the value of his life, I don’t stop to do the sums. I believe in my own cause, and it’s not a cause to line my own pocket, it’s a cause to save this planet. So if I need to kill patients and take their food for me to keep going ... I will, and I won’t worry about it.’

‘I hate to say it, but I’m edging that way.’

‘Nothing wrong with that, Paul. Nothing at all.’

Back in the UK, the choice of where to spend New Year came up, something of a debate for a week or so. Jimmy surprised everyone by suggesting the Spanish Isle of Tenerife, off the coast of Morocco. No one had any particular objections, and we booked rooms at a five star hotel between Los Christianos and Las Americas - the famous haunt of drunken young Brits. Our IT guy, Gareth, had bought one of the apartments we had built in Los Christianos, and he was down on the Isle with his family.

On the second day, Jimmy drove me to a marina close to the airport whilst the girls enjoyed the beach, the Spanish Police kindly providing us an escort. At the marina we strolled along the concrete sea wall, glancing at boats, Big Paul and Karl hanging back.

‘This is where it started,’ Jimmy reflected. ‘Right here.’ He pointed at the water. ‘I was here when World War Three kicked off, and where it ended a few days later. From here I set sail on the long voyage, and I’m still on that voyage.’ He noticed a boat, and recognised the name. ‘Mind if we come aboard?’

A grey haired man raised a hand to his eyes. ‘Jimmy Silo?’ he gestured us on board. ‘You ... er ... you have a boat down here.’

‘I did, some time ago,’ Jimmy said. ‘You cross over to Gomera much?’

‘Now and then, nice run. But if the winds are wrong you can’t get back in here.’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy reflected. ‘Better to have the wind with you, than against you.’

‘Get the kettle on, mate,’ I urged the boat’s owner.

Magestic

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Part 9

2008

The New Year started with PACT getting involved with the Anjouan Islands, off the coast of Africa, where a coup of sorts was on the cards. The Rifles landed, and the coup was off the cards. Still, PACT and the Rifles rounded up the rebel leaders and seized weapons, a thorough search made of the islands, and the rebel's expensive weapons would be costly to replace. Jimmy ticked a box.

After the death of his father, Jimmy had spent more time with his elderly mother, and she could be seen visiting the house more often, Han always taking the time to talk with her. She had no grandchildren, neither Jimmy nor his brother having families, and loved Shelly and Lucy to bits. Now that she was alone I encouraged Shelly to visit more often. But to say that she was alone was not strictly correct. Jimmy's aunt had become a widow two years earlier and moved into the old house after Jimmy's father had died, along with two cats. The old house also offered a live-in housemaid and cook and five of our security staff, none of whom seemed to mind sharing with two old widows. The lads had their lounge, Jimmy's mum and her sister had their own.

Jimmy's brother had always been a bit of a mystery, and I could count on one hand the number of conversations I had with the guy. He was a year older than Jimmy, lived in Newbury with his long-term girlfriend, and shunned any publicity. He did, however, accept a million pounds off Jimmy towards additional security, and compensation for the intrusive and annoying press attention. He worked in a toyshop that specialised in complex model trains and read a lot. And that was just about all I knew of him.

Sykes kept an eye on Steffan Silovitch, who always used his full name to try and lose the connection with his famous brother. A security camera had been set-up in the shop, another across the road, and the local police knew to keep an eye on the place. He visited their mother every two or three months, and remembered family birthdays better than Jimmy. So far, he had not visited Africa, nor our clubs. No one knew the history between the brothers, and no one dared ask.

January saw the Prime Minister ask for the nutters and tourists at our gate to stay away, and the police erected signs: no waiting. The terrible January weather was keeping most of them away, and the

die-hard kooks were being picked up and moved on by cold and miserable police officers. Cars that stopped were issued a sixty pounds fine, and if they returned, even to slow down, additional fines.

With snow on the ground, and school closed for a few days, we were all inside and staying warm, the kids playing in the main house. Sharon had brought her daughter to the house get some work experience, and I had to stop and wonder how the girl had grown two feet since the last time I saw her. She was now eighteen. When did that happen?

Three days after the daughter had started to attend the office, Sharon approached me before it was time for her to leave, and asked if I thought there was any work for her daughter – proper work. I said I'd discuss it with Jimmy, and found him later in the diner with Michelle, who now qualified as Jimmy's longest running girlfriend, of sorts. It was "of sorts", because Jimmy delighted in annoying Michelle by sleeping with any beautiful actresses he fancied, then telling her about it – in detail. I was jealous, of sorts.

'Sharon's daughter is looking for work.'

Jimmy gave it some thought. 'In order to be of any use to us, she has to first go visit the empire for a few months, get some experience of the far corners of the empire, then return. Discuss that with Sharon, and devise a schedule where she would work a few weeks at each place, and in each country. Then we'll see.'

'You must already know?' I pushed.

'No, since she was supposed to have died in a car crash a few months back.'

'Ah. You ... altered it.'

He nodded. 'So it's a bit of an *unknown*. Mystery, eh?'

'Adds a spice to life,' I said as I stood. I gave Trish, Helen's assistant, the task of planning a schedule and arranging tickets, and called Sharon at home. She was a little reticent about sending her daughter around the world, but finally agreed. Young Jane would now go on her travels, and I decided that the first stop should be the Cardiff club. She could start with bar work, and work her way up.

The plan had left me wondering about Shelly and Lucy, and what they would do when they grew up. University? Definitely. But then what? Jimmy had said that Shelly would be a marine biologist, and so far it could be said that she had a leaning towards things aquatic. I guessed that they'd have their own ideas by then, and would ignore anything I said. By then I'd be "the old man".

The next morning, Keely presented me a large file, the detailed plans for a new rail link across the DRC, through the other country that was called “The Congo”, joining existing track in Nigeria, and heading towards Liberia and Sierra Leone. I sat with a coffee in the diner and scanned the very thorough document, the plans seeming to indicate a few bridges - quite a few bridges, and four short tunnels. A trunk of the line would even touch Kinshasa.

I had the file sent by secure courier to the Foreign Office, to the people we still housed there. They studied it, and reported that it was feasible, sending the file down to the corporation on the next flight. The corporation studied it for a week and agreed; it was feasible; bloody expensive, but feasible. I presented the figures to Jimmy, who glanced at them, then asked me to make a start, using forty percent corporation money, forty percent US aid money, and twenty percent CAR money; and to release the news it to the press. Since the western press would not be interested in a train line in the DRC, I got my wife on the case, and she sent the details to the African Times. Only afterwards did I think that I should have told Kimballa first, and the Nigerians and others. I just hoped they’d see it as a ‘planned’ new rail line.

I had not put the file down for even ten minutes when Jimmy’s brother stepped in. ‘Steffan? You looking for Jimmy or your mum?’

‘I was looking for you,’ the tall fella explained.

‘You were?’ I puzzled.

‘The shop that I worked at closed and ... Jimmy said you had track building projects that I might be interested in.’

I resisted a smile and composed myself. ‘The tracks we’re building, they’re ... bigger than Horny gauge for model trains.’

‘I have a degree in surveying, with a Phd in train and cargo logistics,’ he flatly stated, stood stooped, his chin on his chest.

‘Ah. Well, in that case you’d be ideally suited,’ I acknowledged, feeling a bit silly. ‘What did you want to do ... exactly? It’s in Africa.’

‘I’ve discussed it with my girlfriend, and we’re happy to move down there.’

‘Oh. Er ... in that case we could make you project co-ordinator, a house in Goma, near the airport. Nice area, safe, lots of amenities.’

‘OK.’ He waited.

‘Right. Well, when did you want to go?’

‘Next Monday. House is up for rent.’

‘That soon. Well, if you deal with Sharon, she’ll arrange the tickets ... and everything else, and I’ll let them know that you’re

coming. But don't forget to arrange shots if you're going to live down there.'

'We need that super drug stuff?' he asked.

'That would do it. One size fits all.'

'I'll arrange it when we get down there.' He turned and sloped off in his size thirteen shoes, and I went and found Jimmy. 'Bit of a turn up, your brother and trains.'

Jimmy nodded reflectively. 'He'll do a good job. And they'll all mistake him for me and salute. Variables in play.'

'Huh?'

'Nothing. Listen, Chinese not happy about us stuffing America full of cheap medical kit - that's their area. So we'll buy some of their kit and sell it at cost price around the States.'

'Won't that fuck off the distributors for this stuff?' I asked.

'Yes,' he said with a sigh. 'But we need to get healthcare bills down. And that complex making the medical kit, I want it doubled by the end of the year, which will please the Chinese ... no end.'

'I was thinking about that hospital in Goma, and the health tourists. What if ... we fill it full of Cuban surgeons and offer reasonably priced operations? Make it ... a centre of excellence in Central Africa?'

'Great idea. Go do it, young man.'

Pleased with myself, I went off and called the corporation, and gave the co-ahead to both move more Cubans to the hospital, and to advertise for paying patients. It then dawned on me that the Cuban Government might not like the fiscal elements to my plan, so I rang the Cuban Embassy in London. They would get back to me.

The next day I got a fax from the nice gentlemen in Havana, happy with the proposed use of their medics, but asking for a small percentage to come back to them. They asked for twenty-five percent, I agreed to thirty. I even sweetened the deal with a twice-monthly direct flight to Havana from Goma hub, on one of our 747s.

This new use of the Cubans had hardly been agreed when they faxed again. How about we roll out the same idea around Africa? Without consulting with Jimmy, I agreed to trial it. I could locate hospitals in Kinshasa, Nairobi, Mogadishu for definite, Zambia, Sierra Leone - where there were still Cubans at the main hospital, and Liberia. And Zimbabwe for sure, Malawi, Burundi would be up for it, and Rwanda. Oh, and Tanzania wouldn't object.

I studied at the piece of paper in front of me and said, 'Oh ... my ... god.' Sharon and Helen turned towards me as I stood and headed

off to find the oracle. He was sat reading a newspaper. ‘When you agreed the Cuban hospital thing, you had more in mind, yeah?’

He lowered his newspaper. ‘Yes.’

‘A rollout to all African capitals, nice clean hospitals with subsidised Cuban medics, our cheap medical supplies, and advertised through the Africa Times.’

Without detracting from his study of the papers, he said, ‘And don’t forget rotations of RF staff, to keep them sharp.’

I faxed back the Cubans and asked if they had enough medics, and how many medics did they wish to commit? They had upwards of twelve hundred doctors they could commit to it, so I informed them that I would roll out the programme in as many capitals as I could. Giving some thought to the commercial considerations, I ordered a new company created, and would allocate thirty shares to the Cuban Government, the rest owned by CAR, the Cubans paid as contractors. Two minutes later I altered my plans and made it fifty-fifty.

I went and found Jimmy, who was still sat reading. ‘Listen, if this model works, and it *will* because we have cheap everything, then how about we stick a few hospitals in South America, where the Cubans already have that programme running.’

‘Yes.’

I stood. ‘It’s been good talking with you.’

I grabbed Helen and Trish, found a quiet corner and we thrashed out a few ideas. The name Central African Medical Services had already been sent to the corporation, but Helen said that was fine; when operating in South America we’d transpose A-African to A-American. Simple. Helen knocked up a job advert and sent it down to the African Times straight away.

A week later we had a list of people applying for administrators positions, most of them British or European, some travelling up from Africa for an interview, a few already working in Europe. The European candidates I liked, because they wanted to “go and make a difference”. The African candidates were looking for work, rather than a calling, and this project was one step removed from good old-fashioned missionary work. At the end of the interviews, held at the club in London, I hired three people straight away. The director for all operations would be British, the Director for Africa would be French, and the Director for South America was of mixed parentage, British and Spanish.

Their first assignment would be to work out of the existing hospital in Goma hub for a month and get a feel for things, and to

create a master plan. They'd then need to locate suitable buildings in each capital, or even have them built. I suggested that they try just Nairobi and Kinshasa to start with, to get the basic model right, and sent them packing with a good budget – not that they needed it.

Getting back to the house I was upbeat, never happier than when I was solving problems or creating new ventures. In my lounge I found Helen with a sour face, Jimmy sat on the sofa, Lucy sat playing with a Gameboy and Shelly sat with a bruised eye. I knelt in front of my daughter. 'What happened, baby?'

'A boy hit me,' she informed me, her bottom lip quivering.

I turned to Helen, who faced Jimmy.

Helen said, 'Jimmy had a word with the boy's parents.'

'Damn right,' I said as I stood. 'And?'

'And the local police have been around,' Helen reported, not looking happy. 'The father has taken his family into hiding.'

'Ah. Well why did the little sod hit Shelly anyway?'

'She threw his ball over the school wall, or some nonsense,' Helen explained, her arms folded. 'Gwen's been on; they're not too happy - they know the family!'

Jimmy stood. 'Shelly's bruise will be gone in the morning, I've told the police I didn't threaten the family - merely hinted how unhappy I was, and I've assured the police that the family is in no danger. Rest is down to you.' He knelt in front of Shelly and kissed her on the forehead. 'All better in the morning, don't be sad, OK.'

With Jimmy gone, I led Helen to the kitchen. 'I would have done something to the little bastard. Boys don't hit girls!'

'They're kids, seven years old for god's sakes!'

'Yeah, well it may have saved my arse by Jimmy ringing the guy. I would have lost it with him.'

She grabbed a dishcloth. 'I want you to ask Jimmy not to get involved in this sort of thing, they're our kids.'

I forced a breath and leant on the kitchen top, locking my elbows. 'They're our kids, and Shelly's part of his great master plan. We can't disentangle ourselves, the world wouldn't let us.'

'It should have been our choice, not his!'

'True, and if I'd been here I'd probably have been charged with making threats.'

'Talk to him, or I will!'

I lifted the phone and asked Karl to come over and watch the kids, leading Helen to the house. In the hallway, I turned towards the pool, and led a perplexed Helen to the basement. Tapping in a code,

I opened a heavy door and knocked the lights on. From under a cloth I revealed the gravestone, and stood back.

‘What the hell is that?’ Helen gasped, pointed at our daughter’s premature headstone.

‘We found it at the funeral of Jimmy’s father; we were meant to find it. It’s a message for Jimmy ... from Shelly.’

‘From ... Shelly?’

‘VAT14 is the message, JDI is your doing.’

‘My doing?’

‘Just ... do ... it: JDI you always tell the girls.’

She closed in on it. ‘VAT14 – JDI. What does it mean?’

‘He knows, but he won’t say.’ I tapped the headstone. ‘Our daughter sent that back through time. And yes, she’s our kid, not his. But if that message makes a difference, maybe even to 2025, then she’s not just our kid – she’s a part of it, an important part of it. Perhaps even the key part of it all.’

I led Helen out of the basement. ‘We have her till she’s too old and too independent to be told what to do, then she belongs ... elsewhere.’ In the house we thanked Karl, and I followed Helen into the kitchen. ‘Just what do you think would happen if we fell out with Jimmy?’ She didn’t answer, and attended the dishes. ‘What would happen if we took the kids, said *to hell* with all this and moved out, bought a little house somewhere and pretended to be normal?’

‘First, our new neighbours would move out, not wishing to be next door to us. Then who’d run the girls to school? You? Running the gauntlet of the press, let alone the world’s terrorists. And in case you had forgotten, this house is his, the clothes on our backs were paid for my him, the money I have in the bank is his.’

‘So we’re prisoners.’

‘I’m not. I like what I do, and I like being a part of it, and I’m in this to the finish. However it got started, we’re in it, and you’re far from bloody innocent; you came here to spy on him. And if you weren’t doing that, what else would you do doing now? Some shit job spying on someone else, and risking your life? Most likely you’d be in prison by now, or dead. Instead you have all this.’

I forced a breath and took a moment. ‘I seriously doubt Jimmy would do anything to you if you wanted to leave, but he’s not the problem. What would the CIA do if you were out there and vulnerable? And if the kids didn’t have armed police guards – then what? Are you willing to put them at risk?’

She sighed. ‘Some days I just want to run away.’

I straightened. 'If you did ... you'd go without me.' She glanced at me. 'I'm staying, right to the end,' I told her, and I meant it. 'I don't always like the idea that I got caught up in this, but I'd rather be in here than on the outside. This train we're on is heading for a brick wall. We can be in the cab, trying to change course, or we can be in the back, completely unaware of when it'll crash; blissfully ignorant.' I took a moment. 'You wanted me to go talk with him. Fine, I will. And you ... you give some thought as to what else you'd be doing if this had not got started.'

In the office, I found Jimmy alone, and sat at my desk. 'Helen's not happy, she wants you to stay out of the kid's lives, at least the kind of crap that happened today.'

'Inform your dear lady wife, my PA, that I have been suitably chastised. And, in the years ahead, when people try and kidnap and kill your kids I'll deal with them harshly, but I'll get written permission from her ladyship first.' He held his gaze on me and waited.

I took a moment, and sighed. 'Do we stay together, me and Helen?'

He turned back to his screen. 'I'm not going to discuss that with you.'

'That's what I figured. And if she wanted out?'

'She may say that, but she won't. Ever.' He looked up. 'It's one thing to look at the fence and long to be over it, but when you get over there you're all alone in the wilderness. And it wouldn't be a very pleasant wilderness for you two; press would never leave you alone.'

'Just for the record, I have no desire to jump the fence,' I told him, fiddling with a stapler.

'I know. And I created this environment to be as pleasant as possible for you and the family. This place, and its facilities, is more about you than it is about me.'

I stood. 'I appreciate it. Just hope that I can make her see that.'

'Paul,' he called. 'I ... got you into this, and sometimes I regret that. You could be a tired stockbroker in London on the tube, but ... but at least you'd have less pressure.'

'I wouldn't swap, you know that,' I quickly came back with.

'I know.'

Back in the house, we got the girls ready for bed, the atmosphere a little frosty. When they were tucked up, and Helen had downed her second large glass of red wine, things were finally back to normal.

Almost. We sat at watched the news, the sound turned down to a quiet background hum.

‘If I wanted to go, you wouldn’t come with me?’ she softly asked, focused on the TV.

‘No,’ I replied straight away, also focused on the TV.

‘And if I took the kids?’

‘I’d still be here. I’d arrange security and money for you, but I’d still be here.’ I took a breath. ‘Back in 1985, Jimmy told me about the future, and the war in 2025, and the rise of the Brotherhood. At first I figured ... it’s not my war, it would be a long way off. Then Jimmy said an odd thing. He said: you can fight them over there, or wait till they walk up the Richmond High Street. Well, my mum lives around the corner from the High Street. So if I go ... out there somewhere and fight, the bad guys don’t land up here. And now that I know where the fight is, I’d rather the fight be over there than here, our kids in the firing line. Well, everyone’s kids in the firing line. So if you go, I’ll be on the front line for our girl’s sake.’

She put her feet on my lap, a peace offering, and I started to rub them. ‘Was a time when I hated the whole idea of kids, and men for that matter. After the car bomb, and being exposed, I was suddenly very lonely and afraid. You know, I actually thought Jimmy might kill me.’

‘If someone pulled a gun on you ... he’d step in the way.’

‘I crawled into *your* bed because I thought that would protect me.’

‘And I knew we’d be married years before we met,’ I confessed. ‘I knew before we went to Africa together. That’s why I put up with you.’

‘Hah! I’m a catch.’

‘Well, you weren’t at the beginning, but Jimmy said you would change after getting pregnant, and you mellowed from hard spy-bitch to a nice woman.’

‘Maybe I’ve gone too far,’ she considered. ‘Lost the edge I once had. I should have rung that guy. Hell, in the old days I would have knocked him down and stuck a stiletto heel in his groin.’

Shelly came downstairs in her Harry Potter pyjamas and fluffy slippers, her eyes moist. ‘I had a bad dream.’

I lifted her onto me.

‘I want Jimmy,’ she whimpered.

After exchanging a look with Helen, I called Jimmy, and he came straight over. He sat in a comfortable chair and Shelly snuggled up,

a blanket over her, soon asleep. We left the TV on, the sound down low, and withdrew upstairs, turning on the TV in the bedroom.

At 6am he was still there, and I woke Shelly. 'Come on, sleepy head, school.'

'It's Saturday,' Jimmy reminded me.

'Is it? Bummer.'

'You're a silly head, daddy.'

Jimmy eased up and let Shelly down. 'Get dressed quick, and we'll have breakfast in the diner, yes?' She ran upstairs. He faced me. 'All well in the marital bedroom?'

I nodded. 'We had a good talk, she'll be fine.'

Jimmy took a moment. 'You'll never know just how jealous of you I am.'

There was little in the way of words to answer that.

The tabloids ran the story about Jimmy threatening the boy's father, but stayed just inside the line where we could start legal action. I called Gwen, she found me the number of the father, and I did the dutiful and apologetic bit – at length. I expressed my concern about his lad hitting Shelly and he was very apologetic in turn. I assured him that he was in no danger and being silly; Jimmy would never have hurt him, it was a great big misunderstanding. The family moved back into their house, having stayed at a relative's house, and things would return to normal. Hopefully.

On the Monday morning I drove Shelly to school, the snow now cleared. She said goodbye for a change, jumped down at the school gates and walked in. But as I observed, she stopped dead, turned to a boy poking his tongue out at her, and slugged him with a right hook, knocking him down. I was out of the car in an instant, running in, teachers closing in to attend the boy, whose nose was now bleeding. 'Shelly!'

She became tearful. 'He hit me!' she said, stamping a foot.

'That was the boy?' I asked, Shelly nodding. I led her inside, and to the headmaster's office.

'Ah, Mister Holton...' the headmaster stumbled with.

I sighed, frustrated. 'My darling daughter just punched the boy who hit her. Nose bleed.'

'Oh my.'

'Listen, I've sorted it with the parents, at least I had done, and now this. I would appreciate it if you'd do the job you're paid for, and sort this all out. They're just kids! I know the people who own this school, and if you can't get this under control I'll buy the school

off them and make a few changes. We on the same page, Mister Headmaster?’

‘I believe we are,’ he reluctantly stated, stiffening and adjusting his black robe.

‘I’ll leave Shelly in your care.’ I knelt and faced Shelly. ‘The boy hit you, and you hit him, so you’re even. If I hear of you hitting anyone else we’ll take you out of school and you’ll study at home.’ I wagged a warning finger at my tearful daughter, and left, more frustrated than angered.

In the office I stopped, and let out a loud, exasperated sigh. ‘Shelly just hit that boy with a mean right hook.’

Helen was horrified, Jimmy not commenting. ‘They’ll expel her?’ Helen asked.

‘I doubt it, but we’ll have to wait and see.’ I sat at my desk. ‘But why don’t you price up some private tutors lunchtime.’

Nothing was said for ten minutes, our office atmosphere like an “M” Group meeting on a bad day.

Independent thought

I scanned a report from Zimbabwe, and their use of US dollars to stabilize their economy. It gave me an idea. I called an expert, without Jimmy knowing, and asked a few questions. That was followed by a discreet email, in fact a dozen discreet emails, to various Africa finance ministers: what did you think of a common economic zone with US dollars as the reserve currency? The result was fifty-fifty, with half in favour, two wanting to sign-up there and then. And why wouldn’t they, their own currencies were used as toilet paper.

I called Kimballa directly and asked him what he thought, hinting that it would have significant fiscal benefits. He was keen, and also had no problem with a parallel currency running. We discussed the new bank, and if it would work in dollars. After the chat, I cheekily called the Bank of England, and got through to the busy Governor, taking his advice at length. A common reserve currency, or a parallel, in the new economic zone would make all transactions easier, and it would control the typically Africa hyperinflation, but would also make the nice man in the White House happy. After all,

the US Treasury could print dollars at no cost, and use them to buy African oil and ore. It would be OPEC all over again.

Concerned that Jimmy wanted to move away from OPEC working in dollars, I went and found him and confessed to my research.

‘The problem with OPEC ... is not that they deal in dollars, it’s that they hold a lot of them, and may drop them. The Africans are far less likely to drop their dollars in the decades ahead. Unfortunately, if they all switched now, then the US economy would get a boost now, instead of in 2017 - when they need it. With the medical benefits we’ve given them, and the wars that they’re not involved with, their economy would rocket, then crash even worse in 2017 – if and when OPEC drops the dollar.’

‘Then when would be the best time to do it?’ I asked.

‘From 2010 to 2015, and in slow incremental steps. Start with our region, and start paying people in dollars. Give them three months warning then pay all our staff in dollars. Some are already paid that way, some in Euros.’

‘It was a good idea, then?’

‘Yes, a very good idea, just a little premature,’ Jimmy commended. ‘Now, you remember what happened with the drug?’ He smiled. ‘Wait for the phone to start ringing. And don’t forget, it was your idea.’

I stood, and walked frowning down the hall, wondering why the phone might start ringing.

The next day Han cornered me, wanting an explanation of this major shift in fiscal policy.

‘It was just an idea to stabilize the currencies of the countries we’re involved with. Did you have a particular concern?’

‘Did the Americans ask for this?’ Han probed.

‘No, it was my idea. We’ve started the bank, and that will have branches all over the region. Besides, it’ll be easier for you.’ I then made an off-the-cuff remark that would have ramifications. ‘You have a lot of dollars; you could buy Africa ore with them, pay wages with them.’

Han seemed to have been hit by sudden realisation, and thanked me, walking off.

‘You’re welcome,’ I said, puzzling his reaction.

I sat with Helen in our house, eating lunch and discussing our daughter. When my phone went it was Hardon Chase.

‘Paul, you at the house tomorrow?’

‘You can’t come around, we don’t have enough milk in.’

Chase laughed. 'Are you there?'

'Yes, no trips planned, we're busy trying to figure ways of disowning our kids.'

'I'll be there for 9am,' Chase informed me.

'Does that mean you're bringing a hundred Secret Service chaps?'

'It does, unfortunately.'

'Will your visit to us, and here ... piss of the Prime Minister?' I nudged.

'That's my next call, he'll meet us there.'

'Where you landing?'

'RAF Fairford – if I pronounce it correctly.'

'I'll get the kettle on. And more milk.' The lined clicked dead. 'Whoops.'

'He's coming here?' Helen puzzled.

'Wants a room with us.'

'What!'

I smiled. 'Just kidding, we'll stick him in the main house. That is what it was designed for.' I walked around to the main entrance, finding a dozen police cars coming up the drive. I was, however, reasonably sure that this was not about Shelly. But not completely sure. In the office I found Jimmy. 'Chase is coming here. Tomorrow.'

He turned his head away from his screen, and nodded. 'Do you know what you've done?' he calmly asked, returning to his screen.

'Not ... entirely. They want to discuss Africa using dollars?'

'And if African nations adopted dollars, and their economies grew as we expect?'

'They'd ... make a buck?'

'They'd ... make a few bucks, a few trillion bucks.'

'Ah. In which case ... we're popular, yes?'

'I told them it was all your doing, and your project. They're coming to talk to little old you.'

'Han was being a bit odd earlier, till I suggested they could pay wages in dollars.'

'It may be *wise* not to discuss that with Chase. Very ... wise.'

'Ah.' I went and found Han, and asked that he keep it quiet, surprised when he was most insistent that it be kept quiet as well. The corridors were full of intrigue, as well as police officers with sniffer dogs. I cornered the senior man. 'Hey, you!' I wagged a warning finger. 'One of our Alsatians is on heat, and I know what

you coppers are like. If she gets pregnant I'll arrange a DNA test, and send you the fucking bill!

'I'll keep an eye on the dogs,' the man said with a smile.

Meanwhile, the headmaster at the school had been doing a good job of making the peace. The nice man then decided to drive around with the parents of the lad, a surprise for us. They crawled along through two police roadblocks, through the gate – eventually – past a hundred armed officers and up to the house, imposing at your first visit at the best of times.

When the gate staff informed me of their arrival I let my head drop. 'Helen, we have visitors; the parents of the boy Shelly hit.'

'Oh Christ! And why now?'

We met their car outside, armed police and dog patrols rushing about.

I shook the father's hand, the man looking terrified. 'It's not normally like this, but the US President is popping in for coffee in the morning.' I gestured them inside, and to the diner, where Han and Ivan sat with Jack. We eased into a booth, teas ordered. 'So, how's school?' I asked the headmaster.

'Well, we think we've ironed out the problems, and the warring parties have shaken hands and said sorry.'

'You should come back tomorrow,' I suggested. 'See if you can't get the Americans, Russians and Chinese doing that.'

'They ... are all coming here?' the headmaster delicately enquired.

'Bit of a pow wow. Actually, we sit and eat and drink, and get nothing done, but it makes the voters think that they're earning their keep.'

The headmaster stared at Han.

'This is Han, from the Chinese Secret Service, Ivan from the KGB, and Jack does our rose garden.'

The labelled men bowed their heads in turn.

We all did the parental apologetic bit in turn, and offered to try and rein in the worst excesses of our kids. It was going well. Then a dog nipped Jimmy on the shins in the corridor, right outside the diner.

Jimmy lifted the heavy Alsatian by the scruff, eliciting a horrible noise from it. 'If your fucking dog bites me again I'll bite it back, then I'll fucking bite you!' he roared at the dog handler. We couldn't see what he did to the dog, but it sounded horrible. He stepped in and ordered a tea, sitting at the next booth, eyeing the parents of the lad. Calmly, he said, 'I'd like to take this opportunity to apologize

for any misunderstanding. As a sign of good faith, I'd like to offer you a First Class trip to Kenya, to one of our lodges.'

The father nodded, still looking terrified, as the senior police officer stepped in. 'I'd like to apologise for the dog, Mister Silo. You ... won't be suing us for millions and millions will you?'

'No, I won't. Relax.'

The officer stepped out as Sharon stepped in. 'British PM be here later, staying overnight.' Jimmy nodded.

'Should my government be here as well?' Han asked Jimmy.

'They are here – you're here. Besides, I would never allow major decisions to be taken without discussing it with them first. Relax, or I'll set the dogs on you.'

We agreed to meet the other parents at Gwen's house in a few days, and escorted them out through the police. They drove off as Sykes arrived in a silver Mercedes, his driver opening the door for him.

'All this fuss for the President,' he grumbled. 'Got a room for me?'

'Ask Cookie or Sharon. I guess the police have grabbed a few, and we don't know how many Chase is bringing.'

'Jack has spare rooms, we'll stay there.'

It took Shelly longer than normal to get home, despite her police escorts, and she asked what was going on. She thought we were in trouble, again, and took some reassuring. All night long the police patrolled around the house, the advance party of Presidential Secret Service arriving around midnight and running their own checks.

At dawn I noticed two small marquees on the lawn, TV crews already in place and looking a bit haggard as our security boys issued them with tea and coffee. I stopped to say hello, a few of the lady presenters looking less than presentable without their make-up. When asked about the President's visit, I pretended that I didn't know.

When they asked if it was a snub to the Prime Minister, I countered with, 'It was the Prime Minister's idea to meet here, away from it all, and Air Force One can land at the US air base up the road.'

I figured the school headmaster would understand, and kept Shelly home; she had official business to attend to. In the diner I met Jimmy and French Michelle. Michelle was now an early riser, and I wondered if she had been injected – but didn't ask. It set me to thinking as I plonked down.

‘With the super-drug out there, what are we doing about Rescue Force staff?’

‘Some have already injected themselves,’ Jimmy reported.

‘Should we not roll out Doc Adam ... to them all?’

‘They’d notice the effects – they’re doctors, but I guess we could hide it behind the super-drug. Yes, tell Doc Adam to widen his programme, but on a voluntary basis.’

‘And today?’ I nudged.

‘Today is your show,’ he toyed.

‘Oh. Well, some guidance would be good. That way I won’t upset anyone.’

‘Treat the subject matter as more of a ... *what if* than a certainty, and take opinions. That’s all.’

‘You want me to chair the meeting?’ I queried.

‘Yes, you need to start practising, young man. I’d say *just be yourself* – but I won’t. Try and be polite for a change.’

Michelle laughed, getting a wagged finger from me as Sykes stepped in.

‘We all secure?’ I asked him.

‘Like bleeding Fort Knox,’ Sykes grumbled.

The PM stepped in with his aide.

‘Sleep well?’ I asked.

‘Great rooms,’ he commended, ordering a coffee before he joined us.

Jimmy faced the PM and said, ‘Chase won’t get all he wants today.’

The PM stared back for a moment, then nodded.

‘What does he want, exactly?’ I probed.

‘Let him ask,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘No point in having a meeting if you all have fixed opinions before hand; these are not Middle East peace talks.’

I headed back and got the girls up. Despite the stems, they still slept a lot, and behaved much like normal kids – apart from kicking world leaders in the shins. I had another shave, changed my shirt, and fussed over what suit to wear. Helen put on her pin-stripe outfit and looked gorgeous, and we checked each other over before leaving the house.

‘Do you know what you’ll say?’ she asked.

‘Not a clue.’ Which was true. We didn’t even know exactly what Chase was after yet. I put the TV on and watched his motorcade winding its way towards us, inconveniencing the locals. We’d be even less popular.

His motorcade pulled in at 8.30am, and it was a good job the house offered a lot of parking space. That free space had been cleared of other cars earlier, most now parked on the grass near the lake. Police helicopters buzzed overhead, and the TV presenters were ready, make-up slapped on, their hair done. I stepped out as Chase pulled up, the cameras now filming live, and got myself filmed shaking his hand as he stepped out of the car. He waved at the press before following me inside.

As we progressed, I quickly got out, ‘We can’t talk alone without a major incident, so the “M” Group representatives need to be in on it.’

‘I figured that.’

We entered the dining room, the others stood waiting, greetings exchanged. Good job it was a large room. It took ten minutes to settle everyone, drinks brought in. Notepads were taken out, the President’s aides making ready, all eight of them. And for this trip he had dragged along the head of the Federal Reserve and his Treasury Secretary. That nailed it; this was about the dollar being used in Africa.

I stood. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, electioneering politicians, hard working aides.’ They laughed.

‘Is it an election year?’ Chase asked, causing more laughter.

‘Yes. Now, I guess that we’re here to discuss African fiscal policy, especially in relation to the dollar, and the proposed future use of the dollar there. So, I’ll start at the beginning, since this is fluid, and moving quickly.

‘We’ve created a sub-Saharan economic co-operation group, and they meet in the Goma hub conference centre. It’s obvious that we wish that group to grow in stature, and for the existing African Union to be less influential. We’ve also created a bank in the region, the purpose being to offer venture capital at good rates to boost business and to help fledgling businesses. It will also help the movement of money around the DRC mining areas. To that end, we have decided to simplify things and pay our staff in US dollars in the region, since the local currencies are ... volatile, to say the least. May I ask, at this point, if other “M” Group nations plan on paying their workers in dollars?’

‘We do,’ Ivan stated.

‘If it is convenient and desirable,’ Han stated, making me puzzle that.

‘We have not discussed it,’ Michelle offered, the British PM saying that it made little difference, but might be easier. They were, however, all certain that it would add stability to wages.

‘OK, in addition to paying wages in dollars, we have – very recently – floated the idea of our region in the DRC adopting the dollar as its official currency. That would simplify things for everyone there, although many transactions are already dealt with in dollars or Euros and outside of the region, bank to bank.’

‘Is it certain?’ Chase asked. ‘Your region will adopt the dollar?’

‘More or less,’ I replied. ‘We still have to finalise it with Kimballa. And, given that our region is – in fiscal terms – a heck of a lot bigger than the Kinshasa economy, they’d surely follow suit. So that would mean that the DRC adopts the dollar, as well as Zimbabwe already using them.’

‘And the other nations?’ Chase nudged.

‘Somali is already in favour, Kenya could probably be persuaded, and the small nations would sign-up straight away. Zambia and Tanzania are considering it.’

‘How keen ... is Tanzania?’ Chase probed.

‘Their own currency is starting to climb against its neighbours, which means that small businesses there are suffering at the hands of the oil dollar. I’m sure they would be interested. Sierra Leone and Liberia are keen, as is Rwanda.’

‘That covers most of Central Africa,’ Chase noted.

‘It’ll be discussed at the next meeting of the co-operation group, which is –’

‘Six weeks,’ Helen put in.

‘Six weeks,’ I repeated. ‘From our point of view, it makes life easier, and should make it easier to trade between nations. But, it will take many years to roll out, assuming that all of the various nations wish to join up.’

Chase said, ‘We’ll be happy to help your bank, to send you a few experts to help out and to build a relationship with the US banks.’

‘Can never have enough experts,’ I quipped. ‘By all means, send them.’

‘Do you have revised estimated GDP figures for the region?’ Chase asked.

Jimmy handed over a sheet. ‘They’re provisional. And I’ve factored in a five year roll-out.’

Chase showed his colleagues. ‘And if we desired to accelerate that process?’

‘We’d be concerned about a boom and bust cycle,’ I told Chase. ‘We expect that OPEC *may* drop the dollar around 2017. Any support you get from African dollars should peak at that time, should it not?’

‘Well, perhaps...’ Chase admitted.

Jimmy said, ‘So we would need to see some measures in place to avoid a boom and bust - to be encouraged to accelerate that process, always assuming that the Africans will co-operate.’

‘Measures?’ Chase queried.

‘I’m sure that the fine and good gentlemen that you brought with you could work out a strategy that means there’d be no dramatic economic benefit, but a smooth curve. Perhaps they could work on such measures today and tonight, and we’d discuss it again in the morning.’

Chase glanced at his people and nodded.

Michelle asked, ‘Will this boost the US economy?’

‘Since your economy is linked, do you worry about it?’ Jimmy asked her. ‘It will brush off on you, as my good habits brush off on you.’

Everyone at the table froze, Michelle staring back.

‘We’re not worried,’ the British PM stated, breaking the tension, people hiding smiles.

‘We’re in favour,’ Dave Gardener put in for Israel, making us laugh.

‘Russia has not decided yet,’ Ivan declared.

‘A stable currency in the region will benefit all,’ Jimmy told Ivan. ‘OK, let’s break for one hour, and I’ll meet with each of you in turn, so please consult with your governments.’ To the British PM he said, ‘You can consult with yourself.’

‘It’s the only way anyone listens!’ our PM retorted.

Fresh drinks were ordered as Jimmy and I led the US delegation to a lounge, security trailing behind. Everyone settled around a coffee table, drinks placed down, biscuit tins opened, ties loosened.

‘So, what do we need to do to get this moving?’ Chase asked.

‘All that’s in question ... is the speed, not the process,’ Jimmy insisted.

‘So what measures?’ the Secretary of the Treasury asked.

‘A control of house price rises, control of personal debt, and no wild spending plans.’

‘We’re Republicans,’ Chase noted with a grin. ‘We don’t believe in public spending.’

‘You’ve cut taxes?’ I asked.

‘Small cuts, yes. A ... health dividend,’ Chase suggested. ‘Insurance premiums are falling, direct pressure from me.’

‘Good,’ Jimmy commended. ‘The world’s health services will need an overhaul. There are, apparently, a few out-of-work doctors.’

‘That’s already causing problems. But, they can’t have it both ways,’ Chase stated. ‘So, if we work out a five year plan...’ He held his hands wide.

Jimmy said, ‘I’d also work out a five year plan, and then you’d print lots of dollars and get something for nothing from Africa.’

‘We want Tanzania,’ an aide put in.

‘No doubt,’ Jimmy quipped. ‘And we’ll do whatever we can to help, we just desire a smooth curve, not a boom and bust. And whilst we’re on that, housing prices are overheating, and your investment bank, Liebermans, is stretching itself. Its bubble will burst, and take down a few others when it does. If you don’t act I’ll cause a run on it.’

They made a note.

Jimmy added, ‘And you could nudge domestic interest rates up a bit, dampening the housing market, or build more low cost units.’

We met with Han ten minutes later.

‘You’ll be able to offload more dollars than they realise,’ Jimmy told Han. ‘And quietly. Besides, if the region grows, then the Africans will buy cheap goods, your goods, over expensive American goods. You can still sell in the Yuan if you wish.’

‘My government will take your advice on this, since they are still analysing it.’

‘Your country is not the problem; an unstable America is the problem, and this will help at a critical moment.’

Ivan had no problem, or opinion, either way, but Michelle conveyed European ‘concern’ over favouring the dollar. We grabbed the President and stepped out to the cameras for a little electioneering, several US news crews now joining their British colleagues.

Jimmy began, ‘President Chase is visiting today ... to once again try and urge me to buy American goods for Africa, and that’s what America needs: you need your salesmen out there selling your goods and fighting your corner. I am sure that, by the end of this session, even greater investments will be made in Africa, because I am fighting their corner. We are also looking at adopting the dollar for our region of the Congo.’

He made way for Chase, who gave a speech aimed at the folks back home, followed by the British Prime Minister sucking-up. The

next photo-op was scheduled for the morning, the press booted out to nearby hotels. That left us re-convening the “M” Group meeting and airing opinions, which led to lunch around the table, and talk of other matters.

Shelly came over, and sat asking the President innocuous questions, such as why did he have so many bodyguards, and so why did people not like him? Then she asked if, when he stopped working at the White House, they would put him in a mausoleum – being careful to pronounce it correctly.

‘Not my doing,’ I insisted as people laughed. ‘Must get it from school.’

Chase told Shelly, ‘They put dead Russian leaders in mausoleums. Former American Presidents make a living by visiting those countries that no one else would visit.’

The various Presidential aides met with the “M” Group representatives during the day, and we all sat down to a working meal in the evening, relaxing in the lounges afterwards as the aides continued to scurry about. At least they did not have far to go, Cookie keeping everyone happy with coffee and tasty bites.

The following day, at the morning session, the Chinese made a statement through Han, wishing to see projected figures and plans. Ivan echoed that, and we got into percentages, but more or less amicably. Chase and Jimmy made another electioneering speech, and announced a few new deals, plus the planned new train route. We bid Chase and our Prime Minister goodbye, the house slowly returning to normal. When all of our guests had finally departed, and the police had left us, our own staff performed a thorough search of everything, Big Paul organising things. He found a watch, a ring, a few coins, some notes, but no bugs. Calm reclaimed the house.

In the weeks that followed, Shelly came home each day happy enough, and we sighed with relief when a day without incident was marked off the calendar. She then brought home a boy from class. I found myself asking him questions: what he wanted to be when he grew up, how his studies were going, till Helen grabbed me and stopped me. I was in shock; my seven-year-old daughter had a male friend. I always figured I’d not let her have a boyfriend till she was perhaps thirty – or older. I spied on them through a crack in the door.

Floods and quakes

The dramatic effect that the super-drug was having on the world was not abating, and the news was still full of it. It had already resulted in job losses, that dark cloud counterbalanced by money saved in the health budgets. There was talk of tax cuts here, which made us, and the current government, popular. That just left the problem of a few out of work doctors. University places were cut back, and the first protests by medics had taken place. Jimmy then annoyed me by making an off-the cuff comment that made the front pages: 'Doctors in this country would prefer people to be sick, and dying in pain - it helps them justify their salaries.' It did not help the mood of the medics.

As the weather improved through the spring, the world underwent an adjustment, a large adjustment. And it was all our doing. The number of emotional TV reports about people coming back from the edge of death had eased; it was now common and of little interest to the TV viewing public. The Chinese were happy enough, making a killing from being the first to package and sell the drug, and we dispatched close to a million vials to Africa. It wasn't enough for Africa, nowhere near enough, and that was deliberate. We didn't aim to cure everyone, and even allowed the middle classes to buy a dozen vials each. We did, however, make sure that all medics and NGO staff working in Africa took priority.

That programme led us to the next meeting of the co-operation group in Goma, where we floated the idea of an economic federation, whilst not pushing the adoption of the US dollar too hard. The DRC, Zambia, Malawi, Burundi, Rwanda, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Liberia and Somali joined the economic group straight away, and we did not push the others. We did, however, explain that our banks would give preference to those countries as far as investment capital was concerned – quite an attractive incentive. Kenya and Tanzania resisted joining the economic group until they were sure that it did not mean that their hard earned wealth, what it was, would be shared with the poorer neighbouring countries. So much for African unity.

Kimballa signed off on our region adopting the US dollar, and the whole of the DRC adopted the dollar as a parallel currency until such time as all of the local notes had been collected in. Chase was happy. He printed a shit load of dollars and flew them over.

Not to be outdone by Chase, Senator Pedersen met us in Goma with his colleagues and inspected Gotham City at length, the tallest tower being his own. I showed him around our hospital, TV crews filming his party entering, which was odd considering that the place was mostly staffed by Cubans. Still, he wandered around the wards with me, meeting and greeting staff and patients. The hospital still issued super-drug vials, and surgical health tourism was growing rapidly. The westerners in the region all made use of the facilities, and mine managers often sent their workers here for the best care after accidents – which were plentiful. The hospital now offered a thousand beds and edged close to its capacity on a bad day. At the rear of the hospital sat three white RF Hueys, kept busy acting as ambulances for far off mines.

Our new hospital administrators had begun their observations here, the group's overall director remaining whilst the others set off on their travels. We found the overall director in an office next door to the African director's office, next door to the hospital director. He showed us a map on the wall, pointing out the coloured pins for hospitals now open in Nairobi and Kinshasa, the first South American centre opening in Rio de Janeiro. Others were being constructed from scratch.

Jimmy had handed me this project, and did not interfere. I now had this project to oversee, the nightclubs, Pineapple Music, the bank and the medical supply companies. I'd consult with Jimmy if I was unsure about a direction, but otherwise would make my own decisions. That freed up Jimmy to plot and scheme in world politics, and spend time staring at the grass or at the wall, which occupied a fair bit of his time.

Arriving back in the UK, I decided to be bold. It was either that, or to get snowed under with work. I found Jimmy in a lounge, watching the TV news. 'I was thinking of building another office, somewhere nearby, then I'd stuff all of my projects and staff in it.'

'Where?' he asked without taking his gaze off the TV news.

'Back of the house, down by the fence, other side of the red-roof houses. Office block, two storey, twenty offices.'

He shook his head. 'Up past the lake, over the road, is a farm up for sale. Grab it, and use that. Put a tunnel under the public road; it's raised anyway. Oh, and put some apartments up there for staff and visitors, the kind that don't need to come in here.'

With Helen helping, I got to work buying the land, and sat down with Rolf the architect. It had been a while since we'd worked on anything together, and he was still busy buying houses for us and

renovating them. I handed him a specification, and left him to come up with a few drawings. I asked for a large room with a large desk, so he had to adjust his drawings at the second meeting. Scanning his latest offerings, I then asked for the ground floor windows to made smaller, and positioned higher, and made the walls thicker; bomb proof. Behind the office block would sit a block of thirty apartments hidden behind tall trees. We duly received planning permission and got to work.

Four weeks prior to a storm hitting Myanmar, we invited representatives of their secretive junta over to London and met them at the club. They did not have an RF unit, and had never expressed an interest in one.

‘We would like you to consider allowing Rescue Force staff access to your country if you suffer floods in the future,’ Jimmy began, Han in on the meeting. ‘We have many countries to call upon, so you may be *selective* on which rescuers you allow in.’

‘We can deal with our own country ... and our own people,’ they politely stated, making me wonder why the hell they had flown over.

‘But if you allow in our rescuers, and our aid, then you will have to spend less money yourselves,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘And such a joint venture between us may lead to us putting pressure on those that organise sanctions against you, and criticise you.’

I smiled, and forced it away when they stared at me.

‘You have much influence,’ they noted.

‘We’d also like joint oil projects in your country,’ Jimmy told them. ‘So, coming back to Rescue Force. What we would like to do, is to ask you if rescuers from China, Indonesia, India, and other nations could help you in the event of a flood.’ He handed them a list of nations. ‘Please choose which nations would be acceptable to you. Then, if you have a flood, they could assist, and it would be a first step towards us working together in the future – and towards me busting some sanctions.’

‘We will consider your proposal –’

‘I’d like an answer by tomorrow,’ Jimmy cut in with. ‘Then, we can talk about oil, money, and sanctions. I’d like to meet here again, tomorrow at 3pm.’ We stood and shook their hands, getting back bewildered looks, not least by the short duration on the meeting.

That evening we met Po, over on a visit, and enjoyed a meal at the Chinese restaurant, Shelly now adept at the chopsticks, Lucy coming along. I still used a fork. Later, in the old apartment, when the girls had been put to bed in the spare room, Helen, Jimmy and myself in sat in the lounge with mugs of tea.

‘This is where it all began,’ I told Helen. ‘And you know the odd thing - I keep picturing you here, but you weren’t.’

‘That was Judy,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘Or maybe Katie Joe, or one of the others.’

I wagged a warning finger as he grinned.

‘It’s transposition,’ Helen insisted. ‘People and places. I sometimes picture Jimmy at my boarding school.’

‘In a skirt?’ I asked.

‘I *was* there, off an on,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘I visited perhaps ... ten times.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Had to time it right - when Helen’s uncle would attack her.’

‘And you topped the bugger,’ I remembered.

‘How does it turn out?’ Helen asked after a moment, staring into her tea.

‘Which bit?’ Jimmy asked.

‘The three of us,’ she said.

‘I won’t say - exactly, but you’ll be there ... at the end.’

‘Can you fix it?’ she asked, now lifting her gaze to him.

‘Don’t know ... is the simple answer. And I sometimes think that I’m determined to try and fix it for the wrong reason.’

‘Do explain,’ I nudged.

‘I sometimes think ... that it’s a challenge to me – to fix it – and not a desire to save human life.’

‘Right thing for the wrong reason,’ I quipped. ‘Just like Chase. So, does it matter?’

‘Not really, the end result speaks for itself,’ Jimmy said with a sigh.

‘And Shelly has a role to play?’ Helen asked.

‘Yes ... and no.’

‘Come again?’ I asked.

‘She has an important role, but I know what she does, and could do it without her – to a degree. That’s not to lessen her achievement, but it’s an achievement that I already know about.’

‘Then why re-invent something?’ Helen puzzled.

‘I may not be around when she grows up. So, she *should* re-invent it. Besides, I have a question to ask her when she’s older.’

‘Question?’ I puzzled. ‘How could she know the answer, in the future, if you don’t?’

‘Wait and see,’ he enigmatically stated.

‘What about the message?’ I nudged.

‘It may not have been your daughter who sent it. The message has a hidden meaning.’

I took a moment. ‘I was sat right here when you first told me who you were; scared the crap out of me. Then you played to my weaknesses.’

‘Money and girls,’ Helen put in with a sigh.

‘Yep. That and the fact that I’d be rich.’

‘Does your dear lady wife know just how much you’re worth?’ Jimmy toyed.

‘Hell no! She may want to divorce me.’

‘How much are you worth?’ Helen pressed. ‘How much are *we* worth?’

‘Over a billion pounds,’ I told her.

‘Might be worth divorcing you,’ she joked.

‘Your daughters would never forgive you,’ Jimmy quietly stated, stopping Helen dead. ‘And they may restrict access to the grandchildren.’

After a brief awkward silence, I said, ‘Stuck with me, love.’

The next afternoon, the delegation from Myanmar were a little more amenable. A deal was struck, allowing in Chinese, Indian and Indonesians rescuers. And, oddly enough, the French. On the way back, we dropped in to Mapley.

‘Awake, Bob?’ I asked as we entered.

‘Deployment on?’ he asked, looking up from a mountain of paperwork, now a wedding ring on his finger after a private ceremony on the Maldives.

Jimmy explained, ‘Crusty is predicting a major quake in China in May, mid May. It’ll be a major deployment, so warn everyone now.’

‘How many we sending?’ Bob asked.

‘Around sixty percent; hundred jeeps and two-dozen Hueys. Cubans will go, but no one else from the Americas. No black Africans; Chinese can be a bit prejudiced.’

‘Who’ll head it up?’ Bob enquired.

‘Hancock from Hong Kong, he speaks the language,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Right, next. There’s a UN mission in South Ossetia, northern Georgia. Get hold of Handy and Rabbit in Mawlini and get some mine clearance going. I also want a team of fifty sent over there to ... assist, and to provide cover for the mine clearers, plus hearts and minds to the locals. Send them in via Russia, and get RF Russia in there. I also want some money thrown at a few NGOs to help clean the place up a bit.’

Bob took notes. After a thirty-minute chat we met a few of the national representatives, and toured the busy base, ending up in the AMO building. They showed us the latest dummy, the Silo Stiffy, and I was aghast at how lifelike the damn thing was. As I leant in and studied it, the head turned and the eyes opened. 'Help!' it said, shocking me upright, the instructors bursting out laughing.

'Fuckers!' I whispered.

'It's all computer controlled from next door,' they explained. 'Voice box as well now; it describes where it hurts in several languages. You also get make-believe shit to stuff in the colon, bile, the works. One of these in every frigging hospital now.'

'Give the out-of-work medics something to do,' I quipped.

'Plenty of those about,' they informed me. 'Lots more applying to Rescue Force as well!'

'Kiss me, Paul,' the dummy asked in its mechanical voice, everyone bar me laughing.

'Fuck ... right ... off!'

'Touch me there,' it said as we left. 'Please, don't go!'

The Myanmar flood, created by a cyclone, caused a great deal of damage, but the authorities duly allowed in the nominated rescuers, and NGOs to help with the clean up – which would take a while. That left us to concentrate on the Chinese quake, for which we packed our bags and headed off to Beijing via Moscow.

Security at Beijing airport was tight, and we were whisked away in a coach, around to a hotel that Po's family had built with permission of the People's Republic, and now a favourite haunt of westerners. Po greeted us at the hotel, the manager and his staff lined up ready. That annoyed me a little, since I just wanted a shower and a bite to eat, not to be treated like royalty. After ten minutes of greetings we made our excuses and headed to our allotted room, two small beds laid on for the girls, Cat in an adjoining room. Not wanting to face the mêlée below, we ordered room service and unsociably ate in the room. When Jimmy called, I said we'd face the bustle in the morning, and he didn't request our presence.

In the morning, we all sat down to breakfast together and discussed the itinerary, the first task being to meet those Chinese officials that constituted their internal "M" Group, Po figuring it to be about business in Africa. Han turned up as we finished breakfast, Cat given charge of the girls till Han brought forwards a Chinese language teacher. The girls would now get some practical Chinese lessons, which pleased me.

Glancing at the smog on the horizon on this warm morning, I boarded the coach with Jimmy, Helen and Han, and we journey the short distance around to the grey and drab government buildings, through tight security and to the same building that we had attended before. I remembered the first time that I had arrived here; I was terrified, and wondered if we'd ever leave. Now, my head was full of scenarios, plans, ambitions, and problems to solve; but no fear. They led us along familiar corridors and down into the bowels of the building, a few familiar faces waiting, many new ones. Han introduced me to his assistant.

'My sister is not a goat,' the man quipped, dead pan features. 'Although she is starting to grow a beard.'

I laughed, impressed at how far the stiff Chinese had come in adopting trivial western humour, not sure if it was progress or not. Helen had been studying Chinese for quite some time, not wishing to be left out, and greeted the officials in reasonable phrases. And, unlike the White House, we had a plentiful supply of tea and coffee on hand, even biscuits. With cups in hand, we settled about the same huge table, white boards and maps sat ready.

'I'll start with a summary briefing, if that's OK with you,' Jimmy began. The Interior Minister gestured Jimmy towards a white board. 'Let us start with Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. The Taliban took heavy casualties from the Somalis, and have not fully recovered. We continue to supply the Northern Alliance, and the checks and balances are maintained. Al-Qa'eda continues to attack Northern Somalia, which is a good thing – we are capturing and killing their fighters – and they are not directing their interest towards the west. They are, unfortunately, directing some interest towards Zanzibar and the oilfields. The interest they're showing is perhaps forty percent more than I had anticipated, which may be due to the acceleration of the extraction from that oilfield. All alterations of the timeline have consequences.

'Now, with the use of PACT in Africa, we're on top of al-Qa'eda in the horn of Africa, and Zanzibar has settled down. Please note, that it is my intention to use PACT aggressively in sub-Saharan Africa to quell all terrorists groups and freedom fighters. You should also note that PACT will have a key role in the 2025 preparations. Coming back to Afghanistan, I am happy with where we are. It is not ideal, but it is neither moving forwards nor backwards. It is contained, and the Americans will not invade, not with Chase in office at least.

‘Pakistan is getting support from America and Britain, and making arrests of al-Qa’eda operatives as they move in and out of Afghanistan. We’ve had an officer placed inside their army for many years, and the man is now a general. We pay him, and he keeps the pressure up on al-Qa’eda. He also provides us with information.

‘OK, India. The commando unit now numbers just over six hundred men, paid and equipped by me, and they enjoy regular training exercises in Africa. So far they have successfully intercepted each terror attack by Pakistani Taliban fighters. We have also struck a deal with the Indians, as you know, to keep those attacks out of the press. As we speak, the Indians are aware of the men who will plot against Pakistan with a bomb aimed at Israel. I see no danger of that plot developing. Instead, the greatest danger is that the story leaks out. There will be further attacks in India next week, and the commandos are sat waiting.

‘Africa. The growth curve of the region is well above that which we anticipated, as is the oil output, and the growth of the Zanzibar field. I will admit to making some changes there to try and fix other problems, such as Iranian nuclear ambitions. We also have the situation where President Chase, someone who I expected to be at war with, is now on board one hundred percent. As a result of that, he has invested in the region, and the region continues to grow way above our previous estimates. All projects are ahead of schedule by at least one or two years, some five years.

‘Most recently, we accelerated the release of the super-drug, with the profound affect that it is having on the world, and on cutting health budgets around the world. Most significantly, it will cut western health budgets. You must factor in an increase in spending by the west on your goods.

‘In Africa, we have created the airline as planned, and that is stable. Despite subsidising the flights, its near one hundred percent usage is causing a profit. We have also created the bank, as planned, and that is growing steadily. All mines and oil operations will soon use that bank, and we can be sure of smooth money flows around the region, and payment transactions between buyers and sellers. As you are aware, our region has adopted the US dollar a full five years ahead of schedule, for reasons that I will outline later. President Chase is now very keen to see the economic region we have created grow, and use to dollars. The danger there ... is of an overheated western economy. But I’m afraid we started that process with the release of the drug. As such, I have asked the various governments to nudge up domestic interest rates. Whilst discussing President

Chase - he will win the next election easily, and will have my assistance doing so. OK, questions.'

The Interior Minister started simple. 'The biggest problem in the next five years?'

'I think that, with the factors in play – especially in America – that Cuba and Venezuela have been dealt with as potential flashpoints. That goes for a 2015 American attack on you. The US economy will be buoyant for the next five years at least, with the health benefit extending well beyond that. I believe that with Cuban oil, African oil and electric cars, the worst elements of the energy crisis will be dealt with as well. That leaves earthquakes in several modern cities causing severe economic problems, plus pandemics up to 2017, and eventually an OPEC crisis.'

'Will your plans in Africa be enough to counter-balance OPEC?'

'No, never. But it may soften the blow some,' Jimmy suggested. 'That, coupled with a strong US economy between now and then, and we're in a much better position. The danger is that Chase allows the economy to heat up, and that US banks take bigger risks because of the feel-good factor. There is also a danger that the next Democratic President may spend what money Chase has tucked away under the sofa.'

'No significant problems between now and 2015?' they asked.

'We've altered the time line, so we're in new and uncharted waters,' Jimmy cautioned. 'There is always the danger of the unpredictable. In 2010 there will be a major quake in Haiti, followed by another in Chile, and the economic costs will be high. We'll then suffer a quake in Europe that will cause severe economic hardship. The Ukraine may tear itself apart around 2011, but I'm hoping that the Russians get on top of that. If I was to make a guess, then I'd say that an overheated economy is the greatest danger, followed by exposure of myself and the "M" Group.'

'You expect exposure?'

'I expect the Europeans to accidentally disclose details and, combined with the super-drug, it will arouse suspicions. It was always my plan to deal with exposure around 2010. But, now that we have the co-operation of the Americans, that may be put back.'

We got into small detail for an hour before breaking for lunch, eating upstairs. And I still didn't have the hang of chopsticks. Han thoughtfully fetched me a fork as Helen and Jimmy made do with chopsticks. In the afternoon session we got into arguing growth curves for Africa, and the benefits that the US was receiving.

‘Listen,’ Jimmy began, sounding a little frustrated. ‘You ... are not the problem. Future American presidents are the problem, that and a volatile western economy, and it’s those two that I’m interested in. You’re not going to invade anyone or be reckless with your economy. So if I take a few percentage points off you and give it to them ... so be it. You can count the costs in Yuan, but if the plan goes wrong out there you’ll count the cost it in bodies!’

An hour later we broke for the day, no doubt to give them time to come up with even more questions. Back at the hotel, Helen and I found the girls in colourful Chinese outfits, a floral patterned silk, and looking just gorgeous. We snapped pictures with our phones before grabbing the digital camera. The girls kept the outfits on during dinner, Po joining us, Han explained that the outfits were a gift from him. They were simple, and inexpensive, yet a delight.

The next day Helen made her excuses, not following much of the talks, and took the girls to the zoo with our Chinese minders. Jimmy and I re-entered the bunker and rolled up our sleeves, the Finance Minister and his team now in attendance. Making use of a translator for some words and phrases, I detailed my areas of operation, the new bank and the hospitals. The hospitals were of little interest to them, other than the fact they were part owned by CAR – in which they had a stake. They were, however, very interested in the bank. I cut a potentially long conversation short, and quite innocently.

‘Why don’t you send an expert or two to work at the bank – help to give me some guidance, eh?’ It stopped them dead, and left them nowhere to go with further probing questions. I explained, ‘The aim of the bank is to assist with venture capital to established African businesses, to increase the GDP ... and to make consumers of them sooner.’

‘And the medical equipment factories?’ they nudged.

‘They should help you a lot,’ I suggested, already knowing their objections. ‘They lower western medical bills, which means the western governments can offer tax breaks, and so people spend more. More spending helps you. President Chase has already lowered taxes and US consumer spending is up a few points. Is that not good for you?’

They reluctantly agreed, Jimmy sat quietly, observing our hosts more than myself.

The Minister asked, ‘Which African businesses – which types of African businesses – will do well in the decades ahead?’

‘Exports will never amount to much, its an internal marketplace in support of ore, oil and tourism. But, as they grow, their cities will

have all the same needs as western cities, so they'll have all sorts of businesses. The growth sector in the next ten years will be those businesses that support the mines.' I glanced at Jimmy, and he seemed happy with report. Well, the monkey had listened to the organ grinder often enough.

Jimmy took over, and we got into the small detail of a twenty-year plan that had been seriously disrupted due to recent events. We factored in revenue from the drug, that revenue diminishing next year, but still offering up a great deal of money considering how cheap it was for them to produce. Those figures were programmed into a laptop by two earnest Chinese geeks. They were just like western geeks, only more so. We then factored in the increased western buying of Chinese goods due to tax breaks, the Zanzibar oil, and the ore from Africa. On the minus side, we asked for money for the next generation of nuclear power stations, for very conventional desalination plants that were quite unconventional, and their rollout to Somalia and Jordan. We also piled on financial requests for dams in the DRC and Uganda and a pipeline across to Lake Victoria, another pipeline the other side feeding Kenya.

The geeks did their sums, and their paymasters reluctantly agreed that they were way ahead of the curve. Jimmy then gave them two future dates, and suggested that both would cause a sharp drop in western spending in China, and that was factored in, although it was hard to estimate the effects. I then piped up and insisted that the Chinese's own savings in healthcare be factored in, plus extra productivity from its workers as a result.

After three hours we had an adjusted growth curve that left China in a very healthy position in the decades ahead. In order to wipe the smiles of their faces, Jimmy detailed two pandemics that would kill fifty million Chinese – even with the drug – plus a rise in middle class dissention. Our hosts factored in a drop in productivity, due to many of their key workers being quite dead at the time, and they adjusted their figures at two key points. That caused a lot of debate, and further thought would now have to be given as to how to plan ahead for it.

After lunch, we again got into the small detail, answered specific questions, discussed the quake deployment, and broke at 3pm to meet with the current Premier in his office.

When I shook his hand, he said, 'If you label my sister as a goat I'll have you taken out and shot.' He held his cold stare on me, then smiled, gesturing us to seats. I began breathing again.

Han sat with us, tea made in small cups as we settled.

The Premier continued, 'Of course, it is an odd statement - to mention someone's sister here in China - since none have siblings.'

'And a good policy that is,' Jimmy mentioned, being carefully studied.

'I believe we are ready for the earthquake,' the Premier added. 'And I must admit, foresight is a wonderful thing. Although, some days I wonder if our ability to solve problems is lessened by that knowledge - and our lack of desire to seek solutions for the unknown.'

'A swordsman must practice,' Jimmy acknowledged. 'Till he turns his sword into a plough to work the fields.'

'Indeed,' the Premier acknowledged with a forced smile. 'Although I do not follow such ... *Christian* doctrine.'

'I'm surprised that you knew the reference,' Jimmy responded.

'There are a great many Christians here,' the Premier acknowledged. 'Many phrases woven into our language from your early missionaries. Are you ... a Christian, Mister Silo?'

'I raise my head and shout at whoever is up there every day,' Jimmy replied.

'If you ever get to meet him, you will have a lot to discuss - after some lengthy apologies.' We laughed. 'Now, what do you believe - or indeed know - about problems we may have with our middle classes in the future?'

'That they are easily dealt with - in comparison.'

'In ... comparison?'

'If you were to compare the houses, household goods, and luxuries that your people possess... against America, then there is a shortfall, followed by a natural desire to copy. But if you were to consider that the Americans offer greater freedom, then that freedom comes with a price, namely not much of a safety net. They are free to lose their jobs, to have no healthcare, to suffer high crime rates, and to live on the streets. You need only manufacture a large net and sell its virtues, especially in the years ahead when known problems hit America and the west. They ... will suffer great volatility, whilst you will plod along steadily - yet surely.'

'And, at the end of the day, democracy is over-rated. Once every four years we get to vote for someone who is not obliged to keep his election promises, who *will* do a bad job, and then change to someone else - leaving a mess behind. The people cannot vote on individual policies, and big business directs the politicians. Democracy, in the west, is a commodity that can be bought, or lobbied for. In America, the Jews are a tiny minority, yet their lobby

groups enjoy a hundred percent success in influencing presidents, something that will backfire in the future. The blacks and Hispanics are large minority groups, but have no political clout. In the future that will change, especially the Hispanic influence.

‘The one good thing about the advancement of technology, is that the internet allows individuals to voice their opinions, and in the future that will be real-time, people making their voices heard by clicking a button and voting. That’s real democracy, which is about the people voting, not about corrupt politicians trying to make themselves popular.’

‘An interesting viewpoint, and I will consider our *safety net*,’ the Premier offered.

‘Don’t worry about your political system,’ Jimmy told him. ‘When things go badly wrong in the west they’ll admire your stability, and your ability to react to a crisis. At the end of the day, people don’t know that all they want is a roof over their heads and some food – till it’s not there!’

‘We receive criticism every week from American civil rights activists and politicians,’ the Premier stated, ‘whilst the American President asks if we can buy more Treasury bonds. We are ungodly barbarians to be criticised in public, yet asked to loan them money in private – now America’s single largest creditor.’

‘To try and judge western politicians by any measure of logic – would be a waste of valuable time,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘China is a whorehouse.’

The Premier blinked. ‘What!’

I stopped breathing.

‘They like to visit you in the dark of night, yet condemn your impropriety during the daylight hours,’ Jimmy said with a grin.

The Premier cocked an eyebrow. ‘I doubt that I will make use of that analogy, Mister Silo. Even in the dark of night.’

We made small talk for twenty minutes, stood for a photo, and then headed back to the hotel. The girls were full of news about baby Pandas that they had been allowed to feed, digital images displayed for me on their cameras.

The next day we hopped onto the coach and drove for two hours, leaving the smog of Beijing for the coast, and to the nearest supply of salt water. Our coach negotiated its way through a well-guarded building site, and arrived at a small and experimental desalination plant.

Traditional desalination involved boiling water, capturing the steam, cooling it and making pure water from it; drinking water.

That process of distillation used up energy, which typically came from electricity, possibly generated by a nuclear power station. This first plant that we visited used the sun's energy to heat the air between glass panels, a large area of glass laid out in front of us, the size of a football pitch. Salt water was being pumped in one end, drinking water produced at the other end. Other than capital costs, it was cheap to run, but did not convert much water compared to its powerful counterparts. Still, it would be implemented in Somali since it was cheap to run. The next plant looked similar, but contained millions of what appeared to be glass tubes.

'The tubes are made from plastic, from oil,' Jimmy explained. 'Salt water goes in one end, the water evaporates and is collected in good volume. At night, the pipes are flushed with additional seawater to remove the accumulated salt, then a little fresh water with some chemicals in. Compared to the first plant, this is much cheaper to build in Africa; it has few moving parts and maintenance is very low.'

'So we use the local oil to make them, to make the pipes,' I noted.

Jimmy nodded. 'But at some point in the future, someone will notice fresh water supplies not far from the coast in Somali. Between those supplies and the ocean are certain types of rock that produce the osmosis and membrane effects, filtering the water. The first large-scale test is just about ready, a few miles up the coast from Mogadishu. It takes longer to filter the water, but the volumes pumped can be huge.'

'Are those rocks found in the Middle East?' I asked.

'In some places, but not quite where I'd like them,' Jimmy admitted. 'Which is why I gave samples of the rocks to the kids in Shanghai a few years back. Come on.'

We boarded the coach and negotiated more building work to arrive at an area of large steel vats looking like grain silos. I could see VAT1, VAT2 labelled. 'VAT14?' I whispered.

'No.'

'Oh.' And we found only six of them. Inside them rested numerous layers of a synthetic fabric, made again from oil, and substances that the kids had come up with, based on combinations of crushed rocks.

Jimmy pointed up at a tall vat. 'There's very little energy used, the production costs are small if you don't try and use nice shiny steel vats, and maintenance is limited. The water flow is good compared to other osmosis techniques and ... it's cheap as fuck

basically. Couple of these already in Somalia, the special project ready for us to test when we arrive.'

Thirty minutes in the coach brought us to a tightly guarded nuclear power station, long corridors plodded down to find the site managers office. In the office, I was surprised to find technicians from Russia, Britain, France and the States.

'That's what I like to see, some international co-operation,' I quipped.

Each man was introduced in turn as we settled about a table. One of the men attended a white board, numerous figures already annotated on it. He gave a twenty-minute talk, explaining the difference between the cost of building certain types of reactors – they were all very expensive, but some less so – and the running costs and efficiencies achieved. Seemed like this plant had been cheaper to construct, would be cheaper to run, and its efficiencies were greater – much greater, thanks to a few hints from Jimmy. Its operational twin was being built in Somalia and would be fully operational in two years, the aim being to power both Mogadishu, as well as a few desalination plants of various specs.

We peered down through clear water at fuel rods, although I wondered why, had tea and a chat, then headed back. In the coach, Jimmy examined reports of the efficiencies of the desalination plants and the nuclear plant, making notes. As we arrived back, he handed his corrections to Han.

Helen and the girls had been on an outing to the great wall, something I was still yet to visit, and Shelly stood spouting stats to me about the famous tourist trap.

At dawn the next day we packed up, escorted to the airport for an internal flight down to Shanghai, a plane for just our party as usual. In Shanghai, we booked into a very tall hotel, in an area that reminded us all of Hong Kong, the modern city a stark contrast to its sedate capital. With Cat taking the girls down to the hotel pool, we boarded a coach with Han, and made an hour-long journey through terrible traffic to the military base that housed the brain-trust kids.

This was Helen's first visit, and I briefed her on the way. She questioned the kid's apparent captivity, not that they were kids anymore. In the main canteen we joined the professor and several older boys – the eldest now twenty-six, food collected from the buffet counter.

Jimmy informed the professor, 'I've given Han the necessary adjustments, and areas to look into.'

‘We don’t think we can improve the desalination model any more,’ the man reported, shaking his head.

‘You’re ten percent short,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘So keep at it.’

One of the Kenyans announced, ‘I would like to return to Kenya, to help there.’

‘Of course,’ Jimmy readily agreed. ‘What would you like to do?’

‘Agriculture was my first passion, I’d like to return to it.’

‘I’ll arrange it with Cosy,’ Jimmy offered. ‘We’ll get you a house, a car and some money.’

‘That is good of you, sir,’ the young man acknowledged.

‘What about others?’ I asked. ‘They homesick?’

‘There is a group of Congolese who desire a return,’ the same man informed us. ‘Some are interested in mines, some oil, some like finance – if you have work for them.’

‘I should think so,’ I agreed. ‘Send them to the corporation, and call me when they get there. Do they have kids?’

‘Some do, yes.’

‘Families?’ Helen queried.

‘The older students here are free to ... mingle,’ Jimmy explained.

‘Oh. And where do they live?’ Helen asked.

‘Here,’ Jimmy replied. ‘There’s a crèche, a nursery, and individual apartments at the rear.’

‘We’ve isolated the anti-body,’ the professor put in, a conspiratorial nod exchanged with Jimmy.

‘Is it safe to return?’ another young man asked.

‘Not really,’ Jimmy told him. ‘Others will take an interest in you if they know about your skills. We’ll have to see if those who return are ... monitored. But, now that we have the anti-body, and much of the experimental systems working, it’s less of a problem.’

‘And now that the world knows of the super-drug?’ they posed.

‘Its use will not produce many like you,’ Jimmy informed them. ‘Perhaps one in every twenty or thirty thousand, and the kids will simply be labelled as autistic.’

‘You will not release the blood?’ they queried.

‘No, not yet,’ Jimmy firmly insisted. ‘The time has to be right. If it were to be used widely in poorer nations, then the population explosion would cause great hardship.’

‘We found no answer to the pandemics,’ they stated.

‘There are none,’ Jimmy agreed.

‘Pandemic?’ Helen asked.

Jimmy explained, ‘In the years ahead, certain diseases will mutate, killing many. And no, there’s nothing we can do. Only

people with my blood could tackle it, and even they will fall ill for a while.'

'So ... what will happen?' Helen pressed.

'It will run its course, then come back around every few years till they find a cure,' Jimmy replied.

'And you're not aware of one?' she asked, clearly surprised.

'No, because some diseases are adaptive. There will always be a need for further research.'

'And the effect on Africa?' one of the Kenyan's asked. 'Many will die?'

Jimmy nodded. 'Yes, and trying to save them would be almost impossible.'

'But not completely impossible,' they nudged.

'If the blood is used early, the diseases will adapt to it early, and cause greater problems later. Remember, the flu family is adaptive.'

From the looks on their faces, I doubted that they were buying it, not completely. After the meal, the young Kenyan men introduced their girlfriends, and we sat on sofas in the crèche for a while, the toddlers curious about us strangers. Jimmy handed them a few extra projects before we inspected the latest variant of their electric car, a joint venture with a Chinese motor manufacturer. I sat in one, pushed the start button and sped away. It possessed no gears of course, being electric, and the acceleration it offered was smooth. Going around in circles, I stopped, started and pulled away quickly, trying to imagine pulling away from a junction.

One of the main complaints about electric cars had been the acceleration bite, but this little baby shifted. Back at the entrance to the college, I asked, 'How many miles on a charge?'

'Five hundred,' they said with a smile.

'Five hundred? Shit!' I reflected as I stood back and inspected their handiwork. 'Time taken to recharge?'

'Flash charge at one hour, over overnight at seven hours.'

'Re-charge costs?' I asked.

'In western terms, ten dollars of electricity,' the professor stated.

'That's a ten dollar tank of petrol then,' I realised. 'Less, because five hundred miles equates to two tanks. Five hundred miles for ten dollars - that'll piss off a few people. Capital cost?'

'Nine thousand pounds here, plus shipping costs and taxes, so thirteen thousand pounds in the UK,' the professor ran off. 'Battery technology is the expensive part.'

'But, once bought, you could go a week on one charge at ten dollars,' I thought out loud.

Jimmy pulled up with a screech, easing out of his vehicle with Helen.

‘Did you just take my wife for a drive?’ I dryly asked.

‘It’s OK, she behaved herself,’ Jimmy said as he approached. He beckoned Han closer. ‘I want the first thousand shipped to the DRC straight away, second thousand to the UK. A hundred for Rescue Force Kenyan, and two thousand for Hong Kong – through Po.’

Han bowed an acknowledgement.

‘We going to upset a few people?’ I asked.

‘Most likely,’ Jimmy responded. ‘Especially the British Prime Minister, who puts a hefty tax on petrol. If people go electric then he loses that revenue.’

‘He’s got the health cost benefit, so fuck him,’ I suggested.

‘A good attitude, young man,’ Jimmy commended.

Back at the hotel, we enjoyed the facilities - pool, sauna and massage – followed by a lengthy meal, the girls reporting their trip to a technology museum that sounded nothing like a museum; they had played with robots and video games.

Arriving in Hong Kong the next afternoon, we were picked up in an electric coach, courtesy of Po. At his hotel we booked into familiar rooms, time for a wash and change before heading off for a surprise. The same electric coach took us slowly through the petrol traffic and to a local taxi firm. We pulled inside its massive garage, and halted short of assembled TV crews and journalists. I straightened my tie. Stepping down, the press snapped us, Jimmy leading us towards Po, whose family owned the taxi firm. A gleaming green and yellow taxi sat on display, large letters proclaiming it to be electric, a man in a green and yellow uniform at the wheel.

Jimmy stood behind the microphone. ‘Ladies and gentlemen. For many years I have invested in electric car technology on the mainland, and we now have the fruit of that labour in the form of this taxi.’ He gestured towards the vehicle. ‘This vehicle is electric, has an acceleration as good as any similar vehicle, and can drive for five hundred miles on one charge of its battery. That’s ... five hundred miles ... on one charge. And that charge costs ten dollars. This, ladies and gentlemen, is the future ... here and now. This taxi company has four hundred cabs, all of which will now be electric. And, because of the savings made, we will be subsidising all journeys for the next month.’

He repeated his previous words in Chinese before fielding questions, finally being filmed inside the taxi, driving it back and

forth. Helen and I sat in the back and waved for the photographers, followed in turn by Po and his executives.

Back on the electric coach, thirty minutes later, I asked, 'Will we roll out these to the States?'

'No, not yet. Let them see it working here first.'

I grinned. 'Best way to get someone's attention - is to ignore them.'

'And there are other reasons,' he enigmatically stated.

'How many taxis will go electric?' I idly enquired as we negotiated the busy petrol traffic.

'All of them; it'll become the law here, and in Shanghai to start with,' Jimmy explained. 'I'll bring in thousands of them, letting taxi drivers hire them for next to nothing. The buses will go the same route soon, no pun intended. We're even looking at electric motorbikes. My deal with the People's Republic, is that they get five years from now before I release the technology.'

'The Germans like green technology,' I put in.

'They'll buy some, and the Dutch and the Swedish; the cars will be big in Europe. In the years ahead you'll be able to grab an electric car, drive it town to town, leave it or pick up another – and all for free. By then we'll have road-tracking technology, so you just tell the computer where to go and ease back. It's great fun to start, then gets boring. At the end of the day, people like driving like idiots.' We exchanged indifferent shrugs.

'What about ships?' I asked as we negotiated annoyed motorists.

'Yes, some go electric. They have wind turbines on deck, recharging as they go. Odd thing is, all the electric energy technology I'm sharing now – was created by people very short of petrol. When they developed it, Africa had not been developed, nor the Zanzibar field or others like Cuba. The people of this planet are getting the benefit of it, without being short of petrol, which will lead to less oil needed, so it'll last a bit longer.'

'Does that constitute a paradox?'

Jimmy made a face. 'More or less.'

We enjoyed a relaxing two days at the hotel before heading to Dubai, changing for a Mogadishu flight, now boarding one of our own Central Africa Airways Boeing 757s, our tickets swapped at the last minute for security. Big Paul, and two of his mates, were already onboard the flight, and armed. They showed me their official Air Marshal badges. With the aircraft levelling off after climbing, Jimmy walked back and greeted Somalis in Arabic, some of them

being government officials. He had also scanned all of the faces, just in case.

At Mogadishu International Airport, our escorts were waiting, the government here only having been notified of our arrival a few hours earlier. A coach whisked us the short distance to a hotel that we had built through our property business. Jimmy had designed it, so it was secure – and came with a rooftop bar. We drove through high gates in a high wall, some fifteen feet tall, through pleasant gardens and to reception. The entire ground level seemed to be solid concrete and offered no windows, reception built with an airport-style security check; they did not stop us when we bleeped through the machines. Checked in, we claimed the top floor penthouse suites, Big Paul and his mates adopting the room whose door faced the lift. The first man dragged out a chair and sat staring at the lift doors, Somali Rifles now in the hotel grounds.

I took Helen and the girls to the roof whilst the day was still hot, finding the rooftop bar and pool a replica of that which I first found in Nairobi. With no one apart from us in attendance, I asked a waiter about its popularity.

‘Sir, only de guest on de first class come to here. Floor number ten and more bigger, sir.’

Well, that explained it. The girls hit the pool the instant their clothes were off, and I lovingly accepted a cold beer. For an hour I sat in the sun with Helen, Cat sat on the edge of the pool. But when I noticed a pair of binoculars fixed to a wall I went to investigate. By standing on a bench you could see out over the city, the glasses for those that liked close-ups.

From what I could see, Mogadishu was doing well, many new buildings, even a handful with glass exteriors. The streets looked clean, nearby gardens were well tended, houses offering blue pools, and there was the distinct absence of gunfire on the breeze. In the distance, I could make out many cranes earnestly lifting materials up to the roofs of new buildings reaching skyward. The airport had looked clean and tidy as we passed through it, and the journey from it – although along dry and dusty streets – was no different to many countries I had visited. Yes, Somalia was coming along nicely. I returned to Helen as Jimmy and Big Paul arrived.

‘Abdi will be up in a bit,’ Jimmy reported.

Since we had four waiters attending us, drinks were quickly placed down. I questioned the beer with Jimmy.

‘For westerners only, locals would get flogged. They do drink, some of them, but it’s against the law.’

‘How’s the house?’ I asked Big Paul.

‘Lot of building work up the top end,’ he reported. ‘Your new place. Bunch of temporary security guards watching it.’

‘Found a nice woman to settle with yet?’ Helen asked him.

Big Paul gave her a look. ‘I’ve done my bit for the species, and procreated, creating a fine lad and a fine daughter.’

‘He finished school?’ I asked.

Big Paul nodded. ‘In college, studying hotel management.’

I turned to Jimmy, and waited.

Jimmy shrugged a shoulder. ‘It was not meant to be, but ... why not.’

‘What was he meant to do?’ I asked.

‘Fuck all,’ Big Paul put in. ‘Bunch of dos jobs.’

‘And your relationship with the girl and her mum?’ I asked.

‘I send them money...’

‘And?’ I nudged.

‘The mum’s not looking to hook up. She has her life down there.’ He made a face then sipped his beer.

General Adbi, Defence Minister, joined us ten minutes later, an aide and four bodyguards accompanying him. Before he had arrived, the girls were asked to exit the pool and cover up. This was still Somalia. We greeted him and ordered cold drinks, non-alcoholic drinks, our own beers removed.

‘The city looks good,’ I told him.

‘Much building work with the money from the oil, and investment from abroad,’ Abdi keenly reported.

‘And the new President...?’ Jimmy asked.

Abdi seemed reluctant to answer. ‘He is a politician.’

‘As you may well be, soon enough,’ Jimmy pointed out.

Now Abdi seemed reluctant with that career path. ‘Perhaps.’

‘You must see it as a battle, my friend,’ Jimmy told him. ‘A battle to get the best quality of life for your people, to increase trade, and to build the economy. Your service to your people will continue, just in a different format. And who better to protect their interests ... than you?’

‘Perhaps,’ Abdi acknowledged, brightening a little with the compliment.

‘Everything set for tomorrow?’ Jimmy asked him.

‘Yes, all is set. I will accompany you to the facilities, to see how you make clean water from dirt and seawater. I must tell you, many here think you are crazy – but I have faith.’

Jimmy smiled widely. ‘Tomorrow we shall see.’

With Abdi and his party gone, the girls reclaimed the pool, two white families appearing. I guessed they were from floors ten or above.

One man came straight over. In an accented voice he began, 'Sir, I work for you at CAR.'

'Take a seat,' Jimmy told him. The man joined us, his family grabbing sun beds. 'Where are you working?'

'In the northwest, near Baardheere. I have been overseeing a new railway marshalling junction. When finished, we shall be able to increase the number of daily trains. Unlike cars, they cannot pass each other.'

'No,' Jimmy agreed. 'If you have a diagram, bring it up later. I would be interested.'

The man stood. 'I will, sir. Enjoy your stay ... at your hotel, sir.'

'We could go by train from here to Mawlini?' I asked.

'No passenger trains that I'm aware of,' Jimmy replied. 'Be a rough trip.'

'Don't the workers go back and forth, all the way to the DRC?' I puzzled.

'No, they fly. It's three whole days by train, so they'd need a week in this hotel just to recover!'

Shelly brought over coins that she had found, plus a diamond ring.

'That real,' I wondered.

Helen had a look. 'Yes, it is. We should ask reception if anyone reported it lost.'

'Can I have it?' Shelly asked.

'No!' I snapped. 'Some lady lost that.' I lifted Helen's hand. 'See mummy's nice rings: how would you like it if she lost them and someone else kept them?'

Shelly spun around, ran and dived back in, no doubt cursing under her breath. Jimmy beckoned a waiter and asked for the manager. When the manager arrived, a Frenchman, we showed him the ring.

'No one has reported it lost.'

'I want you to give me a list of all western women that have stayed here,' Jimmy instructed. 'I'll take the ring to London, to my solicitors, and see if they can have it appraised or identified.'

'Yes, sir,' the manager said before withdrawing.

'How could someone not notice it was missing?' Helen puzzled. 'The first time you washed your hands you would notice.'

Jimmy puzzled that with a heavy frown. 'Big Paul, go down stairs and ask the manager to check with the police; see if any western women have gone missing around here.'

'Something? I asked Jimmy.

'No, just seems odd that it wasn't reported.'

Big Paul was back within minutes. 'French lady went missing a few weeks back, couple of days, then turned up. Said she'd been to Kenya on a trip and stayed too long.'

Jimmy gave that some thought. 'I want name, address, occupation and passport details.'

Big Paul headed back to the lift.

'Something?' I nudged.

'People don't come to Mogadishu without good reason, and don't visit Kenya whilst forgetting to inform their hotel.'

Big Paul returned with the details, Jimmy calling Sykes with the passport number. At the end of the call he smiled widely.

Lowering his phone, he called over Shelly. To Helen and me he asked, 'How much cash have you got on you?'

We raided our pockets and produced two thousand dollars, which Jimmy handed to Shelly. 'That's for you, for finding the ring.'

With Shelly sitting down to count the money, our money, I asked, 'What the hell did you find out?'

'The woman who lost that ring, who never came back for it, is a nuclear technician, working at the new plant.'

'Oh shit,' I let out. 'She loses her ring, disappears in Kenya, gets swapped, and her body double doesn't file a report for a ring that she doesn't know about.'

'The French are spying?' Helen queried.

'No, they're contributing,' Jimmy pointed out.

'So who,' I thought out loud, 'would be interested, knowing that it's next generation? Iranians?'

'They're not that good,' Jimmy scoffed. 'This took planning. So, I guess we'll have to find out.' He lifted his phone and dialled PACT, asking for their best agents in the country to get on the case.

Helen and I spent all night speculating on just who may be behind it, plus trying to persuade our daughter to loan us some pocket cash.

The next morning I took an early swim, boarding the coach later and now with increased security. We took the long way around the city, a random route, and journeyed north to the new nuclear facility. That nuclear facility was on Somali soil, but the area it occupied was given over to the British Government under license, now sovereign territory and guarded by Kenyan Rifles and Pathfinders. A small

breakwater and dock had been built, and just about everything came in by boat. The construction workers had been Swiss and French, no Somalis let near it.

We slowed as we passed through an outer gate, manned by Somali Rifles and police, and reached a second gate after some six hundred yards of parched desert, this one manned by the Kenyan Rifles. Inside, British and French soldiers patrolled with their own police officers. Security seemed very good, but an insider, an employee, had obviously breached it. I had previously questioned the logic of a sensitive facility on Somali soil, but Jimmy was up to something, not revealing what. Now we stepped down to a screening by British police officers.

‘Wanna check my ID?’ I asked the senior man.

‘Since you’re paying my wages – no, sir.’

‘How do you know that I’m me, I could be an impostor.’

‘There couldn’t be two of *you*, sir.’

I wagged a playfully warning finger and stepped into the cool interior, soon in a control room, the reactor not ready, and certainly not working. We made small talk with the managers and staff, asked about progress and glanced at charts.

Jimmy then shook a ladies hand. ‘Monique, yes?’

She was momentarily startled. ‘Yes.’

‘I read your staff profile,’ Jimmy quickly got in. ‘So, how is your fiancé?’

‘Fine, sir. We hope to be married next year.’

‘You don’t wear his ring I notice?’

‘Not in work, sir. Metal is not a good idea around here.’

‘Of course,’ Jimmy said with a smile. ‘Oh, you lost this in the hotel swimming pool.’ He lifted the ring for her to see. ‘Your engagement ring.’

She blushed. ‘That ... can’t be mine.’

‘You’re right, it’s not. It belonged to the woman you killed, and replaced.’

The managers were now closing in, our suspect going red and glancing at the faces.

‘You can answer my questions, or I’ll hand you to the Somali Rifles for interrogation, informing them that I don’t want your body ever found. Now, I want you to whisper in my ear who sent you. Or else.’

After many seconds, she leant in and whispered in Jimmy’s ear. Jimmy straightened, making eye contact with two plain clothes Pathfinders, who led her out.

‘She was a spy?’ the manager gasped.

‘Yes. Is your French head of security here?’

They summoned the man, the managers and technicians disturbed by the turn of events.

Jimmy stepped up to the man, and looked him over. ‘We’ve just discovered a spy, who took the place of Monique. Since she – the original – was a French citizen, I’ll be making a formal complaint to your President about your lack of ability. You may resign your post today if you wish.’

Before anyone had a chance to do anything, the plant manager shouted at the security man and led him out, a toe up his arse.

I closed on Jimmy. ‘Lucky we found that ring.’

‘Very.’

‘Fortuitous, almost,’ I softly quipped.

‘Planned, almost. Someone knows Shelly’s habits well.’

We walked out, boarded the coach and navigated the short distance to the desalination plant across parched desert. There, Abdi awaited us with a pack of journalists, and a host of African TV crews. I even noticed a Jordanian crew.

This desalination plant was not so much a plant, as a long stretch of moist ground, about four hundred yards long, pipes in and out of both ends. What the press could not see, that a large sign conveniently displayed, was that it was actually a deep trench, some ten metres deep and twenty metres wide, lined with concrete and filled with a special dust made from rock and compacted down. The trench rested at a slight angle, and seawater had been pumped into a reservoir at the far end, now creating a pressure that pushed the water – very, very slowly – down the trench and through the compacted rocks. At the far end, filters cleaned up the water and stored it.

With Abdi and his government colleagues in tow, we now walked to the arse end of the trench, stepped down into a concrete box and accepted glasses of tepid water from technicians dressed in white. I sipped mine, finding it palatable. It was not perfect, but it was OK. Everyone downed their drinks of plain water, and made suitable noises and faces. It was not perfect, they agreed, but it was OK.

Climbing back up, we approached the TV crews and the press. Jimmy began, ‘This desalination facility, the pipe under our feet, is very cheap to build, simple to operate – since there is nothing to do, and the end result is clean water, good enough to drink. This is the prototype. There is a larger version under construction, and that will provide Mogadishu and its surrounding area with drinking water.

Any country that wishes to send its scientists here is welcome to do so, to see the very simple technology behind the process.'

He fielded questions for ten minutes, the technicians handing out pamphlets on the technique.

Moving back toward the coach I asked, 'This fix Jordan?'

'Partly. And partly by regular desalination, and partly our plastic tubes. And we can swap some of this technology for Jordanian Uranium ore.'

'Jordan has Uranium?'

'It has one of the world's largest deposits. Better to buy it now than after 2025. It'll boost their economy as well, when they need it.'

'And our spy? Who was she working for?'

'She fully believes that she's working for the French Government.'

'But isn't...?'

'No.'

'You have an idea?'

'An idea, but not much more at the moment,' Jimmy admitted.

As we landed back in the UK, the ground was shaking in China. Fortunately, the People's Army had insisted that everyone sleep outdoors the night before, an AK47 up the backside of anyone not co-operating. Buildings collapsed, schools and hospitals, and people in remote areas were still hurt. Rescue Force moved in and set-up camps and temporary shelters, complete with field hospitals. Five thousand people died on that first morning, Jimmy suggesting that it should have been sixty thousand. Now came the awkward part for the Chinese authorities, the admission that their building codes were crap, and that local authorities built sub-standard buildings out of sub-standard concrete. The recriminations would last a long time, reverberating around like an earthquake.

Shelly had been discussing what to do with her money on the flight on the way back, and I was tempted to take it off her. I certainly wasn't going to allow her to take it to school on Monday. Back at the house, her first suggestion pleased me: a huge fish tank for the school, so that all the children could see the colourful fish. I sanctioned it. Next was a fish tank for our house, which I agreed to after discussing it with Helen; after all, our daughter was due to be a marine biologist. Finally, she wanted a golf buggy converted, a pink Hannah Montana golf buggy. Picturing her tearing around in it I agreed, wanting to see it parked next to Big Paul's combat model with its camouflage colours.

Two days after returning home, a stray rocket – fired from Georgia – wounded several Rescue Force staff. Jimmy rang the President of Georgia and told him that the next time he set foot in Europe he'd wake to find Jimmy at the end of his bed. And left it at that. We put together an international team, and they visited Georgia, leaning on the Georgian President. If he wanted western aid, he would have to stop his countrymen lobbying the odd missile at South Ossetia. He'd also have to sleep with a chair up against the door.

Plans, plans and more plans

My new office was finished a month later, and I moved in the people that I had hired, Jimmy checking their faces first. I had allocated myself a grand office – chairman of the board, space enough for my new secretary. Helen was banned, not least because she always took the piss out of my filing system. That filing system meant that everything important - and not dealt with - was in plain view, even if on the floor. I had two walls of continuous desks made up, and now my existing project files were laid out under their departmental headings.

On my desk lay the important files, and within hours I knew where everything was. Stepping out from my office, an open-plan room offered sofas around a large coffee table, the all important tea and coffee making facilities nearby. On my immediate left sat an office for my Pineapple liaison. After him came my bank liaison, because I thought that was important. Next came the airline, then CAR, then a guy from the corporation, the property business and finally the clubs.

Some of the men, and they were all men, now lived in the apartments, and a few had bought houses locally. When they were moved into their new homes, and settled into their new offices, I called the first meeting around the coffee table. My secretary was Sharon's cousin, a bit of a forty year old frump, but apparently excellent at her job. Jimmy recommended her for her sharp tongue, and ability to tell very important people to "go stick it up their backsides".

We all grabbed mugs of tea, and sat facing each other. 'Welcome to this ... the first meeting of the "Paul is disorganised" club.'

They laughed.

‘Your job is to make me less disorganised, and to save me time, because I have only so many fingers, and many pies to dip into. OK, first rule: if I’m here – I’m here. If I’m not here, chances are I don’t want to be answering the phone to you lot. If it’s not life or death, it waits till I come in or call in, because if there’s a meeting in the house – called at short notice – then I’ll be tied up. You’ll also have lots of peace and quiet when I’m abroad, which is a fair amount of the time.

‘What I want from each of you ... is a summary of your departments, and by that I mean a page at most, if not two paragraphs. Behind that should sit a more detailed explanation, which I would expect to be more verbal than written, but also written for the file. But be careful, because Jimmy will ask for figures and reports, and he’s not as polite as me when things are not ready. So, for instance, let’s ask – how are things at the club?’

The relevant man reported, ‘Cardiff club is down five percent on last year, year on year. Food consumption is up, drink down a bit. London club is other way around, with lots of idiots buying expensive champagne to impress the ladies. It’s up three percent year on year, hotel now full most of the time, Cardiff hotel lagging. And the London club benefits from many corporate meetings being held there midweek.’

‘Good, short and sweet. No corporate work in Cardiff?’

‘It’s Wales, guv.’

I nodded. ‘OK, that’s the kind of report I like. If I then wish to go into detail, I’ll do it with you individually. So, let’s start with problems.’

The airline guy raised a pen. ‘Boeing and Airbus are charging us for the wages of apprentices in Goma, yet they’re paid by the corporation.’

‘Rip them a new arsehole. If they don’t pay it back, remind me to get involved.’

The bank guy raised his pen. ‘The Chinese have sent advisors to the bank HQ in Goma.’

‘Fine, I was expecting that. Let them audit, observe, and sniff around to their hearts content.’

‘They’ve offered investment capital, just about a hundred million dollars, but only for mines.’

‘Fine, use it, but not out of proportion to other investors. Is all corporation money going through the bank now?’

‘Yes, and they’re building a secure cash repository at Forward Base.’

‘I thought we had one?’ I puzzled.

‘We do, but it’s not big enough. It’s holding a lot of local currency.’

‘OK. Corporation, what’s new?’ I asked the man.

‘Steffan Silo is working on the rail link –’

‘How’s he ... fitting in?’ I probed.

‘He has a house on Spiral Two, he’s taken up golf at the course, and people often mistake him for Jimmy.’

‘And the train project?’

‘They say he’s come up with some great money saving ideas, and some efficiencies. Instead of shipping concrete sleepers for the track, he’s ordered up their manufacture at three sites on the route, and made the track a twin track. That way, a supply train comes alongside the crane that lifts the sleepers and track into place. They think it’ll shave a third off the time at least.’

‘And the cost?’ I asked.

‘Be cheaper, but still expensive as hell.’

‘OK. The roads?’

‘There are new roads down to Zambia, through Burundi and towards Malawi. Many new internal sections, and the Burundi-Tanzania section could be a motorway, of sorts. We’ve widened it to four lanes in some places.’

‘Give that stretch priority over the Kinshasa road. And where the train track runs from the north, across Southern Sudan and into Kenya, see if we can’t create a road that follows it. OK, what about Gotham City?’

They laughed at the name. The corporation representative answered, ‘We’ve got more apartments than people at the moment, so we’re building small towns in other areas, where mines are concentrated and where the roads are good.’

‘And those spare apartments?’ I nudged.

‘They’ll fill up as the factories in the area grow.’

‘Are they growing as fast as they could?’ I pressed.

‘Yes, painfully fast.’

‘And the university?’ I asked.

‘Just about finished, first term is September.’

‘Did we sanction a zoo after all?’ I asked with a frown.

‘There are plans for one, south of the airport, about three miles.’

‘Make a start on it, but let’s make sure it has a captive breeding program and a lot of interesting exhibits. Let’s have people flying in

just to see that. And coming back to those empty apartments, let's see if we can't think of ways to attract other factories down there. Start with European companies involved in plastic and synthetics, since we've got the cheap oil right there. Remind me of that in a month.'

After a hard day at the office, a few piles moved around, some actually getting filed, I jumped into one of our new electric cars and sped under the road and down past the lake, halting outside the house. It was not a long commute. I hadn't charged the car since I took receipt of it, and figured it would last a hundred and fifty years at the rate I was using its battery.

'I'm home honey,' I announced. 'Did you have a hard day at the office?'

'More space now that your junk has gone,' she told me. 'How is it up there?'

'I'm getting a lot done, and I can find my piles on the floor where I left them.'

'Shelly, show daddy what you got today.'

Shelly jumped up and led me by the hand out of the front door. There sat her pink Hannah Montana golf buggy, making me smile. She unzipped the plastic rain covering and jumped in, so I sat next to her, peering through the front plastic. She hit the start switch and then the pedal, shooting off at a worrying speed.

'Slow down, baby, that's quite fast.'

She slowed a little, turning and heading around to the front of the house. And straight for a silver Mercedes coming up the drive.

'Turn, baby.'

Shelly yanked the wheel.

'Other way, baby.'

She turned, but so did the driver. His breaking was good, Shelly's a bit slow, and we smashed the front of the buggy, plus his lights.

With Shelly giggling, I stepped down as Sykes eased out with his driver. 'I'm terribly sorry, Mister Sykes.' I inspected the damage to his car with my hands in my pockets.

'Is she on your insurance?' he barked.

'Mr Sykes, I dare you to report that you were hit by a pink Hannah Montana golf cart.'

Jimmy stepped out. 'Shelly, dear - drive slow, like I told you.'

She reversed, turned and sped off.

'Send Paul the bill,' Jimmy told Sykes as he shook his hand and led him in, a scowl my way. I had to walk all the way back around to the house.

‘Shelly, when you crash into someone else’s car, you stop and say sorry,’ I told her as we got ready for dinner.

‘What?’ Helen puzzled.

‘She just smashed Sykes car.’

‘Oh, god. I knew it was a bad idea.’

‘There’s an inhibitor in the buggy, I’ll alter it to six miles per hour,’ I offered. ‘Then she can just crash slowly.’ I inspected the fish tank, delighted with it. Sometimes, late at night, I’d turn off the main lights and just watch the fish, the brightly coloured creatures illuminated by their own tank lights.

In the weeks that followed I began to appreciate the family more, always having to catch up on what had happened at school or home. My office was only a third of a mile away, but I was a commuter now, and not a home worker any more. With President Chase hard on the campaign trail – but well ahead in the polls, we flew over and gave him a resounding endorsement, even attending some of his rallies.

Message in a bottle

Keen to see Gotham City grow faster, I met with several US plastic manufacturers, but could not convince them of the cost savings; their markets were here in the States, and Africa was somewhere around the atlas. I decided to take a more direct route, and followed Jimmy’s example. I found one of the largest suppliers of plastic bottles in the US and bought a controlling share without even asking Jimmy, the money coming from CAR. I sent their best people to Goma to open a factory. Given that it was a CAR company the land was free, the oil dirt-cheap, the labour keen – and very cheap.

By time Hardon Chase had been re-elected I was finishing off my plastic bottle factory at break-neck speed. The first bottles out of the moulds were sent to African bottling plants, since they were closer. And we beat their previous purchase costs. When they had been satisfied, we sent the bottles further, but still within Africa, soon cornering that market and producing a million bottles a month. That became five million as a second plant came on line, working twenty-four hours a day in three shifts.

With African markets just about conquered – stiff competition coming from Nigeria, I set my sites on the Middle East, and soon

found a few customers there. That led north to Europe, where the bottles were shipped in very large batches. But not just bottles for fizzy drinks; we had won orders for the nice shampoo containers and other products you'd find on the shelf at any chemists. Seemed that there were a lot of products sold in plastic bottles.

Using my name as influence, I waltzed into the boardrooms of several British supermarkets, and offered to beat any price they were currently paying, and to match the quality of their existing line. They asked for labelling and printing on the bottles, save it being done up here, so I organised a labelling extension to the factory and bought equipment that sprayed on coloured images, organising experts from Europe to operate the new machines. Jimmy knew of the project, but left it to me. He did not interfere.

We enjoyed New Year 2009 in Fiji, stopping off in Auckland and Sydney on the way back, but flying back via Goma hub. There I proudly showed Helen and the girls my bottle factory, the ladies each recognising the labels for products they used at home, especially shampoos. My daughters already knew more brands of shampoo than I did.

Hardon Chase was sworn in on a chilly day, and we stood in the crowd of honoured guests, feeling suitably cold. And we only got to talk to him for ten minutes. The day after the ceremony, I visited the plastic bottle supplier and pointed towards their bottom line, the company profits now soaring. I set them the task of getting our bottles into America and in turn they handed me specifications for the first few lines, which included smaller, but more expensive bottles, hotel shampoo vials and perfume samples. After working out a few figures, I estimated that I could put them on a 747SP and fly them over without killing the margin, till they explained that the contents came from the Far East. Simple. I shipped my bottles from Mombassa to South Korea, a year's supply at a time.

With Shelly celebrating her eighth birthday, Lucy now six, I was busy opening up new markets in Europe and the UK, and in Gotham City my plastic factories gainfully employed three thousand people.

At Shelly's birthday celebration, Jimmy said to me, 'Good work on the bottles, really good work.'

It was strange; I no longer felt like Robin to his Batman. Buoyed by that, I sat down and had a brain storming session with my team. We isolated the most complex and expensive items we could find that were made of plastic, and most of them seemed to be fitted to cars, vans or lorries. We got to work, and chief salesman Paul Holton got on the phone, always getting through to the managing

director, whether they accepted calls from salesman or not. I soon had an order for hard plastic parts that would fit cars being manufactured in the UK. Our margins started to increase, even though that was not the main aim. The main aim was for Goma industrial area to make products that sold around the world, and to employ more people.

Bushfires, mate

After the New Year visit to Fiji, the trip to Sydney had an ulterior motive; Jimmy wanted to check out the units, to review inventory and readiness. Before leaving, he had asked Dunnnow and his team to re-assess their previous effectiveness during bush fires. Now, as we edged into February, reports came in of bushfires, the start of the season for south Australia.

On February 1st, Jimmy ordered British, French, and German alpha teams to Australia – just in case. As well as for the experience. When he dispatched Doc Graham, people figured that something big may be up. As the days ticked off the calendar, I called up a web page that I had book-marked and checked the bushfire reports. When I noticed a report suggesting that they were getting worse, I brought it to Jimmy's attention.

‘More bodies and jeeps, please,’ he said to me.

I called Bob Davies. ‘Bob, send the white Kenyans to Australia, jeeps in Il76 aircraft. Send over New Zealand, Samoa, Fiji. Oh, and the new Hawaiian teams. But make sure they all have jeeps.’

‘Hueys from Kenya?’

‘Yeah, couple.’

Each day I checked the news, and each day the situation on the ground was deteriorating. And when I caught a particular news article I stopped dead; an RF medic had injected a burns victim with super-drug, and was not only filmed doing it, but describing it as well. I checked with Bob, discovering that the deployed teams carried Doc Adams super-drug. In other words, his own damn blood with the red blood cells removed. Jimmy calmly suggested that people would put it down to the super-drug. Besides, it was great for burns.

The bushfires turned out to be the worst for decades, but our people were on top of it, the backpacks containing a blood product from the future. If only they knew.

Bottles, lots of bottles

Seeing my successes back in December, in the plastic bottle market, the Chinese wanted in, not least because I was pinching some of their trade. I readily agreed, and they constructed four large factories, each big enough to land a plane on the roof. They began producing fittings for the Far East car market and I tried not to pinch any more of their trade. Since they now employed an additional nine thousand people I was happy enough.

The spare apartments had gone, but not by workers and managers; all sorts had moved in. It was as Jimmy said: create the right commercial conditions and it will attract people to it. These new residents accompanied small businesses that serviced the factories; we even had our first brothel open up. Jimmy and I could not decide if it was a good thing for the workers or not, but left it in place. After all, if we closed it down it may go underground. At least this one would pay taxes. That gave me an idea, but Jimmy said no.

With most of the apartments in Goma now full, or at least sold to someone – absent or otherwise, I commissioned new apartment blocks, still plenty of investment dollars sloshing around. The zoo had been built quickly, little more involved than digging ponds and throwing up fences, and it now housed every type of animal that you could find in Africa. It stretched almost a mile end-to-end, and came with a large visitor centre, a small hotel for visiting experts, a staff accommodation block and a research centre. That research centre, and its carefully targeted projects, would be sponsored by us; grants would be available for research into a variety of animals, large and small, and the diseases that afflicted them.

Sat in my office one day, looking at the literature for the zoo, I had an idea. I didn't discuss it with Jimmy first, I simply ordered the new project. Our zoo would now have a college built next to it, for Africans to come and study for degrees in zoology. It would come under the wing of the main university, and all of the places on this new residential course would be free. When I informed Jimmy, he just nodded approvingly.

Unfortunately, we received four thousand applications for just sixty places, so it was back to the drawing board. I ordered an extra four hundred rooms built at the zoo college, plus an additional five hundred at the main university, which was a short commute on a free electric bus.

Thinking on, I persuaded HSBC and Barclays to open branches near the airport, and a British supermarket to open a store. A number of restaurants had popped up, a few shops selling all sorts, and the locals now enjoyed all the modern conveniences.

One day I asked my team, 'What could we grow ... and sell?'

Bananas, was one answer put forward, coconuts another – for an export market. I ordered a massive swath of land cleared, irrigation trenches dug, and banana trees planted. Those trees occurred naturally in the region, so it was a case of simply finding the specimens below six foot tall and pinching them. Finding that many villages already nurtured banana plots, I arranged for their produce to be bought and transported to a central sorting area. From there the bananas would go by truck to Nigerian, Kenyan and Tanzanian markets, some to be shipped up to the UK. In Goma, they were given out free at various outlets, and each factory had a free lunchtime delivery. The coconut trees would take longer, but at least many had had been transplanted. We would have to wait a few years for any sizeable coconut harvest.

That set me to thinking more. What could we put in the bottles we made? Fruit? Fruit juice? Tomato juice? I could ship it up to Europe.

At that point Jimmy stopped me, and asked that I try and feed Africans with cheap produce, which would also help to boost the local economy. That led to a big pow-wow with the corporation staff, and an inventory of all things grown, animal or plant. The orphanages grew their own crops, and generated around sixty percent of what they needed. The fish farms were very productive, but little in the way of crops were currently being grown in the region; wrong type of soil. Zimbabwe, however, had great soil for crops, so I sanctioned extra money for farming projects there, so long as they were super-sized.

Seeing that the land in the DRC was fertile, albeit a little sodden in most parts, and we had sunshine, I asked about greenhouses. Glass was expensive to import, they reported.

'Don't need glass, we have Perspex factories coming out of our ears!' I told them.

A factory was duly tasked with making small square panels. They disobeyed that order, and made panels that were six foot high and three feet across, with one edge rounded and one with a groove; a green house could be put together in two minutes. Pleased with this innovation, I ordered up hundreds of thousands of panels and set a team to work. A hundred miles west of Forward Base, land was cleared of trees and flattened by Caterpillar bulldozers, the new muddy zone the size of ten football pitches. Concrete lines were laid, twelve inches deep and ten feet wide. On them, the panels were clipped together, soon creating long lines of parallel greenhouses. Fearing that a storm might topple the flimsy greenhouses, metal wire was run across each and the individual greenhouses were pegged down like tents. Large trays, made of plastic, were placed inside the greenhouses, filled with soil from the nearby ground, and a variety of plants seeded, including tomatoes.

I was happy with this gardening project, not least because it gainfully employed two thousand locals. Po shipped us fertilizer for free, aboard empty trains returning to the region from the coast, and our crops had an excellent environment in which to flourish.

A nutritionist, a British man, then approached us. He had seen a write-up on the greenhouses and had been involved with Africa for many years. His idea was simple: grow the crops locally, convert them to paste, a bit like tomato sauce, then sell it cheap to Africans. But because it was a paste, a certain amount of water removed, it would be concentrated, and free of the additional packaging typical for loose fruit. That would also mean that transport costs would be lessened. If we put the mulch in three or five litre plastic containers it would be cheaper again. I hired the guy on the spot and sent him off to get started, the processing plants required being very simple to set-up and run, and employing even more locals.

When a corporation official questioned the cost of employing the locals, on projects not yet showing a profit, my answer was simple. 'The oil and ore in the ground belongs to them, not to us. If the profit from that oil and ore creates jobs, and they get paid, then that's the correct use of the money we make. Furthermore, if you ask a question like that again I'll give you to the Congo Rifles for target practice.'

I flew down in March, to see the fruits of my labours, literally, and took only Big Paul with me after he asked to accompany me. We stayed one night in the first airport hotel, since I always liked to check out the ambience – and the quality of service it offered our guests. As with River View, all those years ago, I would walk

around the guests during the evening meal and enquire if everything was OK, conversing in a few different languages.

In the morning we grabbed four Pathfinder bodyguards and hopped onto a bus, simply because I wanted to see what the new electric buses were like. Very few people were travelling outbound from the airport, and when the last passenger jumped off I ordered it to return, stood next to the driver and asking questions of the vehicle's performance, passenger numbers, and all the interesting things that people left behind on it.

Back at the airport we hopped off and waved forwards two green and yellow electric taxis. I gave the pathfinders dollars for their driver, worrying that they'd just stick a gun in his face, and we set off, a very smooth and quiet ride to my latest venture, the fruit concentrates. At the factory gate they were not expecting us and a call had to be made. Paul who? Once inside, I sat down in their canteen with the Pathfinders and Big Paul, three litre containers grabbed, dishes and spoons to the ready. We squeezed out the concentrate, one each of banana and tomato into separate dishes, and sampled them. The banana concentrate was just like mashed up bananas, and the tomato concentrate just like mashed up tomatoes, only a little less bitter. That lack of bitterness seemed to come from the heating process. All in all, we all thought they were great.

The bottling facility had been cleaned and sterilized overnight, after numerous test batches had been sampled, and now I ceremonially threw a switch that re-started the machinery, being photographed by the African Times. An hour later the first batch of a thousand three-litre containers were ready, filled and labelled. I ordered them put on a truck and took charge of it, asking for the next run of a thousand containers to go to the orphanage as the additional bottling lines were brought up to speed.

With the Pathfinders following in their green and yellow taxis, Big Paul and I sat in the lorry cab and directed the driver to the working-class suburbs of Gotham City, on the east and towards old Goma town. I stopped the lorry at a busy crossroads and stepped down, our white faces being noticed. From the back of the lorry we grabbed containers as people looked on, and placed down the concentrate. With the Pathfinders forming a chain, I lifted the first container and offered it to a woman stood watching us. She read the label and walked slowly off with the heavy banana concentrate. Kids ran forwards, and I gestured towards the containers already lined up on the side of the road, young kids soon struggling along with my produce. Other adults, mostly women, now closed in, and each

carried a container away, Big Paul and myself working up a sweat as we off-loaded them.

People soon came running down the street, and I noticed some of the same youths more than once, not that I cared. In thirty minutes we had offloaded the lot, mounting back up for the return trip. The second lorry sat ready, and I directed it to the university, to the student canteen; they would be my willing volunteers. We carried twelve containers inside, finding a few dozen students sat about. I called them over.

‘I would like you all to taste this new product, and to give an opinion.’

They fetched dishes and spoons, the refectory staff coming out to see for themselves what was up. We were a hit; the students and staff loved it, especially if you added a dollop of ice cream. They helped us unload a hundred containers, and we set off again. This time I headed for the nearest factory, a plastic components factory, and towards their canteen. The manager rushed around, worried, and surprised at what I was carrying into his staff canteen. We repeated the taste test, finding similar results, but some of these poor buggers would find it waiting for them when they got home tonight. I dumped a hundred containers and set off, offloading all of the containers at nearby factories before returning to the bottling plant.

The plant machinery was now at full capacity and producing more containers than I could give out in a lifetime. With an IL76 sat waiting at the airport, I confirmed that five thousand units would go to Mawlini, to be sent on to Darfur after some sampling at the base. The rest would be distributed around our region by truck, sold through shops and given out free to corporation workers of certain grades.

Back at the hotel, I showered and changed my sweat-soaked clothes, having lunch with Big Paul and staying well away from the fruit. I’d had enough. I was then surprised to find that Big Paul had a project of his own that he had been working on in secret, but with Jimmy’s permission, hence his interest in accompanying me for this trip. It involved fishing, and was to be a surprise for me.

After lunch, we drove around to the airport, a Huey sat waiting. We threw the pilot and co-pilot into the rear with the bodyguards and lifted off, Big Paul knowing where he was going. After getting lost, twice, we eventually found what he was after, an area of what appeared to be swamp at first glance, a group of modern steel sheds next to a helipad and a road, a few trucks dotted about and a dozen workers.

With the rotors winding down we eased out, being greeted by the project manager, a local man named Seth. He led us forwards and pointed out numerous narrow channels of water, each no more six feet wide, but stretching into the distance with no end in sight. The banks of each channel appeared to be just overgrown jungle, small trees and bushes overhanging the water.

‘OK, I’m curious as to how you’d get a fishing rod in *there*,’ I told Big Paul, stood with my hands in my pockets.

‘You don’t, the locals fish with nets and spears,’ he began. He pointed at a channel. ‘This was all shit land, jungle, but without too many big trees. Basically, it was swampland. We dug the trenches, each about three feet deep, let them fill up with water, and put in catfish and other species from the other fish farms. The difference, is that this needs no one to maintain it, and all the tasty insects from the leaves fall into the water for the fish.’

I saw a splash. ‘What was that?’

Big Paul grinned. ‘The fish around here don’t wait for the insects to fall off the leaves, they jump up for them.’ He nodded to the manager, who sent forward two men with spears, the men soon hauling back a catfish some four feet long. ‘They can grow to that size in a year, and it needs no maintenance. Besides, in the shallow water like this they breed well, and there’re no competitors for their eggs.’

The manager handed over a chart. Big Paul said, ‘One acre produces one tonne a year.’

‘A tonne an acre? That’s good,’ I commended. ‘How big is this spread?’

‘Two hundred acres,’ the manager informed me.

‘And all it cost was a digger for a week,’ Big Paul pointed out.

‘Excellent.’ I faced the manager. ‘You have permission to increase the size of this to twenty thousand acres.’ The man blinked. ‘Employ locals, get whatever you need.’ I faced Big Paul. ‘Excellent project, low cost and natural, and it keeps the locals gainfully employed.’

We let the pilots fly us back, chatting in the rear about production quotas. This was low tech, but the fish could be frozen locally and shipped, or even shipped alive. We spoke of a fish plant that would clean and process, and I left that to Big Paul to work on. He was a fisherman at heart.

L'Aquila

With our RF teams home from the Australian deployment, Jimmy informed me of a quake in Italy in April. I was concerned, since this was close to home and in the middle of Europe. We drove over to Mapley and called in the senior staff.

'Right,' Jimmy began. 'Crusty is predicting a quake in Italy.'

'Italy!' they queried.

'Italy,' Jimmy confirmed. 'In the north, some place on the map called ... the L'Aquila region. It does, apparently, have a history of quakes, and Crusty has been over there looking at the recent small quakes. He has a tight date range, which helps I guess. I want all European Alpha and Bravo teams, and our reconstruction teams. And I want tents for fifty thousand people set up days before the quake. Seven days from now you all drive down together, across Europe.'

'Shit,' they let out, sat looking stunned.

'Doc Graham, you're in charge on the ground,' Jimmy ordered. 'Start making plans now, please.'

Leaving Mapley, we drove east down the M4 motorway and to London, a 4pm appointment at the Italian Embassy. Once through the security, we were led straight in to the Ambassador, a warm welcome offered. The mood would not last.

'Mister Ambassador,' Jimmy began. 'As you know, we have a man that predicts earthquakes with his clever software, and you will also be aware that you signed the Rescue Force Charter. That Charter allows us to move into Italy without additional permission from you.'

The Ambassador stopped smiling.

Jimmy continued, 'We are predicting a quake in six days, in the L'Aquila region, which may cause a lot of damage, so we are – obviously – keen to discuss it with you.'

'Yes ... of course,' the man stumbled with. 'What ... what did you wish to do, exactly?'

'We wish to move our people into place before the quake strikes - to be ready.'

'But this earthquake prediction is not an exact science,' the Ambassador pointed out. 'Your presence may cause panic amongst local population.'

'That ... is the price to be paid for vigilance,' Jimmy insisted. 'Arriving two days later achieves little. Besides, our man is happy

that he can pin down the date due to small recent quakes and micro-quakes. So we wish to deploy at the end of this week.'

'This week? I ... will need to discuss this with my Government—'

'You'd then be in breach of the charter you signed,' I pointed out. 'And you'd be expelled from the Rescue Force family.'

'Again, I need to discuss that as well, and its implications.'

I was just not in the mood. 'OK, tonight we go public and issue the warning, with or without your blessing, Mister Ambassador.'

'Such a move could lead to legal action,' the Ambassador pointed out.

'It could,' Jimmy suggested. 'It could lead to people staying put when you don't back our warning, being killed, then suing your government. And let me be clear about something: I would set aside a hundred million pounds to give to the families of the dead for their legal costs in attacking your government.'

'We on the same page, mate?' I asked the man.

'I do not appreciate threats.'

'And we don't appreciate making treaties and then having people break them,' I countered with. 'You ... signed a treaty. All you need do is stick to it.'

'As I said, I will consult with my government. This meeting is ended.'

Back in the car, I said, 'That could have gone better.'

'Same old bollocks, same old politics,' Jimmy commented as we drove around to the BBC studios. Jimmy went straight for the jugular. 'We're predicting a serious earthquake in Northern Italy, in the L'Aquila region for the end of this week, but the Italian Government has failed to honour the Rescue Force Charter and is refusing to allow our rescuers in. That will probably lead to Italy being expelled from the Rescue Force organisation. I just hope that we're wrong, and that the people of the region are not killed in large numbers. I would hope that some, at least, leave the area in the next few days, those that value their lives, and the lives of their families.'

We had lit the blue touch paper.

Driving back, the Prime Minister called. He had been on the phone with the Italian Prime Minister, who was furious at many people and many things, feeling the heat already and not knowing why – or how this had even come about.

The morning news ran the story, the Italian press all over it, people starting to pack-up and leave the region in question. At least some were listening, and the news coverage was a hundred percent in Italy and Europe. We received a fax around noon from the Italian

Prime Minister, confirming that we'd be allowed in under the conditions of the Charter he had signed. We had kicked the front door in, and cut short a lengthy diplomatic process with some very un-diplomatic language and conduct, Jimmy suggesting that they would have dragged their feet.

We drove over to Mapley in the morning as the various RF teams assembled, brought back from abroad and off training exercises. Fifty white jeeps sat lined up, equipment being strapped to the roof racks. I patrolled the line under a grey and threatening sky, rallying the troops and meeting some old faces. We now seemed to have some large white RF lorries, although I had no idea where they came from, which were now being stuffed full of tents. These days, we had white RF tents, not stolen UN tents.

With TV crews filming, and several crews embedded, the teams ran through their final checks and mounted up. Jimmy walked out to the line of jeeps, paused as he took in the long line, then blew a whistle, pointing the first jeep towards the gate. An impressive column of fifty jeeps, and ten large trucks, moved slowly out of the gate and towards the Channel ferry ports. In France and Germany, similar columns were either moving off or getting ready. They were due to meet in Switzerland late tomorrow, and to drive south together, a deliberate spectacle for the cameras. Hueys would take off from various locations tomorrow, refuelling en route to Italy, another spectacle for the cameras as they grouped together.

Back at the house, we packed our bags ready; we'd be at Mapley for the deployment. Two days later we drove over early, missing the nutters at the gate, who all seemed to sleep in late. We dumped our bags and checked our suits, Helen and Trish setting up the communications centre. As they were doing that, a column of white jeeps and trucks a mile long wound its way through Italy and to L'Aquila, white Hueys overhead. Italian TV news had filmed the column on a stretch of straight motorway, the image making the front pages under the playful heading of "Invasion". The vehicles turned off the highway onto side roads and spread out, each moving to a pre-planned halt, where camps would now be set-up. On the outskirts of the regions, RF doctors and nurses pulled up at the local hospitals and made themselves known, many booking into nearby hotels.

That evening, I gave my first interview, along the lines of "better safe than sorry". But so far we had little to report.

As a grey dawn appeared over Italy, the tented cities grew out of nothing, covering previously green fields with a uniform matrix of

white tents and portable plastic toilets. Many of the local residents had already given up their homes, but an estimated sixty percent remained. Now, Italian RF teams knocked on doors and tried to persuade the stubborn locals to spend a few nights under canvass, the offer of free food and drink dangled. Many took to the tents, whole extended families, and all local schools were closed.

The next evening, Jimmy spoke to Doc Graham, urging him to try and lever more people out of their homes and into the tents. The teams redoubled their efforts, begging people to leave for the night at least, and to come back in the morning. Thousands more were nudged under canvass, cold for them this time of year.

Early the next morning the quake struck, the damage great, the death toll rising as rescuers returned to those houses that had not been evacuated, and sifting the rubble. But at least the families in the tented villages celebrated their survival, and Jimmy ticked a box.

The press descended upon us that day, the communications room full as we relayed facts, figures and opinions; a well-practised routine. On the ground, RF teams rushed about under the gaze of a hundred TV cameras, shoulder flashes of Britain, France, Switzerland, Germany and Italy displayed. They moved with professionalism and practised ease, and it made me proud to observe them on the TV news.

With Mackey sat in the lounge with us, I remembered our first meeting, at a fair in Scotland. It had taken a long time to get here, but the teams were now excellent. And he still wore hiking boots to the office. As we sat there, he informed me of a pending retirement. Christ, he was almost seventy, I realised.

Packing up, we returned home early the next morning, the kids glad to see us. The main RF teams returned home a day later, leaving behind the reconstruction teams, and enough people to man the tented cities.

Jimmy commented, 'Those tents will still be there a year from now, the houses not rebuilt. But we'll give the Italian Government some shit over it.'

Haiti

A week later, and with the weather improving, Jimmy handed me a new project, as if I didn't have enough to do. Haiti would suffer a

quake in 2010, and we needed to make preparations now. I sat down with paper and pad and had it all worked out within two hours. In the main house I asked Helen's assistant, Trish, about planned trips, and fixed a weeklong holiday in Cuba for Helen and myself, no kids allowed. Uncle Jimmy would be helping out with the girls, a task he relished. I grabbed Big Paul and Karl and told them to pack; we'd leave in two days.

Landing in Cuba, in the tourist north, our low-key minders drove us around to a new hotel, built by us through the property business. The hotel had been laid out in the shape of a horseshoe surrounding a large pool and park, and totalled three hundred rooms. Settling in, Helen found it odd for the girls to not be with us. She rang the house within ten minutes of unpacking, finding the girls in the diner with Jimmy, eating all the things that we generally rationed – or disallowed.

'He's spoiling them,' she complained after the call.

'That's what uncles do. And grandparents. C'mon, sangria at the beach bar.'

We knocked on the room shared by our earnest bodyguards, and led them down to the bar, picking up two plain-clothed Cuban officers in the lobby. With some sangria downed, Helen relaxed a bit. Local ladies offered massages on tables, just on the grass in front of us, so we both lay face down and indulged ourselves for an hour.

Returning to the bar, I stepped towards the guys, and time started to slow down.

I reached their table, moving in slow motion, focused on Big Paul's hideous Hawaiian shirt. A silver coin on the floor spoke to me. It offered me my life back. I bent down, touched it, and Karl's head exploded, the high velocity round passing through my bodyguard, my friend, and making a very large hole.

A shove from Big Paul, and I was somehow underwater, the clear pool water tainted with delicate swirls of red blood as I looked up at the sky. A splash caught my attention, a blurred face, a lot of hair swirling in the water, a hand on my head lifting me up. I broke the surface facing Helen.

'Paul!' she screamed.

'I'm OK,' I got out, scanning the people running back and forth.

A second shot rang out, indistinct, then a third.

'Stay down!' Big Paul shouted, now knelt next to a short and stubby palm tree.

We stayed in the pool till the screaming had subsided, realising that most of the holidaymakers had fled. Looking over my shoulder,

I could see a large pool of dark red blood that used to be Karl, a hole in the back of his head big enough to fit a tennis ball in. That fate had been meant for me, and I had to stop and ask – why?

The air filled with the sounds of sirens, police officers soon running about, and we were still in the pool, Big Paul close. The officers formed a line and we eased up, bent double and running inside. Through the lobby we sloshed, leaving wet footprints.

They escorted us to our room and took up position outside as I closed the door. I reached for my phone and dialled Jimmy as Helen towelled down, my wife shaking, but not from the cold. ‘Jimmy, Karl is dead, sniper aiming at me.’

‘Helen OK? Big Paul?’

‘Just Karl, round took his head off. I think maybe a fifty calibre from the hotel next door.’

‘Then we were lucky. They’ve had their shot, they won’t get a second one. Take it easy for a few hours, decide what to do, I’ll deal with the security.’

I hung up and stripped off the wet clothes, placing on dry ones, putting the wet clothes on the balcony before I realised that was probably a bad idea. From the balcony I confirmed where the shot had come from: roof of the hotel next door. I opened the door and told the police what I thought before attending the mini-bar. I twisted the top off a small bottle and handed to Helen. ‘Down it in one, it’ll help to take the edge off.’

She did as asked, and I could see her hand trembling. I eased down to her on the bed, an arm around her. ‘We’re still alive, and the kids are OK.’

‘Karl got engaged last week,’ she got out before bursting into tears.

I had forgotten, someone had mentioned it in passing. And I knew that it was not the loss of Karl that she was crying over. I hugged her tightly, the image of Karl’s head still fresh. And that coin. That coin saved me.

But who wanted me dead, and why now? We were in Cuba, so we were close to the States. Were the CIA still pissed? At least, were some elements still pissed at us? And what about all the people we got sacked? My mind was racing with possibilities. Jimmy had not issued a warning, so this was an aberration in the timeline, something unexpected. And the more we fixed things, the more of these we could expect.

Helen eventually composed herself, a knock at the door leading to the local police chief stepping in.

‘We can talk?’ he asked in a heavy accent.

I showed him to a chair and sat on the bed, his assistant standing.

‘You are not hurt?’

‘No. And the sniper was on the roof of the building next door, I worked out the angle.’

‘We know, he killed the two officers guarding you,’ the man unhappily reported.

‘Look for Americans,’ I suggested.

The chief took a moment. ‘CIA?’

‘We have had problems with some of them. They lost their jobs.’

The chief nodded slowly to himself. ‘Our President has called me; he is most concerned. Such things as this are rare here. Who knew you would come here?’

‘Just the household staff, a few others. We only book tickets a day or two before we travel for added security.’

‘Someone knew your intentions. This sniper, he must have taken a day or two to travel.’

‘I’ll ... investigate who knew in our organisation,’ I offered. ‘If we find out anything ... we’ll tell you.’

‘If this man is a professional, he will have a way to leave this island.’

‘He’ll go to a house nearby, five or ten miles, isolated, and wait for a week or two.’ After I said it I wondered why, but it made sense. ‘Use all of your men - we’ll pay their wages. Search isolated farms. Start ten miles out and work in. I’m serious, we will pay the wages, pay them overtime, bring them in from other areas.’

‘I would have done so, our President wishes this man found.’ He stood, and I followed him up. ‘You will stay here?’

‘Yes, for a few days, then I have business in Haiti.’

As I showed them out, Big Paul stepped in, his tacky Hawaiian shirt splattered in blood. He reported, ‘They found a rifle on the roof, but it won’t have prints.’ He stood at the window, peering down at the crime scene below.

‘Then the shooter’s still in that hotel,’ I thought aloud. I dialled Jimmy. ‘Get on a flight. The sniper is in the hotel next door, posing as a guest.’

‘On my way.’

Jimmy handed the girls to Cat, jumped into a car and headed towards Heathrow with a police escort, flashing lights all the way. By the time he arrived he had hired a 747 over the phone – his credit was good, the plane for just him and the security detail. A flight plan

was filed as the plane took off, the Cuban authorities notified when it was in the air.

Helen and I ordered room service, and we sat in the room with the curtains drawn, numerous calls taken; the news was now all over the world. I had asked the police chief to stop any guests from leaving the hotel next door for twenty-four hours, and he agreed. Still, if our sniper was any good he'd be in no hurry, he'd be sat around the pool with an accomplice, a woman. And I was determined to have him.

Jimmy arrived at 4am, a ten-hour flight from London, brought around under heavy escort. 'You holding up?' he asked.

Helen nodded, but didn't answer.

'Helen,' he called. 'Toughen up. Some day soon someone may pull a gun on the girls, and I need to be sure that you'll fight, not sob.' He led me out.

In reception, he spent an hour looking at names before leading me next door. The same exercise was repeated, one name causing him to pause before continuing. 'No.'

'You paused at a name.'

'Did I?'

I put a finger at the name.

'May as well wake him up, then. Since we own this damn hotel, we can make it official.'

With the police close, we took the stairs up to the man's room, the individual booked in with his wife according to the register. At his room, the police stood either side of the door, Big Paul with his back to the wall. Jimmy knocked, a finger over the spy hole.

'Hello?' came an American accent.

Jimmy nodded to an officer, who said 'Hotel Manager' in Spanish. The door clicked open and revealed the man stood there in the room's electric light. He was in his forties, moderately fit, but displayed no tattoos of a military nature that I could see.

'You're ... Jimmy Silo,' the man stated, stood surprised.

'I got here quickly in my time machine,' Jimmy whispered. 'So, as the owner of the hotel, I'd like to apologise for the ... disruption.'

'You ... you wake people at 4am to apologise ... for the disruption.'

'Not all of them, just the special ones.'

'Special?' the man repeated.

'Those that have served time in Columbian mercenary units.'

The man stared back for almost ten seconds, then tried to slam the door. When Jimmy was in your doorway that was always more

of a hope than a practicality. Jimmy slammed his arm into the door as he moved forwards, Big Paul moving in behind him. Jimmy caught the man with a kick to the back, a right hook at the 'wife' sending her flying and knocking her cold. The man had hit the floor, making contact with the sliding doors with his head. Jimmy dropped and punched down, a blow to the ribs. I could hear the crack from outside. The police rushed in, grabbing the couple, not that they were resisting. I began to search the room, but Jimmy led me out.

'He's not our man,' Jimmy stated as we headed back for the lobby.

'No?' I queried.

'No, he's the man we were supposed to find. We'll find out that he was paid to be here to ... watch some innocent tourist. And the woman probably has no idea.'

In the lobby, Jimmy asked for coffee and food from the receptionist, and sat himself where he could observe the stairs and lift. 'We have a few hours. Maybe I'll recognise the man, maybe not.'

'You sure that's not him?' I pressed.

'What agency would screw with us?' Jimmy posed. 'No, if someone was going to make an attempt they'd need to be very sure of themselves. A simple check of that man's name in the CIA database would have revealed him. Shit, even I knew his name.'

The police returned, and we positioned them around the exits as we sat quietly sipping coffee and eating cake. The hours passed slowly. At 6.45am the first early-bird tourists appeared, old couples with towels wanting a dip, odd looks towards us as they recognised our group.

At 8.30am I figured most of the guests had trailed past us, and were now in the restaurant. We stood, stretched, and walked in, playing like owners and apologising to the guests for the disruption. A few photographed us as we walked around the tables. Having met just about everyone, Jimmy returned to a table and sat, now facing a man in his sixties, a woman in her thirties, and a teenage girl.

'How are you?' he politely asked the woman.

'It's rude to sit without being invited – even if you do own the hotel.'

'I'm glad you said that, because I needed to place the accent to the correct part of Canada.'

The woman hesitated.

'Canada? We're American.'

‘No, you’re not. *They* may be, but you’re not. *They* may just get away with a very long prison term. You, on the other hand, would be handed over to me – since I have a lot of influence here, Kate.’

She was up and running, Big Paul catching her with a punch and sending her across a table. Screams went up as the police grabbed her.

Jimmy faced the older man. ‘There was probably a time when you believed in the good guys winning. I strongly suggest that you dig deep and find what’s left of your morality, and strike a deal. If not, I’ll fly you to Africa, where they’ll cut bits off and make you eat them.’

The young girl burst out crying, now led away by the police. Jimmy held his gaze on the elder man, police now stood behind him.

‘What kind of deal?’

‘You tell all, I decide what happens to you. Roll ... the dice, my friend.’ He waited.

‘The Company hired us for this.’

Jimmy shook his head.

‘No?’ the man queried.

‘No, the people hiring you were disgraced former members. That leaves you with a retirement plan in the Caribbean, otherwise known as a Cuban jail. And the inmates may not like you.’

‘Kressip.’

‘Mister Kressip is an incompetent buffoon. Try again.’

‘He had another man with him, a hand missing.’

‘Ah, well ... you may have just earned a reprieve,’ Jimmy said as he stood. A nod to the police and the elder man was led away. ‘Can I have your attention, ladies and gentlemen,’ Jimmy loudly called. ‘Yesterday, someone tried to assassinate Paul. These were the people behind it, and they have now been caught. By way of compensation - for your disruption, you will all get a full refund from us, and the offer of another holiday free of charge. I hope that you can make the most of what is left of your holiday. Once again, I apologise for the disruption.’

We turned to leave.

‘Hold on!’ a British man loudly called, and we stopped. A tall and wiry man in his fifties walked forwards, a hooked nose and an unhealthy red complexion; he reminded me of my old school headmaster. ‘I, for one, will not be looking for a refund. My wife had cancer and you ...’ He stumbled. ‘Your drug cured her. No one has done more for Africa than you, so you ... you can shove your

refund.' He wagged a finger. 'And my sister sent ten thousand pounds to Rescue Force, most of her life savings.'

The people on his table started to clap, soon followed by the others in the restaurant, many standing. I stared at them, dumfounded. They didn't want to lynch us, they actually wanted to thank us, gunfire disturbing their holiday or not.

'Do you have a camera?' Jimmy asked the man, leading him back to his table. A silver digital camera was produced. 'Ladies and gentlemen, if you would honour me, I'd like a group photograph.' He gestured people towards the fruit counter, tallest at the rear, kids at the front, Jimmy stood with an arm around the man's sister. Big Paul took several snaps. 'Please email a copy,' Jimmy requested of the spokesman before we left.

Without saying goodbye to Helen, Jimmy headed back to his waiting aircraft under heavy escort.

In our room, I found Helen sat staring through a crack in the curtains. 'We caught them,' I softly stated. 'Jimmy recognised them.'

'I used to be stronger than this,' she muttered.

I sat on the edge of the bed. 'That was the work you were doing. And ... and back then you didn't care - you had nothing to lose. Now you do. C'mon, pack; I'll bring forwards the trip to Haiti. Day there and we'll head back home.'

Later that day we boarded a plane to the Dominican Republic, no direct flights to Haiti available, and hired an executive jet for the short trip to Port Au Prince. Sykes people had already landed in Cuba and were now making arrangements for Karl's body, and to continue the investigation.

We spent the night in a well-guarded, yet rundown hotel in Haiti, the shit hole of the Caribbean, a place with a crime rate slightly higher than the Congo before we got involved there. It was an unpleasant room, in a strange in a violent city, and we hardly spoke. In the morning, a car whisked us around to the Presidential Palace, a grand white building that was out of place with the rest of the city. It felt odd to approach it, knowing what would happen in a few short years. The President welcomed us, Helen conversing in French and acting as translator, our hosts English limited.

'Thank you for your time in seeing us,' I opened with.

'We are most thankful that you have turned you attention this way.'

'Let me get down to business. We would like to open an orphanage here, room for ten thousand children.' They blinked. 'We

would then like to help you with your security, offering to take your young men and turn them into fine soldiers.'

'How many soldiers?'

'Five thousand to start with, and we would pay for everything, creating barracks here. We would also equip them.'

'The Haitian Rifles?' the President asked with a smile.

'Yes, sir, the Haitian Rifles. We would also like to open a Rescue Force unit here, trained in Cuba.'

'How many?'

'Two hundred to start with,' I informed him. 'And again, we would pay for everything. We would then like to open small clinics here.'

'We do not get many visitors like you,' the President said with a smile. 'We agree to all of that.' He handed over the documents. 'Ask for whatever facilities you need.'

I handed over a banker's draft for twenty million dollars. 'Towards your administrative costs in dealing with us.'

'You have an ... interesting approach.'

Little more than twenty minutes after entering the Presidential Palace we were leaving, documents in hand and heading straight back to the hotel, grabbing our luggage and setting off immediately to the airport, where our jet waited. We said nothing on the way, and my wife's mood was worrying me. That jet took us down to Barbados, where we hopped onto a 747 bound for London, a discreet change of plans – just in case. On the flight, sat in First Class, people delicately ignored us, glances made underneath eyebrows.

Jimmy was waiting in the coach at the airport, with the girls, a thoughtful touch. Through good old British rain we journeyed slowly home, the girls relaying to us all of the treats Jimmy had allowed them, showing us the new laptops he had bought them, Shelly's customised with Hannah Montana stickers, Lucy's adorned with Harry Potter stickers.

I studied the rain streaking diagonally across the windows, and heaved a sigh. To Jimmy I said, 'You found the mastermind?'

He nodded. 'The gentlemen lost a hand in a grenade accident a long time ago. He recently lost the second hand, just before getting arrested.'

'Should make going to the toilet hard,' I commented, no joy in my voice. 'Karl's fiancée?'

Jimmy took a moment. 'Wants nothing to do with us.'

'She blames *us*?' Helen asked.

Jimmy made a face and shrugged. 'Anger has to find a focus. I've compensated her, but I doubt she'll stay in touch. I compensated his parents as well; they're OK about it. Well – not OK about it, but they don't blame us. Mood at the house is a bit off, Rob and the guards a bit down, as you can imagine.'

Shelly told me, 'Karl has gone to work in London.'

I glanced at Helen, then addressed Shelly as she fiddled with her laptop. 'Yes, baby, he's gone to work in London.'

The next day I sat in my office, and just stared at the piles, wondering why I was bothering with any of this. I swivelled my chair and watched the rain hit the window for a minute before picking up the first report: Big Paul's fish farm. A diagram showed the areas developed, those yet to be developed, and rate of progress. I heaved a big breath and turned the page.

Jimmy knocked, and stepped into my office, the first time he'd viewed it. Without taking in the place, as if he'd been here many times before, he sat opposite me. 'Weather forecast for the next week is good, so how about our Scottish Castle? Your romantic trip away was ... cut short, so I thought we'd go ... fishing.'

I eased back and, swivelling, glanced through the window, the clouds broken.

Jimmy added, 'The files will still be there when you get back.'

'Have you spoken to Helen?'

'She's my PA: where I go, she's obliged to follow ... or be absent from work without a note from her mum. I may have mentioned it to Lucy, who's keen.'

'Yeah ... why not.' I stood.

That evening we departed by coach, our escorts following, soon on the M5 motorway and heading north. At 5am we negotiated tight bends down to the Castle, and I noticed a few tents on the grass as we pulled up. The castle staff were, quiet sensibly, fast asleep. As were the two girls. Jimmy and I stepped down and stretched, Big Paul easing out of his Range Rover as the sky adopted an amber hue, the sun fighting to rise. As a group, we walked down to the concrete jetty, the tide low and the sea dead calm.

'Peaceful,' I noted.

'I've got all the fishing gear,' Big Paul idly commented.

We sat on the coach till 6.30am, a maid at the castle noticing us and opening up. As quietly as we could, we claimed our rooms, soon heading down to a full English breakfast, the first customers of the day. Four RF medics joined us, surprised to find us in residence, and we caught up on the RF gossip. A Royal Marines Major and Captain

came down to breakfast a little later, their men camped out on the hillside. Still, the men had the weather. And if they didn't, they were supposed to be tough.

Big Paul set out before us and grabbed winkles for bait, plus a Mackerel pilfered from the kitchens, and some squid. The girls put their little pink Wellington boots on and we walked down as a group to the jetty, plenty of room for the group to fish off. Big Paul's two rods were already set-up, and he patiently helped Lucy whilst I assisted Shelly, the girl's rods suitably small and light. They lowered their baited hooks over the side, straight down till the weights touched the bottom. Helen laid out four deckchairs and opened a magazine, Jimmy and myself casting out. Despite the rocks at the shoreline, the bottom of the loch was supposed to be mostly sandy.

With our rods set-up, we admired the view down the loch, the day warming quickly. Ten minutes later, Big Paul pulled in a flatfish, the girls excitedly examining it, the odd arrangement where its eyes were both on the top of its flat head. Our first catch was not big enough for the pot, so was tossed back in.

When Shelly screamed I assisted, holding the rod whilst she reeled in a six inch Blenny. I unhooked it and put it in her bucket, my daughter squatting and studying her catch. After all, it had put up a fight. Lucy brought up crabs, shrieking and shaking them free. When Shelly brought up a crab, she grabbed it from behind and shoved it towards Helen's face, causing a shriek.

The day warmed nicely, everyone removing layers of clothing, lunch brought out to us, wet wipes to remove the stink of fish off fingers. Big Paul caught flatfish, eels, and a horrible looking Monkfish – all destined for the pot.

At 2pm I sat with Jimmy on the deckchairs, faces to the sun, cans of lager in hand, the girls off exploring rock pools with Helen. 'Peaceful here,' I commented.

'Far from the madding crowd,' Jimmy responded.

The RF team leader came and asked for a few fish, his team intending to eat some raw, cooking the rest. Big Paul took a bit of persuading, but allowed the man two fish.

At 4pm, the day hot and the tide right out, the sand was now exposed. We could see Shelly itching for a swim, goggles in hand and nagging Helen. Jimmy and I walked around, undressed down to our pants and walked in, the water absolutely bloody freezing. Shelly disappeared below us, back up a minute later with a lobster held high.

‘Hey, Big Paul!’ I shouted from the water. ‘Shelly got a lobster; better than your crappy fish.’

Shelly took her catch to the beach and studied it intensely for several minutes, soon going back for more, five large lobsters recovered from the depths. I figured we’d be eating them over Big Paul’s meagre catch. Chilled, we all towelled down and dressed, retiring to our rooms, the castle chef handed his live ingredients for tonight’s feast. I had figured that the girls would shy away from boiled lobster, but no, they observed us break them open. The girls copied, creating a mess, but enjoyed the white lobster flesh. So what if the waitress crunched exoskeleton as she walked around – we owned the damn place.

The good weather extended to the next day, so we ventured up the opposite hillside to the castle, peering down from our lofty vantage point, RAF jets screaming by. We met two RF teams out hiking, sweating as they plodded along with heavy rucksacks, and loudly encouraged them to put one foot in front of the other. The girls picked heather and chased after rabbits as we sat on the grass and took in the view, time moving very slowly.

Hiring a local tourist boat the next day, we donned red life jackets and set off, soon slowing to enjoy sea otters in the distance. That experience was topped by numerous inquisitive seals popping their heads above the water to view us. Colonies of seabirds were observed from a distance, the craft’s captain giving a running commentary of interesting facts, and we glimpsed dolphins on the way back. With a few hours of daylight left, we followed Big Paul to the trout stream and practised fly-fishing, not catching a damn thing.

The girls had enjoyed the boat trip, and nagged a little, so we repeated the loch excursion the following day, this time heading further around the headland, the wake of our boat briefly attracting dolphins. It took all of my strength to stop Shelly from plunging in after them.

After five days at the castle we all displayed modest suntans, and had all slowed to a different pace, to holiday pace. The Canadian style canoes were brought out of a shed and washed off, the whole gang setting off on an around-the-bay paddle, inquisitive sea otters again glimpsed. Then, following Jimmy’s direction, we suddenly sped up and reached the middle of the loch and upped oars. When Shelly shrieked I spun around, to see a dolphin breaking the surface nearby. These dolphins, British dolphins, were nothing like Flipper off the TV; they were eight feet long and a darker colour, black and white almost. They were bigger than our damn canoes. The pod

honoured us with their company for ten minutes, gracefully sliding through the water and circling us.

Turning back towards shore, I noticed other canoes, a darker colour, two men in each. 'Who are they?' I asked Jimmy, now concerned.

'Royal Marines, Special Boat Service,' Jimmy responded. 'Come on, let's race them.'

We picked up the pace and closed the distance, moving back towards the loch shore and adopting a parallel course.

'Nice day for it,' I shouted across the water's calm surface.

'You Jimmy Silo?' a man asked, looking very tired.

'Yes,' Jimmy responded. 'Want a race back?'

'You're not exactly in fast canoes, guv,' a solider responded.

'Thousand pounds if you beat us in,' Jimmy said, he and Big Paul taking the lead. It was the like the opening scene to Hawaii Five-O, and I even hummed the tune. Helen and I picked up the pace, soon cruising quickly along and surprising the soldiers, Jimmy in a mad race with the lead military canoe, he and Big Paul frantically paddling.

'Come on, ya fucking Marine poofters,' Big Paul shouted at them. He had been Special Air Service; these lads were Special Boat Service, their archenemies in dick measuring contests.

Jimmy got into his rhythm, and his damn canoe was about to break the surface and start flying, pulling away from us, the girls encouraging mummy and daddy to go faster. Jimmy's canoe hit the sand first, by two lengths, and Big Paul was suitably ungracious and rude, the solders downright bleeding knackered. Well, they had already completed a ten-mile ocean trek. We pulled in just behind the last soldier's canoe, a respectable placing for a married couple with kids. Big Paul was soaked from Jimmy's splashes, Jimmy now splashing his face with cold seawater.

It was a good finish to the holiday, and after a wash and a meal we set off south towards the house. En route, Helen and I agreed that we had enjoyed this more than we figured we would have enjoyed a week without the girls. I think we both turned middle-aged in that instant.

We had found more time for each other this trip, even with the girls with us, and held hands a lot. And, after Cuba, Helen seemed more affectionate, more needing of my attention. I guess all it needed was to be shot at. Again.

War in the desert

Somali and Ethiopia shared a long border, and as such shared a few small areas that had been disputed over the years, but mostly just by those locals living close to them. One day in July, a brash group of young Ethiopian soldiers walked up to the border and to a Somali checkpoint. The Somali border officers on duty smiled and welcomed their visitors, soon held at gunpoint and marched across to Ethiopia.

When the news reached Jimmy he called Ngomo straight away. 'Launch Operation Bucket and Spade.' He opened the basement command centre and I was worried, and rightly so. Jimmy had been waiting for just such an incursion, and hinted that this incursion was both advanced and 'timely.'

In Somali, Abdi put on his combats and his boots and called in his senior officers. Ngomo ordered the Pathfinders – those now training in Somali, to board their helicopters and fly up to the section of border in question. There they disembarked, marched all night and crossed the border, encircling the small town where the Somali border guards were being held. And I found nothing in the news about the men's abduction, puzzling it. The Pathfinders liberated the captive men, storming the police station where the Somalis were being held, killing thirty Ethiopians. Extracting the men and withdrawing, the alarm was sounded, the Pathfinders now killing anyone that approached or challenged them. They walked a mile out of town, skirmishing on the way, to be picked up by helicopter and whisked back across the border. Now Reuters reported the Somalis abducted, making me scratch my head.

The morning edition of the African Times ran the story that the Somalis had been abducted, and that the Somali Rifles had rescued them. They neglected to mention the sixty dead Ethiopian soldiers, plus the odd slow moving Ethiopian housewife and a few goats.

The Ethiopian Government responded with threats, and moved tanks towards the border. That constituted a 'material threat' to a member of the economic co-operation group, which triggered a mobilisation of some ten thousand Rifles from a variety of nations, even from down in Zimbabwe. Mawlini went on full alert, the base a hive of activity as Jimmy told me to pack a bag. With a bad feeling about where this was heading, and Jimmy not being very forthcoming, we flew down to Goma hub overnight, changing to a

flight to Mawlini and arriving in time for breakfast. Booked in at the hotel, we climbed to the rooftop bar in time to see a dozen Cobras take off.

Mac came up to us. 'We going to fucking war or something?'

'Hope not,' Jimmy responded.

Mac did not seem convinced by that. 'All the Cobras are live-firing in the desert like they'll be needed soon!'

'As I said, let's hope not,' Jimmy reiterated, camel steaks placed down.

Mac sat and studied us. 'You reckon the Ethiopians are daft enough to attack Abdi?'

'Abdi has no fighter aircraft, few tanks, and the Ethiopians do,' Jimmy pointed out.

'So what happened at that border incursion?' Mac asked.

'Somali Rifles launch a quiet and discreet rescue – Somali style.'

'They shot up the whole fucking town!' Mac noted.

'As I said – Somali style.'

'Congo Rifles flew in here last night; Zimbabweans, Zambians, the lot,' Mac reported. 'Fucking flights all bastard night long! They've all driven over the border.'

'So, besides that, how're things, Mac?' I lightly asked.

'Aye, fucking peachy,' he quipped.

A long way off, a column of Ethiopian tanks moved east, and towards the town that had witnessed the quiet and discreet Somali rescue. They halted at the border, their orders simply to protect that part of their territory. Since the Somalis did not have many tanks of their own, it was a bit of overkill. Across the border, in the hills and rocks that flanked the border road, the Pathfinders and Somali Rifles dug in and made ready.

After a camel steak breakfast, I drove around to the helicopter compound, finding Hal walking across the apron with his gunner. 'Aren't you a bit old for all this?'

'Still show you how to fly, sonny. What's the flap anyway?'

'Ethiopians may cross the Somali border.'

Hal stopped dead. 'And we'll go out and attack them? Paul, Kenya has a border with Ethiopia. You looking to start a war?'

'Somali and Kenya are signatories of a mutual defence pack.' I shrugged. 'Politics.'

He poured me a cold drink in the pilot's lounge, and we slouched down. After a moment studying me, he said, 'You lost a bodyguard in Cuba?'

I nodded. 'Bullet was meant for me. Missed by six inches, if that. Guess I haven't been doing enough to help the world of late.'

'They caught them?'

'Ex-CIA, and ex ... because we got them fired.'

Hal shook his head, wiping sweat off his forehead with a sleeve. 'It's a fucked up world. After that drug you released I figured you'd be popular.'

'We are in some circles. And ... there's something you need to know. I ... asked Doc Adam to inject you with the wonder drug a few years back, when you fell ill after Mozambique. You were touch and go.'

'That explains a lot; it took ten years off me. I go jogging in the mornings with the others.'

'You got the full strength dose, most just get a quarter of that,' I explained, bending the truth a little.

'Most of this lot have had it lately, hell of a difference – they all jog around the airfield in the mornings! And none of the big-brained fucking doctors can figure it out. Quacks!'

'It's made a difference around the world,' I sighed.

'Made more than a difference, Paul,' Hal stated, a serious expression adopted as he eased forwards. 'Folks around here have put two and two together ... and come up with an AIDS orphanage free of AIDS.'

I glanced at the other pilots. 'We injected them all years ago, cured the lot.'

'And in the Congo, and down in Zimbabwe?' Hal nudged.

I nodded. 'We injected about fifty thousand kids.'

'That's fifty thousand reasons why people should not be trying to shoot holes in you.'

'Well, there are other things we're involved with, like world politics.'

'Always a dangerous business. How's the family?'

'Great. We just had a holiday in Scotland, good weather, nice break away. How's *your* nipper?'

'Growing rapidly. She wants to be a nurse,' Hal enthusiastically reported. 'She was up here the other week, stayed with me during half term. She likes to fly as well, and she's smarter than me. That orphanage of yours – they bring them along quickly, by god. I got a computer in the house, and she teaches *me* how to use the damn thing!'

'Listen, if there's any action over the border – be careful, huh.'

'Yes, mum.'

Driving back, ten minutes later, my escorts stopped at the Rifles HQ building and informed me that I was wanted inside. I found Ngomo and Jimmy huddled around a map. 'Didn't you used to have a desk job?' I asked Ngomo as I shook his giant steak of a hand.

'I prayed for a conflict,' he boomed. 'And Ethiopia delivered.'

I scanned the map, seeing marks for Rifles units all along the lengthy border. 'They kissed and made up yet?'

'No, they threaten to take the land they claim,' Ngomo reported. 'We shall sit and wait like the spider.'

After twenty minutes of listening to movements and dispositions reports coming in, I got the impression that they were plotting something. They used the word 'trap' and 'trigger' a lot. Driving back to the RF compound, Jimmy explained that the senior staff were not happy and wanted a word about the drug. We pulled up at the lecture theatre and stepped in, finding twenty of the senior staff assembled.

'God bless all here,' I said. 'Who's round is it?' It did not generate a smile, just polite, forced movements of cheeks.

'So,' Jimmy began, his hands held wide. 'You have some questions.'

Doc Hoskins asked, 'May we ask ... did the kids at the orphanage get injected with the wonder drug?'

'They did,' Jimmy responded without hesitation.

'They were tested upon?' a doctor asked.

'No, we ... were tested upon, Paul and myself. Fifteen years ago we were both injected. And, as you can see, there are no side effects, Paul producing a healthy set of girls. And as for Ebeye, you need to be aware of only one thing: ninety-five percent of the kids were terminal, most dying of AIDS. From the day I took over we lost no more than half a dozen, and none since that time.'

'You had the drug all those years ago?' they queried.

'As you've already mentioned, it had to be tested. So we injected terminal patients, thousands of them, and all survived. Besides, we didn't want to cause the kind of reaction that the drug has caused, the furore, and the misuse of it.'

'Misuse?'

'Old ladies inject themselves to look better. The drug doesn't always go to the sick or the terminal.'

A man raised his hand. 'I have friends who are experts in disease medicine, and they can't make head nor tail of it.'

'I'm sure they'll figure it out eventually,' Jimmy said. 'And don't ask me, I'm no scientist.'

‘Were the Rifles injected?’ a woman asked.

‘Yes, all inoculated. That’s why they’re so fit.’

‘Jimmy, you haven’t aged a day since I met you,’ Coup stated. ‘Is that the drug?’

‘There’s a stronger version,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘The common drug, the one curing AIDS, is one eighth of the strength. The drug Doc Adam has been offering you is one quarter.’

‘What’s the difference – in practical terms?’

‘If you take Doc Adam’s drug you’ll sleep four hours a night and run thirty miles before breakfast, as well as being immune to every disease known to man. It also seems to slow the ageing process.’

‘Fucking hell, Jimmy,’ Coup let out, the medics glancing at each other.

‘If you have any doubts, don’t use it - it’s a personal choice. I will, however, recommend the lower dosage for all Rescue Force staff working in tropical areas.’

‘What effect does it have on trauma patients?’ they asked.

‘Injecting a trauma patient will accelerate the healing process; four weeks will become four days. And its excellent for burns; someone with ninety-percent burns would be cured in a week.’

A chorus of whispers shot around the room.

‘Where the fuck did it come from?’ they asked.

‘Russia, some accidental breakthrough, and the CIA had it for twenty years. I bribed a few people, got hold of it, and developed it for AIDS treatment. Rest was a side effect.’

‘Will it be carried by all RF staff in the field?’ a man asked.

‘I hope so, because it’ll make a hell of a difference. But it’s not cheap, not yet.’

‘You all driving the electric cars?’ I asked, wishing to change the subject.

They nodded. ‘I haven’t charged mine in a month,’ someone said.

‘Another miraculous breakthrough,’ someone curtly commented.

‘There’s no pleasing some people,’ I quipped.

Jimmy told the man, ‘The technology was there twenty years ago, but hidden by the oil companies. There’s also a shit load of secret patents that I’m after, all sorts of technology that they don’t want out there.’

‘You out to fix the world, Jimmy?’ a medic asked.

‘Yes.’ He waited as they glanced at each other.

This group was not stupid, they had observed us close up for many years, and these latest breakthroughs were astounding. They

loved us to bits, but were just as curious as anyone else. For the first time, I felt that our cover was about to be blown.

A man raised his hand. 'When this "M" Group of world leaders meet – do you address them?'

'Yes, about a variety of projects I'm involved with, in particular African investment.'

The same man said, 'You have a drug that cures everything – which is impossible, an electric car that never stops, your man Crusty predicts quakes – which is impossible, you make more money than anyone else on the planet, and you don't age. Is there something we're missing, Jimmy?'

'Some gratitude,' I suggested, now secretly worried.

'There's only one thing to say to that,' Jimmy began. 'Wait and see what I do in the next few years. You ain't seen nothing yet, people.'

'Do you have any sensible questions?' I asked.

'You mind if I ask why they tried to shoot you in Cuba?' Coup asked.

I stepped closer to him. 'A difference of opinion, about releasing advanced technology,' I carefully stated, and lied. 'Our electric car will cost the oil business a lot of money, but might just save global warming. You figure it out.'

Jimmy put in, 'When we took over in the Congo they tried to kill us many times - they even shot down a plane - because they wanted to continue to remove ore, and to keep Africa poor. Now look at the Congo.' He held his hands wide. 'Jobs, hospitals, law and order, and - most importantly - a future. Not everyone wants that for Africa. Now, does anyone wish to question the value of what I have achieved for Africa?'

No one responded.

'Fine, because I fancy some lunch. We'll be here a few days if you have Rescue Force questions, problems or gripes.'

In the rooftop bar I said, 'Ungrateful bunch of fuckers.'

'They're not stupid, they can see it more than most. They've seen me pull far too many rabbits out of the hat, and they're afraid. And I'm afraid that the clock is counting down.'

'You think we'll be exposed?'

'Two or three years.'

I sighed. 'Not looking forward to that; be even more nutters at the gate then. And I have two kids!'

'They'll turn out fine. The kids, not the nutters. Now, shut up and order.'

That evening, the Ethiopian tank commander got bored of sitting in his warm tank, and ordered his troop of twenty-five tanks forwards - without permission from his superiors. The Pathfinders sat quietly eating meat from tins, no fires allowed, and carefully watched the tanks trundle past as the sun set on the horizon.

The TV news had been reporting the build-up of African Rifles units some ten miles from the Ethiopian border; tents pitched, campfires going. And no armour. No tanks, no armoured personnel carriers, and no air cover. They were a tempting target, sat having a brew and sing-a-long around the campfire.

The last tank in the slow moving Ethiopian column was closely followed by four support vehicles. As soon as the last of those vehicles had rounded a bend, the Pathfinders on the Ethiopian side of the border blew a very large hole into the road at a narrow passing. No re-supply would be coming anytime soon, and no retreat was now possible.

History would record that, as soon as the Ethiopians knew that their tanks had crossed the border, a recall order had been dispatched. Jimmy knew that as well, but he had a plan. The road in front of the lead tank blew, alerting the column to the fact that something was amiss. It was the cue for the Pathfinders, who took their time to pick off the intruders with anti-tank rockets.

By dawn, the border road was strewn with burnt-out tanks and destroyed lorries, bodies littering the roadside. None of the invaders had survived. Kenyan military cameramen had filmed the scene at dawn and transmitted it by satellite, the Ethiopian Government waking to the images of a tank column that had been decimated. They, the Government, did not wish to escalate things, but they had a population to serve, and that population now wanted blood, protests breaking out in the streets.

Ethiopian Migs took off and headed east at high speed, their target being Mogadishu, secure in the knowledge that the Somalis possessed no aircraft. It was a mistake, because north of Mogadishu someone had positioned a great big brand new shiny nuclear reactor, paid for with western money. Now, high above Mogadishu, an American AWACS plotted the approach of the Migs. An operator tracked their course, projected that they were on a course for Mogadishu, and got on the radio.

‘Ethiopian Migs heading directly for the nuclear power plant.’ The truth had been stretched by some twenty miles.

I had been in the Rifles HQ when the message was received, and became seriously concerned.

Jimmy tapped the map. 'There's never a US Navy carrier battle group around when you need one. Oh, I forgot, there is one – off the coast of Mogadishu.' He made eye contact with me. 'Forget my own head if it wasn't screwed on.'

'Carrier battle group?' I repeated.

'F14 Tomcat; the best aircraft ever invented, now or in the future. Joint strike fighter? Bollocks!'

The AWACS reported the nuclear facility under threat, several flights of F14s screaming in at wave-top height to avoid being detected. The residents of Mogadishu received a rude wake-up call as the jets screamed overhead, heading west. A few minutes later, the formations of Ethiopian Migs were buzzed at high speed by the F14s and thought better of it, turning for home. Problem was, that AWACS operator.

'Bogeys turning after you, they're hostile. Break and engage.'

The Migs turned in a circle and headed west in hurry, the F14s vectored onto them. None of the Migs survived. As the last Mig hit the desert sands, scaring the goats, the UN Security Council met in the middle of the night in New York. They sent Ethiopia a complaint about the attack on the nuclear facility, and aggressive moves against the peaceful US F14s, the communiqué leaked to the press.

Ethiopia was now down twenty-five tanks and six expensive Migs, this whole episode being a very costly adventure for them. Not wishing to invade Somalia, but wishing to appease its unruly crowds, the Ethiopians mobilized their army and moved columns towards their southern border. One particular column, in the very south, was isolated on the map by Jimmy. If you drew a wiggly line, you could – if you were a bit drunk – say that it put them on course for Mawlini. And that was not allowed.

The base alert was sounded, all non-essential staff ordered to leave, medics to make ready for casualties. The Rifles were already on the border, and anyone moving towards us would have to be suicidal. As I stood there, quietly cursing Jimmy for arranging all this, I heard the Cobras take off. I stepped outside to see a line of twenty Cobras and ten Hueys disappear into the distance, my thoughts with Hal. I heaved a breath, cursed Jimmy, and returned to the map table.

The Ethiopian tank column had no intention of crossing the border, but a move towards that border was a provocation. What were the tanks there for, if not to attack? They halted ten miles short of the border and formed a nice neat line, their parking skills admirable. On their hot engines they heated water for a brew, and lit

cigarettes, wondering if they could hear distant thunder as they discussed the current market rate for goats. Time was when a weary soldier could go home for the weekend, buy a goat and slaughter it for a good family feast. Not any more, prices were rising. As they lamented about better times in years gone by, the roar grew. The sky was clear, so they scratched their beards.

The first Cobra in the line fired from a mile out, hitting a tank and decimating the crews sat around it. It followed-up with anti-personnel rockets before banking southwest, its colleagues taking it in turn to fire at the line of neatly parked tanks. The tank crews managed to move several tanks, forwards or backwards, but their efforts were of little use. Inside an hour some thirty tanks and twenty support vehicles were burning, few left alive as the Cobras returned to base.

‘Job done,’ Jimmy stated.

‘And the purpose of this in the grand scheme of things?’ I testily questioned.

‘To ... diminish the Ethiopian Army and Air Force a little, to let them know that our nuclear reactor will be protected, to discourage them from any future border incursions, and to let all the terrorists in the Middle East know that we have a great big shiny nuclear plant here. Now, without that plant we could not have justified the US involvement, and their involvement will help to peg the power plant as western, and therefore a nice target.’

‘Why the fuck ... would you want them to target it?’

‘Mop up. If they come for it ... we’re ready. And they will, their best fighters being lost in the process.’

‘It’s a hell of an expensive decoy!’

‘Oh, it does have a genuine need here, but I like to have several uses for something. And now CAR will open up a few nice oilfields here, in Somalia. Guess ... where?’

I gave it some thought. ‘Along the Ethiopian border?’

Jimmy lifted his eyebrows and nodded. ‘If not dealt with now, they would have disrupted our oil production later.’

‘And you’re using Somalia to mop up Middle East terrorists.’

‘Better than the Richmond High Street!’

The UN asked for a ceasefire, and got one. The Rifles were pulled back, a few brigades left in place as a token gesture, and peace reclaimed the region, the Ethiopians now certain to think twice about future border incursions. CAR would move into the new region and sink wells, striking oil, finding a substantial field.

And in the weeks that followed, Arab fighters journeyed to Somali, to a well prepared killing zone that a fly could not get through, our agreement with an enlivened Abdi being that the attacks would not be made public.

Back at the house, I had asked Jimmy, ‘What *exactly* would exposure entail?’

‘A good speech by me, support of the world leaders, and then lots of silly questions about Elvis, and what would happen if I killed my own grandfather.’

‘Oh. And ... it’s certain in the years ahead?’

‘Would have been around 2010, but ... but the drug has aroused suspicions ahead of time. But, on the other hand, the drug will make us popular. The electric car is five years ahead of itself, so that will arouse some suspicions as well. But, Hardon Chase and Petrosi at the CIA are onboard, so they could manufacture some nice decoys and be helpful. They’ll have to be careful about lying to congress, and if asked directly they’d have to admit the truth. Then we’d go and live on a small island. Or in China. You know, I actually thought about relocating there if things got hairy over here.’

‘And will they? Get hairy?’ I pressed.

‘Like a roller coaster. But all you need to deflect attention away from yourself, is something far more scary on the horizon – and that we have by the bucket load, unfortunately.’

‘I’m sure you know what you’re doing...’

‘But?’

‘But I have a family. And ... people shoot at me,’ I pointed out.

‘If and when we’re exposed, the world’s governments will have no choice but to offer better protection than a US President,’ Jimmy said, adopting a reassuring tone. ‘And I’m hoping that, with Hardon Chase on our side, we can drag it to the end of his term.’

‘Four years,’ I thought out loud. ‘Shelly will be ... twelve.’

Prince Ali Bin Something

Sykes took a call at his London office inside the MOD building, from a Saudi Prince that insisted on meeting him. The British Government were not about to upset the Prince so, after consulting with the Prime Minister, Sykes drove around to the hotel that the Prince was now staying at, protection in tow. In a penthouse suite he

found the Prince and his entourage, Sykes leaving his security staff outside the door.

‘Greetings, Mister Sykes,’ the Prince announced from where he sat in the window, his aides stood waiting. ‘Please, do come in.’ His accent was the result of an expensive education, finished at Oxford University. He sat now in his full regalia of white Arab robes. But, despite being a prince, he was fifty-five years old.

Sykes eased down. ‘Thank you, Your Highness. How may I be of service?’

‘So much more polite than your countryman; Mac, I believed he was called, the commander of the base at Mawlini.’

‘You ... spoke to Mac?’ Sykes puzzled.

‘Yes, with regard to a donation to Rescue Force. He referred to me as Your Worshipfulness, which may be down to his lack of education, or the attitude he picked up in your army. I would hope that he was just being ignorant, but I have also had correspondence with his paymaster, the legendary Mister Silo, who referred to me as Your Royal Smelly Fly Trap.’

Sykes shifted uneasily in his seat. ‘My Government would like to distance itself from *both* ... sets of references.’

‘Ah, ever the eternal diplomat, Mister Sykes, the product of a proper education.’ The Prince dismissed his entourage to the next room. ‘Now, let me be frank, Deputy Director Sykes – a Deputy Director for a very long time. Mister Silo and his associates first caught my attention many years ago, since I take an interest in the horn of Africa and Somalia, and I have followed his activities very closely. May I say, Mister Sykes, that I as a child I enjoyed a puzzle to solve, and your Mister Silo has been a source of amusement for a decade or more. Amusement – in that I am amused when I ask my staff questions that confound them.

‘You know, the Somalis slapped my ambassador about the face and threw him out of the country - the first time in living memory anyone has shown us such affront. But my spies inside the Somali establishment suggested that your Mister Silo cautioned tolerance and diplomacy, at a time when I thought such an affront might have been his doing. He is an enigma, wrapped in a puzzle, surrounded by a high fence with dogs that have very sharp teeth. And by those dogs, I mean people like yourself.’

‘Your Highness?’

‘Don’t be coy, Mister Sykes. I have spent three hundred million dollars on bribing people the world over in order to unwrap some of the puzzle that is Jimmy Silo, and I know more than you might wish

me to. Recently, both an American gentleman and a French gentleman were most forthcoming, and most generously rewarded. You see, Mister Sykes, I have a lot of money, and I don't mind using it to solve puzzles that keep me awake at night. In Riyadh, I have a team of ten men who do nothing other than scour the world for information about one James Silovitch. They collate it, sort it, sift it, make intelligent assessments, then tie themselves in knots when they try and explain what motivates him. I have ten researchers, and twenty opinions, which is why I like to bribe former members of the intelligence services.'

'I'm not one of them, Your Highness,' Sykes firmly pointed out.

'Indeed no, or I would have no respect for you. No, you are a puzzle in yourself – in that no one has ever held such a post as yours for so long: "M" Group liaison. And you look ... fit and healthy.'

'Did you have a question, Your Highness,' Sykes nudged.

'I know far more than you realise, and I seek an audience with Mister Silo, for which I have already donated a substantial amount to Rescue Force Kenya, to this rude man, and may make further substantial donations. I may also make public what I found out, something that may make your job a tad harder in the near future.'

Sykes pulled out his phone, and selected Jimmy's private number. 'Jimmy, it's Sykes. I'm sat here with Crown Prince Ali Bin—'

'Tomorrow, 2pm at the house, three aides, British police escort.' He hung up.

Sykes stared at his phone for a moment, then put it away. 'Mister Silo will see you tomorrow, at his residence in Wales, at 2pm. You are requested to bring only three aides under a British police escort.'

The Prince smiled widely. 'And yet, Mister Sykes, you did not even ask a question. It was as if ... he knew in advance.' He stood. 'Please send me an escort in the morning, at the prescribed time to depart – allowing for dreadful London traffic.'

Sykes had followed the Prince up, and now bowed respectfully.

At 1.30pm the next day, the three-vehicle convoy arrived at the house, extra police laid on. I knew who was coming, and when the vehicles pulled up I stepped outside to greet them.

'Alright, mate,' I offered the Prince, he and his aides now dressed in a western suits, looking up at the house and taking in the grounds.

'The ever-rude Mister Paul Holton.' We shook.

'It's not the words that are spoken, but how they are heard, that sets the tone,' I said, one of Jimmy's phrases.

The Prince stopped. 'Then I shall listen with better ears.'

I gestured him inside, and led his party to a lounge, the group keenly peering into each room like tourists as we progressed. In the lounge, Jimmy sat reading a paper. He did not stand, but he did at least lower the paper, folding it neatly. I gestured the Prince's party to a sofa. 'Drinks, gentlemen?'

The Prince sat. 'Would you ask Cookie for four green teas, please.'

I sat and lifted a phone, ordering the teas, a beer for myself.

Jimmy began with, 'Did you come here with the intention of bugging this meeting, Crafty?'

The Prince smiled widely. 'No one has called me Crafty since boarding school, here in England. And no, no bugs.'

'Are you sure?' Jimmy posed. 'Really sure that you trust your men, that your uncle does not keep track of you – and your activities?'

The Prince stopped smiling, and I noticed Big Paul hovering in the doorway. Jimmy now beckoned Big Paul in, and pointed at the man on the end. Big Paul gestured the man up, then patted down the man's lower back. He faced Jimmy and nodded. The Prince was on his feet, shouting in Arabic. He got back a few terse words, the man stepping out, Big Paul following closely. Sitting again, the Prince composed himself. I took out the gizmo for interfering with electronics and turned it on.

'I apologise for that,' our visitor offered. 'Family.'

'And when your family is your boss...' Jimmy said, his hands wide. 'So, how can I help you?'

'I believe you already know the answer to that question.'

'Yes, but it would be impolite to assume.'

'And yet, not impolite to treat me like your gardener.'

'Who is the king, and who the serf?' Jimmy posed.

'I shall adopt ... a subservient role for this meeting, since this is your house.' The teas were brought in, so Jimmy grabbed the spare one. 'I have bribed a great many people, and I have spent a great deal of money doing so, many hundreds of millions of dollars –'

'What a waste,' I cut in with.

'Perhaps. But I like to solve problems, especially when they affect me directly. May I ask, first of all, if you are blocking the African nations from joining OPEC?'

'Yes.'

'May I ask ... as to why?'

'It was a gloriously foolish mistake for the Americans to persuade OPEC to trade in dollars. A great benefit for America for decades,

but the books will need to be balanced at some point. That point, in the years ahead, will see OPEC dropping the dollar, and problems for the American President in power at the time, who, having a large nuclear arsenal, will wish to use it to ... solve problems.'

'Ah,' the Prince said after a long pause. He sighed, 'It is something we know of, yet never dare speak of; like a distant relative who is in prison.' He sipped his tea. 'Are my assumptions about you correct, Mister Silo?'

'You would have to list them, for me to correct you,' Jimmy suggested.

'You work for this Mister Magestic?'

'If not in body, then in spirit, yes.'

'An ... intriguing answer. And he can predict the future with great accuracy?'

'He can indeed.'

The Prince took a moment, staring into his tea. 'The Chinese super-drug, filtered through pigs blood; was that in any way deliberate – the choice of pigs?'

'No, just simple biology.'

'But the drug that *you* were injected with was pure; a concentrate.'

'Correct.'

'And if one wanted to obtain this drug...?'

'It's expensive,' Jimmy pointed out. 'And I am selective about who receives it.'

'My price ... is one hundred million dollars, but I have some questions first. It cures and prevents all diseases?'

'Diseases are adaptive. There may occur something in the future that may make you unwell.'

'But would not kill me?'

'No.'

'And it would slow ageing?' the Prince pressed, and by his tone I figured that it was the main point of interest.

'You would live to be a hundred and sixty in good health.'

'That is a long time. And with further injections?'

'You would live forever,' Jimmy suggested.

'And if I wait, will the drug be developed in the decades ahead?'

'Yes, in around fifteen years, maybe less.'

The Prince thought it through. 'I wish it now.'

'Order the transfer of the funds to Rescue Force Kenya,' Jimmy suggested as he stood.

The Prince and his aides followed Jimmy up, and I wondered where my bloody beer had gone. Our guest took out his phone and ordered the transfer.

‘Follow me, but just you,’ Jimmy told the Prince, and led him out. They stepped down to the basement, where one of Sykes doctors waited. Jimmy took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeve, instructing the Prince to do likewise. The doctor drew blood.

‘I heard that it was blood to blood,’ the Prince commented, injected a moment later, two full needles worth.

‘You’ll run a temperature for a day, drink plenty of water,’ the doctor explained. ‘Your urine will smell bad for a week, and you should eat more protein, more meat. You’ll sleep less and be able to start exercising after five days.’

‘Exercising?’

Jimmy explained, ‘You’ll be able to run marathons – and win!’

‘The soldiers, the Rifles?’

‘Have all been injected, and are very hard to kill,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘Pray that you are never on the receiving end of their anger.’

Jimmy led the Prince out, thanking him for the donation, and waved the cars goodbye.

‘That supposed to happen?’ I asked as we stood on the gravel at the front of the house.

‘Yes. I’d be tempted to use him, but he can’t be trusted. Besides...’

We turned, stepping into the house.

‘Besides what?’

‘A year from now his uncle will kill him.’

‘Then why inject him, for fuck’s sake?’ I pressed.

‘First, the money, and second ... he would have gone public with what he thinks he knows.’

I rang Rudd and asked him to check the bank account, getting back a “Fuck me!” The Prince was good to his word, and would soon be jogging about the royal palace in, well, wherever he came from. And I never could pronounce his bleeding name.

I then rang Mac. ‘Mac, what did you say to that Saudi Prince?’

‘I was right polite, like. Honest,’ Mac protested.

‘I know, he just donated a hundred million dollars to you.’

There was a long pause. ‘He what?’

‘You heard, check with Rudd. He said you persuaded him.’

‘Oh ... he ... er did, did he. Well, aye.’

‘Nah, just kidding. You nearly blew the fucking deal, you dosy fucking Scotsman. Jimmy had to twist his arm to get the money.’

‘We got the money?’

‘Yeah, check with Rudd. Free beer for the troops this weekend, you rude bastard.’

A hell of a September

At the beginning of September, Jimmy informed me of a flood and two quakes. Then I noticed the dates. ‘You’ve got to be kidding!

‘Nope, they all occur at the same time.’

‘They serious?’

‘Quite serious, yes.’

‘We’ll split three ways?’ I questioned, getting back a nod. Oh, hell.

On September 15th we drove over to Mapley, a command meeting called, the senior staff up from Mawlini. After an hour of meeting and greeting, taunts and jibes, they eventually settled.

‘OK,’ Jimmy began. ‘I have a guy who reckons he can tell the difference between a bad cyclone, and a really bad one.’

‘What’s the difference?’ they asked.

‘One cause lots of damage, one causes lots and lots of damage,’ Jimmy said with a shrug. ‘He’s betting a cyclone in the Philippines will be a peach, so we’ll attend. That just leaves us the other problem: Crusty has come up with two earthquakes, both faults on the same plate, or crust, or whatever. And guess what: they all fall on the same day.’

‘The same fucking day? Three places? Three deployments?’ Bob Davies queried.

‘Three *major* deployments,’ Jimmy emphasised, causing a chorus of complaints.

‘Where?’ they asked.

‘Sumatra, Samoa, and the aforementioned Philippines. But, they’re not too far apart.’

‘Jimmy, your globe at home is a bit small, maybe,’ Doc Hoskins said. ‘They’re all a thousand miles apart.’

‘Yeah,’ I said. ‘But on the map they’re only this much.’ I held my forefinger and thumb close.

‘The budget cover this?’ Bob Davies asked.

Jimmy nodded. 'Leave that to me. Now, Samoa is a small island, so numbers will be limited, Sumatra will be headed by their own teams, and the Philippines will have their own people as well. So, work out some numbers and teams accordingly. I want the Australians, New Zealanders, the Fiji unit, Hawaii unit and Hong Kong as principles, Chinese behind them. British and French Alpha teams to Samoa, some Hueys to the Philippines, some to Samoa.

'Right, Doc Graham, you're running the show from here, since not even a superhero like you can be in three places at once. I want the New Zealand director responsible for Samoa, the Australian national director to handle Sumatra, and you can choose someone for the Philippines field command. Questions?'

They all grumbled under their breath, and we left them to it, our part done. We were the money and the direction, they were the nuts and bolts, the plans and procedures, the small detail; as well as a bunch of whinge-bags who loved stuff like this, yet always moaned and pretended that they didn't.

The following afternoon we returned, and they presented a plan to the entire assembly of national representatives in the lecture theatre; dates, times and routes. Advance parties of facilitators would set off within days, working like movie scene scouts and getting a lay of the land; hotels, access airfields and storage facilities. They would book themselves into hotels, reserve rooms, and start paying local workers to be prepared.

We stopped for lunch and made a few adjustments to the plan, before touring the airfield and greeting trainee rescuers and old hacks alike. A few new buildings had sprouted up, and some seemed to have moved all by themselves. That, or I had just forgotten the layout. The UK Huey training school had grown, and now qualified dozens of fresh pilots each year. One new building caught my attention, over the road from the main gate, and we drove over. The large building announced itself as "Diagnostic Training and Testing", which could mean that they tuned cars. We walked in, being greeted by nurses and doctors in their typical hospital uniforms, and climbed the stairs to a darkened observation lounge. We sat with a few grey-haired old doctors and peered down through soundproof glass at a Silo Stiffy, getting a commentary through speakers.

'Start again!' a senior man shouted.

The trainee, or young doctor, walked back to the door, stopped, and advanced when waved forwards. The dummy relayed a few symptoms and was checked over, soon going into arrest. From a side

room a crash team rushed in, the young doctor shouting instructions at them.

‘Stop!’ went up from the instructors. ‘You useless fucker! Start again!’

Laughing, we eased up and wandered the building. After all, we’d paid for the damn thing. Ten such rooms had been set up, one dummy now being operated upon. We sat next to other onlookers.

‘Will the patient make it?’ I whispered to the man next to me.

‘He’s not bad. First time appendix for the young lad.’

‘Is it realistic enough?’ I asked.

‘Oh, hell yes. You sometimes forget it’s a dummy.’

‘These all hospital employees?’

The man turned his head and nodded. ‘A hundred a week come through here: short, sharp shock treatment. It scares the hell out of some people, but they leave knowing what to do, and having practised it. Save fumbling on their first few patients.’

‘Is our drug ... making people redundant?’ I risked.

The man made a face. ‘In some areas, but it doesn’t affect trauma or injury, or geriatric medicine, which is seventy-five percent of it. The researchers were affected the most, but they’re not doctors, mostly biochemists.’

I felt better. Biochemists: fuck ‘em.

We returned on Sept 25th with our bags and reclaimed our rooms, expecting a busy week. Helen fired up the communications centre and I fired up a Huey, taking Air Cadets for a spin and posing for group photographs.

In Bob’s office, the communications officer sat keenly ready. Jimmy told him, ‘Set filter to operation Philippine Storm.’

Fingers hurriedly struck keys. ‘Filter active.’

‘Sound deployment.’

‘Deployment order sent, Operation Philippine Storm activated.’

‘Re-set filter to Operation Sumatra IV and Operation Samoa I, and sound deployment.’

‘Filters set, sending signals.’

Bob and Jimmy both signed three forms, authorising the deployments. A distorted tanoy message echoed, teams forming up ready and being checked before heading towards waiting coaches, the local Air Cadets observing with keen envy. From the roof of the command building I watched the coaches pull away, our people heading towards Gatwick airport, where jeeps were now being loaded into the backs of IL76 transports. Our Hercules, four of them in the fleet now, were winging their way towards Samoa.

The only hiccup to the whole thing was the reaction of nice people of Samoa and American Samoa. When we issued the warning they all collectively panicked, many fleeing to New Zealand. Tourism died instantly and holidaymakers rushed to get off the island, those planning on travelling now cancelling their trips. Fortunately for the hotel owners, a very mad bunch of people called "RF watchers" descended in force, keen to see and feel a quake close up. The hotels filled back up.

On the islands, indigenous peoples living near the coast moved inland, to where we had already formed tented camps, and boats brought villagers over from small islands. To be fair to them, the local authorities handled it well.

Given that half of the name American Samoa was "American", and the island was technically a US colony, Hardon Chase sent a few thousand soldiers, a medical team and many tents. The poor island was weighed down with more rescuers than indigenous people.

On the 25th, the cyclone started to have an effect on the Philippines, and the last few flights to land were buffeted. Now there was little our people could do till the rains stopped. They hunkered down in hotel rooms in Manila, since tents were out of the question during the storm. Theirs was a waiting game.

During the day of the 28th, night time in Samoa, the ground shook, and the crazy quake followers jumped up and checked their equipment, rushing outside in the hope of filming a tsunami actually coming ashore. They were not disappointed, and several were killed, many injured, making me shout and curse at them from afar. The locals, feeling the ground shake, ran for the hills, and few were injured or killed. Houses had been destroyed by the quake and resulting tsunami, but the tented towns easily coped with the influx. Search and rescue operations began, but there were few missing persons to find. A long and costly rebuilding programme began.

The next afternoon the quake struck Sumatra, the people less prepared and many killed and injured across a wide area. There, our people were more keenly needed, and kept busy.

In the control room, warm bodies came and went all day and all night, people sleeping when they could. It was a well-oiled machine these days, but there was always the unexpected, such as searching for a bunch of twelve tsunami watchers who were now missing. In Sumatra, a chimney had toppled onto a RF jeep injuring its crew, which meant several other teams now had to extract them, and we had to arrange return flights and medical care.

In Manila, the rain lashed the streets and filled the gullies, people and houses swept away. Our teams ventured out whilst the storm was still raging, being filmed yanking people up out of the water from the sides of bridges, our Hueys following victims caught in fast flowing rivers as they sped along toward an uncertain fate. One Huey hit a power line and dropped like a stone, breaking in two, the crew and passengers all suffering minor injuries. I checked if Dunnaw was flying. Each incident generated a mountain of paperwork, forms and more forms, plus families to be notified.

Poor old Bob Davies and Doc Graham were knackered, dark rings around their eyes. I felt like injecting them. Still, we all pitched in and covered for them when they wanted a few hours sleep. I even called a few families to inform them of injuries to their loved ones. Helen kept the press fed with updates and details, names of British rescuers injured, and I kept the press fed with coffee and doughnuts.

By time October appeared on the calendar we were just about done in Samoa, long-term teams left in place, the main body of rescuers withdrawn. Sumatra was dragging on a bit with searches in remote areas and the outbreak of disease, but we scaled down and withdrew many of the teams. The Philippines, on the other hand, was getting worse and we increased the size of the teams, Hong Kong deploying two hundred rescuers, European Supplementals being flown out – when the weather permitted. Some got stuck in Singapore. Remote villages were cut off by mudslides, and the few deployed Hueys were kept busy.

We left Mapley after five days, the girls staying with us some of that time, and returned feeling tired. But it was a contended kind of tired, a feeling that we had made a difference. A mountain of paperwork awaited me, and my team gave me verbal reports to speed things up. Sat there, I'd say: yes, no, no way, or tell them to fuck off. Two hours cleared quite a backlog. The report about our electric cars had caught my interest.

Several British politicians had taken to driving the cars in order to show their green credentials, and a number of London taxi drivers had adopted them. Many of those new cars had been smashed up within weeks by other, jealous, taxi drivers, a lesson for the future. We had given the staff at Mapley a hundred vehicles to make use of, and they could be seen tearing along the motorways, all sporting large lettering that proclaimed them as electric cars. Bumper stickers announced: the car in front of you is electric.

In South Wales, we had given a hundred cars to taxi drivers, who were now making huge profits from having not paid for their

vehicles, plus the low running costs. Several more were duly smashed up by their rivals, but at least they all wanted one now. The staff at Pineapple and CAR were handed them as pool cars, and they became a common sight. In Sweden, the government took delivery of a thousand and sung the car's praises. That was echoed by the Dutch, the Germans and the French. We even had the first few cars stolen and driven to Moscow. Well, you know you have a good product when Russian mafia gangs steal them to order over BMWs and Mercedes.

Jimmy then introduced hundreds of them to the islands of Malta and Tenerife, where fuel imports were costly. Tourists were soon being whisked around in taxis that cost around a penny a day to run. Advance orders for the cars, from China, topped fifty thousand around Europe.

In the States, a report both puzzled me, and made me smile wryly. Several of our cars had crashed and caught fire, injuring drivers, several more leaked fumes and made their drivers ill, and their road safety was being panned. That was all very interesting, since we had not sent any to the States, and the cars had not been given either import licenses or road worthy certificates yet. Still, numerous lawsuits were pending against the Chinese manufacturer. Given that it was illegal to import the vehicles to the States, I couldn't wait for the day in court to come around: madam, where did you buy this vehicle?

I sent Pineapple Music magazine a lengthy piece on the conspiracy by the oil companies, and they ran it, the article soon copied in the mainstream press. Jimmy had been right to keep the cars out of the States.

In China, meanwhile, they were rolling out electric buses based on the same technology, their oil consumption dropping by the day. They had also designed a car for the internal markets, a tad cheaper, and were rolling them out as only the Chinese could, by the thousands each day. Prince Ali Bin something may have been feeling a lot fitter these days, but his bank balance was about to catch a cold.

India then bought the technology off China for a staggering sum of money, a portion of which came our way. Soon, those little yellow taxis with lawnmower engines would all be electric, and Prince Ali Bin Something would be echoing around his bank vault, the one that used to be full of cash.

Unit 402

Flying down to Goma hub overnight, Jimmy mentioned Unit 402, the reason for the visit.

‘Wasn’t that a pop group in the sixties?’

‘I think that was Unit Four Plus Two.’

At the airport hotel, we welcomed Ngomo and a Pathfinder captain into Jimmy’s room, Big Paul having checked for bugs at length. We had brought in two chairs from my room, and now sat facing each other, tea served from a tray on a coffee table.

‘How’s the Ethiopian border?’ I asked Ngomo.

‘Quiet, unfortunately,’ he sighed.

‘Well, I may have some work for you,’ Jimmy began. ‘In Europe, I now have a team of agents monitoring African politicians visiting Paris, London and Switzerland. These ... *politicians* are all involved in stealing money from their governments here, and hiding it in banks in Europe for their retirement, plus the use of prostitutes and cocaine. It is my intention to monitor them here, to collect evidence and to expose them.’

That surprised me, since Jimmy vowed never to get involved with African corruption, instead, making use of the politician’s willingness to be bribed. This seemed to be something of a U-turn.

Jimmy continued, ‘Unfortunately, exposing them will be bad for business, and bad for Africa’s reputation. Still, we can’t have them stealing the money that I’m helping the various governments to make.’

The captain piped up. ‘If they fell ill, or had accidents, then Africa would not be painted with their colours.’

My eyes widened.

‘An interesting idea,’ Jimmy reflected. He faced Ngomo. ‘What do you think, old friend.’

‘I think ... that a small team of good men could arrange a few *accidents* well enough. A little food poisoning, fishing accidents, car accidents.’ He shrugged. ‘These things happen all the time.’

‘They do,’ Jimmy agreed with a dangerous smile. ‘But such a unit would need a man we can trust to stay the course of time.’

‘I would be happy to serve Africa in this way,’ the captain offered. ‘I have no love for such men.’

‘Could you find others ... like yourself?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Perhaps ... eight or nine thousand,’ the captain quipped. ‘The soldiers hate the politicians; they see the fat pigs wasting money.’

Jimmy opened a drawer and retrieved a wad of dollars, handing it to Ngomo. ‘Such a mission would have to be ... *off the books*.’

‘Indeed,’ Ngomo agreed. ‘No written records.’

Jimmy handed him a sheet of names. ‘These gentlemen are the worst of the fat pigs. But those at the bottom of the list deserve a loud and public passing. A ... *message* to others.’

‘There are no leaders on this list,’ Ngomo noted.

‘They would be ... too noticeable,’ Jimmy suggested. To the captain he said, ‘This mission requires careful planning, delicate execution, and the detailed removal of any evidence.’

‘I have a few ghosts in mind,’ the captain offered.

‘More money will be available via my man Cosy in Mombassa,’ Jimmy told Ngomo. ‘Ask for what you need to make the project run smoothly. Don’t take risks, old friend. And for those on the list in Somalia, Abdi will assist you – with relish.’

We left the hotel an hour later, hopping on the return flight.

‘Should have done this a long time ago,’ I commented.

‘I wasn’t planning on doing it all,’ Jimmy reflected. ‘But ... lately I just feel – to hell with being nice.’

‘You’ve altered a lot of plans of late,’ I posed.

‘Yeah,’ Jimmy reflected. ‘I opened up African oil to help the western economies, then released the electric car five years early, plus the drug. They’re getting all the goodies up front. But, if the momentum and the co-operation can be maintained, we could sail through 2015 and 2017, a straight enough run at 2025.’

‘Those Russian coffee shops...’

‘No.’

Magestic

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Part 10

Exposure

As my wall calendar changed to October 2009, displaying a nice picture of a mountain range, I was quietly concerned; Jimmy had always suggested that 2010 was the first probable year of exposure. Work was progressing well, all African projects growing dramatically, but I had a feeling in my gut that took the edge off, and took the joy out of a lot of what I was doing. And Jimmy, he did not seem to be in the mood for being stealthy anymore.

At a dinner in the city of London, one Friday night, he made several off-the-cuff remarks that he was “shorting” Liebermans, that the banking sector was looking stretched, and that when Liebermans folded it would take a few with it. It was like a slow moving atom bomb going off.

The Financial Times ran the story on the Sunday, but at least used the Queen’s English and a few nice words, a flowery account of the comments attributed to Jimmy. The British tabloids were not so concise: banking world coming to an end! The PM was on the phone, disturbing us on Sunday, and these days I appreciated my weekends now that I was a nine-to-five office worker. And a commuter!

On the Monday morning the markets turned red, the banking stocks losing six percent in an instant, Jimmy having bet the downside through Switzerland. He may have been a loudmouth, but he was also a sneaky loudmouth that liked to plan ahead. The FTSE Index dropped, and the DOW opened lower, banking stocks taking a hit, especially Liebermans. They couldn’t take legal action against Jimmy because the comments were made at a social function, beer in hand. Besides, he was still legally registered at McKinleys to offer formal advice on the stock markets, tipsy or otherwise.

At noon Jimmy led me to the basement, always a worry, but I found one of the rooms now set-up as video conferencing centre. Jimmy checked himself in a full-length mirror, sat at a desk and hit a few buttons, an earpiece placed in. ‘Can you see and hear me?’

‘Yes, all good,’ crackled back. ‘Two minutes.’

The voice counted down, Jimmy staring at a camera which displayed a small image in a corner of its lens, that of the news studio the other end. I put in a second earpiece and sat.

‘Mister Silo, the markets have reacted nervously to your comments regarding Liebermans in America, and the banking sector in general. Do you stand by your comments?’

‘Yes, I do. Not least because I received an unsolicited copy of Liebermans trading accounts a while ago. Those accounts confirmed what I already suspected, which is that they’re heavily leveraged, and even a small downturn in the property market would hurt them, probably forcing them to file for bankruptcy. I estimate that just a three percent downswing in house prices could force them over the edge, because they’re leveraged thirty times their own size.’

‘Could you explain that for us.’

‘Liebermans, as a business, is worth just about four hundred million dollars. It has borrowed twelve *billion* dollars, and invested that money in the property market, some of it in highly leveraged positions. They’re badly exposed to the property market, as are many of the US banks. In the UK, I’d expect Mortons to get into trouble soon for the same reasons - which are stupidity and greed, nothing more complicated than that. I was also sent the details of large scale accounting fraud by many of the British accountancy firms involved in auditing British and American banks. In particular, a practice whereby debt is swapped ahead of reporting quarters, and swapped back afterwards. A great many American bank directors should be in prison, along with many of the directors of the largest accountancy firms in the city of London.’

And that was that. Balls had been kicked, cages rattled. Still, we made a lot of money off the falling market, being just as dishonest as those that Jimmy had condemned. Later that day, Hardon Chase ordered a review of banking guidelines, but it was too late for Liebermans. For them, the ground was rushing up quickly. In a conversation with Chase, Jimmy suggested that there would be consequences if the New York Fed bailed out Liebermans. He wanted an example made of them, followed by a review.

A document was released to the world’s press, anonymously, detailing leverage rates for individual banks, ranked in order of exposure. They ranged from one multiple, which meant that the bank had borrowed what it was worth – something that no sensible business would ever do – to those in the high twenties; it was name and shame time. Mortons, in the UK, showed a leverage of eight, the next highest UK bank leveraged at just four fold.

The run on the banks continued, although some fared better than others and recovered quickly, those with low multiples. And Mac in Mawlini, he scratched his head as eighty-seven million pounds

arrived in his account, donated from an S. Mellie Von Flytrap in Switzerland. And all this occurred just a week before the next “M” Group meeting, this one due to be held in Berlin. I had to wonder about the timing.

With the banking sector furore settling, I got back to work. Jimmy had suggested that I nurture those African businesses that were already established, making use of our bank’s considerable investment funds. On my desk rested a magazine about African industry, produced to coincide with one of the trade shows at Goma conference centre. The back page held a picture of Mombassa docks, which set me thinking. I researched the company that ran the port, and discovered that they also ran some of the trains we used, plus a fleet of trucks. I called their managing director, a Samuel Obotou.

‘Samuel? Paul Holton from England.’

‘A great honour, Mister Holton. Indeed, a great honour. How may I be of service?’

‘Do you mind if I ask ... do you have finance that you’re paying off?’

‘All businesses have finance that they are paying off.’

‘Do you mind if I ask about the arrangement you have?’ I pressed.

‘Six million pounds at twelve percent over twenty-one years.’

‘Could you do with more finance? I mean - if you had more, could you expand your business and employ more people?’

‘Certainly. We are struggling because of the finance, not the lack of work,’ Samuel stated.

‘Then I’ll offer you twelve million at one percent over twenty years.’

‘That is most generous. But may I ask ... why?’

‘We want to boost jobs in Kenya, nothing more complicated than that.’ As I said it, I realised that I was starting to sound like Jimmy.

‘Then I will be happy to receive your assistance.’

‘I’ll arrange it within days. Oh, do you know of any other businesses in your region that could do with some ... you know, finance to grow?’

He gave me a list. All the time and effort I had put into trying to figure that out, and all I had to do was ask. I offered the main trucking company in Mombassa ten million at one percent, the largest rail company six million, and a small Kenyan shipping company three million towards leasing more ships. And for each recipient of my donor cash I asked how many new jobs would be created. My notepad jottings added up to around eight thousand new

employees, not a huge number for Africa. I was happy enough with what I was doing, my new approach, but still not a hundred percent.

Next came a train company that worked out of Dar es Salaam. It was state owned, but did its own thing. Kind of. I got through to the main man via an interpreter. They did not have any loans, but it could be argued that they owed the government money. Since the Tanzanian Government owned it, it was all a bit odd.

‘How much money would you need to create a thousand new jobs?’ I asked.

‘Around a million pounds,’ was the answer they finally came back with, based on existing figures. These were better numbers.

‘And they would be sustainable, long term jobs?’

‘Yes, we have many more orders than capacity.’

‘OK, I’ll loan you twenty-five million, secured by the Tanzania Government. Will they do that?’

‘Yes, sir, they own the business.’

‘And how would you spend the money?’ I pressed.

‘More track, more rolling stock and engines, and cargo yards.’

‘Fine, I’ll send someone to you. Thank you.’

I went and found Jimmy. ‘Tanzanian state railway company: good investment?’

‘Sure. Ask them to help with an improved east coast track. From South Africa right up to Mogadishu.’

Dave Gardener stepped into the office, and I was surprised by how ill he looked. ‘Got a moment?’ he asked.

Jimmy and I led him to the diner. Dave had been injected, but that was almost twenty years ago, and he had been sixty-seven at the time.

‘Dave, are you well?’ I asked.

‘Struggling on.’

‘Why not have another injection?’ I pressed.

He smiled, shaking his head. ‘Wife went last week –’

‘Why didn’t you tell us?’ Jimmy softly enquired, both of us shocked.

‘Well, I’ve done better than I should have,’ Dave reflected. ‘Should have left a while back, and I thank you for all you’ve done.’

‘But?’ I nudged.

‘But I don’t want to go on forever. And, from what I understand, even another injection will not make that much of a difference at my age.’

‘It’ll stretch your life by another ten or twenty years,’ Jimmy softly stated. ‘But with some deterioration.’

‘So, no, no injection, thanks. And, this is my official goodbye, I’m ... retiring.’

‘You’re welcome here any time,’ Jimmy told him.

‘I know, and I’m glad to have seen what I have, to have witnessed what I have, and worked alongside a time traveller. And ... I hope you fix it all.’ He took a moment. ‘I’ll be leaving tonight, but I wanted to see you one last time; so strong, so young looking, so determined.’

‘Leaving tonight?’ I queried.

Jimmy said to me, ‘We don’t enjoy many freedoms in this life, choosing the time and place of your own death is one of them.’

‘Christ,’ I let out. ‘Would you ... like to see the kids again?’

‘I said goodbye to my own yesterday. Coming here was my last bit of business to settle. My replacement will introduce himself soon.’

‘He as polite as an Israeli?’ I asked, making Dave smile.

‘Hopefully, as polite as the British.’

With Dave departed, I took a stroll around the grounds, the relentless march of time catching up with those around me, but not with myself. Down by the river I bumped into Rob and his dogs.

‘Out for a walk, boss?’

‘Yeah, needed to ... think a bit. How’re the dogs?’

‘And I’m OK too,’ Rob quipped, making me smile.

‘Don’t start, I got enough on my plate.’

Rob settled the two dogs. ‘Karl used to feed them, and I reckon they know he’s gone.’

‘That’s the problem, isn’t it: time moves on, people go.’

‘And new ones arrive. Can’t dwell on it. I’ve buried six dogs here. All of the current batch are third generation already.’

‘Really?’

‘The pups make up for the loss of the old dogs,’ he said as he headed off.

I stared after him, thinking about children. I plodded slowly on, hands in pockets, trees inspected, squirrels glanced at. Back at the main house I jumped into my electric car and returned to my office, finding a few new messages left on my chair.

A week later we flew over to Berlin, accompanying the British PM and his party, and trying not to discuss “M” Group material too much, although some plotting and scheming went on en route. The German security was modest, blacked-out coaches used to transport us to a country hotel just outside the city, a sprinkling of reporters already camped at the gates.

Our rooms were palatial, and there was no need for extra beds for the girls, they had school. After unpacking the basics and hanging up suits, I left Helen to update her laptop and went for a walk through the hotel. Downstairs, I bumped into Ben Ares and his team coming in, shaking his hand.

‘You lot comfortable with the venue?’ I whispered.

‘The hotel, or Berlin?’ Ben asked as we walked on together.

‘Berlin,’ I whispered.

‘Would not have been my first choice.’ He gestured towards a man in his late thirties. ‘Oh, this is David, your new contact.’

‘That’ll keep it simple, another David.’ I shook his hand. ‘Must admit, I miss the old one.’

‘As do we all,’ the new David commented.

I left them at reception and walked into the grounds, the rain holding off as President Chase’s motorcade wound its way in. His car slowed, and his Treasury Secretary stepped down, the convoy pulling off again. The man strode purposefully towards me.

‘Wilkommen in Deutschland,’ I offered.

‘Got a minute?’

‘Sure.’ I gestured him towards a pond, and we strolled slowly on.

‘We’re thinking of bailing out Liebermans.’

‘That would put you on a collision course with Jimmy.’

‘It’ll be bad for the US banking sector if they fold,’ the man pointed out.

‘And, it’ll be worse if the warning is not heeded, and many large banks fold in a few years time. You can deal with the one now - and no market crash - or many later with a recession. Take your pick.’

‘And if we do bail them out?’ he pressed.

‘I guess we’d keep the spotlight on your banking sector, then ask the Chinese to make your eyes water.’

‘We don’t need to borrow so much from them, the economy is buoyant.’

‘Suggesting that you want a fight,’ I noted.

‘Not in an ideal world.’

I stopped. ‘You’ll save the hand and lose the arm later, because your banks won’t give up the leverage.’

‘Is there a half-way measure?’ he asked.

‘That would probably involve capped multiples,’ I suggested. ‘Always assuming that you get accurate and truthful figures from your banks, a novel approach for them.’

‘We could cap them at twenty,’ he tentatively suggested.

‘I think we’ll publish all multiples anyway in the years ahead, so the investors can make up their own minds, whether you’re comfortable with twenty or not. And even if we don’t, people will look for them.’

‘The markets will adjust,’ he suggested. To what, was not clear.

‘Look, you were supposed to crash last year, but you didn’t. Now, every year that rolls by sees even more money leveraged. So if you crash this year, it’ll be worse than last year could have been, and next year worse again. If you crash in ten years time it’ll be a hundred times worse. The whole point of Liebermans is a boiling exercise; a warning to others. And don’t insult my intelligence by telling me you can reign in the banks worst excesses - you can’t! If you crash now you could survive it, but do it from 2015 to 2017 and you’ll lose America ... and we lose the planet, so you go figure that out with your slide rule.’

At the first meeting, held around a large rectangular table, I noticed that the leaders were all the same old faces. We had not changed a leader for a while.

Jimmy began with, ‘Welcome to Berlin, a peaceful, prosperous and vibrant city that was once the centre of a great conflict. And that’s the thing about wars ... and the advance of time; wounds heal, albeit slowly in some areas. Those that were fighting on opposing sides can come together, and the next generation does not hold the same grudges. So, welcome world leaders, hard working aides and former enemies.’

‘First order of business.’ Jimmy nodded toward an American security official. The man stepped up to an Indian aide and lifted a scanner for a few seconds, nodding towards Jimmy when finished. To the Indian aide, Jimmy said, ‘Your mobile phone seems to be on continuous transmit.’

The man apologised and switched it off. ‘I must have nudged it accidentally.’

‘And yet ... the journalist at the other end was not nudged.’

Everyone focused on the man, especially the Indian leader. Words were exchanged.

Jimmy said, 'You can leave now, through the door, or through the window.' The man was escorted out as further devices were waved around the room.

'I would like to apologise to the group,' the Indian Prime Minister offered.

'I accept your apology,' Jimmy said. 'And I'm sure that rest do as well, and do not hold you responsible for this man. OK, moving on, the first order of business is ... oil. As you will have seen, oil over-production has lowered prices, making me popular in Saudi Arabia.' People smiled. 'That boosts the western economies, but also makes countries like Russia suffer a little, since they benefit from higher oil prices. It is not my intention to force prices lower, but to stop them rocketing higher. Crude is currently \$55 a barrel, with a good supply. By this time it should be \$70 plus, spiking above \$120 – which would hurt many oil-dependent nations. I would like to point out to the Russians that European oil and gas demand will only ever increase.

'Now, the electric car technology has been released well ahead of the planned date, and many of you should reap the benefit of its cost savings - except our Russian friends – who may desire a higher oil price. What our Russian friends should also consider is that Russia will benefit from selling its oil, not using it on its own consumers. The less its own citizens buy, the more foreign currency is generated.'

Jimmy took a breath. 'It may be hard to picture the turbulent future at this peaceful juncture, but without the steps that I've taken in recent years, then the key year of 2015 – and subsequent years – would have been flavoured by severe economic problems in the west, leading to political unrest. I hope we can all be grateful that we have the chance of reaching that point in the future ... without either problem.

'President Chase. Your oil industry has already attempted to derail the electric cars. Fine, their implementation is your choice. You may, if you wish, continue to gas-guzzle whilst the rest of the world reaps the cost benefit.'

'We aim to go all electric vehicle in seven years,' the Germans put in, albeit heavily accented.

'We have similar plans,' the French added with a softer accent.

'As do we,' India stated. 'As you know, we have bought the technology off the Chinese.'

'China aims to make good use of the technology,' Han announced.

‘Unfortunately,’ Jimmy began, ‘we have a problem. Many countries retain large numbers of dollars to buy oil, and if they end up buying less oil then their fondness for hanging onto dollars may wane, something that America should plan for.’

‘How ... exactly,’ Chase firmly nudged.

Jimmy explained, ‘As a natural consequence of the electric car technology, OPEC will focus on the developing countries in the years ahead. But, the developed countries will still need oil for lorries, for industry, and the change over to electric cars will never be total; the developed countries will reduce their oil consumption by little more than thirty percent over the next ten years. There will be more dollars on the market, but it won’t be a dramatic change. Besides, Africa and the other developing nations will ... develop.’

‘And the impact of all of this?’ Chase nudged.

‘I’ve affected oil production, the western housing bubble, and released electric car technology, to avoid a serious economic crisis,’ Jimmy informed him. ‘My strategy moves us away from that danger, but presents other potential problems that need to be planned for. You all need to consider the impact of a lower volume of oil purchases, and the effect on the petrol-dollar. You also have the super-drug health dividend, and a more stable availability of oil. If not managed, those factors could lower the value of the dollar. But, as the US economy benefits from cheaper oil and consumer tax breaks, a counter-balance could be created. And that’s why we have such a capable person in the White House.’ Chase cocked an eyebrow. ‘I’m confident that he can sort it all out, so that one area counterbalances another.’

‘Will America adopt the electric cars?’ the Chinese asked.

‘Yes, but in small quantities to start with. Oil is now stable, so why should its gas-guzzling citizens worry? What the nice man in the White House should consider ... is the extra growth seen in European and developing economies from the costs savings. He needs to remain competitive. Which brings us nicely around to those fine gentlemen who run the major US banks. As most of you will already know, I expressed my feelings about banks such as Liebermans recently, and the nice man in the White House is considering bailing them out.’

Jimmy opened a folder and handed out a list of US banks. ‘This is a list of US banks, ranked in order of risk. Those at the top have a multiple of more than thirty. That means that they have borrowed, for themselves, more than thirty times their net worth, and invested it into the housing markets. So long as the US housing market

remains strong there's no danger. But, as soon as the music stops, it's a case of musical chairs, with just six chairs for twelve banks. I strongly recommend to all nations, except America of course, that no fresh investments be made in the top US banks, those with multiples over ten.'

'That's most of our banks!' Chase complained.

Jimmy held his hands wide. 'I informed you many years ago what would happen, and now they're over-stretched. If - and it's a big if - house prices dropped five percent, you'd have to bail them out to the tune of half a trillion dollars. If you wait three years, and property prices drop five percent, you'll bail them out one point three trillion. After five years, that becomes three point five trillion. You with me so far, Mister President?'

'Is there a middle road?' Chase unhappily asked.

'Find some honest bank directors?' I toyed.

Jimmy smiled. 'That would be one solution, albeit a bit ... improbable.'

'And if we capped multiples?' Chase asked.

'They'd lie to you, and hide the truth, as they're already doing with debt swaps.'

Han said, 'The Chinese Government is most concerned about this matter, and will be reviewing its investment policy. We will impose a multiple of twenty to start with, lowering that in subsequent years.'

'Have you met with the banks?' I asked Chase.

'The Treasury Secretary met with them recently,' Chase replied, sounding unhappy to be discussing the topic openly.

'And they reminded you of the money they make for the US, and of the liquidity benefits that they bring,' Jimmy posed.

'Something like that,' Chase reluctantly admitted.

'My preferred course of action would be for Liebermans to hit the wall, followed by a statement from you that *no one* will get a bailout. Followed by a tough investigation into accounting standards.'

'Again, is there a middle road?' Chase pushed.

Jimmy took a breath. 'Have you ever wondered why I developed the drug in secret, along with the electric car technology? I've done many things by myself, because I don't have an electorate to worry about, nor can I be compromised, bribed or bullied. I do these things for the good of the planet, and I make the choices, knowing that it would be very hard to get a consensus in a group like this, where each of the leaders present has a vested interest. And my relationship with Russia, China and Europe is as much about counter-balancing

the worst excesses of US policy as anything else. You can follow my guidance, and the consensus here, or you can do your own thing, Mister Chase. If, next year, your banks need bailing out, you'll leave office as the man who caused a severe economic crash, and not as the great leader we all hoped you'd turn out to be. You need to look forwards ten years, then look back and ask ... how did I handle that financial crisis? They warned me ... but it still happened, and I left office with a very low approval rating.'

The room fell silent, everyone focused on Chase as he unhappily stared back at Jimmy. We waited.

Chase lowered his head and heaved a breath. 'We'll tighten up the worst excesses of the bank, and give Liebermans notice to reduce its multiple to twenty – with a warning that they'll get no bailout.'

His Treasury Secretary shot a dirty look at the back of Chase's head.

'We'll take a one hour break,' Jimmy ordered. 'During which time the Chinese and Americans can discuss ... future bond purchases.'

I led Helen back to our room and ordered food.

'That going to be a big fight?' Helen asked.

I shrugged. 'Jimmy won't back down, so Chase can co-operate or lose Jimmy's help. The patient ... doesn't like the taste of the medicine.'

At the next session, the mood was a little off, few smiles evident. I should have brought Shelly.

Jimmy began, 'The Chinese and the Americans have made some minor agreements, but not completely to the taste of the nice man in the White House. Moving on, whilst still on the same basic subject, the French and Germans should be aware that when Greece applied to join the Euro, the figures it presented – prepared with the assistance of certain American banks – were completely fraudulent.'

The French and Germans sat upright.

Jimmy continued, 'Their debt is three times higher than that declared, and some members of the American team here knew that fact all along.'

Looks were exchanged.

Jimmy added, 'Greece will get into trouble in the years ahead, speculated upon by those very same American banks that assisted the fraud. Whilst on the subject, Portugal and Spain – which will become known as the Club Med countries – will also face great difficulties. If, and when, the US banking sector falters, Spain will

plunge into a recession that will lead it out of the Euro, a similar fate for Portugal and Greece. If the banking sector does not falter, the Club Med countries will falter at a slower rate, but they will still falter.'

'They leave the Euro?' the Germans questioned, aghast at that suggestion.

'Their people will see things as having been better before the advent of the Euro, with a strong desire to fix their tourist trade through a lower currency. Spain will suffer twenty-five percent unemployment for years, forty percent amongst its young people. The voting public will only tolerate that for so long. So you can see why I wish to avoid an economic crash.' He faced the Russians. 'When that crash comes it will take eighty percent off your stock markets.'

He took a moment. 'I had always assumed that, at this date, we'd be in a war of words with America, and by "we" I mean everyone apart the Americans.' Chase straightened. 'So *everyone* ... listen carefully. Between now and 2015 there will be pressure on the dollar, downward pressure, and that pressure will be resisted by the nice man in the White House at almost any cost. During that economic conflict, America will make use of its banks to its own benefit. All other nations must be careful in the use of large American banks, because they have a vested interest in propping up the dollar, knocking the Euro - and any other currencies in Eurasia.

'The decline of the dollar is inevitable; it's overvalued by a long way, and pegged to the price of oil. So long as there was a shortage of oil and a steady rise in oil prices the petrol-dollar remained strong, falsely strong. That cannot go on forever. It will, eventually, fall back toward its proper value, a painful adjustment for not just America, but the whole world. What happens in the next five or ten years is not a question of ... *can it be fixed*, but how can the pain be eased. That process can either be a negotiated process, through this group, or it can be a fight - every country for itself. The first step in that fight, and the start point, is how President Chase deals with his banks. If he deals with them as I expect, then the war will start soon, and America will not be invited to further "M" Group meetings.'

'Not invited?' Chase challenged.

'If we begin a conflict, you'll be on your own,' Jimmy coldly stated. 'You won't be getting any guidance from me, but those you're in conflict with will receive help - because they're not the problem.' He held his gaze on Chase.

'I said we'd tackle the banks,' Chase curtly pointed out.

‘Mister Chase, I can already see the knives in your back.’

Chase took a moment. ‘There’ll be resistance?’

‘That’s something of an understatement. The people around this table are not your immediate concern, your own countrymen are. Even some of your own cabinet will be an issue, and they’ll leak details of these meetings to undermine you.’

The British Prime Minister put in, ‘You once said, in one of these meetings, that we should always keep talking – even if we don’t like each other.’

Jimmy faced him. ‘And you could sit with an American President when US banks and hedge funds are creating a run on the pound to benefit the dollar? These meetings are only useful if the participants don’t lie to each other, about things such as Greek debt.’

‘Why did you not mention that before?’ the Germans asked.

‘Ammunition is not much good unless kept dry ... and ready for use at the right time,’ Jimmy responded. ‘There are many things that I know, that you don’t.’

‘I’d like a recess ... and a private chat,’ Chase curtly demanded.

‘By all means,’ Jimmy said with a false smile. ‘Thirty minute break, please.’

Jimmy led Chase and myself to a side room and arranged chairs.

‘Just where the hell did all this come from?’ Chase demanded.

‘We warned you many years ago about your banks,’ Jimmy calmly stated. ‘Now we’re reaching the tipping point, a point where’ll I’ll have no choice but to expose your banks.’

‘You knew the multiples,’ I put in.

‘There must be a solution,’ Chase insisted.

‘Even if you wanted to control your own banks, your own people would trip you up,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘And your Treasury Secretary is more loyal to them than to you. He has an eye on his next job.’

‘And if I was amenable to a solution...?’ Chase nudged.

‘Then I’d say ... do what you can, but gently, and I’ll play hardball. That way, there’ll be fewer knives in your back.’

‘So instead of them coming for me they go for you,’ Chase questioned. ‘And they may try and expose you!’

‘If they expose me, they’ll strengthen my arm,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘No, more likely they’ll try and discredit me, or shoot me.’

I didn’t like the sound of that. At all.

‘Can we keep channels open?’ Chase asked.

‘I would hope so, but I know what will happen with the banks, and they’ll all need a punch on the nose,’ Jimmy replied. ‘There’s

not much of an alternative. It'll become a dirty fight and, at the end of the day, you're paid to fight their corner, not mine.'

Chase stood and glanced out of the window. 'One of the first things you said to me ... was to think about the end of my life: how I'd view myself looking back.' He turned. 'I don't want to be at the helm during a crash, nor do I want to be undermined by my own people and discredited. I know what they can do.'

'If you leave it to me ... it'll hurt,' Jimmy informed him. 'But, you'll have less of a problem with your own people.'

'And if they undermine you we lose the planet,' Chase pointed out.

'There is that,' I lightly stated.

Chase returned and sat. 'So we do a little a both. I'll push as much as I can, you ... kick some balls, and I'll try and deal with the fallout.'

'It'll be messy,' Jimmy warned.

Back in the meeting, we discussed the electric technology, the wonder drug, African development and oil quotas before breaking for the day. Now the serious work would begin, not least the French and German governments discussing what to do about Greece. Jimmy met with them and offered to assist the Club Med countries in the next few years. Following that, he made a call with ramifications; the CEO of Liebermans would now be under the spotlight. A copy of their dodgy debt-swaps, ahead of shareholder meetings, had been handed in to the SEC, the New York Post, the Washington Times and CNN.

At the group meal that evening, Chase was called out to take a call. Returning, he unhappily informed us that Liebermans was under investigation. The first blow had been struck, but one that Chase could not be blamed for. He issued a short statement to the waiting press after the meal, condemning any sharp practices in the banking sector and siding with the poor old investor; Joe Public. And I had a chore. I went and found Chase's Treasury Secretary.

'Got a minute?' I asked, leading him away. 'Just wanted to point out that Jimmy handed a file to Chase, the contents of which would put you in prison for a long time.' The man socked upright. 'Some of the detail is real, some has been very cleverly manufactured over the past twenty years.' I tapped him on the shoulder. 'Enjoy the rest of your evening.'

The second blow had been delivered. I went and found Ben Ares. 'Got a minute?'

He gestured me to a seat. 'Problem?'

‘Of a sort.’ I took a breath. ‘Jimmy knows that various Jewish investment managers will perpetrate some major frauds in the years ahead, which will harm the reputation of *Jewish* investment managers. He’s going to deal with them as he has done with Liebermans – very public, and very loud. Of course, if they were dealt with quietly first...’ I held my hands wide and gave a big Dave Gardener shrug, and left it at that.

In London, the Serious Fraud Office took receipt of a bundle of documents regarding a British accountancy firm. In the morning, the British PM was not a happy bunny, voices raised in a private meeting with Jimmy. The PM had been warned years earlier, so I had no sympathy for him. I sighed, another frosty “M” Group meeting on the cards.

Jimmy began the next session with, ‘OK, as some of you are aware, there have been a few developments overnight. Documents outlining illegal practices at Liebermans have been handed to the SEC in New York, and the Fraud Office in London have taken receipt of documents relating to an accountancy firm. There will be fallout. All you need keep in mind is that the *people* elected you, and that you work for those people.’ He focused on the American team. ‘It may have been wise for you to consider that I’ve had moles inside your banks for some twenty years.’

‘I’m going to get tough with them, where I can,’ Chase reluctantly offered, a statement meant for the other nations assembled about the tables.

Russia stated, ‘We will be ... *cautious* about investing in certain American banks.’

China and India echoed those words, France and Germany stating that there would be a far reaching review. I guessed that they meant Greece, as much as their own countrymen investing in the nominated US banks.

‘Israel will also be conducting a review,’ Ben Ares stated, causing Chase to focus on him.

‘Moving on,’ Jimmy called. ‘And to recap. The next ten years will be dominated by the slide in the dollar, and the steps taken to prevent that slide. There is no easy way of dealing with it. In a worst-case scenario, a future US president will go to war to prop-up the dollar. At best, there will be economic war of some degree. The path will not be smooth, and there’s very little that I can do to assist; there is no magic formula to apply.’

‘Our American friends at this table are aware of the problem, and everyone else is aware of both the consequences, and the possible

actions that may be taken. For each American action, they have a reaction planned – I’ve made sure of that. My role, in the years ahead, will be to try and lessen the damage to both sides. One solution, a definitive solution, would be for the US to lower its currency whilst reducing health costs and implementing new technologies to remove the dependence on oil. That ... is unlikely to happen till its absolutely necessary, a little late in the day.

‘What Mister Chase needs to be aware of is that the health and energy savings available to America’s competitors are huge. Their economies will benefit, as yours could. It’s up to you.

‘Now, if OPEC dropped the dollar around 2017, the effect would be a lowering of the value of the dollar, causing America’s imports to double overnight. If the health and energy benefits are in place, then the pain of those rises would be greatly lessened. US citizens need not worry about the rise in oil prices ... when they drive electric cars. And the rise in food imports can be offset by tax breaks, caused by the health budget savings.’

He faced Chase. ‘You may have assumed that was my reasoning all along, to help deal with your two largest cost centres; oil and healthcare. You can wait till 2017, or you can take small steps towards that date, using the savings to adjust the dollar’s position in the world. This is the best opportunity you’ll ever get – but I’d bet my life you don’t take it.’

Jimmy pointed at the Treasury Secretary. ‘I’d like you to arrange a meeting of the top banks for next week. I’ll see if I can’t make them see sense. OK, moving on to the next generation of nuclear power stations. They will cost less to build, less to run, and will produce a greater output. And as for their waste products, our friends in Somali are happy to accept as much waste as you have. I’m preparing a facility there, and the fees will be low.

‘OK, the Swine Flu pandemic will run its course – no pun intended, but will not be as severe as various pharmaceutical companies would like it to be. Those people injected with the super-drug will be ninety-percent resistant, but all countries here should divert a large portion of their medical research toward flu variants. In the future, they will kill a great many people, even some of those with the super drug.’

We got into small detail, and the mood lifted a little, sensible questions asked and answers given. We even managed to finish with a few jokes. Landing back at Cardiff airport, we found the girls in the coach, full of news of hamsters and mice and rabbits. After my heart had started again, they explained that the animals were in a

large shed near the rose garden, and not running around our house. Helen and I sighed with relief.

Back in my office, I accepted a mug of tea and listened to updates for an hour before Jimmy stepped in. He waved people down when they attempted to stand, and eased down onto a sofa.

‘So, this where all the proper work happens, eh?’ he said with a smile.

‘Deep thinking and doughnuts,’ I said.

‘I figured we’d finally float Pineapple, sell some stock to make a few quid.’

I pointed at the Pineapple liaison. ‘That doesn’t mean that you’re fired. Don’t worry.’

‘Quite correct,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘Good people are hard to find. But your work may alter a bit.’ He faced me. ‘I fancied more shares in the media group, Blake Carrington’s.’

‘Blake Carrington?’ they queried.

Jimmy stood. Thumbing towards me, he explained, ‘That’s what he calls the guy. And yes, he does look like Blake Carrington.’

‘Timescale?’ I asked Jimmy as he headed towards the door.

‘Best do it before the news leaks,’ he said as he waved goodbye.

I raised my iPhone and selected the picture of our accountant. ‘Neil, float Pineapple as fast as you can, sell some of our shares, raise some dough. Thanks.’

I pointed at my Pineapple liaison. ‘In addition to Pineapple, you just became our liaison to the media group. The guy’s name is Ted Schapp-something, and our accountants should have some info on them.’

‘Media One Inc,’ the man stated.

‘That’s them, they own the African Times.’

Later that evening I asked Jimmy how many of our shares we would offload.

‘All of them, but quietly,’ Jimmy responded.

‘And the reasoning...?’ I nudged.

‘If ... exposed, then people would see it as *unfair* that we pick future hit singers, and may see a lot of what we do as being unfair. The media group could not be said to make use of any unfair advantage. Besides, I’ll need the media group to beat up a few banks.’

‘Coming back to exposure...?’ I nudged.

‘The American banks will want to fight back,’ he said with a shrug.

That weekend, eight new security staff appeared. Extra cameras were fitted, more sensors, and a small hut was built on the main house, on its purposeful flat roof. Positioned up there would be four new men, ex-soldiers and mates of Big Paul. They would be furnished with binoculars, night sights, and rifles licensed by the government. I was asked not to mention it to Helen yet. When I asked Jimmy if he expected the US banks to get dirty, he enigmatically said, ‘Amongst others.’

Four new Range Rovers appeared, all of them identical, and a second coach, this one fitted with bulletproof glass. These vehicles would now drive around at random, just to see who was following. It wasn’t a very relaxing weekend, not least because Liebermans dominated the news. Late on Sunday night Jimmy came over to my house after the girls had gone up to bed. We cracked open cans and sat with Helen, the sound on the TV turned down.

‘Need to kick an idea around,’ Jimmy began. ‘This meeting I’ve asked for with the bank chiefs, it was not supposed to happen, not this way. It’s an ... unknown. My first instinct would be to try and strong-arm them. Well, my first instinct would be to try and talk nicely, but they’d never respect that. And who the hell am I to ask them to behave?’

‘Do you have dirt on any of them?’ I asked.

‘On all of them, or at least elements of their businesses.’

‘The room will probably be bugged,’ Helen suggested.

‘Definitely,’ Jimmy agreed with an odd smirk. ‘Some of them have already researched me, and think they know a thing or two.’

‘They’ll try and expose you?’ I asked.

‘No, because then we’d tell people to avoid them, and the public would probably listen,’ Jimmy explained.

‘You think they’ll try and bribe you?’ Helen asked.

‘Same difference, it wouldn’t work. Besides, some of them are honest – to a degree. It’s just the risks that they’re taking that’s the problem.’

‘So you can’t threaten them with anything,’ Helen thought out loud.

‘Could bust up one or two as an example,’ I put in.

‘They’re unlikely to respond to that. Besides, they don’t work as a group; it’s a cutthroat business – they’d be happy to see each other suffer.’

‘So what motivates them?’ Helen posed.

‘Keeping their jobs and making money,’ I responded.

‘Can’t risk offering them bribes,’ Helen noted. ‘*You’d* end up in trouble then.’

‘Correct, since they may report the fact.’ He wagged a finger. ‘But, when faced with a bribery charge, the authorities would ask what I’d make out of it. The banks could hardly say that I bribed them to stop breaking the law.’

‘That would be an odd day in court!’ I quipped.

‘I can’t bribe them ... directly,’ Jimmy said, staring at the carpet. He looked up and grinned. ‘But I am licensed to offer stock market advice.’

Witchcraft

The following Tuesday we flew overnight to New York, to a meeting that the White House had arranged with the bank chiefs, none of whom were supposed to know about us, about the secret parts of what we got up to at least. Staying at my apartment overlooking Central Park, Jimmy handed Helen and myself small pouches to keep our mobile phones in, to prevent interference.

‘Interference from...?’ I nudged.

‘You’ll see later.’ He gave me a pouch that fitted well into my jacket pocket, another that slipped into Helen’s handbag. ‘You won’t have much of a signal when your phones are inside, so just use the pouches for this meeting. And ... don’t react when I do strange things.’

‘If you start dancing like New Year, then I’m walking out,’ I threatened, wagging a finger.

‘I think today’s meeting will be a little more ... frosty. No dancing. Be lucky to get a coffee.’

Two hours later, we drove the short distance around to a hotel, into an underground car park and up to a penthouse suite retained by one of the banks. It came complete with a mini-boardroom and a waitress, and left me wondering if secretive meetings went on here, power deals done.

The first two people I met were pleased to see me, and reacted a bit like giddy tourists. The rest were a mixture of polite, to downright sour-faced. And the CEO of Liebermans, he was not in attendance today. I guess he had his hands full, or his hands cuffed. The natural leader of this supposed “group of equals” was the CEO

of BNK, Art Ritter, a thickset man in his fifties. He now nudged people towards the meeting room, where the nice young lady waitress dispensed coffees. So far, so good.

When everyone had settled, Helen at my side, Art Ritter curtly began with, 'You called this meeting, Silo.' He said side on to the table, facing the window.

'Actually, Hardon Chase asked if I could try and work out my differences with you, since I explained to him my intention of giving you all a hard time in the years ahead.'

'And why do you think you need to ... try and give us a hard time?' Ritter testily asked.

'Because for some of you, your balls are bigger than your brains, and when you collapse you'll take a lot of good people with you. You can think of me as Robin Hood to your Sheriff of Nottingham.'

'So you represent the little people,' Ritter thought aloud. 'Yet you use the system as well as anyone to make money, legal or otherwise!'

'I'm not investing other people's money in risky ventures. And if I went bust, I'd not take down the western economy.'

'That's a rather dramatic statement,' one of the other men put in.

'Do you think so?' Jimmy asked. 'I don't, and I'm smarter than all of you. As such, I sent a detailed report to AIG today, along with copy of documents from several of your banks, so that they know what they've been buying.'

Several of the men glanced at each other, seemingly uneasy.

'And the leaked Liebermans documents?' Ritter asked.

'Yes, that was my doing. As will be the other documents to be released, depending on how well this meeting goes,' Jimmy explained.

'And you bribed people to get hold of them?' Ritter risked.

'Certainly not,' Jimmy said with a coy smile. 'They were sent to me anonymously. And it's no good trying to trick me into saying something that I shouldn't, since all the electronic gizmos you have on you stopped working when I entered.'

'What makes you think we're bugging this meeting?' Ritter posed.

'All electronics give off a signal, and I was born with the odd ability to detect them, as well as block them.' I frowned at that. Jimmy added, 'Why don't you check them, and your phones and watches.'

'My watch has stopped,' two men echoed.

They checked their phones, finding them off, and could not get them to switch back on. We sipped our coffees as we waited for them to settle again; to stop cursing, and to settle.

‘Clever trick,’ Ritter acknowledged, his own phone dead as a Do-Do.

‘You ain’t seen nothing yet,’ Jimmy threatened. ‘So, why don’t we just cut the crap and see if we can keep you all out of jail, and prospering.’

‘You’re deluding yourself, Silo,’ Ritter baulked.

‘I have your trading statements, Ritter,’ Jimmy coldly stated. ‘The real ones. They could go to the New York Times.’ Ritter lost some of his smugness. ‘Just call my bluff, I’ll send them to the press, and we’ll meet again in a day or so. Then, after each meeting, I send another file in, and we’ll keep meeting till none of you are left in charge.’

‘You must have spent a lot of money to get those files,’ Ritter tried to draw out of Jimmy.

‘I put people in place ten and twenty years ago,’ Jimmy replied. ‘Just for this very occasion.’

‘What the hell is that you want?’ a man asked.

‘Stability - nothing more complicated than that. I want you fine gentlemen to make money now, and twenty years from now. Unfortunately, my spies in your organisations suggest that you’re all heavily overstretched, that you don’t understand the risks that your bright young traders are taking, and that those very same traders don’t really understand the risks they’re taking in turn. Some of you have five traders making ninety-five percent of your profits. And CDOs are just downright dishonest. So, to answer your question, I want what you want. I want you to carry on doing well, and not to be fucked over by stupid young traders given a free hand to bet billions in markets they don’t fully understand. If not, I’ll keep leaking documents till you’re all tarnished – as well as all out of a job.’

‘And who the fuck made you God?’ a man asked.

‘I don’t think God cares what you do; he has a policy of *non-interference* in the development of mankind. I, on the other hand, have a policy of direct interference, hence my work in Africa. And, unlike God, I don’t forgive.’

‘Just who the hell do you think you are?’ a man asked.

‘Who and what I am is not the point. It’s what I can do if you don’t play ball that should be of interest to you.’ He turned his head to a man on his left. ‘I sent the New York police a file about the secretary you made pregnant and had killed – as we sat down to this

meeting.’ The man stared back. ‘I found the doctor you used to remove the foetus from her dead body, thereby removing any DNA link to yourself. That doctor is willing to ... confess all, to ease his conscience.’

The man’s mouth slowly opened.

‘Bob?’ others called, getting no response. ‘Bob?’

The man got up and rushed out, others standing, and horrified at this turn of events. When they returned, Jimmy said, ‘Does anyone here have any doubts about just how ruthless I can be?’ He had made his point.

The remaining men settled, one standing by the window and peering down, his hands in his pockets. That man now turned. ‘I did some bribing of my own. Some ... research on you, Silo.’

‘I’d expect nothing less from men as capable as yourselves.’

‘*You* ... have a few skeletons in the closet,’ the same man noted.

‘Skeletons?’ I repeated. ‘He could start his own bone factory!’

‘Why don’t you tell the nice men here what it is that you think you know,’ Jimmy urged.

The man stepped closer. ‘The CIA think you’re a time traveller, the White House believes you to be a power clairvoyant. And you host each “M” Group meeting. You don’t attend those meetings, you are the meeting.’

‘OK, show of hands please for those people who think he’s correct?’ Jimmy called.

Only two men raised their hands.

‘That’s the thing about outlandish theories,’ Jimmy noted. ‘They’re ... outlandish. It’s the Michael Jackson effect: people like his music, so who gives a fuck about his habits behind closed doors. And ... I’m popular. Your outlandish claims would probably just make me more popular. More of a ... curiosity.’

The man went back to the window.

‘Can we get off this waste of time, and get back to cases,’ a man urged. ‘I’m not even sure I want to be in this meeting, some of the things being discussed here.’

‘What the fuck do you want, Silo?’ Ritter asked again.

‘I would like the following: I’d like you to lower your multiples, to take fewer risks, to apply proper risk strategies, to be less ... dishonest about quarterly and annual accounts.’

‘That all,’ a man baulked.

Jimmy lifted his face to the man in the window. ‘There’s one question you’ve not yet asked.’

The man took a moment, stood with his hands in his pockets. 'What do we get for being good little boys and playing nice?'

'Good question,' Jimmy commended. 'What would you like?'

'To know what the markets will do next week...?' the man risked.

'OK.'

The man hesitated. 'What?'

'I said ... OK, provided we have an ... agreement, of course. There are also oil sales that I can route through you, ore sales. And you can have shares in certain business that are doing very well, at a discount.' He held his hands wide. 'Why do you need bright young traders with Phds when you have me?'

'You saying what I think you're saying?' the man queried.

Jimmy nodded. 'Those that wish to join my exclusive club may do so. I take no money, I give tips, and you then adjust your positions and ... your greed. At the end of the day, you're there to try and make money, something I'm very good at. I just don't want you to screw around with risky ventures.'

The same man stood staring down. 'Got a business card?'

Jimmy handed the man a card. 'Does anyone else wish a further - and private - meeting?' Two men took the cards, stared at by Ritter. 'The rest of you may measure the success of these three, plus the pain that you're about to suffer, and decide to come and talk to me.'

'You'll hand us African business?' another man asked.

'I'll hand you oil business in many areas, and my Chinese colleagues will invest with you.'

A forth man took a card. That was four out of nine, and I was smiling inwardly; greed was God here. It was all about the dollars.

Jimmy stood. 'Your phones will work again now.' He pointed at the man who first took his card. 'I'm floating Pineapple music. You can handle it if you like.'

Several phones chirped into life, startling people. We left them to check on messages, and to puzzle the witchcraft used.

Back in the apartment I asked, 'How'd you screw with their phones?'

'A type of EMP, but on a very high frequency. It stops electronics dead whilst it's active, but then dissipates. I had someone in the room below with the equipment. The Ebeye kids developed it for me.'

'Cool. And dangerous,' I said. 'Hope they don't take it on plane.'

'In years to come it'll be used to bring down planes,' Jimmy informed us. 'But not till around 2020.'

That evening, we met with Blake Carrington and talked shop, Jimmy insisting that his media empire pressure the banks, especially over multiples. Oliver Standish, current CEO of Pineapple and now living in Los Angeles, caught wind of the floatation and called me.

‘We were trying to keep it quiet,’ I told him.

‘Shouldn’t I know?’ he complained.

‘When it’s floated you’ll make a shit load of money, so stop whinging. You got those shares for fuck all, and you’ll place them at one hundred and fifty million dollars at least.’

‘Well, yes, but then we’ll have a board, who may not wish to keep me on.’

‘When you get the millions, worry about it then. Or retire to the Caribbean on a big fucking yacht. Besides, it was inevitable; you knew that. And don’t forget to remember us at Christmas.’ I hung up and returned to the polite chitchat with our media mogul.

The weight of the world

Back in the UK, I again tried to find ways of creating more jobs in Africa. And, after much headache, I figured that mines were the best way forwards, issuing many concessions, some to American companies linked to various banks that we were suddenly best buddies with. New mines were opened in Burundi, Malawi, Zimbabwe, Sierra Leone, Zambia and our region in the DRC, the nice people at Caterpillar kept busy. The mines made money and employed a great many local people, plus skilled workers to operate the machinery. From the DRC, our fuel tankers travelled out, soon delivering cheap diesel to many mines, even as far south as Malawi.

Jimmy attended a meeting in London, regarding donor aid to Africa, and came away with most European countries finally offering to channel all their donor aid through us, a significant move that would upset many leaders in Africa. Charities and NGOs would now have to ask us for money - and prove where it was going, and poor old Switzerland would have to make do with less stolen cash being tucked away. The various European governments received complaints from several African states straight away. Those Africa nations were told to contact us, but never did.

After some persuading, Kenya and Tanzania finally joined the economic cooperation group, and Jimmy formalised the group with a sitting chairman and a fulltime staff in Goma hub, a staff of some two hundred. Their job was simple: to boost trade, and to find ways of cooperating with each other to save money. They started with a complaint from Somalia that we were pinching banana trade from them, and we eased back on the free bananas heading for Kenya. Trade shows would now be held every two months, with major deals often being signed at the conference centre.

I would sometimes receive innocuous reports from Gotham City that pleased me, such as the first car wash, a new cinema, a football league, a private dental practice, a college for evening classes. These were all things that we in the west took for granted, but had to be built to spec in Gotham City, population now seventy-five thousand and growing rapidly.

Without my hand in it, the corporation had created several business parks offering small units at low rent, complete with free electricity, and those same units now housed all sorts of new ventures, including bike repairs, washing machine repairs, a carpenter or two. Gotham City was attracting those industries that the people needed, and we were developing a service sector.

West of Forward Base, Big Paul's fish farm was growing, and well beyond the limits I had set. A few locals had seen the fish farm and asked for help setting up their own. Diggers were sent in, the rest would be down to them.

The mayor of a town on a river had been cheeky and asked for a small dam, for no reason other than to make the fishing easier. A simple dam was quickly constructed from concrete, a road across the top for locals to drive over. It offered an overflow that regulated the water's height, and boats that were idle much of the year were now employed for fishing, many young fish inadvertently added to the river upstream by our earnest fish farming efforts. They were the ones that got away.

When the UN lauded the effort to help the local people, I sat back and gave it some thought. I ordered another twenty stretches of river, those near villages, to be dammed in the same cheap manner, road bridges built. The corporation were careful to point out the dangers of flooding, so dam heights and overflows had all to be carefully checked. One particular group of villagers lived in an isolated tight gorge, not far from where the airliner had crashed years before, and their request for a dam was duly granted, its height worked out. Since there were no other villages for miles up stream, or chance of

an overflow, a ten metre concrete dam had been constructed in a deep gorge, a useful new road across the top of the overflow. The brisk river filled the dam quickly, the water backing up some five miles and lapping another village. Those villagers rejoiced at the water level, and the calm water. They jumped into their boats and headed down stream, soon trading with the other village, two sturdy boats being furnished by the corporation. Since the previous jungle trek, village to village, was a three-day event, the locals were happy.

Looking at the next valley across on the map, I ordered a similar dam, and another jungle highway was soon created, more boats dropped by Huey. Then the same nice lady from the UN came back on: could they please have one of those small hydroelectric generators fitted. I agreed, and soon received a photograph of what looked like a car engine with a propeller on a long shaft, the propeller simply lowed into the lively overflow. Lights were now on in the village. Progress. I instructed the corporation to build as many dams as it pleased, with the same small generators fitted, and to extend the project south into Zambia, as well as east into Burundi and Malawi.

Divide and conquer

A month after meeting America's top bankers, two of them came over to the house, both of them now far more amenable. One was handling the Pineapple floatation, and both had bought shares in an oil and mining group. We now allocated them oilfield concessions off Sierra Leone and Guinea, plus several mines in the DRC. That deal was sweetened even further with stock market tips. In return, they displayed and admitted to their multiples, and volumes of CDOs traded. Jimmy offered comments on their exposure, and positions were duly adjusted.

Oddly enough, there was no mention of clairvoyants from these bank chiefs, just an odd acceptance of what we could offer. Liebermans had hit the sidewalk and been bailed out by the Fed – but now with Jimmy's private approval. Another odd occurrence was Jimmy's secret purchase of Liebermans shares, after the company was re-launched with a new management team. I realised why a week later when the new CEO paid us a weekend visit, the

kind of visit kept out of the press. Jimmy knew the man. Having met the guy, I smiled for ten minutes after I left them to chat, Helen enquiring as to the source of my merriment.

Blake Carrington's media group had run dozens of stories about over-stretched banks, the word "multiples" on everyone's lips, and all of the world's private investors both understood the term, and now looked for it when investing; as did many of the institutional investors, the all important pension funds. Declaring a multiple above twenty was now suicide for a retail bank, many banks boasting of their low multiples in their prospectus or in newspaper ads. But when I asked Jimmy if we had won, he said no. And the security remained tight.

'I may have just made things worse,' Jimmy explained. 'Because when you start to feed the tiger its hard to stop. And the next "M" Group meeting might just see America and Israel sat there, since the rest are pissed off at what I'm doing. Chase is just about the only happy one in the group, not the one being expelled.'

'Bit of a ... turnaround?'

'Yeah,' Jimmy sighed. 'But the others are not going to do anything stupid, so staying close to Chase might be the best policy. If you want to swap, I'll do Africa and you can run the "M" Group for a while.'

'Is the extra security necessary?'

'There's one bank group that has teeth; not them, but their bedfellows. They may be an issue. Anyway, we have another serious problem to face, and that's the Haiti quake in January.'

'It's a bad one?'

'It'll just about flatten the entire country.'

'Shit,' I let out.

'But that's not the problem. Once again we'll have to convince the people to sleep outside, and the world will be watching this one.'

'We'll be exposed,' I realised.

He nodded. 'It will be hard to bluff our way through this one. And, our own people will be suspicious.'

'How many people are you deploying?'

'All of them.'

'All of them? A full deployment?' I questioned.

'And others.'

'Why so many?'

'Two reasons: first, a dry run for a larger quake, and second – half a million casualties.'

‘Fucking world *will* be watching. When will you let the boys at Mapley know?’

‘That ... is a good question. The later we leave it, the less chance of a leak. But ... less room to get everyone in place. Given the size of the deployment, we should have started planning a year ago.’

‘They got it down now,’ I confidently stated.

‘Should hope so after all this time.’

‘So what’ll you do?’

‘Get Christmas out of the way, then sound the alert. The rescuers deserve their Christmas; we’ve robbed them of a few.’

‘You’ll bring in the reserves?’

‘Yes, and the Rifles to keep the peace. Plus five thousand French soldiers - because the locals speak French, plus the US Navy.’

‘That’ll leak in five minutes flat,’ I warned. ‘So how long can we leave it before the call-up?’

‘January 1st. That will give us just eleven days.’

We decided to call a meeting of the household “M” Group in the lounge.

Jimmy began, ‘There’ll be a quake in Haiti in January, a very bad quake. Because of the size of this quake – the damage done and the size of the force I’ll send - publicity will be an issue, as will exposure. Warn all of your governments that exposure is a possibility. In addition to that, I’ll be requesting five thousand French troops for a lengthy deployment, the US military to run the airport and provide fuel, as well as to provide a hospital ship and logistics. I’ll need C5 or C17 transports from Britain and America from January 2nd.’

‘Why such a large deployment?’ Jack puzzled.

‘A million casualties,’ Jimmy responded. ‘Most of the country will go.’ They were shocked. ‘Besides, this is a dry run for another quake in the future, a more severe quake. Those of you involved – please make the requests.’

I faxed the Haitian President and enquired if he would be visiting Europe or America anytime soon. He’d be in New York, at the UN, in late November, so we pencilled a meeting. Sitting with his file, I could see that their RF unit had been created at an old airfield, two hundred people employed, most of whom were now training in nearby Cuba. The Rifles were still a fledgling unit, but they gave me an idea. I increased the intake of trainees and dispatched more instructors from Africa, French speaking Congolese instructors. Besides that, there was little I could do to get extra bodies in places ahead of time. More Cuban medics in Haitian clinics was one idea,

rejected when I considered what might be left of the clinics afterwards. Now we'd wait, and worry.

Preparations

In early November I firmly nagged Jimmy, telling him that we could wait no longer before making preparations. He reluctantly agreed, and we drove over to Mapley, to a meeting with Bob Davies and Doc Graham.

'Awake, Bob?' I asked as we entered, finding his wife with him. 'No impropriety going on here, I hope?'

'That was before we got married,' she quipped on the way out.

Jimmy brought in Doc Graham.

'Deployment on?' Doc Graham asked as he sat, notepad ready.

'In January,' Jimmy began. 'And ... it's classified top secret till I say otherwise. I want you two to delegate whatever tasks you can, call in whatever help you need, and free yourselves up to plan a job. Its working title will be Operation Anaconda.'

'So why's it a secret?' Bob puzzled.

Jimmy took a moment. 'Crusty is predicting a quake in Haiti.'

'It's in a quake zone,' Bob acknowledged.

'He's predicting the destruction of just about the whole country, millions of casualties.'

They both eased up and stared at us for a moment.

'How many would we send?' Bob asked.

'Everyone,' Jimmy answered. 'And if it leaked ahead of time...'

'Panic on the streets,' Doc Graham finished off. 'And if he's wrong, or the dates are out?'

'Then we'd move the whole force for nothing,' I acknowledged.

'Jesus,' Bob let out, throwing down his pen and running his hands through his hair.

'We did it before,' I pointed out. 'In 2004.'

'We were a tenth of the size back then!' Bob noted.

'We'd want thirty Hueys and a hundred jeeps,' Jimmy suggested. 'And between now and then I need a plan, but kept secret.'

'Sending the jeeps by plane would be expensive, as well as that many Huey's,' Doc Graham thought out loud. 'Could pretend that they're off to Cuba for an exercise and send them by boat. Two weeks sail time.'

‘Do it,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘They need to be in Cuba for January 6th. The Huey’s can fly over to Haiti, the jeeps will go by ferry. I’ll arrange that.’

‘That just leaves the warm bodies and kit,’ Bob noted. ‘What specialists would we need?’

‘Full surgical capability and aftercare, basic search and rescue, plus dogs.’

‘We put a dent in the budget in September,’ Bob cautioned.

‘There’s plenty in the Mawlini account, more coming soon,’ Jimmy responded. ‘Don’t worry.’

‘Moving everyone won’t be cheap,’ Bob again cautioned. I was starting to wonder whose bloody money it was.

‘Good job I have an airline then,’ Jimmy quipped. ‘We’ll use some of them, especially the 747s. That’s four hundred bodies a go. I’ll borrow some C17s and C5s as well.’ He heaved a breath. ‘So, you’ve got an operation to plan. Label it up as an exercise in Cuba for now.’

On the way back, Jimmy took a call from Sykes. It was not good news. The former French President had been a bit tipsy at a cocktail party in the South of France, and had described the “M” Group and Jimmy in detail, to a reporter who had secretly taped it. It was aired on primetime French television an hour earlier. My stomach turned. Now it was a case of getting to January without exposure, let alone beyond it.

At the house, Jimmy asked if the BBC had been on. Yes, twice! He told Sharon to call them back and descended to the basement, straightening his tie. He fired up the video conferencing equipment and sat in front of the camera.

‘Anyone there? Silo to London. Come in London.’

‘Two minutes,’ came a disembodied voice as I sat off to one side, wishing I had a time machine of my own.

They counted down.

‘Mister Silo, thank you for joining us at such short notice. Have you heard the comments from the former French President?’

‘I got the gist of it, yes. And may I say, that since the man in question has left office he’s been feeling less important, if not useless. I guess these ... pleasantly odd allegations are a way of him impressing journalists.’

‘You do attend the meetings held by the world leaders.’

‘True, but I don’t attend G8 or G20, or anything with a “g” at the front, I’m not important enough.’

‘What do you say to allegations of a global conspiracy?’

‘I’d say that ... if there is a single group of people controlling the planet, then they’re doing a really bad job of it, especially of fixing the Eurovision song contest. I mean, how fixed is that? I think the secret Illuminati are doing a bad job with Eurovision.’

‘What do you say to the claim that you control the “M” Group meetings?’

‘I’d say that if I did control those countries we’d have peace on this planet, tattoos would be banned on girls, and there’d be no adverts between programmes. Do you have any other silly questions?’

‘Thank you, Mister Silo.’

We were off air. Jimmy faced me as he stood. ‘How did I do?’

‘Is Eurovision fixed?’

‘Who ... cares?’

We called an “M” Group meeting in a lounge, Michelle on the spot. Her fellow housemates were now very formal in their condemnation of her countryman. Unfortunately, there was little we could do to the former French leader without arousing suspicions further. It was a mess. After the meeting, I gave Helen a hug, and we sat facing each other, watching the kids play with their laptops.

‘This the end?’ she asked.

‘Well, after the big deployment in January, Jimmy thinks it may be.’

‘We’ll be prisoners then,’ she sighed.

‘The house and grounds were built for us,’ I informed her. ‘A very pleasant prison.’

‘The press will look into my past,’ she softly suggested.

‘Sykes has been through it,’ I told her, a surprise for my wife.

‘He did?’

I nodded. ‘Jimmy had your past wiped. And that general – your old boss, he died a while back. His daughter may suspect something, but I doubt she knows.’

‘Best get some shopping in then,’ Helen wistfully stated.

‘That’s the attitude. You know, in the basement there’s food for three months. There’s also a new generator in case the lights go out, fuel for a month, they strengthened the fence and there’re more bodies around it.’

She focused on the girls. ‘They couldn’t go to school.’

‘No,’ I said with a sigh. ‘Probably not. Anyway, this weekend, London club, you and me.’

‘Last time?’

‘I should hope not. If the worst comes, we’ll blame Jimmy for everything and plead ignorance.’ We laughed. ‘Besides, Gotham City is quite nice these days. Then there’s Hong Kong, or the castle in Scotland.’ I took Helen by the hand, glanced at the girls glued to their laptops, and led her upstairs, throwing her onto the bed.

‘What’s brought this on?’ she whispered as I lifted her skirt.

‘The face of imminent danger. Always a turn on.’

The entire household “M” Group journeyed to London with us that Friday night, everyone labelling it as The Last Supper. We enjoyed a meal in the Chinese restaurant, the mood upbeat, the gang resigned to the problems ahead. We ate a lot, drank a lot, and made rude comments to other guests. It was an odd time, and an odd mood. It was if our bank manager had asked for his money back, and we all stood in an empty warehouse. That’s how it felt: the end of an era.

We mingled with celebs in the VIP area, being suitably rude to anyone who asked about the “M” Group, and Helen and I danced close, the first time for many years; it was as if we were meeting for the first time, all over again. A few people asked for a word, probably about business, but I ignored them. Jimmy joined us on the dance floor with a model, not Michelle. That either meant that he would describe his antics to her later, or there’d be a threesome later. Keely and his new wife took to the dance floor, Han and Jack chatting in the computer room, Big Paul and the security patrolling for girls daft enough to date them.

Then the music stopped, and we could hear singing. Our song. Down in the Red Room, Katie Joe was singing, the song piped around the club; Jimmy’s doing. I exchanged a look with him. We were like the last two couples on the Titanic as it went down, defiant to the end.

Helen and I quit early, making love in the shower of our room. Bored with just lying in bed, we got dressed and headed back down for more food. We had worked up an appetite, and giggled like teenagers as we sat eating. It was odd, but the pressure was off now that we had this new reality, that of being exposed to the world. We chatted to Katie Joe and her husband later, surprised that they had lasted the test of time. Well, at least eight years, but no kids so far. Jimmy now stood flanked by two models, one on each arm, with no sign of Michelle.

Helen and I slowly drank ourselves into a stupor and we were helped to our room, collapsing on the bed clothed and falling a sleep. Jimmy, on the other hand, had placed the models in separate

spare rooms upstairs, and was trying to set some kind of record. He attended both in turn before returning to Michelle to tell her about it. In the morning, we heard about damage to their room; I guess she had limits after all. When I saw the papers I laughed, not caring too much at all anymore: Silo beds three in a night! They even had pictures of the models, so I guessed that Jimmy had planned it. Talk about going out with a bang.

At 10am we found Jimmy and Michelle in the diner, uniformed police officers sat in the corner. I wondered if they were keeping the peace. Michelle looked a bit moody, and Jimmy displayed a bruised eye.

‘You’d best ring the Prime Minister and apologise,’ Jimmy told us as we sat.

‘Why?’ I asked. ‘You were the one having all the fun!’

‘Helen?’ Jimmy called.

‘What?’ she puzzled. ‘What did I do?’

‘Check your mobile log. You called the Prime Minister and, just for a joke, told him that I was stoned and running down Oxford Circus naked.’

Helen put a hand to her mouth. ‘My god!’

‘They sent police cars out to find me, apparently.’

I faced Helen. ‘I don’t remember you doing that.’

‘Me neither,’ she replied.

‘You were both very drunk,’ Michelle informed us. ‘Triple vodkas.’

‘Did that make the papers?’ Helen asked, now concerned.

‘Not yet,’ Jimmy answered. ‘But it will. The officers behind me asked if I ran down the street naked.’

‘Ah, fuck ‘em all,’ I said. ‘We needed to let off steam.’

‘Feeling better?’ Jimmy asked us.

‘Much better,’ I replied, Helen nodding.

‘What happened to your eye,’ I indiscreetly asked. Deliberately.

‘I hit him,’ Michelle answered.

‘Will England and France be going to war?’ I teased.

‘He said De Gaulle was an idiot,’ Michelle complained.

I stared at her, wide eyed. ‘Well, Jimmy, how ... how could you?’

Helen sniggered, now being stared at by Michelle.

The police officers finished up and stood. Approaching, one said, ‘Can we have a snap? Whilst your still in one piece, boss.’

‘Sure,’ Jimmy said as he stood. They used their phones and took a few pictures, leaving us to our breakfast.

At 1pm, cleaned up, we jumped into a coach and headed towards the rear entrance of No. 10 Downing Street, not actually giving a shit if the PM was in a mood or not. Jimmy, Helen, Jack and myself walked through, led to a meeting room, the PM's residence quiet.

The PM entered, sighed theatrically, and sat. 'You made the papers for all the wrong reasons.'

'Smokescreen,' Jimmy said. 'They're less likely to believe I'm not just an ordinary Joe.'

'Ordinary Joe's don't bed three stunners in the one evening!' the PM pointed out. He took a moment. 'You think exposure is close?'

'Yes,' Jimmy answered. 'And, after the quake, there'll be questions. So you'd best prepare yourself for that all important speech.'

'I've dusted that off a few times over the years,' the PM admitted. 'But I'm kind of hoping that you'll make the speech first.'

'I'll try to,' Jimmy offered. 'Naked or not.'

The PM focused on Helen. 'I could believe it from your rude husband, but not from you!'

'Sorry, Prime Minister, we'd been drinking,' Helen offered.

'I got that from the loud background music. I had a hundred officers trying to find Jimmy. I even woke-up Jack in his hotel room.'

'Well, with things like that in the papers, who'd believe the truth about me?' Jimmy posed.

'Yes, well ... no more smokescreens like that, please'.

'We'll try and be good, sir,' I offered, less than sincerely.

'French and Germans are mad as hell over Greece,' the PM informed us. 'We're trying to defuse it, but I think they'll formally accuse Greece of deception.'

'That's what it was,' Jimmy pointed out. 'But where I can I'll try and boost the Greek economy, after the Greeks offer to tighten things up. They're still running a high deficit and lying about it, *and* they have money in certain American banks still.'

'Where are you with the US banks?'

'I've got four on board,' Jimmy stated.

'When you say ... on board?' the PM nudged, seeming worried.

'They receive trading advice - all above board, and oil deals,' Jimmy explained.

'On condition...?' the PM asked.

'That they behave.'

'Is four enough?'

‘It’s enough to make a comparison, and to show up the others. Divide and conquer. They’re only strong if they act together, and AIG is about to rip them a new asshole as well for miss-selling.’

‘Is that enough?’ the PM asked, adopting a serious tone.

‘It’s a start. And quite good considering that at this point we should be in an all-out war with the States. So, yeah, things are better. I’d go so far as to say ... things are good.’

‘Except the exposure,’ Jack put in. ‘My wife doesn’t have a clue, and that’s not a conversation I’m looking forwards to.’

I focused on Jack. ‘You mind if I ask if you were injected?’

‘Both of us were, a few years back,’ he admitted. ‘Half strength.’

I faced Jimmy. ‘Michelle?’ He nodded. ‘Han?’ Again he nodded. ‘Best do Cookie and Sandra, I’d hate to lose *them*.’

The PM asked Jimmy directly about his parents.

Jimmy took a moment. ‘I buried them more than once, so it’s ... a bit odd. And I don’t want them to see the next decade. It’s ... too much for them to understand.’

‘And our girls?’ I testily put in.

‘They’ve grown up with high fences and guards, they’ll think nothing of it,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘They’ll adapt better than anyone else.’

‘Will Haiti be expensive?’ the PM asked.

‘We floated Pineapple, so all the revenue will go there.’

‘It will?’ I queried, snapping my head around.

Jimmy nodded. ‘It will. And more. If not, it becomes a failed state and turns to crime.’

‘How much will you spend?’ the PM asked.

‘Well over a billion. Probably two.’

‘Expensive pastime,’ the PM noted.

‘A few years down the road, Athens will be hit, and that will cost Europe two hundred billion. So start saving your pennies.’

‘Athens?’ the PM repeated, looking horrified. ‘A quake?’

Jimmy nodded, suddenly appearing saddened.

‘How bad?’

‘Complete and utter destruction. The city won’t be habitable for decades afterwards.’

‘My god,’ the PM let out, straightening. ‘The cost to Europe...’

‘As I said, start saving your pennies. And not a word to anyone. And I mean ... *anyone*.’

EMP

That afternoon, Jimmy held an impromptu “M” Group meeting at the old apartment, the lounge checked carefully first. I welcomed the new Israeli representative, now known as New Dave.

Jimmy began, ‘An hour ago, the American Embassy in Kinshasa was hit with a small EMP weapon.’

‘What?’ Keely queried.

‘An EMP weapon,’ Jimmy carefully mouthed.

‘Who ... who’d have the technology?’ Keely asked, horrified.

‘I would, I organised it,’ Jimmy explained with a grin, the group quietly shocked. ‘It was hit by a low yield device, the size of a football, and the effects are temporary. And yes, you can tell Chase that it was me, done as an example, a ...wake-up call. OK, the reason for this meeting is to discuss the future use of such weapons, and to prepare for them, hence the practical lesson. Six years from now, many of your embassies will be hit by EMP weapons. British and American embassies will be the principal targets, but once the technology is out there others will be hit. You must, all of you, constantly search for anyone working on EMP technology and stop it. You must also start to plan for detectors and counter-measures, which I’ll help you with.

‘The house in Wales is EMP proof - it was designed that way; lead lining and copper coils help to disperse and disrupt an EMP wave, as well as EMP high frequency weapons. The US Embassy in Kinshasa was hit by a high frequency weapon, the device simply switched on and then off. It was not a pulse, and frequency weapons are not as destructive. A frequency weapon prevents use of electronics, but a pulse would fry them.

‘Beyond 2015, students will build EMP weapons in their garages and use them in places like New York, causing great damage. Such weapons need time to charge, and give off characteristic energy waves first, so early warnings can be given. You can run wires down buildings and embassies, and switch on a high frequency current that causes a strong magnetic effect when needed, disrupting the pulse. If not stopped, then in 2015 a group of student activists will wipe out the New York Stock Exchange and a whole city block. That brings us ... to the dangerous part.’

‘That attack isn’t dangerous?’ Keely loudly questioned.

‘No, that can be planned for. In the future, a device the size of mobile phone could be taken aboard an aircraft and used to fry the controls in flight.’

‘Jesus,’ I let out.

‘A larger version of that same technology could be fired at an aircraft in flight from three thousand feet below, frying the controls. Aircraft can still land, more or less, but most will crash. In the decades ahead, civil aircraft electronics will need to be built to military specs, to resist EMPs. I’ll be providing you all with detailed files. And, if my requests are not heeded, I’ll start frying your embassies just for fun. That won’t hurt anyone, and landline phones may still work – although certain handsets will pack up. You’ll just need to replace all other bits of electronics, and computers.’

Keely asked. ‘Could a foreign power use it for economic warfare?’

‘Most definitely,’ Jimmy affirmed, nodding. ‘A device could wipe out a bank. The first detectors will be available within months, made in China under license. In six months I’ll be running tests on British embassies in Africa – removing people with pacemakers first!’

‘Will anyone ever develop a battlefield version?’ Keely asked.

‘Yes, *you* will. And, in 2025, they may be put to good use to deny the enemy the use of its communications – a most effective tool.’ He pointed at New Dave. ‘You, will feel the effects first as Palestinians realise that it’s an effective weapon. Fired at a jeep, the jeep stops. Tanks are protected to a degree, but Apache helicopters are vulnerable. Don’t believe everything the manufacturer says!’

‘Will our banks be attacked?’ New Dave asked.

‘Not really, since it would require a device the size of a car or van moved into place first, and then wired to the mains electricity. No, your jeeps and helicopters will be the targets, plus infantry; your soldier’s radios will stop working. That, and your embassies will be hit after 2015.’

‘It’s a lot of effort, on the part of the terrorists, for no loss of life?’ New Dave posed.

‘It’s a weapon that can be used over and over, costing you money to tow away jeeps and repair them. And the Palestinians *will* bring down helicopters, a great victory for their propaganda machine. And if they did manage to hit the business district in Tel Aviv, a great cost to you. Hitting your embassies is more of an annoyance, but it still costs a great deal to replace all the communications equipment. Since there’s no sound, or evidence left behind, it’s easy enough to

avoid getting caught. I'll fly a prototype to Israel and fire it at a few things, see how you cope. If you're confident, sit in the helicopter and I'll fire up at you.'

People smiled at New Dave, who declined to participate in the live test.

We enjoyed a Saturday night at the club, Jimmy popular with the kind of men who wished to emulate his wayward lifestyle, and Helen and I again let our hair down. Travelling back on the coach, on Sunday afternoon, the mood was positive. Cat handed us back the girls, who explained what they had done without their controlling parents around, which included bringing the new hamsters into the house for a visit. And a rabbit. And a tame owl. Helen and I exchanged looks. Where the hell did the owl come from? Fearing an invasion of things furry and smelly, I went straight out later that day and bought a kitten, the girls delighted by it, but also distracted from other creatures, crawling walking or flying.

Having kittens

A few days later, Jimmy popped around to my house in the evening. Helen handed him a bottle of beer as he sat on the sofa.

'The Haitian President should be as cooperative as we need, he has nothing to lose,' Jimmy began with.

'But...?' I posed.

Jimmy sipped his beer. 'But, population control will be at the front of his mind; mass panic, looting and crime. People will empty their bank accounts – those that have them – and piss off abroad.'

'Which won't be good for business,' I noted.

'It won't make that much of a difference given what will happen, but he'll want it managed well.'

'How do you *manage well* a disaster like that?' Helen scoffed.

'You don't, but it's his country, so we have to gloss it up a bit,' Jimmy replied, seeming tired for a change.

The kitten ran out, chasing nothing in particular, and inspected the three of us as we sat there. It decided that Jimmy looked more comfortable and jumped up, sniffing the newcomer. Jimmy lifted it onto his lap, the kitten settling almost immediately. Lucy bound in, looking for it, plonking down next to Jimmy.

‘Have you been feeding the owl?’ Jimmy asked our daughter.

‘Yes.’

‘So tell mummy and daddy what you feed it.’

‘Dead mice.’

‘Dead mice?’ I repeated.

‘Rob catches them with the dogs, keeps them for the owl,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Sometimes rats from the river.’

‘Lucy, darling,’ I loudly called. ‘You wash your hands after feeding the owl, OK.’

She ignored me and stroked the contented kitten.

Jimmy lowered his head towards her. ‘What do you want to be when you grow up?’

‘A vet,’ she came back with straight away, Helen and I exchanging looks. This was news to us.

‘And what is Uncle Jimmy building you at the top end?’ Jimmy asked.

‘A paddock.’

‘A paddock?’ Helen repeated. ‘You’ve bought them a pony?’

‘No, they’re your kids, you can buy them one,’ Jimmy quipped. ‘Shelly’s friends all ride, and you can’t leave her out.’

‘I could teach them,’ Helen put in.

‘You can?’ I asked.

‘Junior champion,’ she informed me. ‘About time I got back into the saddle.’

‘Jimmy rides,’ I pointed out.

‘You do?’ Helen asked Jimmy.

‘Have done for years, although not for a while – if that makes sense. I rode across Canada a lot, slept under the stars. Proper horsemanship.’

‘Well, when we get back from New York we can go horse hunting,’ I said with a sigh.

‘Ponies, not horses,’ my wife corrected me.

‘Gwen has a few for sale,’ Jimmy informed us. He handed the kitten to Lucy and stood. ‘Have a think about a strategy for the Haitian President.’ He wistfully added, ‘Some cash in his back pocket might do it.’

We landed in New York two days later, security tight, a private security firm hired instead of the men that Pineapple used to supply us with. But Chase had a surprise, and had arranged an FBI escort as well. I was feeling popular and wanted, not! After an evening in my apartment, the other now back under the ownership of Pineapple, we

journeyed down to the UN building, to a meeting with the Haitian President. It was never going to be easy, I considered on the way.

Jimmy already knew the way through the UN building and, once through security – flashing our own UN Ambassador identity badges – we found the Haitian delegation. They made us coffee from a tall plastic urn on a trolley. Well, it was the UN building.

‘How goes the Rescue Force unit?’ they asked through an interpreter.

‘Fine,’ I said as we sat. ‘Two hundred medics being trained in Cuba.’

‘And many young soldiers being trained?’ they asked.

I nodded as I stirred my coffee. ‘Yes, that’s progressing well, but we’re here to discuss a ... problem.’

Jimmy offered no comment and let me take the lead.

I took a breath. ‘We have computer software that predicts earthquakes, and an expert in such matters.’ The interpreter did his bit, and the Haitians were on the ball. They stopped smiling. ‘We’ve had great success with earthquake predictions, and we’re now predicting an earthquake in your country.’

‘When?’ they asked, a logical question.

‘In January, the first or second week,’ I replied.

‘You will send your people?’ they keenly asked, obviously desiring our assistance.

‘Yes, we would like to. But there is a question of people panicking.’

‘Yes, yes, of course,’ the President acknowledged. ‘There may be unrest.’

‘And some may wish to leave, to go abroad,’ I ventured. ‘So maybe it is best kept quiet for now.’

‘Yes, but we must make plans.’

‘We ... are making plans. We will coordinate all UN agencies, all supplies, and all of the rescuers. We could also offer you soldiers from Africa, the famous Rifles that you already see training your men. They could be under your control to ... keep the peace.’

‘Yes,’ they agreed. This was going well enough.

‘And afterwards, we would help to pay for reconstruction,’ I offered. That cheered them.

‘How much?’ they asked, straight to the point.

‘Around two billion dollars,’ I said, and I should not have.

They stared at me as if I had grown a second head, and I realised that I should not have said it.

‘That is a lot of money,’ they noted. ‘What damage do you expect?’

I glanced at Jimmy. He said, ‘Earthquakes are hard to predict, so we always allow for the worst, and hope for the best.’

‘Yes, good. So, what damage do you expect?’ They waited.

I said, ‘If the quake is as bad as we think it will be, then much damage.’

They all shrugged. ‘What is ... much damage?’ they pressed.

I glanced at Jimmy again. ‘We don’t know,’ I lied.

‘You must have an idea, or you would not have earmarked two billion dollars. It is a lot of money for a little damage!’

Jimmy eased forwards. ‘If the quake is as bad as we think, then not a single building will be left standing afterwards.’

They digested that, eyes widening and mouths opening.

Jimmy added, ‘If our man is correct, then your country will cease to exist and have to be rebuilt from scratch.’

This was just the approach we had hoped to avoid, and I had to wonder why our presentation skills were so lacking. Our hosts glanced at each other, nothing said for many seconds.

‘And if you are wrong?’ the President complained.

‘You still get the two billion dollars from us,’ Jimmy answered him. That seemed to appease the man, as well as shock him upright.

‘So ... what do you wish to do?’ the President finally asked with a large shrug. ‘We should ask for UN aid to be ready.’

Jimmy said, ‘The UN will not act until after a quake has caused damage, but we would like to move before the quake strikes. We can have tents, food and medics in place - away from the cities to avoid panic, and could make use of them when the quake strikes. We’ll also supply some money up front to assist with preparations, but we should try not to panic the people.’

‘They will panic when the buildings collapse!’ they pointed out, and they were right. They were being more practical than I figured.

‘We could warn them to sleep outdoors, or in the tents for a few nights,’ I suggested. ‘Fewer people would be hurt.’

They glanced at each other and shrugged their agreements. ‘Yes, maybe.’

‘How many people would you send?’ the President asked.

I countered with, ‘How many would you like? I mean, the more people, the quicker we can repair buildings.’ I was happy with the question after I asked it.

‘Send as many as you can,’ the President suggested.

‘We’ll group our people in Cuba, at the training base,’ I suggested. ‘Then fly over or come by boat when ready.’

‘Oh, OK,’ they acknowledged.

‘We would land our people around the 3rd of January onwards,’ I told them. ‘We expect the quake around the 12th, give or take a few days. Before then, we should try and keep it quiet.’

‘But you will be making plans?’

‘Yes, we’re busy making plans now,’ I confirmed.

‘And you can move many people in a week?’ they asked.

‘Yes, we can move many people,’ I confidently stated, putting on my diplomatic smile. ‘We would send people to help at the airport, to help with logistics. Everything will be ready and in place.’

‘And what assistance will you give us after the quake?’ they just about demanded.

Cheeky buggers, was what I wanted to say, but didn’t. ‘We will provide long term care and reconstruction assistance. Many years of assistance.’

That seemed to appease them, and I had to wonder why the fuck we were even talking to them. I handed them a document that expanded upon the standard Rescue Force Charter and allowed us to land as many people as we thought suitable. They signed and handed it back, and I handed over a banker’s draft for fifty million dollars, although my hand didn’t want to let go of it. We left after forced diplomatic smiles were exchanged, and promised to keep them informed of developments.

On the way out, I said, ‘Did we just try and persuade them, and bribe them, so that we can help them for years to come?’

‘We did.’

‘I’m sure there’s something wrong with that, somehow.’

‘It’s an imperfect universe. Still, if he’s a problem he’ll disappear the night of the quake.’

‘How many Rifles will you land?’

‘Enough to take the whole of the Caribbean. And by time he figures that out, he’ll have a rifle up his nose and the world’s press watching him.’

‘You know, you’re becoming more of a diplomat in your old age.’

‘Next comes a TV interview, after a hospital visit,’ Jimmy explained.

‘Hospital?’ I queried.

‘Publicity time comes ahead of exposure time; we need the people to like us. So make like an electioneering politician.’

‘Should have brought the girls,’ I grumbled.

An hour later we entered a public hospital, TV crews tipped off, and headed towards a pre-arranged visit to a cancer ward. The chief physician met us with his assistant and we fell into step as they led us on.

‘Haven’t put you out of a job, have we?’ I asked as we walked down a corridor.

‘Not yet, but the workload is lessening. Events of the past six months have been extraordinary. Now, Chemotherapy seems outdated and barbaric, but that’s medicine. We used to bleed people and use leeches.’

‘Still do in the UK, mate,’ I quipped.

He led us to a ward, but these American wards were not like the UK; here, everyone had a room. In the UK and Europe, twenty same-sex patients would be attended in the one long room. This place reminded me of the UK’s private hospitals, and I’d only ever been in them briefly during the birth of the girls. Our guide now led us to a forty-year-old man that appeared too well to be in the bed he occupied, the TV crew trailing behind.

‘How you doing, mate?’ I asked.

‘I go home in an hour,’ he said with a smile.

‘What was wrong with you?’ I asked.

‘Pancreatic cancer. I was diagnosed two months ago.’

‘Two months in bed?’ I puzzled.

‘No, I had a bank of tests first, went through the motions, then insisted that they try your drug. I was injected last week.’

‘So what’s the prognosis?’

‘No signs left, none at all,’ the man keenly informed us. ‘Wife picks me up in a while.’ He let his legs down and stood next to us, the four of us now facing the camera, and making like electioneering politicians.

‘You do realise,’ I whispered, talking out of the side of my mouth. ‘That your wife won’t be here in an hour. She collected the insurance on you and left with a nice young doctor!’

The man laughed. ‘She only collects if I’m dead.’ He opened a cabinet, pulling out a large photograph of what he used to look like.

‘That was you?’ I asked, holding the picture.

‘I put on twenty pounds in a week.’

‘That’s not a good thing!’ I warned.

‘They’re throwing a “welcome back” party if you guys are available.’

I faced Jimmy.

‘What kind of food?’ he asked the patient.

‘Italian!’

‘Then we could eat,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘We’ll be back in a bit.’

The doctor led us out of the room, and to another waiting patient, a man in his thirties that also looked very well. This guy, however, had his wife and kids at his bedside. I focused on the younger daughter, about the same age as Shelly, and not dissimilar in appearance. I lost my smile, and had to look away from her.

‘So, what were you diagnosed with?’ I flatly asked.

‘Prostate cancer, but aggressive. I ... was terminal.’

‘And now?’

‘Now I could run around the park with the girls,’ he joked, and I was not enjoying this; his family looked too much like my own. And the look on the girl’s faces hit me right in the heart. I wasn’t afraid of death, but I was terrified of leaving my girls without their father, an odd skew on my mortality.

Jimmy asked the girls what they wanted to be when they grew up. One wanted to be a doctor, a good answer for the camera, and the other wanted to be a lawyer. That kind of balanced things out. We made small talk, posing for both the TV crew, and a growing army of hospital staff with cameras. In the corridor, I asked the doctor if we were making medics redundant.

‘Take a look at that family. Who’d put their job ahead of that.’

I glanced over my shoulder as we moved off. Most of the time I was insulated from the real world; that happened on the TV news. This was all a bit too real, and awkward. I didn’t quite know why I felt so out of place, I should have been happy with what we had achieved. We met additional patients, stopping to talk with the staff as we progressed, finally ending up in a room with the latest Silo Stiffy, two doctors stood ready beside it.

I closed in and touched a scar on the make-believe skin. ‘It had its appendix out?’

‘Dozens of times.’

‘Does it degrade?’

‘No, we have a man that repairs it good as new,’ they explained, laughing. ‘That guy could take out an appendix better than us!’

‘What do you use it for?’ I asked.

‘Junior doctors, and nurses’ annual tests. This is not a teaching hospital – not really, so everyone should be competent enough in their various fields. But it all helps. Even some of the senior staff come down and use it for fun; they give each other scenarios, a few dollars or a beer on the result.’

‘So what does this one do?’ I asked.

‘This model handles a punctured lung better - very realistic. And the temperature control is better. This thing is warmer than my wife!’ We laughed.

I pointed at it. ‘If it gets any more realistic, they sell them in sex shops.’

‘That’s no joke. A doctor was fired for being ... too friendly with one,’ they explained.

I faced Jimmy. ‘Maybe we should modify it.’

‘Can’t do that without removing the Obstetric benefits,’ Jimmy explained. ‘There’s a version that delivers a baby.’

‘I’ve seen it,’ one of the doctors put in. ‘It has a foetal heartbeat. Surgeons can practise a “C” Section.’

‘Yeah, well listen guys - we’re not trying to do you out of a job,’ I tried to explain.

‘You won’t, because someone will always have to inject the old ladies with the super-drug,’ they joked. ‘Down in Florida its a thousand dollars or more a shot.’

I shook my head.

‘Rumour has it there’s a stronger version, and a much stronger version,’ they nudged, closing in.

‘It has side effects,’ Jimmy told them. ‘Including insatiable appetite, chronic weight gain, and insomnia. So forget it for now.’

Glad to be away from the dummy, I followed Jimmy back to the first patient we had met, the man now dressed and ready. He handed us the relevant address, and we arranged to meet at the restaurant - complete with our sizeable security detail. We hopped into our vans.

Fortunately, the establishment in question was big enough for us all, many people already in attendance. Jimmy placed our security detail on a table by the door, a few men posted outside. And then we became family, Italian family, hugs and kisses aplenty, thanks from everyone – filmed all the while by the stalking TV crew. Jimmy lifted a young girl up, closing in on her parents, as I was handed a beer by a group of well-built men.

‘What do you lot do for a living?’

‘Fireman, next door.’

‘Next door? That’s handy. You come here for food after shift?’

They nodded. ‘Rick is one of ours.’ They pointed at the man who had invited us.

‘What’s his job?’

‘Driver mostly, but we train to do all the jobs.’

‘Over here, ambulances are run by the firemen - yes?’ I queried.

‘In most places, yeah, but not always in the big cities.’

‘In England, ambulance drivers and firemen are quite different jobs,’ I explained as background music started. ‘We have people who are drivers and basic medics, or paramedic trained.’

‘When are you opening Rescue Force here? We keep asking around.’

‘Difficult over here: the law, the cost - and getting sued. In Africa, we have top quality western doctors working for thirty thousand dollars a year, and no chance of suing us.’ I shrugged a shoulder. ‘It’s a calling, not a job.’

‘Do they get their food and accommodation thrown in?’

I nodded. ‘Good accommodation, and travel tickets for holidays. Plus they can go on safari when they want, or visit the beach hotels. And our medics ... we teach them to fly Hueys. After a year in the job they don’t want to leave; we have a very low turnover rate.’

‘They all very fit?’

I lifted my eyebrows and nodded. ‘Long walks in the desert heat, jungle survival training, the works. And we put them across assault courses.’

‘What about the ladies?’ they keenly asked.

‘There are more women than men at the bases, free beer, disco on a Friday and Saturday. If you’re interested, apply online. In England, firemen can do a year with us on their old wages, their jobs held open for them.’

‘Shit...’

I was led to a table, starters placed down, soon surrounded by eight people all trying to talk at once, a little bewildered by it all. At least the food was good, and the beer plentiful. An hour later, the firemen were keen to show off their ladder, which I later figured out was their station, and not just a really nice ladder for climbing up things. They led Jimmy and myself next door to meet the night crew, the cancer patient being greeted warmly by his colleagues. I guessed he’d be back in work soon.

We wound them up about having to work, and told them how good the beers next door were, soon drifting back towards the open doors of the station. But that was when fate took over, and time started to slow down. I remember the smiling faces, the TV crew on the street, our security guys stood on the pavement. Jimmy was stood two steps ahead of me, and chatting to the cancer patient. On the pavement, a shout was issued by one of our security staff.

I was still smiling, my senses deadened by the beer.

Turning my head to the right, I saw a man with a gun, and a sudden movement in front of me. What happened next caused me to reach out with a hand, a subconscious reaction.

Jimmy took the cancer patient by the shoulders and pulled him in, and to Jimmy's left, Jimmy turning his back to the gunmen – and putting his big frame in the way.

Three flashes, three modest cracks, and three rounds hit Jimmy in the back. The security men fired back, the attacker falling backwards. People, and time, seemed to freeze. Jimmy turned his head towards me, and I remember the look. He looked ... at peace. He looked me in the eye, and his eyes said: it's OK. Then he smiled, dropping to his knees a second later.

I started forwards, soon grabbed by three of the security men and pushed firmly back into the station as screams went up. Shouts. It was a blur for a while. And all I could see was the girl's face, the girl in the hospital wondering if she'd have her father around.

They led me inside, the fireman now helping me as if I was a victim. And I wondered if Jimmy was gone. I wondered ... was it just me now, and I felt desperately alone. He said this day may come, and now it was here. I was now point man for the entire fucking planet, but I just wanted to be sick.

A few minutes later I could hear sirens, lots of sirens, and now I was more annoyed than afraid. 'I need to go with him!' I shouted at the wall of men protecting me. I moved through the firemen and found the security detail, the men now blanketing me as they led me toward a van. I had wanted to ride in the ambulance, but they said no. Now in a van, we followed the ambulance. I lifted my phone and dialled home, getting Ricky, on duty in the basement camera room.

'Ricky, Jimmy's been shot, let everyone know.' I redialled, and woke Helen. 'I'm OK, don't panic - but Jimmy's been shot.'

'Shot? Badly wounded?'

'I don't know, he may be dead. I'll call you when I can.'

The trip to the hospital, the waiting room, the fussing doctors - it was all a blur. Then the entire New York police department turned up, surrounding the hospital and putting men in each corner inside the hospital. I had never seen so many uniforms.

Reports came out to me: Silo in surgical prep', Silo on his way to surgery, Silo in surgery. It was a full hour, and numerous dreadful coffees, before the head surgeon came out to see me. And now a police chief, New York FBI director, and a few other faces were present.

The man in blue operating robes said, 'He was built to last.'

‘What?’ I puzzled.

‘Three rounds hit him in the back, severed two arteries, punctured both lungs. He should be dead, but his body seems to have ... well, closed up the holes. His ruptured arteries closed, saving blood loss.’

‘We’ll need to move him to a military hospital,’ the FBI guy said, the doctor puzzling that.

‘I’ll decide where the fuck he goes!’ I barked at the man. Facing the doctor, I asked, ‘How long till he’s well enough to be moved?’

‘A week or two! He was shot three times.’ He walked off.

The New York FBI director obviously knew the security risks of Jimmy being here. ‘We could bring in a doctor that’s in the loop,’ he offered.

I gave it some thought, and nodded; Jimmy’s physiology would cause questions. And as I stood there, I considered that there were probably things about his physiology that even I didn’t know about.

My phone went, Hardon Chase. Looking at the phone, I could see a dozen missed calls, but didn’t remember the phone ringing. ‘Mister President.’

‘Paul, are you OK?’

‘Not hurt, if that’s what you mean. And Jimmy is making the medics scratch their heads.’

‘How is he?’

‘Healing far too quickly. Your FBI guy is fetching one of your doctors.’

‘That’s probably a good idea. Any word on the shooter?’

‘You tell me, I’ve no idea.’

‘I’ll call you back when I have a report. Are you staying there?’

‘Yes.’

He hung up, and I asked for the senior hospital administrator. When the man came out, I said, ‘I realise that this is not a hotel, but I want to be in Jimmy’s room, or next door.’

‘For you, no problem.’ That was a nice reaction for a change. He led me through the corridors, two of my security men sticking close by. They were hardly needed, there was a police officer positioned every five yards. I waited in a room upstairs for twenty minutes, finally seeing Jimmy wheeled past. He had no tubes down his throat, which I considered was a good sign, just a drip in his arm. I followed. They pushed the wheeled surgical stretcher he was on against a bed, lifting him over – six of them struggling with the weight, and wired him to a dozen machines.

A doctor was worried. ‘His breathing is still low, so too his pulse.’

‘That’s normal,’ I quickly put in. ‘He’s always been like that. Born like it.’ That earned me odd looks.

They spent five minutes checking everything before leaving a nurse in a chair. I took the second chair. When the administrator appeared, I explained that the chair was enough, and that a private doctor would arrive. He wasn’t sure if he liked that, but sloped off as I settled to the reassuring rhythmical sounds of the monitors.

Going back through the missed calls, I called back each person in turn, giving an update. At midnight, Jimmy opened his eyes and turned his head. To the nurse he said, ‘Could I trouble you for a drink?’

She jumped up, startled, and fetched a doctor. The young doctor stepped back in, soon joined by an FBI doctor, a grey haired and stony faced individual straight out of the X-Files. I would not have left my girls alone with him. The FBI medic was in his late fifties, and left the young doctor in no doubt as to who was in charge. He dismissed the young doctor and closed the door behind him. We now both closed in on Jimmy, a drink poured.

The doctor said to Jimmy, ‘You probably know more about your own physiology than I do. Anything you need?’

Jimmy sipped the water. ‘Blender, milk, tinned ham, tuna.’

‘How quickly will you recover?’ the man probed.

‘Quick enough ... to cause a few questions.’

‘We’ll move you tomorrow,’ the doctor suggested, standing back.

‘That was a daft thing to do,’ I told Jimmy.

‘Was it?’ Jimmy asked. ‘Do we measure a life in a moment, or by a lifetime of moments averaged out?’

‘Huh?’ I exchanged a look with the doctor. Facing Jimmy, I asked, ‘Did you recognise the shooter?’

‘No.’

‘Any clues?’

‘Again ... no.’

‘Well, half the fucking New York cops are downstairs,’ I told him. ‘And I see a problem.’

‘Just the one?’ Jimmy toyed.

‘Your scars will go, but people will know that you were shot. So next time you’re on the beach with a model, people will notice the lack of scaring.’ Only now did I realise that they had cracked open his chest, a large white pad fixed down his chest and partly covered by a blue blanket.

‘It’s a good point,’ the doctor agreed from across the room.

‘You’ll have to stick to Michelle,’ I risked.

Jimmy gave me a look, an eyebrow cocked. 'I'll keep my t-shirt on. Besides, January will be ... interesting enough by itself.'

The doctor turned to me for an explanation.

'There'll be major quake in Haiti. We're going to have their entire population outdoors on the night in question.'

The man lifted his eyebrows. 'That could arouse suspicion alright.' After a moment, he said, 'You know we've started to inject all Special Forces soldiers with the blood product?'

I gave it some thought. 'We can hide the truth behind the super-drug.'

'That is turning out to be a good smokescreen,' the man agreed.

'So, tell me,' I asked, folding my arms. 'There really an X-Files?'

He gave me a look. 'I'll go work a blender. If I can find one!'

With the medic gone, I faced Jimmy. 'Containment will be hard.'

'Maybe not. I'll tell the waiting press that I heal well because of a concentrate of the super-drug.'

'Every fucker will want it then!'

'Those that can afford it. We'll sell it, starting at five million a pop, all donated to Rescue Force. That way, we make some money from the smokescreen.'

'Will that risk the blood getting out there?' I cautioned.

'The rich recipients are not about to inject other people, and they'd not think to do it. Besides, five years from now it'll be out there.'

'That Arab prince will be pissed!'

'I never promised him an exclusive deal, and he offered the sum – I didn't set the price. So fuck him.'

'How long till you're up and about?'

'I could walk now, but I'll be a good boy for a day or so. Besides, there may be a few nice nurses to give me a bed bath.'

I took a moment. 'I thought I lost you back there. Thought for a while it would be me running things.'

'If I'm killed you'll receive detailed files after thirty days. After that ... who knows what you do.'

'It's not something I'm looking forward to,' I admitted.

'I have confidence in you.'

The doctor returned later, with the horrendous milkshake, and Jimmy downed most of it before trying to catch some sleep. At dawn, I woke in the chair, finding Jimmy stood dressed, the FBI medic asleep in the other chair. Jimmy had his jacket on with no shirt underneath – white pads visible, his shirt obviously

bloodstained and ruined. He eased off his jacket as I stood, and poked his fingers through the three holes.

‘Waste of a good jacket,’ he commented.

The FBI guy stirred, and eased up. ‘Shouldn’t you be in bed?’

‘When you’re ready, arrange the move. I’ll play nice and sit in a wheelchair. But instead of skulking around, I’ll make a statement downstairs. And see if you can’t get me a shirt.’

The FBI director, the same man from the night before, knocked and stepped in, surprised to see Jimmy stood. ‘Should you be up and about?’

‘I’m fine. Any word on the shooter?’

‘Claude De Bouche, Belgian, former French Foreign legion. He was in a hotel room, suitcase full of cash. We’re tracing back his calls now, which were mostly to Belgium.’

Jimmy faced me, a look exchanged. ‘Thank you. Let me know what you come up with.’

With the FBI gone, I asked, ‘You know who was behind it?’

‘Kind of glad they made this attempt. Well, glad they failed. It confirms who was behind the lady at our nuclear plant in Somalia. But ... let’s not discuss it here.’ He held a finger to his lips.

Half an hour later, and feeling hungry enough even to try that god awful milkshake, I pushed Jimmy out of his room in a wheelchair, the attending physicians on the ward surprised to say the least. The police fell into step and we took the lift down, the main reception busy, the ambulance bay packed with TV crews. A snowstorm of camera flashes began, a thousand questions asked at the same time once the sliding doors had opened. Cold fresh air enveloped us.

Jimmy waited a few seconds. ‘If you quieten down I’ll make a statement.’ He waited. ‘Last night, we were invited to a meal by a fireman recovering from cancer. He had been treated with our super-drug, and wished to express his thanks. On the pavement outside of the restaurant, a Belgian man shot me three times, and it was me he was aiming at – not the fireman or anyone else.

‘Now, some of you may be wondering why I’m looking as well as I do, given that I was shot three times and underwent major surgery. The answer is simple: there exists a concentrated form of the super-drug, which not only has amazing powers of recuperation, it also halts the ageing process. I, and others, have been injected with that drug, and it appears to be perfectly safe. But, at the moment, it’s expensive to produce. Having said that, we will be offering a trial of it in the New Year for those that can afford it. They would be injected at their own risk, and all proceeds would go to Rescue

Force. Now, I have some healing to do, but I will be making a further statement in two day's time.'

I pushed him towards the funnel of blue uniforms as the questions started up again, soon in a convoy of vans and heading out of New York and to the nominated military hospital. I wasn't sure if the security here would be any better, given our track record with the CIA. They allocated Jimmy a nice room, offering me one next-door, en suite shower to boot. We ordered up enough food for four hungry patients, and sat eating as several military medics asked questions of the recovery process. They took pulse and blood pressure readings, and examined rapidly healing scars, front and back. Digesting the huge meal, I lay on my bed and closed my eyes for two hours.

I found Jimmy asleep when I checked in on him later, so watched the TV or answered calls. The news was still full of it, but they seemed more interested in the super-super-drug than the shooting. At this point I figured we should give it a name, and made a note to ask Jimmy when he woke. 'Super-super-drug' sounded naff.

'Manson,' he replied when awake.

'The Manson drug,' I thought out loud. 'That was the place in Canada...'

'That's where they developed it, experimenting on people in a very unethical manner. But, after World War Three, no one gave a shit.'

'That's another paradox,' I realised. 'Because people are now getting the benefit, but no war.'

'Yep. Any nice nurses?'

'Not so far.'

Jimmy eased up, took off his shirt and pulled off the white pads affixed to his skin. 'How'd they look?'

'Red and blotchy, but healed up. Will the marks go?'

He nodded. 'Might just be a ridge or two.'

Our allotted doctor knocked and stepped in, closing in quickly to view Jimmy's chest. 'Jesus.' He ran his hand over the long vertical scar. 'And the internal damage?'

'The bones heal quickly, but end up thicker by about ten percent. Rest of the flesh will be fine. And the reason that I'm still alive is that my arteries were altered to be more elastic. For most people that would be a problem, but I also have a greater concentration of red blood cells and my blood carries additional nutrients to compensate. When my arteries are cut they close.'

'I'm on the research team looking at your blood, and we're still puzzling the damn stuff that's in there.'

‘You’ll get there,’ Jimmy encouraged.

‘We just found what appears to be a protein compound common to algae.’

‘Must be a mistake,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘Anything you need?’ the doctor asked.

‘I’ll be ready to leave tomorrow. After that, a little physiotherapy, some nice lady masseurs, and it’ll be fine.’

‘You’ve been shot before,’ the doctor stated.

‘Many times,’ Jimmy answered, putting his shirt back on.

‘May I ask, why you grabbed that fireman?’ the doctor delicately broached.

‘The truth? Because I don’t value my own life that much,’ Jimmy replied as he buttoned up.

The doctor glanced at me. ‘Given what’s at stake, is such an attitude ... wise?’

I closed in on the man. ‘Given that your own fucking CIA try and kill us on a regular basis ... is that fucking wise!’

‘Don’t tarnish us all with that brush,’ the doctor insisted.

Jimmy told him, ‘There’s a story, a long story, that you don’t know yet. You’d need to know it all to understand my ... attitude, and maybe someday that story will be out there. Now, if you have a few sick people that may benefit from my cheery disposition, then why don’t you introduce me.’

We made like electioneering politicians, and did the rounds with the doctor, stopping to chat to many servicemen, most suffering from more regular diseases than the trauma of warfare, or day to day military training. In one room we found an admiral with advanced cancer.

‘You had the super-drug?’ I asked the man.

‘It’s too late,’ the doctor replied.

‘Get a needle,’ Jimmy told the doctor, easing off his jacket.

‘I’d need authorisation,’ the doctor stumbled with.

‘The prognosis is not good, so fuck the authorisation,’ Jimmy insisted.

The doctor closed the door after checking the corridor, and fetched a needle and syringe from a drawer.

‘Three of those,’ Jimmy suggested, pointing at the small volume the syringe offered. A rubber tourniquet was wrapped around his bicep, the admiral now staring up at us and looking bewildered. When done, Jimmy told the admiral, ‘If it’s not too late, then you’ll be up and about after five days. Eat a lot of protein.’

Out of the room, we continued our rounds, four additional terminal patients injected. Hell, what did they have to lose? Back in Jimmy's room I fielded a dozen calls from various world leaders before we sat down and watched the news together, flicking the channels.

The following morning they brought us fresh shirts, our old shirts binned. A group of doctors stood and marvelled at the scars on Jimmy's chest, or lack of them. We thanked them and signed out, vans taking us back around to the apartment. It was as we left it, and we packed our bags, fresh flights booked. In the First Class nose section of the 747, for the flight back to London, we were an oddity as normal, finding a few of our singers and a scattering of celebs. Helen and the girls met us in the coach, it was a Saturday, and we caught up on what the girls had been up to.

Driving past Mapley on the M4 motorway, Jimmy lifted his phone. 'Bob, Jimmy.'

'You OK?'

'Fine, stop fussing. Listen, cancel all training exercises for January and February, cancel all leave, but give extra holidays over Christmas. May as well cancel all exercises from now on, that way we'll have no injured people for January. How's Anaconda?'

'Coming along, I think we got the logistics covered. Be a hell of an operation, though. And with these changes to normal operations you want ... people will be suspicious.'

'Don't care, I want everyone available for January.' He hung up.

Five minutes later Rudd called me from Nairobi. 'Paul, how's Jimmy?'

'Fine, we're heading home now. What's up?'

'There have been thousands of small donations to Rescue Force, totalling some thirty million dollars, and two large donations of a hundred million dollars each – anonymous.'

'Put it all in the general Rescue Force fund ready for January.'

'January?'

'There'll be an earthquake, but keep it quiet.' I hung up and faced Jimmy. 'Have you put some money in Rudd's account?'

'I sold some old shares.'

'Individual donations are up.'

'Good. Have to get shot more often.'

Back at my house, I noticed that the kitten had changed colour. I stood with my hands in my pockets, staring at it. Then I pointed. 'Did you dye the kitten?'

‘They have one each now,’ Helen explained. ‘Save fighting over just the one.’

‘Oh.’

‘And Shelly mixed up the hamsters in their cages. Four have become eight.’

‘You can give her the birds and bees talk, that’s your area.’ I poured myself a beer.

The fall-out from the Manson drug, which it was now officially named, was huge; it completely sidelined the shooting, people desperate to get hold of it. But it also re-opened the debate about Jimmy being a time traveller, or even from another planet, a few of the tabloids running silly stories. For the most part, people didn’t care, and the rich and famous all desperately wanted the new drug.

Christmas

After consulting with the PM, we decided against selling the Manson injections in the UK. Sykes put together a team and flew them to Goma with fresh vials – Jimmy having given blood, the sale of the drug now widely advertised. Flights were booked solid, despite the price tag of five million dollars for an injection. I bet that the Saudi Prince was kicking himself.

In the weeks that followed we sold most of the vials, and replaced them with a new batch. And I never knew that there were so many millionaires in the world. We had raised two hundred million dollars and sent it on to Rudd, who was just not getting used to large numbers.

Pineapple was floated in London and New York, but we had sold our shares to one of the friendly US banks, who would sell it on for whatever they could make. The initial listing was oversubscribed three fold, so they’d have no problem. One point five billion dollars winged its way to Rudd, who needed more fingers and toes to count the zeros. Two point four billion dollars now sat in the account, a statement sent to Mac in Mawlini, who called.

‘Paul, there’s a gazillion dollars in the account!’

‘How many zeroes is that? I toyed.

‘More zeros than I could count!’

‘There’ll be a big exercise in January, the money will go towards it.’

‘An exercise! We couldn’t spend that money in ten fucking years!’

‘See what happens. And relax for fucks sake.’

In the days that followed our senior staff called us, all concerned; they could see the build up. I told them to wait, not being very helpful. Jimmy was back to making use of the gym, and making good use of a new masseuse, although I didn’t ask just how good she was. The news of the Manson drug had spread around the world, and the world’s elite were now flying down to Goma hub, many staying for a holiday, and all surprised at how advanced Gotham City now was. Ageing TV stars of yesteryear were being enlivened and rejuvenated, singing the praises of the drug, which caused even more health tourism.

Jimmy and I figured that January may bring exposure, so we concentrated on making money to cover Haiti, and stopped caring about what the world thought about us. I hit the trading screens and made money from a few takeovers that Jimmy had listed for me. Bob and Doc Graham came over to the house a few days a week and we opened a room in the basement, files spread out. We had booked a dozen 747s, in addition to our own, and the RAF dropped in with details of what aircraft they had available. Boats and ferries were secured for the water crossing from Cuba to Haiti, and the US Navy made ready for an “exercise” at their base in Cuba, Guantanamo Bay. Jimmy said that it was poignant that the US base was being used to launch medical ships, but did not explain why.

Christmas was spent at home, time with family and friends. We had considered inviting the usual people, but we knew that there would be lots of questions. Instead, we sent money to the senior RF staff and flew some of them to the Seychelles for a week, those that didn’t have family gatherings planned.

On Christmas day, two ponies arrived for the girls, both animals suitably small in stature. Helen had bought the girls suitable riding gear and helmets, and we watched our girls canter around in the rain. The place was becoming a menagerie.

Fed up with a damp Christmas, we headed for the club for New Year, tickets expensive for those who had booked ahead. Many of the household “M” Group joined us, and I felt quite relaxed, secure enough within the club walls. A police officer delivered me a yellow telegram before midnight, a note from the Queen herself: good luck in January.

I showed Helen. 'Next week everything changes, and I don't care.'

She wasn't quite as stoically defiant, but was now resigned to a few changes. We ate too much, and drank too much, a bit wobbly as the New Year was rung in, not getting to bed till 3am, and then just collapsing. In the morning, in the diner downstairs, Jimmy said that we'd drive to Mapley in an hour. It was time.

Helen and I finished our breakfast without saying much, packed up and boarded the coach as if condemned prisoners heading for our own execution, pulling into Mapley at 1pm and finding it surprisingly busy. And when people saw us they stopped; they knew something big was up. In Bob's office, Jimmy asked him to use the tanoy and to gather all of the staff outside. When the troops had assembled, Jimmy carried a chair outside and stood on it, waving everyone closer. I looked out over almost two thousand people. Thankfully, it was a fine day.

Jimmy loudly began, 'It has taken us twenty years to get to this point, twenty years of hard work, training, and planning. Rescue Force began its life in Kenya, as a small unit to backup the mine clearance teams. Since then it has grown a little.' Faces in the crowd smiled. 'I have never failed to be proud of the work you've done, or the way in which you've done it. Apart from maybe the drinking in Mawlini.'

Everyone laughed.

'Now we have a major deployment to attend, and one that will stretch us. Our earthquake software is predicting a major quake, larger than anything seen so far. Many of you will not return here for two months.'

Looks were exchanged.

'What we go to do now ... is what must be done to save life. Our family ... of forty-three nations ... will work together, as they have always done. For those of you here that are deploying for the first time - don't worry, just follow your team leaders and do as you're asked; you'll make us proud. And, if you're lucky, you can fly in a Huey with Dunnow.'

They laughed.

'I hope you all had a good Christmas, because it's now back-to-work time.' Jimmy turned, and lifted his gaze to the windows of Bob's office.

The tanoy came to life. 'All Rescue Force staff: full kit check, you have twenty-four hours. Dismiss to your duties.'

People headed off in their groups as we stepped back inside, climbing the stairs to Bob's office, the communications officer sat waiting.

'Communications officer,' Jimmy called. 'Sound full kit check worldwide, followed immediately by full recall worldwide, including all reserves and affiliates.'

The message was sent, pagers knocked off. Jimmy made a few calls, and the RAF turned up, plus a dozen police cars. I turned on the news as I sat having lunch with Helen, the recall already known.

'The single largest call-up of rescue personnel the world has ever seen,' they reported.

'So much for a quiet deployment,' I quipped. I went up to the roof after lunch, and stared down at thousands of people coming and going, numerous lorries unloading kit, others being loaded up ready.

I remembered the first time we stood on the air traffic control tower roof with Rolf the architect. When we told him there was a twenty million pound budget he almost fainted. Now I took in the airfield, little resemblance to that first image. And our lease still stated that we would have to return the airfield to how it was if we left.

We were not planning on giving a briefing to the press till the following morning, but I noticed a few cameras, the embedded crews; some of these guys were making a career out of following us around. Back downstairs, I took off my jacket and double-checked movement logistics, calling Gatwick airport to check on a few things. Jeeps were on their way by ship, two-dozen Hueys also on the high seas. The remainder of the Huey's would go via Il76 transport or C5 galaxy, rotors removed.

I rang Ngomo. 'All set, my friend?'

'We are ready. The men move to Goma in three days, there to Haiti.'

'Good luck.'

I rang Mac. 'How's the weather?'

'Not so warm, but a lot of people working up a wee sweat today.'

'Busy there?' I toyed.

'Aye, you could say that,' he quipped. 'Staff back from Darfur and checking their supplies. Rifles going as well?'

'Peacekeepers, to stop looting and rioting. They're just like the peacekeepers already there. Only not so peaceful.'

'God help the fucking looters! When do we deploy?'

'Day or so. Those from afar are heading to you to group, like the Indonesians. Australians, New Zealanders, and the rest are heading

to Hawaii to form up, and the Chinese will fly direct in their 747s. Their jeeps went by boat a week ago, so they'll be going through the Panama Canal by now. Anyway, you best get back to it.'

'Be at it all night,' Mac grumbled. 'There're flights coming in from all over. Zimbabwe teams just landed, some from Burundi, all over the fucking place.'

'You can practice your diplomatic skills.'

'Aye, bollocks.'

Stood on the ground floor of the HQ building, and chatting to national representatives, I welcomed a team of French army officers, eventually finding them desk space; there was little left. Michelle sorted out their communications, as well as some food from the canteen.

We chose not to stay that evening, giving up the HQ building apartments to a few of the visitors, and opened our own mini-command centre in the basement, a handful of people monitoring the situation for us and producing reports. All nations reported their kit check status and the total numbers of rescuers available for the deployment – less people off sick or injured, and itemised equipment that was unserviceable. But at this stage we wished only to check kit availability and numbers of warm bodies, grouping some of them together to cut travel costs. The teams from the smaller nations had flown to their regional training centres and extra kit had been issued where necessary. But the busiest groups by far were the logistics people; they had more pallet-tonnes to move than all previous deployments put together.

Food and water was my assigned area, and I was using that well practised technique known as "overkill". I had previously ordered a million three-litre water bottles made, before shipping them to the Dominican Republic, where they were now being filled with spring water and loaded onto pallets. Also in the Dominican Republic, my teams from the DRC corporation were buying up biscuits and tinned food by the tonne, moving the provisions west to the border with Haiti. From the US, I had bought a ship full of wheat, the cargo now being offloaded at Port Au Prince docks and being transported to a central storage area near the main airport, an area that one of our friendly NGOs had set up.

The first of the Rifles had landed, three hundred of them, and were now busy erecting a tented city near the grain stores, as well as clearing land ready for imminent expansion. Fences were being torn down, tracks laid ready, connecting to the airport. At dawn, I read a report that confirmed the advance RF party had landed, Doc Graham

and his team; they would set-up a tented area to the east of the main airport perimeter. Problem was, the camp would be a bit bigger than the Haitian President may have anticipated – but only by a factor of ten or so. Maybe twenty. Thirty at a push.

In my office, I called my team together and discussed the Haitian deployment, since most of my team were involved in some form or other. Our airline had cancelled a number of domestic flights around Africa, and our aircraft now ferried African rescuers up to Mawlini. At Mawlini, the Alpha teams and command staff were preparing to fly over to Goma hub for an onwards flight in one of our 747s.

My corporation guy was organising plastic bottle supplies for the next few months, and my new liaison to Media One Inc - formerly my liaison to Pineapple – was busy monitoring all Caribbean news outlets for comments on the deployment. So far, there were few column-inches dedicated to the subject. Finally, my liaison to the nightclubs was busy organising fundraisers for a quake that had not yet struck. The first would be advertised on the 13th, a series of charity galas.

With that done, I boarded the coach, finding most of the “M” Group representatives already on board and waiting my arrival with a slow handclap and rude comments. They would be helping their own nationals as usual.

At Mapley, we received a quick update from Bob, that of logistical movements overnight, plus news of the arrival of the first few British reservists here. Those reservists continued to trickle through the gate all day long, kit checked and issued, the first group of a hundred put onto a coach for Gatwick airport that evening. The UK Alpha and Bravo teams had already set-off for the airport, and should be on their way to Cuba by now, our jeeps due to be docking there tomorrow, the ships containing the Hueys due there tonight. Hal and his team of mechanics should be landing today, I remembered, and seeing what the ocean journey had done to our old ladies. We had allowed several days for their testing – just in case.

By the end of the second day we had landed ten aircraft full of tents at Port-au-Prince airport, with another three hundred Rifles to erect them. Meanwhile, the Haitian President had gone on national TV and announced that we were predicting a quake, and that his government were taking civil defence precautions just in case. Our people on the ground reported no reaction from the population, who had more immediate problems to worry about – that of their daily struggle to survive in the slums.

On the third day we landed sixteen aircraft and another three hundred Rifles at Port-au-Prince airport, the tented city growing rapidly, the airport workers scratching their heads as to why so many tents were being erected in the distance. Barbed wire arrived by truck from the Dominican Republic and was duly strung around the massive new camp, a camp that already offered tents for ten thousand people, yet held only a thousand.

On the fourth day, RF teams started to arrive in Cuba. After their long flight, some travelling for twenty-four hours, our rescuers were all shown to tented accommodation and allowed two days to adjust and to acclimatise. The British Alpha team, having re-grouped in Cuba, flew over to join Doc Graham and to create the main headquarter tents, signs erected: HQ tent, canteen, stores, and toilets. One sign displayed "Mawlini's rooftop bar: four thousand miles that way". The field cookery unit arrived in Haiti shortly after them and set-up, soon servicing the thousand people already there with warm meals.

With that box on the list ticked, Doc Graham began Operation Dispersal. Trucks loaded with tents, followed by trucks loaded with barbed wire, followed closely by trucks loaded with Rifles, ventured out to the three pre-arranged sites and began creating tented cities, fencing them off, all the while curiously observed by the locals. The standing blue-helmeted UN contingent also scratched their heads. We had our first tent stolen that evening, plus grain stolen from a store.

An initial batch of ten jeeps were readied and tested in Cuba, put on a ferry with their drivers and dispatched to Port-au-Prince, aiming to dock at night and to drive inland unseen. Meanwhile, more wheat was offloaded and moved toward the airport storage areas, along with the first deliveries of my food and water. Some of that would go towards the hungry mouths already in country, most towards the indigenous population.

Day five registered a spark of press interest in the Caribbean, plus a spark of annoyance in the UK, as we continued to ignore them. We knew that if the British press asked certain questions we'd regret giving certain answers, so we delayed the interviews as far as we could.

The residents of Port-au-Prince were now curious about all the aircraft landing at their normally quiet airport, the daily tally now topping twenty, tents and food stocks being moved out to eight dispersal sites and stored ready. Thirty miles south west of Port-au-Prince a camp had been created, a field suitably large enough to

accommodate the Hueys, helicopter landing zones marked into the grass. A fence was thrown up, a hundred tents pitched, the locals scratching their heads at the strange activity.

Day six saw three hundred rescuers land at the airport and take up residence in the tents, Doc Graham's team allocating them tasks. Many rescuers were immediately dispatched to the dispersal areas, the first batch of white jeeps now to be glimpsed driving around the capital. The airport authorities took delivery of several refuelling trucks, a compound created for them well away from anything else, ten trucks sat idle and waiting a useful function. In Cuba, at the main RF base, some six thousand rescuers were now in the varying stages of arrival, kit check, rest, or being made ready to fly over to Haiti. Hal and the pilots had been busy, and white Hueys were now buzzing about the island and being thoroughly tested. Happy with his old ladies after their ocean cruise, Hal sent six to the US base at Guantanamo to be refuelled, the pilots flying on at night to Haiti and landing south west of the capital.

Day seven saw the Hueys being made use of, the population now glimpsing them overhead moving stores to the dispersal sites, the curiosity amongst the locals growing. That day, Jimmy decided that we couldn't put off the British press any further and agreed an interview in the communications centre. Three TV crews were patiently waiting, plus a handful of old hacks with notepads. We sat behind a desk and indicated that we would make a statement before fielding questions – so long as the questions were related to Rescue Force.

Jimmy began, 'As you're already aware, Rescue Force is making ready for a major deployment to the Caribbean island of Haiti, where we're predicting an earthquake to occur in a few day's time. As is typical with Rescue Force, we've moved our people into place ahead of the expected earthquake so that we're ready on the ground to help immediately. As we speak, we're creating camps and building up supplies. That process will continue over the next few days, till all of our people are in place and sat waiting ready. OK, questions.'

'How many people are you sending?'

This is a full deployment.'

'How many people is that?'

'In this case, some thirty thousand staff.'

The press collectively paused. 'Thirty thousand?'

'Yes.'

'What ... kind of quake are you expecting?'

‘We’re expecting a substantive quake to strike Haiti.’
‘What Richter scale?’
‘I couldn’t relate it into that scale.’
‘But you’re expecting a large quake?’
‘Yes, we’re expecting a large quake.’
‘How many casualties do you expect?’
‘Up to half a million.’
‘Is this the largest ever Rescue Force deployment?’ they asked.
‘This is the largest deployment to date.’
‘Larger than the Boxing Day tsunami?’
‘Yes, more than five times bigger than that.’
‘What sort of damage do you expect?’
‘We expect the damage to be extensive. Beyond that, it’s hard to quantify.’
‘Who else will be involved with this? Will the British Government be sending people?’
‘The RAF will be assisting, the French Army are sending five thousand soldiers, and the US Navy will be heavily involved.’
‘What if the quake doesn’t happen?’
‘Then I’ll have spent a lot of money for nothing.’
‘How much is this costing?’
‘Two point two *billion* dollars.’
They blinked. ‘Two billion dollars?’
‘Plus whatever the various governments will donate.’
‘The two billion, that’s your money?’
‘Yes.’ Jimmy stood. ‘Now, we’re busy, so we’ll organise another press conference tomorrow or the next day.’

The cat was out of the bag, off and running. That evening, reports came in of people in Haiti packing up and leaving; they were finally taking notice. And as they were packing up, three thousand Rifles landed, occupying the tents made ready for them. All were armed with pistols and rifles. Jimmy commented, ‘From this point on, I run Haiti.’

Day eight saw the US Navy arrive in force, their grey ships visible offshore, their hospital ship’s big red cross visible through the early morning haze as dock workers observed the unusual scene. Jimmy gave the order, ‘Move in.’

The French contingent landed, soon directed to their tents. As that was happening, two hundred Rifles took up station around the Presidential palace, tents erected on the lawn, whether the President liked it or not. Further Rifles moved out to secure the dispersal sites, all armed. From Cuba, rescuers flew in all day long, and the

remaining Hueys made the sea crossing, the second squadron of ten helicopters now grouping at the airport. Doc Graham dispersed the food and water as it arrived, out to the campsites, smiling when a batch of parachute bottles arrived.

These we had developed years earlier, packs of food and water that could be dropped from a Huey, a small parachute deploying to break the fall. They were now made in Goma, at a plastics factory, and we now delivered hundreds of tonnes of them to Haiti.

The Haitian President called that night, concerned about a great many things, not least the ring of soldiers around his palace. Helen took the call and interpreted, Jimmy telling our gracious host to look at the small print of the document he signed, that everything was as described, going to plan and OK. We cut the President short, and hung up.

With the revelations that we had made to the press being digested, a small army of TV crews and old hacks jumped onto planes to the Dominican Republic, hoping to be on the ground when the quake struck. They were beaten to it by the RF Chasers, the mad bunch who loved to be in a disaster as it unfolded. In Cuba, meanwhile, many of the European reservists that had been called up were finishing a few days of intensive training.

On day nine, all remaining rescuers were ordered across to Haiti, flights landing at Port-au-Prince every twelve minutes. The tented city, once devoid of suitable occupants, was now bursting at the seams, teams allocated dispersal areas and sent off in hired local buses. The US Army landed at the airport, mobile air traffic control equipment made ready, their own tents now erected. Another two thousand Rifles touched down, dispersed straight away, the remainder of our RF jeeps landing by ferry. In total, thirty-five Hueys were now available, plus a hundred and fifty jeeps.

The surgical teams had also landed that day, large tents now being erected at the dispersal sites. Their set-up time was typically the longest, beds needing to be erected and screwed together, lights fitted, equipment checked and laid out ready. A full surgical team needed two days at least to make ready. At the airport, British, French, Chinese, Cuban and American military surgical units landed, each moving to an existing hospital and setting up in the grounds. The inconvenienced hospital administrators were placated with cold hard cash. That and a look at the Kenyan Rifles stood guard.

Day ten saw the world's press reporting from a busy Port-au-Prince, as well as from Mapley, the communications room now

packed out, Helen and Trish kept busy. I helped out with canned drinks and chocolate for the press, but kept away from questions of super-drugs and “M” Group meetings. I even had one persistent hack thrown out.

Day eleven saw a full turn out command meeting in the aptly named Command Room. Jimmy began, ‘Are all teams on the island?’

The last were due to land in an hour, the Cuban base now quiet. And the Cubans reported six of their own field hospitals set-up and ready, they had even delivered a handful of babies. The British military medics had treated people from a house fire and a bus crash, and the French had also delivered a few babies.

Jimmy threw his hands into the air. ‘You’re not supposed to start till I say go!’

Everyone laughed, most looking very tired now, especially poor old Bob Davies.

Jimmy continued, ‘OK. Tomorrow is the first day that Crusty thinks may be a quake day, so tonight I want you all to get eight hour’s rest, and plenty of food. That’s an order. In the morning, continue to move supplies into place, but have the teams rested. From tomorrow afternoon, I want jeeps going around the city, advising people to work and sleep outdoors; offer them free food and drink as an incentive.

‘The President of Haiti will make an address in a few hours - he’s going to close schools, and a few hospitals. The patients will move to our tents at the hospitals – just in case. Besides, the care they’ll get in our tents is a lot better than the fucking hospitals! OK, anything outside of the plan that we need to consider.’

Bob said, ‘The Canadian Army wish to send a medical team, as do the Germans, Israelis, Australian Army and a few others.’

‘Fine, but tell them to get a move on. Ask Doc Graham to arrange dispersal sites for them.’

Bob added, ‘Americans have landed twenty helicopters at the airport. We weren’t expecting them.’

‘More the better,’ Jimmy said with a shrug. ‘What’s the tally of bodies?’

‘Thirty-two thousand,’ Bob reported. ‘Plus ten thousand US Marines on standby.’

‘Then I guess we’ve done everything we could.’

Bob added, ‘We have vials of the super-drug out there, to treat the wounded.’

Jimmy nodded. 'Good.' He faced the group. 'We wait on the morrow, good people. Get some rest!'

We collected the "M" Group representatives and headed back, Cookie preparing a special meal, and we made use of the dining room for a change.

'No exposure problems so far,' Jack ventured as we sat down to eat.

'Tomorrow, our jeeps will go around Port-au-Prince, especially at dusk - just as the quake strikes,' Jimmy explained. 'And, three weeks from now I'll move many rescuers to Chile, where a nasty quake will strike, and the level of suspicion will rise.'

'My wife still doesn't know anything,' Jack put in.

'Get her some dirty videos,' I dryly suggested, getting a look.

'My parents do not know what I do,' Michelle admitted.

'And I've lied to my new wife,' Keely unhappily reported.

'My parents will fuss,' I admitted.

'Does Shelly ask difficult questions?' Han asked me. 'She asked me about various websites that detail our activities.'

'I've explained that the sites are not true,' I replied, and she's probably too young to be worried by it all. She's on Bebo under a false name; Helen Keely.'

'Why my name?' Keely mock protested.

'She thinks you're a spy,' Helen said.

'Look who's talking!' Keely retorted.

'You do come across as shifty,' Helen told Keely, a glint in her eye.

'Thanks, Marta Hari,' Keely carefully mouthed.

'Oooo,' I let out.

'Play nice, children,' Jimmy encouraged. 'Or there's no desert.'

'Might I ask, what does the future hold for this group?' Han put in.

'More of the same, but more security, and fewer trips to local restaurants,' Jimmy informed us. 'This estate was built with a purpose in mind.'

'A very nice prison,' Helen quipped.

'That, and a suitable abode for a group such as this,' Han noted. 'The Germans wish to send a representative, as do the Indians.'

'No, it will always be just you lot; the damn house is busy enough as it is,' Jimmy insisted. 'Besides, after exposure they'll all want a representative here.'

'Will it cause problems, with this lot being favoured?' I asked.

‘Yes,’ Jimmy replied. ‘But I had expected to lose Keely before now.’

‘Lose me ... how?’ Keely asked, looking worried.

‘Through disagreements with the White House.’

‘So things are ... better than planned?’ Han nudged.

‘There’s no point in knowing the future, just to repeat it,’ Jimmy pointed out.

‘You caused a stir at that military hospital in New York,’ Keely commented. ‘Brought back half a dozen off the terminal list. You’re popular in that place at least.’

‘And the assassin?’ Han risked, a topic that had been avoided so far.

Jimmy faced him. ‘I’m dealing with it. In fact -’ He checked his watch. ‘- there should be three hundred Pathfinders landing on distant shores right about now.’

‘What!’ people gasped. ‘Where?’

‘Colombia.’

‘The Colombians wanted you dead?’ Jack puzzled.

‘No, Venezuela ... wanted me dead.’

‘Why?’ they asked.

‘Oil!’ Keely stated.

‘Yes, oil. And the lowering of its price,’ Jimmy explained. ‘That, plus their ruler’s connection to a certain group of Belgian mining corporations that lost out to me – and are still a bit pissed at me. They’ve been whispering in his ear.’

‘So why are the Rifles in Colombia?’ Keely asked.

‘They’re going to clean out the FARC rebels once and for all.’

‘That’ll put them on the Venezuelan border,’ Keely noted.

‘Yes, and if any Venezuelan soldiers should approach the border, they’d tangle.’

‘I thought we were trying to avoid conflict in the area,’ Jack queried.

‘We’re trying to avoid *American* conflict in that area. No one said anything about the Rifles. And the Pathfinders are acting as a private mercenary army, hired for cash from the Kenyans after lengthy negotiations with the Colombian Government – who could always argue that the Rifles went too far.’

‘A proper proxy war,’ I put in.

‘I’ll need to update Washington on that,’ Keely cautioned.

‘You may all do so, now that they’ve landed – and cannot be stopped.’

‘And the timing?’ I asked with a grin.

‘Timing? My lad, timing is everything,’ Jimmy smugly stated.
‘The world will be watching Haiti,’ Helen realised.
‘Crafty bastard,’ I commented.
‘If Chase knows who tried to kill you...’ Keely warned.
‘He won’t invade,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘And right now, the FARC have no idea what terror lurks in the jungle. And I mean ... terror!’

Day twelve

We didn’t drive over to Mapley as I thought we might. Instead, we caught up on other things, the businesses and Africa. But by mistake, I received a report from Yuri on the progress of the coffee shops in Russia. I was staggered to see that there were now nine thousand of them, spread right across Russia, many in small towns. The farmland we ran produced the milk for some of the shops, plus meat and cereal crops that they used. Several regional warehouses had been set-up to receive the raw products necessary to supply the shops, distributing thereafter the finished buns and cakes.

And the coffee, it came from Cuba by boat in large quantities and cost very little. That meant our bottom line was looking very healthy, profits in the millions. We were even selling advertising space on the walls of the coffee shops. It gave me an idea. I found an expert, and asked about coffee and cotton growing in the Congo. The answer was ‘yes’ - in some areas. Since the DRC was such a large area, it offered many types of soil and terrain, spread across varying altitudes, some with their own microclimates. I got the corporation on it: I wanted coffee and cotton grown locally. A cheeky email came back asking about slaves, and ships to the new colonies in the Americas!

That afternoon, the weather was pleasant for January, and I went for a walk, but well wrapped up. It was the calm before the storm, and the thing that annoyed me the most about the idea exposure was the thought of not being able to influence Africa anymore. Then I stopped and consider – why not? Even if they know about us, would that alter things? Kimballa wouldn’t withdraw his support, he’d probably think it cool. I walked all the way down to the house, considering that I could carry on as before.

At the house I found Abdi and his team visiting, as well as Ngomo. That meant a war council. After a tea in the diner, Jimmy led us down to the basement, a large map of Colombia stretched out and weighted down. Turns out that thirty Somali Pathfinders were involved, hence Abdi's interest, and Jimmy detailed their current position. So far, they had killed anyone who spotted them, including a few civilians, and no mention of them had been made in either Colombia or Venezuela. They had landed near Paramo, northeast of Bogotá, split into five groups, and were busy searching jungle valleys for FARC guerrillas as they moved northeast towards the Venezuelan border, a very long hike. Re-supply was by scheduled parachute drop, and only a few in the Colombian Government knew about it.

There was also the small matter of the mission creep. The Colombians were under the impression that a hundred and twenty Rifles had landed, not three hundred, and that they would act as eyes and ears only, an intelligence gathering force. Jimmy had stretched the mission a little. And this little campaign was about to make military history with the first ever use of small EMP weapons in the field, plus outlawed laser rifles that blinded enemy soldiers. I wondered just how many laws and conventions we were breaking.

With our African visitors gone, we sat and watched the TV news, awaiting the quake. It would strike around 10pm GMT, so we'd have a long wait. But, given the size of the deployment, there was little else that we could concentrate on. "M" Group representatives could be seen walking the grounds

Later that night, Jimmy called me at the house. 'It's started. Get some rest, we'll drive over in the morning.'

Ten minutes later, the news was full of the quake, live pictures being fed back. At midnight, Helen and I were still glued to the TV, our white jeeps seen attending injured people. We glimpsed the Rifles helping out, as well as manning street corners, interviews given by Doc Graham and others. We'd put twenty years into Rescue Force, so if they didn't have it right by now they'd never have it, I considered as I went to bed. In the morning, the news was of total devastation, not a building left undamaged, and mass casualties. The footage showed our rescuers crawling into collapsed buildings, others handing out food and drink.

'My bottles,' I pointed out, no joy in my voice.

Hueys could be seen over the city, parachute packs drifting down, kids grabbing the packs as they landed. French soldiers were now on

the streets, the Presidential Palace badly damaged, images relayed of surgical tents, patients being attended on camp beds outdoors.

At 7.30am we sent the girls off to school, and joined Jimmy in the office. 'It all going OK?' I asked.

'As expected,' he flatly answered. 'And on the other matter, the Pathfinders were busy. They stumbled across a camp of some two hundred FARC. They used the EMP to knock out radios, blinded the sentries with lasers and knifed them, then earnestly killed every last rebel, liberating twelve hostages. I think they struck gold first time out and got the FARC leadership – or part of it. They've injected the hostages with the drug, given them food and weapons and arranged a pick-up.'

'Won't they talk about the Rifles?'

'Not if the government gets to them first; they'll claim the credit. And now the Pathfinders are moving northeast. But after this success I doubt they'll find many more rebels till they hit the Venezuelan border.'

'Why not pull them out?' I ventured.

'They were never there for the FARC,' Jimmy coldly stated.

The coach awaited, Big Paul riding shotgun today, and we headed out of the top gate, taking a different route just in case. Meanwhile, the Colombian Government had received a signal about where to find the hostages. They flew in by helicopter and "rescued" the men, claiming a great victory over the FARC, still no mention of the Rifles.

At Mapley, the press were now out in force, the base just about empty except for the snappers and scribblers, and the attending police. Ignoring the press for now, we entered the HQ building and found a tired Bob Davies, an oddly quiet Bob Davies. We sat opposite him.

'Someday,' Bob began, throwing down his pen, 'you'll have to tell me how you do it, since I doubt Crusty could find the key to his own front door without help, let alone predict quakes with this level of accuracy. I get a hundred letters a week from eminent scientists that dispute the technology, some of them have been friends for years through the UN.'

'How do *you* think we do it?' Jimmy toyed.

'I don't know, and that's a worry. And I don't know how you make electric cars that don't stop, or drugs that cure everything. And let's not forget the small issue of being shot three times at close range, and some miracle fucking drug that heals gunshot wounds overnight!'

‘Yeah, but besides all that, how are things with you?’ I lightly asked.

He eased back. ‘I’ve never figured you two out - the money you have - and you spend it on us. And two billion for a deployment? I lose a lot of quality sleep trying to make sense out of you pair.’

‘Best give up then,’ I suggested. ‘You’ll give your dear lady wife a more restful night.’

Jimmy had been brushing fluff off his trousers. Now he lifted his gaze and asked, ‘Bob, do these things affect your desire to continue to sit in that chair?’

‘A little; I hate what I don’t understand.’

‘As do most intelligent people,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘You know, I was considering bringing you into the inner circle some years ago, because we need you in that chair – and have no desire to lose you.’

‘Inner circle?’ Bob queried.

‘“M” Group,’ Jimmy stated.

‘So it is some sort of secret group,’ Bob considered.

Jimmy glanced at Helen and me. ‘You’re not stupid, Bob. How do you think I predict quakes, the stock markets, wars, and other events?’

‘You’re psychic?’ Bob toyed.

‘No, and I don’t believe in such crap,’ Jimmy informed him. We waited.

Bob took in our faces. ‘Any of the claims on those websites true?’

‘Some, yes.’

Bob held his hands wide, a plea for assistance.

Jimmy said, ‘There’s only one logical way to know that an event will occur, and that’s if you witnessed it previously.’

‘Witnessed ... something that hasn’t happened yet?’

‘Hasn’t happened for us yet,’ Helen put in.

‘He’s well over a hundred years old,’ I told Bob. ‘He’s immune to all diseases known to man, he heals very quickly, and he knew you’d be in that chair a very long time ago.’

‘OK, now you’re worrying me. A hundred years old?’

‘And then some,’ Jimmy added.

‘And if you shot holes in him, he’d just get right back up,’ I added, enjoying Bob’s expression.

Helen added, ‘The reason that many of the world’s leaders listen to him ... is because he knows exactly what the future holds.’

‘How *can* you know?’ Bob asked Jimmy.

‘Because he’s been there,’ I toyed.

Jimmy nodded. 'How else would I know exactly when a quake would strike?'

Bob stared back at us.

Helen said, 'It's not complicated, Bob. He's a time traveller.'

'A ... time traveller,' Bob repeated, staring back wide eyed. He swallowed. 'So what was on that website was true.'

'Yes,' Jimmy acknowledged. 'So now you need to join the dots to get the big picture, hidden in the detail: time traveller, world leaders, Rescue Force designed to respond to bad quakes. Why would the world go to so much effort as to build a time machine, and send me back.'

Bob considered his response. 'A ... future quake, a big one?'

'Several,' I put in. 'The kinds that would change the course of history.'

'You ... can't stop them?' Bob puzzled with a frown.

'No,' Jimmy admitted. 'I can't stop them. But, with a track record of accurately predicting quakes, I might just convince enough people to evacuate certain cities in time. Cities with millions of inhabitants.'

'Jesus,' Bob let out. 'When?'

'That's classified, and if you were to accidentally disclose what you know then the world's intelligence agencies might just want to shoot you full of holes,' Jimmy explained. 'And you don't heal as well as little old me.'

Bob took a moment. 'A lot of people have taken shots at you over the years. Why, if you're so useful?'

'Because they wish to use the knowledge I have of the future for their own simple economic gains,' Jimmy lied.

'As well as political gains,' I added. 'World politics: best not get involved.'

'And now that I know, am I in danger?'

'It's due to come out within a few years, or less,' Jimmy explained. 'Maybe a lot less. So you're only in danger if you talk about it between now and then.'

'Will you ... be talking?' Helen asked Bob directly.

'Like fuck. I have a family.'

'Thanks for that,' Helen quipped. 'I do too.'

'How long?' Bob asked. 'Till the big one?'

'Five years to the first one, eight to the second,' Jimmy answered. 'And both will cause extreme economic problems. One will hit Europe, one America. Followed by a series of pandemics that will kill hundreds of millions.'

'The drug!' Bob realised.

‘He’s not stupid,’ I quipped, facing Jimmy.

‘I hired him for his keen intellect,’ Jimmy told me with an assertive nod. Facing Bob, Jimmy added, ‘Do you think we can move on, and fix Haiti, Mister Davies, before we fix the world?’

Bob responded, ‘We were right there in the streets when the quake hit, giving first aid inside of five minutes. Given what happened, they’re getting the best care, but there’s not a building left undamaged. Rebuilding will take a decade at least.’

‘That’s a UN problem more than ours, although I will be heavily involved there for a long time. We need to save as many lives as we can this week, get the tented cities going, then start with the bulldozers. Nothing more complicated than that.’

‘I can handle it,’ Bob said defensively.

‘I know,’ Jimmy replied. ‘I saw you do it before.’

That was a revelation, Helen and I exchanging looks; Jimmy had done this all before. We always figured as much, but had never discussed it openly, Helen’s pet theory being that Jimmy could jump back and forth. I knew that was wrong because he got messages; if he could jump he wouldn’t need messages. My theory was that he was stuck here, a one-way trip. I didn’t ask him, because I knew what he would say - the same as with the Russian coffee shops: no!

We left Bob to worry about things temporal and supernatural, and attended the baying hordes of the press corp. Helen diligently issued facts and figures, whilst Jimmy and I split up. I took CNN, he took the BBC, and we sat in quiet side rooms, ties adjusted.

‘Paul,’ the lady began with. ‘How is the rescue deployment progressing?’

‘It’s still early days as far as building searching goes, but many people heeded the warnings and remained outside of their homes. Unfortunately, the damage was extensive, and across a third of the country, with almost every building being damaged. The dead and wounded figures will still be high, but not as high as they may have been.’

‘And what of the infrastructure?’

‘There’s no water or electricity, no phones working for the local people or the government, but we figured on that and have food and water stockpiled ready, more arriving each day from stores we built up in the Dominican Republic. We’ve allowed for enough supplies to feed all those in the affected regions, and distribution has already begun.’

‘How many rescuers are there on the ground?’

‘About thirty thousand, plus soldiers.’

‘And the American military?’

‘Your Navy is offshore with a hospital ship, helicopters, and your Marines are there in force. And your Army technicians are running air traffic control at the main airport.’

‘What has this operation cost to mount so far?’

‘We sold our shares in Pineapple Music and other companies and diverted just over two billion dollars to the fund.’

‘That’s your own money you’re using?’

‘Yes,’ I said with a polite smile. ‘It does no good to just sit in a bank somewhere.’

‘What’s the next step in the reconstruction process?’

‘A long haul ... of demolishing and rebuilding almost every structure.’

‘And how’s Jimmy?’ It was an odd question.

‘Just as big and ugly as ever,’ I said as I stood, terminating the interview. I found Sky News and repeated much of the detail before allocating time to Al Jazeera and Russia Today, Euronews and France24. Jimmy gave the Chinese national network twenty minutes, lots of praise for the Chinese rescuers, who made up the largest single national contributor of warm bodies. In the command centre, I found a room full of buzzing people, sixty conversations going on at once.

‘A Huey has crashed,’ I was informed; one dead, several injured. I scanned the names, finding that Ratchet had been piloting, but was still alive. Well, with that many helicopters running that many sorties this was always a possibility.

Our reconstruction ship had arrived, a ship with many large cranes, and a crew of hairy-arsed builders that were now tasked with clearing the docks and repairing the wharfs. I grabbed an NGO manager that I recognised, and asked about work details. His people were hiring unemployed Haitians, which was just about all of them at the moment, issuing coloured hats and t-shirts, then paying the new recruits to clear streets and load rubble into trucks. It kept the local people gainfully employed, gave them money for food, and cleaned the place up. His target was to hire twenty thousand locals.

Sat having lunch with Helen, we watched the images coming out of Port-au-Prince, recognising a few of the people being interviewed. We even glimpsed Hal and Hacker, Anton and Cassie taking a TV crew around the main hospital. The various world leaders pledged aid money, and the UN Secretary General landed. He did, however, drop the hint that UN aid would be channelled through Rescue Force.

The next day we caught images of our builders at the port, their cranes lifting debris out of the water, men with jackhammers breaking up damaged roads and concrete jetties. It was all proceeding in a very orderly and planned fashion. Repairmen were filmed hanging off telegraph poles, locals employed to assist, and a convoy of trucks were filmed arriving from the Dominican Republic, enough concrete and breezeblocks to rebuild thousands of buildings. Po had ships waiting offshore, stuffed full of those plastic buckets that were a housewives delight – millions of them. Also queued up offshore were ships from West Africa full of cut timber, another ship loaded with cement, a third loaded with plastic sheeting from the DRC. Jimmy had been busy in the planning stages and everything needed was at hand, just as soon as the port was cleared.

On the third day I caught a TV talk show from the States that questioned how we knew about the quake, and the advance preparations, some guy making claims about clairvoyants. Shit, if this was the best they could come up with, I thought. I had spent so long worrying about exposure that this was something of an anticlimax. News then reached me that the British Magestic, an actor come tarot reader that gave predictions to the tabloids, was claiming credit for the earthquake predictions. A journalist then asked if we'd be suing him. No, was my answer, and I refused to be drawn it, walking off with a hidden grin. Some elements of the press grabbed the idea, the idea that we would not take legal action, and that it may mean that Magestic was the source of the predictions.

I had hardly relayed the story to Helen and Jimmy when we received a call from Sykes: a senior French politician was claiming that French presidents, past and present, had taken advice from Jimmy and a power clairvoyant named Magestic.

‘Always plant a big lie behind a small one,’ I quipped. ‘It was a good idea, to create the myth of Magestic,’ I told Jimmy.

‘Why thank you, young man.’

Later, when the press asked about these latest revelations, I denied any knowledge of Magestic, but did so with a smile. The story ran in the tabloid comics, not least because the British Magestic was one of their own, with a premium rate line that you could call to get your horoscope. Jimmy then set in motion something that would light a fire under the tabloid Magestic. He rang the man and told him to predict a major quake in Chile in a month, a cool twenty-five thousand pounds handed over.

In the days that followed, I adopted a cynical attitude to the press, and in some ways I hoped to be exposed, to have it over and done

with. When they asked about Magestic I made jokes, but never refuted the claims of others. I enjoyed teasing the press, the worst elements of which were using their imagination to come up with all sorts of weird stuff. The only unhappy people were our lawyers, chomping at the bit to sue someone, but being held back. That Friday, we cheekily held a Magestic Night at the club, the Red Room stuffed full of gadget manufacturers and computer suppliers, all displaying their futuristic technology. We even had a few clever robots offering drinks.

When Jimmy was asked by a well-known lady presenter, a forty-year-old frump, what he was predicting, he replied, 'I'm seeing you and me in a hot tub, followed by night of dirty sex in elevators and in stairwells, leaving smudging fingerprints wherever we go.'

She stumbled so much she couldn't continue the interview. And the French politician, he was now being laughed at.

Unfortunately, the detail of the Colombian Army's rescue of their hostages was leaked, questions asked at to why many of the rebels seemed to have had their throats slit, several being mutilated, testicles cut off. Several bodies had also been found with hands cut off. The Pathfinders, meanwhile, were hiking northeast, killing anyone holding a weapon, and removing the ranks of the FARC. Since bodies were hidden, the Colombian press were none the wiser; they could hardly report the sudden disappearance of secretive rebels that hid in the jungle as a matter of chosen career lifestyle. As the world concentrated on Haiti, the Pathfinders approached the Venezuelan border, and I grew worried.

The weekend after Haiti hit the news, we locked ourselves away in the house and tried not to concern ourselves with the outside world. I spent time with girls, playing computer games that they beat me at easily enough. Then a piano suddenly appeared in a room in the basement, Shelly now having lessons. Helen played, but it had been a while, and so practised when Shelly was not around. Then we discovered that Jimmy played, and played well.

He explained, 'I was once stuck in a hotel for two months or so. They had a piano, and the lady I was seeing was a music teacher.' He shrugged. 'There was little else to do.'

On the Monday morning, a Pathfinder officer turned up with a secure satellite communications set. A dish was placed on the roof, wires run down to the basement, where Jimmy and I now studied a map of the Colombian/Venezuelan border.

Jimmy tapped the map, the Colombian side of the border. 'They're finding many small pockets of FARC here – groups of no

more than twenty, and well worn trails. When the rebels fail to report, their colleagues across the border should come looking for them. Hopefully.'

'Are there many of them?' I asked.

'A few thousand, but spread around Colombia, most holding down regular jobs and donning the combats at the weekend. A few bombs had gone off as reprisals for the loss of their leadership.'

'And the plan?'

'To remove as many of the FARC as possible, then cross the border to annoy the nice man running Venezuela.'

'Annoy him ... how much?' I asked, glancing at the Pathfinder officer.

'A great deal, hopefully,' Jimmy replied.

Quietly concerned, I returned to my office, and to my real work, that of building up African GDP. Studying reports, I could see that the corporation had taken some of my words literally, and had constructed thirty-six small dams across streams and rivers, aerial photographs attached. Fishing was becoming something of an industry. They even had teams at the fish farms releasing fry into the dammed river sections to boost stocks. On the larger rivers, those typically used as transport highways, nets were being used to catch fish stocks and dump them upstream in the dammed sections.

Cotton was now being planted in certain hillside locations, coffee plants imported and seeded, and the sugarcane acreage was increasing rapidly with grants from the corporation. East of Gotham City, a new suburb had been created from five thousand self-assembly homes, roads improved and free buses provided. Gotham City was witnessing its first traffic jams.

Gotham City's zoo was now an attraction in itself and drawing in a thousand visitors a day, many local schools sending their kids along on a regular basis. Tourists staying at the lodges, and seeing animals in the wild, could now view them close up, their children playing with the young from most every species.

In the north of our region, close to the principle oil fields, a number of small dams had been constructed many years earlier for hydroelectric projects. I now insisted that the lakes behind the dams be populated with fish fry and the locals given access. If the water was just sat there, we'd make use of it.

The water bottling stats were now staggering, my plastic bottles filled with spring water and transported all around the arid regions north of the DRC and Uganda. One report I read seemed a bit cynical, but made me smile anyway.

An existing NGO had been encouraging displaced peoples in the northeast of Uganda to build their own homes, a lengthy process tackled a few hours a day – when the people were not busy tilling the fields. Our people had simply driven in hundreds of self-assembly homes, wood and plastic, and set them up in a day. The finished homes were handed over, food and water left inside for their new occupiers. I was sure that the aim was not to show anyone up, but the NGO in question was not happy. That and the fact that their government level financial support now came through us.

Our plastic factories now made seats that looked like garden furniture, shelving units, even tables. Mosquito nets were now being fashioned from synthetics and handed out around Africa by their millions. The downside was that they burnt well, and quickly, so smoking in bed was an issue for the unwary. We now made our own plastic buckets, and they could be seen everywhere, along with three-litre containers of banana and tomato concentrate.

In cities of Nairobi, Kigali, Harare, Kinshasa, Dar es Salaam and Mogadishu, subsidised electric buses could be seen on most routes, including cross-country routes. America had Greyhound, Britain had National Express, and Africa now had Central African Buses, our comfortable electric buses covering journeys of hundreds of miles. With the 2010 football World Cup in South Africa nearing, we offered them fifty electric buses and they jumped at the chance, planning on running the buses free for spectators.

When I mentioned the buses to Jimmy, he said, ‘If a man in a village can get to a town – and cheaply – then he can work and support his family.’

Inspired by the oracle, I went straight back to my office and budgeted an additional sixty million pounds for the smaller versions of the buses, each costing us thirty thousand pounds new from China. Our region would see buses reaching the villages, all of them. And Jimmy’s brother, Steffan, was proving to be a practical man. As soon as a short section of new track was completed he would order passenger trains to run back and forth along it, tickets subsidised. Small stations were created at every town, and I had images of him creating meticulously detailed models first. When I sent him a joke email about it, he sent me back an attachment, a photo of a huge room with a map of central Africa laid out, the train track visible, the hills and valleys modelled to scale, the mines and roads labelled – and in great detail by the look of it. I laughed; he had made a scale model first.

That week, when I received a copy of the corporation's income and reserves, I could see that they were running out of things to spend money on. We were making so much from the mines and the oil we couldn't spend it fast enough. I sat with Jimmy, and we agreed to boost neighbouring countries. Companies from Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Malawi and Zambia were tasked with more roads and new rail track, contracts totalling three billion dollars issued. And they were in US dollars; everything these days was in dollars around central Africa.

I then tried an idea on Jimmy that I thought was a bit outlandish. 'How about more people in the economic cooperation group, like a mini-parliament?'

'That idea ... is about ten years ahead of time. But, since we've moved forwards so many things, we may as well move on it. Create a large building in Gotham City, a thousand offices, and make a start.'

That evening, sat on the sofa at home, I doodled designs for the new building. Shelly sat and peeked at my scribbling, then went off to draw a picture of her own. Just before her bedtime she showed it to me on, her drawing covering an A3 sheet of paper, the detail as amazing as the rest of her drawings. Her design looked a bit like a cross between the Pentagon building, and Po's hotel in Hong Kong. Basically, a sloping Pentagon building with balconies and hanging gardens.

She pointed. 'Each room has a window, and the rooms inside all have balconies for people to sit and have lunch, or to meet outdoors – because its very warm in Africa. And in the centre is a garden and fountain for people to walk around. And up on the roof is more garden and people can walk all the way around.'

I showed Helen, both of us impressed. With Shelly in bed, I walked over to the house and showed Jimmy the drawing.

'It's not far away from the one I would have suggested. Fine, do it.'

Returning to my house, I opened Shelly's door and sat on the bed. 'Jimmy likes your picture, so we'll make the building in your design. Well done.' My daughter was delighted.

The next day I welcomed Rolf into my office, an office that he had built, and I showed him the picture. 'You design it, but our people in the region will build it.'

'Great detail, but do they actually have kangaroos in Africa, Paul?' he asked with a cheeky grin.

I examined the picture. 'Ah, well, that was Shelly. And no penguins either, please.'

With Rolf gone, after a tea and catch-up, I grabbed my corporation guy and pored over maps of Gotham City and the surrounding area. We decided to keep the new building away from tall apartment blocks, since they would dominate it. Given that the people working in the building would be the more affluent residents of the city, we decided to position it north of the golf course and not too far away from Spiral One. There was a natural low in the terrain, so some of the building would be hidden from the golf course. We pencilled in new roads, a new park, a lake, a new up-market housing estate, and a plush new external gym with a car park. We were happy with the plans and sent them by courier down to Goma.

But then Jimmy cautioned me, 'Use European administrators, Germans and Swiss, not too many Africans - or the corruption will be endemic. Put offices in there for the European Union, for the Americans, the Chinese and others. Then, when we're ready, advertise the top jobs, but allow the nations to vote on them. You'll need a transport minister - roads and rail, agriculture minister, defence, police, refugees. But start with making it all about business and trade, and expand from there.'

I deliberately hinted to Keely what we were planning, Hardon Chase on the phone the next day.

'Paul, are you creating a pan-African parliament?'

Resisting a smile, I said, 'That's a long-term goal, and a wish. First we need to get them cooperating.'

'But the senior positions at this new building will be pan-African?'

'Yes; Transport Minister, Defence Minister, etc.'

'A common Defence Minister? You ... think that's possible?'

'Yeah, just a matter of time.'

'And an economic tie-up?' Chase risked.

'That's a way down the road. We'll get them co-operating on the easy stuff first, like a Tourism Minister.'

'Can I ... put a mission in this building?'

'Sure, more help the better. And I see you've moved into the airfield we set-up for you.'

'Air transport command have set-up home there,' Chase explained. 'Apparently, the fuel is cheap.'

'I'll let you know when the new building is ready,' I offered.

Jungle war drums

Haiti was winding down, and teams were being withdrawn, although we'd have a large permanent presence in the country. Crusty belatedly predicted the quake in Chile, and Rescue Force collectively said, "What the fuck?" Teams were tasked with a brief rest in Cuba, re-supply, and a move down to Chile. And many British teams were now keenly reading their Magestic horoscopes in the tabloids.

Meanwhile, things on the Colombia border were about to turn nasty. The Pathfinders had killed many rebels and cleared a large area of mountainous jungle. As expected, a trickle of fighters had crossed the border from Venezuela in search of missing comrades, and duly been ambushed. The Venezuela authorities then accused the Colombians of being aggressive on the border, whatever the hell that meant. The Colombians confirmed that they had no soldiers in the area, and no reports of even so much as a shot being fired. The bodies of the FARC guerrillas were all being hidden, the evidence removed, and journalists moving into the area found it all quiet, not least because the pathfinders had slipped across the border.

When I studied their new position on the map I was concerned; the international ramifications were huge. Jimmy was as confident as ever, and hinted at a plan, and not to worry. I went off and worried about his plans.

Inside the Venezuelan border, the Pathfinders descended towards an isolated mine, some twenty miles from the nearest town. And this mine, it was run by a certain Belgian group.

Just before dawn, two days later, an EMP device was made ready, aimed at the mine buildings and fired. It made no sound, and unless you saw its coloured lights diminish you wouldn't even know that it had fired. As per Jimmy's instructions, it was smashed up and buried in the jungle, each device a once-only shot.

In the mine buildings, hungry workers were wondering why the kettle no longer worked. With all the of the mine's workers and staff conveniently grouped, some still in bed, the Pathfinders moved forwards, secure in the knowledge that a distress call would not be issued.

Dorms were opened with boots, grenades tossed, 7.62mm rounds sprayed. Inside of six minutes no workers or managers were left alive, their attackers dragging off bodies. The mine offered a nice

deep pit at its centre, the bodies now tossed into it. When done, the Pathfinders grabbed bulldozers from the bowels of the quarry – the machines still functioning, and covered over the bodies with hundreds of tonnes of rubble. Those same bulldozers were then employed to destroy everything of value at the mine. Finally, a bulldozer dug a hole into the access road, some five hundred yards from the mine's main, and only, entrance.

The commander on the ground hid some of his men near that access road, the rest allowed to shower – warm water available, to eat the plentiful supplies and get some rest in a bed for a change, blood stains ignored. That first day of occupation, no visitors came down the road, and the soldiers were all allowed a good six hours sleep in rotation, warm beds keenly occupied as other soldiers returned to duty.

The next morning, a supply truck trundled along the dirt road, halting at the hole. The driver and his mate jumped down and inspected the obstacle to their progress, cut down a second later. With the bodies hidden, the soldiers drove the truck around the hole as best they could, and keenly re-supplied themselves.

Two hours later, with the day warming up and the morning haze lifting, a local official drove his jeep towards the mine, checking on the loss of contact. He and his companion also drew up at the obstacle and inspected it, cut down and dragged toward shallow graves. Their jeep was navigated around the hole and into the mine, gainfully employed to patrol the outer perimeter of the large facility.

As dusk fell over the jungle, signalled by an increase in animal calls, a two-vehicle police patrol approached. This time, as they stepped down, two of the officers were isolated and hit with laser weapons, taking a few seconds to lose their vision. The police puzzled their colleague's behaviour, helped them back into the jeeps and drove away.

Stood listening to the Pathfinder officer relay the detail to us in the basement, I puzzled the actions as well, Jimmy not being very forthcoming.

The following morning, as dawn rose over the damp jungle, the moisture steaming off the vegetation, three police jeeps approached. But this time they had a man dressed in a chemical suit and respirator. The local police, for reasons known only to themselves, suspected a chemical leak as the cause of the blindness – and whatever fate had befallen the workers at the mine. They halted at the hole in the road, checked the man's suit, and watched as he plodded forwards down the track. Strangely enough, the man failed

to return to them. The police waited for an hour, frustrated, a second man donning a mask and walking forwards, radio in hand. He also failed to return, the provincial town police stood scratching their heads as to what to do next.

Now they had a half-decent idea, and called for an aeroplane from the nearby strip. The Cessna flew over the mine and reported no sign of anyone, but a lot of damage; there were no bodies and no movement. It was all very odd. But not as odd as the Cessna now corkscrewing down to earth, impacting the jungle nearby and bursting into flames.

EMP one point, Cessna 172 no points.

Three officers risked the mud of the jungle and fought their way towards the smoke. The men remaining at the jeeps lost radio contact, and after an hour decided that retreat was the better course of action. They turned around and drove off to report the facts.

The following morning, a convoy of the local soldiers approached the mine, three jeeps and a truck loudly announcing their approach. The hole in the road had, quiet naturally, filled with water overnight. The lead jeep assumed that it was a puddle and did not slow down, soon sinking and hitting the far edge of the hole, its driver and passenger propelled through the windscreen. The jeep behind hit its breaks, skidded, and nudged the prone vehicle in front. Men jumped out, weapons ready, defensive positions taken up, much shouting disturbing the creatures of the jungle.

Ten minutes later, the officers realised that it was not a trap, and dragged the jeep out of the water, their men attended for serious head injuries. Those men were driven out, around the truck. With thirty armed soldiers to hand, the commander led a patrol forwards. At the entrance to the mine, the Pathfinders employed the lasers and blinded six men in alternating positions along the line of the approaching platoon. And then just waited.

Men screamed, begged for help, and the commander withdrew his men, now convinced that there was a deadly chemical in the air; a deadly chemical that was not killing people, just making them blind somehow. The vehicles turned around and drove off to report the strange happenings at the mine. The Rifles returned to the huts, food downed, showers taken, sleep grabbed.

At dawn the next day the distant drone of a heavy helicopter could be heard through the mist covered jungle canopy, the Rifles hidden in either the huts or the nearby jungle. Glimpsing an Mi8 helicopter approaching, the EMP was not used. The Mi8 was good old-fashioned Russian technology, military technology, and

controlled by wires rather than electric servers. It over-flew the mine, circling many times before finally landing. Soldiers in gas masks stepped down, waving detectors about for five minutes. They cautiously stepped forwards and checked the nearby empty offices, returning to the helicopter.

At this point, the pilot made a mistake; he opened his side window and peered out through his gas mask. Seeing the opportunity, a Kenyan sniper fired twice in quick succession, killing pilot and co-pilot. At the sound of gunfire, the Rifles opened up, the Venezuelans now caught on the ground or sat in the helicopter's doorway being cut down, Kenyans rushing forwards to shoot the remaining men sheltering inside the helicopter. With the rotors still whirring, the Pathfinder commander called over two officers familiar with the Mi8. The Venezuelan bodies were loaded into the back of the helicopter, pilots and all, the Kenyan officers taking the blood-spattered controls. Four additional Pathfinders were positioned in the rear of the helicopter before it lifted off.

Ten minutes later, the residents of the local town peered up toward a grey sky, to see the Venezuelan Army Mi8 approaching at around a thousand feet, a common enough sight. But once over the town, the helicopter started to rain down bodies, the skydivers slamming into cars, crashing through roofs, or just splattering onto the tarmac roads. Local residents were now being startled by uninvited Venezuelan soldiers bursting headfirst through their roofs and landing on their dining room tables. Panic broke out. Returning to pass again, the helicopter now at rooftop height, the men in the back fired down at the streets below, killing and wounding many. The panic widened.

Two miles short of the mine, the Mi8 put down at a widening of a crossroads, and was abandoned intact. The soldiers ran back to the mine as the reports of this incident reached the press in Caracas, and the country's President; blindness, rumoured chemicals, the disappearance of the workers and the police, and now the Army shooting up a town and dropping bodies from a great height. It was all very odd, so reinforcements were dispatched, an elite army unit of some three thousand men.

A team of Pathfinders were now dispatched toward the town with an EMP. At dusk they stepped off the access road and moved across country, approaching the town from a high ridgeline. As dawn threw a grey light over their target they hid themselves in dense undergrowth and waited, binoculars used to scan the town below, their satellite phones used for communications. They soon observed

a convoy of green Venezuelan Army trucks pulling up in the main square, some thirty vehicles in total. The Pathfinders readied the EMP, hid their own phones behind the ridge, and fired at the town centre. The device was duly smashed up and buried as activity in the town below was keenly observed. Venezuelan Soldiers could now be seen stood around fiddling with radios, or attending trucks that had stopped, others that would not start. Wheels were being kicked. For the worried townsfolk, there was the additional strange occurrence of all TV's shutting down, radios not working, and the landline phones were out.

Stood in the basement, Jimmy said to me, 'No army can move without communications, not even a mile. Never forget that lesson.'

Back in Venezuela, down in the town, old ladies were observed crossing themselves and praying; the Bermuda Triangle had descended on their provincial mining town. The Kenyans on the ridge packed up and jogged back to the mine through heavy rain. As they approached their own positions they stopped and lifted green torches, three green flashes issued, three red flashes returned. They entered the mine, in need of warm food and dry clothes after giving their verbal report.

In Caracas, the authorities worried over the loss of contact with their men. A plane was dispatched from a nearby base, which flew low over the town and reported the soldiers occupying it as ordered, just not being very sociable and returning calls to HQ. The commander on the ground found a motorbike that still worked, jumped on it and rode through the rain to the next town. Caracas now got its update, its incredible update. Four Star generals scratched their heads and shrugged a lot. An advanced EMP weapon was just about the last thing they may have suspected, even if they knew what one was. More trucks were dispatched, along with armoured personnel carriers. By accident, they had made a smart move, because those personnel carriers were old Russian stock, Cold War era and designed to be EMP proof. That, and they contained no delicate circuit boards.

As Rescue Force made ready for the Chilean deployment, ten armoured personnel carriers belched smoke and trundled into the mining town. The officers of the elite army unit, and a hundred soldiers, mounted up and set off towards the mine, the rain clearing as they progressed.

Laser weapons were created for a specific purpose: blind your attacker head on, but leave him alive so that several of his colleagues would carry him off the battlefield. Hit one soldier, but occupy the

time of four soldiers – plus the attending medics. It was like a sniper shooting an enemy soldier in the leg - it tied up the enemy's resources. Now, the lead vehicle noticed the large puddle just as the driver was robbed of his vision. He hit the brakes and halted, the convoy behind easing up as he declared his loss of sight over the radio. The drivers of the other vehicles were also now occupying a darkened world. Thoughts returned to the rumoured chemical agent, panic gripping the men.

Brave soldiers jumped out and replaced the drivers. The first soldier drove forwards, straight into the hole, and got stuck just as he also lost his sight. Then nothing. No shooting, no further loss of sight. The carriers were awkwardly turned around, revving and belching smoke, and headed back the way they came. But now the puddle in the road ahead of them contained an anti-tank mine. The first carrier set it off, blown onto its side, a large hole in its belly. The convoy halted, their path ahead blocked.

The senior officer ordered the men out and to disperse into the dense green jungle. The men adopted defensive positions, and waited. The officer scoured the lush green vegetation for any sign of movement, but found it all quiet apart from tree frogs and distant animal calls, cursing his unseen enemy. Then he noticed that the man in front of him seemed slumped. 'Corporal?' he whispered. He advanced and nudged the corporal, getting no response. Turning the corporal over, he noticed blood from one eye, and no pulse when tested.

'I can't see!' a man screamed, followed a second later by the pitiful cry of a second man.

A soldier in front slumped, lifeless. The officer had seen enough. He got up and ran down the road, a few soldiers following. At the point at which the officer had set off running he had twenty men on his heels. As he reached the first bend, puffing and sweating, he counted just three remaining.

His men had just been experimented upon by the Rifles, the Kenyans now employing a type of miniature rail-gun, a three inch long subsonic projectile being accelerated by a tubular magnet. It was completely silent, very accurate within thirty yards, and had now been tested with good effect.

The Pathfinders removed the bodies as it started to rain again, checking the personnel carriers. Each carrier was allocated a driver and, as the cover of a damp night descended, they were driven to the Mi8, all neatly parked in row. And left intact.

In the basement command centre I said, 'You're seriously fucking with their heads.'

'Warfare is many things, the last resort of the badly organised being to use brute force. The aim is not to be loud, with puffs of smoke. The aim ... is to achieve your objectives. And right now, no one will be going near that mine for a while.'

'For a decade or two!' I quipped. 'So what now?'

'Now we raise our game, and take the gloves off.'

I didn't like the sound of that.

At the mine, the Pathfinders grabbed a final hot meal and packed up, moving out towards the nearby town. With the rain offering them good cover, they made it to the ridge above the town at dawn. Noticing a group of soldiers at the edge of the urbanisation, stood near a garage, a team was dispatched. Two out of four Venezuelan soldiers lost their sight, the others panicking; whatever was at the mine was now in the town, the news spreading quickly. People packed up and drove off as the day warmed up.

By dusk, hardly anyone remained in the town, just a few stubborn individuals who had locked themselves inside their homes. The Pathfinders slid quietly down into the town. In the main square, handbrakes were released on abandoned trucks, soldiers now pushing the trucks down a natural gradient and toward the outskirts. A mile out of town they halted in a neat line, alternators removed from backpacks, the truck's alternators replaced. Twelve out of fifteen trucks came back to life, the soldiers mounting up. With the weather acting as a suitable deterrent to nosy observers, they set off north in a line, headlights blazing.

Before dawn the next day, the convoy turned off the main road and halted. An innocent lumber crew were in the wrong place at the wrong time, all shot, their bodies hidden. As night came on, the weather cooperated with a nasty storm, the trucks again moving north in convoy.

The Pathfinders commander held up the map of Venezuela and showed it to his adjutant with a torch. 'The map of this country, it looks like a map of Africa. It is a good omen I think.'

They reached their objective before dawn, a sizeable oil refinery serviced by a rail marshalling yard to the north of it. On an isolated side road in the next valley they disembarked, the drivers remaining with their vehicles. The Pathfinders formed up, then split into three groups. The main force now moved onto the heavily wooded hillside, the other side of which lay their next objective. That objective was soon illustrated by the morning's bright sun, the

Pathfinders peering down a valley at a huge oil refinery, seemingly millions of silver pipes going in all directions. They opened tins of meat and settled, sleeping alternately through the day. That day turned out to be warm and rain free, the men well rested for their night's work.

At 11pm they crept quietly forwards, covering a distance of half a mile, and arrived at a dilapidated old fence that offered little challenge. They simply pulled down large sections of it and stepped into the refinery, finding tall silver towers brightly lit with yellow neon lights, the air full of the clanking sounds of unseen machinery and distant working trains. One group approached the refinery's heart, its control room and offices, an EMP destined to make its presence silently felt. Two hundred yards short of a tall office block that housed the brains of the refinery operation, the EMP was silently made ready. Men checked their watches. Where possible, the soldiers ducked behind metal objects, just in case. The EMP operator aimed, and fired his invisible projectile. The lights went out, the background clanking ceasing.

An unusual peace gripped the blacked-out refinery, many puzzled workers wondering why not even their torches were working, let alone their radios. From the shadows, death stalked closer and closer. Train drivers suddenly wondered why they couldn't see, desperate calls let out to colleagues. Pistols with silencers, covered in cloth, found their targets at close range, the ring around the refinery tightening and moving inwards.

Security guards at the main gate fell silently to the ground, their bodies dragged off, the gates they once manned now locked closed. In the control room, dozens of managers and technicians bumped into each other, some using lighters and matches and trying to restart the huge sleeping monster. Doors opened and dark figures moved, death delivered after quiet coughs from pistols. Within an hour, three hundred workers lay dead, even the ladies serving in the canteen - there would be no witnesses. A withdrawal was signalled with a flare fired up into the dark night, the red arcing glow indicating that it was clocking-off time for the Pathfinders. The withdrawal was made in haste, not least because taps had been opened on oil storage tanks, fuel now flooding out. Train tanker carriages had been attended in turn, taps opened.

Fifteen minutes later, stood on the ridge and panting a little, the commander raised a radio detonator and flicked the switch. The flash lit the surrounding valley and the low clouds, visible for miles around. The bang registered a good three seconds later, the refinery

utterly destroyed, the storage tanks ablaze, their angry flames reaching hundreds of feet into the air. With some urgency, the Rifles reclaimed their trucks and set off north along main roads without a care. After all, they appeared to be Venezuelan Army.

The next day Hardon Chase called Jimmy. 'We're getting some strange reports from Venezuela. The people you have hunting down the FARC –'

'I may not have mentioned this before, but the President of Venezuela was behind the attack on me in New York.'

'He was? Directly?'

'Yes. So ... *payback* is what, I think, you Yanks call it.'

'That oil refinery?'

'May have been visited by the Kenyan Rifles.'

'Jesus. And they're claiming a chemical agent was used further south?'

'No, but advanced technology was employed.'

'How ... advanced?' Chase asked.

'Ten or twenty years ahead of what your boys have to play with. But don't worry, I'll brief your guys on it after this ... advanced field test.'

'And if the soldiers are caught?'

'There would be a bloodbath. But they won't, hopefully. Keep your eye on Puerto Cabello tomorrow night.'

In Venezuela, the Pathfinders brazenly drove north along main roads, plenty of fuel found aboard their trucks when they had been pinched. As night fell the heavens cooperated, opening with a torrential downpour. They pulled into an isolated petrol station. The garage's bored night staff were surprised to see black soldiers walking in, even more surprised when pistols were levelled at them. The trucks refuelled in turn, the contents of the garage shop pilfered and handed out. The last soldier, waited on by the last truck, placed a charge on the lid of the underground petrol reservoir - and ran like hell. The trucks pulled away to the bright incendiary flash of what was left in the reservoir.

Driving all day, the convoy approached the industrial outskirts of Puerto Cabello as an amber sun disappeared behind the western horizon. The commander checked his watch. 'If they're on time, we have five minutes. Slow down.'

Outside of the port, a ship manoeuvred slowly towards the outer breakwater, the harbour pilot that had been put aboard it now quite dead and hidden below. At the mouth of the harbour, and facing an horizon of twinkling lights, the ship came to a halt and began to

slowly reverse. Below decks, special generators built up a charge. At the ship's bow, three powerful EMP weapons sat ready, each looking like a stubby cannon. Lead screens were now hastily erected behind them to protect the ship's own delicate systems. The crew stepped back when ready.

With the EMP's charged to maximum capacity, the ship's captain shut down all of his own electronics, circuit breakers pulled. That left just one live switch, which he now threw. Nothing happened for a second or two, nothing visible, no sound. But then he could see the lights fading on the shore, the dark night claiming the town, tall buildings turning from beacons of light to dark shadows on the horizon.

The pathfinders commander lowered his watch and observed the fading of the flickering lights on the horizon, those houses nearby unaffected. 'Could have been a long walk. OK, speed up.'

In the port, the ship manoeuvred itself very slowly to the berth it desired; the Pathfinders had just twenty minutes before it left. Aboard the trucks, the soldiers made ready for the final phase. Charges were made ready, C4 and plastique, timers attached. As they entered the darkened city they turned west, aiming to avoid the city centre, not least because of the gridlock that now blocked its streets.

Passing a petrol station, the commander lifted his radio. 'Last truck, hit the petrol station.'

Driving on, the trucks bright headlights were just about the only illumination on the dark streets, perplexed motorists now stood next to their vehicles, or giving up and walking home. The incendiary light from the burning petrol station illuminated that walk home, but did nothing to reassure nervous pedestrians. With the road junction ahead blocked, the lead lorry slowed, nudged a car and floored it, pushing the car aside and continuing without collecting the other driver's insurance details. Further vehicles had to be nudged aside as the convoy approached the port gates.

The commander lifted his radio. 'Port gates ahead, get ready.'

The men in the back cut holes into the tarpaulin sides, weapons made ready. At the gates, two police officers stood on duty, brightly illuminated by the truck's headlights, but then distracted by a distant explosion. They jumped clear of the trucks, which were not slowing, shot dead a second later by the soldiers in the back, their glass control room showered with rounds. Up ahead, the lead vehicle could see a ship at berth, three green lights displayed on its bridge. It wasn't so much that it displayed the right code, in so much as it was

the only ship with any lights working at all. The trucks halted, the soldiers jumping down and rushing for the gangplank, welcomed aboard by Kenyan Rifles posing as sailors.

With the gangplank raised, the ship pulled away unopposed, not so much as a rubber boat in the harbour with an engine that worked, no phones and no radios functioning. In almost total darkness, they set sail for nearby Haiti, where they would blend into the rest of the Rifles. At the harbour mouth their trucks blew, illuminating the dockside.

In Caracas, meanwhile, a truck trundled along and halted on a hill overlooking the small and congested city. Its driver jumped out and checked what his rear was pointed towards, making a face and shrugging; how the hell was he supposed to aim this damn thing? A second lorry pulled in ahead of him, halting some ten yards in front. The driver mounted up, glanced at his colleague, then threw a switch. Nothing happened, so he threw it again. They leaned out of the windows and craned their necks around, finding the city now in darkness. In the Palace, the President cursed, wondering why he was sat in the dark, his desk phone not working. He soon found that his lighter was the most advanced piece of technology to hand that still worked. The second lorry ran a chain to the first, that vehicle's own electronics now quiet dead, and towed it away.

In Puerto Cabello the CIA observation team dispatched by the White House sat in the dark, candles now lit. 'Was that an EMP weapon?'

'Houses on the hills have lights on,' a man at a window reported. 'And there's a ship leaving port with its lights on.'

'My phone is dead, the landline's dead, and my fucking watch has stopped!'

'It was. Fuck me, that was an EMP blast.'

'Yeah, well any fucker with a pacemaker will have bought it.'

'How do we report it?'

The senior man stood. 'We start walking, looking for a few horses. That mode of transport is not affected by EMPs!'

In Caracas, the US Embassy would have reported the blackout – if it could. Not a damn thing worked, the staff sat in the dark.

Chase was on the phone an hour later, the middle of the night in the UK. 'Jimmy, you blacked out that port! And the whole of fucking Caracas! We can't raise our embassy.'

'Pay careful attention, Mister President, because you've got less than five years before a bunch of college kids do that to New York.'

‘Tomorrow morning I’m kicking some butt. We should be more prepared for an attack like this on us.’

‘I have detectors and defensive systems, I’ll send them to you soon.’

‘Jimmy, the cost to the Caracas?’

‘I’m in a war, Mister Chase, a fight to the finish. Keep that in mind, because I have no problem with cutting off a hand to save an arm. Numbers on a page, detail in a column. And when you consider how many will die in the years ahead, then it’s better I’m here, than dead at the hands of a tin pot dictator. Goodnight.’

When Jimmy told me what he had done I was staggered. ‘You hit a city ... with an EMP blast?’

‘Two cities,’ he corrected me. ‘And the death toll in Venezuela is around a thousand. But no one will be investigating the deaths anytime soon, they have ... other things to worry about.’

‘Like no communications, no phones, no computers working!’

‘You know why I used the EMPs?’ he posed.

‘Mass panic, but no casualties?’

‘No, because the damage done will be assessed by the world, who will then wish to be EMP proof in the future. That could have been a long hard process. I mean, how do you persuade people that EMPs are dangerous?’

‘Two birds with one stone. But ... shit!’

‘Indeed.’

‘So how long before the electronics come back to life?’ I asked.

‘Landline phones and basic household electricity return after a day, mobiles and computers are shot permanently.’

‘There were probably a million mobiles in Caracas,’ I thought out loud. ‘They’ll need to buy some more.’

‘And desk calculators, wall clocks, car radios, fridge regulators, oven timers, a light aircraft or two. The main airport is outside the city, unaffected, and I tampered with hospital electricity so that they’d switch to generator before the EMP hit. I’m not all bad.’

The next day I was up early to check the news, finding just a throwaway line about Caracas suffering power outages. And that was it. Haiti still dominated the news, and now the Chilean deployment was attracting attention, not least from the residents of the target area. They were moving out in their thousands, the news now split between Haiti and Chile, our rescuers filmed landing.

I scoured Reuters, finding little, then Googled the story. I guessed the lack of a story was the lack of working computers in the Caracas. But a day later the story was posted on a few blogs on the web

versions of various American news agencies, including our own, citing the strange power outage in two cities at the same time. One theory was an atmospheric disturbance.

‘Atmospheric disturbance?’ I repeated. ‘What the fuck are you on, people?’

I Googled “Venezuela refinery fire” and found a story in English, eventually, reports now of a terror attack by guerrillas, since the bodies had gunshot wounds. It also ran the story of the strange happenings at the mine in the southwest, suggesting a biological agent had been used. So far, no one had a clue what had really happened and this story was not making it to the mainstream TV minutes.

Jimmy then volunteered a few details that had a bearing. The Pathfinders had killed the FARC on their way to Venezuela, even carrying several severed hands across the border with them. FARC paperwork, radios and rifles, had all been transported, and dropped where they’d be found; the only available clues to the police would point towards the FARC. I should have figured that. Two birds with one stone? This was more like four.

The Chilean quake struck, and the world’s media turned that way, Jimmy quite crafty in his timing of the attack on Venezuela. But one story did catch my attention, that of the Venezuelan President blaming Colombian soldiers and their imperial ally the Americans for the refinery attack. Guess they had not found the evidence, or simply didn’t believe it.

Two days later, a few western commentators put two and two together and concluded that an EMP weapon had been used. Problem was, none of the world’s armies had one, not even the Americans. The story did not make it to the main news, but it grabbed a few column inches in various papers, the Venezuelans now threatening war with Colombia and moving soldiers towards the border, whilst suggesting that the Colombians had paid their own archenemies, the FARC, to attack Venezuela. I had to wonder about their ability to join the dots.

Sykes popped in whilst Jimmy was out, a file in hand offering a damage assessment of Venezuela, his people costing the damage to the two cities at a billion dollars a piece and rising. The economic hardships were causing unrest in Caracas – not so much as a fridge working, and it turned out that the government and local councils there did not make as many backups of their computer systems as they probably should have. The law courts lost all cases, the police lost its national database, and the new Citizen’s Security Database

was wiped. Some elements of the police were now suggesting that an organised criminal gang was behind it. All in all, life in Caracas would be seriously hampered for an estimated ten years, the streets still blocked with cars that would not start.

‘The powers are in a flap,’ Sykes told me. ‘If this technology was used here ... it’d be a disaster. We have bank backups in secure and protected facilities, but the fact is ... we’re not ready.’

‘That was one of the reasons behind the demonstration. You’ve got five years, so be happy.’

‘Those three hundred soldiers went through Venezuela like ghosts - a frightening capability. And some of the weapons they used ... our boffins are struggling to come to terms with them.’

‘Jimmy suggested that - unless changed - an EMP would knock out Frankfurt in ten years.’

‘His hand held devices seem to have a range of about five hundred yards, so I don’t know what use they are on the battlefield.’

‘You need to sneak up and hit a building with them, so they’re only for specialist use. According to Jimmy, you can’t mount them on a plane, or use them at sea during a war. Their main use is against small countries. He thinks the Americans may strike Iran in the future, so he’ll use the EMPs to blind the Iranians first.’

‘In the hands of terrorists, they’d be a great threat. So we’re making plans ... and flapping a lot. The Israelis were utterly terrified when they saw what they could do.’

‘If we give the Israelis one they’ll test it on Gaza. Be no TV that night!’

Jimmy arrived back, just as a convoy pulled in, a collection of American Generals and Admirals.

I exchanged a look with Sykes as our unhappy visitors approached. To the visitors I said, ‘Did the nice man in the White house send you here with his toe up your arse?’

‘Something like that,’ the first man grumbled.

Jimmy led us all to a lounge, drinks organised, an operational post mortem started. Fortunately, he handed over early on the A-Z of EMP defensive systems.

The Admiral asked, ‘If that ship had sailed up to New York, what would have happened?’

‘The good thing about New York, is tall skyscrapers made of steel. That helps. Buildings also block the pulse, sheltering the ones behind. So you’d have seen damage on one side of the island and not the other. And, like London, your banks have basement storage, for fire and theft as much as anything. So records would not have been

lost as badly as in Caracas. But most mobile phones would have stopped, watches, basically anything with a circuit board in it.'

'Is there a defence?' they asked.

'Not one that would be a hundred percent effective. You can help to protect a building, like this house – which is EMP proof, and set-up early warning systems, but that early warning is just a few seconds. It's all in the file.'

'And the other advanced weapons used?' they nudged.

'Blinding laser weapon and miniature rail-guns.'

'Blinding laser weapons are outlawed,' they pointed out.

'I don't think the world's terrorists got that memo,' Jimmy countered.

'And the rail-gun?'

'A miniature; a subsonic projectile designed for Special Forces - as silent as you can get. I'll have a few of each delivered to you.'

'And you developed the technology ... where?' a general probed.

'Can't say,' Jimmy said with a cold smile. 'But I'll give you a clue: in the same place as much of the other advanced technology and weapons that I'm developing – that you don't yet know about.'

They glanced at each other. The same man said, 'In the wrong hands, EMPs could take out New York, or a major US city.'

'It's not in the wrong hands, it's in my hands.'

'And the Russians and Chinese?'

'Will have the very same file as you on defensive measures. And, the first use of it will be in New York in five years, when a bunch of college kids bring down the Stock Exchange.'

'And the other weapons that you're working on?' they nudged.

'You'll be made aware of them at the right time. And before then I won't be putting them in your arsenal, just in case I don't get along with the next incumbent. But I will give you a clue. Future problems, terrorist and military, look more like EMPs than dropping conventional bombs. You need to think outside of the box, gentlemen. And whilst you're doing that, I'll develop the defences and countermeasures ready ... for when you've stopped thinking.

'And, thinking on, you and I will cooperate on using EMPs against small countries in the years ahead. A kind of ... humane way to fuck-over a country. I've even shipped one to Afghanistan, and as we speak the electronics in Kandahar are dying, denying them their communications. You see, gentlemen, there are more ways to stop someone in their tracks than bombing the hell out of them.'

'Could an EMP pulse device be fitted to a plane?'

'Only if you don't like the pilot and crew,' Jimmy quipped.

‘Could one be dropped like a bomb?’

Jimmy smiled widely and pointed at the man. ‘In large numbers, in 2025, denying the terrorists their communications.’

They glanced at each other, and made notes.

‘And the battlefield application?’

‘Against an enemy that’s prepared ... modest at best. You could fire at a valley ahead of you, knocking out their comms over a distance of a mile or two, then advance your soldiers. Best dropped from a plane and fired-off at five thousand feet, hitting an area a mile or two wide. Remember, they work best through air, not through buildings or trees, something that your predecessors knew all about at the height of the cold war. Problem is, you’ve hardened your tanks against EMPs, but not your New York skyscrapers – which will be the target.’

‘How’s your embassy in Kinshasa?’ I asked them.

‘Everything went off for half an hour, then came back,’ a general informed me. He faced Jimmy, ‘Why can’t that technology put on a plane?’

‘You could only use it if your own troops were not close by, so it would be no good where the fighting was concentrated. And you would not use a pulse weapon from an aircraft platform, you would use an alternating frequency device. And you’re missing something. Aircraft ... EMP devices to jam ... other electronics?’

‘Jam another aircraft?’

Jimmy made a face. ‘You’d have to be close enough to see it, so you would have loosed off a missile well before that time. Come on, thinking caps on.’ He waited. ‘Countermeasures?’

‘Jam an incoming missile?’

‘You win a cookie. The technology jams anything with a circuit board, including a missile, which would then fly off course.’

They keenly made notes.

‘So, if an F14 is sending that signal out its rear, no missile could hit,’ an Air Force general speculated.

‘Correct, but his wingman might have something to say about it. Think ... terrorist.’

‘Placed on a commercial airliner?’ the same man puzzled.

‘Yes. If the airliner is locked on, then the EMP frequency device switches on for five seconds. Then, not locked on. And, with a limited range, it won’t screw up nearby air traffic control or other aircraft.’

‘But the next generation of jets could EMP toward a missile?’

‘Until such time as those making the missiles make them EMP proof. You’ll then develop a stronger pulse, and they’ll have to go back to the drawing board. At the end of it, the jet’s countermeasures are stronger than the missile’s EMP shield could ever be. Such EMP countermeasures will remove flares and chaff on fighters, but you’ll remain vulnerable to ground controlled missiles, or those fired front on. Anyway, in a few weeks we’ll all pop over to Israel and test fire a few devices. Fix a date for after the parades.’

‘Parades?’ they asked.

‘Returning Rescue Force heroes,’ Jimmy proudly explained.

An hour later we waved goodbye to our guests, a long way to come for a short visit.

‘I like Chase,’ Jimmy oddly stated as we turned back in.

‘Why?’

‘Because he sent that lot over, and next week he’ll have EMP defences set-up. Can’t argue with that. Problem will be the Israelis.’

‘They’ll use the technology.’

‘A minute after I ask them not to,’ Jimmy said with a sigh.

‘So where we holding the parades?’

‘I thought Rome for the Euro teams, Hong Kong for the Far East teams, Gotham City for the Africans, Cuba for the Americas.’

‘Together or split?’ I asked.

‘We’ll attend them all together; Rome, Goma, Hong Kong then Cuba.’

Michelle appeared in the office doorway. ‘Moment,’ she asked and we followed her to the corridor. ‘Six Belgian mine managers have been arrested in Africa, on bribery and corruption charges.’

Jimmy told me, ‘They work for the company behind the attempt on me.’

Michelle added, ‘Also, three men arrested on terrorists charges in France. They have made confessions, admitting the attempt to kill you, and that Venezuela and Belgium were involved. It will make the news in hours.’ She walked off.

‘Good job I bet the downside of their stock,’ Jimmy commented.

‘That an end to it?’ I asked.

He shook his head. ‘That spider has many legs.’

‘Will the Venezuelans figure out the attack?’

‘They will if I tell them,’ Jimmy said before he walked back into the office.

A week later, a Russian delegation visited Venezuela and offered a much-needed loan, and signed a joint venture oil deal at the same time. They also expressed their concern at the evidence of

Venezuelan involvement in the attempt on Jimmy, gently suggesting that it may have an affect on future relations. The Venezuelan President had received a gentle slap on the wrist by the Russians, but a loud message from Jimmy, the Russians hinting that he was behind the attack.

I found that foolish of Jimmy, since I figured the Venezuelans wouldn't learn any lesson, and would probably attack us further. I was being naïve again; that was exactly what Jimmy wanted, and had planned for.

We packed our bags and flew to Rome a week later, the weather good for a parade as most European leaders gathered, a drive-by and fly-by arranged, all European teams partaking. It was good to be popular for a change, and everywhere we went we were applauded and thanked.

After three days in Rome we flew down to Goma hub, meeting all of the African leaders, most of whom were booked into the golf hotel and enjoying the course. And here we couldn't have been more popular. Some three thousand African rescuers paraded down the main avenue, watched and waved at by deep crowds, a meeting of African leaders held later in the conference centre.

One of our own 747s flew our party directly to Hong Kong – which included Doc Graham and Bob Davies, another parade and another reception. But we did, at least, get a few relaxing days at Po's hotel. We ferried a few of the Hawaiian team home, refuelling in Honolulu before flying direct to Havana, our hotel booking having been made before we left for Rome. The Cubans had planned on a large parade, and Jimmy had planned on the Venezuelan intelligence services making an attempt on us. As our plane touched down, a boutique hotel – the one we were booked into, exploded, three senior Venezuelan agents killed by their own bomb.

Jimmy had just put Caracas on a collision course with the Cuban authorities, a dozen Cubans killed at the hotel, including police officers. And somehow, Jimmy had caused the Venezuelan's timer to go off as soon as the bomb was being made live.

For the benefit of the parade, the Cubans hid the incident, moving us to another hotel. The parade went off without a hitch, and we flew over to Haiti a day later, a scheduled meet with the Haitian President and his team. Unfortunately for the man, Jimmy wanted him and his corrupt cronies gone; they were already stealing aid money. Two Venezuelan agents, back-up to the Havana bombing, had been picked up by PACT agents in a boat off Cuba. Drugged, the men now sat in a car in Port-au-Prince. As the President's vehicle passed

nearby, a second car blew, killing the President, a second device roasting the two Venezuelan agents, but not their ID cards.

The news was not good for Caracas, Havana now livid, the US and UN investigating. And the media got all the facts, the details of the attack in Havana leaked. Ignoring the bombing, we toured many of the tented cities, and met the rescuers stationed in Haiti for the long term, before flying off towards London.

Jimmy said, 'The wedge between Caracas and Cuba was necessary. It wasn't quite planned that way, I had to adjust a few things, but ... I'm a few years ahead of schedule.'

'A tick in the box?' I asked.

Jimmy nodded. 'One more off a long list.'

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Part 11

Old scores

With the media discussing the Venezuelan attempt to kill us, and the media buying our side of things, the war of words heated up. America, and a few other countries, labelled Venezuela as a terrorist state, as did a few around Central America. They worked on the basis of the evidence presented by the Cubans – of all people, coupled with that of the UN and French Army investigators in Haiti. Venezuela counter claimed, by suggesting that Jimmy had turned off the lights in Caracas and destroyed mines and oil refineries, at a time when some of their own police were blaming the FARC. Since the Venezuelans seemed to be trying to justify their attempts on Jimmy, they just made themselves appear guilty of the car bomb attacks – which they denied.

Jimmy then did an odd thing. He nagged the Cubans to meet with the Venezuelans, and for them try and sort out their relationship with their southern neighbours, for the Cubans to act as honest brokers and to mediate in this mini-crisis. The Cubans took the advice and agreed to meet the Venezuelan President and his team in Havana, the accused to bring their evidence with them, although that would again point towards their motivation to attack us.

The Venezuelan President took off in a small jet and headed north, but contact was soon lost with the plane as it headed toward Havana, wreckage discovered offshore the next day. As soon as I heard, I had images of a ship or two picketed along that stretch of the Caribbean, an EMP or two pointed upwards. When I confronted Jimmy about it he denied any involvement. The black box recorder would never be found, and that ended an episode.

The Venezuelan public suggested that either Colombia, America or Cuba had shot down the plane – an oddly matched trio of co-conspirators, the wreckage recovered so far suggesting that the plane impacted the water intact and with no signs of missile damage. Elections would now be held for a new president.

Spring neared, and the media were just crazy. Not crazy with exposing us, nor crazy about us, just plain crazy, the stories getting stranger by the day. Jimmy now unleashed the dogs of solicitors that we retained and warned the various British papers about the silly stories. In the States, we let loose the lawyers on several commentators who suggested we had been active in Venezuela,

suing for substantive sums. First, our accusers would have to prove the entry and exit of the Rifles, their transport to and from the area, evidence of their involvement at the mine and refinery, then complicity in the outages in Caracas and elsewhere. Since the Venezuelan police chief was publicly voicing his opinion about the FARC and criminal gangs, those accusing us would have a hard time justifying their claims.

Our one weak link was the Colombian Government and Army, some of who knew about the insert of the Rifles. But they were not about to admit any of it.

One news group offered to settle out of court, but we were putting a large number on the settlement, aiming to make it hurt. In parallel, a group of American and European experts had concluded that an EMP weapon had been used, and would stick by it in court. Unfortunately for our accusers, the experts also agreed that they were not aware of anyone perfecting the technology – short of detonating a nuclear device in orbit, but suggested that the USAF or NASA may have developed one – and detonated it in orbit over Caracas. That did nothing for their case in the States.

We jumped on a plane and headed to New York to keep up our charm offensive, the risk of exposure seemingly firmly buried beneath a mountain of rumour - and complete nonsense. At this rate we'd never be exposed. At the airport we were met by an FBI protection team, thirty officers, most of whom were heavily armed. Hardon Chase was not about to take any more chances, not least because of Jimmy's miraculous return from the dead still attracting column inches in American papers.

In New York, we reclaimed my apartment, Cat watching the girls in the UK, and made ready for a chat show. Helen dressed up smart-sexy, looking gorgeous, and we headed around to the studio, to be filmed in front of a live TV audience. That fact made me a little nervous, since the public were all being a little weird these days. They either sent us their life savings, proclaimed Jimmy as the messiah, or wanted us dead for some reason or other best known to themselves. And that was the reserved British public. The American public were just downright crazy.

Cliff Taylor, our host, had interviewed us twice before and I felt reasonably sure that he would not ambush us. That and the fact that he knew what our American lawyers might do to him. We stepped out to a loud applause, but I could not tell if they were being polite, or genuinely liked us. The three of us eased down onto large sofa,

facing the host at a bit of an angle so that audience, and the folks at home, could see us.

When the applause had eased to a quiet background crackle, Cliff said, 'Ladies and gentlemen, we have with us tonight: Jimmy Silo, Paul Holton, and Helen Holton – for those who've just arrived back on this planet. So Jimmy, what planet *are* you from?'

Jimmy smiled. 'I'm a big fan of Star Trek, as you may know, and I love the idea of people living aboard spaceships in ordered societies.'

'You think you could live on the Starship Enterprise?'

'I could, definitely. I've always loved travel and exploration, long journeys to new places.'

I resisted a smile.

'How many air-miles do you three clock up?'

'Too many,' I mock complained. 'But we take the girls with us when we can.'

'Do you holiday together?'

'Not always,' I replied. 'But there are some benefits to having Jimmy along; he watches the girls if we want to get away for a while.'

'You have a full time nanny?'

'We do, but the girls like their Uncle Jimmy,' I explained.

'Helen, how do you cope with work and motherhood?'

'Well, the girls are ten and eight - and well behaved, so they're not usually a problem. They're in school during the day, and are quite happy to study in the evenings.'

'What are they into now?'

'They've gone off Harry Potter, they've seen the films too often. They're now both into their music studies, and even compose a few of their own simple tunes.'

'You all live on a big estate, so plenty for them to do?'

'Yes, plenty,' Helen agreed. 'The main house has a pool and gym, a piano room, and the grounds have rivers, ponds, a paddock and a small zoo.'

'A zoo?'

'A large shed with hamsters, rabbits, and an owl.'

I cut in with, 'But the girls haven't yet figured out why their four male hamsters became eight!'

The audience laughed. The host said, 'I think maybe one was not male. So, Jimmy, I hope you don't mind, but you were shot three times. What was the story there?'

‘Many years ago ... we moved into Africa, and helped to stamp-out corrupt western mining companies exploiting the Africans. To date, they’ve made ten or more attempts to kill us for what we did.’

‘And what did you do – that they’re mad about?’

‘We left all the profits in Africa, and paid taxes to the Africa nations. Before us, western mining companies simply took the ore without paying for it, ignoring the poor people.’

Cliff shook his head. ‘That’s terrible.’ He raised his head to the back screen. ‘We have a picture of what your city in the jungle looked like. Before -’ They displayed a strip of savannah, the volcano visible in the distance. ‘- and after.’ They displayed Gotham City’s tall apartment blocks.’

The audience collectively sighed, and said ‘wow.’

‘How much have you spent on that?’

‘Hard to say,’ Jimmy answered.

‘But everything you earn is put back into Africa, or to charity, yes?’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy agreed.

‘So how much – in total – have you earned and given to charity?’ Cliff pressed.

‘If you include all of our re-investment back into Africa over the past twenty years, then around thirty-eight billion pounds, about fifty billion dollars.’

The audience gasped.

‘Fifty billion dollars? That’s what you earned – and could have paid yourself?’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy said with a nod.

‘What’s that as a percentage of total earnings?’

‘Ninety-nine point five percent,’ Jimmy answered. ‘I have less than thirty million in my personal account.’

‘Wow. And you Paul, do you keep a little back for Helen?’

I smiled. ‘I have to, I’m married.’

‘Helen, what do you spend money on? Do you like jewellery? Fast cars?’

‘Neither. I have my house, the girls, my work. I don’t need anything else, and I certainly wouldn’t spend money on lavish trinkets. We live simply.’

‘Apart from the huge estate.’

Helen explained, ‘Some thirty people live there, staff that work for us or with us, so it’s more like living in a working hotel.’

‘My office,’ I began, ‘is half a mile away from my house, still inside the grounds, but full of my staff; the estate was built for them

more than us. Jimmy lives in an apartment no bigger than the room I had in college.'

'I'd heard that. Jimmy, why the small apartment?'

'What else do I need? My life is not in the house, it's ... out there somewhere.'

'And the man who shot you here? Who was he working for?'

'He was working for a Belgian mining company, who the authorities there have now raided, arresting the key suspects. But he was funded by the former President of Venezuela.'

'And that's the bit I don't understand. Why was that crackpot involved?'

'He fully believed that I lowered oil prices by developing African oil fields, and avoiding joining OPEC.'

'And all us motorists really hate you for that,' Cliff joked, the audience laughing. 'And the January Rescue Force deployment, you sold your shares in Pineapple Music to pay for that?'

'Yes,' Jimmy answered. 'And shares in a few other businesses.'

'And paid two billion dollars to have all those rescuers on the ground?'

'Yes, an expensive deployment.'

Cliff started to clap, soon joined by the audience. 'Ladies and gentlemen, two billion dollars to help the people of Haiti.' The three of us felt awkward, at least I did. 'And now you're involved in electric cars?'

'Yes, we're keen to help with global warming and the energy crisis.'

'And these new electric cars, what's different about them?'

'You can drive for five hundred miles on a ten dollar top-up,' Jimmy explained.

'Five hundred miles ... on a ten dollar top up? Where can I get one?'

'You can't,' I said. 'Your oil industry is trying to stop them being imported here, and they've bribed a few senators.'

'The cars can't be bought here?'

'No, and may be banned for many years,' I added. 'Meanwhile, the people of China and Europe are driving around for nothing. I have one on the estate, I use it to go back and forth each day. In six months I've not topped it up, and it produces no pollutants harming the environment.' I had done my political speech bit.

'In Africa,' Jimmy began, 'we have electric buses that are free for the passengers, routes all over our region.'

‘Amazing, truly amazing. Is your hospital there still full of my friends and colleagues?’

The audience laughed.

‘Yes,’ Jimmy said with a smile. ‘Many stars of yesteryear heading for a shot.’

‘An expensive shot!’

‘Yes, but it all goes to Rescue Force.’

‘Talking of charity drives.’ He faced the back screen again. ‘Ladder 142, come in please.’

The screen came to life, revealing firemen in uniform, the former cancer patient mid-screen. He shook his bucket. ‘We’ve had a fundraiser for Haiti, and raised twenty-five thousand dollars.’

‘Thank you, Ladder 142,’ Cliff offered. ‘Rick, you wanted to say something to Jimmy.’

‘Jimmy, your drug saved my life in hospital, and you saved me again when you put yourself in the way of that gunman.’ His wife and daughters walked into shot, and I wanted to get up and run out. It took all of my strength to remain there, and to remain composed. Then the daughters thanked us. God, could it get any worse, I wondered. It was the longest ten seconds of my life.

With the image gone the audience again applauded, and I forced a polite smile, wanting to be somewhere where they were shooting at me.

‘Jimmy, the Manson drug, is it really as good as they say? Is it the elixir of life?’

‘The drug stimulates the bodies own natural release of stem cells, and those types of cells help children to grow and adults to heal. As we get older, that process slows down, the drug simply speeding it up. It simply makes use of what a baby has: that strong replacement of cells each day that’s missing in us adults.’

‘And it halts the ageing process?’

‘I’m forty-five years old,’ Jimmy posed.

‘And you look thirty, if that. And the gunshot wounds you received?’

‘They healed very quickly because of the drug.’

‘Do you need top-ups to this drug?’

‘No, one injection in a lifetime is enough. But if you’re injected late in life you don’t age backwards. Best to have it when young, because you stay young.’

‘I think, maybe, there’ll be a few more people flying to your clinic.’

‘If people wait, it will be cheaper in the future. I hope. Besides, the drug is not wise for everyone. You need to exercise a lot to keep the weight off, because an increased appetite is a side-effect; the body craves more protein to rejuvenate itself.’

‘Any other side-effects?’

‘You sleep less, alcohol doesn’t affect you as much, cigarettes are not as addictive, but your pecker gets *much* bigger.’ Our host, and the audience laughed. ‘Just kidding. The main side effect is a concern for the sporting industry, because you become much fitter. A few athletes have taken it and got themselves banned. In fit young people it has a dramatic effect, allowing them to run all day long without tiring.’

‘I read a report - I have it here - a report from the American Medical Council. It suggests that – in American alone – the drug will save four million lives this year alone.’ The audience applauded. Cliff continued, ‘Worldwide, the UN says that figure will be thirty million.’

When they had stopped clapping, Jimmy said, ‘A lot of people have made a fuss about the affectionately titled “M” Group meetings. Well, one of the things that the leaders in that group did was to have faith in the drug, and to assist my research. Hardon Chase had faith in it shortly after coming to office, and assisted with hidden finance through Africa. Without his input, that drug may not have made it into the public domain.’

Oh dear, I thought, the Russians and Chinese would be on the phone later.

Jimmy continued, ‘And the cheap equipment that your hospitals now benefit from - that comes from factories in Africa that Hardon Chase funded with US taxpayer dollars.’

‘Why keep it secret?’

‘Because your Congress is full of idiots with their own agenda, many of whom didn’t want the projects pushed forwards. The research had to be done in secret to get around some of the Congressmen in the pockets of the drug companies. Hardon Chase invested a few billion dollars in Africa, and I deliberately misdirected that money towards the drug, the hospital equipment, and now the electric cars – and Chase knew. Hardon Chase’s legacy will be a cost saving to the US taxpayer in the trillions. And at the end of the day, they’re the people he works for, not big business. Whoever gets in after Chase will inherit so many cost savings he won’t know what to spend the money on.’

‘I’m a Democrat,’ our host admitted, ‘But I would vote for Chase.’

‘It’s not the party that matters - it’s the person. And that person needs the guts to stand up to those around him, and to big business – for the sake of the voters.’

I was starting to see where this was going, and hid my grin.

‘So what’s next for team Silo?’ our host asked.

‘We’ll be busy on a new pan-African cooperation group this year,’ I said. ‘And I’m trying to extend our buses to remote villages around Africa.’

‘And Rescue Force?’

‘Are all fast asleep,’ Jimmy said, making everyone laugh. ‘They deserve a rest!’

Off air, I was pleased with the way it went, very pleased. Exposure? Fuck ‘em, I thought. We just introduced the blood, and the “M” Group to the world, and made them both seen quiet innocuous. Anyone trying to reveal the “M” Group now would not be taken seriously, and the blood was out there; the websites about us had nowhere to go. We had just described the drug on global television, and justified the activities of the “M” Group. Wow!

There was a time when such revelations would have been just that; revelations. But now they were accepted facts, like microwave ovens or iPhones. I left that interview an inch taller, feeling good about life, and constantly surprised by Jimmy. How often I had doubted him in recent years.

We were escorted around to the club, and I enjoyed a relaxing evening of celebs and singers – many having been injected, no one wanting to bitch or moan at me. The club was no longer ours, it was on the Pineapple balance sheet, but our faces still fitted. I had a great evening, I felt good, and Helen had never looked better.

But in the morning, Jimmy dropped a bombshell. ‘You and Helen have two years left. You’re due to split then.’

I was stunned. ‘Everything between us is ... fine,’ I argued.

‘It takes two, and people change,’ Jimmy said with a sigh. ‘And ... I know what happens. Sorry.’

I had to sit down and stare at nothing for ten minutes. When Helen suggested shopping, something she knew I hated, I agreed for a change. I took my wife shopping, angry at the world in general and Jimmy in particular, but trying to be as nice as I could to my wife. I even splashed out on a little jewellery for her, despite what we had claimed the night before.

Back at the apartment, I found Jimmy scanning the American papers. ‘Got a minute? Or ten.’ He lowered his paper. ‘Let’s take a walk.’ I led Jimmy out, telling Helen we’d be back in fifteen minutes. In the building’s large and plush foyer, I directed Jimmy to a seat, asking the security detail to give us some space. So far, Jimmy had not commented. ‘Things between us ... are fine.’ I meant between Helen and me, and keenly waited a reply.

Jimmy took in the ornate ceiling cornice. ‘They say ... that our personalities are formed by age sixteen, and that our childhood scars us for life. It ... forms deep groves, and establishes what we like and don’t like. Those likes and dislikes are masked in middle age, and come back later; we return to our roots. The boy who liked to play toy soldiers likes to read military books when he retires.

‘Helen ... was not a happy child, which is why she took up the odd career that she did, and that just made her even more unhappy, more ... angry with the world. When you provided her with a home and a family you distracted her from that foundation, you papered over the cracks and turned her head away from the mirror. And, since then, she *has* found genuine happiness, and you’ve done a good job as husband and father. The problem ... is that as the years go by she’ll start to slip back toward her real self. And that real self is not so attractive.’

I sat listening, but not commenting.

Jimmy continued, ‘You may feel - you may argue, that the past eleven years have changed her, changed her for the better, and you’d be right – it has. But you’re on borrowed time, because as soon as the girls become more independent - and it’s just the two of you - she’ll slip back towards being the person she was, the one angry with the world. And, unfortunately, being a virtual prisoner in the estate hasn’t helped. People shooting at us hasn’t helped either.

‘She deeply loves her family life, yet deeply resents the fact that she’s caught up in all this. Fact is, it could not have happened any other way. If she hadn’t come to spy on us, then you wouldn’t have married her. And if you’d not married her, then you wouldn’t have two beautiful daughters, and you would not have had the stability that I needed for you to develop. Raising the kids, and being married, has given a few extra elements to your personality that are necessary for later, for when I’m not here.

‘When I say *not here*, I don’t mean getting myself killed. If things work out OK in 2025, or the preparations are as good as I’d like them, then I’ll be ... returning to where I came from. After that, or even before, you will – in an ideal world - take a larger role. So

whether I'm shot or not, you'll be running your own show at some point. And what you're doing in Africa at the moment is great training for a wider political role. So, it needed to happen this way, because I could never see an alternative. And Shelly has a role to play, something of a paradox.

'I hate to admit it, but your marriage and your family life has been one very big training exercise for you, an important part of the plan towards fixing 2025. And that objective ... is one for which I would sacrifice anyone, or any thing.'

I stared at my shoes. 'Could you fix it? Me and Helen?'

Jimmy sighed. 'I could help to prolong it for the sake of the girls.'

'And when the time comes?'

'You'd move into your old apartment, and still spend lots of time with the girls, so don't worry about that. She's not about to jump the fence, and you'd still work together.'

'That ... seems a bit odd from this angle. I mean ... if we break up, it'll be for a reason. To then work together?'

'You'll understand more at the time. And, I'll do what I can to keep you together. But let me ask a simple question: do you still have sex every night?'

I considered my answer. 'Well, no.'

'There'll come a time when you're happy to have her there - in bed with you, but just can't turn over and do what you used to. For some couples that's not a problem. Anyway, you have a few years, so make the most of it.'

We took the lift back up.

I hardly slept that night, and the next morning we flew down to Washington aboard a private jet, Hardon Chase more than keen to see us.

In the Oval Office, Chase pointed at a trolley. 'We got tea and beer, so you Brit's can't whinge.'

'Took long enough,' I quipped. I made the teas for Helen, Jimmy and myself, asking the Chief of Staff if he wanted one.

'So,' Chase began. 'You're working hard at raising my approval ratings. They're the highest ratings since Reagan sat down with the Russians, by the way.'

'We do what we can,' Jimmy responded.

'Cut the crap, Jimmy. What are you up to?'

'You need to beat up the banks more. So now you have a bigger stick to hit them with.'

'I thought we were more or less on top of them?' Chase puzzled.

‘Not where we should be, and the mortgage market is heating up; too many applications are being passed, and quite fraudulently. Kindly jump on it, or my next speech will take twenty points off your ratings.’

‘I’ll order an investigation, and tightening. Again,’ Chase sighed.

‘And spend some money on low cost units,’ Jimmy encouraged. ‘I’m going to build more houses - here and in the UK - to assist, but they take time.’

‘What are we aiming at?’ Chase asked.

‘Prices are rising by twenty-two percent, but we need fifteen percent to stop future problems. You don’t need to raise rates, just enforce the mortgage regulations. Make an example of a few people before I do.’

‘And the cooperating banks?’ Chase nudged.

‘Four are on board, the others in the spotlight, and there’s no imminent danger,’ Jimmy reported. ‘But you only need a small correction in house prices to have them hurting.’

Chase eased back in his chair. ‘There are a lot of folks not happy about you helping those four banks. Especially overseas.’

‘Well, if you did your job properly then I won’t have to,’ Jimmy curtly pointed out. ‘Why not split off the retail banks from the investment arms?’

‘This is a Republican Administration, Jimmy; non-interference, market forces, etc.’

‘Then I’ll interfere when necessary, and you’ll bail out BNK. That means nationalisation, which should be abhorrent to a *Republican Administration*. And then you’ll have people telling you that capitalism – and the free market economy - doesn’t work.’

‘We’re keeping an eye on them, and they know it,’ Chase offered.

‘You’re due to give a speech in New York soon, so kick them hard,’ Jimmy firmly encouraged.

‘I could get Shelly to kick them in the shins,’ I offered.

‘How is she?’ Chase asked. ‘Haven’t seen her for a while.’

‘Growing rapidly,’ I said. ‘She does a lot more with her time than I did at that age; I hung around on street corners getting into trouble. Our girls play musical instruments, ride ponies, use the computer - they never seem to have any free time.’

‘It’s a different world,’ Chase noted. ‘So, when will that new pan-African parliament building be ready?’

‘Six months or less,’ I replied. ‘We’re building quickly, and it’s a simple enough design.’

‘Shelly’s design,’ Helen put in.

‘Yes?’ Chase queried.

‘She drew a building and Jimmy approved it,’ I explained. ‘Although Shelly’s drawing did have kangaroos and penguins in the grounds.’

‘We conducted a survey after your TV interview,’ Chase informed us. ‘And most people accept the drug and the “M” Group, and don’t see anything sinister in either. Anyone trying to expose the inner workings would hardly make the papers.’

‘A carefully crafted lie,’ Jimmy agreed.

‘You think exposure is still a possibility?’ Chase asked.

Jimmy said, ‘I’ve muddied the waters a great deal, so unless a senior official goes public we should be OK for a few years more.’

That seemed to attract Helen’s interest; I could see the look on her face out of the corner of my eye.

Chase got back to Africa. ‘So what do you see this new parliament doing?’

I answered, ‘More of the same, just more organised. We’ll advertise for ministerial level jobs, and let the national leaders vote on the candidates. We’ll start with a Tourism Minister, an Agriculture Minister, and a Minister for Cooperation.’

‘And a Minister for the Rifles,’ Jimmy added. ‘Then a Minister for Refugees, plus one for innovation and technology. After that it’ll grow into a full cabinet, with sought after well-paid jobs.’

‘And the final goal?’ Chase nudged.

‘It’ll have teeth, and influence,’ Jimmy stated. ‘Block buying power, block military power, and block economic power.’

‘The way the DRC is going, it’ll join the G20 group of nations in ten years,’ Chase pointed out. ‘And the combined co-operation group could do that sooner.’

‘It’s cash rich, but needs sustainable industries,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘Problem is, it’s too far behind the rest of the world to ever be the next Taiwan. So oil and ore will always dominate, but I’ll develop the internal markets as much as I can.’

‘And by 2025?’ Chase asked.

‘Africa should be a hell of a counter-force to the Brotherhood. Instead of the Brotherhood moving south and capturing land, we’ll move north and take it from them. Overall, the region is a good six years ahead of where I thought it would be, and Paul is doing a great job of maximising the growth. He keeps them busy.’

‘We’ll release our own super-drug in a month,’ Chase informed us.

‘Which version?’ I asked.

‘The Chinese model. We’ve struck a deal with a pharmaceutical company here, and the inner methods will be kept secret. They’ve found a way to mass-produce it, they’ve even done a better job of it than the Chinese.’

‘Your pharmaceutical companies way ahead of them,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘But don’t forget the agreement: don’t sell in Asia or Africa.’

‘We’ll sell it here for now, and take a very big chunk out of the health bill. I’m planning a new round of tax cuts.’

‘Why not save some for a rainy day?’ I asked.

‘Well, that as well,’ Chase reluctantly agreed.

‘That would be a better use of the money,’ Jimmy firmly nudged. ‘If the countries out there held fewer dollars, it’ll help in the future.’

‘I’ll look at it,’ Chase offered, but I had to wonder what was really going through his mind. My mind was elsewhere as well.

Back in New York, we met those bank bosses that we were friendly with, and plotted a major scam, one that would hurt BNK. Jimmy did not give them all of the details, he simply suggested that there would be a currency squeeze, and for them to buy and sell when he indicated. In the meantime, he asked them to reduce their holdings of Euros.

A Greek tragedy

A month after meeting with President Chase, Jimmy said it was time to bust up BNK and a few others. But the timing was out of Jimmy’s hands; that involved others. Those others got a nudge, and finally sat down for a chat. At the end of the chat they left Jimmy to execute the plan, but were not happy with it - and would never admit to it.

The next day, the French and Germans were reported to be unhappy with Greek debt, rumours of the Greeks misleading the European Union. Someone Stateside then released a few very accurate figures, suggesting that Greece, as well as Portugal and Spain – the Club Med countries – were all in trouble. The Euro took a dip. It was not a massive dip, but nonetheless a dip against the dollar. I observed it in my old apartment, waiting ready behind three Forex screens.

BNK were involved in the rumours and the subsequent squeeze according to Jimmy, the bank colluding with a few of their hedge fund buddies. Fact was, Greece was genuinely stretched, but not by as much as they would have been without Jimmy having interfered in the markets years earlier. BNK ran a trading arm, like most banks, and that trading arm had decided that anyone betting the upside of the Euro-Dollar trade was onto a losing bet. Under normal circumstances, they would have been correct.

On the second day the Euro slid further, with additional unconfirmed reports leaked. I waited patiently and observed, checking my watch. The Greek bourse had fallen, but I had bet the downside heavily through BNK themselves two days ago. I now reversed strongly, which must have been a surprise to the computer at their end, no humans involved in these automated trades. I then made the computer's day by heavily betting the Euro to rise against the dollar. A human trader may have questioned my sanity, and possibly figured that something was amiss. Either that or they'd rub their hands at the idiot wasting his money.

I now had a billion dollars bet on the upside through various accounts, and through several Swiss exchanges I bought Euros with our stronger Dollars, most of which were Hardon Chase's investment dollars for Africa. It was a bit cheeky. It was also a risk, but not as great a risk as that inherent with options or stocks, the movement between the currencies always being small.

The French, German and Greek Governments then released a joint statement, suggesting that a minor liquidity and debt blip had been dealt with, and followed up with a report that Greece had just taken receipt of a twenty billion dollar loan from China, a ten billion dollar loan from Russia, and further twenty billion Euros from France and Germany. They made it clear that there was no problem at the Greek amphitheatre. The tragedy would be played out, but just by the actors.

The Euro rallied against the dollar, BNK and others scrambling to get out of their positions, and stunned by the news. I was joined in my old apartment by New Dave, Israeli banks having been involved in today's action. We had reversed our trades on the Greek bourse, and were now making a killing off BNK's trading arm, the foolish traders not placing the bets in the open market. They had been tipped about a Greek/Euro fall, and so assumed the up-bets to be folly. As for my Forex futures trades, BNK had no choice but to wait, and to see me take their money. By close of play I, and others in on the

deal, had taken six billion dollars off BNK and their co-conspirators, a bad day on the markets.

And my two billion dollar profit? I bought six thousand electric cars and four hundred electric buses, asking for them to be shipped to Athens, the Greek Government already expecting them. In addition to that, six of our oil tankers were dispatched to Greece, the oil a gift that would be kept secret. My medical factories switched delivery to Greece, enough supplies of medical durables to keep them going for five years. And China delivered vials of the super-drug, to lower Greek medical bills further.

We had done as much as we could for now, the finances of Greece nowhere near a crisis. The behind-scenes-crisis with Greece's European partners, the ones it had lied to with the help of BNK, would rumble on.

The news of the currency squeeze hit two days later, a rumour that BNK was in trouble. They had made a bet, a strong one-way bet against the Euro, and now their trading account had a deep hole in it, a year's profit wiped out. Chase called. BNK had borrowed from the New York Fed, short-term loans, but not a great rate. Jimmy leaked the full details of BNK's woes to the financial media and, given the remarkably risky nature of their one-way trade, Ritter was replaced. What could have been a Greek tragedy had been dealt with using everything at our disposal, and in a coordinated ballet.

Unit 402

The President of Senegal was not a popular chap, not with his own people, nor Jimmy. Unit 402 were sent in, the timing critical.

The President of this poor West African nation had spent a great deal of money on a large statue perched atop a small hill, something to rally and inspire the population. That population was struggling to make a living, and they displayed no appreciation for communist-style edifices. A day after the huge statue had been completed, it was blown to pieces, so much explosive used that bits of it travelled half a mile. The President was not a happy bunny. He blamed all sorts of dissident groups, and his police cracked down, the usual suspects rounded up, the crackdown widely reported in the African Times.

Turns out, the old boy objected to his harsh treatment in the African Times, and called Kimballa a few names, saying that it was his doing. Well, that was just rude. Unit 402, still in Senegal, made a few additions to the President's official car. The following morning, as the Presidential convoy left the President's private residence and journeyed towards parliament, his car blew up.

The people of Senegal rejoiced in the streets, and Kimballa made a few rude comments of his own, not at all concerned that he was a suspect. Unit 402 withdrew from Senegal, no evidence left behind.

It was, technically, the first African leader that Jimmy had directly assassinated, and openly admitted to in our circles. And these days I didn't care. My mind was still on Helen, and I was angry at the world. I understood Jimmy's motivation, and I'd not go back in time and swap the my girls for anything, but I was mad at him anyway. I was also now mad that he had informed me; it may have been better not to know. At least these next few years would have been lived through with a sense of optimism, not pessimism.

That evening, I went around the main house, ready to have another go at Jimmy, and there had been a few of those in recent weeks. I found him in a lounge, watching TV with Han.

'Can I have Jimmy for a while?' I asked Han.

Our polite Chinese houseguest stood and bowed, withdrawing.

'Still mad?' Jimmy asked, focused on the TV.

'There must have been a reason you told me, instead of just letting me ... well, let it happen.'

Jimmy took a moment. 'In Vietnam, when the young soldiers arrived there, they were afraid - yet youthfully optimistic. But then they mixed with the soldiers who had already been there for a while, soldiers who had become disillusioned. The optimism went, and the fear grew, growing into terror. When their friends were killed, that terror was focused. But, as time went on, that fear became a resentment ... of fear itself, and slowly evolved into anger towards the enemy. They then wanted to go out and kill those that had frightened them, and eventually did so, becoming better soldiers. But that anger was also directed toward the indigenous population, hence the shooting of civilians.

'Then, once the soldiers returned home, they went through a difficult adjustment, many suffering post traumatic stress disorder. And, finally, years later, some old men went back to Vietnam for a holiday, walked the same fields as they did in their youth and met Vietnamese veteran soldiers, coming to peace with what had happened, and how they felt about it.

‘You see, having experienced a wide range of emotions, you can look back in later years and rationalise them, and you can recognise them in others, and in yourself.’ He finally faced me. ‘The more time you spend thinking about it, the more you’ll get back to Vietnam for a holiday. It would have been easier for those old veterans to deal with the war in their youth if they had the benefit of foresight at the time. For most people, it’s very difficult to look forwards a few years, then to look back and judge yourself on live events, or events just about to happen. We have to go through them to understand them.

‘Right now, you’re going through the break-up in your mind, a better place to do it than here in this house, shouting and screaming, moping around, and being a great big pain in the arse when I need you at your desk. So this is a dry run, a dry run that’ll help a great deal when the real thing happens. So, think ... till you’re at peace with it.’

I heaved a sigh and walked home. Thinking.

Angola

Angola shared a long border with the DRC, and hosted the dated Unita rebel group, a group that Jimmy had oddly avoided up to now; he had always insisted that the time had to be right. They had not crossed the border or caused us any problems, rightly terrified of the Congolese Rifles.

So I was interested when, one fine Monday morning, Ngomo turned up with two officers. We put him in one of the palatial rooms, but he complained straight away, wanting a smaller room. We gave him an apartment. Hell, he would have been happy sleeping on the floor. In the basement, we huddled around a map of Angola, numerous coloured annotations already marking planned deployments.

‘Unita rebels have crossed the border,’ Ngomo reported.

‘Daft of them,’ I quipped.

‘Yes, so now we must act,’ Ngomo insisted. ‘I have spoken to President Kimballa and he has assigned me the task.’

‘You mean Jimmy gave you the task,’ I corrected him.

‘A loyal soldier must always go through channels,’ Ngomo said defensively, but with a grin.

‘So what’ll you do?’ I asked.

‘Hunt them down like dogs and kill them all,’ Ngomo stated.

‘Should have figured that,’ I quipped. ‘So why now?’

Jimmy said, ‘Angola has mines that should be part of our group, and a rail route I want to improve.’

‘But they go through Unita held territory,’ Ngomo added.

‘And the Angolan Government?’ I asked.

‘Is pulling back all of its forces, happy to see us assist,’ Ngomo explained. ‘We have five thousand soldiers ready.’

‘Take a week then,’ I said.

‘A month, just to be thorough,’ Jimmy corrected me. ‘And, we’ll practise a live airborne insert, even a high altitude parachute insert of Pathfinders. It’s hardly necessary, but good practise.’

‘And afterwards?’ I asked, studying the map.

Jimmy drew a line from our southern oil region, across Angola and to the coast.

‘It’s shorter than the Tanzanian route,’ I noted.

‘And plenty of mines to get involved with.’ He faced Ngomo. ‘How are the three mines run by that Belgian company?’

‘Ah, not good, sir. Unita rebels blew them up.’

‘Unita are on their arse,’ I pointed out. ‘They couldn’t blow up a statue.’

The officers laughed. An hour later the signal was sent; the Rifles were off to war, our Hercules aircraft carrying its deadly cargo of Pathfinders, our Chinooks transporting the Rifles.

The African times ran the story in the morning - that of the Unita rebels crossing the border with the DRC, and Kimballa ordering the Rifles to move in, a request to move in that was echoed by the Angolan Government itself. It was all above board and legal, an above board and legal massacre of downbeat and disorganised starving Unita rebels.

Back at my desk, I found a dozen new files to scan. The first displayed photographs of standard apartment blocks, lots of them. They each stood four storeys high, offered twenty apartments per floor, and typically displayed a shop on the ground level. I scanned the attached note, realising that the corporation had decided to standardise apartment building to save money, and to make construction easier; using the same builders over and over.

I initialled the cover letter and suggested that they build them in each town with a population over a suitable size. I closed the file and

forgot about it as Helen stepped in. 'You're not allowed to criticise my filing system,' I joked.

She came around and sat behind me, and I swivelled my chair to face her. 'I came up with an idea, and Jimmy said to discuss it with you, dear.'

'Work ... idea? Dear?'

'Yes. Dear. Jimmy was never keen to waste too much money on remote villages because they don't add much back into the overall GDP. But, we are producing more teachers than we can find work for, and police officers as men leave the Rifles. So I suggested that they combine.'

'Have the children taught at gunpoint?' I toyed. 'Yes, I can see that. Harsh, but fair.'

She gave me a look. 'Build a standard school, with a small house attached for the teacher, a second house attached for the police officer, then stick one in each village. A third small house, or apartment, would then be used by Rescue Force, because Jimmy has just ordered a massive push around Africa.'

'Sounds very efficient; a schoolroom with three apartments tagged on. And if they were all the same design, they'd be easy to re-produce. I've just signed off a similar project with apartments.'

'So you can draw up the plans for the schools and produce a few prototypes. Earn a living for a change!'

'I'm doing more now than ever. Glad when I get home!'

'There's something else. The girls are being taunted a bit by their friends over certain websites, and the kids these days use websites when they're six!'

'What do you think?' I asked. 'Have a word with the headmaster?'

'Jimmy said to bribe them.'

'Bribe the headmaster?' I puzzled.

'No, the kids in their class.'

'Ah, right. Well, they're ten. Won't be as hard as the "M" Group. Leave it with me, I'll organise a school trip to the zoo.'

'Sounds reasonable.'

With Helen gone, I called the school's headmaster. They had a few days off coming up, and could stretch to one or two more. When I gave him my suggestion he was surprised, but would put it to the other parents of the pupils in the classes that Shelly and Lucy attended.

'Ten years old,' I said to myself. 'I'll beat the crap out of them.'

A week later, we accompanied twenty-two children and most of their parents, flying out of London on a direct flight to Goma. I had said a zoo, just not which one. We spent the first night in the airport hotel, the parents and guardians enjoying the bar and facilities, hitting the zoo in the morning. I had cleared out most of the other visitors well in advance, and we had the run of the place, cuddly balls of fur keenly stoked by the children. They hand-fed many of the animals, rode on the backs of a few, and by teatime the rabble were mostly worn out.

The next morning we packed up and drove to a nearby lodge, also cleared out of guests – who were compensated or moved elsewhere, and we had the place to ourselves. By now the kids were competing with each other to see who could name which animal, and all stared through binoculars at the savannah. A Rescue Force Huey flew in that afternoon, as arranged, and took many of the excited kids for a spin.

The following day I split the boys and girls. The girls went back to the zoo, the boys to the Congolese Rifles base with their fathers. Those that had asked to attend this outing were now lying down beside instructors and blasting paper targets with M16 rifles. I was once ten, and I knew what these lads wanted. They all got a ride in an armoured personnel carrier, and practised their mine clearing, re-joining the girls for the evening meal.

On day four I arranged a coach to the man-made lake for a few hours of fishing, tackle already set-up and waiting. A few monsters were hooked, landed with a bit of assistance, a crocodile spotted.

On day five we flew over to Mombassa, and to River View beach hotel, the kids screaming in the water ten minutes after booking in. The grown-ups sheltered from the sun around the beach bar as the kids bonded in a way that they never could in a schoolyard. The bravest boys and girls had a go at scuba diving, some of the parents joining them, whilst Helen and I just watched contentedly, cold beers aplenty. We sat talking parent stuff with the others.

Day six saw a brief trip to the small zoo behind the hotel, a flight up to Mawlini after lunch. Booked in, I took everyone to the rooftop bar of the RF hotel, the kids on tiptoes to peer out at the famous base. Plenty of aircraft and helicopters were coming and going, the boys suitably excited.

With an hour or two of daylight left, we took a coach into the desert, soon witnessing an Mi24 roar past and bomb a nearby range. The kids loved it, their parents terrified. Not to leave out an educational element to the trip, we journeyed on to a nearby oil

derrick, where a spokesman for the oil company gave a lecture on oil and tested the kid's knowledge of things fossil and geological.

The following morning we spent an hour with Rescue Force, crawling over jeeps and examining bits of equipment, before a splash in the pool and a barbeque lunch. We showed the group the Cassie film after lunch, the lecture theatre air-conditioned, followed by the film of Hal's life in the evening. At the end of that film the man himself stepped in, the kids asking questions about jungle horrors - and shooting people. I kept Mac away from the kids; the youngsters were not ready for him yet. I was not out to scare them.

We flew directly back to London the next day, luxury coaches transporting sleeping kids and parents back to Wales, just one last task. The following Monday, with the kids back in school, Jimmy went to visit, many of the boys keen to meet him. A week later I asked Helen how things were in school, getting back an affirmative smile.

Then Jimmy called me down to the main office. 'What the fuck did you do, numb nuts?'

'Do? With what?'

'Did you sanction two hundred million pounds on new apartments?'

'No.'

'Apparently, you did.' He thrust the file towards me.

I read the detail. 'I said for them to build these apartments in towns over a certain size.'

'What size?' Jimmy loudly questioned.

'That ... I left to them.'

'They've commissioned four hundred and sixty!'

'Ah. Well, that I did not sanction. Directly. Is it too late?'

'Well,' he sighed. 'They've ordered the construction and hired people, ordered the materials.'

'How many would have been appropriate?' I asked.

'Less than that! But, I guess a full five years worth can be done now; they won't be wasted. Problem is, the builders will be busy for a year, then laid off. Better to have spread it out.'

'I'll check how it happened,' I offered. 'Oh, and they've broken ground on the new parliament building.'

Meanwhile, the Rifles were clearing out Unita rebels in Angola, and I had even more work to do all of a sudden, Angola now being my patch as well. I sent Steffan Silo a note, asking him to review its rail link for our use. On the map, I noticed an airport near the existing rail line, a place called Luaua. I faxed the Angolan

Government and asked if I could develop the airport and surrounding area. They agreed, not least because it was in the middle of nowhere. Not wanting to make another mistake, I showed it to Jimmy on the map.

‘Yes,’ he said. ‘I would have suggested it. Base for the Angolan Rifles, when they’re formed.’

I contacted the French company that had handled the design of our other airports, and asked them to fly someone down to Luaua Airport as soon as they could, to make an assessment and to report back.

Steffan Silo then sent me a series of digital aerial photographs of the airport in question, the guy just as psychic as his brother. Turns out that Steffan had already reviewed the rail link, and had commissioned a pilot to fly the entire length of track, a special camera taking still images every two seconds from six hundred feet; they could be flicked through on a computer. I scanned the images, soon realising that the airport was basic, to say the least.

The Angolans agreed for an advance party of Rifles to make a home there, and I ordered thirty of our self-assembly homes to be shipped. RF DRC were ordered to open a small clinic at the airport straight away, and I asked for a facilitator from Forward Base to be sent down on rotation, his task being to develop the local infrastructure.

Meanwhile, psychic Steffan Silo had ordered the shipment by train of a team of his own to Luaua airport. That team journeyed down the train track in question, their carriages loaded with self-assembly huts, tents, supplies and communications equipment. They arrived at the same time as the French airport designers, the locals bewildered by the attention they were now receiving, tents and huts soon sprouting everywhere, the Rifles creating a camp for themselves.

When Ngomo noticed the outpost he queried it. When he discovered my plans he asked if it could be used as a helicopter base, being re-supplied by train. I agreed, and some of the Hueys being used in the Unita campaign set-up happy home there, Steffan Silo organising a weekly supply run of fuel and heavy equipment. This small project now held my interest, because it reminded me of Mawlini all those years ago. I then noticed just how many people Steffan was employing nearby, and queried it.

Turned out that he had gangs, hundreds of men, following a special train that measured kinks in the track. The kinks slowed trains and wasted fuel, so his teams would nudge the track left or

right, up or down, depending on what the computer instructed. And now that we aimed to utilise the track all the way to the coast, his teams would go all the way to the coast as well.

Time moving on

Jimmy handed me an Apple iPad one day. 'That's what computers look like in the future.'

The iPad was like a tablet, a large version of an iPhone; touch screen, branching hierarchical menus.

He added, 'You use them as phones as well.'

I held the large tablet to my ear. 'Seems a bit odd.'

'Two way video. In the future, Helen will have a plastic sheet on the kitchen wall, two foot square. When you call, she touches it and it comes to life, two-way video communications. In the future, holding a phone to your ear will seem odd to people; they talk face to face, and body language comes back into fashion. These iPads - you can use them as a keyboard, linking several together. One is a screen, one a videophone, one an open spreadsheet. The large computer monitors you see today will all be gone inside of five years.'

'What about small phones?' I complained.

'There're still available if you don't want to lug one of these about, and miniaturised further into lapel badges like Star Trek. Voice activated, it has a booster unit in your pocket. Now you Google what you want, but in the future it's mostly voice activated and interactive, and 3D video gets interesting. You have three thin plastic screens, each one three feet square; one in front, two on the sides. Could even have one above or below you. You then watch Jurassic Park and scare the crap out of yourself. They're also great for flight simulator games; when you peer left and down you can see what's actually below you on the left. And when you've finished you just roll them up and stick them away. Technology has been driven by kid's games for decades; it's no different in the future.'

'What's shopping like in the future?'

'It's mostly online, because people will always go for the lazy option. You choose what you want online and it gets delivered. And you can have a repeat order, making small adjustments when needed. It's already available in a few places.'

I played with the iPad for hours, glimpsing the future. At home, Shelly grabbed it and flicked through apps for an hour till I tickled her and grabbed it back. There were, apparently, iPads waiting for us all in the office; Jimmy had bought fifty. Within a week I was reading reports from my sofa, or reading the news. Progress.

The sleeping giant awakes

I took a call from Coup, Mawlini base now being visited by a Japanese group. Up to now, the Japanese had shown no interest in Rescue Force, despite Japan suffering all manner of natural disasters and quakes. Now they wanted to meet with us to discuss Rescue Force, which was fair enough. I told Coup we'd talk to them, and he went off to see when and where they'd like to meet. He came back on fifteen minutes later, asking if their Prime Minister himself could pop in and see us when in Europe next week. I was a little surprised by that, but agreed. Down at the main office, I informed Jimmy.

Jimmy heaved a breath, and stared at nothing for a moment. 'The giant awakes. And early.'

I exchanged a look with Helen and Sharon.

'OK,' Jimmy said. 'We'll meet.'

'Is there ... a problem?' I asked.

'A coin has two sides,' he enigmatically stated.

The following week, the Japanese Prime Minister met with the British Prime Minister in London – a scheduled meeting, then flew down to us in our Agusta helicopter, bringing with him a team of six. Sykes had a few extra police officers patrolling the grounds, just in case.

I didn't know any Japanese phrases, and greeted our guest with a simple head-bow and English words, the Prime Minister speaking a little English. In the lounge, I introduced him to Jimmy and Helen, drinks organised before I closed the door and eased down.

'Thank you for seeing us,' the Prime Minister offered, heavily accented. The rest would be in Japanese, and translated. 'We are interested in joining the Rescue Force group of nations, but we have other matters that we would like to discuss – if you are amenable to discuss them.'

Jimmy took a moment. 'Other matters?'

'Such as protein markers for algae.'

I puzzled that with a heavy frown.

‘You may speak openly in this group,’ Jimmy encouraged him.

The Prime Minister glanced at Helen and myself. ‘Our scientists have dedicated a great deal of time to studying the phenomena that is Jimmy Silo.’

Oh dear, I thought.

‘We have obtained the super-drug, the Manson drug, an electric car, and have studied everything you have ever done – in great detail.’

This sounded familiar.

‘And what have you discovered?’ Jimmy toyed.

‘The characteristics of a protein marker in your blood that matches perfectly that of a genetically modified algae that exists only in a Japanese laboratory, and was created two years ago – despite the marker being in your blood for much longer than that. We have also noted that our theoretical future ideas for electric battery technology are already incorporated into your electric car. Our scientists were astounded, in that you have solved the problems that they have only just theorised about, and we lead the world in this technology. They are certain that such industrial research exists nowhere on this planet.’

Oops.

He continued, ‘We have, naturally, examined all websites detailing claims about you, some of which seem to fall in line with our own theories.’ He waited.

‘Did you have a question, Prime Minister?’ Jimmy nudged.

‘Are you who we think you are?’

‘Yes.’

The visitors exchanged looks. ‘And your age?’ the PM asked.

‘A figure that would shock you,’ Jimmy answered, Helen and I exchanging discrete looks. We wanted to know that as well.

‘Your purpose here?’

‘To help.’

They considered that.

‘Help with ... earthquakes?’

‘To help ... with many things. For mankind to survive intact beyond 2030 would require a miracle of biblical proportions.’

That caused a stir with our guests. ‘You seem to have favoured certain nations?’ they delicately pointed out.

‘A teacher, in the school yard, need concern himself first and foremost with those children that cause problems, bully others, or

fight amongst themselves. The well behaved children need less attention.'

They digested that.

'Will Japan be struck by a major quake before 2030?'

'No.'

'And our role in the future?'

'Not enough. Like Germany, you sit back and do too little to affect world politics ... when you should be more involved.'

They exchanged looks. 'And what ... preparations should we be making for the future?'

'You can help by developing better nuclear reactors, and more efficient hydro-electric generators, plus alternate fuels. Anything that lessens the world's dependency on oil is a good thing – for us all.'

'May we have a liaison here?'

'No. I will tell you what you need to know, when you need to know it. Unlike others, yours ... is an easy path to follow.'

'We are willing to assist you.'

'Have you reverse engineered the battery technology?' Jimmy asked our guests.

'We believe we could.'

'Then put all of your energies into it, and move away from oil as fast as possible, selling electric cars when you can. That will help me.'

They seemed agreeable with that. 'And the drug? It was developed for a purpose?'

'Of course. But diseases in the future will adapt, millions will die,' Jimmy explained. 'Dedicate time to research in SARS, Swine Flu, and that family of viruses.'

'Is there more we can do to cooperate with you?'

Jimmy lifted an iPad. 'The future of computers, and of phone communications.' He placed it down. 'In a month or two I'll visit Tokyo, and give you directions for technological advancements.'

With the Japanese gone, Jimmy called an "M" Group meeting of house representatives. 'We've just had a visit by the Japanese Prime Minister and his team. They put two and two together ... and came up with the truth about me, not least because they recognised that some of the technology I use came from them – at least from them in the future, ideas sat on the drawing board at the moment.'

'The electric car battery?' Keely asked.

'Theirs,' Jimmy agreed.

'And the drug?' Jack asked.

‘United States Air Force,’ Jimmy answered.

‘Will they be a problem?’ Han asked.

‘No, they’re keen to help. But, they’re already trying to reverse engineer the electric battery. Since they have the early designs for it – and the right scientists, it won’t take them long.’

‘Will they expose you?’ Jack asked.

‘No, never,’ Jimmy firmly stated.

‘Will they be useful?’ I asked.

‘If they work on certain technologies, then yes.’

‘How will their economy fair against ours?’ Han asked, and I had been waiting for that question.

‘They’ll stand still, you’ll grow strongly.’

That seemed to appease Han.

‘So, all round, nothing to worry about,’ Keely concluded.

‘No, so update your governments. Japan is now “M” Group, they’ll be at the next meeting.’

Marko and Yuri came to visit the next day, talk of a new upmarket nightclub that they had created in Gotham City. Their mines were progressing well, and their interests in Russia were prospering. Chatting in a lounge, Jimmy floated the idea of increasing food sales in the coffee shops.

‘Why not create a restaurant chain?’ Yuri asked.

‘Restaurant, or fast food bar?’ Jimmy asked. ‘Many of these coffee shops are in small towns, and the people don’t have a lot of money.’

‘MacDonaldski,’ I put in.

‘Why not,’ Marko argued. ‘We have the beef and the bread!’

‘I think it’s a good idea,’ Jimmy agreed, causing me to study him, trying to figure out what he was up to. Really up to. He suggested a name, the Russian word for “Beef”. The outlets would be “Beef Café” in Russian. He made one odd suggestion, in that they should also sell frozen burgers.

‘Won’t they be hard to eat, sat in the café?’ I testily asked.

‘They can be taken home to heat later,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Many Russian housewives would do that, instead of sitting and eating, and the Russians don’t like to walk and eat.’

Marko and Yuri agreed. The project had a go ahead, our beef production set to be increased. Jimmy then suggested that the abattoirs near the main farming area produce the beef for the burgers in their finished form, that our facilities produce the bread for the buns; basically that they create the ingredients for the burgers and

freeze them. Some would be sold over the counter, the rest heated and sold as with a normal burger bar. It all seemed harmless enough.

Our Russian company, running the coffee shops, would now be tasked with the burger bars as well, opening near the coffee shops were possible. Distribution centres would be common, truck delivery common, and the cost savings huge.

Jimmy then mentioned that Russians read a great deal, especially in the winter. They had one of the world's highest book-reading rates, second only to Iceland. Marko suggested books in the coffee shops, Yuri admitting that he had considered a chain of bookstores.

Jimmy said, 'Such a bookstore should offer new and second hand books, and those that you can rent for a dollar or less. New, used, and rental.'

Yuri was keen, the set-up costs low, and those costs could be kept low with centralised bulk buying.

Jimmy added, 'Some shops may have three of a book, others none. They can swap them when needed. All in the family.'

Now I was very curious as to what the bugger was up to. He offered extra investment for the books and burgers, and the projects would move forwards, Yuri offering to recruit a management team. Yuri also mentioned the arrival of a thousand electric cars in Moscow, taxi drivers adopting them in large numbers, the Russian Government now keen to adopt the technology, selling its oil abroad instead of to its own citizens. Three electric buses were also in the city and on trial, much fanfare over their arrival.

Many Muscovites had already both seen and used the buses in Africa whilst attending a safari holiday, we had made sure of that. So the arrival of the buses caused a lot of interest, fond memories from those who had enjoyed safaris with us. To date, that was over thirty thousand Russians, their annual exodus to the sun now topping some five thousand a year, most being routed through Goma hub direct from Moscow.

Marko and Yuri had seen a need for more hotel space in Gotham City, and so had commissioned a new hotel complex, southeast of the airport and towards the lake. It would concentrate on Russian tourists, and would be built like a holiday hotel, a circular three storey building surrounding a central pool. They aimed to build a berth on the lake and offer boat trips and party ships. Progress; tacky Russian holidaymaking had reached Gotham City.

Whilst on the topic of boats, Jimmy mentioned that he had arranged for two large ferries to be transported to Lake Tanganika in pieces and assembled by a German company. They would transport

up to four hundred people, and would run continuously up and down the vast lake. Albeit slowly. When I questioned the speed of this mode of transport, Jimmy explained that journeys would be cheap, could be taken overnight – rooms and beds offered, and that the roads to our mines in the southeast were not good.

With our Russian guests still at the house, our hospital director turned up with his assistant. We now ran hospitals in Gotham City, Nairobi, Kinshasa, Mombassa, Dar es Salaam, Mogadishu, Sierra Leone, Liberia and Guinea. We had concentrated on geographical locations where the hospitals could either be a benefit, or would be widely used by a populace with a few quid to spare. Future hospitals were planned in Zambia, Burundi, Malawi and Zimbabwe.

In the Americas, we now offered hospitals in Rio De Janerio, Brasilia, Equador and El Salvador, a new hospital being built from the ground up in Haiti.

Our director nagged about his supplies, since we had diverted some of our cheap supplies to Greece and Spain. We agreed to look at production levels, but could not produce much more without annoying the Chinese. Well, not much more for western countries; Africa was a different matter. I made a note to increase Africa production and distribution.

Despite the low cost of treatment at our hospitals they were showing a profit, not including capital costs or start-up costs. The fuel to run their generators was low, the supplies low-cost, the Cuban medics cheap, and most hospitals had the free use of twenty or thirty RF doctors keeping their skills sharp. Our director gave us an hour-long presentation, and we asked questions, getting opinions instead of the usual facts and figures.

Jimmy told him, ‘I want all of the countries in the cooperation group to have a hospital as fast as possible, then I want secondary cities in those nations to have clinics. Leave the nations outside that group for now. When the new parliament building is finished there’ll be a pan-African Minister for Health, paid by us. These hospitals will only be a small part of his remit, but I’d like him to start with one in each country.’

‘I’d answer to him?’ our director delicately enquired.

‘In the same way as you’d answer to Kimballa,’ Jimmy explained. ‘It’s their country, and you’d cooperate. You’re private business, they’re government – and they license us.’

‘How’s the health tourism?’ I asked.

‘The core African health tourism is still growing, the hospital in Goma is kept busy, and the regional hospitals are at a steady capacity.’

‘The number of people flying to Goma hasn’t reduced?’ I puzzled.

‘No, there’s still a large catchments area for Goma, made larger by cheap flights. The other hospitals might cause that to ease off in time. Besides, industrial accidents are rising with the rise in factories, so that keeps us busy.’

‘Is the health and safety record poor?’ I asked.

‘Not really. There’s a lot of new building work, and new factories,’ our director explained. ‘It’s the nature of the work in a large industrial area – always a crushed toe or broken arm.’

Jimmy put in, ‘I’ve started to put Rescue Force teams into factories - for basic first aid. Good practise for new staff.’

An hour later we concluded, the man off to visit family in the UK, and we organised a formal house meal that evening for Yuri and Marko.

The next day, I scanned a report from Somali; the storage of nuclear waste. At an isolated stretch of the coast a new breakwater had been built, and a deepwater dock now stretched out into the Indian Ocean. Waste ships berthed, serviced by a specially built train. That train took its deadly cargo inland twenty miles, the track splitting a dozen times toward individual underground storage areas.

That detail was not what caught my attention. What caught my attention was the money that the Somalis were making, and that the various governments were happily paying. The project had only been up and running for three months, but it had earned two hundred million pounds so far. Dumping nuclear waste seemed to be an expensive business. And Somali was cheap in comparison!

Three reports later, I picked up a sheet that detailed continuing al-Qa’eda attacks on Northern Somalia. It also explained that almost a hundred “X-Rays” had been neutralised near the nuclear plant. Reading on, I could see that rebels from Yemen, not card-carrying members of al-Qa’eda, were being caught in Northern Somalia. Concerned, I went and found Jimmy.

‘If the unhappy chappies crossing over to Somalia are from Yemen, then how long till Abdi fights back?’ I posed.

‘He’s already in talks with the Yemen Government, talks that would allow him to move into the hills of Yemen and clear the fighters out,’ Jimmy admitted.

‘That a good thing?’ I questioned.

Jimmy made a face. 'It's not ideal, but it would reduce the fighter's numbers. That - in itself - is good, because in 2013 and the years after they'll kick off more. We can deal with it then, or now.'

'I thought you were leaving it to the Saudis?'

'They'll not cross the Yemen border,' he scoffed. 'Besides, this could be argued to be a local issue, Somali and Yemen are neighbours; the west can't be blamed.'

'And if the fighters are not cleared out?' I pressed.

'They won't bother the west, but they may try piracy in the Suez Canal. Yemen runs out of oil in two years, water shortly after, then it becomes a failed state. That could go either way, but I'm not propping them up. I was waiting for them to rattle the Saudis for some cash.'

'But Abdi won't wait.'

'No,' Jimmy said with a sigh.

The next day, several squadrons of Cobras, Hueys and Mi24s landed at Scorpion Base in Somalia, up from Kenya. The Kenyan Pathfinders followed them, and six thousand Somali Rifles began a period of mountain warfare training. We were going to war in Yemen, whilst five thousand Rifles were still mopping up Unita rebels in Angola.

In the weeks that followed, I went through a strange daily routine. I had been trying to spend more time with Helen and the girls, but I was also enjoying my work. I would arrive at work early, and work hard to try and clear my desk so that I could leave early. But that usually meant that, after lunch, I'd have cleared the urgent stuff and would then find a new project to look at. That new project would catch my interest and I'd be there at 5.30pm, suddenly cursing and rushing home, and getting home flustered. My secretary had taken to calling me on her way home and asking if I had left yet.

I had then modified my approach and began taking work home with me, Helen and the girls often involved with Daddy's homework. I would describe something I was working on and they would make useful comments. Mostly. The girls occasionally wanted to feed and house all poor people, till I pointed out that we couldn't. Many an evening we would be sat with the TV turned down low, the girls on their computers or reading quietly, and I'd ask Helen for her input.

My dear lady wife did a good job of curbing my excesses. That, and she asked Jimmy the next day about things and then told me later. It would have been easier to share an office with Jimmy and

just ask him everything, but I wanted to do most of it myself. Besides, he was busy staring at walls, plotting and scheming.

Lobster

Sergeant Nbeki was affectionately known as “Lobster” because he had once asked for it in a Mombassa café, being laughed at by his men. Dressed in drab green fatigues, he now kissed his wife and children goodbye, and drove his jeep around to Mawlini field from the Rifles married quarters. He checked again his kit as the dawn light fought its way in through the windows of his office. Ready, he checked his watch and stepped out to a dark blue herringbone sky, an emerging yellow glow to the east signalling the start of a crisp new day.

His team of seven men stood around their heavy rucksacks, weapons slung over shoulders, a last cigarette enjoyed before a long flight.

‘What did I do ... in the previous life ... to deserve you lot,’ Lobster grumbled.

‘You must have been a sinner, Sarge,’ a man joked as a bus pulled up, hissing to a stop.

The men boarded the bus, labouring with their heavy packs, heads counted. The count was not necessary, because Lobster knew every man from years of training and fighting together; he could feel their presence, not having to look for them. With Lobster perched in the open doorway, the bus trundled the short distance around to a waiting C130 Hercules, a whiff of aviation fumes and the roar of engines welcoming them. With one pack on their backs, one cradled in their arms, they walked up the loading ramp and into the rear of the plane, took up seats near their comrades, and adopted personalised routines for both passing the time, and dealing with uncomfortable rides in Hercules aircraft. Lobster adjusted his ear-defenders, reached into his backpack and pulled out a tatty booklet of puzzles. Safari: find twenty-five hidden animal names. He readied his pen.

Four hours later, they landed at a hot and dusty airstrip in sight of the Red Sea, the Saudi border just a few miles to the north of them.

Lugging their heavy kit, they claimed two waiting jeeps as Lobster found the command post, and his unit Captain.

‘Is this Angola?’ Lobster asked as he entered.

His Captain shook his head. ‘Lobster, you’re two thousand miles away from where you should be. Again.’ They attended a map with three other NCOs.

The Captain tapped their position on the map. ‘The Yemen Government forces have pulled right back, so as soon as you cross the line ... everyone is fair game. Drive to RV Alpha and leave the jeeps. After that it’s mountain goat country. You’re patrol route is along the border for twenty miles and back, seven days. Easy, my wife could do it.’

‘I’ve met your wife, sir,’ Lobster commented. ‘And with these heavy packs - I wish she was coming along.’

The men laughed, dismissed to their assignments. Lobster mounted up, craning his neck around to the other jeeps. When ready, he placed on his sunglasses and waved them forwards, four jeeps in the column. He loaded and cocked his weapon; this was now a live operation.

Two hours later, after snaking ever upwards through mountain passes, the air thinning, they found their mark on the map, a convenient sheltering overhung under which to leave the jeeps, the natural formation offering them plenty of cover for a defensive position. They scanned the immediate area with a keen eye, employed their binoculars for ten minutes, then settled for a sleep before nightfall.

Lobster opened his bag of tricks, pulling out a new device. He believed that it had been developed in the west, knowing nothing of autistic Kenya kids in Shanghai. He plugged in the battery on this green device, the size of a mobile phone, and placed in an earpiece. Stepping away from the jeeps and to the edge of a precipice, he switched on his new toy, two beeps signalling that it was working, a dial lighting up.

Pointing the device like a Geiger-counter, he slowly swung it around, the device bleeping faintly as it was pointed down the valley. He read the scale, the printed scale informing him that whoever was using a radio or phone on that particular bearing was many miles away. He turned around and aimed the device up the valley, the machine eliciting three separate bleeps on three separate, but close bearings. Estimated range: four miles.

Returning to his men, he switched the device off. ‘We have some trade northeast. Four miles out, three separate groups.’

His fellow sergeants scanned the map as they rested in the shade. 'Do we go to them, or are they coming to us?'

Lobster tapped the map. 'We'll get above that village and see who's about.'

At dusk, with the men rested and fed, they heaved on their heavy packs, checked weapons, put in their ear microphones, and placed one foot in front of the other. Three separate groups of four men set out into the cool night, a gap of fifty yards between them. Using night-sights and the new EM scanner, they were never in any danger of being surprised.

At a crossroads, two miles further up the hill, they left one team behind, that team now hiding itself in the rocks above the junction, and discovering a convenient cave. They would wait. Lobster led his team onward, leaning forwards to march with his heavy backpack. A mile short of the village he turned off the road and began climbing up a slope, followed by the second team a hundred yards behind. Nudging over a ridge, his sweat cooled by a stiff breeze, Lobster peered down at the distant village, a handful of dim house lights visible. Turning around, he signalled his men into the rocks, to hide their kit and to camouflage themselves.

As his second in command pulled level, Lobster scanned the village with his night-sight. 'No movement, some trucks,' he whispered. He lifted his new toy and switched it on, swinging it back and forth. 'Ten or more independent signals. Two strong signals, so they're in use, many low signals.'

'It's an active cell,' his comrade suggested. 'Too much chatter for a small village.'

'Time to see what they do when I show them Baby,' Lobster said with a grin. From his backpack he pulled out an EMP device, this one even smaller than the one he had employed in Venezuela. 'No one leaves Baby in the bag,' he joked, his second in command shaking his head. Lobster eased over the ridge to be away from his own equipment, made ready the throwaway device, and fired at the village below. Back in his original position, he switched on the EM scanner and found nothing. 'No TV tonight! No Baywatch!'

Pointing down the slope with an arm, Lobster said, 'See that outcrop and small ridge above the road? Take that position ready for the morning. Now that their radios don't work they'll go visit their relatives to talk.'

'Will the device stop their cars?'

'No, not unless close. It's only good to fuck up small radios.'

Lobster sat enjoying a tin of salty British Spam as the sunrise illuminated his lofty perch, the valley below still shrouded in darkness. He noticed movement in the village. Through his binoculars he could see two jeeps about to leave, the rear of the first containing four armed men. Reaching to his chest, he took hold of his radio control and depressed it three times quickly. Two seconds later he repeated the signal, his men getting ready.

Studying the terrain that the village access road followed through the valley, he figured that the villagers would receive the echo reports of any shots fired. He lifted his hand, talking into a microphone on his wrist. 'Team Two: get down to the road and use silencers and laser; you have five minutes. Get close to them.'

Now covered in camouflage netting, Lobster leant over a rock and observed Team Two break cover and scamper down the slope, kicking up dust before hiding behind rocks just five yards above the road. Weapons were adjusted, silencers fitted, a laser made ready. The soldier with the laser ran ten yards along the road and ducked between rocks, nestling under a bush.

To his left, Lobster could see the jeeps approaching, the drivers in no particular hurry. And their windows were open. His own team readied their sniper rifles to support their colleagues below.

The driver of the first jeep slowed a little as the gradient of the road increased - and he got the right gear. And at this early hour he was not wearing any sunglasses. The crosshairs of the laser followed the man's rugged features. As two faces became distinct, the sounds of the jeep engines growing, the laser operator fired twice, then immediately aimed at the men in the rear and fired, soon focusing on the driver of the third vehicle. And not a sound had been issued by the weapon. It took an additional two seconds for that man's face to come into view. The laser again silently discharged, robbing the man of a working retina.

The first jeep eased to a halt, much shouting coming from within, the driver and passenger soon stepping down and shaking their heads, a hand to their eyes. From the nearby rocks, delicate coughs bent them double, men in the back already slumping. Twenty rounds had been fired before the Pathfinders were up and running at their prey. At close range, they fired into each slumped fighter. It was all over.

Their radios came to life. 'Put the bodies in the jeeps, drive the jeeps down to the steep gorge we passed and push them over,' Lobster ordered. 'Earn your bloody breakfast!'

Lobster eased back and opened his water bottle, taking a swig. Glancing back toward the village, he could see another jeep being made ready and raised his binoculars. A DSHK fifty calibre anti-aircraft machinegun was being checked over. Reaching into his jacked pocket with some urgency, he grabbed his aircraft radio. 'Any bird near grid 112?' He waited. Nothing. 'Any bird near grid 112?'

'Ground 112, this is Mike-Whiskey-One-Niner, receiving.'

'Mike-Whiskey-One-Niner, I have trade; Duska on a jeep.'

'Ground 112, approaching from the southeast. Do you have visual?'

Lobster lifted his binoculars, eventually locating an angry Mi24 stalking his way. 'Mike-Whiskey-One-Niner, keep coming on that heading, two miles, village in your one-o'clock position. Building with red carpet hung out to dry, right side, Duska on jeep, over.'

Focused on the DSHK now, one hand on his radio and one supporting his binoculars, Lobster could hear the dull drone of the approaching helicopter. So could the DSHK operators. They reversed the jeep and threw a sand coloured cloth over it.

'Cheeky!' Lobster depressed his radio transit button. 'Mike-Whiskey-One-Niner, update on trade. Building, red carpet outside, east side of building, alley, Duska camouflaged, over.'

'Ground 112, roger. On attack run.'

The sound of the helicopter grew, resonating around the valley, soon the crackle of rocket fire, flashes on the ground visible before the explosions registered a few seconds later, echoing several times about the valley as if the hill themselves were growling at being disturbed this early.

Lobster waited for the smoke to clear, peering through his binoculars. The jeep was on fire, the building demolished. 'Mike-Whiskey-One-Niner, good hit, thanks, and good day.' He switched to his patrol radio. 'Get some food, some sleep. We move out at dusk.'

Returning to his tin of Spam, Lobster eased back against a rock and stared down the valley, sure that he could see a slither of the distant Red Sea through the morning haze.

I drove the girls to school, Big Paul now in the back because Lucy liked to sit up front and would not move for him when asked. It added a smile to the school run. Back in my office, I scanned post-it notes and email printouts, soon behind my computer and opening emails.

The basic design for the universal African village school had been agreed and several prototypes built, the UN keenly observing our progress. An image came attached to the email, and it showed a two-classroom schoolhouse appended by a two-storey building at one end. The ground floor of that domiciliary building was split between a police office and a Rescue Force office, the upstairs providing two small apartments. Since they offered two rooms and several beds each, I guessed that Rescue Force would double up with someone. Then I noticed an RF tent in the corner of an image. It seemed that the RF presence was not full-time.

I approved the design and agreed a modest fifty buildings, but in the DRC only.

The next email was from Jack at the house, simply a link to a website. I clicked the link and opened a news blog, soon reading about Caracas – and the horrific aftermath of the EMP.

Most of the modern fridges there had stopped, their contents spoiled, but not just in households. Food stocks in the supermarkets were spoiled as temperature controls failed. When people had finished the rapidly warming contents of their fridges, they ventured out on foot to find additional sustenance. Tins were OK, packets of dried products, but all dairy produce and frozen goods were ruined overnight. It did not help that shop tills were not working. In local abattoirs, the cooling systems cut out, the produce spoilt. Butchers soon closed shop.

The banks had been closed when the EMP struck, and none had opened in the morning, none of their electronics working; wages could not be paid, savings could not be drawn. The angry citizens of Caracas began throwing things at immobile police cars, and more mobile police officers. No radios or mobile phones worked, although a few landlines had come back to life.

The army had moved onto the streets in force, not pleasing the hungry citizens. Those citizens were all denied entry to their usual places of work since very little equipment was functioning. Those angry and hungry citizens had time on their hands, and leant over balconies complaining to their neighbours, or throwing things down at the police and soldiers below.

By the third day, hunger was an issue, rioting and looting a growing problem, soldiers having shot a few protestors. The government had brought in food and water from other cities, the army flying in radios that worked. The meagre supplies were not enough, the rioting grew, and people either walked or cycled out of Caracas, joining buses in nearby towns as they headed toward

relatives in other cities. With streetlights not working in the evenings, or any other lights, crime rose, and citizens took to shooting at dark shadows, soldiers returning fire.

By day six, the government had brought in enough food for those stubborn citizens that remained, although half the city had walked out. Cars and lorries from other areas moved into the city and a bus service re-started. Some old cars had continued to work after the EMP blast, but would not re-start once halted. People had no work to attend, no shops were open, no banks functioning, but they had a few buses with which to move around.

Seven days after the EMP strike, mains electricity had been restored to all, lights were on, landlines functioning in most places. But few air conditioners worked, unless they were older and simpler models. TVs and radios would have to be replaced, since they were now useless, as were mobile phones. And the cost was placed in the billions.

As I read the detail, I wondered how New Yorkers would cope with an EMP blast. A note at the bottom interestingly listed the loss of fridges as one of the main complaints of the residents of the city.

Under the cover of night, Lobster led his men out on what would be a long six-mile march around tight trails, stopping and checking for activity every few hundred yards. By the following dawn they were tired and hungry, finding a deep gorge to hide in. A man climbed up the gorge side to act as lookout as the remainder cooked a well-earned meal.

At dusk they moved out, rested and fed, and soon picking up radio chatter ahead. Moving across a gentle rise, through waist high bushes, they happened across a major gathering in the valley below. No lights were visible, but the radio detector was going crazy. The men dropped their packs and crawled forwards.

Through his night sight, Lobster could make out a hundred men, two-dozen jeeps, several DSHK, and two tanks under netting next to a compound. He lifted his aircraft radio. 'Any bird near grid one-one-four?'

'Ground 114, this is Romeo-Alpha,' came an American accent. 'What's your pleasure?'

'Rome-Alpha, I have principal trade, requesting a principal strike. We have a hundred soldiers, jeeps, tanks and Duska, over.'

'Ground 114, standby. Birds flocking together.'

A full six minutes later, the radio came back to life. 'Ground 114, this is Romeo-Alpha. How's the trade?'

‘Romeo-Alpha, trade is plentiful. I’m marking my position with a strobe light now. Standby.’ Lobster’s second in command set-up the signal, visible only from above. ‘Rome-Alpha, we are lit. I repeat, we are lit. Trade is eight hundred yards northeast, in the valley below. Approach from the southeast, along the valley. Tanks behind north wall of compound, Duska spread around, so reception could be warm, over.’

‘Ground 114, we’re three minutes out.’

From their raised position, Lobster and his men could soon hear a distant rumble, the growing sound of heavy helicopters. Observing the small army below, the Kenyans could now see men running around and hiding. The Duska made ready, but the tanks remained immobile.

Lobster raised his aircraft radio. ‘Ground 114 to all birds, Duska are ready for a warm welcome, tanks not moving. Duska are positioned on west of valley, main body of men in gully to rear of central compound, fifty yards beyond it. Tanks behind compound walls on east of valley, over.’

‘Standby,’ crackled back. ‘Ground 114, starshells, close your eyes.’

‘Starshells!’ Lobster shouted. ‘Close your eyes, look away.’

The first Mi24 roared in and fired a dozen airburst starshells, their formula designed by Jimmy. Night turned to day, night vision lost, men on the ground temporarily blinded as the flares drifted down. The night sky, behind the starshells, was now invisible to the men on the ground, who fired up at random. The First Mi24 banked east and turned, its colleagues opening up on the well-lit valley floor, aiming at the DSHK to the west, their priority targets.

The DSHK fired off at random, lines of red tracers streaking outward, soon pounded by airburst fragmentation rockets and ground detonating high explosives. The roar grew, helicopters and exploding ordnance, the west of the valley well and truly pounded as six Mi24s attacked in turn.

When night reclaimed the valley, Lobster and his men lifted up and peered down through their night sights. Lobster lifted his radio. ‘All birds, this is Ground 114. Duska to west have ceased firing, Duska on the east ridge is still working. Tanks are now moving. Fighters have RPGs, over.’

The Mi24s returned for a second strike, carpeting the valley with a rippling line of flashes. Missiles streaked towards the Duska, Lobster figuring that they were from an unseen Cobra. From behind him, Lobster could hear a swish and a roar as a missile flew

overhead, soon impacting a tank head-on. A second missile passed close overhead, destroying the second tank as rockets rained down on the fighters taking cover in the gully. A third pass, and the unseen helicopters turned for base.

‘Ground 114, damage assessment, over.’

‘Ground 114 to air boss. Two tanks destroyed, twelve jeeps, five mounted Duska, sixty soldiers. Out.’ He lifted up. ‘C’mon. Time to police-up the valley.’

Five hours later, Lobster could not find a living soul in the valley, and stood panting as the sun tried to put in an appearance. He pulled out his water bottle, took a giant gulp, and splashed his face, staring down at the lifeless remains of a hundred fighters. His second in command limped forwards, helping another man.

‘What happened?’ Lobster softly enquired, the energy gone from his voice.

‘Grenade thrown by a wounded man. Caught us both.’

From the opposite direction, another two men approached, one being helped along.

‘Broken ankle,’ the able-bodied man reported.

The final men approached from the north, all now bound with field dressings and limping along.

‘What a sorry bunch we are,’ Lobster let out, looking over his men. Shaking his head, he lifted his aircraft radio. ‘Ground 114 to any bird.’

‘Ground 114, with is Romeo-Ten. Copy, over.’

‘Romeo-Ten, Ground 114 needs med-evac, over.’

‘Ground 114, two Hueys inbound. How are the natives?’

‘Romeo-Ten, natives are all dead, over.’

Two minutes later, two green Hueys swept up the valley, flaring and setting down quickly, four soldiers bursting out of each and adopting covering positions. Lobster led his men forwards. Slowly. The helicopter crews picked up their backpacks from the hillside, Lobster soon stepping down at field headquarters, walking through a dust storm with his head down.

His Captain stepped up to him. ‘How are your men?’

‘Out of service, sir. They all picked up minor wounds when we cleared the valley.’

The two of them observed medics run forwards, helping the wounded men towards a surgical tent.

‘And the valley?’ the captain asked as they followed the men.

‘Two tanks destroyed, twenty jeeps, five or six Duska, and a hundred men killed, sir.’

‘A good tally,’ the captain commended. ‘Well done. Get cleaned up, write-up your report. If I don’t have it today - I’ll send my wife around to see you.’

“M” Group London, May, 2010.

The British elections had come and gone, and if you weren’t paying attention you could have missed it. Unlike US elections, the British elections were more of a debate between gentlemen, a rare cross word. Since the incumbent had served three terms already, and held a lead in the polls of twenty percent, the opposition Conservative Party did not put up much of a fight.

Attending this “M” Group meeting in London was, technically, the old British Prime Minister, since the Queen would not swear him in for a week or two yet. The only other change was the attendance of the Japanese Foreign Minister and his team. The man looked a bit bewildered, not least because he had received his briefing - his revelation of the future, two days earlier. That was enough to spoil anyone’s week. He now took in the faces as the existing leaders welcomed and jibed each other, simple gifts exchanged, our Japanese member feeling a bit like the new boy in school.

When the leaders had settled, Jimmy began with, ‘Welcome again to the “M” Group, and I hope that you all had a good ash-free flight – except the British Prime Minister who, despite driving here, is flying high enough with his election victory.’ The various leaders congratulated our new Prime Minister, who was still the old Prime Minister.

‘This will be my last term,’ the British Prime Minister announced. ‘After this term ... I’m retiring.’

‘And I’m sure that *no one* ... will be glad to see the back of you,’ Jimmy quipped, causing a few smiles. ‘Moving on, I would like to welcome the Japanese Foreign Minister and his team. As you are all aware, Japan is now part of the “M” Group, since they realised that some of the technology that I employ as a completed product is currently sat on their drawing boards. I have stolen some of their technology, technology that they would have developed in the years ahead.’ To the Japanese Minister he said, ‘And no – you won’t be

getting any compensation. To begin with, may I ask the Chinese and Russians how their negotiations are proceeding with Iran?’

The Russian Prime Minister, who used to be the President, and who would become the President again, began, ‘The Iranians have agreed to a deal. They will cooperate with us, and France, and will receive enriched uranium fuel rods.’

‘Well done, and thank you,’ Jimmy offered.

‘Will they honour that agreement?’ Ben Ares asked.

‘For many years more than they would have done otherwise,’ Jimmy explained. ‘They will return to their desire for a nuclear bomb around 2015.’

The Japanese asked, ‘Should we use the nuclear waste dump in Somalia?’

‘By all means,’ Jimmy encouraged. ‘It was designed with you all in mind. Somalia has the wide open spaces, you have the waste. Ship your waste across. And whilst we’re on waste, I’ve been working with the Russian Government for several years on cleaning up the numerous nuclear powered submarines left rotting along Russia’s Arctic coast. Russia may lay claim to that section of the Arctic, but at least it won’t glow in the dark now. Much of that waste has been transported to Somalia, much needed revenue for the Somali economy.’

‘Whilst on that topic, now may be a good time to discuss the advanced technology employed at the dumpsite. You see ... the waste is not just dumped. It’s opened up, and the rods are allowed to react with each other in a process that both captures the escaping radiation into the surrounding material, but also diminishes the residual radiation of the rods themselves. After 2025, no one will be digging them up to play with. Besides, they end up being buried under a million tonnes of rocks.’

‘OK, moving on, let’s talk about EMP weapons, and the defences against them -’

The Germans interrupted with, ‘We would like to protest their use in Venezuela.’ The French agreed, as did the Indians.

Jimmy took a moment. ‘Some lessons ... need to be learnt the hard way, and it was not a simple decision to take. First, the Venezuelan President wanted me dead, and we all know what’s at stake. If it’s a case of ... kill everyone in Venezuela to keep me going till 2025, then I would do so, and will do so in the future. I will never let anything stand between me ... and preparing mankind for 2025, so kindly keep that in mind. Second, it was necessary for

you all to see the damage. In just under seven years, Frankfurt will be hit by a powerful EMP.'

That woke up the French and Germans.

'The lesson was meant to be a very loud lesson, so that you all look at the dangers. Unless you're ready, future terrorists – and others – will wipe out your cities.'

'We're getting ready,' Chase put in. The Chinese, the Russians, the British and the Israelis echoed that.

Jimmy added, 'The German Government should cost-up the damage to Frankfurt, and plan accordingly.'

The Japanese asked if they would be targeted by an EMP. 'Yes,' Jimmy told them. 'Unless we change the way things go. Within seven years there will be a handheld device designed to interfere with aircraft controls, but those devices will contain a stored charge that can be scanned for. And whilst on EMP weapons, I made a number of miniature weapons available to our Israeli friends, and they successfully tested one at a Hezzbulah rally recently. The podium microphones stopped working, along with ten thousand mobile phones. And, as we speak, EMP weapons are being employed in Yemen to disrupt the communications of the fighters - with great effect.'

'And the outcome in Yemen?' Ben Ares asked.

'It will run out of oil soon, then water, then become a troublesome failed state, affecting that region. The UN should be nudged towards helping out.'

'Will their terror groups travel out?' Ben pressed.

'Only so far as Somalia, and those that do will not live long.'

'Is there a solution to Yemen?' Chase asked.

'Yes. Give them lots of money to sit around doing nothing, a kind of UN welfare. I won't be spending money on them.'

'You spent money on Somalia,' Chase countered.

'Somalia has a strategic use, and resources to pay their way. Yemen doesn't. If you want to help, knock yourself out. There's then the other fifty countries around the world in the same situation as them, many in Central America - if you're feeling generous, Mister President.'

He waited, Chase not pushing the matter. Jimmy glanced at his checklist. 'Next, the number of tourists visiting Africa from Europe has reached a plateau, so I will be laying on extra flights from Russia, as well as starting flights from Shanghai. I would like to see the Chinese Government encouraging safari tourism. It will be

subsidised. I will also be laying on extra flights from America, from Washington, Philadelphia, and also from Toronto in Canada.'

Jimmy checked his list. 'As an aside to that, does any nation wish to have any additional factories or mines in Africa?'

'Should we be involved there?' the Japanese asked.

'It's not a high tech area,' Jimmy pointed out. 'They need what you produced twenty years ago, not plasma TV screens. I would, however, appreciate any surplus or cheap radios, TVs, or computers. That goes for all of the developed nations here.'

'Are we not developed?' the Indians quipped.

'You, sir, are trying to send a man to the moon ... when you still can't send a man to the village.'

The Indians didn't seem to like that. 'You don't agree with our space programme?'

Jimmy took a moment. And time stopped. 'In the decades ahead, certain scientists will discover a way of reaching other worlds, worlds just like this one, but without rockets.'

The room erupted into a million questions, and a dozen conversations all at once. I was shocked as well, and glanced at Helen. It took a few minutes to settle everyone.

'You saying we don't need a space program?' Chase loudly complained.

'I'm saying ... that there is another way.'

The Chinese asked, 'In the future, is this method successfully used to explore other worlds?'

'It will be,' Jimmy answered, all of us again shocked. 'There will now be a one hour recess for people to ... digest this.' Jimmy led us out, the ramifications of this latest revelation being huge.

The money invested in space technology was astronomical, as were the tax dollars earmarked for future ventures. This altered the world in one sentence, but as we walked along the corridors of the conference centre we were using, I had to wonder how they'd justify scrapping their space programmes. Or if they would?

In a side room, we poured teas and coffees, soon cornered by the British Prime Minister.

'Jesus, Jimmy!'

'I didn't make the world, or the future. Don't shoot the messenger.'

The Prime Minister was shocked. 'Travel to other worlds! My God!'

Jimmy then made another revelation. 'When they programmed the time machine they got their sums wrong. They opened a portal to

what they thought was Canada, 1960. What they saw was definitely not Canada in 1960.'

'And they sent people through?' I asked.

'I've said as much as I intend to, for security reasons. It was necessary to get the idea out there, the idea that they don't need to waste money on expensive rockets.'

'They're going to think you're a fucking alien now!' I quipped.

'Well I'm not. I was born here, on boring old Earth,' Jimmy countered.

Shaking his head, the Prime Minister walked off, Chase striding in and sitting as we eased down. We blew our hot teas.

'Christ, Jimmy. Other worlds! NASA will join that long queue of people wanting to shoot you!'

'Which is why I keep a lot of things to myself,' Jimmy pointed out.

'The Space Shuttle retires soon,' Chase mentioned. 'How long before this news is out there?'

'2015, or thereabouts,' Jimmy explained. 'So delay spending what you can.'

'The next generation shuttle is already on the drawing board. It's budget will be discussed in Congress soon enough, and debated in the media!'

'Then you'd best start thinking of reasons not to go to Mars,' Jimmy told him.

'So this new technology,' Chase wondered out loud. 'It could get us to Mars?'

'No.'

'No?'

'But it will allow colonisation of other places. Besides that, I don't know that much about it.'

'Hah!' Chase said as he eased up. 'After this, no one Stateside will be believing in old mystics called Magestic, not that they do now.'

With Chase gone, we sipped our teas in silence for a minute.

I asked, 'Was it ... wise to get that out there now?'

'I had three reasons to bring forward the date,' Jimmy stated. 'One was to stop them wasting money on Mars. Otherwise, as we get towards 2025, they'll waste a fortune on technology that's no good against terrorists.'

'It'll turn the world on its head if this gets out,' Helen cautioned, and my wife seemed as nervous as I felt.

‘They all accept that someone invented the drug, and now it’s out there,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘If you went back twenty years and showed someone an Apple iPad they wouldn’t think it witchcraft, they’d love it. Someday soon, a NASA scientist will theorise about something outlandish ... and people will accept it. The time machine that I made use of was on the drawing board in the 1960s. It got built, because after World War Three it was a hope – and no one gave a shit about consequences. And after the war, people worked for their supper, there were no wages. Scientists were cheap!’

‘I don’t think that’ll catch on with the modern day NASA staff,’ I firmly pointed.

Back in the meeting, the mood was odd, but not an unfriendly odd. Jimmy began, ‘I will not be discussing the other-worlds matter for some years, and you need to all maintain security – tight security. What I will say, is that scientists alive today, working at NASA, already have the ideas, and that those ideas have been there for decades. There is nothing magical ... about the technology.’

‘We develop it?’ Chase asked, seemingly pleased with that.

‘It ... is most likely to be developed after 2025, after a disaster, and as a desperate measure. Prior to that, the expense will not be justified, and some of the world’s *believers* will have issues with it, causing unrest. There would also be extreme issues about who may develop the technology, and control it for their own benefit. So I will say this: don’t waste your money looking for it, because there is a key piece missing that only I know of, something that you will never discover.’

‘How could that be?’ Chase argued. ‘We’re bound to figure it out.’

‘The key scientist, with the key information to make the breakthrough, is in my care. I will act as his guardian, so that no nation has overall control.’

‘We accept that,’ the Chinese and Russians put in. The rest were not so sure.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I have been the guardian of a great deal information for a long time. The circumstances have not changed, whether it be an earthquake or a space craft.’

‘That is true,’ the British Prime Minister put in.

Chase then said an odd thing. ‘I would like the British Prime Minister to increase Mister Silo’s security, and the same for all other nations when he visits.’

Leaders exchanged looks.

Jimmy asked, ‘Touching. But is that to keep me safe, or in line?’

‘Safe of course,’ Chase insisted.

I was suspicious of Chase’s motives, but I could not put my finger on why. We spent an hour on EMP defences, all nations now having all of the relevant documents to hand, Jimmy explaining that he would fry their embassies around Africa at random, just to test them. France and Germany asked questions about Greece, and all nations made offers to help, large and small.

In the afternoon session, we got off things extraterrestrial, and more down to earth.

Chase banged a fist, but not hard. ‘You almost destroyed BNK!’

‘Did I?’ Jimmy questioned. ‘They bet the Euro to fall against the Dollar. That move could have just as easily gone against them from a number of other factors, such as European Central Bank intervention.’

‘That is correct,’ the Germans pointed out.

‘And the money you made?’ Chase pushed.

‘All diverted to Greece, the subject of the attack by BNK – who lied about Greek finances.’

‘A fair but painful lesson,’ the Chinese Premier put in, earning a look from Chase, the Japanese a little bewildered still.

‘And the US taxpayer loaned them money, it was not a gift,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘I explained before: the worst excesses of your banks need to be curbed. If not by you, then by me.’

Chase sighed. ‘Are the banks where they should be?’

‘No, not even close,’ Jimmy replied, Chase looking exasperated.

‘Then we will, *again*, look at the matter,’ Chase reluctantly agreed.

‘And keep looking at the matter each and every year, because they have short memories,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘The British Prime Minister should also be aware that I will ... *bust up* certain British banks. I would, naturally, only be able to do that if they take large risks on directional trades. Perhaps the new Prime Minister could get through the honeymoon period quickly, and have a look at UK banks.’

‘We skipped the honeymoon in favour of a week with the Italian Prime Minister,’ the PM sarcastically stated. ‘After five honeymoons, four in office, I’ve grown cynical.’

After the session had broken for the day, the aides met for a chat whilst the leaders headed off to hotels and embassies. We were staying in the old apartment, Big Paul and his mates babysitting the place after checking at length for bugs. The formal evening meal turned out to be an informal meal at the Chinese restaurant in our

club, political aides and security attending the Indian restaurant. When the various leaders had finished their meal, they occupied three rooms, the aides scuttling back and forth, questions asked, comments made, ideas floated – or shot down.

Much of the talk was of the war in Yemen, the UN trying to broker a peace, not that either side wanted a peace. The fighters were disappearing quickly, but the Yemen populace were up in arms and rioting in the streets, protesting at their own government, as much about jobs and fuel costs as anything else. Jimmy and I spent time with the Japanese in turn, explaining the previous history of “M” Group meetings and procedures. What everyone really wanted to talk about, that of the concept of travel to other worlds, had been banned by Jimmy.

It was unfortunate timing that the Japanese had attended their first meeting at a time when Jimmy made probably his biggest revelation to date. They were still digesting it, and still seemed stunned by it, more so than time travel itself.

I cornered Chase. ‘So what’ll you do with NASA?’

‘As Jimmy is probably already aware, they have a top team looking at all things Silo. There’s still a great many that believe in time travel, so we’re spending some money on that, and they think the blood helps with long space journeys. Guess they’d have to rethink that. So they’ll not be that surprised by this latest news. Well, they’ll crap themselves, but then do the geek bit and go off and try and figure it all out.’

‘You think they’ll resist cuts?’

‘Not if they have another toy to play with,’ Chase suggested with a grin. ‘Besides, I’m the tax cutting President, so I’ll tag NASA onto my tax-cut list. Already got a few senators leaning that way, your Senator Pedersen amongst them.’

‘You’ll have to use Russian rockets to get to the space station,’ I pointed out. ‘A bit embarrassing for you.’

‘Yeah, well that was a NASA screw up. And the re-useable shuttle has cost more than if we used rockets. Fucking egg heads!’

‘Still, your use of Russian rockets is good for international relations,’ I said with a glint in my eye before walking off.

The morning session was mostly about Japan, and what it could do to cooperate and integrate with the others on “M” Group matters. The French, German and British Governments then signed deals with China to import electric cars and buses, but only a two-year deal. After that, we suspected, they would pinch the technology.

I had wondered about the German desire for electric cars, when they had such an important car export market of their own. Jimmy explained that people buying nine thousand pound electric cars were not in the same league as people buying twenty-five thousand pound BMWs and Mercedes. And Jimmy hinted that there would be a future BMW with an electric engine; a big, powerful, and show-off BMW with an environmentally friendly engine. Seemed wrong somehow.

The Russians had struck their own deal with China, a joint car plant or two already in progress. And America still showed no interest in the cars, despite the fact that other manufacturers electric cars were already available in the states.

We broke at 3pm and went our separate ways. On the coach, on the way back, Han had a question, a formal question, and it sparked a debate.

‘Will other worlds be colonised?’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy answered.

And the next question I expected.

‘By who ... will they be colonised?’ Han asked, everyone now keenly attentive.

Jimmy stated, ‘I would never share the key technology to open a portal ... until such time as we had a system of world government. But, in answer to your real question, it would be very difficult for any nation to benefit from moving back and forth through a portal. You could not move heavy equipment or large numbers of people, so what use is a colony? They may live happily elsewhere ... but why?’

‘To get away from this place,’ I said.

Jimmy turned to me. ‘That is one circumstance in which I would release the technology.’

‘Escape from here after a disaster,’ Jack noted. ‘How many people could go?’

‘Not many,’ Jimmy admitted.

Some very strange scenarios were fielded on the way home, Jimmy not adding much to the debate. He did, however, say that future travel to other worlds would not result in meeting aliens. That stopped us all dead, and caused even more wild speculation.

I greeted the girls, twice, because they were engrossed in a game on their computers. I then offered to cut the electricity, and they pretended they had missed us.

‘So,’ Shelly began. ‘How was the boring old “M” Group meeting?’

I wagged a warning finger; she was ten, going on thirty.

A long way off, a C130 Hercules landed back at Mawlini, Lobster stepping down with his heavy pack. Little was said by the tired men as a bus took them around to the armoury, weapons checked and handed back, spare ammo and specialist equipment handed in. When done, Lobster joined others in a jeep, driven around to the married quarters in silence. Lobster climbed the stairwell to the second floor, to his apartment, and knocked the door. His eldest daughter, eleven years old, opened up and welcomed him back. Lobster dumped his rucksack by the door and slumped down, unlacing one dusty boot whilst his daughter attended the other.

Barefoot, Lobster padded across the cool marble floor and into the kitchen, being hugged by his wife. A beer waited on the table. Lobster lifted it and sipped, moving through to the balcony and to a seat facing the base, the roar of distant aircraft disturbing his peace. He sipped his beer, sighed, and stared out across the desert towards the Rifles base. Ten minutes later he was dozing in the sun, his beer half finished, his wife used to the routine. Lobster's rucksack was already unpacked, his clothes in the washing machine.

A very British summer

British summers tended to consist of a great week in May, making everyone optimistic – especially the weather forecasters, followed by a typically damp July and August, rain keeping the foreign tourists miserable – and in museums and castles instead of on the beaches.

With the next seven days forecast to be good, I took the family up to the castle in Scotland. We had to share its facilities with two-dozen RF staff that acted both as extra security, and great babysitters. The girls didn't really need babysitting, they were generally more sensible than me, but it was nice to have people around to keep an eye on them.

Shelly had picked up the chunky RF manual on basic training and read the whole thing in a day, soon asking intelligent questions of the medics. And they never tired of answering them.

With the water warmish - if you had a wetsuit, and calm enough, we took Shelly out in a zodiac when the dolphins were spotted. She

donned her goggles and sat waiting for fifteen minutes. When the dolphins were finally spotted we moved into the path of the pod and waited, Shelly judging the entry time. She dived in and disappeared, coming up for air next to a dolphin, the two of them seemingly swimming in tandem. We caught some of the action on video, but she was never on the surface long. When she got too far away we went after her and I had to impose a time limit, or she would have followed them out to sea, never to be seen again.

Back aboard, our little dolphin was shivering, despite the wetsuit, and we towelled her down on the way back, listening to her describe the pod from her human-fishes-eye view.

The weather held, and we enjoyed five good days, Shelly having jeep-driving lessons, the seat moved forwards and a cushion provided. Still, she got the hang of it - eventually, and RF could pay for the damage to various fences and cars.

September saw a return to our hotel in Canada, a group holiday, the weather more predictable here. We fished, we canoed, and we ignored the outside world, little talk of work or “M” Group matters. I would sometimes sneak away from Helen and use my iPad to check reports, not wanting to spoil the holiday with talk of work, but I missed my reports.

The UN were up in arms about the conflict in Yemen, that was now a former conflict in Yemen. The death toll amongst the hill fighters was high, many villages without their men folk, only young boys and old men left. The Somali Rifles had behaved like Somalis, and been thorough. Still, no new fighters would be coming out of the hills for a while. A few dozen al-Qa’eda operatives had been captured and “questioned”, leading to further arrests.

No new attacks had taken place in Somalia, no al-Qa’eda attacks for many months. Many Arab fighters had travelled to Yemen to volunteer their services for the cause, and had all been killed – a satisfactory outcome. Since the Somalis were Muslim, and defending themselves, I had to puzzle what their “cause” was. The Yemen conflict was now a memory, northern Somalia quiet.

Before leaving Canada we dropped in on their RF unit, based west of Toronto, and met the troops, some of whom were rotating back down to Haiti. They gave me an update.

‘Your people started to bulldoze houses, whether the owners liked it or not. People complained at first, but then they got their homes rebuilt for free and moved back in. And the new houses were made out of proper concrete, stuff that won’t crumble in a quake. They also made sloping supports in corners for extra strength.

‘Where the homeowners were dead they built two storey apartment blocks, and placed needy families inside. There are a hundred gangs of builders, and they pull down a house in a few days, and put another one up in ten days. There’s got to be a couple of thousand new houses back up; streets are clean, tented cities are disappearing. Outside of Port-au-Prince, your people are building apartment blocks with hundreds of rooms in. And the orphanage north east of the city? That has thirty thousand kids in, some with parents alive – but no money. I reckon that in two years it’ll all be done.’

‘What’s the crime rate like?’ I asked.

The man gave me a look. ‘Robbers are shot dead on sight, UN not happy. Your people built a big prison out of town, that’s got ten thousand in it already. Police and soldiers on every street corner.’

‘They’re not short of people, they’re short of hope. So we remove the bad people, and nurture the good people.’

‘Got no argument from me,’ the man offered. ‘My father worked in the Congo before you got there. He could tell you a thing or two about what it used to be like. If a girl was gang-raped, the attackers might be made to give her father a chicken or two. Now they’d hang them all. He’s eighty now, my father, and we took a safari down there. When we landed at Goma hub he thought it was Nairobi. For the first day he checked the map a lot.’

‘Progress,’ I quipped.

Gold

Our region of the DRC produced a great deal of gold, and we had made a great deal of money by selling it. Jimmy now ordered that our bank keep a reserve, a large reserve. Fort Knox was built near Gotham City, above it a new glass office block for the bank. This would be its third move.

I flew down with my team in October. From my room at the hotel I peered out at two distant glass towers, the second being the handiwork of Marko and Yuri. Their new nightclub was on the twentieth floor, and named “Club Twenty” for obvious reasons. That evening, over a meal, Yuri then informed me that it was named after a place in Malta called Club 22, which occupied the twenty-second floor of a tower block. I guess it was a Russian thing.

Later that evening, he showed me around the club, the establishment closed to the public on a Monday. His new offices were situated below, along with the offices of many Russian companies involved in the region. Seemed like they all wanted to stick together.

In the morning I viewed the vaults at our bank, steel doors two feet thick guarding the numerous stacks of gold ingots. In a separate room ran parallel rows of shelves, and on them rested blue velvet bags of uncut diamonds, also kept off the market to keep prices stable. Taking the lift up, I found offices for five hundred people, all busily occupied.

Our bank now offered close to a hundred convenient branch offices in the region, an additional sixty spread around Africa. Inside our region they acted as wage distributors. Cash would be dispatched from the vaults below, all dollars, and to the various town branches. There, mine managers would draw the cash and pay their staff, typically cash-in-hand at the end of a working week, few of the locals making use of a bank account. Once spent in local shops – and bars, the dollars would wind up back with the bank and the process would start over again.

Doing business here, for the mines, was now straightforward, and cheap and efficient international money transfers were facilitated. Foreign workers, and those locals with a few dollars to hold, had accounts at the bank and made good use of them. We even offered a good rate of interest for deposits.

Having met the bank bosses, and many of their staff, my security detail whisked me around to the new cooperation group building. It was just about complete, and recruitment was advancing at a pace. The nearby gym was finished and in use, a new row of restaurants being sampled by locals, the newly laid avenues being earnestly cleaned today by a small army of locals.

I accepted a yellow hard hat and followed in the chief architect, otherwise known as Rolf. ‘You wangled a trip down here. Are we paying for that?’

‘I designed the damn thing.’

He led me inside, through the main glass doors and to a reception area that reminded me of the UN building in New York. This foyer did, however, have airport style security. Past reception, Rolf pointed out two large staff canteens. And by “staff” he meant the workers, not the political appointees. We took the stairs up five flights and to the roof, finding workers tending soil and bedding plants. Shelly would be happy.

Facing the centre of the vast building, it reminded me of the American Pentagon from the point of view of basic shape, the staggered levels reminding me of Po's hotel. Below us, five sections of five storeys sat facing each other, but each advancing storey was smaller than the one below, creating a pyramid effect. Someone on the top balcony could see five balconies below, and if they were drunk and fell over they'd only hit the balcony below.

Rolf pointed down. 'The centre will have a pond and benches. There are five sets of lifts, five sets of stairs. The ground floor offices, below us, have been set aside for the maintenance staff and building stores, the rest are all up for grabs. Up here, you can walk all the way around, as you can on each floor. Bit of a walk though, you might want golf carts.'

'Fuck 'em. They can work some weight off.'

'There are small canteens in each section, one for each twenty offices. There are two formal restaurants inside, on floor below us, and toilets for every ten offices, showers on each floor. And all the principal offices are en suite, thirty of them. There's a video conferencing centre, a press centre, a crèche.'

'A crèche?'

'All mod cons,' Rolf commented. 'Electric car and parking place for most workers, chargers set-up ready.'

'There'll be a free bus service as well,' I put in. 'Just need to find some warm bodies to put in the place.'

'Space for three or four thousand people easily,' Rolf noted. He led me back down.

'Many of the staff who're now over at Forward Base will come here, plus others from some of the offices dotted around here.'

Jimmy joined me the next day, and the hard work and horse-trading began. The leaders from all of the cooperation group countries arrived, occupying the conference centre. They had all been made aware of the new posts that were available, had been asked to suggest candidates – those people not currently gainfully employed elsewhere, and would have a chance to vote.

The first post was that of cooperation group chairman, a top political job that rotated every two years. Jimmy nominated the popular former Prime Minister of Ghana, and the group voted him in. His office would be the first to be completed. I hoped the plumbing worked.

Next came candidates for the post of Agriculture Minister. Each of five men gave a short speech, a man from Kenya voted in. He was followed by the nominations for Minister of Women's Rights who,

quite rightly, would be a lady. Five female candidates loudly lectured the assembled men, fingers wagged, a loud lady from Kinshasa voted in. The post for Economic Development Minister went to one of ours from Forward Base. Following him came a Minister for Technological Development, his job to get the Internet working around Africa. He was followed a Minister for Hospitals. That post was not the same as the Minister for Health, which was more about village health.

They voted a Zambian man into the post of Minister for Roads and Railways, and another Kenyan for the important Defence Minister position. I thought Ngomo or Abdi might want that job, but neither applied. The Foreign Minister, the face of Central Africa to the world, was a half-caste New Yorker that had been born in Liberia. He'd carry the flag abroad.

After lunch, they voted on junior positions, everything down to waste disposal, recycling, water reclamation, hydroelectric projects, farming, orphanages and tourism. By the end of the day, some sixty people had been hired, due to take up office as soon as they had a suitable office to take up, and some furniture to sit on. Many would use offices around Gotham City for now.

One Minister asked if he could hire his wife as a secretary. Jimmy offered to have him shot, and no one else asked about employing relatives. What the Ministers did not yet realise was that we had hired two hundred European administrators, and that they would be rotated every once in a while. We had also hired a firm of Swiss accountants to check the books, and Germans to run the building. There would be no corruption or theft.

That evening, all of the new employees met again at conference centre. Jimmy took to the podium and welcomed them all, and gave some pointers for projects, the detail of which would be expanded upon. He then laid down the law.

Salaries would be paid by us, directly into an account in our bank. Expenses were claimed through the Swiss, in writing. Anyone fiddling their expenses would be taken out and shot. People laughed, but could not tell if he was being serious. Men that touched their secretaries would be dismissed, men that had sex with their staff would be sacked, men that abused their positions would be sacked. People who accepted bribes would be imprisoned.

'Any questions?' he finished with, his audience silent, sat wide-eyed. 'You're in the job ... to set the standards, to lead by example, to refine the image of Africa. If you get caught with your hand in the till - I'll cut that hand off. If you do a good job, it's a good wage for

life. For the first year you can claim half of your rent for living here. You could also apply for a mortgage to buy a property here. You'll all have an electric car and a driver/bodyguard, a former member of the Rifles. You may use your own cars, but you must use the bodyguard we assign you. That guard will live with you if you have a large enough house.

'Your medical bills are all paid if you use our hospitals, dental bills are covered. You'll get twenty days a year paid holidays, and all travel costs are covered. You may stay at our hotels and safari lodges free of charge for visits. You may not live in such places.

'Now, your first task will be to make contact with your opposite numbers in each government department of the countries involved. So the new Minister for Farming would meet each Agriculture Minister in each country to find out what they're working on. Your job is then to see how cooperation between the countries can improve what they're doing, to bring us problems and requests, and we'll then see if we can help.

'Always keep in mind that if we buy in bulk, and work pan-African deals, then we can get better deals and better prices. It's also about distribution. Some countries have plenty of oil, some have none – but they may have farmland or mines. It's about ... spreading the resources evenly around, whilst not seeming to be a communist state. We're not in the business of telling African politicians to do things. We talk, we listen, we ask, and we persuade.'

We spoke to many of the new appointees individually as champagne was offered, and I figured that I would have a lot to say to them all; these people would now tackle much of what I had been tackling from my office. I could see that I would be a regular visitor to the new building.

A week later, with the offices finished, the plumbing working, furniture to sit on, the new Ministers moved in. Joining them was a European Union delegation, an American mission, plus Russian and Chinese liaisons. Jimmy had said to hold back many offices, since others would wish to take-up residence in the future. The African League was not allowed in, nor OPEC.

A block of sixty offices had been taken up by our corporation staff, and Kimballa had grabbed ten offices. This was, after all, his country. Pan-African Counter Terrorism gained an office and a new political liaison, the Rifles would have an office, as would our police force. Old offices around Gotham City would now be made use of by others, Forward Base seeing a re-shuffle of office space, some given over to the Congo Rifles and Rescue Force.

During the flight back, Jimmy explained that I would need to re-organise my involvement in the region and its projects; these new appointees were now tasked with much of that work, and they would have their own ideas. I was a little deflated by the suggestion, but Jimmy pointed out that it was both my idea to start the virtual government, and that it would have happened this way in time.

Busman's holiday

Back in the UK, Jimmy came up to the office two days later and we advanced through many of my current projects, assigning most of them to the new ministers, the relevant files sent down to the new building, which had already attracted the title of Goma Pentagon. My desk was soon looking tidy – I could see the wood, and I was concerned. It was almost as if I was out of a job, and it was my own dumb idea that had caused this. A week into the new pan-African government I had handed over just about all of my projects, and was now relegated to checking up on their work. Reports and requests started to come in and I either agreed, denied or simply commented.

It was the kind of transformation from manager to chairman, and I now ran my eye across reports and initialled them, but did not get into the detail. In some ways it was similar work, but I had less to do, getting home early most days or popping down to the house for lunch. The finances of CAR and the corporation were still under my control, so I had, in effect, become the Finance Minister for the cooperation group.

But the first time I made a half-hearted comment to Jimmy that I had more free time, he gave me a dozen new projects, including the electric cars and busses. I was duly tasked with getting them into every country in the world. Oh, I thought. Was that all? Have that done before lunch. But now, instead of just spending money to solve problems, I had to persuade people, a novel approach for me.

I started with the Club Med countries, delivering samples of the electric buses to cities in Spain and Portugal, demonstrating them to local council officials, and listing their benefits. The buses green credentials were clear for everyone to see, and the cost savings were huge. Still, people sat in them, stared at them, read the literature and said they would get back to me. My sales skills were lacking somehow, and I had to puzzle the lack of immediate take-up.

Not to be disheartened by it, I bought controlling shares in a bus company based in Malaga, ordering fifty buses from China using a loan for the company supplied by our bank. We trained the drivers, which took an hour, set-up the charging stations at several motorway service stations along the Costa del Sol, and rolled out the stock, subsidising the tickets. I allowed all students and pensioners to travel free for three months, and by the end of the first week the local Spanish were visiting relatives along the coast in their thousands. Tourists took journeys up and down the coast, day trips from their hotels, and we pinched airport transfer business.

My greatest triumph that month was a tie-up with a major tour operator. They had thousands of coaches that journeyed back and forth between airports and hotels. Pale Brits would be picked up at the airport, sunburnt Brits would be dropped back a week later. Given the subsidies available to buy the coaches, and the extremely low running costs, they grabbed as many as they could afford. And when they could afford no more I offered them coaches on lease at great rates, practically giving them away.

Flying back from a meeting with them in Palma, Majorca, I tallied my figures and realised that I might soon total twenty-two thousand coaches around the Club Med countries. Back in the UK, I moved directly to the other tour operators and pointed out that they were now greatly disadvantaged by their competitors. I held four meetings, and secured deals for another twenty thousand coaches, the first of which would run from the UK down to Spain.

At that point Jimmy stopped me, and asked that I get European coachbuilders involved, a change of tactic caused by political pressure. I approached a German company, and they were keen to talk, they even had a few new designs already on the drawing board. I furnished them with the specifications of the large coach battery and its electric engine, and they were sure that they could build a chassis for it easily enough. I ordered four batteries and four engines from China, free for this coachbuilder to experiment with, and left them to design a European coach that housed a Chinese battery, whilst helping to protect European jobs.

This was my first indication of problems to come. The various European governments all sung the praises of electric vehicles, but also wanted to safeguard the jobs of their workers. In the UK, I took the indirect approach, and decided that our PM could fuck right off. I bought a controlling stake in a coach company, imported a dozen coaches and ran them along motorway routes free of charge, seats reserved online, first come first served. It caused a storm of interest,

then a storm of protest from the main coach carrier. I invited that carrier to my office and made it simple.

‘You can adopt electric coaches, and I’ll help, or I’ll take all of your routes. Have a biscuit with your tea.’

They collectively swallowed, then agreed to meet my very pleasant demands. They contacted their British coachbuilder and we worked a deal similar to that with the Germans. In the meantime, I altered the ticketing rules for the free buses to pensioners only.

In South Africa, everyone had been impressed with our electric coaches during the World Cup. I sent the South African Government a letter and they responded positively, interested in rural and long distance routes. Being the politically correct individual I now was, I suggested that their own coachbuilders make the buses, and that we would lease them the batteries and engines. They readily agreed, and the first batch of fifty units arrived in November.

Meanwhile, a Canadian carrier contacted me and expressed an interest. The first ten units were shipped over to Toronto, their target being the long distance routes - those that used the greatest fuel and showed the greatest cost savings overall. Our coaches could top six hundred miles on a charge.

Bracketing the States, my next client was Mexico. The authorities in Mexico City had bought twenty coaches in October, and had been running them around the city for a month. Their report was interesting, stating that the weary commuters of their city noticed no difference, but when asked - thought the coaches quieter and smoother. Those same commuters had been amazed, when told by officials taking a survey, that the bus was electric. It had made the news, and Mexico ordered over a hundred coaches, their coachbuilders taking delivery of more than five hundred battery units.

As Christmas approached, Jimmy asked me to tackle certain countries, and senior coach salesman Paul Holton turned back towards Europe, to Eastern Europe. I placed batches of ten coaches on trial in Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Poland. They were left to be experimented upon by the various coach companies. But it soon became apparent that what most nations desired were the hard to reproduce batteries, and it became a matter of the sale of batteries, not coach bodies.

Jimmy then took the world forwards with one giant lurch, at least he would for certain countries. A scooter appeared at the house one day, an electric scooter. I placed on a helmet, turned it on, pushed

off and accelerated. It had been a while. The dogs were soon barking at me as I whizzed, very quietly, around the grounds.

Back at the front of the house, Jimmy explained. 'They cost fuck all, and go five hundred miles on a charge.'

'Italy!' I said. 'Bella, bella, jump on my scooter!'

Taking Helen for a romantic break, security in tow, we flew down to Rome, a batch of fifty scooters waiting for us. With much fanfare, and the Italian Prime Minister presiding, we issued the keys to students who had both applied for them, and won their tickets in a lottery, finally paying for them. We cut a red tape and the scooters shot off, very quietly.

To Italian TV, I explained, 'They cost three thousand Euros, and you can travel for five hundred miles on one charge. That charge costs no more than ten Euros, and many colleges will offer it free.'

The whole of Italy was staring at my TV image. Not to be politically incorrect, I agreed that the scooters be imported only by licensed scooter manufacturers and re-sellers. After all, we had enough problems without the Italian mafia after us.

Helen and I enjoyed our December break in Rome, and by time I returned home the Italian public had ordered some thirty thousand scooters. But Shelly had met us at Cardiff airport, and was being nice. We suspected that she had broken something. At the house, Jimmy barked at Shelly, who confessed to pinching the electric scooter from the garage, and riding it so fast she lost control and ended up in the lake. Jimmy gave her a bucket and cloth and told her to clean the cars, Helen letting our daughter know just how unhappy she was; young girls and fast scooters did not mix. That and the fact that our daughter drove like an Italian!

After a damp Christmas at the house, New Year saw us fly down to Barbados. We whiled away a great deal of time on Pebbles Beach, which had no pebbles at all - just lots of brilliant white sand. We scuba-dived off the beach with our girls, viewing a few contemporary wooden wrecks - the oldest no more than forty years old, then joined boat diving trips to the reefs. Both of our girls were competent divers, fearless under the water, and thought nothing of taking off masks and adjusting them, or even swimming without them.

With our boat anchored near a reef, Shelly placed on her small goggles and dived in, astonishing divers on the reef below by swimming past them at speed in her dolphin style, staying down for four minutes or more at a time. When friendly instructors saw her they would offer her their reserve regulators, and she would tag

along for a few minutes, buddy breathing. She was as much of a curiosity as the colourful fish and slow moving turtles.

Tall now, up to my shoulder, she was towering over the other girls in her class - as Jimmy said she would. Lucy was also tall for her age, and we quietly hoped that their surge in height would soon slow down. We did not want a pair of six-foot daughters!

Shelly's height, her looks and budding curves, had started to attract boys in the years above her. She was, apparently, very popular, but showed little interest in boys as she neared eleven. So we were surprised when she appeared hand in hand with an American lad on holiday, a thirteen-year-old lad.

I had no idea what to say. 'Got a job, son?' I asked, Helen shooting me a look.

He frowned at me. 'I'm in school, sir.'

His parents were at our hotel and he dragged them over, the couple a bit surprised to see just who their boy was dating. They joined us for a drink as the young couple wandered off. The kids didn't need a chaperone, they had two tall Barbados police officers in tow. Armed officers. I asked the father, Steve, what he did.

'Realtor.'

'That's an estate agent in England,' I pointed out.

'Palm beach,' he added.

'Bit of a busman's holiday?'

'Busman's ... what?'

'It's a saying. Like a coal miner having a holiday in a mine shaft.'

'Ah. Well, Palm Beach is a lot like this place. You got the sun and the sand.'

'So why the trip here?' I asked.

'We're just about to buy a small place here, apartment block, six apartments. We'll then let them out to the tourist trade.'

Jimmy clambered out of the pool with Lucy and walked over, our guests a bit shocked. Jimmy had that effect. With tracksuit now on, Jimmy joined us, greeting the couple. Lucy sat on his knee and scanned the strange faces.

'Got more than just the one lad?' I asked. 'We're trying to marry-off Lucy.'

'Dad!'

'No, just the one,' the father answered.

They joined us for the evening meal, our daughters and their lad sharing a table with Big Paul, who was at their level. Well, what kids wanted to eat with their boring old parents? The next day, and those that followed, Big Paul acted as chaperone, which worried us,

and we only saw the kids at breakfast and evening meal. It wasn't a bad deal, it gave us some peace, but we grilled Big Paul each evening to see what they had been up to.

Eating out, at the Ship Inn, St. Lawrence Gap, we made ready for New Year's Eve, many of the locals out. Our daughters danced between tall locals, Shelly with her new boyfriend, Lucy with another girl of her age that she had befriended. I tried to keep an eye on them, but received Helen's elbow a few times. After all, there were twelve plain-clothes police officers on hand, the building surrounded.

After ringing in the New Year, we walked as a group along the main tourist trap of bars and restaurants, chatting to locals and tourists alike. Back at our hotel, we all joined the ongoing party. At 2am I found myself with Jimmy, sitting on the hotel's beach beds, beers in hand and facing the black ocean.

'They're growing up fast,' I reflected, glancing up at the stars.

'Got to let go at some point.'

I sighed. 'Was hoping not to.'

'I had a kid.'

I took a moment. 'The girl in Canada?'

'No, the daughter of a lady doctor in Africa. An ... accident.'

'What happened to her?'

'Don't know. I ... left her behind.'

'Does it bother you?' I risked.

'It surprises me that it doesn't bother me more. I think ... I've seen too much death. I sometimes think that I should care more, other times I think I care too much. It's the dance -'

'You and your other self,' I finished off. 'When to fight, and when to be kind. I learnt with the electric cars ... that there are many ways to achieve your aims, the first and obvious one not being the best way. If it was a planet of androids it would be different, but we have to pander to the human condition, to play politics, to make people think that the idea was theirs.'

'You're learning.'

'And sometimes you just need to shoot someone,' I put in. 'Talk won't do it.'

'I once had someone tell me ... that the people should make their own choices. They'd make mistakes, but they would be their mistakes, and that I shouldn't interfere.'

'So what did you do?'

'I shot him.'

We both laughed. 'It does cut a long conversation short,' I noted.

‘You know, if they ever built a time machine – I mean again – they’d never agree on who to send through, or what that individual’s remit would be. That’s why I made the choice. Right or wrong, it was my choice.’ He sighed. ‘But, given what’s going to happen, I couldn’t make it any worse.’

‘You mentioned before, that if you fixed it – you’d go?’

‘Yes,’ he reflected with a sigh. ‘Back to where I came from.’

‘That place doesn’t sound like a barrel of laughs,’ I nudged.

‘No, but the fight there isn’t finished. I have ... unfinished business.’

I puzzled that in my drunken state, Lucy stepping up and sitting on me. ‘God you’re heavy. You’re not three years old anymore, young lady.’

She faced Jimmy. ‘Why do they say that you’re dangerous?’

‘To some people ... I am dangerous,’ Jimmy told her. ‘In Africa, girls of your age are attacked by grown men, and I ask the police and soldiers to kill them. Many people don’t think that’s right.’

‘Why?’ she innocently asked.

‘In England, if a man commits a crime, the police investigate, arrest him, and he has a solicitor and a fair trial. In many countries that’s not possible, because there are no police, or the police will accept money, or because the culture is different. In Africa, there’s not much law, so you have to be hard with people. You remember Karl?’

‘Yes.’

‘He was killed by a man shooting at your father. I found the man who tried to kill your father, and I was not very nice to him. That’s why people are afraid of me.’

‘But you don’t hurt good people,’ my daughter protested.

‘No, I don’t hurt good people,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘Not if I can help it.’

‘Why don’t you have children?’ she asked.

‘I’m still practising,’ Jimmy told her before she walked off, deep in thought.

We rejoined the group half an hour later, in need of fresh beers, Helen giving me an odd look. At the bar she closed in on me.

‘The lad’s mother asked me why Jimmy was not married. Lucy was right there, and told the woman that he was still practising!’

I laughed.

‘I’ve never been so embarrassed. Good job were leaving tomorrow.’

In the morning, Shelly gave the lad her Facebook details, making me feel ancient. At that age I could just about write. Heavily tanned, we boarded the flight and headed back, a new year and a few new challenges ahead. My mind was on electric buses, but Jimmy had a directive for me. He wanted me to link-up a group of principal towns around Gotham City, and develop them. The two farthest towns were two hundred miles apart. In British terms, that was coast to coast. In DRC terms, that was a bus ride to the next town.

January, 2011

With the estate covered in snow, Jimmy handed me a file detailing a desalination plant in Jordan. It was nearing completion, would be oil powered, and I needed to divert my plastic bottles towards it. The Jordanian authorities had readily agreed to a number of experimental desalination plants near Aqaba. Some utilised plastic pipes, others consisted of glass sheets, some were powered by solar panels, and a large facility was being constructed from our osmosis rocks. That facility would be thirty yards across and nine hundred yards long in its first phase.

Jimmy had upset the Israelis by supplying subsidised oil to the Jordanians, the oil destined for this specific project. When they used typically Israeli diplomatic language, Jimmy suggested that they build their own plant; he'd supply them oil, and I'd supply plastic containers. They accepted the deal, which surprised me. It was like my two girls: don't give one without the other. Fact was, Jimmy was happy that the Israelis wanted a new plant, and I guessed that he gave the Jordanians one first to piss off Ben Ares, the process of appeasement being important in Israeli politics.

Yemen would also be receiving a new desalination plant, paid for by the Saudis in a move to try and calm the country. Since the end of hostilities, the one-sided hostility of the Somali Rifles towards the hill fighters, the Saudis were being helpful to Yemen, throwing a little money at the problem. And Prince Ali Bin Something had met with an accident. So much for his injection of the blood.

I had just sorted out plastic bottles for Jordan when Jimmy handed me a sheet of figures.

'The Chinese have paid us our cut of the electric cars, the drug, the Zanzibar oilfield, and some other stuff. The Russians have paid

me for a few things they owed on, and Chase has invested more money from his health savings. I've also diverted all CAR income for a year to expand the regional production.'

'Couple of quid in the kitty,' I noted.

'And I just worked a deal with Kimballa, a five year tax break.'

'Huh?' I puzzled.

'For the next five years we'll keep all the tax earned in the DRC, plus his cut of the profits. He's got enough money to last forever, so we'll use it to grow the region. Bottom line is what you can spend in the next twelve months.'

'Looks like a hundred and seventy-five billion pounds,' I queried.

'Yep. So spend it.'

I stared at him. 'Spend all that lot? On what, for fuck's sake?'

'On developing the region. Technically, we should allocate it to the Ministers in Goma, but that would be no fun for you. Besides, they'd be tempted to waste it. I'm off to China, Hong Kong and Tokyo for two weeks, so have fun.'

'You taking my wife?' I asked as he headed towards the door.

'No, so get her involved with the spending. Women like to shop.'

With Jimmy gone, I called an "M" Group meeting the next day, Han absent. 'OK. I have some money to spend on African development, but I'm also trying to be politically correct. I want each of you to contact your governments and ask them if there's anything that you think you should be selling to us. In particular, ask about old military equipment or civil aircraft. To start the ball rolling, Michelle, I want twenty Airbus A320s, so let your President announce it – whilst making it appear that he worked the deal.'

Everyone laughed.

'Keely, I want four new 747s, so let Chase know. And can you get me an up-to-date list of second hand kit, like Hueys. OK, does anyone have any immediate items they think they want to sell us?'

'Do you want a few Nimrod aircraft?' Jack asked.

'No, they're crap.'

'Why do you think I offered them!' Jack quipped.

A day later, Keely handed me a printout, a long list of military hardware that had seen better days. With him sat opposite me, I read down the list.

'OK, twenty Hueys for Somalia, plus all the usual spares. Two Hercules for Somalia, Kenya has enough. Ah, A10 Warthogs!'

'Ground attack aircraft, anti-tank,' Keely put in.

'I want ten for Somalia, ten for Kenya, spares, technicians and training.'

Keely made a note.

‘F15s? You’ll sell us F15s?’

‘Sure, they’re export models. Lots of them out there.’

‘Excellent. I want ten for Kenya, ten for Forward Base. Let’s not give them to Somalia yet.’ I read down the list. ‘A destroyer?’

‘Got a heap of small destroyers going cheap,’ Keely encouraged.

‘They are cheap. Do they work?’ I challenged.

‘They’re good for ten or twenty years, but the electronics are cold war era.’

‘I’ll take five of them at these prices, but we’ll need instructors.’

‘Got them, no problem.’

‘Then I’ll give two to Kenya, three to Somalia, and we can patrol the Horn and the Straits for the next ten years.’ I read on, a finger on the items. ‘81mm mortars, I’ll take the three hundred tubes you have listed, and the ammo. Rest I’ll think about.’

‘Got some short range radars that could be useful,’ salesman Keely nudged. ‘Shore based, they can spot aircraft and ships.’ He pointed them out, the units coded.

‘Range?’

‘A good thirty miles each. And ... they’re mobile.’

I made a face. ‘I’ll take twenty units, spares and instructors.’

‘You’ll need decent radios, long distance, so the operators can report back. There’re fifty listed.’

I nodded my agreement. With Keely gone, I sent the news of the deliveries to our Defence Minister, his job to relay it to the various parties. He emailed me back, Tanzania asking about warships. They offered to go fifty-fifty, Keely adding three additional destroyers to the list.

Thinking about our region of the DRC, I contacted the head of our airline, Central African Airlines, and asked him to order an additional twelve Dash-7s for internal use. I informed him of the new A320 aircraft and asked that he petition for additional city-to-city routes, the new 747s be to employed along additional transatlantic and Chinese routes.

Michelle offered up four old maritime patrol aircraft. I was interested, because Africa had a long coastline and we operated many offshore oilfields. They were a steal, so I took them, instructors and spares included. Ivan offered a list of military hardware, but I already knew what I wanted.

‘I want sixty tanks for Somalia, forty for Kenya, two squadrons of Mi24, one each for Kenya and Somalia. I want an additional sixty

thousand AK47s, and a shit load of ammo. Oh, best add forty armoured personnel carriers.'

Many of those AK47s would be issued to our police force, some of whom already carried them, most making do with pistols in urban areas. Village police officers would carry AKs for added firepower, and for visual deterrent effect.

After lunch with Helen, I dragged her back to my office, and we discussed various projects that we considered worthy of extra money. She favoured the standardised village schools. I was in agreement, and the existing rollout schedule was increased four fold, but moving out from Forward Base in concentric circles. Charity begins at home.

We discussed education, especially adult education, and I went through channels for a change, giving the new Education Minister a sizeable budget whilst asking him to increase adult literacy. Ebede college still produced a great many teachers, all employed directly by us, and I sent Anna a note, explaining a greater budget. She came right back with a request for more money for the orphanages. I had to question why they were short of money.

Turns out that they were not short of money, but that locals wanted their kids to attend the orphanages, the kids receiving free meals. I asked her to go and meet with the new Education Minister, because the orphanages were evolving into schools, and increased his budget further, twice in one day.

The aforementioned meeting took place the next day in Goma, Anna roping in our new Orphanages Minister. They came up with a plan, a kind of cradle-to-grave approach, where kids entered an orphanage, were joined by others as it became a school that turned into a college, whilst offering some evening classes for adult literacy. Each establishment would need a police officer or two, and schools and orphanages would range from small village outposts, to establishments as large as Ebede.

Anna then emailed me and asked about school nurses. Since the kids had all been injected, I found myself surprised by the heading when I opened the email. She meant for rural areas, the nurse acting as a basic medic for an isolated area. I said that I would prefer the candidates to undergo rescue force training, and to fall under that umbrella. That agreed, Anna contacted Coup at Mawlini and asked when she could put two thousand nurses through basic training.

Coup was straight on the phone to me. I explained, 'They would undergo basic training, then work in rural schools, only returning to you once a year for a check-over. Use Forward Base.'

‘If they’re any good ... we can pinch them?’ Coup asked, now a great deal calmer.

‘Sure. And they’re available for large deployments if necessary.’

Bob Davies came on the next day, Mawlini somehow two thousand trainees larger. I repeated the story, and calmed him, but with a grin. Turns out that Coup had wound up Mac by suggesting they would all be arriving the following week.

That evening, watching the TV with Helen, the girls on their computers, a programme about satellites came on.

‘Satellites,’ I said. ‘Satellite TV. We launch a TV satellite over Goma, and offer programmes; news, sport, movies.’

‘Got a large audience,’ Helen noted.

‘What time would it be in New York?’

‘Now? Late afternoon.’

I selected Blake Carrington on my phone. ‘Ted, Paul Holton. Listen, thinking of a satellite TV service in Central Africa.’

‘Been thinking about that ourselves.’

‘Got a proposal?’ I firmly nudged.

‘Yes, I’ll send it over.’

‘Ball park figure ... to put a satellite up?’ I asked.

‘Forty million dollars for a ten channel satellite.’

‘Consider this a firm nudge. I’m interested, especially in a new channel that’s controlled from Goma.’

‘Could be up and running quickly. Satellite companies send me stuff every week – they have a few cancelled orders laying around on the launch pad. Cheap if you use the French launcher in South America.’

‘Get back to them, see what deal we can get. Thanks.’ I returned to Helen. ‘Pan African TV.’

‘Paid advertising revenue would cover some of the cost, if not all.’

I rang our Pan-African President, Errol Chamba from Ghana. ‘Mister President, sorry to disturb you. You weren’t asleep, were you?’

‘No, no. It’s nine o’clock here.’

‘Do me a favour, and assume that we’ll launch a satellite TV service for the region. Kindly have a look at offices, studios and people for a new TV service, starting with news and current affairs.’

‘A very interesting idea.’

‘Not least because you would be on it most days! Thanks. Goodnight.’

Blake Carrington came back on the following afternoon. He had grabbed a satellite that someone else had failed to pay for, and it could be launched in two weeks. I told him to stick it right over Goma; it would transmit a test page till ready. He then indicated that it offered twenty-four channels, and how about separate language channels. So long as we controlled it, I didn't care.

President Errol received an email from me, asking that offices in the Goma Pentagon be grabbed for the TV service, and to move ahead quickly with studios and offices, and to start recruiting suitable staff. He had a communications officer, and got the man on the job.

That set me to thinking. Not so much about propaganda, but about what programmes we might like to see on the new service. I contacted a small production company and invited them down. With two men and two ladies ranged in front of me, I began, 'We're creating a satellite TV channel in the Congo, and there're a few programmes that I'd like made. Nothing fancy, just basic documentary type programmes. What would a typical one hour programme cost?'

'Up here, typically a quarter of a million.'

'Oh.' That seemed a lot. I glanced at the sheet I had, a sheet of their company details. 'OK, let's get down to it. Your company is worth little more than a million in assets, turnover of four million a year, yes?'

They were on the spot, and surprised by my approach. 'Well, yes.'

'Here's a suggestion. I buy seventy-five percent of your company for ... three million based on turnover and assets. You keep a quarter of the shares, you get a good wage, and I give you more work that you could cover in a lifetime.' I eased back. 'Think about what we did to Pineapple Music.'

The main man said, 'I own the shares, with my wife.'

I held my hands wide. 'Looking to stay small?'

'Well, no, not really. What ... what would we be making?'

'Dozens of documentaries, on topics that I would choose, many around Africa. You'd be flat-out busy. Things like ... pollution, fish farms, Rescue Force, politics and wars. And some news work.' I waited.

'Yes, I ... think we'd be interested. Can we get back to you?'

'Sure, but don't take too long, I'll be taking to others next week.' I thanked them and showed them out.

Back at my desk, I glimpsed a new report, our hotels in Goma nearing their capacity on occasion. I ordered two new hotels, both to offer five hundred low-cost rooms. Thinking on, and studying an aerial map of Goma, I ordered a third hotel to be built, this one next to the Pentagon, and for it to five star quality. When Yuri found out he asked to handle it, meaning that he would build and run it. I was interested in capacity, nothing else, and gave him the go ahead. His other hotel, near the lake, was doing well, stuffed full of Russian tourists sunning themselves.

Someone then informed Radisson SAS of the new hotel projects, and they asked to build one. That was odd, because we would never have refused them. It was odd that they had not offered before now. I offered them a grant towards building the hotel, provided that it was at least three hundred rooms. They came back with an offer to build a six hundred room monster of a hotel, the other side of the conference centre, a shape that resembled a Canadian Maple leaf. I signed it off.

That proposed new hotel then brought a complaint from the corporation, a complaint that Goma risked power outages in the future. Horrified by that, I sanctioned an additional oil-fired power station, whilst asking about further hydroelectric dams. Such dams were possible, but none within thirty miles of Goma. Conscious of the fact that oil-fired power stations were not very eco-friendly, I offered the Rwandans a new oil-fired power station on their side of old Goma town, so long as they sold us electricity. It was a done deal, and our region of the DRC reduced its carbon footprint, albeit done in a cynical manner. I justified my actions by telling people it was to create jobs in Rwanda.

Fresh from harming the ozone, I emailed Steffan Silo and asked what he could achieve with more money, and could the Angola train route be speeded up. His email indicated that he was already shipping ore that way, but that the process would benefit from an expanded port facility on the coast and a container operation. I asked how much money was needed.

He estimated sixty million pounds to expand the dockside and to bring in better container cranes. I offered him a hundred million pounds, and asked that the route and the port be made suitable for the needs of the next twenty years, some of the money be used at the Luaua airport.

I was always happy to give Steffan money; he was one of those people that accounted for every penny. He also beat people up on price and got us good deals. Within an hour he sent back a graphic,

the image indicating four marshalling yards on the route, in addition to what would be built at the port, a diagram attached. Inside the borders of the southern DRC, new stretches of track would fork off and stretch out several areas. The main track already touched the northern oil areas and ran within twenty miles of Forward Base.

It now appeared that Steffan planned a branch line to Forward Base, another to Goma hub, touching the southeast corner of the city. It would mean that goods could now be exported via Angola in addition to Tanzania and Kenya. The Angolan rail journey was the same distance, but it would mean that European and American cargo ships would benefit by picking up goods on the west of Africa.

That evening, after dinner, I asked, 'What is it that Africa needs the most?'

'I'd say education, but we got that covered. And you can't educate people in a year or two, it's a long process.'

'Health won't have an immediate effect on GDP, and we're doing what we can there,' I commented.

'Housing?' Helen posed.

'If we build houses, the workers are gainfully employed till the houses are finished, then out of work again. Construction is a fickle thing. Besides, we've already earmarked a shit load of money for new apartments in the DRC – and that project employs a hell of lot of people.'

'So what industries produce good jobs, and stable jobs?' Helen thought out loud.

'Well, mines and oil for one, but they're growing as fast as they can, short of skilled workers.'

'What's the aim for 2025?' Helen asked.

'Soldiers, with a suitable GDP behind them to support a long deployment.'

'Do we have enough soldiers?'

'Too many,' I suggested. 'We need them in 2025, not now. Can't recruit them now and sit them in barracks for fifteen years. Besides, former soldiers – working in the police and elsewhere – can be called up.'

'Then maybe we're doing enough. We just need to wait.'

I lifted my eyebrows. 'The old man told me to spend the money this year, so it must be for a reason.'

'For a sustainable economy, Africa needs an internal market as well as an export market. We've got the mine and oil exports, and they're growing. So that leaves the internal market.'

I sighed. 'That takes time. The mineworkers have money, most don't. There's a hell of a class-led financial gap in many places.'

'It'll filter down, as in any society,' Helen assured me.

The next morning, I hovered around my desk, again frustrated. Returning to a valuable source of information, as well as inspiration, I picked up the Goma trade fair magazine. One article detailed South African wines. I called the agriculture professor I used in the region and asked about soil conditions for wine.

'Perfect,' he said. 'In several areas.'

'Import a shit load of vines and set-up a ... you know, wine industry.'

'Will do. Goma volcanic vintage!' he joked.

'What else grows well in our region?'

'Bananas - as you know, coffee is doing well, sugar beat doing well, and any kind of vegetable in the greenhouses.'

'How are they doing?' I asked.

'Great. Production grows each year, and they grow some real monster vegetables.'

'How much is sold?'

'All of it.'

'What's stopping you expanding it?' I asked.

'More hours in the day!'

'Hire some extra staff, I'll OK it. How much more could you produce without wasting it?'

'Could increase ten fold and not waste it, Paul. No shortage of hungry mouths around here.'

'Fine, increase the acreage all you want, I'll sanction the money. Just get on with it.' I hung up and emailed the corporation, sanctioning the expansion.

Not wanting to upset our new ministers down at the Pentagon, I contacted them all and asked for ideas and suggestions, things that they could spend money on.

At 3pm I knocked off, early for a change, wandering into the main office. 'Ladies,' I offered Helen, Sharon and Sharon's daughter – now back from her travels and looking much older, less innocent somehow.

'No work?' Sharon asked as I sat and observed them.

'I'm paid to think,' I told her, getting a look.

'Do you still trade the stock markets?' Sharon's daughter asked.

'Now and then,' I commented.

'Do they have that in Africa?' she naïvely asked.

I stood, raised a finger as an idea hit me, and rushed out. Back in my office I called the head of our bank. 'I think its time we had a stock exchange in Goma, and a metals futures market, ore contracts. What do you think?'

'There's a small stock exchange in Kinshasa, a futures exchange in Lagos that handles a lot of oil and ore.'

'Got a paper and pen?'

'Fire away.'

'I want a purpose-built building, a modern stock exchange, with several floors for futures contracts. I want buyers and sellers to have offices, good communications links. I want us to help with liquidity, and a decent gold market, diamond market, and anything else we deal with.'

'Should put us on the map,' the man enthused.

'I want to steal the trade from Lagos, and make ours the biggest and the best exchange in Africa. And I want the ground cut on that building tomorrow.'

'Could attract a lot of jobs.'

'Jobs ... how?'

'Traders and bankers – they're all high paid jobs. With them would come a quality service sector; executive apartments, nice cars, a casino.'

'A casino? What a good idea. Anyway, fast as you can, send me your plans, get the corporation on it.'

Googling Las Vegas casinos, I picked one I liked and called, getting through to the manager, and wondering if he was old school mafia. Turned out he was a Mormon.

'How can I help?'

'I'd like to open a casino in Goma, but I know nothing about casinos. So I was looking for someone to run it, a joint venture.'

'We offer a franchise service, and a management service, plus equipment rental and security staff.'

'Sounds good.'

'How big a casino are you thinking of?'

'Well, I've no idea. But we get a lot of politicians, conventions, trade fares. There're a lot of rich Russians in the area, and we're about to open a stock exchange, so lots of young lads in pink shirts and a few quid. I guess I would want it to handle ... what, five hundred people at least. But we get a lot of tourists passing through, waiting for planes.'

'We could offer a design and building service, then a full management service.'

‘Fine, but we have our own builders here. So if you design it, we’ll build it, you kit it out and help run it.’

‘What about shows?’

‘Shows?’ I asked.

‘Tom Jones.’

‘Ah, shows for the punters. Yes, sure, room or two at least.’

‘I’ll assemble a team and ready a contract. They’ll come to you, and you can select layouts.’

‘Great. But I’m in Britain, so email me when they’re due to land and I’ll arrange transport.’ I gave him my email details and phone number.

I was pleased with myself. A stock exchange and a casino; they would attract the high earners. We already offered quality hotels, listed a top quality golf course, a nightclub, and many restaurants. We also possessed a world-class zoo, and the surrounding area was dotted with quality lodges. Our tall apartment blocks housed quality abodes and penthouse suites. All we needed now was a marina.

I fought the image away, then smirked. Grabbing the map, I could see the canals that led from the nearby lake and our own artificial lake. But what would Jimmy say? I went and found Helen. ‘We can dig extra canals, for boats, very cheaply. If we built a small dockside, little sailboats could park up, next to it a bar or two. What do you think?’

‘It would be nice. Water features always make a city look better.’

‘You don’t think Jimmy would whinge?’

‘No, it adds quality to the place, its cheap, the tourists will like it.’

I called Yuri, finding him in Moscow. ‘Yuri, that hotel of yours by the lake – I was thinking of building more canals, but with boats for the tourists, and a marina.’

‘A marina?’ he keenly asked.

‘Yeah; water, boats, cafes, restaurants, apartments nearby.’

‘I would be interested, Marko too. How about we go fifty-fifty?’

‘OK, I’ll draw up some plans and send them to you.’

There was only one thing to do. I grabbed Shelly and gave her several large sheets of A3 paper and a map of Gotham City. ‘You remember Cardiff Bay, with the shops and boats?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well, we’re building something like that in Gotham City. Why don’t you draw a design.’ I marked on the map where it would be, and left her to it.

Three hours later my daughter returned, several sheets in hand. The first was a map of the city, the new marina positioned southeast, a large canal linking it to the lake. She had come up with an amphitheatre design, people in bars and restaurants all facing a central circular marina. From that central area, three small canals spread out, widening to further small marinas. This was not one marina, but a main marina, feeder canals and three small marinas.

Around the main marina she had detailed concrete wharfs, cafes laid out, people strolling. Behind the cafes ran a line of two storey bars and restaurants, behind them a row of four storey apartments with balconies facing the main marina.

Along the edges of the canals, the walkways continued, a mile down to the lake, concrete piers jutting out some four hundred yards into the lake itself, pencil sketches of people fishing. But my daughter had not finished there; she had canals snaking deep into the city in several places.

I pointed at them. 'What are these for, babes?'

'People visiting can take a boat to the cafes. People on holiday.'

'Good idea,' I admitted. They linked Yuri's hotel to the marina, so that would please him. They also reached towards the new Radisson hotel, and the back of the conference centre. I tapped a large building. 'What's that?'

'Mum said there would be a casino.'

'Ah, good position. Right, now photograph it and email the image to me. I'll send it to Goma.'

'How much do I earn?' Shelly risked.

'We'll name it after you,' I told her, messing up her hair.

I sent the image to Yuri, then down to the corporation - asking them to make a start on the canals, but to line them all with concrete, or they'd be overgrown with plants and mosquitoes. I also started a drawing of my own, that of the new stock exchange and its accompanying offices, the buildings sat on a large waterway that reached toward the lake and connecting to the main marina. When done, I scanned the image and attached it to an email, sending it to our bank CEO: Gotham City, the Venice of Central Africa!

When Jimmy returned I showed him the sketches. 'Good,' he commented, as if he had anticipated them. 'But you need pumps to keep the water at the top of the canals fresh, or it will stink. You'll also need to extend the waste pipe from the sewerage plant, or it'll stink. And a filter in the main marina itself, or -'

'It'll stink,' I finished off. 'And the stock exchange?'

'Would have happened eventually.'

‘And the design?’ I pressed.

‘Yes, it’s good. Water features always help. When this is all done we’ll try and attract some clever young men; give McKinleys an office down there. And, at the end of the day, that’s what Africa needs. It needs a bit of a buzz to attract the entrepreneurs, and they create jobs.’

‘That land north of River View, Mombassa, would make for a good marina,’ I suggested.

‘Sure. Good for the area - for jobs, and good for tourism.’

I gave him a rundown of everything else I had bought or budgeted for, and he had no objections.

‘Don’t let it stress you, it takes time,’ he reassured me. ‘And right now our area has a growth figure of twenty-five percent a year. Work on the agriculture projects, because Africa needs exports. Zimbabwe is quite capable of feeding half of Africa, so give them a nudge.’

‘How was China?’ I probed.

‘Cold.’

‘Anything ... interesting happen?’

He took a moment, glancing out of the window. ‘Started a few new projects, next year’s technology.’ And he revealed little more. ‘Oh, you might want to involve Po in the Mombassa marina, maybe the one in Goma as well. And the People’s Republic will start work on a new port just south of Mogadishu, links to the DRC along the rail track. They’ll also get involved in the port in Angola.’

‘Anything I should be looking at?’

‘Keep pushing the electric technology. Get ex-president Harvey on it, and ex-president Art Johnson. Let them earn their bloody keep.’

Going backwards

I had either spent, or earmarked, around ten percent of the available budget. With Yuri and Po putting in money, I was going backwards, now with even more money to spend. That led to a radical approach. Following the lead of Hardon Chase, and considering the citizen’s own spending power, I raised all wages in our region by ten percent, those of people we employed directly.

My thinking was simple. If people had more money they would spend more money, and that would develop a service sector and boost internal markets. Thinking now like a politician, I remembered the dull UK election, and images of our Prime Minister that was - and who now is - visiting small business starter units. I took the plans for the business parks around Gotham City, and ordered them built in each of a hundred small towns around the DRC, northern Zambia, Burundi and Malawi.

That did not amount to a great deal of money, so I sighed and increased the project to an additional hundred towns, adding blocks of small offices to the estates. My corporation liaison suggested that the project would employ forty thousand people to build, the same number again to employ when ready, but that some would move across from other jobs.

Thinking on a grander scale, I put out to tender ideas for hydroelectric dams around the region. Steffan Silo came back with a few ideas. It seems that you did not need a wide dam to create a water pressure to turn a turbine, you needed a tall and slim one, and he pointed me towards a hydroelectric project in Wales, north of our house. I tracked it down on Google and found a small lake at the top of a hill, a long pipe down the inside of the hill, and a turbine at the bottom. Water pressure was a factor of height, not width.

The DRC offered plenty of mountain ranges and tight gorges, all scaring a rain soaked land. After all, they did not call it the rain forest for nothing. Steffan pointed towards German made turbines, and hinted that we had more than enough steel for the required pipes. What would be left would be a gradient. I studied the map, checking contours of hills to the west of Gotham City, an impenetrable land of parallel gorges where the earth itself seemed to have been squeezed together. I found a high lake fed by rainwater, its natural outlet being a waterfall in a tight gorge.

I cut-and-paste the image off Google Earth and attached it to an email, along with Steffan's suggestions. Unfortunately, each of the turbines seem to be only suitable to power a single apartment block, perhaps two. Fortunately, there were a great many high gorges and waterfalls, the area completely uninhabited. From the German manufacturer, I ordered six turbines straight away. Our existing factories were not geared up for pipes of this size, so I had to eat humble pie and order them from our competitors, the Nigerians.

Informing Steffan of what I was proposing, he said that six turbines wired end-to-end should be able power Gotham City easily enough, something about the efficiency of the set-up compared to a

single unit. Room for growth, I figured. Thinking on, I could see that a large part of our region contained steep gorges, the bane of our road builder's lives. That nudged me towards three turbines for Gotham City, and a great deal more for the region, especially northern Zambia.

Unexpectedly, a team from the German turbine factory flew over the next morning, emailing me en route. They were on their way - and could they see me please?

'I like Germans,' Jimmy commented when I told him. 'Their preciseness to detail.'

We welcomed them into the house at noon, leading them to a lounge. Without any prompting, they held up an A3 chart, and gave us the ABCs of hydroelectricity. Helpfully, they told me just how much pipe was required, exactly what diameter, and what height of water. Seems that little more than a hundred metres of water at forty-five degrees could drive their turbines. The lake at the top, the reservoir, was only needed to maintain a steady flow, and that in some cases they had turbines working without reservoirs, simply tapping fast flowing water.

They keenly offered to send a team to the region to assist, to conduct surveys and to co-ordinate the installations. A smaller turbine, with a two-foot pipe reaching up seventy-five yards, could power a village of a hundred abodes, provided that it was the usual mix of domestic electric bulbs, fridges, radios or TVs. If it was just a case of electric bulbs in rural African villages, the smaller turbine could power six hundred abodes.

I ordered a hundred of the smaller turbines as a first test, and a further twenty of the larger turbines. They then asked the obvious question of how much electrical wire, and did we want bulbs? Off the top of my head I suggested that they allow for two or three hundred huts in each village, but a thousand or two in the small towns.

I was thinking small. Jimmy piped up with, 'How about we tackle northern Zambia?' To our visitors he said, 'We'd like an additional sixty larger units for Zambia. Now, what do you have that can power a small factory, or indeed a large factory?'

'You will need three or more of the larger units working in concert, a water height of two hundred fifty metres at one point five metre pipe, three separate pipes.'

'And would that run a typical plastics factory?' Jimmy asked.

‘Yah, no problem. With that configuration we can power five thousand houses with all utilities. And in the night time, we can pump some water back up the hill.’

‘Pump water back?’ I queried with a frown.

‘You have the electricity generated at night, but no use, so we switch to a pump that sends water up. It can also be ... that you stop the water flow down, but not such a good idea to always stop and start.’

‘At night,’ Jimmy began. ‘Can the charge be diverted along high power lines to local towns or other factories?’

‘Yah, of course, we do this in many places. We have automatic switching gear we manufacture.’

‘Then we’d like you to look at that as well,’ Jimmy told them. ‘If this all works well, we’ll look at a second order of a further two hundred units.’

It was worth the trip for them, and they left looking like happy German salesman.

With the Master Race gone, Jimmy said, ‘I have the kids in Shanghai working on a more efficient turbine, low cost long life light bulbs and efficient heating units. In time, we’ll swap out some of their turbines and try the others.’

‘So why order this lot?’

‘To keep the German Government happy,’ he said with a shrug.

Back at my desk, the result of my request for ideas from the ministers was a large pile of printed emails, enough to keep me busy for a week. I sighed, glanced at the first page, made a tea, then finally sat.

The first suggestion seemed to be waffle about youth programmes and creating good citizens. I scanned it, one line catching my attention: cadets. I lifted up and stared out of the window, then turned, staring at the page. Cadets. Army Cadets: ten year old boys that would be twenty-five years old in 2025. But was I being premature?

The orphanages already ran cadet movements, both Army Cadets and Rescue Force cadets, and both programmes helped get the kids ready for adult life in either chosen service. I emailed back our Defence Minister and agreed to fund two thousand huts, spread across the region, and that the Rifles would supply instructors. I then suggested that camps be run during school holidays, especially the summer holidays, to regional centres in each country, again using the Rifles. We’d take boys as young as ten, the upper age limit being eighteen. And we’d inject them all.

Contacting Ngomo, I told him that I wanted his patronage as Honorary Colonel in Chief of the pan-African cadet movement, jointly with Anna at Ebede. Anna would make sure they learnt the “good citizen” bits that our Defence Minister had mentioned. She also had a head start, having run such programmes for fifteen years or more.

The next email was from the Health Minister, but seemed to detail the same subject matter, making me puzzle why the hell the Health Minister was involved. Reading on, it seemed that Africa had a great many errant boys and girls just hanging around, neither in school nor working, but trying to earn a crust in rubbish dumps or mines. Now I was following. But my idea –my solution - seemed a little outlandish, if not downright illegal.

I called Jimmy. ‘Jimmy, kids in rubbish dumps. My first thought would be a kind of orphanage, but one with a fucking high fence and guard dogs. They have lessons, whether they like it or not, get fed, and discipline is tight.’

‘And your second thought?’

‘That the fucking UN would be all over us!’

‘In most African nations it is - as in the west - illegal for a child not to be in school, or to be working under sixteen.’

‘So ... we’d be enforcing the law. And forcing them to have three good meals a day.’

‘You would. And fuck the UN.’ He hung up.

I emailed back the Health Minister. ‘Please liaise with the Orphanages Minister, and Anna at Ebede. We’ll create orphanages with high fences and guards, and enforce attendance for kids that wander the streets. A first step would be a residential school that they may attend voluntarily. If not, they would be forced to attend. I suggest this programme start in the DRC, in each large town, rolled out to Kenya and Tanzania. Substantive funding is available.’

The next suggestion was easy enough, a request for more computers in schools. We already had a programme running in Europe and America whereby second hand computers found their way to us. I faxed the South Korean embassy and asked for information on surplus microprocessor chips, old chips, and computer base units. We didn’t need the latest computers, just basic word processing. That fateful fax would lead to a batch of twenty thousand computers, each unit costing us less than a hundred pounds. They would give a teenager gamer in the west a heart attack with how slow they were, but they were all that the kids in Kenya needed.

The third suggestion lit up my face. ‘How about we assist African football youth hopefuls with more regular tournaments, prizes and trophies?’

I could not type fast enough. ‘Please arrange several tournaments at Goma, of teams from all over our region, 16-18, 18-21, etc, and pay for their travel and hotels. Create suitable cash prizes for teams and individuals. Please televise it. Afterwards, make the tournaments twice yearly. I am happy to fund internal youth leagues in all countries in our region.’

That was followed by an email from the TV production company I had offered to buy. They would sell. I got the accountants on the case, but in the meantime emailed them back. ‘Can you send teams down to Goma to create a series of one-hour documentaries. They could be two hour if you like. First, the growth of Goma hub, then fish farming, then the new parliament, the cadet movement, the orphanages – please visit Ebede in Kenya, the story behind the banana and tomato concentrates, the growth of the northern rail line link, a story about the new German hydroelectric turbines, and anything else you can think of. But absolutely no criticism of African politics. Be neutral. And any animal programmes are great. And fishing.’

The next email suggestion was just as far away from creating jobs as the football tournaments, but I loved it. ‘How about a golf tournament with a big prize, to attract world class golfers.’

With a smile, I send back. ‘Yes, offer a million pounds in prizes, and run them three times year in Goma and River View, two weeks apart so that people can attend both. Wait till the new hotels are finished in Goma.’

The following ten emails almost sent me to sleep, I could hardly figure a reply. I had asked for what the minister would spend money on if they had it. Maybe I worded it badly, since the suggestions seemed to be all over the place, and not focused on regional advancement or job creation. Either that, or the people we hired were crap. Jimmy though they were all fine, so was this a case of them being good at tackling the problems under their noses, but not thinking outside the box?

I finally found a suggestion that made some sense, especially to the more devious side of my nature. The Junior Defence Minister suggested a combined Officer Training College. I wondered if he was thinking what I was thinking, in that army officers often ended up in power – sometimes by force.

Wondering if the guy was being smart, or simply thinking of pan-African cooperation, I readily agreed to fund a new college at Forward Base, places for thousands of officer cadets. I contacted Sykes and asked him to assist in finding some former British Officers to help run it. And that innocuous request led to a far-reaching shift in NATO policy. And Russian military policy. And Chinese.

When I mentioned to Jimmy the new officer training college he smiled oddly and folded his arms. I puzzled that, but explained what I had in mind.

‘Great idea,’ he commended. ‘And influencing future leaders – excellent thinking young man.’

‘But...?’

‘Oh, nothing,’ he said with a grin.

I spent all night trying to figure out what was wrong. Helen racked her brains as well.

The next afternoon, Hardon Chase called me. ‘Paul, this officers college in the Congo, you doing it to influence future leaders?’

‘That was never the intention,’ I lied. ‘I was thinking of a common army in the future.’ I should not have said that.

‘What?’

I realised what I had just said. ‘You know, the Rifles.’

‘They’re not a common army!’ Chase pointed out. ‘Anyway, we thought we’d *assist* with the college.’

‘You knock yourself out, and assist all you like – it’s all innocent cooperation.’ Now I sounded like I was lying, even to myself.

‘We will,’ he threatened. ‘I have a team on it already. Is the British Army sending down instructors?’

‘Yes, lots of them,’ I said. Then I changed the course of NATO with a comment that I had not thought through. ‘Thinking of sending soldiers down as well, you know, desert and jungle training.’

‘Ready for 2025?’ Chase asked.

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘Where better to train?’

‘And the Russians and Chinese?’

‘No interest at all,’ I said, and I still sounded like I was lying.

‘See you soon.’ He hung up, and I realised what I had done, almost.

I found Jimmy. ‘Hardon Chase thinks that college is to influence future leaders.’

‘It is.’

‘Well, yeah, but I think he got the impression I was being evasive.’

‘You probably were.’

‘And I hinted that UK soldiers would train there, ready for 2025, trying to put him off the scent.’

‘Oh dear.’

‘What’ll he do?’ I asked.

‘He’ll consider that US forces should be desert and jungle trained ahead of 2025, and nudge US units that way.’

‘And ... that seems fine,’ I puzzled.

‘Sure, we desire that they be desert-trained ready, but not quite yet. Still, young soldiers training now will be NCOs in 2025.’

‘And so...?’ I nudged.

‘Every fire starts with a spark, and every chess game won - started with a single pawn moved.’

‘So ... what have I done?’ I puzzled.

‘You moved a pawn, that will greatly assist with world peace.’

I stared at him. ‘OK, now I’m confused ... and my head hurts.’

‘You’ll figure it out. And give that college a good budget. Let the officer cadets fly light aircraft, helicopters, parachute, the works. I want that college to be a guarantee of a great career. Make it a three year course.’

‘Three years?’ I questioned. ‘Sandhurst Military Academy is forty weeks odd.’

‘They have to study as well. Some will be graduates already, but most will be eighteen at entry. It’s Africa. For the graduates, it could be two years. But what we’re aiming at, is that someone leaving is not just on par with his western counterpart, but better.’

‘Fair enough. Still don’t see what the fuss is all about.’

‘Let it unfold,’ Jimmy said with a grin.

Forward Base

With the move of many of our facilitators up to the Goma’s Pentagon building, office space and apartments were available in Forward Base, some grabbed by Rescue Force and others. I informed them of the officer training college and they halted plans to move things around. Ngomo was given overall control of the project, and he already knew what he wanted to achieve. He made a quick visit to Forward Base and drew up designs for lecture theatres, barracks and additional classrooms. Besides that, he had all he

needed to hand; a large army base, an airfield, firing ranges, gym and pool, hills and jungle nearby.

He duly ordered a larger Married Quarters for overseas instructors, apartments for visiting instructors, and a hotel for visitors, family or otherwise. All Congolese officer cadets would attend from September. Zambia signed up, Burundi, Malawi, Somalia and Tanzania. Ngomo's own country held out, because they had a fine college and a fine tradition in Kenya. Sierra Leone and Liberia signed up after they figured out that it would be a good thing – and free, and Zimbabwe joined after a short review. The September intake would be full, if not bursting at the seams. Extra barracks were hurriedly built, extra classrooms, some two thousand entrants due to start the course. The corporation nudged additional warm bodies to Gotham City and freed up an admin building or two.

Sykes had found twenty former Army officers, the men willing to work at the college for a few months a year, plus a few retired British NCOs that were specialists in certain technical subjects. They would be joined in August by American instructors, plus British and American civilian lecturers. That led to a quick review by the British and American Governments, who now assigned serving members of their armed forces to the college.

An American Army Colonel turned up at the house a few days later, unexpected. I showed him to the diner and got him a coffee.

'Long way for a chat,' I commented.

'On my way to Forward Base,' he explained.

'To do what? Teach at the college? It ain't open yet!'

'No, I'll be at the base occupied by Air Transport. We're expanding it to include an infantry training depot.'

'Goma hub is good for a visit, but your boys will need to behave - the cops are all ex-Rifles.'

'That's why I'm here. We intend to put our guys through jungle and desert training, Rifles style.'

'Well, it's never going to quite the same,' I commented.

'Why?' he defensively challenged.

'They start at seventeen, the discipline and training harsh, and they see a lot of action. Can you teach that?'

'It's a good point,' he conceded. 'Which is why I'm here. We can't reproduce that, but we've been ordered to go as far as we can to match them.'

Jimmy stepped in, placing down a stack of files, the officer standing. Jimmy waved him down as he sat. 'So, Rifles training, eh?'

‘Yes,’ the Colonel agreed.

‘I’ve arranged for a large base to be created in the north of Somali, a second near Mawlini. They’ll both be able to handle three thousand men at a time, and you’ll need to pay the Somalis and Kenyans a few dollars for upkeep.’ He handed over a thick file. ‘Desert, mountain and jungle. My ... suggestions. We’ll also assign you officers and NCOs to assist, and we have a variety of weapons for you, plenty of ammo. I’ve outlined a sixteen week programme with two breaks for R and R. Will they all be injected?’

‘Yes, the basic drug, some with the stronger version,’ the Colonel reported.

‘They’ll need it,’ Jimmy cautioned.

‘The first batch through will remain as instructors,’ the Colonel explained. ‘Help to refine the course.’ He paused. ‘I’m security cleared, sir. May I ask if the course you’ve outlined is ... based on future events?’

‘It is,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘The course contains civilian control and marshalling techniques, riots, roadblocks, and bomb detection and disposal. In the years ahead it’ll be extended.’

With the Colonel gone, I said, ‘I thought they’d be too proud for training alongside the Rifles.’

‘If ... events had not been altered, they’d be fighting in Afghanistan and learning useful things about desert and mountain warfare, as well as counter-terrorism. They’re not, so I have to give them the benefit of what they should know by now. I’m just thankful that Hardon Chase is pushing the training.

‘The problem, is that western soldiering styles are designed for the survival of our troops, not the maximum inflicted casualties on the enemy. When our soldiers are shot, their colleagues stop and help, pulling back. To win, you need to ignore the wounded and keep pressing forwards the attack. The Rifles know that, but they don’t teach that at Sandhurst yet.’

‘The Americans be ready before 2025?’

‘Depends on who gets into the White House. Fifteen years is a long time.’

‘I’m still not seeing anything odd about the college, or this new training,’ I pressed.

‘That’s why they pay me the big bucks,’ he said as he left.

On my way back to my house I noticed Jimmy standing alone on the edge of the grass, staring down towards the main gate. I drew level with him. ‘Intruders?’

‘No,’ he softly replied. ‘Just thinking.’

‘About what?’

‘I’m going to make myself unavailable for a few days. Tonight, have your family eat in the diner, and if anyone should ask about US soldiers in the Congo, be ... obtuse.’

‘OK,’ I reluctantly let out.

‘You know why I started the student flights programme?’

‘So that the current-day business leaders would have travelled over to Russia when students, and now they know that the Russians are not so scary ... and just like us. Only poorer. Apart from the very rich ones.’

‘You have learnt well, Grasshopper,’ he joked. ‘And the easiest way to get someone to do something is...?’

‘Tell them not to.’

‘I’ll be back in a few days. And, if you don’t screw it up, the entire world will lurch forwards and take a giant leap, a full five or ten years early.’

I lifted my eyebrows. ‘No pressure then.’

Big Paul pulled around the corner in a Range Rover. Jimmy jumped in and drove off, leaving me staring down at the gate. I surprised Helen and the girls by insisting we eat in the diner, something we rarely did these days. Our girls often ate there after being told off, it was their sulk zone – where they knew they’d get sympathy from the household gang. We claimed a booth and surprised Cookie.

‘How’s the food in this joint?’ I loudly asked, Michelle and Jack already eating. Jack had a wife that cooked, he just didn’t like her cooking much.

‘Cooker broken?’ Cookie asked us.

‘Having a rest,’ I told him. ‘Four full English breakfasts with extra everything,’ I ordered, surprising Helen and the girls. We were on a health kick at the moment, greasy food banned.

Michelle eventually asked about the US Army Colonel.

‘They’re setting up a base in our region. Infantry training.’

‘What kind of ... base?’ she gently nudged.

‘They’re learning how to fight in the jungle and desert. A programme that Jimmy set up.’

‘Jimmy set it up?’ Jack asked. ‘He ... designed it?’

‘Yep, long course, lots of detail.’ Helen and the girls ate quietly, wondering what I was talking about.

‘This course,’ Jack pressed. ‘It was designed to fight against *you know who?*’

Shelly faced him. 'You're not some sort of spy type, are you Uncle Jack?'

Jack smiled. 'No, my dear, I tend the rose garden.'

'I think the answer to your question ... is yes,' I told him.

'So why now, and why America?' Michelle probed.

'Because when the time comes you'll not be there, they will,' I toyed, making it up as I went along. 'They'll be the spearhead troops.'

'Makes sense,' Jack agreed.

I could see Michelle's grey matter working away.

'Jimmy's off on a secret trip for a few days,' I slipped in. 'In case you're trying to reach him.'

'We can practise French conversation,' Shelly suggested to Michelle.

Shelly had grown up not liking Michelle, but now that my daughter was blossoming she found Michelle a role model. There was also some jealousy of Michelle, because she spent time with Jimmy, and Shelly idolised Jimmy.

'I'd like that,' Michelle offered.

Helen shot me a look. She spoke perfect French, but what child wanted lessons from her mum!

Han came to my office the next day, his first time ever. 'Am I disturbing you?'

'Never, always have time for you. Apart from when I'm asleep.'

Han gave me a look over the top of his glasses. 'I was interested in this new venture, the training of American soldiers in Africa.'

'Sorry, I'm too busy to talk,' I joked.

Han sat down anyway. And stared at me. 'Since Batman is away, I will have to make do ... with Robin.'

'You're supposed to say: since the organ grinder is away, I'll make do with the monkey.' He stared at me. 'Jimmy is teaching the Americans, some of them, how to fight the Brotherhood.'

'And when was that decision taken, might I ask, Monkey Boy?'

I smiled widely. 'Only a few weeks ago.' I held my hands wide. 'They haven't even started yet.'

Han stood. 'Would you happen to know ... why this has come about?'

'Jimmy thinks that they'll be the spearhead force in the desert.'

'Not the Rifles?'

'I'd guess both, at some point. Middle East is a big place, and the Rifles will operate in the South. That was the plan the last time we discussed it – was it not?'

Han bowed his head and left, leaving me grinning. I figured I knew what Jimmy was up to and gave him my theory when he returned.

‘No,’ he said, deflating me.

‘Did I screw it up?’

‘No, you did well.’

I went off to start drinking heavily.

That following week, Jimmy came up to the office and we opened a map of the DRC, our corporation guy with us. ‘Let’s order six new oil-fired power stations for the south and southwest, and plenty of high voltage cabling and towers. But let’s award contracts to European companies to keep the politicians here happy; British, French and German. Hydroelectric projects are good in some areas, less effective in others.

‘OK, the local councils in each of our towns are quite good these days, and they know what each town needs. So let’s give them a bigger budget, a capital investment grant for buildings, roads, sewers, and industrial parks.

‘Next, let’s have a look at Africa’s image, and employ extra people in each major city to clean it up, including some of those outside the zone. Start with Nairobi and Mombassa, Dar es Salaam, Mogadishu and Kinshasa, and lets employ an army of out-of-work people to clean up.

‘Next, we need to look at traffic, and traffic cops. The roads are often terrible, and they all drive like Italians. But, if we made sure that every car was roadworthy ... there’d be none left. So let’s think about more traffic cops in our region tightening up on the worst excesses, and let’s invest in more traffic lights, roundabouts and bypasses. We aim to create jobs, and we could hire twenty thousand traffic cops straight away – many of who could drive electric cars.

‘OK, electric buses; we’re not even scratching the surface. There have to be a million clapped-out old buses trundling around Africa belching smoke. We have less than a thousand. So let’s organise a massive rollout, concentrating on the cities; city centre to suburbs and back for the daily commute to work.

‘That port we’re developing in Angola, Lobito, turn it into a major city. Stick a frigging marina in it, apartments, the works. There are two airports nearby, so enhance them. I think that area will be an important hub in the future, very important. And drop a few hints that it’ll be a major commerce centre in the future – through the African Times. Po and Yuri should be interested. Oh, and our TV channel goes live in a few days; Central African News.’

He stood. 'Pack a bag, we'll pop down tomorrow. We can view the large muddy hole that will be a marina some day.'

I got to work and set the directives, as well as allocating money – the easy part. And I still hadn't spent a fifth of the budget available. The last thing I did before leaving was to order two thousand electric scooters for Kenya, a move that many people would live to regret.

Landing at Goma International Airport, I could see building work in the distance and pointed it out to Jimmy.

'Extending the airfield a bit. Again. It's years ahead of schedule and suffering growing pains.'

We booked into the golf hotel, its rooftop bar identical to that of River View in Mombassa. Meeting with the hotel's manager, and his team of European and American marketing experts, they explained the preparations for the golf tournament. Without any nudging from us, they had organised an Africa tournament first, a top prize of a hundred thousand dollars. That would be followed a month later by an open world tournament, top prize half a million dollars. They explained to us that any well-known player could stay at our hotels for free. Generous of them. From now on, Gotham City would be witness to at least eight tournaments a year, of some description.

Jimmy then suggested, 'Hold a charity tournament, for Rescue Force, where any world leader can play. They have to contribute ten thousand dollars to Rescue Force to enter.'

'Does our Prime Minister play?' I thought out loud.

'Hardon Chase plays,' Jimmy mentioned.

'I can just see him on the green – with his thirty bodyguard scuffing up the grass!'

The new marina was as described: just a muddy hole in the ground, several cranes in position. It was bordered by another muddy hole, that of the new casino.

'I've ordered another marina,' Jimmy informed me.

'Where?'

'You know the valley between Spiral One and Two? In there. A canal will reach down towards the lake, but it'll need sections of road to be bridged. No big deal. That will then take the canal all the way around the back to the Pentagon, where they can make another small marina with cafes for the staff to lunch at.'

'The Venice of Africa,' I commented.

'I've asked that all building rainwater run-off be channelled through the canals, or they'll stink a bit.'

We drove the short distance to Senator Pedersen's tower, taking the elevator to the top floor, the building security letting us onto the

roof. Perched under a mobile-phone mast in a stiff breeze, we stared out at our creation.

‘It’s grown a bit,’ I quipped, peering down at the marina’s building site. The Pentagon building looked nice from this angle, and Spiral I and II reminded me still of the Los Angeles hills. ‘Why have the airport smack in the centre?’

‘Only suitable place for it; alternate site was six miles down the road. Besides, it adds a buzz to the place, and they don’t fly at night too much.’

Facing the other way, I could see the boulevard stretching out towards the sprawling hospital complex, the vast university next to it. I pointed. ‘Is that a church?’

‘Yes, I funded it after people complained. There are a few small chapels in the shanty towns, but the rich locals wanted one.’

I could see the winding road towards old Goma town, now dotted with houses, estates and factories.

A local official stepped out to us. ‘Sorry to disturb you, sir, but I thought that this would be a perfect time to discuss Mister Yuri’s proposal for a public viewing site here.’

‘Great idea,’ Jimmy commended. ‘But fence it all over so that no one can jump. There are four lifts, so make one dedicated to coming up here, and don’t let people use the stairs. We don’t want the tourists disturbing people who live here.’

‘It would be 10am to 4pm, sir.’

‘Fine. Thank you.’

The man handed us a tourist guide before he left. I opened it and read, ‘Zoo, Spa hotel, Golf complex, inland lake, shopping centre, safari lodges, safari trips, helicopter rides. Well, the marinas will improve the city attractions. But how about a monster shopping centre?’

‘Yuri and Marko are planning one, next to the casino. It’ll be aimed at the tourists, but this place has a few millionaires living here already. And with the golf tournament crowds, the shops should survive all year round.’ He pointed. ‘You see the lakeside – I’m planning on developing the whole thing, a mile or two each way, lots of canals and marinas. The new stock exchange will be further down, next to it a glass fronted office block, next to that more apartments.’

‘Will this place be your legacy?’

‘I don’t think of it in those terms. It’s a laser light show for Africa, to attract business.’

Listening to “The Girl from Ipanema”, the lift took us slowly back down to ground level, a helicopter waiting for us at the airport. Our security boarded a second Huey, a thirty-minute flight made to Big Paul’s fish farm.

Flying over it, I could see a million sparkling channels through the dense green foliage. It was as if the bushes themselves were growing out of a vast lake. ‘What’s the current acreage?’ I asked through the headset.

‘I think he said fifty thousand acres. There are a dozen of these now, many smaller ones that the locals run.’

Our Huey touched down in the parking forecourt of a large factory made from clad steel panels, the management lined up ready. Away from the Huey, we shook hands with the manager, and he led us inside, and to the strong whiff of fish. Workers in plastic aprons and headgear attended numerous conveyor belts, large boxes of ice everywhere.

The manager lifted a finished pack of fish, vacuum packed and frozen. It didn’t appear any different to that found in British supermarkets; except that these were fresh water fish, and destined for local consumption. There were no Cod here.

‘How far do they get shipped?’ I enquired.

‘As far as Nairobi, in frozen train cars,’ the manager explained.

‘Frozen train cars?’ I queried.

‘Mister Steffan Silo brought them from abroad, sir. The train goes once a week through Burundi, Tanzania and to Nairobi.’

‘Where does most of it go?’ I asked.

‘Most is consumed in the country, sir, but we are developing an export market; Zambia and Uganda.’

With our nostrils complaining, we toured the factory like electioneering politicians, before flying a short hop across to one of the vast greenhouse projects. There I recognised a face.

‘You were in Shanghai?’ I whispered.

‘Yes, sir. My wife and family are now with me here. Come.’ He keenly led us to a greenhouse, I had to stop and laugh.

Pointing, I said, ‘What the fuck are those?’

‘They are marrows, sir. Big ... marrows.’

I banged a fist onto a marrow as big as myself.

Jimmy said, ‘Africa has very fertile soil, plenty of water and rain. It’s a great place to grow things like this.’

‘How long did that take to grow?’ I asked our guide.

‘That is one season – nine months. Then they are harvested, cut up and packaged nearby.’ He led us to the next greenhouse, where

tomatoes, too fat to be supported by their own stems, lay on wooden slabs. And these tomatoes looked like red footballs.

I tried, and struggled, to lift one. 'Shit.'

'That single fruit can fill two three-litre containers,' our guide keenly explained.

'Why haven't I seen any reports about these?' I asked of our guide.

'We don't advertise the work here, sir.'

'No shit.'

He showed us giant potatoes and a variety of vegetables, before leading us onto a bus for a short ride to another steel-clad factory. Or at least it looked like a factory from the outside. Inside, our nostrils were again assaulted. We climbed up a flight of steel steps as a group, and peered down at large pens.

Stunned, I pointed. 'What the fuck is that?'

'It's a pig, sir.'

'A pig? It's a fucking elephant!' I stared down at a pig the size of a car, lying on its side.

Jimmy explained, 'They're growing six hundred pound pigs, which have all been injected with the drug. And, unlike humans, their offspring all have the blood. Problem is their legs.'

'Not strong enough to stand?'

'Not in the last six months of growth. But then they're turned into bacon.'

'Is that ... ethical?'

'Aim is to feed Africa, not to be ethical,' Jimmy retorted.

We clattered along a raised metal gangway, hundreds of super-sized pigs slumbering in the pens below us, either eating, or feeding their piglets. At the opposite end off this stinking shed, we stepped down and crossed into a second shed, this time it was our ears being assaulted - by a roaring clucking sound.

'Super-sized chickens?' I asked.

'Nope, just regular ones,' Jimmy explained. 'But their feed has been altered to an optimum. They grow quicker and produce more eggs. Now that the feed formula is right we'll build a hundred of these sheds, and the pigs have just gone into production, the vegetables being first canned six months ago.'

Over the noise of the chickens, I asked, 'How will this affect our food production?'

'Four fold.'

'Four fold? We ain't doing too badly now.'

‘Africa is a very big place, with many dark corners. We’re not making that much of a difference, not yet. Besides, the next decade will see a doubling of the population and the growth of internal markets. Consumer spending will grow, a middle class will grow – more luxury goods bought from the west.’

‘And the carbon footprint?’

‘Will grow, but be offset by hydroelectric projects and electric buses.’

Needing to be away from the smell, we exited the shed and walked around the outside, chatting to the mad scientist from Ebede as we progressed. Turns out that his buddy worked on the chicken feed, another working on fertilizer from volcanic ash – which we had a shit load of just laying around, right next to Gotham City. They planned on selling the chicken feed formula around the world, for which they’d get a cut. Very entrepreneurial, I considered. They also planned on selling the fertilizer around Africa and the wider world.

Flying back, I spotted dozens of shimmering patches of land, fish farms for locals. Now that I knew what to look for, I also spotted steel-clad sheds dotted about.

Through the headsets, Jimmy explained, ‘I’ve arranged for many of the fish nurtured here to be released in Lake Tanganika, as well as millions of fish fry. There’s a unit set-up to do just that. And certain waste foods get chopped up and dumped into the lake, like waste bread. The fish stocks are booming. As they are in the river sections you dammed off. And the UN, they’re installing greenhouses in remote villages, giving the locals some training, seeds and fertilizer. Already a few little agricultural industries going on in the deep jungle.’

‘How long till the world hears about the secret stuff here?’

‘Soon, because our exports are growing at a fantastic rate. Those frozen train carriages – we’ll need a lot more. We have refrigerated trucks, but they’re not cheap. I’ll arrange for British beef cattle to be brought down, and we’ll get started on developing a beef surplus soon enough. The world will notice when Africa starts turning away grain ships - and starts selling food!’

At the hotel, sat in the rooftop bar with a cold beer, I idly commented, ‘Those pigs had all sorts of technicians. They trying to make them even bigger?’

‘No, they’re trying to make us a few quid.’

‘Huh?’

‘They’re experimenting on the pigs, trying to make them slimmer.’

I puzzled that with a heavy frown, and a wry smile. ‘You genetically altered them to be huge, now you want them slim?’

‘What would it be worth to the world if you could pop a pill and lose twenty pounds?’ Jimmy asked, a glint in his eye.

‘As much as the drug itself, if not more!’

‘I don’t have the exact formula - I just know where to look. So, they’re looking.’

‘Why pigs?’

‘Because they’re close to humans, and we can’t experiment on humans.’

‘Could never not develop the stuff they gave you - to keep people slim?’

Jimmy smiled. ‘No, that would be a contradiction. Besides, *they* developed the drug to enhance soldiers, not for cosmetic reasons. And their research has never been repeated successfully, because the original scientists were desperate. Necessity ... *was* the mother of invention.’

Central African Television, aka Silo TV

On the third day we toured the Goma Pentagon building, a great many offices now in use, desks already cluttered. The place already looked lived-in. Secretaries had brought in flowers in plant pots and balconies were blooming, most having plastic garden furniture and tables.

We toured the various ministers, getting around to less than half of them that first day. We discussed their ideas, needs and desires, then gave them our own. We agreed budgets and projects, directions, and listened to their gripes and moans. Seems that politicians blowing hot air was not just a western practice.

It took all of the second day to get around to those we wished to meet, and by the end of it I was tired, if only mentally. I also made a mental note to recommend Unit 402 to shoot some of these pedantic politicians. And we were paying their wages! Hippos came to mind when dealing with some of them. At the end of that day I seriously needed a beer, or five.

‘How hard can it be to run a country?’

‘Well, most countries have around half a million people working at it full time, so don’t get frustrated when you can’t do their work all in one go.’

In the morning, we dusted off our best suits and headed to the new TV station, the building equipped with the latest technology and gadgets. They gave us the tour, nice of them considering that we paid for everything, and we watched an interview from behind glass screens, a debate about religious unrest in Chad. That done, it was our turn.

We sat and made ready, microphones attached by a nice young lady presenter, from Nigeria of all places. They counted down, despite the fact that it was not live.

‘Mister Silo, Mister Holton, welcome to Central African News,’ she began with.

‘Thank you for having us,’ Jimmy offered, an odd statement given that we owned the damn show.

‘May I start by asking how the new pan-African parliament is working out?’

‘It’s early days, but they’re already working hard on many new projects, across a wide range of subjects.’

‘In some ways, it is an outlet for your ideas, and your funding.’

‘Yes,’ I agreed, ‘But we would prefer that Africa makes its own decisions. We would then simply guide projects where we thought it was necessary. We listen to ideas and proposals from the various ministers, and then try to help get them implemented where we have influence.’

‘Can you give us an example?’

‘Sure. The Health Minister brought up the matter of truant children working in rubbish dumps, or working underage. So we’re now looking to extend our orphanage programme to include enforced orphanage.’

‘Enforced orphanage?’

‘If we find young children risking their lives and their health working in unsanitary places like rubbish dumps, we’ll remove them by force to a nearby orphanage, clean them up, feed them and educate them – whether they or their parents like it or not.’

‘You would ignore the parents wishes?’

‘What parent wishes their children to work in a rubbish dump?’ I challenged. ‘We would obviously work with the government and police of the various countries, but I am happy to enforce education.’

‘Mister Silo, what are your views on the recent conflict in Yemen?’

‘No country should suffer terrorism at the hands of a neighbour. Somalia had been attacked for many years by rebel fighters operating out of the hills of Yemen, but they finally snapped. The problem is the terror group known as al-Qa’eda, who encouraged the Yemen fighters to attack northern Somalia. That group claims to fight the west in the name of Islam, but Somalia is an Islamic country. Where is their credibility?’

An hour later we were still at it, a great many questions answered, many topics discussed. Our segment was not due to go out as one large lump, but to be cut and edited into smaller sections and dropped into other programmes when necessary.’

Wandering around, we found small studios where our own words were being turned into subtitles, in twelve languages, including French and Portuguese, which were still spoken in large parts of Africa.

After lunch, a TV crew accompanied us to the top of the tallest tower, and we gave a documentary style talk about the planned building work below us. With interviews from all of the sixty ministers, our new TV news service had plenty of material; they’d not be short of air-minutes. Our documentary company had already finished four simple programmes and were busily editing upstairs. We sat with them.

A young British editor explained, ‘This is about the fish farms and the greenhouses. We’ve caught the process of the greenhouses from oil in the ground, to the refinery, to the plastic factory, and finally the crop planting.’

‘Keep it simple,’ I said. ‘Most people watching can’t even write.’

In the control room, we found two Americans from Blake Carrington’s company, of which we owned just under fifty percent. Displayed across a large wall were twenty-two channels currently being broadcast. Eight seemed to be the news, in a variety of languages. Four seemed to be football, two cartoons, two old movies, and the rest were showing African-made sitcoms.

‘Do we have any sponsors?’ I asked.

‘Queued up ready, but we’re not running the ads yet,’ they reported. ‘Another couple of rooms needed to cut them ready, account executives hired.’

‘Where you living?’ I asked.

‘Rockerfella Centre,’ the man answered with a grin.

‘Rockerfella?’ I repeated.

‘That’s what we call it. The tall tower, which is also called Tower Twelve, Tall Dozen, the Scraper; depends on who you talk to. But if you tell a taxi driver you want The Tall Tower they know.’

‘How you finding the city?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Cheap,’ they said. ‘Even the expensive stuff!’

The first man explained, ‘We play golf - and use the bar at the course, the restaurants up Spiral One or Two, or the new ones at the Pentagon. Looking forward to the casino and marina.’

‘Been on a safari yet?’ I asked.

‘No time, been hectic setting up. But we will soon. Haven’t been to the zoo yet either. I liked the designs for the stock exchange area, so I’ll move there when it’s ready. Chicago boy you see; towers and rivers.’

‘Going to buy when I can,’ the second man put in. ‘Property around here rises thirty percent or more a year!’

‘We’ll be starting on Spiral III soon,’ Jimmy told them. ‘Further up into the hills, upwards of three hundred houses, some millionaire pads. And the people we employ can get a hundred percent mortgage at three percent.’

‘Don’t forget to cover the golf tournaments,’ I told them as we left.

Back at the hotel, they were showing our news channel on screens in the foyer and bar. I even glimpsed myself, but not from today’s interview. A file was waiting for us at reception, and Jimmy glanced at it as we headed towards our rooms.

‘Have a look,’ he said outside my room, and I stepped in with it, surprised to find a bodyguard on the balcony.

He stepped toward me. ‘I wait outside the door, sir.’

‘Do you always wait in the room?’ I puzzled.

‘Yes, sir. No room of you can be empty. When the maid come - I look, sir. And I look for the bug and the bomb.’

‘Oh, OK. Thanks’

I grabbed a chair and glanced at a series of sketches of the new marina. It would have a number of different theme bars and restaurants. I saw an Indian, Thai, Chinese, Creole, French, Italian, Spanish, British – although I couldn’t figure what they’d serve, an American diner, an American steak house, a fish restaurant and a few others. Beneath them would be Ye Olde English Bar, French Bar, Italian café, ice cream parlour, a wine bar, techno bar – neon lights, retro bar, jazz bar, piano bar, karaoke bar, and many daytime café’s for the wandering tourist with a few dollars to waste. This marina would be my kind of place.

At the evening meal I asked Jimmy about the guy in my room.

‘My new rule: no car or room left alone, just in case. Room maids are carefully watched.’

‘Any specific threat?’

‘One, but they’re being quiet. They may have even given up.’ He did not explained who “they” were.

The rooftop bar contained a sprinkling of ministers, and we chatted for hours, a few good ideas floated. The sun dipped behind Spiral II, the dying amber light reflected off the tower block windows. It was a nice spot to have a city.

Sat quietly chatting, I heard a distant rumble.

‘That was a bomb,’ Jimmy said, standing. He stepped quickly to the nearest bodyguard and told him to use his radio as other men closed in, the rooftop guests concerned.

‘A bomb in old Goma town, Rwanda side, many dead, sir.’

Jimmy lifted his phone. ‘Bob, Jimmy. Been an explosion in old Goma town. I want Rescue Force Congo fully mobilised, and surgical teams from Mawlini.’ He dialled again, to PACT. ‘This is Silo. There’s been a bomb attack in old Goma town. I want roadblocks in Rwanda, every five miles. Close their borders, same for Uganda, and get Kenya checking everyone. The bombers didn’t fly in.’

‘Should we go?’ I asked.

‘And do what?’ Jimmy curtly asked.

Ministers closed in to discuss the turn of events, many making calls, the rooftop now a mini-command centre. Fifty soldiers had turned up within minutes, and the sky was now full of the roar of Hueys heading east over the lake, both Rescue Force and Congolese Rifles. I figured on at least twenty Hueys and two Chinooks.

The head of PACT turned up, the local police chief and the head of the Congo Rifles in tow. Jimmy led them to a quiet table.

‘They could have placed that bomb here, if they wanted to hurt me,’ Jimmy began. ‘Assuming that it’s not a gas main.’

‘Early reports say a truck bomb,’ the head of PACT reported.

‘So why there?’ Jimmy thought aloud. ‘Someone ... knows that I have a city here, but that someone is so stupid that they think my base is Goma town, even on the Rwanda side. Either that, or the bomb went off early.’

‘We have a lot of officers on the border,’ the police chief pointed out. ‘A truck bomb would not be easy to get through. The drivers, they must have business here.’

‘Then the bombers are stupid,’ Jimmy surmised. ‘Which could be al-Qa’eda.’ He pointed at the head of PACT. ‘I want Kenya, Tanzania and Somalia on full alert. Lock down everything.’

When the man returned to us, Jimmy asked, ‘If you were to look at a map, and you were the truck driver, how would you escape?’

‘It’s a thousand miles to any coastline!’

‘They couldn’t fly,’ I put in.

‘They’d have to drive out, in another truck, to avoid suspicion,’ the head of PACT suggested.

‘Concentrate on the Ugandan/Rwandan border, but ask the Tanzanians and Kenyans to lock their western borders down tight.’

The man stepped away again.

When Jimmy’s phone went it was Bob Davies. ‘Jimmy, there’s got to be three hundred dead in that town, fires raging.’

‘Are we on top of it?’

‘Those that we found alive should make it. Surgical teams on their way, many being transported to your hospital there.’

‘Does that hospital know?’

‘Yes, they’ve got a triage area set-up, doctors returning to duty. Mawlini’s Alpha Team is airborne, be with you inside the hour.’

‘Might find people in the rubble. Keep me updated. Thanks.’ Jimmy faced me. ‘That bomb was crude. Hitting African civilians won’t affect my operations.’

‘Then it was terror they were after,’ the police chief stated.

‘Al-Qa’eda do their homework,’ Jimmy commented. ‘This lot didn’t.’

The army chief took a call. Returning to us, he said, ‘Roadblocks every ten miles across this region, sir. As far as Kinshasa.’

Kimballa called, concerned, followed by various heads of states, and finally Abdi.

Abdi asked, ‘Did my war in Yemen cause this?’

Jimmy replied, ‘We don’t know yet. But if was to do with Yemen they would hit you, not here.’

‘We have closed all access points, roadblocks everywhere,’ Abdi reported.

‘Thank you, my friend. We’ll talk tomorrow.’

Shelly called me, concerned; it was all over the British news. I reassured her that we were alright, and I spoke with Helen for ten minutes, through a background drone of heavy helicopters as our Chinooks ferried the wounded to our hospital.

At midnight, most of the ministers and guests had disappeared, leaving officials, ourselves, and the bodyguards. Food was brought

up to us and we ate under the stars as reports came in. At 1am we journeyed together in an electric bus to the hospital, stepping through bloodstains, the reception area crammed with injured people being treated. Fortunately, there were not too many kids; the bomb had gone off at night.

The senior Cuban surgeon stepped out to us, blood on his gown. 'We are saving who we can, but we have all operating theatres full, some people being operated on in wards. Twenty have died, maybe a hundred will be saved.'

'Thank you, doctor,' Jimmy offered him.

'Thanks to your drug we can work all night, no problem. And we are injecting the burns patients, giving them hope.'

It was an odd statement, the first time I had heard it. Medics were telling us they could work all night because they had received the drug. Was this the future?

Ratchet walked in, helping his co-pilot. I stepped up to him and assisted. 'Did you down a bird?'

'No, a house blew, hitting us in the nose glass. Fucking great fire burning over there, all the shanty houses going up.'

With the co-pilot being seen by one of his own colleagues, an RF nurse, I lifted my phone and dialled Rudd. 'Rudd, sorry to disturb you —'

'I've just seen it on the news. You are OK?'

'Yeah, yeah, fine. Listen, those self-assembly homes we give out: I want five hundred delivered to the Rwandan side of Goma as fast as possible.'

'No problem, we have many I can divert. Leave it with me.'

I dialled Mawlini, getting a duty officer. 'It's Paul Holton. Listen, I want a reconstruction crew in Goma tomorrow, couple of hundred people. Thanks.' Turning, I was surprised to find Anton and Cassie, backed by a solid wall of white uniforms.

'Where do you need us?' she asked.

'Surgeons back there, rest to do triage when the choppers land, few in here.'

Cassie barked orders, the solid white mass splitting up. I stepped outside and into the dark night as a Chinook approached. It flared, blasting me with av-gas scented air, its rear already down. RF staff piled off, met by their colleagues, forty casualties helped out, most able to walk. Forty; that had to be tipping the load balance for the helicopter, I considered. The RF staff rejoined the heavy beast, the Chinook pulling away with its ramp down and disappearing over the lake.

As I stood there, I was suddenly very proud of Rescue Force, and proud of the way that the emergency services here had responded; the people of Goma were getting the best care. There was then just the small matter of the cause of the bomb, which may have been us.

Hardon Chase called, and I gave him the details, no suspects so far. As the sun threatened to rise over Rwanda we were in the rooftop bar having breakfast. Then we got a break, a lorry stopped heading towards Uganda; two Sudanese on board, their papers false.

‘Sudan?’ I queried.

‘At some point,’ Jimmy speculated, ‘their President must have figured out how and why he took such losses – assuming that it’s the Sudanese President and not a faction. Or even al-Qa’eda. And there’s always the possibility that the bombers were just paid fools.’

‘Meaning ... someone completely different could have been behind it.’

‘Well, someone who can’t read a fucking map.’

‘PACT going to interrogate the suspects?’ I asked.

‘Being flown over. In fact, should be there by now. After breakfast we’ll fly over to Goma town.’

As we flew across the lake, a few Chinooks and Hueys passed us heading the other way, the operation ongoing. We landed next to other Hueys, a field acting as a transport hub, and walked forwards with our bodyguards, the men now kitted out in camouflage clothing and heavily armed. We commandeered an RF jeep, its driver told to take us to the bombsite, and we weaved slowly through a mix of local traffic and other RF jeeps. I could see local people walking around as if in a daze, some carrying their belongings on their heads and walking out of town, children trailing along behind.

Pulling up near to the destroyed truck, we stepped down onto a scorched mess of wood and brick. Nothing much was standing for a hundred yards in any direction, just a few brick chimneys. Hundreds of RF staff now lifted wooden and metal sheets, searching for survivors, a few locals being treated on the roadside for minor wounds.

The ground commander walked up to us. ‘Done what we can,’ he reported, his uniform blackened. ‘No one found for hours.’

‘I have some of those self-assembly homes on the way,’ I told him. ‘Put them up nearby. Everyone who lost a home – gets a new one.’

Progressing further through the debris field, being careful where we stepped, I could see what was left of the truck, forensics guys now poring over it.

One stopped and faced us. 'Simple device, manual time, mining dynamite used.'

'Can you identify the dynamite's manufacturer?' Jimmy asked.

'Found a few sticks undamaged, got the name all over it. Sudanese.'

Jimmy and I exchanged a look. 'The timer?' Jimmy pressed.

'Kindergarten time,' the man reported. 'Simple, but effective.'

Returning to the golf hotel, Jimmy ordered that airport security be scaled down, and that tourists not be inconvenienced. We snatched two hours sleep, washed and changed, a TV interview – or ten – to handle. The world's media had travelled overnight, flights from several capitals coming direct to Goma airport. The Pentagon building offered a communications suite, and we now made good use of it. Two hours later I needed a beer, having said the same thing many times over to different TV crews – including our own!

Our own news channel was full of the story, images from the scene augmented with images from the hospital, plenty of images of RF staff. In total, some four hundred RF staff had been called out, the RF reconstruction crews now landing and driving over to Rwanda. Self-assembly houses had been diverted from around the region, and were being filmed arriving. I was in my hotel room, getting updates from our own TV news channel. Somehow, they had film of me at the hospital.

When the head of PACT rang us, it was to relay what the interrogation had revealed. The men did not work for the Sudanese Government, but for an oil group. Jimmy questioned that, because most of the oil companies in Sudan were not state owned, but foreign. The oil company was, apparently, aggrieved about being cheated by us, and PACT now had names and details, which they were investigating.

'Someone we cheated?' Jimmy puzzled, easing back. 'Or someone who lost out to us.'

He rang the CEO of CAR, asking if we had ever made competitive tenders against any Sudanese companies. An emphatic no came back. Besides, we didn't make tenders - we favoured the political route. It was a mystery. He asked the CEO to find out if any Sudanese companies had asked for deals in Somalia, Kenya or Tanzania.

The CEO came back on fifteen minutes later, stating that a Sudanese oil company had tried to get access to Somalia before the Darfur conflict. They were interested in the region near Mawlini. Well, a truck bomb would not get near Mawlini, so Goma had been

their target, we realised. But why not hit Kenya - we had hotels there? We put all of our interests in Kenya on alert, just in case.

Later that day, Sykes came on. 'Paul, that Sudanese oil company, it has shares owned by the President and his family.'

'That's naughty. And a bit personal.'

'Are you about to do anything stupid?' Sykes asked.

'Probably. Keep digging on the company. Thanks.' I told Jimmy.

He made a face, and stared out over the golf course. 'Not making a lot of sense. He's not stupid, he knows we'd strike back. So what would a bomb achieve?' Jimmy called the CEO of CAR again. 'Who's lost out to that Sudanese oil company lately?'

'Rumour has it that a Nigerian company lost out in Southern Sudan because of bribes paid.'

'I don't care what you have planned for today, I want all your top staff finding out what they can about that story, and anything else going on in that region. Get back to me. Thanks.' He faced me. 'A Nigerian oil company lost out to the Sudanese oil company behind the bomb.'

He rang PACT. It turned out that the paymasters of the two bombers were not previously known to either man as employees of the Sudanese oil company, they were from Chad. And the bombers were simple lorry drivers being offered a lot of money.

'Nigerian oil?' I queried.

'They've been trying to get into the Congo for years. They still petition Kimballa every frigging week.'

The next call was Unit 402. Baby was coming out of the bag, and we were extending our stay.

In the morning, we flew over to Goma town again, this time to help erect new homes. TV crews were out in force as we took off our shirts and pitched in, seriously ruining trousers and shoes that were unsuitable for this type of work.

At 3pm, drinking from a water bottle handed to me by an RF crew, I pointed at a few odd people. 'Who are they?'

'No idea,' came back.

Then I could hear American accents, so I wandered over, sweaty and grubby.

'Oh, my, your Paul Holton,' a woman said.

'Yes. And you are...?'

'We were on holiday in one of your lodges when we saw the news, so we came over to help out.'

‘Oh. Well ... thanks. Good of you. But don’t get a splinter, please.’ When I next glanced their way a TV crew was filming their earnest efforts to assist. Guess they’d make the news.

At 5pm we flew back, suitably filthy, filmed re-entering the golf hotel.

The head of PACT joined us as we sat down to a meal some thirty minutes later, scrubbed up now. ‘Some odd news from Lagos. Seems that the building that housed a certain oil company lost its electricity. And phones, and mobiles, and all their computers died.’

‘You know how dodgy their electricity is,’ Jimmy quipped.

‘We looking at Sudan for this?’ the man asked.

‘Not unless we wish to make use of the opportunity it affords.’

‘Meaning,’ the man nudged.

‘That Sudan will be a pain in the future, whereas Nigeria will be an ally – baring certain individuals.’

‘Strike while the iron is hot,’ the man commented.

‘Might not have to,’ I suggested. ‘Do the press know yet?’

‘About the bombers? No.’

‘Revealing their nationality will harm Sudan, let alone anything else,’ I mentioned. ‘It’ll drive a wedge.’

‘Abdi might act alone,’ Jimmy cautioned. He faced the head of PACT. ‘Film the two men ready, please.’ The man left us. Jimmy faced me and said, ‘There’s a terror group that will come out of Sudan, but not for ten years or so. If we weaken Sudan, they may appear early, and attack Somalia, who would probably get the blame for any attack on Sudan. But, Somalia would absorb and kill them, which is part of why I built up Somalia. It may also help to split off Southern Sudan, a real prize – one that I haven’t pushed so far.’

He took a breath. ‘Make a few calls, bet the upside of oil.’

I headed off to my assigned task as the details of the bombers were released, an immediate and loud call for vengeance around our region, a call by the people themselves, Abdi true to form and condemning the Sudanese President. And the poor old Sudanese President was getting it from all sides; Russia, China, America, and Europe.

‘It’s nice to see,’ Jimmy commented.

‘What is?’ I puzzled.

‘African unity. Was a time when they wouldn’t think of the other nations as brothers – they’d be more likely to go to war with each other.’

We hopped onto a late night flight back to London, and left the row to simmer. This row, however, had plenty of TV news minutes,

images of the dead and dying, the two bombers, their dynamite from Sudan. The evidence was compelling, the condemnation loud – and from coast to coast around Africa. Our new TV news service had been tried in battle, millions of Africans watching the story unfold. And we had the exclusive.

I hugged the kids at the house, although they generally resisted these days, or ran away. At the same time, three oil executives in Nigeria disappeared, never to be seen again. They were followed by two gentlemen from Chad, who would never get to spend their ill-gotten gains.

Jimmy gave a great deal of thought to Sudan, and we talked it through several times, weighing up the pros and cons. He finally decided that 2025 was the key objective, and the Sudanese terror group should be put on a collision course with Somalia. He labelled it as a betrayal of Somalia, but we had a war to win.

Later that night, all of the bridges over the White Nile blew, truck bombs being employed. No one was hurt, but the citizens of Khartoum now faced a round trip of a few hundred miles to see the in-laws, or to get to work in the mornings. At the same time, Sudan's long and lonely oil pipeline to the Red Sea blew in ten places, the repair time estimated at six months.

Oil prices spiked and I made a few quid, diverting most towards old Goma town, where I planned a few new apartment blocks where a large hole now lay. From the ashes, old Goma town on the Rwandan side would grow. And rapidly.

The French and Germans were horrified, sure that the damage in Sudan was down to us. The British PM was also not impressed, but Hardon Chase offered to bomb Khartoum. The Russians and Chinese benefited from the loss of Sudanese oil and just didn't give a shit, the Indians placated with sales of Chinese oil from Zanzibar.

Meanwhile, the Pathfinders arranged for a shipment of canoes, along with a lot of rope, to be sent to Khartoum anonymously, just to be rude. Not understanding the joke, the innovative and practical people of Khartoum employed the canoes and rope to go back and forth across the river, causing much mirth in Pathfinder circles.

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Magestic

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Part 12

An independent Scotland

Jimmy was no big fan of the idea of Wales or Scotland becoming fully independent from England. Both of these countries now ran their own parliaments, but with limited powers. What they did have plenty of, were nationalistic politicians that believed they could do a better job of it. Well, all politicians thought that till the time came, and then screwed up just like the rest.

The case for Scottish nationalists was that Scotland had North Sea oilfields, even if those oilfields were in the dying throes of their life. They believed that Scotland could, and should, be a small and rich nation based on that oil presence. That was a belief and a hope, not a certainty. The Scottish National Party, the SNP, wanted to break away from Great Britain, after which all would be rosy north of the border. Forget the fact that they had one of the lowest life expectancies in Europe, a high obesity rate, and even higher alcohol and drug rate, plus large estates full of unemployed people.

Jimmy voiced an opinion on the matter, without wishing to get involved with local politics. The SNP, however, wished to debate the matter, after Jimmy had used a few hard words to describe them. He had likened them to Nazis, and those were the printable comments.

When asked by a journalist if he would debate the matter with the SNP, Jimmy replied, 'They would walk out of the interview, they certainly wouldn't answer my questions. Their belief in their ability to run an independent Scotland is just that – a belief with no substance. They have no plan for what they'd do after independence, other than ask Europe for money.'

The blue touch paper had been lit. A senior figure in the SNP agreed to debate the matter, and we travelled up to London on a fine June day. I aired caution, but Jimmy said that it was an issue that needed airing. The SNP's candidate, Mick Chandler, refused to shake Jimmy's hand in the studio. We were off to a good start. Helen and I sat in a side room to observe the taping of the show.

Once the adversaries had tested their microphones, Jimmy kicked things off, the interview technically his, the questions his, although he came with no prepared notes. 'Mister Chandler, may I call you Mick?'

'Sure,' the man conceded, amicable now that the cameras were on.

'Mick, why do you desire an independent Scotland?'

Straight forward enough so far.

‘All countries should be independent. Scotland used to be independent, the union with England was forced upon us.’

‘True, and I agree with you, but in most cases I’d rather see countries coming together than splitting apart. What role would you see for the European Union?’

‘An independent Scotland would be part of the European Union, it’s something that we’re very much in favour of.’

‘So you’d give up being told what to do by London in favour of being told what to do by Brussels?’

‘Countries within Europe have far greater freedom –’

‘And some have far greater unemployment, and a low standard of living. European Union membership does not guarantee a great quality of life. Talk to the Portuguese, the Greeks or the Baltic States, they’re in Europe – and struggling, as well as now questioning the benefits of membership. It’s not all rosy.’

‘No, but Scotland has great potential, and we’re starting from a more modern industrial base –’

‘And you think you have North Sea oil.’

‘We *do* have north sea oil, something that we should have benefited from over the past forty years.’

‘How?’

‘The oil revenue should have come to us.’

‘Did you pay the billions it cost to explore the North Sea? Did you pay the billions it cost for the oilrigs to be built and operated? The revenue you would have received is far lower than you might expect, because you would have had to allow in foreign oil companies – to do what you could have never afforded.’

‘It would still have been better than what we did receive,’ Chandler countered.

‘Really? Scotland has been a large net receiver of British taxes since the last war, the English subsidising you. You’re top-heavy with unemployed, operating an old industrial base that has been left behind as the world has moved on. How will you balance the shortfall between taxable income and your social bill?’

‘By re-organising our industrial base and workforce with money from North Sea oil.’

‘OK, let’s assume that North Sea oil lasts longer than I think it will, and that London hands over to you tens of billions of pounds worth of oil rigs and refinement plants without a fight – or would you nationalise the refineries – a breach of EU law?’

‘We would not nationalise the refineries, they’re run by private companies like BP and Shell.’

‘So you’d just grab the oil rigs, also owned by BP and Shell?’

‘No, no private property would be grabbed.’

‘So you would just take your cut of the oil revenue, as London does now.’

‘Yes, as the proper owners of the oil,’ Chandler agreed.

‘OK, so on day one of an independent - a supposedly richer Scotland, the English military withdraws, closing all bases in Scotland, a loss of some thirty thousand well paid jobs. How will you cope with those jobs losses.’

‘Why would the bases close?’

‘Because apart from Germany and Cyprus - with their particular histories - England does not keep military bases in other EU countries, especially not when they’re fighting over North Sea oil. So I’m pretty sure that all military bases would close and move south, a massive loss of jobs and taxable income for you.’

‘It would be an adjustment to be considered at the time.’

‘Are you saying that you haven’t thought through independence properly?’

‘Not at all –’

‘Then answer the question. What will you do when all military bases close?’

‘We’ll adapt and carry on, new jobs in new industries.’

‘And if Russian bombers strayed close to Northern Scotland? Who would scramble to meet them?’

‘An independent Scotland would be part of Europe, and within its defence treaty –’

‘The European Union doesn’t have a defence treaty, so you’d be on your own to start with. And English jet fighters would not scramble to aid you, no more so than they would for Southern Ireland. They might for Denmark or Norway, because they’re members of NATO. Would an independent Scotland be a part of NATO?’

‘It’s something we would consider at the time –’

‘Again, you have not thought it through. Yes or no, part of NATO or not? Because if you are a part of NATO then you’d be expected to maintain a suitable army, navy, and your own air force; all very expensive items. You can’t be NATO in name only; it’s a two-way street. You’d be happy to have a US bomber base in Scotland?’

‘No, we’re not in favour of having US bombers in Scotland.’

‘So you’d not get NATO entry, and you’d be defenceless. Fine, you’re choice. Moving on, what’s your definition of a Scottish national – someone with the right to reside there?’

‘They would have to be born in Scotland, as with any other country.’

‘So if Scottish parents working in England have a baby, it would not be Scottish or allowed to live there?’

‘It would be allowed, because the child’s parents are Scottish.’

‘And if one parent was Scottish?’ Jimmy asked.

‘That would have to be decided.’

‘Again, you haven’t thought it through, you’re guessing what you’ll do.’

‘Not at all –’

‘So one parent – allowed to reside or not?’

‘It would be decided in proper debate, since we don’t have that issue yet.’

‘You already offer free university places, England doesn’t. Would a child of a single Scottish parent be allowed to get a place?’

‘Again, that would be debated when the problem arises.’

‘And English people living in Scotland, could they send their kids to university there free of charge?’

‘If the child was born in Scotland.’

‘Could an English citizen - already working in Scotland, who becomes unemployed after independence, claim benefit there?’

‘That would depend on their status, and the years they had paid national insurance in Scotland.’

‘Fair enough. And the five million people, either Scottish – or with a Scottish parent, currently living in England and Wales – they’d no longer qualify to claim benefits or tax credits in England, and would need a new passport, obtained in Edinburg, and would need to exchange pounds to Euros when they popped home for a visit, passports shown at the border.’

‘The adoption of the Euro is something we would decide at time, given the economic circumstances.’

‘Given that it may be just a few short years away, perhaps the people of Scotland deserve to know now. Scottish pounds or Euros?’

‘I’ll not be drawn on it.’

‘How would you organise Scottish people living south of the border, returning to be registered for new passports?’

‘That’s a logistical process that we would plan for.’

‘Do you think England would expel them?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Why would they?’

‘They’d become non-citizens of England as soon as you declare independence. Their British passports would be void, no use to travel abroad. So they’d all have to travel to Edinburgh to get fresh passports, proving their heritage – where they could. Could a Scottish person born in England have an English passport, but live in Scotland and claim benefits?’

‘Again, it would be looked at.’

‘Right now there are five million people watching this programme who’re wondering where they stand. Do they not have a right to know?’

‘I won’t be drawn on theoretical scenarios –’

‘It’s not theoretical, they’re sat watching. And what of people who consider themselves Scottish, but whose parents were born in England, do they get passports? Surely not.’

‘You muddying the waters with small detail.’

‘That’s the problem with two countries that have been intertwined for hundreds of years: where do you draw the line? Who is Scottish, and gets free tuition fees, and who doesn’t qualify? The population of Scotland is around three million, a sizeable minority being English, or born in England. There are then five million people who could claim a Scottish passport, and if they chose to move back you’d have to support more than twice the population, and all the benefits, tax credits and health service.

‘Truth is, there are more Scottish people and their children living and working in England than there are in Scotland itself. Their taxes go to London, not to you, now or afterwards. And if the break with England was acrimonious then you could have a lot of people being made redundant south of the border. Your businesses would also need to pay export duties when trying to sell their goods south of the border. You could end up with a great many unemployed people on your hands.’

‘These are all things that our parliament would debate –’

‘You may not have a choice. Some of those choices would be made for you by England, where most of your citizens live and work. The London Government may wish to limit the number of foreign workers. But let me ask you this? If the Scottish economy was not doing well, would you consider it OK for Scottish people to look south of the border for work?’

‘They enjoy that right and freedom under EU law.’

‘And if Scotland was doing better than it is now, under your excellent leadership, would English citizens be allowed to take the good jobs north of the border – as they do now?’

‘They have that freedom.’

‘So, not much would change really under your excellent leadership. The economy would be the same.’

‘Not at all, we aim to make far reaching changes –’

‘For the benefit of Scottish citizens, creating jobs that the English can then come up and take. All your hard work, and you’ll be creating jobs for well qualified English graduates. Unless you wish to state here and now that job protectionism will take place ... illegal under EU law.’

‘Under EU law ... we would not practise job protectionism.’

‘But you’d like to, otherwise why improve the Scottish economy for some else’s benefit. So, once independent, you’ll use North Sea oil revenue to create a Scottish utopia, with all the good jobs going to the English, Welsh and Europeans. Very kind of you, very ... charitable.’

‘It would not work out like that –’

‘So you *would* protect jobs?’

‘That may be an option.’

‘Which would be reciprocated by London, and five million Scots would have to move north, walking all over the flowers of your new utopia ... and destroying your economy. If you have ever wondered why there are so many immigrants in England, it’s because things here are pretty good. If you do a good job for your citizens, then that very porous EU border will be open to people moving north and absorbing all the extra wealth that you’ll create for your own *Scottish* citizens. So why bother? The better you do, the more immigrants you’ll have to cope with. North Sea oil revenue will be assisting them, not you.’

‘If immigration was an issue then we’d look at it.’

‘Not under EU law you wouldn’t. And if you’re out of Europe you’re then you’re on your own, no money from London or Brussels. Would you be begging the IMF for loans?’

Chandler offered Jimmy a flat palm. ‘We’ll be a member of the European Union, with all citizen rights protected.’

‘Then you’ll be working for nothing, because the better you do the more immigrants – and English - you’ll attract. Thank you, Mick, you’ve clarified in my mind what a charitable group the Scottish are.’ Jimmy reached across and shook the man’s hand, and stood.

Leaving the studio I said, ‘They’re fucked either way.’

‘That’s the thing about the European Union, a sharing of responsibility and wealth. You can’t get ahead without sharing it around.’

‘What’ll happen now?’

‘Now, their angry citizens will wish to protect Scottish jobs, which will help to refine their approach. Their politicians can’t be seen to be protecting jobs, but don’t dare not protect them. I just introduced them to the real world of European politics: damned if you do, damned if you don’t, and damned if you sit and think about it.’

‘You ... going to get involved in the future?’

‘Not really, it just pisses me off – regions wanting to break away, thinking they can do a better job of it. You’ve got the nationalists in Northern Ireland, Czechoslovakia split in two, northern Italy wants to break away from the south. It’s all bollocks. The politicians there, they’re like heart surgeons saying to a patient: we’ve not done this before, but we’re hopeful.

‘If, and when, the world economy goes to shit, lots of regions will break away and put up roadblocks, starting with Texas, Alaska and Hawaii.’

Boot camp

A few weeks later we hopped on a night flight down to Goma hub, catching a connection to the airfield used by USAF Transport Command, and finally a coach around to the new infantry base, the first four hundred American soldiers in place and making friends with the creepy crawlies. Rows of uniform, yet simple huts stretched out into the distance, a few brick buildings now under construction. Their commanding officer called together the officers and NCOs, many of the men in this first batch aiming to become instructors in the future.

Jimmy stood on the bonnet of a jeep to address the assembled men. ‘Welcome to the jungle. And that jungle is not as frightening as it may seem at first glance; some people make it their home. They go to sleep in it each night, they hunt in it, they have sex in it, and they raise their families in it. To them, it’s not so scary.

‘To you, it’s a hostile environment ... until such time as you decide that it’s not. And that’s all you need to do, you need to decide that you can master the jungle, and tame it. Members of the Rifles are dropped into the jungle naked, in groups of two or three, a hundred miles from the nearest road. They carry nothing with them. And, as the Rifles say: if you can’t make it back – we don’t want you back!

‘To them it’s a big joke, and a game. To most western soldiers it’s a nightmare come true, and probably a death sentence. The difference ... is one of a little training, and a big shift in your state of mind.

‘You’re here ... to try and see how the Rifles do what they do so well, and possibly to emulate that training for yourselves and your men in the future. But you fine gentlemen didn’t grow up sleeping on the floor with the insects. You did not eat with your fingers, go hungry, and be beaten a lot. That, gentlemen, cannot be reproduced in a training schedule, nor should it be attempted. The fact is, nice white western soldiers cannot do what the Rifles can do, and for that you should be grateful.

‘So are we saying that you could never reach their level? Well, it’s a case of ... would you wish to? Your political paymasters do a good job of making sure that you grow up in nice safe environments, and that you don’t sleep on the floor. Otherwise, what’s the point of a successful and civilised western democracy?

‘The question that you’re now thinking, is can a western soldier be trained to overcome his soft upbringing? The answer is partly yes, in that British and American Special Forces personnel are mostly capable of walking out of the jungle. But they represent a small fraction of your men. And a group of British or American Special Forces soldiers would not win against the Rifles.

‘To understand that, consider this: the training programme for the Rifles is equivalent to your paratroopers, followed by your Rangers, followed by your Green Berets, followed by Delta Force. That’s followed by extensive jungle, desert and mountain warfare training programmes. And that, gentlemen, is what every basic infantryman in the Rifles goes through, the best of whom are selected for the Pathfinders.

‘All of the Rifles have been injected with the super-drug, and are fit enough to run a marathon and break a world record. They get up at 5am each day and go for a twenty-mile run. After breakfast, they start the day’s training, and don’t finish till 7pm, where they then start educational studies or educational games. Those finish around

11pm, when they have time to clean up and have a beer. Theirs, is a working day of around fifteen hours, and during basic training they're not given time to think.

'Each soldier is trained on all of the world's weapons: pistols, rifles, machineguns, mortars, and artillery pieces. They're taught to drive a variety of vehicles, from jeeps to tanks, and their annual allowance for ammunition would stagger you. In the west, soldiers may go months without firing a shot. The Rifles will fire most every day for two years during basic training.

'In the west, we have an emphasis on self-training, and self-discipline. Here, we don't rely on such things. The Rifles philosophy is to use every minute of the day, whereas in the west you'll find soldiers sat around a lot of the time. That ... is your first key difference. If you were to start afresh with new recruits, you should design a programme that allows them no time to think.

'The Rifles are also taught through the playing of games, similar to the techniques employed by Rescue Force. Around a large field a number of tables would be set up. At each is an NCO with a weapon, or a book, or a piece of equipment. Teams run around the field, stopping at each table. They may be required to strip a weapon, find a fault, or answer a question. The teams compete for prizes, and these games can take eight hours, all the time the soldiers kept so busy they don't notice the passing of time. That, is your second key difference.

'The final difference, is one of culture and motivation. The Rifles have a great camaraderie: the Regiment is home and family, friends and fun, work and relaxation all in one. To be threatened with being kicked out is enough to strike terror into any of our soldiers. But that in itself is not enough to explain the main difference between them ... and you.

'Consider the following scenario. A four-man team of Special Forces soldiers reaches its objective, but two are killed and one wounded. What does the last able-bodied man do? He helps his wounded buddy out, writes a book about what a hero he was and lives happily ever after. The Rifles would press home the attack, even if it meant certain death, they'll never give up.

'Now consider World War Two, and the same scenario on D-Day. Would the last man have given up? Probably not, because he knew what was at stake; his life may have saved a hundred others. So what's the difference between D-Day, and now? The answer is one of no war, no particular enemy, so no motivation to make a grand gesture and a sacrifice.

‘So how do you, officers and NCOs, train and motivate men to fight to those standards in a small war, in a country that is not a threat to the US of A? How do you motivate your soldiers to fight to the end? The answer is – you can’t, and should probably not try to. But, when a real threat arrives, you’ll find some meek individuals willing to give all in that fight. You cannot artificially reproduce the kind of scenario where someone would lay down their life without a strong motivation.

‘The Rifles do not wear body armour, they don’t wear helmets, and they don’t stop if their colleagues are wounded. They learn early on that to take the objective will stop their friends from being killed. Stopping to give first aid will simply create even more wounded on the battlefield. They also learn tactics that are very different from yours. In some ways, you could say that they sneak around more than patrolling in lines, riding in jeeps – and generally letting the enemy know where they are.

‘They would not simply exchange machinegun fire, or mortar fire, from fixed positions. They hate static positions, and their philosophy is one of gaining the advantage where possible – a tactic more akin to your Special Forces than your basic infantry. They’re happy to pick off the enemy, run and hide, and try again later, instead of mounting a frontal assault. It’s about winning, not sticking to rules and conventions, or gentlemanly conduct. They’ll use decoys and set traps as part of basic infantry manoeuvres, something that you’ll not see in western armies. To understand the Rifles, you’ll have to grasp that the objective is everything, the tactics employed don’t matter.’ He jumped down and we led the commanding officer away.

‘An interesting approach, both for you and the Rifles,’ the man commented.

Jimmy replied, ‘A hundred years ago, men stood in neat straight lines in red and yellow uniforms and fired at each other. It’s taken a while to get away from that, and to fight more like the Indians - than General Custer and his men. The job ... is to get the job done, not to stick to formations and procedures on the battlefield.’

‘You think we won’t meet their standards?’

‘Your Special Forces already do – to a degree, and British Special Forces teach the Rifles. The point is, you shouldn’t attempt to reproduce their mindset, or your soldiers will go home on leave and start killing their neighbours. When you take a nice white boy and brutalise him, he goes psycho. The Rifles don’t.’

‘So ... you think this mission is doomed?’

‘Any mission ... needs an objective, clearly defined, in order to reach that objective. What, exactly, is your mission ... as far as you’ve been told.’

‘Well, we tried to train the Liberian Rifles, and failed before you got involved with them. That caused a few harsh words in the Pentagon. And we’ve seen what your boys can do. So it’s a mix of the two: how we could train a proxy army, and be more like them.’

‘That’s politics, that’s not an objective,’ Jimmy stated. ‘Your objective ... is to win the engagement, to kill the enemy – in whatever theatre of conflict you find yourself. So, I’ll make it easy for you. Follow my training manual, take the experience and benefits that it gives your men, but never try and be something that you’re not. Your soldiers want to go home to their wives and girlfriends, to serve a few years and learn a trade before getting a civilian job. You can’t treat them as we treat Rifles. So don’t.’

‘But after a few years of this, we’d be able to recruit and train our own proxy army?’

‘Most definitely.’

We did not stay long, and flew back after an hour-long chat, reclaiming our rooms at the golf hotel. Several ministers came across to petition us for various things, before we made it clear that anyone just turning up would be buried in the foundations of the new marina. Still, we chatted to half a dozen ministers about various projects, and I must admit that I found giving general pointers easier than scanning reports and making my own decisions in my office.

At 1am, sat in the quiet rooftop bar, I said to Jimmy, ‘Do you ever wonder what happened to the younger you?’

‘Younger ... me?’

‘You said he went to Canada, forwards in time.’

‘You shouldn’t believe everything I say; the right lie to the right people at the right time. He didn’t go anywhere, I killed him.’

I faced Jimmy, beer in my hand. ‘You ... killed your younger self?’

Jimmy nodded, reflecting on the past.

‘Would that not cause some sort of paradox?’

‘No.’

‘So ... how?’ I gently nudged.

‘I appeared in that field in Canada, suitable passport with visa stamp, plenty of money, a few diamonds. I waited till nightfall and walked to the nearest town, trying not to be seen. I hopped on an overnight bus - in Canada they don’t stop at night. At the next large town I hopped on a train, couple of days to reach Toronto.

In Toronto I bought a suitcase, then some clothes, a toiletries bag, the works. I bought a second camera and took snaps, having them developed, bought a few postcards and maps, and made like a tourist for two weeks, buying a plane ticket and flying to London.

‘In London, I grabbed a hotel room as a base, then caught the train down to Cardiff, to see if my younger self was where he should have been. You see, in late 1984 my original self got a job at stockbrokers in Cardiff. I did quite well and eventually landed a job in London, but I had four weeks between jobs. I had moved out from my parents’ house and was living in a small bedsit in the Roath area of Cardiff, student land.

‘I spied on my younger self, saw what his hairstyle looked like, any marks on his face or hands. Happy with that, I knocked on his door late one night and shocked him. I told him that I was him from the future, and listed off a few things that only we would know. When he wasn’t looking I broke his neck. In the early hours I dragged his body out to the car I had hired and dumped the body where I knew it wouldn’t be found.

‘Back in his apartment I squeezed into his clothes, then bought a few more the next day. I rang my mum and made small talk, but avoided seeing her till I moved to London and started at McKinleys – and the managers there had only met me once. I worked in London for two months, telling my mum I’d put on weight and that I was working out at the gym a lot, finally going back to Newport to stay for a week.

‘They saw the difference, but put it down to London and the extra weight, and gym training. After that, it was a case of start ticking boxes.’

‘Why replace yourself like that? Why take the risk?’ I puzzled.

‘How would it look if the world’s intelligence agencies couldn’t verify my past?’

‘Well, yeah, they’d definitely think you a fucking alien!’

‘So I had to slip back into the timeline.’

‘What would have become of him?’

‘He would have grown into an arsehole. He’d have stayed with the wrong girls ... and left the one he should have stayed with. He would have ... made a lot of mistakes. You wouldn’t have liked my younger self; it took me sixty years to finally figure it all out, and to be comfortable with myself.’

‘You spend a lot of time thinking,’ I noted. ‘If you haven’t figured it all out yet, what hope for the rest of us?’

He laughed, staring into his beer. 'I'll let you in on a great secret.' He faced me. 'I'm not even supposed to be here.'

I stared at him. 'What?' I puzzled, a heavy frown forming.

'I'll explain it at some point. But my stepping through the portal - not quite what it may seem.'

I was not looking forwards to the next day's political activities, but it had to be done. We travelled the short distance around to the Pentagon building and spent the entire day meeting ministers, glad to be out the door at 5pm. But after our evening meal it started again, Yuri and Marko introducing us to new business partners involved with the shopping centre project.

We were then approached by an Indian businessmen, a hotel guest, playing golf and enjoying the facilities. Thinking him a guest, I invited him to sit. We soon discovered that he was from South Africa, and owned a chain of washing machine factories both in South Africa and India. And could he open one here?

I was starting to wonder if the place had a bad name; of course he could open one here. But when I cautioned him about a small market and a poor populace, I answered my own question about peoples' attitude to the region. Our region was growing, but it was not a great market for luxury goods.

Turned out that his washing machines were quite cheap by western standards, and that he sold many around Africa. I offered him free land, fifty percent of his factory construction costs – not including plant and machinery, and a two year tax break. He thanked me for that, but what he was really interested in was cheap plastic, rubber and steel – the raw ingredients of an African housewife's wobbly washing machine.

With Jimmy sat watching, but not interfering, I said, 'How about this: we create a joint venture, and split the profits. That way, I have no problem about giving you the materials at raw cost, which is just about zero in some cases.'

'What percentage?' the businessman asked.

'What would you say was reasonable ... if I was hanging you out of a helicopter by your ankles?'

The man laughed. 'I'd say sixty-forty to you in recognition of the raw materials, and my forty percent represents my network, and expertise.'

'You'll have a two year deal, then a review.' We shook hands. With the businessman gone, I asked Jimmy what he thought.

‘Our aim is to create jobs, and to give back to the people - so fine. At the moment, people here import stuff like that, and it’s not cheap.’

Suffering further approaches for the next hour, I called over two of the bodyguards, and they stood between us - and those interested in talking to us.

Old Goma town was our first call in the morning, a short flight over. In a large field northeast of the town, a new town in itself had sprung up, hundreds of the self-assembly huts now laid out in neat rows. Accompanied by a resident RF team, we wandered along and greeted householders, enquiring if they had everything they needed, and finding them all smiles. The RF team then informed us that many of the new happy householders had been in tin shacks prior to the explosion and fire. These huts were a significant step up.

In the town itself, we stopped and stared up at tall yellow cranes, an apartment block – or ten – in progress. I recognised the design; four storeys, twenty apartments per block. The mayor of the town welcomed us, thanking us for all our help. Well, since the bomb was aimed at us, it was the least we could do.

In Gotham City, the marina was coming along, an army of local builders toiling over it. The large round concrete swimming pool would, someday soon, be a marina. Now, it was dry and deep.

‘Why so fucking deep?’ I asked Jimmy.

‘To get sailboats in, keels of four metres.’

‘That’s a big boat!’

‘That’s ... Yuri and Marko measuring their dicks. Still, it’ll be nice to see them sat here. Otherwise it would just be speedboats.’

The basic shape of the bars and cafes could be discerned from their foundations, and we’d name the place after Shelly as promised: Shelly’s Marina.

A quarter-mile by coach brought us to another building site, a more important one. The canal we found was again a large empty concrete swimming pool, the deep foundations for our stock exchange being laid, a second building taking shape next to it. Progress.

‘Will the stock exchange be busy?’ I asked Jimmy.

‘Yes, because they’ll trade on all the world’s exchanges, plus our own metals, ore and oil market. Oh, and diamonds.’

‘Will that piss off the Israelis?’

‘Not at all, they’ll be running it. I’ll make contact with the main merchants in Amsterdam soon. African women like jewellery, so I’ll persuade someone to open a factory or two down here.’

‘I mentioned this place to McKinleys. They’ve already bought a few spare apartments ready, they can’t wait.’

‘I think we could attract two thousand traders at least,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘They’ll be followed by buyers.’

‘Buyers?’ I queried.

‘Raw material buyers. They’ll look at oil, ore and metal ingots, and haggle for them here, arranging their own transport out. Take that Indian factory. Their buyer would sit around a pit and, when a new batch of steel was ready, they’d bid for it. At the moment, the people buying the raw materials we produce are at the end of a phone or computer. Down here they’ll have a team trying to get the best deals. Same for our food produce in the future.’

Back at the hotel, we took a call from the African Times editor; a car bomb had gone off in Somalia. Jimmy rang the head of PACT, only to find out that two Sudanese agents had been picked up thirty miles from Mawlini. The men had been gainfully employed scouting for an attack.

Jimmy told the man, ‘I want a line of men on the border, from Kinshasa to the Red Sea. Deploy the Rifles, and put all of my interests on alert.’

‘They’ll strike back at us?’ I asked when Jimmy had lowered his phone.

‘And they deserve to,’ Jimmy softly stated. ‘And, what’s more, I don’t want to do anymore damage to Sudan.’

‘You wanted to drive a wedge,’ I pointed out.

‘It’s ... easy to see things in the 2025 perspective, and to react accordingly. But, part of me hopes that we can chart another course, that maybe 2025 can be dealt with quietly. And ... I don’t always like pitching nations against each other for 2025 posturing – innocent civilians getting clobbered in the process. I know it’s wrong for 2025, but we could have seen a few more years of peace.’

Jimmy called Abdi, getting the details of the car bomb. A busy market had been hit, a hundred injured, thirty dead so far. We sat in the rooftop bar, a fine day, and slowly ate lunch, not much said. I could see Jimmy struggling with the turn of events, not least because he had caused them. But the bad news had not ended; this episode was only just getting warmed up.

After lunch, we packed ready to leave, our cases now with the bodyguards. In reception, Jimmy took a call, the detail causing him to close his eyes for a moment. He faced me. ‘A civilian airliner has crashed in Mogadishu. It ploughed into the city centre.’

‘That’s no coincidence,’ I quietly stated.

‘No.’ Jimmy stared at his phone for a few seconds, then dialled Forward Base. ‘What aircraft do you have on the apron?’

They indicated a 737 headed for Mawlini.

‘I want that plane, hold it, we’re on our way.’

He told the senior bodyguard to take us around to the airport, and to grab Hueys for the short hop down to Forward Base. The Hueys were sat waiting when we arrived, their rotors turning. With the bodyguards carrying our luggage, we ducked our heads and jogged across to the open doors, soon on our way to Forward Base across lush green countryside, Jimmy oddly quiet.

At Forward Base we boarded the waiting 737, our luggage simply placed between seats. The plane was not full, and contained the usual mix of RF staff, Rifles or UN staff. With the door closed, Jimmy grabbed the passenger tanoy.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, a plane had crashed in Mogadishu. We’re going to detour there, after which this plane will carry on to Mawlini. Sorry for the inconvenience.’

When the plane was airborne, and the seatbelt sign was off, Hacker appeared next to us. ‘Guys,’ he acknowledged.

‘Hey, stranger,’ I offered. ‘Where you working these days?’

‘Teaching in Cuba mostly, but I run courses here. Are we deploying to this plane crash?’

Jimmy said, ‘There’re plenty of RF staff based around Mogadishu. Nothing we can do in time.’

‘Was it a crash on landing?’ Hacker innocently asked.

‘No,’ Jimmy said after I glanced at him. ‘We think maybe a bomb, or terrorists.’

‘And there was a car bomb this morning,’ I put in.

‘Sudan kicking back?’ Hacker knowingly asked.

‘Perhaps,’ Jimmy replied. ‘Maybe al-Qa’eda. Either way, it’s bad for Somalia – and the region.’

With Hacker seated, I wandered along the isle, greeting people and chatting, finding a few familiar faces. Touching down at Mogadishu airport, we lugged our cases down the steps, our bodyguards joined by Somali Pathfinders, a bus waiting. Only then did I think to call home and explain the situation. At least Helen and the girls had not boarded the coach to meet me at the airport.

At our hotel, we found an empty suite, our luggage dumped before we headed around the government buildings. Abdi had visited the crash scene earlier, but now greeted us, dressed in his odd general’s uniform, wide shoulders and much braid.

‘Many dead,’ he simply reported.

‘Whose airline?’ I asked.

‘Oman Airlines,’ he reported. ‘A hundred people on the aircraft.’

‘And on the ground?’ Jimmy asked.

‘The aircraft hit an apartment block being built, so no people living in the rooms. Maybe sixty builders hurt or killed, some people on the street, taxis. And this an hour from the car bomb!’

‘No coincidence,’ Jimmy agreed.

‘You think it is Sudan?’ Abdi asked.

‘We picked up Sudanese men near Mawlini,’ I put in.

‘I have thirty thousand men on the border!’ Abdi warned, a finger raised. ‘They will not get through.’

‘Sudan may not be behind the attacks,’ Jimmy suggested to Abdi, and I had to wonder the logic of that. But I kept quiet. ‘I think maybe al-Qa’eda wanting revenge for Sudan.’

‘So we need to go back to Afghanistan?’ Abdi asked.

‘I hope not,’ Jimmy stated.

A man rushed in, shouting in the local language. Abdi faced us as the man retreated. ‘Gunman had entered a hospital, they hold it hostage.’

‘Don’t go near it,’ Jimmy insisted as he raised his phone. ‘Get the Pathfinders and snipers, but don’t enter the hospital.’ Into his phone, Jimmy said, ‘Ngomo, gunmen have captured a hospital in Mogadishu. Have EMPs brought from Scorpion Base, and the new counter-hostage toy. Quick as you can, my friend.’

‘We hit the hospital electrics first,’ Abdi realised.

‘I have another trick,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘We’ll see how it works before we destroy a hospital full of equipment. I’ll need a command post near the hospital.’

‘I will arrange it,’ Abdi faithfully promised as he lifted a desk phone.

Jimmy dialled Mapley in the UK. ‘Bob, Jimmy. I want Rescue Force Alpha from Mawlini - in Mogadishu - ten minutes ago.’ He hung up.

‘A Chinook could be here quickly,’ I suggested.

‘That, or a C130 Hercules.’

Fifteen minutes later we joined a well-protected convoy and ventured through the traffic to a city centre hotel. On the top floor of the hotel we tried to commandeer a room. But as the guests from this floor we’re being ushered out, Jimmy recognised a face. He lunged forwards and grabbed the tan skinned man about the throat, slamming the man against a wall.

‘Stop all the guests from leaving,’ Jimmy barked as he held the man. ‘Move them all to a secure site.’ With the bodyguards close by, Jimmy threw the man into a vacant room.

The bodyguards righted the man and held him. ‘Why are you here? To watch the hospital? To warn them when our people are ready? What?’

The man defiantly resisted.

Jimmy closed in on the man. ‘Do you know what the Somali Rifles will do to you?’ The man struggled, but would not speak. ‘Take him out, make him talk.’

Abdi shouted orders.

Jimmy glanced out of the window, the hospital three hundred yards away across scrubland. ‘Why was he here?’ he quietly asked I as drew level.

‘Radio the gunmen,’ I suggested. ‘Let them know what the police are up to.’

‘Which would suggest a long siege. Why a long siege?’ He faced Abdi. ‘Is this the best building to watch the hospital from?’

‘Yes,’ Abdi responded.

‘Which would make it an ideal spot for a police command post, which our friend probably knew. Evacuate! Now! Everyone out – it’s booby-trapped!’

In a mad jumble, we made it to the foyer before the first blast hit, taking out much of the top floor, showering us in glass.

‘Run!’ Jimmy encouraged, everyone making a mad dash up the street in a disorganised rabble; police, bodyguards and terrified guests. As we reached a corner the hotel restaurant blew, the hotel now well alight.

Jimmy lifted his phone, dialling Mapley. ‘Bob, it’s Jimmy. I want Rescue Force Kenya moved to Mogadishu airport as an emergency deployment. All of them!’ He hung up and dialled again. ‘It’s Silo. I want a full mobilisation of the Pathfinders. I want as many as possible in Mogadishu.’

He faced Abdi, grabbing him by the shoulder. ‘Get on the radio, tell all citizens to stay indoors! Have the police announce it with loud hailers.’

Abdi stepped away and lifted his phone.

Jimmy grabbed a Somali officer. Pointing, he asked, ‘What’s that building?’

‘A government building, sir.’

‘C’mon, that’s our new base. Let everyone know.’ Jimmy led everyone off at the jog, soon at the bland government building and

up to its top floor. The office we selected afforded us a modest view of the hospital.

‘Why haven’t they blown-up the hospital yet?’ I asked.

‘They want something, something more than just that,’ Jimmy suggested as he stared across at the hospital. ‘They may be setting booby-traps.’

‘They want to kill the Pathfinders when they storm the place,’ I put in.

Jimmy heaved a sigh. ‘Yes.’

Fifteen minutes later we were set-up, radios and phones, satellite phones, a dozen Somali officials, senior Pathfinder officers.

A Kenyan Pathfinder officer appeared with an NCO. Lobster. ‘We have the device, sir.’

‘We’ll need someone to get close with it,’ Jimmy stated.

‘I will do it, sir,’ Lobster offered.

‘You know the settings?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Yes, sir.’

‘First, we must play their game. They want us to wait for their own reasons, we wish to wait for our reasons.’

‘Sniper report,’ an officer cut in with. Reading from a sheet, the man said, ‘Eight men, AK47 rifles, three seem to have explosive vests, and they are fixing explosives to the stairs from floor number two and higher.’

‘And the spider said to the flies, come to me,’ Jimmy loudly stated. He approached the window. ‘Contact your best sniper, and ask him to shoot out all of the windows on the north side, but to do it slowly, and without hurting anyone.’

‘Yes, sir.’

I closed in on him. ‘Won’t that spook them? They may blow it up?’

‘First, it helps the device if the windows are gone. Second, we need the Somalia Army to *behave* like the Somali Army.’

Jimmy opened a window, the echo report of a fired round registering with us a few seconds later. He faced the assembled men. ‘Now we wait like the spider ... till the medics are here.’ He pointed at Lobster. ‘Go and find a way to get within two hundred yards, but no closer.’

Lobster dashed out.

‘Will an EMP help?’ I whispered.

‘It’s not an EMP,’ Jimmy revealed.

‘Ah.’

Twenty minutes later, the air reverberated with the sounds of heavy helicopters, our Chinooks landing nearby. An officer reported Rescue Force landed, Jimmy leading me down to them as they assembled on patch of parched brown grass.

Jimmy beckoned the teams closer, some thirty people. 'Listen up. The next job that I ask you to undertake will be dangerous. It will involve getting the hospital staff, the wounded, and the patients out of a hospital that has both gunmen – and is wired to blow.'

Our people glanced at each other.

'This could go badly wrong,' Jimmy added. 'But, if the gunmen blow up parts of the hospital, and themselves hopefully, we'll have a matter of minutes to get in there and get as many people as we can out. Entering the building after the bombs go off will be handled according to unstable building protocols, something you all practise. If you go in with the soldiers, it will be *keep you head down* protocols. They may also shoot at you as you approach the hospital.'

'This is not regular Rescue Force work, so an opposed entry will be volunteer only. You have fifteen minutes, so think about it. I have no problem with anyone who has reservations about an armed assault.'

We left them to digest the detail, returning to the office.

'How many snipers?' Jimmy asked the Pathfinder officer.

'Thirty in place, sir.'

'I want the senior man to have a running commentary of the movements of the gunmen. If we shoot, we need to hit as many as we can in one go.'

'The windows are all broken now, sir. Make for a better shot.'

'Yes,' Jimmy agreed with an affirmative smile.

Five minutes later, Lobster confirmed his position. Jimmy lifted a pair of binoculars and checked. To the senior Pathfinder officer he said, 'Two seconds after the device is fired, all snipers should hit any targets, but only fire for five seconds before you call ceasefire. Then the Rifles go in, the medics right behind. Got that?'

'Yes, sir. Two seconds, five seconds, move in.'

'Make sure that everyone knows.'

We again walked down to the RF teams. 'Gather around,' Jimmy called. 'The Pathfinders will use a type of gas to sedate the gunmen, who should not be able to detonate their explosives. Unfortunately, the gas will only last four minutes, and will have a detrimental effect on the patients.'

‘That gas, and its use here - today, must always be denied afterwards. It will produce symptoms similar to heat stroke and shock. Try and cool down your patients any way you can.’

‘Will it linger?’ a man asked.

‘No,’ Jimmy adamantly stated. ‘It disperses very quickly, and we’ve shot out the windows; you’re not at risk. Now, listen carefully. You’ll go in behind the soldiers, and they’ll deal with gunmen and explosives. But you may trip across one we missed. If you see a weapon, unload it. If you see a gunman, stamp on the man’s neck before you do anything else.’

They glanced at each other.

‘Your job ... is to save lives. But if one of the gunmen recovers, and sets off his explosives, it could kill fifty people – including you and your colleagues. Those gunmen will die anyway, either by sniper or by the gallows, so don’t waste time worrying about them. Your job is to get the patients out. And if you see any explosives ... don’t touch! Right, anyone want to pull out?’

They all stood fast.

‘Any one got any comments?’

A man raised a hand. ‘If we survive this ... do we get extra time off?’

They laughed.

‘If you survive, you all get a week at any of my hotels.’ Jimmy called over a Pathfinder officer. ‘Split them into teams for each doorway, to be behind the Pathfinders. No one closer than twenty-five yards till the signal is given.’

The officer led our rescuers off, and we again climbed the stairs to the office, sweating now.

‘We are ready,’ Abdi confidently stated.

‘When the medics are in place, we’ll go,’ Jimmy said to Abdi, a hand on his arm. We stared out of the window, the Pathfinders and rescuers approaching the hospital from a blind side with no windows.

‘We are ready,’ an officer announced five minutes later.

‘Put me on with the man holding the device,’ Jimmy requested.

‘Nbeki here,’ crackled a voice.

‘This is Silo. Count to ten, fire, count to two and radio for the snipers to fire, count to five and order ceasefire. Understand?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘You have a go.’ Jimmy lowered the radio and approached the window.

Ten seconds later the device fired, no sound or visible trace given. Two seconds later, a crackling echo reached us, and continued for what seemed more than five seconds. Finally, calm reclaimed the scene.

‘They are moving in,’ came a voice.

‘Explosives on second floor.’

‘Wires in stairwell. Disarming.’

‘Ground floor clear.’

‘X-ray killed.’

‘Second X-ray killed.’

‘Second floor being evacuated.’

I paced up and down.

‘X-ray killed.’

‘All people unconscious, in fits.’

‘Third floor stairwell cleared.’

‘Patients being carried out.’

It was a long fifteen minutes, and I paced up and down, listening to the reports, or glancing across at the hospital building.

‘Building secure,’ finally crackled out of a radio.

Jimmy tipped his head, and led me out, down the now familiar stairs and into the heat. Across parched grass, we walked with our bodyguards towards the hospital. On the grass in front of the hospital we found a triage area, patients being treated, many being fanned in the heat, some fitting and convulsing, a few being intubated and worked on. Overall, I figured at least three quarters were coherent, not knowing what their pre-existing conditions had been. After all, they were in hospital for some reason.

We weaved through the busy teams, and to the group leader. ‘How they doing?’ I asked.

‘Hard to know why they were in hospital to start with, so ... overall not too bad.’

‘What are their symptoms?’ Jimmy asked.

‘As you said, heat stroke and shock; classic symptoms. That gas knocked the gunmen out. Should I ask –’

‘No,’ Jimmy cut him off with.

Ambling back towards the command post, I asked, ‘What the fuck did all that?’

‘A type of microwave burst; it warms your body up very quickly from the inside, instant heatstroke. People fit, convulse, collapse, and pass out. After that, you have five minutes to get to them.’

‘And it was developed for...?’

‘Situations just like this, to knock out captors and captives.’

Abdi met us in the car park, a smile for us. 'It worked well, Jimmy.'

'Yes it did - a good field test. Now we have to think about what we do next.'

'We strike Sudan!'

'No.'

'No?' Abdi queried.

'We struck Sudan. And if we strike again they will fall into anarchy and chaos, which will be even worse. As far as I'm concerned, these men were all al-Qa'eda. And, in the weeks ahead, I will think about Sudan, and what to do next. We play the spider, not the raging bull, my friend.'

'The people will want revenge,' Abdi cautioned as we walked towards our coach.

'That's why we have a great leader like you,' Jimmy told him. 'To lead, to persuade, and to influence.'

'It will not be easy,' Abdi complained.

Jimmy stopped and faced him. 'If you strike without me, you will lose me forever.' He held his gaze on Abdi.

'I have never understood what you do ... till after you do it. I am always reminded of who knows the best course.'

'And...?' I nudged.

'I will wait to see the wisdom.'

We shook hands, and boarded the coach, soon on a flight to London.

During the flight, Jimmy turned his head to me and said, 'The airliner flown into the ground was typical al-Qa'eda, I don't think that's anything to do with the Sudanese. I think al-Qa'eda believes Abdi responsible for the hit on Khartoum, and that they want to strike back at him. Those two Sudanese near Mawlini, that seems more likely as a Sudanese response. And the hospital, that was just strange. It feels like al-Qa'eda, but to put bombs on that hotel first was very clever. Too clever.'

'You have someone else in mind?'

'Once they identify the gunmen, and the lookout from the hotel, then maybe we'll get a better idea. Sykes' team are on their way down, so forensics might shed some light on it.'

Helen greeted me on the coach, the girls at a pony show in Wales. Halfway home, Jimmy took a call. He lowered his phone and stared at it before pinching the bridge of his nose and massaging it.

'Problems?' I asked.

His look suggested that I had understated something. After a long moment staring out of the window, he heaved a sigh. 'The lookout at the hotel gave up a name during interrogation. Rahman.'

'Rahman?' I repeated, unfamiliar with the reference.

'It's not his real name, and the man is a ghost. Some believe that he's half western and half Arabic, that he grew up in the west and converted to Islam.

He dialled a number. 'It's me. Increase the budget for PACT by fifty percent immediately. Then increase the budget for security at all pan-African airports in our region. After that, I want you to talk to President Errol, and for him to start a process whereby any old aircraft that doesn't have a secure cockpit door is banned from flying to, from, or over our pan-African airspace.'

When he finally faced us, he said, 'We've altered a great many things, and rightly so. We've ... fixed a great many things, and brought forwards many plans, altering the time line. The problems that we'll face in the next two years were not due to kick-off till closer to 2015, or after.'

'And these ... problems?' I nudged.

'A very capable individual inside al-Qa'eda. In the next two years he'll hijack aircraft and fly them into the ground, and there'll be little we can do about it ... because the aircraft will take off in small shitty airports with fuck-all security, fly over a border and plough into the cities of neighbouring states.'

'The west will be OK,' I suggested.

'The west is not the problem. It's the shit airliner taking off in Oman that hits Nairobi ... that's the problem.'

Jimmy checked his watch and dialled Chase in Washington. 'Mister President, got a paper and pen? Until our new F15s are up to speed I need three squadrons of your F15s - piloted by your guys, in Kenya, the Congo and Somali, and I need them there today. And yes, you should be worried. I'll be briefing the "M" Group at the house later. Thanks.'

'US cavalry to rescue,' I quipped.

At the house, arriving at 9pm, the "M" Group representatives were sat waiting in a lounge. We stepped in and joined them.

'OK,' Jimmy began, taking a breath. 'We can all expect an increase in hijackings in the next few years. The plane that crashed into Mogadishu was – most likely – al-Qa'eda, and organised by an individual code-named Rahman. He will, in the next few years, hijack planes from the Middle East, North Africa and the Russian Caucuses, crashing them into cities.

‘The following steps will need to be taken as a matter of some urgency. All aircraft crossing your airspace must have secure cockpit doors. Pilots ... must never give up the cockpit, no matter how many passengers are killed in the cabin. If they do they’ll just be killed when the plane hits the ground anyway.

‘All pilots should have mace sprays and tazers in the cockpit, senior flight attendants should have mace in the forward galley. Flights to and from a list of nominated countries should have an air marshal seated at the front. I’ll draw up that list for you. Next, comes the hard part. You will all need to introduce protocols and procedures whereby a civil airliner on approach, that is not responding - or has indicated a hijack, is shot down.’

Eyes widened, mine included, and the group glanced at each other.

Jimmy continued, ‘If not, those hijacked aircraft will plough into London, Paris or Moscow. But first, they’ll start ploughing into African capitals.’

He faced me. ‘Check up on the status of the F15s we bought. See if some, at least, could be put on standby with instructors sat next to them ready to go. We have Sidewinders?’

‘We bought a shit load of them.’

To Michelle, he said, ‘I want a meeting in Paris, in a week, a meeting on global air transport security. Invite every country in the world. What I would like to see ... is that airports are classified as secure, very secure, or not secure. That coding would be imposed, whether the airports in question like it or not.’ He turned his head to me. ‘Draw up a list of all airports in Africa that serve jet airliners, and have them reviewed to see if they have metal detectors.’

To the group he said, ‘I would also like to see the following radical approach adopted in as many areas as we can. Any aircraft that does not have a secure cabin door cannot cross a border into another country, certainly not to a country we care about. That means that a Tu154 taking off from Tashkent would not be allowed to land in Europe, Russia or China – or Africa.’

Ivan put in, ‘We have secured the doors.’

‘On small airlines in the Caucasus?’

‘They are outside of our control,’ Ivan said defensively.

‘Then ban them crossing a border until such time as their doors are secured,’ Jimmy firmly suggested. He took a moment. ‘Back in 2000, there should have been an attack along these lines. I warned everyone about securing aircraft doors, and I *removed* several key individuals. The idea, however, has not gone away. Crashing a 747

into a city is the poor man's weapon of mass destruction, and that poor man is now keen to employ this tactic. The attacks will start in Yemen, Oman, Sudan, Ethiopia, Djibouti, the former soviet Islamic states and North Africa. Flights from Oman and Yemen must be seen as flying missiles till further notice. We'll reconvene in the morning at 9am. Earn your keep, people.'

I greeted the girls, back from their pony show, and made no mention of the problems. Both girls had won rosettes, and the security detail had digital images and video for Helen and me to review.

After a large meal we headed to bed early, both up at 5am. I left Helen to sort the girls and headed to my office, a million things to do today. I sent Ngomo an email, suggesting that I wanted the Rifles at each small airport in our region. I wanted men inside the airport terminals, assisting with body and bag searches, additional men stood outside as deterrents. We had a surplus of police officers, and I asked our new security minister to deploy permanent teams to all small and regional airports. This crisis, unwelcome as it was, would create thousands of new jobs.

I then found the contact details of the company we used when buying airport detectors and scanners. I checked my watch, 7.30am, then selected a mobile number. 'That ... Nick Fisher?'

'Yes. How can I help?' came a sleepy voice.

'Paul Holton. I want a price on bulk purchase, installation and training of your airport scanners.'

'You need more? We have your five airports covered – to western standards.'

'We're going to roll them out to all African airports.'

There came a pause. 'Oh. Er ... how many should we quote for?'

'Do you have a list of all African and Middle East countries that don't have scanners, and that you're trying to sell to?'

'It's engraved on my heart. It's what I do all day; trying to sell that lot scanners.'

'How many units could you sell if they all suddenly said yes?' I pressed.

'That would be close to a thousand units.'

'And the total costs? Roughly?' I asked.

'Around three million raw cost, plus transport installation, maintenance and training. So, all in, around six million.'

'That all,' I scoffed. 'I'm going to send you five million pounds today on account. I want you to make as many as you can, and then

to donate them to countries we nominate, starting with Oman, Yemen and the Russian Caucasuses.'

'What?'

'You heard, get a coffee and get to work.' I hung up.

I headed down to the main house later, for the "M" Group meeting, grabbing a bite and a cup of tea in the diner first. A TV was now fixed to the wall, and the morning news reported that half the world's airports were on full alert. Many flights had been cancelled, certain countries now banned from flying to Europe, a few passengers stranded.

I took my mug of tea into the lounge at 9am, the gang assembled, Sykes down, as well as New Dave.

Jimmy began, 'To summarise what actions have been taken overnight – it's fucking chaos out there. So let me be clear: only those flights originating at airports with poor security records need be a concern. Flights taking off in Europe, Russia or the west are not an issue. Flights taking off from Bora Bora are not an issue, even if the airport there is not secure.

'So, Yemen, Oman, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Sudan, Chad, Senegal, and all North Africa states – they're the airports of interest for now. Let's not create another ash cloud fiasco, people.'

'I've ordered a thousand airport scanners,' I put in. 'I'm going to install them whether the airports in question want them or not.'

'Good,' Jimmy said with a nod. 'I've banned all flights from certain North African states from landing in Goma hub or Nairobi till we're happy with their security. Concentrate on them for the scanners. Mr Sykes, kindly put together a pan-European team of inspectors and send them around those nations, and Africa. Let's start working on that airport ranking system.'

Keely announced, 'We have an aircraft carrier off Mogadishu, so if another plane is hijacked we'll shoot it down. That air umbrella covers Kenya as well.'

'Good. Thank you. ETA for fixed wing assistance?'

'Could take a while to get them in place,' Keely warned.

'Then send pilots for the F15s we've already got as a stop gap.'

Keely ventured, 'Hardon Chase asked if they would be welcome to stay long-term?'

'For what purpose?' Han asked.

'To help out in situations like this,' Keely suggested.

'No,' Jimmy said.

'No?' Keely repeated.

‘Once the Africans can defend their own airspace, they’ll handle that task. I would have, soon, suggested US training bases in the Congo – for combined operations and infantry exercises, the same in Somalia. That’s a training wing, not an active squadron, so word it that way and tell Mister Chase that he is most welcome.’

‘On that note,’ Jack put in. ‘I’ve been asked by the Prime Minister to mention that we have jet training aircraft we can offer the region, but more than that ... we’ve put together a package of instructors and technicians. That way, RAF pilots get more flying time and exposure to other regions. And you have cheap fuel for them!’

‘I’ll accept three training squadrons; one at the Rifles base, Mombassa, one at Forward Base, and one in Somalia at Scorpion Base. I’ll also accept a helicopter training squadron at Mawlini. We’ll buy second hand Hawk training aircraft, ten aircraft at each base. As well as any old Provost or Tucano you have. That package was always part of my plan. By 2025 we’ll need African pilots. Good ones!’

I put in, ‘I’ve asked for extra police at all small airfields around our region, Rifles there for now – high profile.’

Jimmy said, ‘It’s time to create a Borders and Airports Police Authority. Advertise for a minister of that title, then get President Errol on it. Set-up a common training facility at Forward Base, create a common uniform, give it a high profile and a big budget – it’ll be a front line agency in the years ahead.’

‘I know someone who would be a great help with that,’ Sykes mentioned.

‘Fine; hire him, send him down. Help us to create that training facility.’

‘Are you aware of specific aircraft attacks?’ Jack asked.

‘Things have been altered a lot in recent years, so I have less of a focus on when and where they’ll be. But I think the next will be from Yemen towards Somalia, then Chad towards Nairobi.’

‘I’ll focus the scanners on them then,’ I helpfully offered.

‘Unfortunately, you’ll just move the attack to another place,’ Jimmy explained.

We spoke for forty minutes, made a few plans, then split to our desks to implement them. At my desk, I quickly scanned all of the emails in my inbox. I printed off many and simply put them to one side, organising the money for the scanners as a priority. The scanner company, being a bit cheeky, came back on with a question

about hand held scanners. I ordered the six thousand they claimed that they could produce in three months.

I then noticed an email from the White House, sent late last night. Opening it, it was hint from Chase about US manufacturers of scanners and airport systems, a link to their website. Seemed that Chase was now psychic. I clicked on “enquiries”, populating the form. In the textbox I typed: ‘Paul Holton, where are you trying to sell your kit – and failing? I’m interested in North Africa and Russian Caucasus.’

An hour later an email came back, someone up early – or to bed late. ‘We’ve been negotiating with airports in those regions recently. What did you have in mind?’

I emailed back: ‘That you offer a ninety-percent discount, and bill me the difference. Spend twenty million dollars. Knock yourselves out. And quickly!’

In fairness to the company, they came back with a list of countries, airports – large and small, the equipment currently installed, and that which they were trying to sell.

For the next few days, that list occupied my every waking minute. I even sat down with Jimmy and trawled through it, marking those airports most likely to be affected in the near future.

Many countries protested their treatment, their citizens having to take extra legs in their journeys to the west. Still, we had focused their attention. Scanners were hurriedly installed at airports where the resident airlines were squealing. Wands turned up, soon humming over passengers in queues, and the who’s-who of bad airports was posted online.

Within our own region, I was confident that we’d have it covered. We had taken surplus police officers out of villages and towns, and each small airport now counted at least thirty officers, the first few scanners arriving. Ngomo had nominated a senior Pathfinder officer for the post of Minister for Borders and Airports, and we accepted him with a telephone vote by the leaders. He occupied an office immediately, staffed by former and serving Pathfinders, and worked sixteen hours a day at his new project.

The new Borders Police would wear dark blue shirts, darker than most of their colleagues, with shoulder flashes that labelled their function. The new airport police training facility was set-up quickly, staff emanating from the existing airlines, from Sykes, but mostly from the manufacturers of the scanners. The new recruits had to learn all about passports, and spotting fakes, and the rules of

immigration to the various pan-African nations. The study of visas would be a two-week course in itself.

Coal, the black gold

With the airport panic calming, and scanners winging their way to third-world countries, Jack brought an RAF officer up to my office. I made them tea.

‘This is Wing Commander Russell, he’ll oversee the training squadrons in Africa.’

‘We already agreed the deal, you don’t need to hard sell it!’ I quipped.

The man smiled. ‘No, just here to clarify a few points.’

‘You mean, you’re here to try and sell us some old kit!’

‘Not exactly. We wanted to know ... just how you see the training evolving, since we could offer a basic flying programme, followed by a fast jet conversion, followed by specialist programmes.’

‘I’d say ... all of the above. But we’ll have to talk to the national leaders. But, as you know, they don’t have much in the way of shiny new aircraft to play with.’

‘Our American cousins have some cheap F16s they’re happy to impose on you,’ Jack said.

I cocked at eyebrow. ‘I see.’

‘And we have a great many Tornados about to be decommissioned.’

‘Which would still be more than adequate for regional use in Africa,’ the Wing Commander nudged.

‘We’ve only just bought a few F15s,’ I pointed out. Firmly. ‘We’ll have more planes than enemies!’

‘These particular Tornados and F16s would be a steal,’ Jack said with a grin.

I eased back. ‘What are you up to, Jack?’

‘I’d hazard a guess, and say Anglo-American influence in the region.’

‘They wouldn’t be under your influence ... would they?’

‘No, but they’d be preferable to a ... growing and emerging economic superpower buying Migs.’

‘Ah...’ I let out.

‘And once started on the route of western aircraft,’ the Wing Commander began, ‘they would buy western aircraft in years to come.’

‘When they had a little money to spend,’ Jack added.

‘You know what I think? I think ... I’d like three squadrons of F16s and three squadrons of Tornados to start with. Spares, technicians and instructors. I’d then see *all* of the countries in our region having a squadron. Will that get you two reprobates out of my office?’

‘It would,’ Jack said with a smile.

An hour later, Jimmy knocked and entered. ‘Are you decent?’

‘Dressed decent? Or well behaved decent?’

He sat. ‘You agreed to the RAF deal?’

‘Yes, made sense. A bit early, but we need a culture of good flying, and that takes years.’

‘It does,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘And the British Army are building a base near Mawlini, one in Somalia, and one near Forward Base.’

‘We being invaded?’

‘Hopefully,’ Jimmy stated, a strange answer. ‘Oh, French interested in a base near Forward Base, and Mawlini, and one in Somalia.’

‘We being invaded?’ I repeated.

‘Hopefully,’ Jimmy repeated, making me puzzle just what the hell they were all up to. ‘Anyway.’ He handed over a sheet of paper. ‘The kids in Shanghai have finalised a project that I won’t release fully – not just yet.’

I scanned the detail. ‘So ... they can turn coal into oil.’ I lifted my gaze. ‘Industry can already do that. It’s expensive, and eco-unfriendly.’

‘Not any more. The process they’ve developed creates a type of oil that burns in a more eco-friendly manner. And the cost of the process has been slashed. And ... our region of the DRC has enough coal to last a thousand years.’

‘Oh...?’

‘Order up the first coal mine and refinery.’

The sound of voices outside my door preceded a knock, and the PM stepping in with an aide. ‘This where all the real work goes on?’

We stood and shook hands, and I ordered drinks from my secretary.

Settled, the PM said, ‘We’re happy about the RAF deal.’

‘Bet you are,’ I complained.

‘We won’t be paying for your contribution, though,’ Jimmy told him.

‘No?’ the PM puzzled, a heavy frown taking hold.

‘No,’ Jimmy repeated. ‘And we’d like the rights to re-start coal mining in this country, and on a large scale.’

‘Coal ... mining?’ the PM puzzled. ‘What the hell for?’

‘After 2025, oil will be at a premium, expensive before then.’

‘Coal fired power stations? Are you mad?’ The PM challenged.

‘We can make them eco-friendly with new technology,’ I put in.

‘You can?’ the PM puzzled.

‘We can now,’ Jimmy answered. ‘But we won’t be building too many. That’s not what we want the coal for.’

‘You going to start making some sense, Jimmy?’ the PM implored.

‘How much is a barrel of oil right now?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Sixty something dollars a barrel,’ the PM answered.

‘Well, don’t tell anyone, but I can convert coal to oil for fifteen dollars a barrel. And I think we can dig it up for the equivalent of twelve dollars an oil barrel. That gives a profit margin of at least thirty dollars a barrel for capital equipment costs.’

The PM stared back, his mouth slowly opening. ‘That ... that could employ tens of thousands of people, and replace North Sea oil.’

‘That’ll piss of the Scottish Nationalists,’ I said. ‘This will be cheaper!’

‘My God, Jimmy. The ramifications are huge!’

‘The Yanks should be happy, they have plenty of coal,’ I put in.

‘So too the Chinese,’ the PM’s aide mentioned.

‘But there’s a problem,’ Jimmy noted. ‘If oil purchases from the Middle East slowed too much it would be like 2025 – only sooner. So this technology needs to be limited for now, but in place for 2015. We’ll build a plant in Africa, one here, one on the States, one in China. And then we’ll make it look more expensive than it really is, hiding the profits.’

‘How much coal is there in your region?’ the PM asked.

Jimmy glanced at me. ‘Enough to worry the Saudis. In simple terms, enough to keep the whole world going for thirty years.’

The PM blew out. ‘No wonder you spend so much time and money on that region.’

Thirty minutes later, Jimmy led the PM out, asking me to break the news to Chase. I checked my watch, and dialled the White House, eventually getting through after I told the lady receptionist

that the reason for the call was a need for advice on improving my sexual technique.

‘Paul, they announce you now as Rude Paul. How can I help?’

‘You sat down?’

‘At my desk.’

‘America has a lot of coal, yeah?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘We’d like to buy it.’

‘Buy coal? What the hell for?’ Chase queried.

‘Would you sell it to us?’

‘Sell you coal? No law stopping you from running a mine or exporting the damn stuff. But what the hell for?’

‘Oh, we just found a way to turn it into oil for fifteen dollars a barrel.’

There was a long pause. ‘You what?’

‘We can convert it now, perfected the technology.’

‘Future technology?’

‘Where else would it come from, dope.’

‘Fifteen dollars a barrel?’ Chase repeated.

‘Yep. So, that coal, you’ll sell it to us?’

‘Like fuck! You can *fuck right off* ... to quote Rude Paul. When can we get the technology?’

‘Sometime after we’ve drawn up a shopping list.’ I hung up.

At 5pm, I noticed an email from the White House. ‘We reckon it takes two barrel equivalents of coal to make oil, and that we can dig that up for twenty-two dollars, less with improved technology and efficiencies. Downstream costs may add another twenty dollars. It’s not a huge saving, but a great alternate. And creates jobs here.’

I emailed back. ‘The process creates a special oil that burns clean for power stations. It can be converted quickly to car gasoline. PS. Jimmy says he can mine coal for twelve dollars an oil barrel equivalent, so check your sums.’

North Korea

Jimmy had visited North Korea once before, with a Chinese delegation, and we had been quietly supplying them with cheap

medical equipment, ships of wheat, and the odd oil tanker. Now, Jimmy said it was time to try and nudge them our way.

On a hot August day, I nudged my family onto the coach, iPADS being carried. Shelly and Lucy sat with Han and practised recognising Chinese symbols on their iPADS. Helen and I fired up our laptops and attacked the hundreds of emails we both received. Still, the motorway journeys passed quickly.

Landing in Hong Kong, Po met us with a coach, plus plenty of security, that routine now handled by the local police. Booked into Po's hotel, we relaxed for a day; swimming, massages, eating, the girls competing to see who could read the most Chinese symbols on the walls.

On the second day, Po brought his family seniors around to talk shop. They had heard about the washing machine factory in Goma and were interested in opening their own factories.

Jimmy began, 'If you open a factory, it should be for goods that are in need, and could be sold locally, ideally back to us.'

'What do you need?' they asked.

'Uniforms,' I said. 'Police and army.'

'We can do that,' they offered. 'Synthetics.'

'No, local cotton,' Jimmy insisted. 'Synthetics are not great in hot humid climates. They're good for rain coats, and we need them as well.'

'OK, we make raincoat and hats, umbrella, cotton uniform. And we can make cheap TV and radio – old parts.'

'They would be good,' Jimmy agreed. 'And we need satellite dishes, furniture – plastic and steel, tools for construction.'

They now had a list of products, and they were keen to have a go.

'The land is free,' I said. 'And we'll help with factory costs.' That pleased them. 'And the more people you employ the better, but the minimum wage is set by us.'

'OK, OK, no problem.'

We agreed to areas where they would locate factories, a Po family plot some two miles square, fifteen miles west of Goma. I emailed the corporation, nudging them to make a start on clearing the land. Our guests then insisted that they build their own tower block and a separate hotel.

'I think there are enough hotels,' I pointed out.

'No, no, we look. When Golf come, many people have no room, and many tourist now from China.'

'So you want a Chinese hotel for Chinese tourists,' I realised.

'Yes, the staff speak Chinese,' they pointed out.

‘Fine,’ I said. ‘Build a hotel, but if doesn’t make money it’s your problem.’

The next day, leaving Shelly and Lucy with Po, we flew up to Beijing, joining a flight down to Pyongyang to meet the Korea leader, the man much maligned in the west. Their airport was basic, and their streets similar to Beijing in many respects; grey. I took in what I could as the dated bus trundled around to the government palace, the People’s Palace, although the people did not get to enjoy it.

Our guide, the Chinese Ambassador, led our group inside, met by his counter-part, and we sat awaiting their exalted leader for twenty minutes. I already wanted to hit him. He stepped out ten minutes later, and I found myself forcing away a grin as the puppet movie, Team America, came to mind. His puppet character was more lifelike. He wore a drab grey, and waved like the Queen as he approached. Everyone was bowing, so I joined in, eventually told to sit. I glanced at Han, wondering just how the world produced leaders like this.

‘Thank you for seeing us,’ Jimmy offered. ‘I would like to begin, by informing you that we developed the technology to convert coal to oil very cheaply. We would like to open a plant here and assist your oil production. If that plant is successful, we can create many more, and boost your economy significantly.’

‘That would be a great assistance,’ the translator told us. ‘But I am sure that you have something to ask for in return.’

‘There are a great many things that we could do to assist your country, whether others like it or not. If you are prepared to negotiate, we will negotiate for the future advancement of this country.’

‘Negotiate what ... in particular?’

‘All of those things that keep you at odds with the west,’ Jimmy responded.

‘I still do not understand your motives,’ the leader complained.

‘I seek peace for all the countries of the world,’ Jimmy responded.

‘And if we agree to these demands, what do we get?’

‘You get unlimited oil from coal to start with. You could even sell it.’

‘That would be a benefit.’

Our glorious leader then rubbed his chest, as if in pain, and pinched the top of his nose. An aide rushed over as our host just

about fainted. We were asked to leave, in a hurry, and soon on the bus heading back to the airport.

‘He is not a well man,’ Han pointed out. ‘We may be able to return in a few days.’

After our two-minute conversation, we reversed our trip, back in Hong Kong twelve hours and two flights later.

In the hotel, Jimmy said, ‘He won’t survive.’

‘Then why we negotiating with him, instead of the next idiot?’

‘Oh, he would have lived a few years yet. But I ... quickened the process.’

I puzzled that. ‘How?’

‘Technology. And don’t tell anyone.’

The next day, a full two days after the leader had passed, his death was announced to the world, the former head of the Army appointed as President. The first thing that the new President undertook, was to extend an invitation to the President of South Korea to visit his northern neighbour.

A senior delegation of Chinese officials met us in Shanghai the following day, after we made a quick visit to the gifted kids – who were now breeding like rabbits. So much for being autistic; they were more like sex maniacs.

We met the Chinese in a government building, Helen practising her Chinese, which was now reasonably good considering she had dedicated so much of her youth to filling her head with other languages. Jimmy produced a small device and plugged it into a wall, informing our hosts that it would jam all electronics.

‘We have a similar device from the children,’ they mentioned in passing.

The Defence Minister got straight to the point. ‘We are concerned by the military build up in your region. Now talk of more soldiers and western aircraft.’

‘Why is that a concern?’ Jimmy asked.

That stopped the minister dead. ‘Well, what is the purpose of the build-up?’

‘What do you consider the reason behind it?’ Jimmy countered, being quite adversarial today.

The Minister glanced at his team. ‘This is a preparation towards 2025?’

Jimmy explained, ‘For the African armies, and air forces, to be ready for that date they would have to start now. You don’t train pilots and officers in a few years, you need a good tradition of such training establishments. Now is the right time to start that process, so

that a plentiful supply of officers and skilled pilots are available at the time. And if my aim was to use western pilots, then these steps would not be necessary.'

They seemed to acknowledge the sense in that.

'You are teaching the Americans, and now the British, how to fight the Brotherhood.'

'Of course.' Jimmy waited.

'Will that disadvantage us in the future?'

'I see no scenario where Chinese troops move into the Middle East. If the Brotherhood reaches Western China then the tactics will be different.'

'The Americans would take the lead in a war with the Brotherhood?'

'The most likely scenario is that the Americans protect Israel and Saudi Arabia, that the African armies defend the south, that the European Armies defend Turkey, and the Russians draw a line at Georgia.'

'That would leave the east open,' they noted.

'India would take that burden, hopefully with your support.'

'And Pakistan?'

'For them, it's hard to say which way they'll turn. But to start with, Pakistan would resist the Brotherhood – all governments will.'

'And if factors change, as they have already done many times? As you say, there is no point in knowing the future just to repeat it.'

'Indeed,' Jimmy said with a polite smile. 'If they change, then we can assess them at the time.'

'And would it not be wise for at least some Chinese units to be trained to fight in the Middle East?'

'I could give you the manual and you can create your own programme, here in China, sure.'

'Would there not be some merit to training in the region of concern, alongside the Africa soldiers.'

I hid a smile.

'That would be a better option, but it would be very difficult to mix your soldiers with others. Your soldiers are like worker ants, your officers like moronic automatons, your style of warfare dated.'

Oh dear, I thought. For some reason that I could not put my finger on, they did not seem to like that.

'You say that our army, and our officer structure, is disadvantaged?'

'Very much so. But your forces are fine to defend China. They're just no good at expeditionary fighting, or guerrilla fighting, or co-

ordinating with western armies. That's fine, they don't need to be, not till 2025.'

'If we lack such a basic skill as expeditionary fighting, then do you not think that it should be addressed?' the minister unhappily pressed.

'There are not many scenarios where you'd need to run an expeditionary war involving others.'

'But there are some,' they pressed.

'Well, yes, if things go wrong.'

'Is it not always the case, that things *going wrong* are the start point of most conflicts?'

'Usually, yes,' Jimmy conceded. He took a breath. 'If you wish to create a unit and send them to Africa I'll do the very best I can with them. But I warn you, they may end up being less able to integrate with rigid infantry manoeuvres afterwards. They'll be taught to fight like the Rifles.'

'We could ring-fence such a unit,' they insisted.

'Then, when you're ready, I will do all I can to assist.'

They asked simple questions for an hour, thanked us and we headed back to Hong Kong. We enjoyed a few days in the colony, Jimmy not even mentioning Korea, and flew back to Blighty. All he would say, was that the device developed to kill the Korean leader was now being field-tested by Mossad agents.

Haiti

I had just about cleared my desk of topical issues when we set-off to Haiti in September. On the flight, I opened my laptop and read the detail of emails that had been downloaded and stored. With the software I now used, I could return emails, and they would be sent when I connected to a 3g mobile connection upon landing, or the phone line in a hotel.

Anna had sent me a lengthy report, her daughter now working with her. Christ, how long had it been since I saw her daughter last? Girl must be eighteen or more by now. And it seemed that Anna was trying hard to do my job for me around our region. She had greatly expanded the orphanages into colleges, children over fifteen

studying vocational subjects, those over sixteen studying for recognised qualifications.

That would have been fine, but Anna had gone further. In each orphanage, at least twenty-five percent of the boys attended the cadet movement training sessions – evenings and weekends, plus summer camps. More than a third of all girls qualified on a basic Rescue Force course and Anna was producing a shit load of nurses, some of who were destined for our village school projects.

But above and beyond the normal needs for warm bodies that we had, she had taken it upon herself to contact the corporation and enquire about skills – and the lack thereof. She now reported some eleven thousand kids studying bricklaying and construction, others training to become electricians, decorators, metal workers. She ran courses for budding oil workers, mine managers, plastics workers. Fighter pilots were not on the list, I checked.

At this rate, our skills shortages would diminish rapidly, especially in the Congo, where our orphanages-come-colleges now totalled sixty thousand attendees. And that number was now being boosted by the prison orphanages, where truant kids were forced to attend. So far, they only held five thousand inmates, and many kids were moved to other schools after a few months of food and schooling.

Anna had also taken Haiti under her wing, the super-sized orphanages working along the exact same lines as Africa, French speaking African teachers populating the blackboards. The first colleges were also under construction, hopefully good construction, and with decent concrete.

Our aircraft landed directly at Port-au-Prince airport, the airport facilities having been improved and extended. The tented city had not completely gone, a large number of re-construction workers still utilising them, alongside RF staff and the Rifles. I did, however, glimpse a large barrack block in the distance, numerous cranes littering the horizon as we landed.

A coach met us, thirty Rifles with jeeps acting as escort for the short trip around to a new hotel, positioned about a mile from the old Presidential Palace. That palace no longer supported a roof to keep the rain out, a myriad of small cranes attending it like crabs on a corpse. Our hotel was a simple collection of long three storey blocks, more functional than attractive, and I noticed again the angled buttresses that ran up the walls. It had been built to last.

The rooms were basic, but nicely decorated, and had a new smell to them. My bathroom looked unused, a lonesome cockroach in the

sink. After a satisfactory meal in the main restaurant, we occupied a conference venue room, the new President and his team coming across to us. Guess his palace still needed a lick of paint. And a roof.

‘Welcome,’ Jimmy offered.

‘Welcome to you,’ the President offered, his words heavily accented.

With everyone seated, coffees made, Jimmy began, ‘How’s progress?’

‘We have demolished four thousand houses or buildings and rebuilt them, and constructed thirty new apartment blocks here in the capital.’

‘And the soldiers?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Our own army is now seven thousand strong, some deployed on the streets.’

‘And the police?’

‘More than six thousand that are the new police force,’ the President offered. ‘Many former officers not working now.’

‘And crime?’ Jimmy nudged.

‘Crime is low, very low now,’ the President proudly stated. ‘Two, three hangings a week.’

‘And the UN?’ Jimmy asked.

‘They petition us every day not to hang or shoot.’ The President gave a large, gallic shrug.

‘Prison college?’ I asked.

‘Many of the prisoners now study the house building, yes. And working with the wood. We release many, not so many problems.’

‘Good. Well, we’d like to bring in oil exploration teams,’ Jimmy announced.

It was news to me, and made me smile.

‘Oil?’ the President repeated. ‘You think there may be oil here?’

‘We’ll not know till we look,’ Jimmy said. ‘I have the forms with me, you can sign them later ... and we’ll make a start.’

With our guests gone, I asked Jimmy about the oil. ‘Off the southern coast. Not much, but enough.’

‘And the real reason we’re here?’ I pressed.

Jimmy sipped a cooling coffee. ‘The chances of the States going at it with Venezuela have diminished, but not gone. So Haiti and the Haitian Rifles are a chess piece; on the chessboard sat ready. There’ll also be unrest in Central America after 2015. And finally, the Caribbean would have fallen to the Brotherhood around 2029 without a boost, and some suitable soldiers to hand.’

‘A piece on the chessboard,’ I repeated.

The following day we reviewed the RF teams still in place, making like electioneering politicians at the hospitals, especially the two new ones that we had raised with our own money. In the afternoon we met the Rifles instructors with their Haitian Rifles charges, and reviewed regular African Rifles still on duty here. With the sun low on the horizon, a UN chartered flight gave us a lift up to Washington.

Hardon Chase welcomed us to the White House the next day, but this time we used the front door, and were filmed doing so. I suspected he was after something. In the oval office, tea plentiful, Chase began with, 'So, coal technology.'

'We'll develop test sites in Africa, so you can have a peek when they're running,' Jimmy placated our host with.

'Timescales?' Chase nudged.

'A year at least.'

'Some excited folk over here,' Chase admitted. 'And ... a few concerns.'

'Something about gift horses and teeth come to mind,' I put in.

Chase ignored me. 'The ... Chinese have a lot of coal.'

'As do the British,' I added. 'And ... Poland.'

Chase glanced at me, but waited a response from Jimmy.

'Your concern, oh great leader?' Jimmy toyed.

'That if the Chinese economy gets the technology, and makes good use of it, that'll it'll give them a big boost. And ... then we'd see lower oil sales, and pressure on the dollar.'

'Oh, no,' I quipped. 'Did someone arrange for all oil to be trading in dollars? Bummer.'

Chase gave me a fatherly, disappointed look.

Jimmy said, 'The Chinese use of coal-oil will have very little affect on oil prices, since emerging markets will take up the slack.'

'Yes?' Chase firmly nudged.

'Yes,' Jimmy repeated. 'But what it will do, is keep oil under seventy dollars a barrel, whilst upstream costs rise, and the profits for fat Saudis fall.'

'Everyone's ... upstream costs will rise as the years go by, so oil is bound to rise,' Chase thought out loud.

'Yes, but in proportion - and measured,' Jimmy commented. 'Otherwise, oil will reach over a hundred dollars a barrel by 2013.'

'And the effect of coal-oil on the US economy?'

'You'll move away from foreign oil, but still keep at your gas guzzling when you should be turning to electric cars and the next generation of nuclear plants.'

‘We’re cooperating with the plant in Somalia, learning a few new tricks.’

‘Here’s the thing,’ I began. ‘Your good friends the Chinese have a drawing board, and on it are more next generation reactors than I have fingers and toes. Then there are the Russians, and we may also involve the Indians in the technology. So don’t cogitate too long.’

‘You seem to be helping the Chinese a great deal,’ Chase complained.

‘No,’ I said. ‘We tell them what we tell you, but they listen and react quickly. Go figure, huh!’

Chase gave me another look. ‘I’ll look at it again. Anyway, I hear the French have landed in Africa.’

‘The French have been there a long time,’ Jimmy commented. ‘They still have a pseudo-colonial attitude to Africa.’

‘You’ll train them to fight the Brotherhood?’

Jimmy nodded.

I said, ‘You may as well know now, that the Chinese were not happy about us training your guys. So...’ I checked my nails.

‘You’ll train Chinese soldiers? In Africa!’

‘We will,’ Jimmy confirmed with a forced smile. ‘Alongside the British contingent that’s on its way, and the aforementioned French. Oh, and the enlarged Indian detachment in the Congo.’

‘Are all the damn “M” Group countries trying to get in on it?’ Chase loudly asked.

‘Can you think of a good reason why they wouldn’t?’ Jimmy broached. ‘Or did you wish to face the Brotherhood alone?’

‘It’s not that that I’m worried about.’

‘How can you be worried ... about foreign soldiers learning to fight in the desert?’ Jimmy posed. ‘Any threat to you - from those countries - would be by airpower, naval or nuclear. Not counter-terrorist.’

‘Well, yes,’ Chase conceded. He sipped his coffee. ‘We have enough airpower in the region to stop a hijacked plane.’

‘For which I am grateful,’ Jimmy offered. ‘But keep up the pressure on crap old airlines flying crap old aircraft out of crap fucking airports.’

‘We’re upsetting a few as we speak,’ Chase noted. ‘The officer training college OK?’

‘They’ve started the first term, three thousand entrants,’ I reported.

‘And the bit here that I’m missing, that you two sneaky shits are hiding?’

‘You saw what I did with the Rifles,’ Jimmy began, a hint of a grin creasing a cheek. ‘Now see what I do with the officers.’

‘Future leaders?’

‘Future leaders,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘Pro-west, pro-America, pro-Baywatch and 90210, at a time when African GDP matters to the world.’

‘You’re welcome,’ I quipped.

‘We’ve contributed to the officer college, and to the new infantry bases,’ Chase thought he needed to mention.

‘Always appreciated,’ Jimmy told him.

‘A lot of folks over here getting twitchy about al-Qa’eda. It may just be an African and Middle East thing at the moment, but that aircraft coming down has worried a few people.’

‘It should.’

‘We’ve used satellite imaging over Afghanistan,’ Chase informed us, as if that in itself might have been a bit naughty. ‘And we can see training camps, upwards of five thousand fighters sat around the campfire. Maybe more.’

‘I’m working on a solution, one you’ll like, and one that those digging your ribs will like. It’ll come to a head in a year. But don’t forget, to take any action you’ll need the public behind you, and not just here. You’ll need wider public support.’

‘Support for ... what?’ Chase puzzled. I wanted to know that as well.

‘Wait and see. And trust me.’

Thirty minutes later we left the President to run the evil empire.

On the plane, mid Atlantic, I asked, ‘The officer college: you said it would change the world. Not seeing how?’

‘You will in a month or so, if you’re bright enough.’

Lebanon

A handful of rockets landed in Northern Israel a few weeks later, but instead of invading, Ben Ares came to talk, an odd move. A very odd move.

I welcomed him at the front door on a damp September day, New Dave and a few officials with him. In the lounge we found Jimmy

with Han, our Chinese representative bowing his head at our guests and leaving us alone.

With the door closed, Ben got straight to the point. 'We have EMPs, we have the counter-terrorist device, we even have the hand-held devices. We have a few blinding laser rifles, and we have the silent dart guns for close-up work by soldiers. And now we have the prospect of a war in Lebanon.'

'It's not a war, it would be *you* invading,' I pointed out, earning a look.

'Is there anything else we can use against Hezbollah other than the James Bond gadgets? Because they don't stop rockets!'

'I'd be happy to put the Rifles back in there,' Jimmy announced.

'You would!' Ben and I said at the same time, both equally surprised.

'Yes. But, I would not use Kenyans, that could be seen as ... antagonistic. I'd use ... Somalis.'

'Somalis!' Ben and I again repeated.

'Somalis would attract al-Qa'eda to Lebanon!' I put in. Loudly.

Jimmy eased back and waited.

I exchanged a puzzled look with Ben Ares. 'Hezbollah would attack them, as would al-Qa'eda?' I noted. 'Abdi has been calling the Arabs a few names of late.'

'Hezbollah would attack, and get themselves killed by the Somali Rifles,' Ben thought aloud. 'A thousand Somalis, with the James Bond gadgets, waiting for Hezbollah to make a move.'

'It would be a massacre,' I suggested. 'Which might just make it worse!'

Jimmy said, 'If Hezbollah fighters were massacred, it would take them a long time to recover.' I was surprised by that. 'But, I would keep the Somalis there for a year or more,' Jimmy added.

'So every al-Qa'eda operative goes to Lebanon to attack them,' Ben Ares realised. 'And get themselves killed in the process.'

'I don't think the UN would sanction Somali peacekeepers in Lebanon,' I quipped. 'Something of a contradiction: Somalis and peacekeeping!'

'No,' Jimmy agreed. 'They'd have to attack north through Israel, with the world watching. Fortunately, the "M" Group would handle the media, and we'd explain that it was either Somali peacekeepers – or a full-on Israeli invasion. Since we control the UN Security Council, not a problem. Ben, rattle some sabres towards Lebanon. Threaten to invade.'

'When could the Somalis be ready?' Ben asked.

‘In five days.’

‘Did you anticipate this?’ Ben pressed.

‘I may have put a unit or two on standby.’

‘Abdi wants payback,’ I realised.

‘You’ll need to re-supply them, Ben; food and water. We’ll handle the munitions, and the gadgets.’

A long way off, Sergeant Nbeki, better known as Lobster, packed his bags and said goodbye to his wife and children.

With the Israelis gone, I asked Jimmy, ‘Is this wise?’

‘You ask that whilst looking at the world from this perspective. So, try and imagine a scorched earth, the Brotherhood running rampant, and ask it again. I see things from a different perspective. If there’s no *end-of-the-world*, then it’s not wise at all. It’s all about perspectives.’

‘Oh.’

‘When you started that officer training college, you set in motion a chain of events that will have huge ramifications. When Rahman downed that plane, he set in motion a second set of parallel events, and the two will collide in around thirteen months.’

‘And when they do?’

‘The world will stop and pause on its journey to 2025,’ Jimmy enigmatically stated. ‘And people will take a long hard look at each other.’

That following week, Jimmy ordered a massive push by Rescue Force into Southern Sudan, a huge charm offensive that would be spread out over the next year, and I had to consider that a war with Sudan was possible. Jimmy said otherwise. He asked me to divert as much food as we could spare to Southern Sudan, along with extra water containers, and even electric buses and scooters.

I had hardly finished speaking with Mac on the phone when an incident occurred at Mawlini. Mac had driven to the nearest town in his four by four air-conditioned jeep, to a merchant who claimed he could get a hot-tub for Mac. The shopkeeper confirmed that the hot-tub was in Mombassa, and being loaded on the lorry as they spoke. Placated by that, Mac decided to return to base and do some proper work.

But getting back into his car he noticed two suspicious men, appearing to be Somalis or Ethiopians. As Mac drove off, the two men jumped into a jeep and followed, cutting up a few bikes in the process. Mac reached across to the glove compartment and pulled out his pistol as he started the journey back to base. On the edge of

town, the two men were still following in their beaten up old car, a lonely stretch of road ahead. Mac used his phone to call the base.

Ten minutes along the straight stretch of road, and having passed only the odd lonely oil tanker, Mac could see helicopters on the horizon. Half a mile later he slowed and pulled up, the men behind being a bit obvious and pulling up two hundred yards back on this desert highway. Pistol in hand, Mac jumped down to the roar of approaching helicopters, and moved to the rear of his jeep. Stood in the middle of the road, pistol in hand, he stared at the other vehicle.

The two men in the car were now less sure of themselves, something of a debate going on as to what to do next. They eventually decided that retreat was the best policy, and executed a three-point turn, starting back down the road as a Cobra dropped from the sky to a hover just ten feet above the road, some three hundred yards in front of them. As opposing traffic went, the Cobra was more worrying than a large lorry driving erratically. They halted.

From their side windows they could now see Cobras either side, Hueys behind the Cobras, a curtain of sand being blown up as if to hide what was about to happen next.

The lead Cobra hit the car engine with a burst of fire, shredding it. The two would be assassins burst from the car, one with an AK47. Righting themselves, one ran away, the second firing toward the Cobra, for all the good that would do. The Cobra, not wishing to be unsociable, returned fire, taking the man's legs off. They went one way, his torso the other way. The second man, the runner, held up his hands in surrender as Mac walked slowly forwards.

A Huey full of Rifles landed nearby and ran at the survivor, soon kicking him to the ground and stamping on him. Two other Hueys touched down as Mac waved off the Cobras. The Rifles ran forwards, checking the car, opening the boot and searching.

Mac stepped up to the Rifles officer, a captain. Over the roar of helicopters, Mac said, pointing at the dead man, 'I want him questioned!'

The captain stared at the blood-soaked sand that lay between the upper half and the lower half of the would-be assassin, his fists on his hips. 'Medic!' he called with a smile.

The survivor was dragged over. 'Take him back. Make him talk!' Mac ordered. 'And send some men to the town, search it.'

A line of three jeeps pulled up, more Rifles jumping down as Mac ambled back to his jeep, wondering when his hot-tub would arrive.

I received an email about the incident, suggesting that senior staff make use of driver-bodyguards. Mac refused, so I made it an order, copying in Bob Davies, then shouted down the phone at Mac. When that didn't seem to persuade him, Jimmy called Mac and offered to sack him and kick him off the base and out of his house. He would have a driver bodyguard. Or else.

Three days after that incident, Somali soldiers started to land in Israel. The UN had been petitioned to allow Somali peacekeepers into the UN patrolled area of southern Lebanon, but the UN had seen the obvious flaw in such a deployment straight away. They resisted. Overnight, the Somalis – complete with blue helmets, drove north from Israel to the UN bases now occupied by soldiers from West Africa, and replaced their colleagues. Those colleagues had been briefed a few hours earlier and were looking forward to returning home. They drove to the coast, where ships had arrived during the night, and were whisked away before dawn. The Lebanese woke to find no difference in the black Africans with blue helmets, and all was normal. Everything appeared the same.

The UN woke to find that their deployments had been altered overnight, and without their say so. The West Africans were on their way home, and would refuse to go back, the Somalis now in place. Not wanting to have their authority tested in this manner, the UN convened a meeting and ordered the Somalis out. The UN Security Council then convened and requested the Somalis to stay where they were, the outside world a little confused to say the least. One group of Africans had been replaced with another. So what? What was the big deal?

Hezbollah found out the next day, the papers reporting the presence now of Somalis on the Israeli border. For the most part, the average citizen of Lebanon shrugged and said “so what?” But the Hezbollah leadership, and their sponsors in Syria and Iran, knew only too well of the west's nuclear power plant and waste dump in Somalia, of western support for Somalia, and now the build-up of western bases on Somali soil.

What I found odd at the time, was the fact that neither Hezbollah, the Syrians, or the Iranians liked al-Qa'eda, or even spoke to them. The Iranians hated al-Qa'eda, because al-Qa'eda supported dissidents and separatists in the south east of Iran, bordering Afghanistan. So I failed to see how they might cooperate on attacking the Somalis.

That first week, the Somalis did little other than play at peacekeeper, and the world's media lost interest, not that it showed

much interest in the first place. But the Somali Pathfinders, along with Kenyan Pathfinders wearing Somali shoulder flashes, checked their ground and set-up reconnaissance patrols. Men were now dug in and hidden with their supplies, night sights and gadgets ready, satellite phones for secure communications.

Five days after the Somalis deployed the first team of Hezbollah fighters set-off to fire a few rockets towards Israel. The rocket team pulled into a lonely orchard at midnight, three cars and one lorry, and began setting up. Dawn saw no sign of the men, their families out looking for them, their vehicles nowhere to be seen. Those vehicles were actually sat in a compound in northern Israel, forensics being carried out, the bodies being examined.

Much scratching of heads followed. A second team, in a second area, set off after dark to prepare more rockets. Four cars and one truck, all now with their lights out, pulled into the rear of a large house, shaded by high walls, a lookout on the roof. Death crept quietly forwards. The man on the roof rubbed his chest, felt unwell, and slumped. The second lookout, in a field at the rear, thought he saw a flash of light, then wondered why the night had suddenly become so dark. By dawn, the cars and truck were across the border being examined, the rockets unused.

The Hezbollah regional commander was now suspicious, sure that Israeli commandos were out and about after sundown. He said as much to his people, asked them all to be vigilant, and sent forwards close to a hundred men to try and engage the Israeli invaders. By noon the next day the news was not good. Only six men had returned, along with twelve bodies, the nature of the men's deaths yet to be determined. The rest had vanished.

The various outlets for Hezbollah claimed the Israelis were capturing men and taking them prisoner, killing others. Israel pointed out that they had no soldiers in southern Lebanon, and went so far as to blame the Somalis, which was a bit cheeky of them. Ineffectual mortar fire was then directed towards the Somali peacekeepers, no one hurt.

For some odd reason, it had taken Hezbollah command a while to figure it was the Somalis, and not the Israelis, despite what happened when the Kenyans had been in position. With no other logical choice, Hezbollah anger was directed towards the peacekeepers, whose vehicles got stoned when they ventured out. So the Somalis stopped venturing out in the white UN armoured personal carriers. And, just for spite, the Somali's blew every electrical appliance in

the nearest large town. People recognised the effect, since some had been on a rally where the same thing had happened. No TV tonight.

With the Israelis providing intelligence about local Hezbollah leaders, some living forty miles from the border, Somali snatch squads captured the men, typically leaving most of the household dead. But the deaths were causing concern, since the people just seemed to have stopped living. There were no signs of injury, and post mortems revealed nothing at all. They had just stopped.

Panic over the strange deaths spread, rumours of the Israelis using chemical weapons. The UN got involved, sending in doctors to examine the bodies, but found nothing. It was all very puzzling.

Al-Qa'eda then showed up, permission asked for safe passage, permission to blow up the Somalis. Permission was granted by Hezbollah, and the al-Qa'eda team drove south. In the Somali base, a computer screen tracked an active satellite phone being intermittently used on its journey south. Teams were warned, others made ready, as the signal closed to within five miles.

The car was spotted on a quiet road, its movement matched to the signal being tracked. A mile further on, Lobster readied a device, a new toy, and moved to within ten yards of the road, not too fussed about being seen. As the car drew closer it slowed, spotting him, the device discharged. The explosives being transported had blown when small sparks permeated the vehicle – and everything inside it, the very purpose of this new device. The last thing the men felt was a tingling, like a million small electric shocks. The device had been successfully field tested, Lobster clambering to his feet and dusting himself off, jibes and rude comments coming from his Somali colleagues.

In the rear command post, situated in northern Israel, a Pathfinder officer explained the device, and its range limitations, the Israelis fascinated. Unfortunately, the device could not be widely used in everyday life without electrocuting innocent Palestinian drivers. The Israelis were not seeing a downside, keen to try it.

In Lebanon, local villagers saw the explosion, and went to investigate. The news reaching Hezbollah command was that the explosives had gone off prematurely; so much for al-Qa'eda's reputation as proficient bomb makers.

A long way off, Rahman sat thinking about many things.

Shelly's marina

With permission from the school, we took the girls and a group of their friends down to Goma for the grand opening of the main phase of the marina. The kids enjoyed a day at a safari lodge, chasing after balls of fur that were faster than they were, and the next day we all dressed smart for the grand opening. Many of the ministers were due to attend, as well as Marko and Yuri, Po and his family, plus a few of the senior staff from the corporation.

But arriving at the marina we could see thick crowds, many tourists, others appearing to be local businessmen in their smart suits. I even saw a few Indians and Arabs amongst the crowd. Security was tight, a line of police officers in blue stretching out and marshalling the crowds.

There remained tall yellow cranes around the casino, but that structure was taking shape nicely, and in the distance I could just make out very tall cranes around the new stock exchange. Pulling up in our electric bus, we stepped down being photographed by hundreds of people, the crowds ten deep at least behind the police and barriers. I waved, getting snapped by tourists.

The canals were now full of green-tinted water, clear at the top, but I could not see the bottom. The concrete sides had been nicely finished with a type of brown tiling, a black-painted iron guardrail running alongside the canal's edge to stop drinkers and revellers from falling in. The sun glistened off the water's surface, and even this small section was appealing to the casual visitor. We strolled along the canal's edge, soon to the main circular marina, wooden pontoons and a handful of boats in place, including a tall sailboat that Yuri had flown down in an IL76. Stood at the edge, at the railing, a hand on Lucy's shoulder, I was very pleased with our new marina.

Turning, I could see the curving row of cafes and bars, signs above doors proclaiming the names and dishes served within. The head of the corporation led us on, finding Po, Marko and Yuri inside an ice cream parlour, suitable produce in hands. We accepted ice creams as we greeted the gang, Jimmy leading us slowly up to the second floor. There we found that all of the restaurants offered balcony seating, and that you could walk along the balcony, which we now navigated as a group.

From the second floor I could appreciate the whole of the marina and its horseshoe of bars and cafes. Directly opposite the cafes,

edging the main canal down to the lake, sat two areas of neatly mown grass, many benches dotted about, play areas for kids tucked into corners.

Helen and the girls took snaps with digital cameras for five minutes, before we wandered down to the ribbon-cutting ceremony. We crossed an ornate wooden bridge, local dignitaries and ministers stood waiting in the sun, TV crews and journalists backing them. President Errol handed Shelly an oversized pair of scissors, and under the gaze of the crowds my daughter cut a large red ribbon. Behind it stood a plinth with a plaque, dedicating the opening to Shelly. Shelly's Marina, Gotham, City, had been born.

With a nudge from Jimmy, I approached the microphone, now the focus of the TV cameras and the keen journalists, some appearing to be western.

'Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming here today, to the opening of Shelly's Marina. This marina was named after my eldest daughter, because she drew the pictures that inspired the creation of this facility for the people of Goma, and for tourists to enjoy.

'It is our aim to create more water features and marinas to improve the appearance of the city, and to attract more tourists, helping the economies of Africa. To that end, I would like all of you to visit the cafes and bars, and to spend some money on cold drinks on this warm day, and some food later. Thank you.'

The crowds applauded, and Jimmy nudged me towards them. They snapped us close up, many asking for autographs. I had to wonder when I stopped fearing the public, and they started asking for autographs. I greeted families from all over the world, a wide range of accented English uttered. I practised my Russian, my Chinese, and even some German.

Yuri led us to his own restaurant, our group soon sitting on the balcony in the sun, having lunch as the crowds spread out, people either walking along the canals or using the bars. Sat there in a gentle cooling breeze off the lake, I could hear metal wires tapping the yacht masts, a familiar sound in any marina. The arrival of a hungry pink pelican was a treat, the bird resting on a pontoon and being keenly photographed by the tourists.

Not to be outdone by Yuri, Po was building his own restaurant – and on a grand scale, and now handed us a sketch of the hotel he was going to build. My first thought was that he would not fill it, but it was a beautiful design. If he wanted to build it he could, the land free, the materials and labour both cheap enough.

After lunch we sat chatting, cold beers on a warm day with a great view; I could have stayed there all day. The girls wanted to see the view from the tallest tower, so we reclaimed our bus and set off as a group, soon on the windy viewing platform, the balcony now complete with wire mesh to stop jumpers. The girls peered down, getting a birds-eye view of the marina, and the sections that were still a work in progress.

The main structure of the casino was complete, and in the distance we could make out the first four floors of the stock exchange in skeletal metal form, a second tower rising up next to it. Po and Yuri seemed to be in a heated debate about what new buildings should go where – and who should build them. Jimmy and I didn't care; they could build as many new structures as they liked.

Jimmy called Po over to a large plastic drawing of the city, one that detailed the various attractions for the tourists. On the drawing, he pointed out where Spiral III was being built, and a new estate called Hilltop. I took a wild guess and figured it would be atop the distant hills that backed Spiral III. Po then studied the distant hills through a telescope fixed to a pole.

That led to a debate between Po and Yuri about who should buy the land and build the houses, Jimmy resisting a smile. Jimmy intervened, explaining that neither Spiral II nor Hilltop was up for grabs, but if they wished they could sponsor Spiral IV and V each. These estates would be closer to the Stock Exchange. I peered out across the city, and figured that they might, by a whole hundred yards or so. Po and Yuri, keen to measure their dicks, agreed to one each.

‘My estate will be better than your estate,’ I whispered to Helen.

‘We should get Shelly to design them, and charge a fee!’

I took my wife to the south side. Pointing at the lakeside, I said, ‘Jimmy will build marinas all the way along, a mile or so. If they're like the first one, it'll make this place the Venice of Africa.’

‘We should build a house here.’

I stopped dead and faced my wife, the one I was supposed to lose in a year or less. ‘You serious?’

‘Yes. Why not? It's cheap to build, and the city is nice place to visit now. We all have a lot of work here, so why not.’

‘Holton Mansions,’ I quipped. ‘Shelly!’ I called. When Shelly drew near I pulled her in. ‘We want you to design a new house, a big one that we can live in when we come down to visit.’

‘On the lakeshore,’ Helen put in.

Shelly peered out at the lake. ‘Where?’

I pointed to a place beyond the Stock Exchange. ‘Half a mile further down the lake.’

Five minutes later, stood with Jimmy, I said, ‘Helen wants a house down here, a big one. What do you think?’

‘Helen ... suggested a house? Here?’

I was surprised by his surprise. ‘Yes. Would that ... not have happened anyway?’

‘No.’

‘Oh.’ We took in the view. After a moment I said, ‘Is ... that a good sign?’

‘I guess so. It’s ... all new to me.’

‘And the house?’ I nudged.

‘May as well make it talk of the town. Make it a fucking great pink palace, Miami style, rooms for us all; offices, staff, security lodge, gates - and a dinning hall to entertain guests. Ten guest lodges.’

‘Governor’s residence,’ I quipped.

‘About time, really.’

I told Po and Yuri about it. It took a whole ten seconds for them to ask if they could build along the shoreline like that. I agreed. And down here, a ten-bedroom mansion cost about fifty thousand pounds to build. If that. Returning to Jimmy, I suggested that we build a row of mansions ourselves, and sell them or rent them out as holiday homes to the rich, especially pro-golfers. He lifted his eyebrows and nodded.

‘Shelly!’ I called.

The snowball effect

Back in the UK, with Shelly busy refining drawings, and Helen having a strong input to our own mansion’s design, I got back to the drudge of running the empire. A golf tournament was about to start, and the hotels were packed out, limiting the spectators. Houses in the Spirals, and the city’s existing apartments, were being rented out for two weeks at a premium, some residents moving out for those two weeks to make money. Other householders had moved in with neighbours to allow their homes to be rented out.

I was busy directing food to Southern Sudan, that country now suffering from the destruction of its oil pipeline. Southern Sudan had all the oilfields, but the north controlled them, the south remaining dirt poor. I now arranged regular food shipments, and also bought food on the open market to ship over. Rescue Force had moved in, being kept busy distributing food to villages. Rudd had organised the self-assembly huts in their hundreds, and the lorries now trundled through Ethiopia to reach their destination.

Anna got a nudge, and some of the new school-building budget went to the southern-most parts of the Christian southern Sudan. With that organised, I returned to the cooperation group, and to facts, figures and statistics. Zimbabwe's crop yields were an inspiration, growing by fifty percent or more a year. They had even seen the return of white farmers. I was not sure that was a good idea, but the farmers did know how to till their own land for the best results.

One report caused me to stop and stare at it. The Chinese, thinking that they should be more involved with grabbing future African GDP and import markets, had made our bank a loan, a great deal of money. That had been followed by the British, the French and the Germans, and finally by Hardon Chase. They all wanted a slice of a future apple, and were falling over themselves to get in there now.

Traditional African investment was seen as "owning" the country, since the country in question could never pay back its debt. That would lead to lucrative mining contracts for the creditor nations. I wondered how much of that attitude was still alive and with us. I heaved a sigh, and realised that everything I had spent or earmarked had been topped-up. Back to the drawing board.

In a bold move, I ordered an entire estate built east of Goma hub. It would replace the huts that sat there now, and would consist of neat rows of our standard four-storey apartment blocks, thirty-six of them at the first go. When complete, those living in the huts would be offered the apartments for the same small rent they paid now. The huts would then be moved elsewhere.

I increased the budgets for thirty town councils, but then had an idea. It was outlandish. It was so outlandish as to make outlandish ideas seem normal. I smiled, but then I shook my head, expecting Jimmy to shout at me. But the damn idea would not go away. Standing at my window, hands in pockets, I decided that the worst Jimmy could do was shout.

Hopping into my electric car, which I still had not charged, I raced down to the house, finding Jimmy in the office. ‘Got a minute?’

‘You have a phone, dear,’ Helen quipped from behind her screen.

Jimmy eased up and stretched.

I tapped a large map of our region, one affixed to the wall, and Jimmy closed in, awaiting my great idea. ‘Kinshasa is a thousand miles away from where the action is. If - and it’s a big if - a new capital city was built here, south of Forward Base, it would be at the centre of all the action, and have road, rail and air links to everywhere. It would create jobs in this region, and make it easier to spread the money around through their existing institutions. And such a new capital would have no shanty towns, people would only be allowed to live there if they had work there.’

Jimmy sat back down. ‘One of the main reasons for having Goma hub where it is, was to isolate it from the corruption of Kinshasa. To be ... a new start.’

‘As this would be,’ I countered.

‘And another reason, was that we run the region – seen at the time as a giant swamp – so that we can control it, its growth and its money.’

‘Which should not change, not now; everyone is loyal to us, not Kimballa. Look, I can only grow the region so much without wasting money, or spending it on projects that are someone else’s ideas. For the region to grow faster it needs entrepreneurs, businesses, and people growing their own city naturally – like every other city on the planet did.’

‘True,’ Jimmy admitted. ‘And it would transplant a million people into our region, people with jobs and skills.’

‘And ... Gotham City would be more Beverly Hills to this new city’s Los Angeles. We keep Gotham City elite, and make this new city a proper working city.’

Sharon, her daughter and Helen, were all now keenly listening.

‘The growth of Gotham City has always been a struggle in my mind,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Because it will attract poor people, as it does now. I’d guess, that twenty years from now, it would be less ideal ... and more traffic jam.’

‘So this would make it a posh suburb,’ I concluded.

‘I had planned on building the next phase of Goma to the south and south west,’ Jimmy explained. ‘The stock exchange area would be mostly posh apartments, the lake would be Miami, the hills would have the Spirals, and south west would be more working class

apartments. If those working class apartments were twenty or thirty miles further south it would not do any harm.'

'Put a rail link in,' I suggested. 'They can commute.'

'Could you move a whole city?' Sharon asked.

'Most of Kinshasa is shanty town anyway,' I said. 'And there would still be business and buildings left there, we would not be pulling them down. I reckon that a quarter million of the best paid jobs might move.'

'Go sell it to Kimballa,' Jimmy suggested. 'See what he says.'

A few days later, Shelly presented me with some typically Miami style mansions, all beautifully drawn by hand. I asked her to photograph them and email them to me, pleased with the work. She then presented me with her drawing of our new house, Helen having had a hand in it.

The house was a large "H" shape, and reminded me at first glance of a French chateau, a slopping tiled roof with numerous small windows. It was two-storey, three with the attic rooms, offered ponds and gardens, and lodges for guests.

'Twenty-four main bedrooms,' she explained. 'Another twenty small rooms in the attic, ten guest lodges, an indoor and outdoor pool, a gym, a dinning hall and three reception rooms.'

'Excellent work, babes. Where would your room be?'

She pointed at a window facing the lake. 'Lucy would be next door, you and mum are here, and Jimmy there.'

I faced Helen. 'Are you happy with the design?'

'Yes, it should be lovely.'

'It's a deal then. I'll call Rolf tomorrow and start it. Right, young lady, I have a new project for you as well. See if you can draw a design for a whole new city, in Africa, but nothing too strange.'

'Am I getting paid for this?' my daughter nudged.

'What ... would you like?'

'A horse, twelve or fifteen hands.'

I turned my head to Helen. And waited. My dear lady wife shrugged. 'OK. Find one you like.'

'Portia has one for sale, he's called Max,' Shelly said with a smile. She ran off to phone whoever Portia was.

When Rolf turned up the next day, he found the Kangaroo in the drawing straight away, this Kangaroo peering out from a window. I wagged a warning finger at him. 'Design it, and build it where I marked on the back. Then I want twenty mansions built, different design for each, as per the other drawings. Think ... Miami waterfront properties and canals. Po and Yuri will build their own

houses at the end of this row. There'll be a road down the backs of the houses, and another row of mansions the other side. Think ... Beverly Hills.'

'We get the whole contract?'

'To design and build, but using local labour. Go to work.'

A week later, Jimmy told me to pack a bag, and we flew down to Goma hub with Big Paul and his mates, jumping on a flight for Mawlini. At Mawlini we booked into the hotel before boarding a flight of three Hueys that had been sat waiting for us. Ten minutes of flying southeast towards the border delivered us to a base almost as big as Mawlini, hundreds of huts, high fences with guards, many brick buildings partly complete, many cranes attending others.

Landing on a concrete apron next to a Huey hangar, we were met by Ngomo himself. 'Welcome to the United Nations.'

'UN?' I queried as I shook his hand.

'The "M" Group military academy,' Ngomo clarified. It was news to me. I didn't even know that this super-sized base existed. I knew there were foreign soldiers about somewhere, but not where.

Ngomo led us to jeeps, which whisked us around to an officer's mess. Stepping down, I could now see Big Paul and his mates suitably armed. Ngomo led us inside.

In a large and air-conditioned lounge we found a sprinkling of officers sat about, and a variety of national uniforms. The officers eased up and lowered books, newspapers and files, stepping slowly towards us.

Ngomo introduced the men, just about getting the names right. We had an officer from the British Parachute Regiment, an American Rangers officer, a Russian Parachute Corp officer with his distinctive blue and white stripped vest, an Indian officer in a turban, a French Foreign Legion officer and a Chinese officer.

Wow, I said to myself, wondering what the hell Jimmy was up to.

'My sister is not a goat,' the Chinese officer said to me. And in English.

'Your English is good, for a mainland Chinese officer,' I probed.

'A condition of being here; everyone must speak English.'

'Yes?' I faced Jimmy.

'One size fits all,' Jimmy responded. 'And it saves having to use interpreters ... too much.'

Ngomo put in, 'In the evenings, all the foreign soldiers have lessons in English, two or three hours a day.'

The British officer said, ‘And the native English speakers have learnt how to offer insults about sisters, and farm animals, in a variety of languages.’

The other officers agreed whole-heartedly about that. The Russian said, ‘In my language, “whoey” is a bad word. So, instead of “How are you?” the English boys say “Whoey are you?”’

I smiled. I had used the phrase myself once or twice.

‘How’s the training progressing?’ Jimmy asked Ngomo.

‘They were all injected on day one, and most now train like the Rifles. A few accidents, and few broken bones, but they are progressing.’

‘And the discipline?’ Jimmy pressed.

‘Not where we would like it,’ Ngomo admitted. ‘A ... change in culture for some.’

‘Punish the whole squad, and their officers, when they break the rules,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘If they’re a problem, send them home.’

‘The English and Americans are the worst offenders,’ Ngomo mentioned. ‘They like to play the fool and play tricks on others.’

‘Have the worst offenders flogged in front of their units, remove liberties and beer, or just kick them out. If you like, flog their NCOs and officers – I don’t fucking care.’

The British Major stood silent, and looking worried, as Ngomo grinned at him. Back in the sun, we boarded the jeeps, soon out of the base and heading along dusty tracks to a firing range. This particular range was enclosed by high brick walls, sand dunes having blown into place against their base.

At the entrance to the range we climbed a set of steep metal steps to a viewing platform, a thick glass pane protecting us from errant rounds or ricochets. Below us, a squad of six men stood in a line – appearing British, no flack jackets or helmets worn. In front of them a man stood waiting our signal. He now lifted his colleague into a fireman’s lift, held up his M16 and stepped slowly forwards.

A target popped up on the left. He swung left, fired twice, then checked the area to his front and right. The target dropped away. A few steps in he fired to the right, followed by a target at the front. At the end of the fifty-yard range he turned around, facing his squad, and started back.

‘In the UK, this would be illegal,’ I noted.

‘It would be in most countries,’ Jimmy agreed.

The man being tested swung his weapon around and fired as he progressed. Back at the squad he carefully laid down his travelling companion, stripped his weapon whilst using his mock-injured

colleague as a mat to keep the rifle parts off the sand, then reloaded his weapon, checking it. He lifted the injured man, and repeated the exercise.

‘How many times would they do that?’ I asked Ngomo.

‘Till they are so tired they cannot think.’

‘Anyone ever been shot?’

‘Yes, a few Rifles have died this way. But it’s good training.’

At the next range, soldiers were holding small targets at arms distance, their colleagues firing at them with pistols from ten yards. After that came a grenade training exercise.

‘How the fuck do you train ... for a grenade going off?’ I asked.

‘You see now,’ Ngomo said.

From behind a thick glass screen, scratched heavily on one side, we observed a soldier with a standard NATO grenade. He walked forwards, alone on the enclosed range, and pulled the pin. My eyes widened and my heart stopped. The man tossed the grenade into the sand, just four yards in front of himself, spun around and lay down so that the axis of his body pointed to the grenade through his boots.

The grenade exploded in a puff of smoke and sand, the soldier jumping up and joining his colleagues emerging from a brick room. He sat down and took his boots off, revealing blood on his foot.

‘He caught some!’ I noted.

‘Yes, he need the doctor to remove it,’ Ngomo calmly said.

‘Everybody get a piece in the foot.’

‘And ... the point of this exercise?’ I firmly nudged.

‘Not to be afraid the grenade, and to know what to do.’

‘No wonder this doesn’t go on in the west,’ I quipped. ‘Shit.’

At the next range, a group of Russians were being put through their paces by Rifles NCOs. Those NCOs had their berets on, but shirts off, each looking like a heavyweight boxer – only more scary. I guessed that they didn’t get much backchat from the recruits.

A long bench crossed the range at this end, on it some twenty weapons. The assorted weapons started with pistols and ended with an M82 fifty calibre sniper rifle, and the aim of the exercise was simple: to see if the recruit could remember how to handle each weapon. There was just the one small problem. The ammunition was on a separate table, in a bowl, all jumbled up. If you tried to stick the wrong round in the wrong weapon you were in trouble. You could even blow your own head off.

Back at base, we observed as men were learning to drive a variety of vehicles, forty-eight different types of them available, and all had to be mastered. The philosophy here was simple. They learnt all

vehicles, all weapons, all scenarios, till they were confident that they could tackle anything. That basic training would then be extended into desert specifics, such as desert survival and desert sniper courses, jungle survival and jungle fighting, mountain climbing and mountain fighting. And that was before they got anywhere near unit manoeuvres and company manoeuvres.

The final training area was for advanced first aid, Silo Stiffys getting plenty of attention in rooms built like lecture theatres. Teams of four men were now competing with each other to correctly diagnose the patient. We sat to observe.

‘What do you see,’ Jimmy whispered.

‘What do you mean?’

‘What ... do you see?’

I studied the men. ‘Soldiers ... training in advanced first aid.’

‘What else?’

‘Training to ... fight the Brotherhood?’

‘Open your eyes, numb nuts.’

With a curious frown, I studied the teams trying to diagnose the patient. And I was still studying them thirty seconds later.

Then the clock on the wall froze, and the world stopped turning.

I glanced at Jimmy as he waited expectantly, and turned back to the soldiers. Each team had four men, but of different nationalities. The team on the left offered a Russian, an American, an Indian and a Chinese soldier.

‘The national soldiers are training together, and bonding,’ I whispered.

‘Good. And what else?’

‘Might make it harder for them to fight each other in the future,’ I whispered.

‘Soldiers don’t make policy, politicians do, so that’s not a factor. What else? What ... current and near-future events may be affected?’

‘They ... could be used in Africa? Against Sudan?’

‘Never. Where ... else?’

I gave it some thought. I ruled out Lebanon, the Somalis were there, and we didn’t want western soldiers to be seen there. A thought occurred to me, and I grinned towards Jimmy.

‘Finally,’ he said.

‘Hardon Chase is pushing for an invasion of Afghanistan,’ I whispered.

‘He’d need some suitably trained soldiers first.’

‘And a multi-national force would stop complaints about western aggression,’ I whispered.

‘And such a campaign would need cooperation at the highest national levels,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘With the public behind them. Chase doesn’t realise it, but this will be the undoing of the Pentagon hawks. If he was sensible, he would never have agreed to this – it was a huge mistake.’

With the competition at an end, rude words exchanged by the various the teams, we walked down to them and chatted for ten minutes.

Back at Mawlini, we spoke to international soldiers undertaking basic flying lessons, both Tucano and Huey, before tackling a well-earned steak in the rooftop bar. Mac stepped out fifteen minutes later, pistol holster on his hip. It looked a bit odd, because he wore RF medical whites.

Mac was looking better these days, better than the gnarled old baldy he had been most of the time I had known him. He looked ten years younger now, the little pot belly gone, even the sunglass crows feet gone from his eyes.

‘Expecting trouble?’ I asked, pointing at the pistol.

‘Never know around here.’

‘And the two men who tried to follow you?’ I asked.

‘Sudanese fuckers. And fucking amateurs!’

‘Compared to an expert like yourself,’ Jimmy said with a straight face, but we all knew he was taking the piss.

‘Aye, bollocks,’ Mac responded.

‘You look ... well,’ I nudged, knowing full well that he had been injected four times.

‘I’m ageing backwards!’

‘Mentally, or physically?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Both! And you could have given me some of that stuff twenty years ago.’

‘We had to test it first,’ I lamely suggested.

‘How’s the wife?’ Jimmy asked Mac.

I snapped my head around to Jimmy, then back to Mac. ‘Wife!’

‘We ain’t married, she ... er ... just lives with me.’

‘A nice bit of black,’ Jimmy said. ‘A nice ... nineteen year old ... bit of black.’

‘Aye, well ... I couldn’t tell how old she was when I met her. They all look the same to me.’

‘Did they not list her age in the catalogue?’ Jimmy asked.

‘I’m helping the local community, providing a job and a home,’ Mac said defensively. ‘That’s my story, and I’m sticking to it.’

‘She’s less than a third of your age,’ I pointed out.

‘Yeah, well I can still get it up.’

‘So how’s the base?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Still fucking growing with the new camp out there; they all fly here.’

‘More people for you to shout at,’ I quipped.

‘So why the big move towards Sudan?’ Mac broached.

‘Since their referendum was inconclusive, the situation has become ... less clear. And, with the damage to their oil industry, I figured we should help.’

‘Aye, and I don’t know who did the damage either!’

‘It’s a mystery,’ I said, shaking my head.

‘Should the people of Southern Sudan wish to break away, I may consider assisting them,’ Jimmy suggested.

An F15 came into land, right in front of us.

‘They based here?’ I asked Mac, certain that they weren’t.

‘No, Mombassa. But always up here for a visit, or to bomb the ranges.’

A second F15 came in behind the first, and I faced Jimmy. ‘Do you think anyone would tell Helen?’

‘You’d be divorced,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘It’s no fun, is it,’ I said with a sigh.

‘Stick to golf,’ Mac suggested. ‘We do.’

‘You play down in Mombassa?’ I asked.

‘No, there’s a wee course here now.’

‘You ... have a golf course?’

‘Four holes so far, we made it ourselves,’ Mac explained. ‘We formed a committee, paid a few labourers, cleared an area and dug up the dirt so that the good stuff was on top, watered it and spread grass seeds. Took six months. Plenty of sandy bunkers, no water feature.’

‘You can allocate some money to it,’ Jimmy offered.

‘We can?’

‘Yes. I’ll be ordering a new estate, just like yours, to sit the other side of the road. May as well have a nice course for the people who live around here.’

‘I’ll get on it sharpish,’ Mac threatened. ‘Any major deployments in the works?’

‘Nothing on the horizon at the moment other than Southern Sudan,’ Jimmy replied. ‘But there’s plenty to do around Africa, so

keep them reaching the villages. And the next time you waste the fuel of eight helicopters to deal with a few gunmen the cost will be taken out of your fucking salary.'

Mac raised his hands in surrender. 'I called the base and told them the situation, that's all. It was their decision to send out a full squadron. Or two.'

'Don't keep a pistol under your pillow, Mac,' I warned. 'You annoy that nice young girl and she'll blow your balls off.'

This visit, the senior staff did not wish to corner us and worry over the drug, or any of our innovations and inventions. They were all now reported to have been injected – and enjoying the benefits. I stood at the wall as the sun hit the far horizon, beer in hand, and enjoying the amber hue that everything adopted this time of day. Hueys came and went, that sound that I was so fond of, and two F15s glided effortlessly by, heading home for tea.

Big Paul drew level, an elbow on the wall, peering down with a beer in hand. 'You miss this place?'

'Yeah. And I miss the stress of a deployment or a battle.'

'Getting old, you see.'

'Fuck off, underling. Where you been, anyway?'

'I've been working on the training programme with Jimmy for the past six months. I'm the liaison, computer in the house.'

'Kept that quiet.'

'Jimmy don't want the world to know. Al-Qa'eda might come straight for us then.'

'Yeah, I suppose,' I softly stated. 'Looks like the Sudanese are intent on sniffing around this place.'

'They think the Pathfinders blew up their bridges. Can't blame 'em.'

'How're the international soldiers getting along?' I asked.

'Yeah, fine, no problems. What you gotta keep in mind, is that this lot are all volunteers, and that back in the UK they'd have fuck all to do other than exercises after exercises. Being here is like going to war for them. And the training they're getting – well, when they finish they don't need to apply to join the SAS, they exceed the old standards – and then some. Prime Minister was concerned.'

'About what? Accidents?'

'No, about the Rambo types going home and kicking-off in civvy street.'

'Ah, I see. That a problem?'

'No, soldiers want to show off when they think they have something to prove. When this lot get back they'll have seen some

action, nothing to prove to anyone. They'll all get patrols in northern Somalia, a few places in the Congo where rebels hold out, Angola. But it's been a fucking eye opener for the British and Russians, being taught by blacks who know more than they do. And the fucking Chinese have never seen blacks.'

'No Israelis here?' I puzzled.

'Some problem with the injections I heard. Not sure if they want their people injected, some religious crap.'

'It's been banned in the Middle East,' I informed my sometime-bodyguard. 'But they fly to Goma to get it. Pope spoke out against it as well.'

'Ah, fuck 'em. What'd they know.'

'Haven't seen your lad for a while.'

'He's down here, at the beach hotel, trainee assistant manager. Having a ball, plenty of girls on holiday.'

I smiled. 'Not a hard life for him. You got anyone steady?'

'Nah.'

Jimmy appeared the other side of Big Paul. 'Any minute now.'

'Any minute now ... what?' I asked.

'Italian UN coordinator with a great cleavage.'

We waited. She appeared beneath, stopping to chat to a few people, but our eyes were not good enough to appreciate the boobs.

'Reckon we could hit the cleavage with our drinks?' Jimmy asked.

'Only one way to know for sure,' I said, and we poured, ducking back and getting three more beers, soon sat looking innocent as the lady in question stormed in; wet hair, and now a wet see-through top. A few cat calls went up, an applause issued from one table as the fiery Italian babe shouted at a waiter, pointing at the wall. That waiter pointed at the men clapping, turning to us with a grin as she assailed them with curses in Italian. We eased back in our seats. After a minute, she realised that she was leant forwards as she shouted, and coming undone. The men, all RF doctors, beckoned her back when she turned away.

She returned ten minutes later with the senior Italian representative, and Coup, lambasting the doctors again. They had cheered when she reappeared.

'Do you think we should intervene?' I asked, without sounding sincere.

'And spoil their view of her cleavage?' Jimmy questioned.

Everyone in the bar was now laughing as she assailed the men in English and Italian, her best assets wobbling as she wagged a finger, eliciting even more laughter.

Jimmy scraped back his chair and stood, wandering over with a napkin. He uttered a few soothing words, wagged a finger at the men, and rubbed her cleavage with the napkin. Coup threw his hands in the air and walked off, Jimmy leading the lady below.

‘That’s him gone for the night,’ I said. I stood at the wall and rang home, chatting to the girls and getting the latest on the new horse, Helen hinting that Shelly had a steady boyfriend. We didn’t know the lad, and we were not about to pry. I drank with Big Paul, chatting to many of the senior staff, and hit the sack around midnight.

At noon the next day we landed back in Goma, a meeting with Kimballa arranged in the Pentagon. At the Pentagon building, we took a little time to view the canal reaching towards it and a new café under construction, before proceeding inside. On the top floor, we entered President Errol’s office, making use of his boardroom, Kimballa and his team sat with Errol and chatting away.

When everyone was settled around the boardroom table, I lifted the shroud on the first drawing that Shelly had made for me, certain that any Kangaroos would be too small to be visible to my audience. ‘We have, for some time, considered building a larger city in this region.’

My audience were quietly stunned by the scope of the undertaking.

‘That city would be designed from the ground up, literally, to be a modern African city, and a shining example to the world of what can be achieved here. But, such a city would compete with Kinshasa and draw the talented individuals this way. To that end, I have the following suggestion. Why don’t we build a new city here, and move your centre of government from Kinshasa, to here.’

They were shocked.

‘Move the capital?’ Kimballa asked.

‘A capital with no slums, with new road and rail links, clean streets, tall towers and low unemployment,’ I teased. ‘A capital, that would put Lagos, Nairobi and Johannesburg to shame. The centre of Africa, the capital ... of Africa.’

They were still stunned, but pleasantly stunned.

‘It would take a long time to move the government and its staff,’ Kimballa complained.

‘We would build certain departments and ministries first, and move just those, and could build enough buildings and apartments to accommodate all of your government’s staff and functions. These new buildings would be purpose built, luxury, yet functional. There would be a new university, a major hospital, parks, cinemas ... everything that you would see in a modern western city, but there would be no slums or pollution.’

‘How long would it take?’ they asked.

‘We would at start the centre and work out, so some ministries could move in a matter of months. And, to start with, it would be a giant complex for the government and its workers. After that would follow apartments for civilians, business offices, factories and industrial parks. The entire project would take ten years or more, but the first stage could be ready quickly.’

I opened a folder and handed out sketches of buildings, images of what such a city may be like in the future.

‘You would pay for this?’ Kimballa asked.

‘Out of the money we make here, plus other money that we would put in,’ Jimmy answered him. ‘Some buildings we would own, some you would own.’

I showed Kimballa the sketch of my new house. ‘We’re building many houses like that along the lake. You could all live in one.’ Now I could see the kind of response I wanted, and from the simple sketch of a house.

‘And what of Kinshasa?’ they asked.

‘It would go on as now, still a major city,’ I assured them. ‘It would only be the government moving, and then key sectors,’ I lied, hoping that they would not question it.

I answered their questions for twenty minutes before we sat around drinking cold lemonade on the balcony. My audience was keen, I could see that, it was just a matter of logistics. I ended by saying, ‘If we build it, it will attract all of the key businesses from Kinshasa, and become a powerful city.’ I could see Kimballa’s grey matter working away, and I knew that he feared us breaking away.

We thanked him for his short visit and showed him out, our President already buying properties off-plan in Spiral III. Our luggage had remained with airport security and Big Paul. We now reclaimed it and passed through our own scanners, boarding a British Airways 747 bound for London.

En-route, I asked Jimmy about the meeting.

‘I would have built up Gotham City, but not as much as you’re proposing for this new city. It’ll use up a lot of cash, but at the end

of the day it'll create jobs and improve the regional GDP, which is just as important. If it's a modern city, and we ring-fence it to keep the poor out, then it should attract a lot of talent.'

'And Gotham City is the rich suburb up the road.'

'Which would not be a bad thing,' Jimmy agreed.

Winter

As winter approached, India and Pakistan were making threats, which worried us all, and the Ukraine was in danger of splitting along ethnic lines. Sumatra had suffered a major quake, RF deployed in time, and Samoa was hit again.

In Lebanon, the complaints to the UN were souring, allegations of the Somalis kidnapping hundreds of people. Fortunately, the UN were very short on hard evidence, and even their own inspectors on the ground did not understand it, many of those inspectors embedded with the Somalis.

An Israeli invasion had been averted, and two-dozen al-Qa'eda attacks had been thwarted. Unfortunately, our scanners had come too late for Chad, a plane hijacked and crashed into its capital, an odd move for al-Qa'eda since it achieved little. A third plane, taking off from Yemen, had been hijacked at gunpoint, despite us donating scanners, and had been shot down by Kenyan F15s with American crews, thirty miles off the Somali coast.

That was the first time a hijacked airliner had been shot down, but it would not be the last. The Middle East, and many countries far and wide, condemned the shooting down, but the UN Security Council countries all spoke in favour of the action, and the dangers that such aircraft posed to the world's major cities.

Unfortunately, many US commentators were suggesting an invasion of Afghanistan, joined by the Russians. The Russian capital had suffered numerous bomb attacks, despite Jimmy's warnings. Problem was, as soon as the police spotted a suicide bomber from the Russian Caucasus, they blew themselves up in the street, or wherever they happened to be when spotted. Many of those fighters, Chechen and others, had made a happy home in Afghanistan, as Jimmy had predicted. We now had the odd situation where Russia and America were on the same page over global terrorism.

In November, I hosted a meeting with Po and his family, Yuri and Marko, plus other investors in our new city. In on the meeting were all of the household “M” Group representatives, CAR and our property management business, the US bankers that we were friendly with, as well as Rolf the architect – now MD of the company that he worked at.

The meeting, at the club in London, concerned the new city south of Goma. Using a large screen, and images created by my laptop, I first displayed a map of the area and labelled various building projects, outlining future projects for Gotham City. That led to an image of the new city, and a few gasps.

‘If you build this, what will happen to Goma?’ Yuri asked.

‘Goma will be kept for higher earners and quality housing, and tourists,’ I explained. ‘And it will have a fast road and rail link to the new city, which will be less than thirty miles away. That city will have everything you may imagine of a modern western city, and may also house the Kinshasa Government. Gotham City will be a rich suburb, with no shanty towns.’

That pleased Po and the Russians no end, all of them now building their own phallic mansions on the lakeshore. Han indicated that his government would be interested in a substantial stake. He was followed by Keely making similar noises on behalf of Chase, and our property development company was certain it could raise more money for the project.

Drinks were brought in, and plans were made, Po suggesting that it could be the new Hong Kong, but African. This was not turning out to be a hard sell, and everyone wanted to know when they could lay claim to a patch of land. Figures were bandied around, sums large enough to give our US bankers an erection. I could see them salivating as they stood over a drawing of the proposed new city. Since property prices in the States were now rising at less than two percent a year, they were keen to invest.

That two percent was a worry for us all, since we knew what a fall in house prices may mean. Jimmy issued stark warnings, and the European Governments made sure that their banks were not exposed. Jimmy said that if prices could be held static for three years we would see some growth afterwards. We stopped building houses, and spare cash was now being earmarked for Africa, not the west’s property market.

In the first week of December, damp and chilly in the UK, we flew down to Goma for the much-publicised grand opening of our new stock exchange and metals market. McKinleys had a key role,

supported by many of the world's key bourses, especially from the "M" Group countries.

Computers had been set-up well in advance and thoroughly tested, even EMP proof, and a group of traders had used a practise program to try everything, all the usual trades. We even had a group of traders sat in Gotham City trading the various world markets till ours was ready.

Our exchange, our stock exchange, was not so much a national exchange of company shares as a subsidiary of six other exchanges, plus links to existing African exchanges as full members. We had not floated CAR, not yet, and it controlled a massive slice of the markets in Africa.

Our oil, ore and metals exchange, on the other hand, would be a world-beater, the volumes potentially huge. We had deliberately stockpiled ore, metal ingots and gold, and they would be for sale on day one. Each of our mines had agreed to partner the exchange, making life easier for them. They dumped their stock with us, and either their own traders or ours would try to get the best price for it, the mines no longer having to worry about transport costs. Their jobs ended when they handed over the ore or refined ingots.

The building was finished, a gleaming beacon that I noticed as we came into land. Next to it stood an office block, where mining companies and traders could have offices. In front of the new exchange ran a canal, down to the lake one way, around to the marina bars the other way. The young traders living here were already singing its praises: It's like Canary Wharf in London, but with all year round sun and cheap beer! Spare apartments were at a premium.

We drove around in convoy, some of the directors of McKinleys with us, plus a representative of the Bank of England and the London Stock Exchange. And fifty reporters.

Inside the building, we took the lift to the second floor, and walked out to applause from young traders in pink shirts. This floor offered an open-cry pit, but also computers around the walls for posting and receiving trades and instructions.

'Are you ready?' Jimmy loudly called, getting back a cheer. He cut a ribbon in front of six TV cameras and fifty photographers, and the main screens came to life. Trading life had begun.

We had posted ore, metal and even some oil deals at good prices, the buyers now making offers to our sellers. Leaving the melee, we took the lift up one floor and viewed a room of computerised trading

stations, young men and women sat behind three screens at once and trading the global markets.

One floor up we found the room for McKinleys, since they were principals to many derivatives traded here; they offered the bets and took the punters action. Above them we found Yuri, Marko, Po and others, champagne flowing. Po had his own traders, as did the Russians, and I suspected that insider dealing might be an issue.

I accepted a champagne flute, one for Helen, and we stood chatting to traders, the first few trades of the day pointed out on screens. Wondering up another level, we met the regulators, the internal police of our exchange, those who would try and spot the insider dealing. Stepping to a window, I could see the canal below, several small speedboats sat waiting some trade, local drivers, and across a wide area of mown grass sat the main marina. I smiled; this place was coming along rapidly.

The other place for gambling your money, although definitely biased in favour of the house, was the casino. After an hour in the exchange we headed that way in a speedboat, tearing along at the legal limit of three miles per hour, bodyguards in front and behind. I smiled; this was the way to travel to work in the mornings. What a contrast to when I started trading, commuting to work on the tube in chilly old London.

At the casino, the neon lights were already flashing, smartly dressed local staff helping us out of the boat, a red carpet laid on, ropes through brass poles. We stepped into the cool, air-conditioned interior, past a security check with airport-style scanners, a quick nose into the cloakroom, and onto the main floor, already hundreds of tourists playing games. Well, Yuri had given them all free chips to play, valued at two hundred dollars.

We gravitated towards a long bar, grabbed beers, and eased down around a table that offered a view of the action below, the bar raised whilst the main roulette tables floor was sunken.

‘Very nice,’ I said. ‘Rooms for shows as well.’

‘They have a few stars playing,’ Helen put in. ‘Talk about west-end shows coming here.’

‘There’re enough tourists,’ Jimmy commented.

‘Can’t build Spiral II fast enough,’ I said. ‘All sold off plan. Half of Hilltop sold off plan.’

Jimmy turned his head. ‘Extend the marina behind us, and put a row of nice apartments along it, maybe four storeys, but long. Ground level should be parking. Build a good three hundred apartments. Call it ... Casino Row.’

Po joined us, Yuri and Marko working the room. Well, they did own half of it.

‘New Hong Kong,’ Po insisted.

Yuri showed us the show rooms and stages, and I could imagine Katie Joe up there singing. I wondered what she was doing now. Stepping outside, and into the brilliant sun, we donned sunglasses and ambled along the side of the casino, parkland and benches that led towards the marina and canals. At the main canal we walked left, and towards the central marina, a fine day for a stroll.

Tourists waved, or took our pictures as we progressed, and I noticed millions of small fish in the canal, pointing them out to Jimmy.

‘Safe still water for breeding,’ he commented.

At the main marina square we noticed a crowd, many pointing into the water. A local, dressed as a chef, tossed a dead chicken into the water. A huge splash followed a pair of massive jaws snapping at the chicken.

‘Jesus,’ I said. ‘That croc is ten feet long!’

‘No swimming today,’ Helen quipped.

We closed in on the scene, the croc now munching on its chicken and swallowing, the tourists snapping away. Well, it was Africa, what did they expect.

‘Can’t prevent them,’ Jimmy said. ‘And have boats in here. Besides, they’re a pull for the crowds.’

Those crowds turned and snapped us more than the croc as we wandered past, but we were soon upstairs in an Indian restaurant and ordering food, enjoying the view below. The sun sparkled off the water, and the white sailboats looked great, now a dozen of them moored.

‘It’s coming along,’ I said, contented with my work.

‘Beautiful,’ Helen agreed. ‘And our house will be ready first week of February with a bit of luck.’

‘I told Rolf to make a few security enhancements,’ Jimmy put in. ‘Ground floor will be stronger, windows bullet-proof.’

I nodded, absently.

The head of PACT came and found us, Jimmy pulling over a seat for him. ‘The Ethiopians have sent us a delegation. They surrender.’

‘They ... surrender?’ I queried.

‘They’ve seen the new F15s, although they’re thirty years old, and the American squadrons, and the new RAF squadrons, now the multi-national force training near Mawlini – and they think we’re going to invade.’

‘Ah,’ I let out. ‘We do have a lot of soldiers on their border.’

Jimmy sipped his beer. ‘Ask them if they would like to join the cooperation group.’

‘Yes?’ the head of PACT asked.

‘Yes?’ I also asked.

Jimmy nodded. ‘They have resources, they’re well placed, and we don’t want them siding with Sudan, especially not if we have designs on Southern Sudan.’ He faced the head of PACT squarely and nodded, the man stepping away.

‘They would assist with Southern Sudan,’ I realised. ‘And secure Kenya’s northern border.’

‘I have no desire to build up Ethiopia,’ Jimmy began. ‘But there’s some merit to clearing out certain groups from within.’

‘Sudan won’t be happy, they’ll be ... twitchy.’

Jimmy nodded. ‘They could be an issue.’

I took in the boats. ‘That money you asked me to spend? By the end of this year I’ll have more than when I started the way things are going.’

‘You give someone a simple task,’ Jimmy mock complained. ‘Don’t waste it, but be bold.’

‘You don’t call moving Kinshasa *bold*?’ I complained.

‘Actually, that surprised me about you. And the house down here.’

‘It did?’ I asked, Helen equally surprised.

‘It did,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘You’re doing better than I had expected.’

‘Thanks, Granddad.’

An hour later we were still there, enjoying the weather, the food and the cold beers.

The head of the corporation came and found us instead of calling, an excuse to get out of the office. Jimmy offered him a seat. ‘Some interesting news, sir. Kimballa has agreed the move of the government.’

Helen and I exchanged looks. Jimmy took a moment, ‘Thank you, start making preparations. Recruit a team of a hundred people; architects, designers, builders, sewage engineers, road builders - find them an office. Start with a four lane highway south, towards the new location –’

‘And a monorail,’ I cut in with. ‘From the airport. It should be raised at the airport, eight metres or so, to allow for traffic, then ground level the rest off the way. At the city, I think it should be raised again, traffic underneath.’

Jimmy approved. 'We need a design, starting with sewers and roads, a new sewage plant capable of handling a million people, a new power plant further south. Design the road layout first, based on New York, then the sewers, then the electricity, then the government buildings, and finally residential areas.'

The man looked stunned. He blew out, stood up and returned to the office.

'What do we call it?' Helen asked. 'New Kinshasa?'

'That would be the obvious name,' Jimmy commented.

'Shelly City?' I ventured, causing a smile.

Jimmy raised his phone. 'May as well shake up a few people.' He dialled the African Times. 'It's Jimmy Silo. Listen, Kimballa has agreed to move his seat of government to a purpose-built new city south of Goma hub. Building projects will be allocated soon. Thanks.'

'Did that just treble property prices around here?' I asked.

'At least. I'll be ordering Spiral V, VI and VII.'

'Need a bigger airport now,' I complained.

'No, it's big enough.'

We wandered back around to the casino, and into its cool dark interior to find the gang. Po and the Russians were sat together, plotting and scheming as usual.

'Some news,' Jimmy said. 'Kimballa has agreed to move his seat of government to a new city south of here.'

'Should treble property prices,' I added, and I could see their grey matter firing up.

'Be big building contract?' Po asked.

'Very big,' Jimmy emphasised.

I tried my hand at roulette, blackjack and even the slot machines. That evening, we returned to the marina, the water illuminated from beneath – a nice touch. From the balcony restaurant we could see the fish darting about, also the odd crocodile sliding past. The bars and restaurants were well attended, and I glimpsed my first batch of drunk city traders in pink shirts. Seems that they had a good day on the markets. If they had a bad day, they wouldn't need to jump off the tall tower, they could jump into the water here and be croc meat.

'A lot of people here,' Helen noted.

'All the lodges advertise it,' Jimmy commented. 'And the hotels. Left and right of us are the smaller marinas. They have a few bars and restaurants, and they attract people wanting some peace. Once the waterfront is extended it'll thin out a bit. But some people are

coming down here for the city, not for the lodges. And we get golfing holidaymakers now.'

At 9pm, Jimmy suggested some shopping, the new centre open till midnight. With a blanket of bodyguards, we wandered back past the casino, through a well-lit park and to the new over-sized shopping centre.

The centre's security staff opened glass doors with golden handles, the interior air-conditioned, the floor marble. It resembled any shopping centre the world over, a wide variety of products on offer, a good spread of jewellery shops. I noticed a second floor, people peeking down at us, a few cameras flashing.

The first cross-section of isles offered a café, and we jumped into glass lifts for the second floor, the place now reminding me of Hong Kong. We passed a shop that sold safari goods, khaki green shorts if you wanted to get into the spirit of things. We stopped at a bar, beers ordered, and sat peering down at the shoppers below.

'Well attended,' I commented. 'Even at this hour.'

Jimmy said, 'Some people, with an hour to spare at the airport, come out here. But now, most safaris have the last day being a night in a hotel here, giving people most of a day to see the city and to shop here.'

'That last golf tournament put the place on the map,' Helen put in.

'I've increased the prizes,' I informed Jimmy. 'All the best players want to come here now.'

'Yeah, well one particular golfer will be here in the morning, upsetting the smooth running of things,' Jimmy informed us.

'Who?' I puzzled.

'Chase.'

'Chase is flying in?' I asked. 'What for?'

'Bit of an African tour, and a few rounds of golf. He'll be off to River View after this place, bit of a break. He's meeting the Tanzanians for a bit of plotting and scheming, after which they'll call me.'

Back at the hotel, we could see the Secret Service wandering around, a stronger presence of Pathfinders in suits, sniffer dogs with their twitchy noses to the floor. In the morning, Chase's coach arrived below the rooftop bar, no armoured limo for his short trip from the airport. He came up and met us, most of the hotel's rooms now reserved for his party.

I shook his hand. 'Welcome to Africa.'

‘So, this is where it all happens.’ He stood at the wall and took in the golf course, the Pentagon building and the distant Spiral estates. ‘Looks just like Los Angeles.’

‘You heard the news?’

‘Yes,’ Chase said, facing me with an intent expression. ‘A new capital, plenty of building contracts.’

‘Should boost the region significantly,’ I pointed out as Jimmy and Helen closed in.

‘Not on the course yet?’ Jimmy asked as they shook hands.

‘Can’t wait. But let’s chat first.’ He gestured towards a table, a hovering waiter beckoned over.

With cold drinks ordered, Chase’s Chief of Staff and his aides seated, Chase began, ‘This new capital – it’ll be the power centre of things African?’

‘It would be,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘This place would be a posh suburb, plus a tourist attraction.’

‘It already looks like Beverly Hills,’ Chase noted. ‘So where would the seat of power be? Your corporation, this new pan-African parliament, or this new city?’

‘The simple answer is – a bit of each, since they all have different functions. The corporation is us ... putting money back into the region, our profits back into the region. The pan-African assembly is to coordinate the countries and establish standards across Africa plus, in time, a common army and defence policy. The new city will tie together this region in a bigger way, and boost the GDP. If it’s done properly, that city will attract smart white guys with good business ideas. When that happens, we have the next Hong Kong right here.’

‘We would, obviously, wish to be in on the ground level,’ Chase firmly told us.

‘Kimballa will follow my lead,’ Jimmy said. ‘So, if we want American companies in here, with incentives and tax breaks, we can organise it. But don’t forget how far we are from the coast. We’re still trying to improve the infrastructure.’

‘The new rail link to Angola looks promising,’ Chase suggested, and I was impressed with how much the devious bugger had researched it.

I said, ‘That rail route could become a road route as well, a good port facility on the west coast, and some stretches of the rail track could be high speed rail, at least higher-speed.’

‘And will Kimballa adopt the dollar?’

‘I think so,’ Jimmy offered.

‘And the neighbouring states?’ Chase pressed.

‘Some would love to, but we have to stabilise them and improve their economies first.’

‘OK, let’s talk about Southern Sudan. You’ve offered to let Ethiopia join the assembly, so what about Southern Sudan?’

‘You been spying on us?’ I teased.

‘We have a whole section dedicated to you,’ Chase joked, but we all knew that it was no joke.

‘I would like, very much, to get hold of Southern Sudan,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘But not at the cost of a war.’

‘We could make that war a ... quick war,’ Chase risked.

‘And antagonise the Muslim North African states!’ Jimmy pointed out.

‘The referendum in the south was in favour of cessation from the north, just about.’

‘The infrastructure of the South is tied into the North. Most business in the south are run by the north.’

‘And their oil profits taken – at least till they lost their pipeline.’

‘I’ve organised a charm offensive in the south,’ Jimmy explained. ‘And when the time is ready I’ll nudge Sudan towards a semi-autonomous region, but with the north benefiting. The best of all worlds.’

‘Timescale?’ Chase asked as he eased back.

‘Twelve months.’

‘And the effect on the region’s GDP?’

‘They have oil in places they don’t know about, and ore. But those two markets are stable, prices stable, so we can’t just boost output without hurting ourselves.’

‘True,’ Chase conceded. ‘This new city, how many Americans would end up working there?’

‘Hopefully, many. But we’re talking about ten thousand, so no boost to jobs back home.’

‘But we will be able to sell our goods from a base here, like Caterpillar?’

‘Definitely. And I’m hoping that you’ll sell a lot of high-tech equipment here, computers and software, and boost African technology by a decade or two.’

‘Consider it done,’ Chase threatened. ‘And when I return to DC, I can confidently state that American companies will get major contracts here?’

‘You can,’ Jimmy said with a smile. ‘Even if some of it is your own money.’

We laughed.

‘And US citizens can live and work here with no visa?’ the Chief of Staff asked.

‘I’m the governor, but Kimballa has the last word on that. At the moment, they can live and work here with twelve-month visas, simply to keep track of them. And you can own property here. I would say that, within the city limits, any westerner could live and work, but the locals may not be happy with that. There may be some protectionism. We’re trying to create jobs for Africans, not for you lot.’

I put in, ‘If an American business employs Americans – fine. If a local newspaper advertises a job, then you’d not want white faces sat waiting an interview, pinching jobs.’

‘Besides, the wages would not attract many people,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘But no restriction on opening a factory?’ the Chief of Staff asked.

‘There’re none now,’ Jimmy told him. ‘You want land - it’s yours. Problem is, the people around here are on low wages, so can only buy cheap goods.’

‘That will change,’ I said. ‘Year by year, but they won’t be buying many big four by four jeeps.’

The Chief said, ‘But companies like Motorola, Coca-Cola, MacDonalds – they’d all get a good foothold?’

‘Sure,’ I said. ‘They can move in now if you like. The locals can sit in MacDonalds and enjoy a Coke whilst sending a text message.’

We laughed.

‘The university we built here was cheap,’ Chase noted. ‘We could build another one at the new city.’

‘Counting on it,’ Jimmy told him. ‘And you can set-up the mobile phone towers and grid, meaning that the locals would use your service first.’

‘When will the ground be cut?’ Chase asked.

‘Soon. But first we need to design it, and you can have an input to those designs. That way, you can prepare your corporations, pick out buildings and sites, the works.’

‘I can send a team down here to work on the design?’ Chase asked.

‘Just as soon as you’re ready,’ Jimmy offered him.

‘You don’t have any qualms about us investing heavily in the project?’

‘African GDP and dollar usage was planned with you in mind,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘So knock yourself out.’

‘How much ore is being produced, compared with what’s under the ground?’ Chase asked.

‘Fuck all,’ Jimmy replied. ‘We could increase ore production ten fold. But then prices would fall.’

‘What I meant was, how long will the ore here last?’

‘At least a hundred years, probably more.’

‘Will you be in office then?’ I asked Chase.

‘Two more years,’ he reflected.

‘And will they erect statues to you?’ Jimmy asked.

Chase cocked an eyebrow. ‘Maybe around here! Anyway, military want a word, they’re set-up downstairs.’

We all eased up and wandered to a restaurant below, eight generals and their aides sat waiting. After exchanging pleasantries, we settled, coffee poured. Chase gestured towards the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs and took a back seat.

‘We’re advanced in our planning for an invasion of Afghanistan. Realistically, we don’t see much of an alternative to invading and clearing out al-Qa’eda, before more aircraft are hijacked.’

‘So far so good,’ Jimmy commented.

They glanced at each other. ‘You don’t think it’s a bad idea?’

‘I think ... it’s inevitable. I have no problem with the invasion, just your plan.’

‘Our plan?’

‘Yes. Why don’t you give us a very brief overview.’

‘Well, we’d land in Kabul, thirty thousand troops supported by helicopters, aircraft and armoured vehicles, and push south.’

‘Might I ask, what the fighters living on the border might do when you land?’

‘They’ll move over the border into Pakistan’ I put in. ‘And wait for you to leave, then move back afterwards.’

‘We’d be working closely with the Pakistanis –’

‘Yeah, good luck with that,’ I quipped.

‘And *your* plan?’ the general snapped.

‘Do you have any soldiers suitably trained for mountains and deserts?’ Jimmy asked, checking his nails.

‘Our Special Forces and Rangers can handle mountains,’ the general said defensively.

‘I see. And what multi-national support would you have for this risky venture?’

‘The “M” Group countries get on well enough these days. I think we could get a UN resolution,’ the general stated.

‘And I’m certain ... that I could get you a consensus,’ Jimmy told him.

They exchanged looks. ‘If ... we modify the plan to one that you approve of.’

‘Yes.’

‘And that plan?’

‘Was worked out a long time ago,’ Jimmy told them. ‘As you might imagine. So, what is your objective?’

‘To neutralise al-Qa’eda.’

‘Al-Qa’eda is an idea, not a person or a place. They exist in Lebanon, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and North Africa. So, as far as Afghanistan is concerned ... what is your objective?’

‘To destroy as many training camps as we can.’

‘And then?’

‘To stop them coming back.’

‘Which would mean a long-term presence, which would be a disaster as your troops drive over mines every day, the folks back home not too happy, the incumbent feeling their wrath – and becoming rapidly less popular.’

They all focused on Chase for a moment.

‘And your plan?’ they testily asked.

‘First, I’d produce some suitable soldiers, then train them ready for such an operation.’

‘The Rifles?’ they asked.

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘Do you have any of your own soldiers that are starting to look and train like Rifles?’

‘The unit in Kenya?’ they queried. ‘There are not many of them.’

‘Do you need many of them?’ Jimmy posed. ‘It’s mountain and guerrilla warfare.’

‘And then there’s the matter of international support for the operation,’ I put in.

‘A multi-national force?’ they queried. ‘Mixed infantry?’

‘Mixed infantry, operating like Special Forces,’ Jimmy explained.

‘Why do you think they’re there?’

Chase said, ‘You set that base up ... to train them to invade Afghanistan?’

Jimmy turned his head to Chase, lifted his eyebrows and nodded.

‘Will they be ready?’ Chase asked.

‘In May, the best time to go in. Armed with EMPs, lasers, silent darts, and suitably trained. They’ve all been injected, and they are all currently undergoing a modified training program, Afghanistan in mind. Many of them are in the hills of Somalia as we speak, and those hills are just like Afghanistan. They’ll be ready in May, around four thousand of them, supported by two thousand Rifles.’

The generals were shocked. ‘And ... support and logistics?’

‘That’s what you lot are there for. They’ll take Kandahar airport again, and try and draw out the fighters, ambushing them on the roads. Separate units will move into the border region to prevent any escape.’

‘Six thousand? That’s all?’ they queried.

‘More than enough. I’ll give you my logistical needs soon, but the Chinese will cover much of it, and the Russians will assist.’

‘How long would they stay?’

‘Four months maximum, then out. They’d return two years later.’

‘And the Afghan government?’ Chase asked.

‘A waste of space, and will always be a waste of space. Try and fix that country and you’ll come badly unstuck, so don’t bother.’

‘Could we alter the make-up of troops in Kenya between now and May?’ a general asked.

‘Sure, but make sure that they all get three months at least.’

‘They’ll use helicopters?’

‘No, they’ll walk, drive or ride horses. They won’t have any body armour or wear helmets. They will ... feel their environment and interact with it.’

‘And the casualty rate?’

‘Less than one percent. As the Rifles say: if you get shot, you’ve let the side down.’

‘Just to be clear,’ Chase began. ‘We’re talking about our soldiers fighting alongside Russians, Chinese and British soldiers?’

‘And black Africans, and the French. And can you see the UN Security Council voting against such an action?’

‘Jesus,’ Chase let out.

‘Keep it under wraps for now. Very ... securely under wraps.’

Chase tried to improve my golf swing later, and I quite enjoyed the game. We took him to the top of the tallest tower, pointing out the various features, and he toured the university at length. Hell, he paid for it. With Chase on his way to Mombassa in Air Force One, we bordered a flight back to London, war now on the cards.

End of year

By mid December, the designs for the new city were coming along, some two hundred people involved. I called them all to London, where a number of models had been designed. Fortunately, the models moved, and you could break bits off.

Around a monstrous table, some six feet square, we pored over drains and sewer works first. They were followed by power lines and phone lines. Then came the main roads, and the link to Gotham City, a four-lane highway now in progress. That highway would cut right through the middle of the city and carry on south another thirty miles, splitting as it headed towards nearby towns.

The monorail was already being built, and would be a two track elevated line to the city centre, Chicago style. In the centre it would split and loop around, looking like a giant pair of scissors. Electric buses would be a key feature, running every ten minutes on most streets, every five minutes down the main drag.

The original idea was for the government buildings to be near the lakeshore, till we figured that the most valuable land would be there. It was moved half a mile inland, a large marina planned. Behind the marina would sit a huge shopping centre and an indoor bar and restaurant area, New Orleans with a glass roof. That would lead to business centre, tall towers, behind which would sit the government buildings. On either side of the government area we would build quality apartments.

Along the lakeshore, north towards Goma, would be a series of posh estates, gated complexes with their own marinas – after the shallow water had been dredged and the mosquitoes killed. Millionaires row, where my new house sits, would be extended a good few miles towards the new city. We planned on two distinct housing estates on nearby hills, nice houses and gated complexes.

South and west of the city would be industrial areas, business parks and factories. The city would have its own hospital, and four regional medical centres, a new university, several technical colleges, a library, a football stadium, a swimming pool and several posh gyms. We were not short of ideas.

I awarded the mobile phone network to an American company, the sewerage to a German company, the phone lines to another American company. The building contracts for the government

buildings were spread out amongst several western contractors, but after that it was a bidding war as to who would get what; I allocated the shopping centre to a consortium operated by Po and Yuri.

It was then a case of people wanting plots, with any buildings that they erected being done so at their own cost. Those near the city centre would charged for, those on the outskirts given away free. The row of international embassies was down to us to build, and they would stretch north towards Goma. In essence, the north and the lakeside were posh, the south and west working class. And, risking some criticism, we would impose a license to live in the city, roadblocks on the main roads. Locals could not simply move in and set-up a shack, since it would be well policed.

I had complained about not spending my budget, but this project would certainly have eaten it all up. At least it would have, but so many people wanted to invest in the new city that we'd have money left over. The Americans, the Russians and the Chinese were falling over themselves to have influence. And the American banks, they all asked for offices to be built in Gotham City, even the ones we didn't get along with. Behind the stock exchange, six modest towers were taking shape, a banking quarter in the making, property prices still under pressure. I could see a Spiral Twenty-Two on the horizon. Literally on the horizon.

Considering New Year, we all agreed that Gotham City was an option; we could get a bit of work done whilst there. We travelled down when the girls finished their school term, the senior staff from RF Mapley invited down, as well as the Mawlini gang. Po, Yuri and Marko, and many others travelled down, a fireworks display and lightshow planned.

Jimmy gave all the RF staff five hundred dollars worth of chips to lose in the casino, and New Year's Eve found us in the marina, at the Chinese restaurant, sat on the balcony under the stars, watching the resident monster crocodile below. That croc was now fed chickens every day and had become an attraction in itself. So far, it had not tried to eat anyone. A woman now stood with a small pooch on a lead, the dog barking at the floating log. My money was on the croc.

At midnight we all stood, a barge on the lake beginning its expensive fireworks display courtesy of Po and the Russians. Gotham City had been here a while, but this felt like its birth, its real birth, the start of a something special. I held Helen around the waist and watched the display.

She leant in and whispered into my ear. 'I'm pregnant.'

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Part 13

A new baby

New Year's Day, 2012, I woke to find Helen's head on my chest, her arm over me, and I wondered about the future. Our future. I also wondered why my clothes were on the floor. We had both agreed we wanted the baby, and we both reassured the other that no thoughts had entered our minds about getting rid of it. Yet we both felt we had to mention it.

I lay there listening to her breathing, thinking about another baby, and even if there was anything to think about. We were not short of money, we could afford full-time nannies, and we had done it all before. Twice. Not only that, but our daughters were now old enough to baby-sit for us. And as Jimmy often pointed out, Shelly was more practical and sensible than her dad.

No, I couldn't see any problems, other than a few wars, terror attacks, assassination attempts, being exposed, the plagues to come and the rise of The Brotherhood. But besides all that, I was happy to bring a new life into the world. My daughters were now too big to hug their dad very often, and I would love to have a dependent child again; one that didn't answer back with a smart comment in five languages. Or Latin.

Helen stirred, lifting her gaze to me. 'Awake?'

'Just thinking that it would be nice to have a kid that doesn't answer back.'

'That would be nice. I caught Lucy looking at porn the other week.'

'What kind of porn?'

'Gay men giving blowjobs.' She eased up and dropped her legs. 'She likes men with cut abs.'

'Could be worse,' I said as I eased out, heading to the balcony and stepping over my clothes. I peeked through the curtains. 'Rained in the night.'

Before breakfast, we knocked on Jimmy's door. He let us in, and we grabbed chairs whilst being curiously observed.

'If you've damaged something in your room, you can pay for it,' he dryly stated.

'We have some news,' I said. Jimmy grabbed a chair, and waited.

'I'm pregnant,' Helen admitted after a moment.

'I've told you before about sharing the bath water,' Jimmy quipped. 'And in answer to your question: no, this was not supposed to happen, I have no idea if it'll be a boy or a girl, and yes I'm very

happy about it - since your daughters are too big to fall asleep on me and they swear at me in Latin.'

'Not ... a good time to be bringing a new life into the world,' I tentatively suggested.

'When was?' Jimmy asked. 'If we thought that ... we'd never have any kids. It'll be fine. So, when do you announce it to the world?'

'May as well get it over with,' Helen suggested, a glance toward me.

'Announce it at the casino tonight,' Jimmy suggested. 'Give the tabloids something to print.'

That day we dumped the girls on Jimmy – whether he wanted them or not, and went for a drive to a safari lodge, enjoying a long walk. Hand in hand, we strolled through the heat, the bodyguards keeping their distance. Back at the hotel, that evening, the girls were curious about our strange behaviour.

'I'm thinking of trading you in for a younger model,' I told Shelly. 'One that doesn't answer back.'

Shelly put her fists on her hips, her mouth hanging open. 'Mum! Are you pregnant?'

'Pregnant?' Lucy repeated.

'Yes,' Helen said. 'We've sold you to a local chief for two goats, and they are nice goats, so it'll be just me and your father from now on.'

'They'll paint your faces red for the marriage ceremony,' I told the girls.

'That's great, mum,' Shelly offered, ignoring me. 'I can't wait to have a baby.'

'What?' I barked.

'I want one at sixteen,' Shelly informed us.

We stood shocked. 'Don't you think you should find the right husband first?' I barked.

'Oh, dad, you are *sooo* ancient. A man would just interfere with my plans.'

'Kids cost a lot of money to raise,' Helen pointed out to our daughter.

'Oh, like we're short of money,' Shelly scoffed. 'Jimmy has created a trust fund for us, we won't starve.' She headed off to her room.

I glanced at Helen, and we set off to confront Jimmy, finding him in the rooftop bar. His guests excused themselves, and we sat. 'You've set-up a trust fund for the girls?'

‘Of course. Why wouldn’t I?’

‘You might have told us,’ Helen complained.

Jimmy sipped his beer, taking a moment. ‘By time Shelly is sixteen she’ll have moved out, studying abroad at eighteen.’

‘What?’ Helen gasped. ‘Moved out?’

‘She’ll be ... a very independent young lady.’

‘She’ll be that difficult?’ I challenged, shocked by this revelation.

‘Not difficult, she’ll be just about the most sensible and practical woman on the planet. But she’ll also want to do her own thing. If you try and rope her in she’ll just go anyway, you’ll only end up hurting yourselves. Once she’s made up her mind there’ll be no stopping her.’

‘Move out at sixteen?’ Helen repeated. ‘Where?’

‘To the main house; be illegal otherwise.’

‘Why?’ I asked.

‘Why does any teenager want space?’ Jimmy posed. ‘You can’t apply logic to it, you just need to be there for her when she needs you ... which will be just about never. She’s tough as old boots is our Shelly.’

Helen and I exchanged looks. ‘And Lucy?’ I asked.

‘She’s the one you’ll be trying to marry off and kick out the door,’ Jimmy emphasised. ‘And you have a new kid on the way.’

‘You’re saying that we won’t be able to rein-in Shelly?’ I pressed.

‘The more you try ... the more she’ll move away.’

I sighed, facing Helen. ‘I think we could get two camels for her.’

‘She’ll take after her mum,’ Jimmy added.

‘I was just like that,’ Helen admitted.

That evening, at the casino, we informed the gang, getting many rude comments, offers of condoms or suitable books to read. I informed the African Times so that our paper could claim an exclusive.

The following day, trying to relax on the golf course, I received dozens of congratulation texts and emails, the phone eventually turned off. Fortunately, the next day would see a return to business meetings, a respite from the baby talk. Jimmy had called a meeting of everyone involved in the new city, Po and the Russians keen to get going.

In a large room at the convention centre, we stood about a map as Jimmy took charge, some fifty people now in attendance. ‘OK, our corporation will, first of all, create a worker’s village here.’ He tapped the map. ‘Two miles south of the proposed city centre. That

workers village should have two hundred wooden huts, canteens, shower blocks, a fence and a few guards.

‘Next to it, our corporation will create a vehicle park for bulldozers and diggers. They’ll start clearing the land and digging the future drains. The eight-lane highway will pass straight through the main city centre, dipping under the centre in a small tunnel. That highway will continue on south another thirty miles. From the city centre, two other highways will reach outwards, northwest and southwest - towards the nearest towns. That ... is the priority; we need good roads to bring in cranes and heavy loads.

‘Next, each contractor involved in the project will build its own workers village next to ours in the south. Each contractor is responsible for its workers and equipment, and everyone will carry ID cards.’ He pointed at a local man. ‘Yours is the largest concrete producer. I want your quarry turnout to be increased six fold.’

The man look shocked. Pleasantly shocked.

‘In addition to greatly increasing concrete output, I want to start a factory that will create pre-cast concrete blocks of given sizes, some with metal mesh inside, some with metal girders inside. They’ll be moved afterwards, many being utilised as pre-cast sections for covers over sewers. And don’t worry, you’ll get a loan from us to expand your operations. Yuri, we’ll want as much steel as you can produce, at least a twenty fold increase in your current capacity.’

‘We are already expanding as fast as we can,’ Yuri put in.

Jimmy pointed a local man. ‘I want as much wood as you can get. Don’t chop down the rainforest, buy it from existing wood mills. Start bringing it in and stockpiling it under cover.

‘OK, next we’ll build the power station southwest of the city, and we’ll start today. That will be both oil-fired, and coal-fired. My aim is that the sewers will be dug first, the pipes laid, the sewerage plant working. Then we need to think about water mains, electrical cables, phone cables. Those pipes and cables will run through concrete tunnels high enough for a man to stand up in. The roof sections will be pre-cast concrete, and will form the pavements of the city, access being via hatches and control points. Our aim is to have the utilities infrastructure for a million people in place before we even have a single person living in the city.

‘Next, we’ll build an estate of standard four-storey apartment blocks in the south, just north of the workers compounds. Those apartments will be available for workers, engineers and visitors. I want forty apartments built straight away, but keep in mind that

they'll not be temporary - they'll be there for decades. So make them nice enough, parks and gardens nearby, shops and facilities.

'But what I don't want ... is for workers to be travelling up to here unnecessarily, creating traffic and walking around in their muddy boots. So everything that the workers need must be provided south of the city centre.' He wagged a warning finger.

'Now, the first building to be constructed will be the corporation building, to house the corporation staff involved with building control. That building should be a quarter mile from the city centre, and started straight away, as soon as the highway reaches it. We'll then work on the following aspects, and in this sequence: roads, mono-rail, bus depot and bus routes. That will allow everyone to move around.

'We'll then have the unusual situation of building a city with many buildings - but no people. Because of that, we'll build apartments along both sides of the road southwest; nice apartments near the city centre, standard apartments further down. They'll have shops, bars, and restaurants. There'll be a clinic, a police station, and other utilities. That community will support those moving into the area, who'll need to buy things on day one.

'The foundations, and lower levels, of the marina and shopping centre will be built - but not used. That will be followed by the first government building, with nice apartments nearby for their staff to live in. Those buildings and apartments will be ready a good six months before anyone moves in.

'The local council office will be built next to the corporation building, more apartments nearby. When that building is finished, you can start work on the nice housing estates to the north and northwest, but in stages.

'Then, when the first government officials have moved in, the marina and shopping centre will be finished, plus the first tall apartment blocks - quality apartments, shops on the lower levels. Next to them will sit office blocks. There's no point in building office blocks without apartments; they need to be ready at about the same time. We'll then look at additional government offices step by step.

'What I have just described ... will be under the direct control of the corporation. Other contractors may build on land allocated to them whenever they like, but do so at the risk of having no one to use those buildings for six months. It's up to you.'

He tapped the map. 'Here, south of the city, is a piece of land jutting out into the lake. I want a golf course built here, a nice hotel,

and a small marina. That golf course will be thirty miles away from the existing course, so it won't take business away.'

He placed a finger on the map. 'The university will be here, in the west, a large industrial park here in the southwest. In the south, near the golf course, will be a small airport for regional aircraft, Dash-7s.' He stretched across the map. 'There will a train line here, with a passenger station, and that line will transport people all around Africa. Inside the city ... there'll be no train track, but it is my aim to make buses free for everyone. Buses and taxis will be electric, and either free ... or very cheap.'

He pointed at a Nigerian. 'We'll be offering you contracts for steel girders and pipes.' He repeated that to a South African. 'Every neighbouring country will get a contract. OK, questions?'

We spoke for forty minutes, promising loans and grants to numerous factories, the nice people from Caterpillar receiving major contracts. Basically, our entire cash surplus would be used up, as well as the investment money. But never one to miss a good deal, Jimmy had reserved the best lakeside land for the corporation to build on and to sell afterwards. We'd make a quid or two.

The tax position was odd, in that this was still our region. Half of all of the taxes would still come to us – all of the taxes for the next four years, which we would then spend on the region as if they had gone to Kinshasa in the first place. The only difference was one of control. I had to wonder what would happen when Kimballa, or his successor, was in power here.

We broke for lunch, eating with the Caterpillar directors and some of Senator Pedersen's buddies. After lunch, people bid for patches of land, a few plots sold, some kept back, a few plots given away. I then met with Steffan Silo, Jimmy showing little interest in seeing his brother.

I met Steffan in the restaurant atop Spiral II, Steffan keeping a house below. Settled at a table, I asked, 'How's the track through Angola?'

'We've improved the worst sections. Why?'

'I'd like to put a lot more ore out that way.'

'It's single track in many places, so we're laying additional track and marshalling areas. Then it will simply be a case of inland on the left, heading to the coast on the right.'

'Timescale?'

'Nine months.'

'And if you had more money and more people?' I pressed.

'Three months. But why the rush?'

‘In case you hadn’t noticed, New Kinshasa will need heavy goods brought in.’

He shrugged. ‘I’ll review it, award contracts to Angolans and Zambians.’

‘What about a road along that route?’ I asked.

‘There is one, good enough in some places.’

‘Could you improve it, send lorries back and forth?’

He made a face and shrugged. ‘We can award the contracts.’

‘It’ll have priority over the northern train line, now that New Kinshasa is under way.’

‘I can fix the worst parts of road, create a few bypasses; that’ll speed up the route.’

‘It may end up being the main artery for the new city, all one thousand miles of it.’

‘I’m working on the city roads as well,’ Steffan mentioned.

‘A man of many talents,’ I quipped.

He made a face and shrugged.

We left Goma hub having started a new city in the heart of Africa. The first coal mine was under way, a South African company running the project for us, and the first coal-oil refinery was under construction. All in, I figured that the new city would keep fifty thousand builders gainfully occupied, and that the city would then house up to a million people in time. It solved my inability to spend money and create jobs in one stroke.

Warfare of the future

Big Paul stood at a foldaway table in front of a shooting range, sunglasses on. Stood in front of him were four groups of ten men keenly observing, interpreters ready, a few Rifles NCOs to hand.

He raised a grenade. ‘This ... is a standard NATO grenade.’ He tossed it to a Rifles NCO, who then walked into the range, pulled the pin and dropped the grenade into a barrel of water. Three seconds later the water reached up ten feet, moistening the parched sand as it came back down.

‘If that grenade went off here, chances are many of you would be injured, but no one killed.’ He tossed a Chinese grenade to the NCO.

‘That’s a Chinese pineapple grenade. When it explodes it sends out larger pieces of metal, and they kill.’

The water again reached up around ten feet. Big Paul lifted up a grenade the size of a lipstick. ‘This is a new grenade, weighing less than one sixth of a regular grenade, so you can carry more of them.’ He tossed it to the waiting NCO. You turn the cap at the top so that the red line is exposed. You then press down against something hard, your finger won’t do it.’

The NCO checked the setting, banged it against the rusted oil drum, and dropped the grenade inside.

‘You have five seconds, longer than the NATO grenade,’ Big Paul added, the water reaching up as high as the previous grenades. ‘A bandolier of these grenades weighs very little, yet they have the same basic effect. You can, however, throw these further. There’s also an adapter for most rifles, especially the AK47, and you can fire them two hundred yards out. If you aim right they’ll detonate above an enemy position.’

He lifted a square grenade, the size of an old nine-volt battery, and weighing almost two pounds. ‘This ... is known as the square grenade, or battery grenade. It has three settings: five seconds, ten seconds, or one minute. Such a long setting is necessary for demolishing bridges and buildings.’

He held the grenade up. ‘This would not only kill everyone here, but they would not find any body part big enough to identify us by.’ He pointed to the desert, to a jeep with two Rifles NCOs, some three hundred yards away. Lifting a radio, he said, ‘Standard grenade.’

They threw a grenade and ducked down. It detonated with a puff of smoke and sand, a dull thud registering a few seconds later.

Big Paul lifted his radio again. ‘Battery grenade.’

The distant NCOs checked settings, dropped the square grenade into a hole, jumped into their jeep and sped away in a burst of sand. Big Paul put his hands over his ears, others copying. The battery grenade blew, the sand cloud blocking out the sun as the blast washed over them, small rocks raining down. It was ten seconds before Big Paul could see his audience again, the men coughing.

‘That, gentlemen, is one mother of a grenade. They’re useful for blowing up small bridges, houses, and compounds. But never think that you could pull the pin and throw it. If you’re up a mountain, then throwing it down is fine. If you want to demolish a building, set it to one minute – and run like hell!’

The nearest NCO attended a mortar, an 81mm. He checked his front, the desert clear, readied a shell and fired. It landed a thousand yards away and blew up a dust cloud.

‘That’s a standard 81mm shell,’ Big Paul informed his students. ‘This ... is an improved model.’

The NCO fired the second shell. Four seconds later an angry dust cloud rose up, four times higher than the previous, the blast washing over the men.

Turning back to the table, Big Paul lifted a standard Russian 7.62mm cartridge. ‘This is a standard Russian 7.62mm. We now have them in Teflon; they’ll do a lot of damage to a car engine, and pass right through a civilian vehicle.’ He raised a larger cartridge. ‘This is a fifty calibre round, also now in Teflon, good for hitting a vehicle engine. It will even damage lightly armoured vehicles.’ He selected another fifty-calibre cartridge. ‘This is an exploding shell. If your enemy is hiding behind a rock, you aim at the rocks left or right for a ricochet shot, and it explodes like a grenade. It’s also good for houses with thin walls, because it explodes inside the house. It won’t kill the people inside, but it’ll wound them all.’

Big Paul lifted a final grenade, similar to the battery grenade. ‘This is the Good Morning grenade. It has an eight-hour fuse, or thereabouts. It may be six hours, maybe ten; it’s random. The minimum fuse time is four hours, the maximum time being twelve hours. You bury them where you know your enemy will return to collect their dead or wounded, and bang! You can also sneak in to a place at night, spread them around, and sneak out. You’ll be long gone when they go off, and they’ll go off at random – scaring the crap out the enemy. It’s a good way of making people think that you’re still around - when you’re not.’

A long way off, Lobster sat waiting some trade in the shade of pleasant orchard in Southern Lebanon. He had dug a shallow trench into a dirt road and planted a long strip of specialist explosives, covering it over. Near the explosives, he left a reason for an approaching driver to stop, a rusted old AK47 lying in the road.

The sun slowly said goodbye and hid itself, the chill coming on quickly in the olive orchard, the location a favourite of mortar crews trying to hit the Somalia UN base.

An hour later he noticed lights. He grabbed his radio and clicked three times, repeating the signal. Readyng his detonator, he waited dispassionately, death not a concern to him, just a consequence. The job was everything. The objective was everything.

The target vehicle slowed, but kept its lights on, soon illuminating the AK47 and squeaking to a halt. A door opened after some debate, a man checking around carefully. The car was in the right position, so Lobster threw the switch.

The blast was not much, it was not designed to be, hence the use of a special explosive. But the car lifted up and rolled, landing on its roof after reaching an apogee of some six feet. It landed in a ditch and crumpled, the man who had eased out blown off his feet, but not killed.

Lobster walked silently forwards, dart pistol ready. The dazed gunman offered little challenge, killed with a dart made of wood, a throat shot. Groans emanated from the car. Lobster twisted off the petrol tap, gas dripping to the sandy floor. He dropped in a pencil thin incendiary stick and walked away, the fuel ablaze a few seconds later.

His colleagues had been kicking dirt back into the hole made by the explosives, but soon running through the orchard to a vantage point. A full six minutes later, a slow roasted mortar shell blew the car in half.

The net effect of the earnest labours of Lobster and his associates, was a great deal of unrest in the south of Lebanon, many fingers pointed at the Israelis and Somalis, but not so much evidence revealed. Bodies were being found, chemicals blamed, UN doctors proving otherwise. And the number of men disappearing was increasing.

Unfortunately for Hezbollah, a great many mortars and weapons had been found by UN inspectors. And there always seemed to be a picture in the Beirut press of a burnt out car, a rocket tube in the back. All told, it appeared as if a great many accidents had taken place by mortar crews and bomb makers. To be helpful, the Israelis suggested that Lebanon introduce a health and safety code for bomb makers; perhaps a certificate of competence for rocket crews.

Rahman had been observing, thinking, and waiting. Now he was ready to strike, sending out his minions in a carefully thought out attack.

A Pakistani registered ship set off from Karachi, taking on board its crew of fighters a few miles off shore, its supply of explosives from a second ship. It sailed south. Through the Yemen Straits it passed without problem, passing under the radar and the watchful gaze of the Somalis, and US Navy ships patrolling close by.

At the town of Suez it took its turn in the queue, accepted aboard a pilot, and progressed north into the canal, heading toward Little Bitter Lake. As soon as the ship was inside the canal, the pilot and his mate were killed, their bodies dumped over the side. The ship's lifeboat was lowered, a deadly cargo of explosives and gunmen inside. That lifeboat powered to the side of the canal as its parent ship headed on.

A second lifeboat was lowered a mile further on, the gunmen inside all prepared to give their lives for their chosen cause. The first lifeboat spotted its target, a huge container ship. It motored to the rear of the ship, turned in its wake and caught up with the slow moving giant. The giant's gangplank was hooked with a grapple, the first fighter climbing up. That fighter stepped up the gangplank, shooting dead the two surprised men staring down at him. Operating the gangplank controls, the gunmen lowered it for his comrades, shots fired at the ship's bridge.

The alert was given, but it was too late. The container ship slowly passed the second lifeboat, that boat's crew destined for a third ship. The container ship's crew were soon overpowered, the Philippine crew all shot. Cutting the engines, the momentum of the great ship carried it forwards as it was coaxed closer to the sandy banks of the canal. Judging the decaying speed, the gunmen turned the nose sharply and jammed it into the bank, blocking a third of the canal.

Down below, explosives were being placed against the hull, more than enough to cause a suitable hole. When ready, the timer was duly set, the gunmen retreating to their lifeboat, a further ship in mind. As they motored north, looking for a suitable ship heading south, the container ship took on water, its stern lowering.

From behind, a second ship dug its nose into the sandy banks of the canal, directly opposite the stricken container ship. With a hole blown into its hull, it also slipped lower at the stern, the Egyptian authorities now alerted and rushing to the scene. The news services around the world had also picked up on the story.

Jimmy received a call from Sykes. 'Two or more ships have been hijacked inside the Suez Canal.'

'Rahman.'

'You thought this would happen?'

'It was one of his ideas, not implemented before. I've changed my plans, and he's changed his. If he's true to form ... then he's wired the ships to blow when the authorities try and board them. Let the Egyptians know your concerns, and keep me updated, please.'

A third ship had been snared, and sunk in the middle of the canal. The Suez Canal was now plugged. Not listening to the advice from Sykes, the Egyptians boarded the partially sunken vessels and tried to move them, the controls smashed, engines damaged. The crew bodies were removed, recovery barges sent for.

The recovery barges were just about the widest vessels allowed into the canal, not least because of their shallow drafts. One moved in from Suez town, another moving down from Great Bitter Lake. The plan was simple: when in place, drag the ships clear if possible, sterns lifted first. Divers would be used to plug holes, watertight doors sealed, air blown in. That would take several days, followed by an additional few days to get the barges into place, for them to grapple their prey, and to start the operation. In the meantime, additional ships were now alongside the stricken vessels, containers being offloaded.

Rahman had anticipated just such an operation. Noon, the day after the attack, his men on the canal banks transmitted the correct radio signals. Those first few containers to be removed, the obvious ones stacked at the top, blew. The blasts killed crews, damaged cranes, and cracked the sides of ships. At the same time, the main target of this exercise, the two rescue barges, blew, soon heading to the bottom.

Rahman had plugged the canal for what should have been at least six weeks, and Jimmy uttered a few rude words.

After a walk around the grounds, Jimmy made a few calls, quite a few calls. Some of those calls were to do with the Suez Canal, now known as the Suez Bottleneck. Tugs had been hired by the British Government, tugs from all around the eastern Mediterranean, as well as from Somali, Jordan, Israel, Kenya, and even Pakistan. They were all headed towards the Suez bottleneck, small enough to squeeze past the wrecks.

The following morning, some twelve tugs tied off ropes and chains to the partly sunken ship blocking the centre of the canal. They put the pedal to the metal, and pulled for all their worth, scraping the ship along the sandy bottom at a very slow pace. Not to be disheartened, and working on double the normal rates, six other tugs turned up and fixed ropes of varying lengths. Eighteen tugs now powered up, creating a hell of a backwash, and dragged the stricken ship along at a modest pace.

Nine hours later, the lumbering cargo container reached the mouth of the canal, the lights of Suez town a backdrop to a thousand spectators. A further two hours allowed the tugs to turn left, and to

drag the ship half a mile away from the mouth of the canal. A cheer went up around the world.

The recovery barges, the ones that sunk before they could recover anything, were less of a problem, and were duly dragged clear the next day. Five days after the attack the canal stood clear, loose containers now being recovered from the depths.

When Jimmy saw a picture of the ships graveyard, east of Suez town, he said, 'They'll still be there in ten years, rusting away.'

In a palatial Dubai apartment, Rahman walked to his window and stared down at the bustling modern city below. Thinking.

Calm before the storm

The next "M" Group meeting was due, and due to be held in Washington, whilst difficult questions were now being asked about Rahman. Jimmy had few answers to offer them, and a few plans would have to be altered.

We stayed the night in the usual Washington hotel, meeting US investors interested in New Kinshasa, travelling around to the White House the next morning. A room normally used for state dinners had been moved around, and I was reasonably sure that we'd not be bugged. Not here. Everyone had arrived at the front door, being filmed, and even the President now openly referred to these meetings as "M" Group, offering no denial about our role. The public were not suspicious, they were keenly awaiting whatever tricks, gadgets or magic potions we came up with next.

I had heard about a Manson Drug Users Club in California, a group of people who got together to discuss the effects of the drug on their bodies, the drugs characteristics - instead of its side effects. They shared recipes for maximum health and strength - whilst allowing minimum weight gain, posed for photographs, and seemed to be caught with prostitutes a lot.

I had not met with either of the new Republican or Democratic candidates, but Jimmy suggested that he was comfortable with either. He saw no major problems with them, but was not a hundred percent sure of the Republic candidate.

In Rome, the numbers of both electric cars and electric scooters were increasing, as was the death toll amongst young riders. We pointed towards Italian driving. The Italians had, however,

introduced speakers to the scooters, speakers that gave off traditional scooter sounds, warning slow moving Italian housewives that there was a teenage Italian driver on an electric scooter approaching at high speed, but with no training, no helmet and little care.

In Nairobi, the scooters had also been popular. Unfortunately, they were just as popular with irate lorry drivers, who seemed to delight in knocking scooters out of the way. The death toll was high, the Kenyan lorry drivers motoring like Italians with attitude.

The people who had claimed the super-drug to be some sort of magic, or alien technology, were now being shot down by researchers working on stem cell projects, those researchers claiming that they would have come up with it in a few years. Yeah, right. We also now enjoyed the Japanese claiming that their scientists were within five years of creating the electric car batteries. That led to a TV programme that described us a “leeches”, grabbing cutting-edge research and finishing it off with the brute force of money. There was also the suggestion of industrial espionage, that we had stolen the plans and profited by them. But even our harshest critics had to agree that the profits had been ploughed into Africa, and to feed the poor.

Jimmy and I now worked the room, greeting leaders and aides in a variety of languages, making everyone feel welcome and needed, but also making everyone feel that we preferred them to the others. Jimmy eventually called order.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, politicians, hard-working aides.’ Everyone smiled. ‘Our first order of business is the Suez Canal. But first, we need to discuss a terrorist with the codename of Rahman – since I’m sure he was behind the attack. If ... I had not altered the way things go, then this gentleman would have appeared around 2015, caused problems for three years, and disappeared forever more. We *have* altered things, and for some reason he has appeared early.

‘And, as if not fully awake, he could have done a better job of it in Suez, sinking those ships in the centre of the canal, not the mouth. His next target should be the Bosphorous Straits, Turkey, and with little effect other than a huge oil spill for Turkey to deal with. That’s assuming that he is true to form. He was behind the plane hijackings in Mogadishu, in Chad, and again in Yemen – the aircraft that was shot down.

‘He will continue to try and hijack aircraft, hoping to crash them into populated western cities. Everyone ... must be vigilant. If contact is lost with an approaching aircraft, put a jet fighter on its

wing and have a look. Now, I can tell by some of your looks that you're struggling with that concept. Your countries ... are your choice, but consider what a 747 crashing in your capitals may do.

'Now, other than what I have already described, I know very little about Rahman. I have little else to offer, so don't ask. But, since he's out of school early, I have taken a few steps of my own. Yesterday, Kenyan and Somali forces re-took Kandahar airfield in Afghanistan.'

Many of the leaders glanced at each other, shocked.

'They flew in on scheduled UN flights; we did a little hijacking of our own. The difference, this time, is that they will stay for several years.'

'How does this affect the plan to invade?' Chase asked, clearly concerned.

'It makes it easier,' Jimmy suggested. 'Because the Taliban and al-Qa'eda fighters will think it a Somali issue, and will try and unseat the Africans from Kandahar airfield. That movement of fighters will help us to gauge their numbers and positions, radio traffic, leadership structures, the works.'

'And thin them out a bit,' I added.

'Will the African soldiers attack civilians as before?' the Germans asked.

'They have specific orders not to, and to stay put, fending off attacks. The previous civilian deaths came from Somalis who took a wrong turn into a town, and most of the soldiers on the ground are Kenyan. Still, there will be civilian casualties, as there were in Mogadishu when al-Qa'eda attacked. An ... eye for an eye is an important part of Somali culture.'

'Is their aim simply revenge?' the Germans asked.

'No, their aim – my aim – is to draw out al-Qa'eda fighters, and to keep them busy in Afghanistan instead of busy hijacking planes. I fully expect that all Islamic fighters, terrorists or would-be fighters, will travel to Afghanistan to join the fight, the more the better.'

'Keep them off the streets elsewhere,' Chase noted.

Jimmy told him, 'I would appreciate you monitoring any movements into Afghanistan, but without intercepting any of them. We want as many as we can to be bottled up there.'

'How many Africans have landed?' the French asked.

'Four hundred.'

'It is not many. There a thousands of fighters and Taliban.'

'It's more than enough. The Rifles have taken receipt of the next generation of advanced weaponry.'

‘How ... advanced?’ the Germans asked.

‘Enough to worry you; you would not wish these weapons to be on the streets of Europe. Now, since we’re discussing Afghanistan, some of you are already aware of the American desire to invade Afghanistan and to root out al-Qa’eda. I have, for the past decade, spoken out against such a move, not because it would have been a bad idea, but because conventional warfare would have been used.

‘American soldiers, training in Somalia, are being specifically trained to fight the Taliban, and the techniques are similar to those that would be necessary to fight The Brotherhood. All of the nations assembled here should be aware that I’m training the foreign soldiers in Kenya and Somali in this fashion, but I’m also training them to invade Afghanistan.

‘Those soldiers, who may later become instructors, will learn techniques that will be directly employed against The Brotherhood, and will also allow those instructors to train their own proxy armies. When the invasion of Afghanistan draws near, it will be spearheaded by American and British soldiers, with Africans in support. The Chinese will supply aircraft and logistics, but I do not ask nor encourage Chinese soldiers to participate ... unless they wish to do so.’

‘We wish to do so,’ Han immediately announced. ‘Since we consider the techniques valid for own forces in the future – if need be.’

Jimmy faced the French. ‘You have some very excellent soldiers from the Foreign Legion being trained in Africa. They would be most welcome, and a great benefit to us.’

‘We are willing to commit five hundred men,’ the French offered.

Jimmy faced the Russians. ‘What say the Russians?’

‘Our people will not be happy for our soldiers to return to Afghanistan, but we wish to find certain terrorist leaders. So we have created an expeditionary force of five hundred men, all volunteers. Most are in Africa now.’

‘Thank you. Moving on –’

‘Do you not ask us?’ the Germans posed.

‘Your soldiers are only fit for barrack duty.’

I hid a grin, and Chase looked away.

The German Chancellor composed herself. ‘Then maybe we should change that – if they will be needed for counter-terrorist operations in the future.’

‘To be ready for May, your soldiers would need to be in Africa next week,’ Jimmy pointed out.

‘We have considered a volunteer unit, and discussed it with our French counterparts. We can have four hundred men ready.’

I asked, ‘And they’ll work under black African instructors?’

‘They have volunteered for the work, so either they know – or they don’t know where Africa is!’

‘We will be glad to have them,’ Jimmy offered the Germans, a quick glance my way. ‘And afterwards, it is my intention to create a dedicated multi-national force, a desert, jungle and mountain warfare brigade. All of your soldiers will then be able train with that unit, to give them experience of what might be required in the future.’

‘And us?’ Ben Ares asked.

‘There is no way ... that I want Israeli soldiers in Afghanistan,’ Jimmy firmly told him. ‘But you are welcome to join the desert training brigade in Kenya.’

The Germans asked, ‘The soldiers in Afghanistan, now and during the invasion, they will breach the Geneva Convention?’

‘If you have thoughts and concerns along those lines, then don’t send your soldiers, and don’t attend these meetings.’ He held his stare on her. ‘We’re now in 2012, and 2015 will see the start of world coming to the end. You’d best wake up and realise what faces you, because what comes next ... I can’t stop. Millions of Germans will die. If you’re worried about sticking to the rules, then maybe Germany needs a stronger leader.’

Well, if looks could kill, I thought. Leaders collectively checked their nails.

‘Moving on,’ Jimmy finally said. ‘The Somalis are in Southern Lebanon, and have killed a great many Hezzbollah fighters, and disrupted al-Qa’eda cells, people that would have ended up turning their attentions to the west.’

Chase faced the German leader. ‘Good people sleep safe at night, because bad people patrol the borders.’

‘Very true,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘And a few years from now ... none of you will care about the Geneva Convention.’ Jimmy took a moment. ‘You’ve had it easy up to now. I’ve removed terrorists and other threats, I’ve averted wars, and I’ve averted financial crashes and other problems. What comes next *cannot* be prevented. The years between 2013 and 2019 will be the worse six years any of you will ever encounter. If ... you survive them at all. The good times are almost at an end, and those good times may not return till 2019.’

I glanced at Helen, thought of our unborn child.

‘As an aside, I hereby request that you all increase your research into SARS, Swine Flu, and the flu family of viruses. A combined research facility in France might be nice. OK, at this juncture I’ll open the floor to questions and suggestions.’

‘Can you explain the super-drug, and its interaction with the flu virus?’ Chase asked.

‘The basic super-drug will assist seventy-five percent of people to resist the flu virus family. The Manson drug will assist ninety-five percent of people to survive the flu viruses. Unfortunately, a person with the basic super-drug will become susceptible to the flu viruses after they have recovered. Some will die. Not many people with the Manson drug will die, but it is not one hundred percent. The flu virus family is adaptive, and no – there is nothing I can do to help. Your only hope is that you come up with something new and different to treat the viruses.’

‘Given that you know the future, we obviously don’t find a cure,’ the British PM put in.

‘There’s always a chance that some bright young scientist will stumble across something,’ Jimmy responded. ‘After all, there’s no point in knowing the future just to repeat it.’

‘The Suez incident was not seen?’ The French asked.

‘It was seen ... to be an idea for an attack in 2016, not now.’

‘Then maybe such future threats should be planned for now,’ the French suggested.

‘I’ve altered my approach, and I’ll warn you of such things. Unfortunately, you can’t stop and search every ship in the canal, or elsewhere. The best bet is to find the people responsible, and read them the Geneva Convention ... as you slowly hang them.’

The Germans still looked peeved.

‘The city in the Congo,’ the French asked. ‘What are your aims there?’

‘To build up the region, adopt the dollar, to increase GDP and to buy western goods when your own economies have gone to shit.’

‘With foresight ... we cannot avoid such a financial fate?’ the French pressed.

‘You ... are not the problem. The nice man who lives here, or his successors, are the problem. When the petrol-dollar crashes, you’ll go with it – because you’re too closely linked. And no, there’s nothing you can do about it. That fork in the road was taken a long time ago, and we all now live in a very integrated and inter-dependent world. But, if there is something you think this group could tackle – concerning the petrol-dollar – then by all means

present it. I would, however, caution you about suggesting that OPEC switches to the Euro, since some mistakes should not be repeated. If OPEC comes calling, send them away.'

The French looked as if they were now hesitant about making additional suggestions. At least openly.

We spoke about electric cars, nuclear technology, and New Kinshasa for an hour before breaking for lunch, time for the aides to scurry about with ideas.

Chase led us to the Oval Office. At the window, he turned. 'Will Europe nudge OPEC their way?'

'Not if I have anything to do with it,' Jimmy offered. 'Besides, OPEC may look at the Yuan in 2017. But, that was before I altered a few things; Africa may alter the playing field a bit. If Kimballa adopts the dollar, and we grow the GDP by 2017 – OPEC won't have a choice.'

'Is that achievable?'

'It'll be close,' Jimmy cautioned. 'I'd need to grow the region, and the only way to do that is the internal market. Any increase in exports ... and we lower prices.'

Chase walked around and sat against the desk, folding his arms. 'So how do we increase the size of the internal market?'

'Use the products internally. Make things and sell them locally,' I said. 'Africans making things to sell to the next town, not the west.'

'But the money to pay for those goods,' Jimmy began, 'comes from export revenue. So it's finite.'

'We could print a few dollars, boost local wages,' Chase risked.

'You'd be spending a great deal now ... in the hope that we hit the target GDP, and there're no guarantees,' Jimmy pointed out.

'As I said, we print them; they slosh around Africa, some used to buy American goods.'

Jimmy shrugged. 'Get someone to work out of our corporation, allocate a few building contracts to companies around Africa, the kind of building projects that use up a lot of manual labour. Make it look like us.' Jimmy faced me. 'Spend some time on the internal markets; factories full of cheap goods.'

'Po is on that one. I can ask him to produce household goods, and subsidize his materials.'

'Ramp it up,' Jimmy said. 'Big time.' He faced Chase. 'Get your people to think about what we can make – what American products can be assembled or made locally, under American parent company control. We have plastic, rubber, steel, aluminium, tin, wood, glass.'

'That covers most things,' Chase noted.

‘TVs, radios, computers,’ I suggested. ‘Basic household goods; light fittings, lamps, furniture. Anything that an African housewife might desire.’

In the afternoon session, we started with coal-oil, a few leaders unaware of the breakthrough.

Jimmy began, ‘For those of you who are not aware, and those not spying on our every move, we have developed the technology to convert coal to oil at a reasonable price. Germany: you have no oil, but you do have coal, as well as access to cheap Polish coal. Within six months we’ll be able to show you the technology, and you can make some of your own oil. That will, unfortunately, not impress our good Russian friends, who would like to sell their oil to Europe, even more than they do now.’

‘We cannot hold back the relentless advance of technology, and the coal-oil converters would have appeared soon enough. After 2025, those converters will be essential, and Russian oil will be insufficient in quantity to serve the needs of Europe and elsewhere. I would like to point out at this juncture that Russia itself also has a great deal of coal, and to balance things out a little I’ll be installing a conversion plant there very quickly. That will give our Russian friends the opportunity to reach a point – in say four or five years – where its production cost of coal-oil matches that of extracted oil. All they need do then – is find buyers, and that is not my concern.’

‘And China?’ Chase asked, getting a look from the Chinese.

‘Will start to produce some of their own oil from coal, but are conscious of the effects of over-production and over-use internally. The Chinese approach will be ... measured, in that I have asked them to sell oil to Japan at a suitably friendly rate.’

The Japanese were all ears.

Chase was a little surprised. ‘Our Chinese friends ... will export oil?’

‘As part of an agreed deal,’ Jimmy emphasised. ‘Not globally. At least not globally till that deal ends in 2017. Five years.’

‘And we get the technology ... when?’ Chase unhappily asked.

‘If you were to produce a great many barrels internally, what would it do to dollar oil prices externally?’ Jimmy posed.

‘Well, it could lower them,’ Chase admitted.

‘So a *measured approach* ... may be prudent. Yes?’

‘Always,’ Chase said with a false smile.

‘Ladies and gentlemen. I could, very easily, lower oil prices. I won’t ... because of the effect that it would have on the dollar, and on over-heated economies. We have a route-map between now and

2025, the aim being to get there without being out of breath. That means that I will try and hold oil at sixty-five dollars a barrel for a few years more, and then manage the price rise – with your kind assistance. We need to get to 2025, and getting there rich will not help; we need to get there united to have any chance of survival.

‘In 2025, and the years that follow, a few thousand well-trained soldiers will make more of a difference than large piles of cash. And for those of you that are interested, the technology being deployed in Afghanistan now ... is the forerunner of technology that will be used to fight The Brotherhood. For most of you, the final report into the conduct of the Afghan campaign will probably be the most important document you’ll ever read.’

They were all listening intently.

‘That document, will give you what you can expect when your expeditionary forces tackle The Brotherhood. Keep a copy next to your beds.’

An hour later we broke for the day, meetings organised between the various leaders. At our evening meal, in the same room at the White House, I asked an innocuous question. ‘Does Rahman know that we’re onto him?’

Jimmy took a long moment, raised a finger, then grabbed his phone. He called Sykes. ‘Leak the basic details of what we know about Rahman. Straight away please.’

By 10pm, US news channels were questioning who Rahman was, listing him as a terrorist mastermind residing in Dubai. In his expensive apartment in Dubai, Rahman was suddenly terrified by this turn of events. He was out of his apartment inside thirty minutes.

In our hotel in Washington, at the bar, Jimmy said, ‘If he’s foolish – and if there is a God – Rahman will run to Pakistan, to personally oversee the fight against the Somalis. And, if we’re very lucky – or he’s very stupid, he’ll enter Afghanistan.’

‘Good move then, naming him,’ I realised.

‘Could have been the most significant move of the fight against him,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘You know, during the Second World War, Hitler refused to believe that the British had broken the Enigma codes. Rahman doesn’t know that he’s up against a time traveller. I ... have broken his code, to some degree.’

‘Spook him then,’ Helen suggested.

‘Spook him?’ I repeated.

‘You know what he has planned, so reveal it. It’ll make him think that some of his own people leaked it.’

‘Helen, you’re wasted as a PA,’ Jimmy told my wife. ‘You should have been a spy.’

Helen cocked an eyebrow and exchanged a look with me.

Jimmy lifted his phone. ‘Sykes, Jimmy. Leak to the press that Rahman is planning to block the Bosphorous Straits with an oil tanker. Thanks.’

What we didn’t know at the time, was how wrong we were, or who Rahman really wanted to target.

Kandahar

A day prior to our “M” Group meeting, Lobster had stepped off a UN plane that had been borrowed by the Rifles. The Russian pilots had been paid off, and would deny any knowledge of the trip, even of an ability to fly. Plane? What plane?

‘Back again,’ Lobster muttered. Being blasted by the turbo-prop back draft, he lugged his kit forwards, dumping it alongside other rucksacks whilst taking in the familiar terminal building. It had not changed at all. Back at the rear of the aircraft, he helped his colleagues push a pallet off, the consignment clearly labelled as “Lobster toys”. With the pallet pushed all the way inside the terminal building, Lobster reclaimed his rucksack, finding a wooden bench to call a home for the next few months.

The initial battle had not lasted long, the first aircraft landing twenty minutes before Lobster’s. This time around, however, many of the airport employees were allowed to walk out unharmed, their purpose being to send a message to the Taliban leadership: the black soldiers were back. Lobster pulled out a knife and set about his pallet, his team nearby.

Command on the ground had been allocated to Major Nlobo, known as Mister Lobo by his team. He was an eighteen-year veteran, having started as a regular soldier and worked his way up, and was a Lieutenant the first time he had landed here. He now drew alongside Lobster. ‘They in one piece?’

‘We find out now, sir. But they’re pretty tough.’

‘Give the men in the city an hour to report our presence, then cut all the communications.’

‘Yes, sir. No Baywatch tonight.’

Lobo lifted his eyebrows. 'I don't think the Taliban allow people to watch Baywatch, Sergeant.' Outside, he walked across to the mortar section. 'Ready, Sergeant?'

'Yes, sir. All set up.'

'Wake up the town with six rounds.' He turned and walked back to the terminal, accepting a fresh tea. A dull rumble caused him to lower his tea and exchange a look with his adjutant. With heavy frowns, they returned to the mortar section.

'What the fuck was that?' he barked.

The NCOs had their noses in the mortar crate. 'They be labelled wrong, sir. They be earthquake shells,' a Somali reported.

'I know, I could hear it. So could people in Angola!'

'They all say regular, sir.'

Lobo inspected the crate. 'Who packed these?'

'They come from China, sir. We no see them before.'

'I wanted to wake up the town, not demolish it!'

'Sorry, sir.'

'Try and hit the crossroads to the northeast with them,' Lobo said as he turned, cursing under his breath and shaking his head.

With little to do at the moment, Lobster offered to help the mortar crews, perching himself on the wall with binoculars and compass. 'Bearing zero-four-seven. Laser rangefinder says two thousand two hundred yards. Fire one.'

A shell was lobbed outward.

Lobster watched as a cloud of dust enveloped a large area, several cars in the wrong place at the wrong time and now rolled away like toys. When the dust settled, a large crater was discernable a few yards off the east road. He lifted the radio. 'Close. Fire another.'

This mortar round hit the edge of the road, leaving a crater that cut into the tarmac.

'West one degree. Fire one.'

The local traffic had an odd reaction to the blasts: they speeded up, as if speed was a safety factor during a mortar attack. Three Toyota pickups were on the crossroads when it was hit, all destroyed, a suitable crater left behind.

'OK, it's zeroed on the crossroads, leave that tube.' He swivelled around, facing southwest. 'Bearing one-one-three. Range one thousand two hundred. Fire one.'

With traffic still on the road, the junction blew, a pleasingly large crater left behind, a few Toyota pickups destroyed. Lobster was certain that their presence was now known. Walking back, he approached trucks being examined, and enquired about the contents.

‘It say conc-re-etee.’

‘Concrete,’ Lobster corrected the man. He turned and faced a digger. It had seen better days, but was obviously still in use, and it gave Lobster an idea. He went and found Lobo. ‘Sir, there’s a digger, and a lorry full of concrete.’

‘Really?’ Lobo asked, pleased at the find.

‘We can make a bunker or two, some sleeping quarters at the far end, and repair the walls,’ Lobster suggested.

‘Definitely.’ Lobo pointed at a Captain. ‘You’re assigned to dig slit trenches, to make concrete roofs, and a few bunkers.’

‘And don’t be forgetting the central heating, sir,’ Lobster offered the captain as he left.

An hour later, Lobster lugged a heavy EMP to the north wall, his colleague lugging an even heavier battery pack. They moved the other soldiers back, and struggled up to the top of the wall, Lobster sitting straddle and facing the town, a few kids visible across the stream.

‘No one leaves Baby in the bag,’ Lobster offered his colleague.

‘Baby? This ain’t no baby, it’s the ugly fat sister.’

With the device plugged in, Lobster diligently checked the settings, re-checked the aim, and fired. The green lights turned red. All done.

In Kandahar, radios and phones stopped working. ‘No Baywatch tonight!’ Lobster said as he jumped down.

Collecting two battery grenades, Lobster and his colleague lugged their heavy bits of kit all the way to the south wall, through a hole, and to a flat and open expanse. A well-worn path showed the way, mines still scattered about from the previous incursion. Two hundred yards out, covered by the snipers on the wall, Lobster found a dry streambed. He turned one way, his buddy the other. A hundred paces along they dumped their heavy bits of kit, set the battery grenades for one minute, placed them right inside the devices, pulled the pins – and ran.

They both made it to the wall as the grenades blew, little but scrap metal left of the two secret devices, and that metal was spread far and wide, pieces now raining down on the airfield.

Nightfall saw the intermittent use of a distant DSHK, rounds falling inside the perimeter. On the roof of the terminal building, a captain sat behind a laptop screen, radio in hand, as the software displayed the streaks of incoming rounds and, more importantly, their origins. Mortars were directed, but did not need be accurate;

anyone within sixty yards was killed as earthquake shells flew out after the DHSK.

Five yards from the captain – the man now chilled in a freezing wind, a type of radar detector spun around. Below, in a warm office, another captain sat behind a laptop, keenly observing a map of the area to a distance of twenty miles. On it, coloured markers denoted radio usage, mobile phones or satellite phones. Blips were left on the screen after brief conversations, moving blips tracked, and priority targets could be selected.

Kandahar was quiet, hit with an EMP, but the screen now showed two or more satellite phones and a dozen radios in a convoy. And two separate groups. He twisted his head over his shoulder. ‘Stand to! Stand to!’

Lobo appeared a few seconds later. ‘Are we popular tonight?’

‘Sat phones and radios, two sizeable convoys. First is moving along the main road through Kandahar, west to east, second is southeast of us and approaching.’

‘Introduce them to some mortar fire.’

The captain lifted his radio, changed the settings, and called. ‘Mortar crew?’

‘Here, sir.’

‘Ready all tubes. Target will be both crossroads, wait my signal. Standby ... standby ... north crossroads, fire three rounds only. Standby ... south crossroads, fire three rounds only – wait out.’ He checked his screen, finding little radio chatter or sat phone use. A sat phone came to life near the north crossroads, then nothing.

Lobo returned. ‘Upload the sat phone numbers to the CIA. They may have them logged.’ He turned away.

‘Mister Lobo,’ the captain called. When Lobo turned back, the captain tapped a box on the edge of the screen. ‘That’s an encrypted sat phone, to western intelligence agency standards.’

‘That’s naughty. They didn’t buy that down the local carpet shop.’

Rahman lowered his phone onto a solid marble coffee table and stepped to the window, staring out at the bright lights of Dubai. Jimmy received a call, his interest peaked in that sat phone.

The captain was also interested, because although not in use, that sat phone was giving away its position, now moving northeast at vehicle speed.

Up on the roof, the chilled captain sat observing as his software burst into life, bleeps given and coloured flashes displayed. He grabbed his radio. 'Incoming! Rockets incoming!'

A small rocket hit the runway; no damage and no injuries. He pinpointed its launch position as the Taliban fighters made ready a second rocket under the cover of darkness, and lobbed a mortar onto it, killing the unsuspecting crew.

In the morning, Jimmy called an early household "M" Group meeting, before we left for Washington. 'Last night, an encrypted satellite phone was used in Afghanistan, cheekily bounced off a NATO satellite. It was a stolen handset that had never been disconnected. It is disconnected now, but the interesting fact is that the recipient's sat phone, also stolen, was tracked to Dubai.'

'Can't send in the marines,' I quipped.

'No,' Jimmy agreed. 'Which is something not lost on Rahman.'

'Do we have a fix on his house?' Jack asked.

'No,' Keely reported, the originator of this particular information. 'Just central Dubai.'

'It's confirmed something that I've always believed about Rahman,' Jimmy stated. 'That he's an Arab, and that he's worth a few quid. We also know now that the two convoys that moved to attack Kandahar last night were operating under his direct instructions.'

'What happened to them?' I asked.

'Wiped out.'

'So he'll send more,' I suggested.

'He's not stupid, and he won't repeat a mistake. The Taliban are a bit thick, but al-Qa'eda are switched on, so too the Pakistani fighters, and Rahman is better again. He's a thinker.'

'So are you,' I quipped. 'So out-think him.'

'That's easy, since he has objectives – and not much patience. And he has no idea of the advanced technology at Kandahar. For all he knows, the airfield is full of Somali grunts – an insult to his superior Arab brain.'

'So what's his next move?' I asked.

'You tell me,' Jimmy countered.

'What's his M.O.?' I asked.

'Planes and boats...' Jimmy trailed off. 'If I was him, I'd hijack or steal a plane, and ram it into that airport terminal at Kandahar. But where ... would he get one?'

'Do they have any in Afghanistan?' Jack asked.

‘Yes, in Kabul, but just a few UN flights. I’ll order as many as I can out, the pilots to be armed. Other than UN and NGO flights, nothing else lands there.’

‘Could he obtain one from a neighbouring state?’ Han asked.

‘Pakistani regional airports may be a choice, or somewhere north, the old soviet satellite states.’ Jimmy lifted his own satellite phone and selected a previously used number. ‘It’s me. Warn the team in Kandahar to expect an airliner attack, like Mogadishu. Disperse them. Thanks.’

‘That wouldn’t kill many,’ I said. ‘I’ve seen the layout of that place. Those soldiers are a mile apart!’

‘Command post is in the main terminal,’ Jimmy said, his hands wide.

‘Could he get surface to air missiles?’ Keely asked.

‘Probably,’ Jimmy answered. ‘And yes – he would try and shoot down our re-supply aircraft. So I’ve varied the routes. To see them coming he’d need a localised radar, which we’d detect.’

‘If I was him,’ I began, ‘I’d do the unexpected, and hit Mogadishu again!’

‘And we know he likes to blow up boats. I’ll send Abdi a message to watch the port. Anyway, tomorrow we’ll try a new weapon on Iran.’

‘Iran!’ I challenged, sitting up.

‘Internet weapon,’ Jimmy said with a smile.

The following afternoon, as we were at the “M” Group meeting, we got confirmation from Mossad agents inside Iran that most internet servers were down, even the corner-shop internet cafes were closing up. It had been a successful test, a full denial of internet use for almost six hours achieved.

The Iranians immediately blamed the west, unaware that the re-start of their servers coincided with tens of thousands of software robots trawling for information based on keywords, and emailing the detail out. It took the Iranians three days to discover that, which led to all computers being ordered off, nationally, whilst a few clever young men found a way to remove the robots.

Details of their continuing weapons programme was now out: names, dates, figures - enough information for the Chinese and Russians to know that their earnest diplomatic efforts had achieved little. The UN received the detail, information that the Iranians would find very hard to deny. When I asked Jimmy if the Americans would attack, he simply shrugged. What he did say was, ‘Always release a bad story on a good story day. Or on a very bad story day.’

Cuba

As we landed back in Cuba, it brought back a few bad memories for me, vivid images of Karl's death a contrast to the fine weather and lush green vegetation.

We were booked into three different hotels – just in case, and had made those bookings some three weeks earlier. Cuban agents stood ready at each hotel, and several of Jimmy's gadgets were pulsing away, interfering with bomb timers and oven timers alike. Alarm clocks went crazy and staff slept in.

The hotel we actually chose was a new-build, and owned by Po. I found that fact odd, since it appeared typically Cuban, not typically crazy. Turned out that the Cubans had used a few harsh words towards Po, and then forced a design upon him. I was certain the drawings had no kangaroos in them.

Despite the hotel being Chinese owned, the staff were all locals, polite and friendly. And the notice board declared that tonight was Salsa dancing night. I had to wonder what the hell they did on the other six evenings of the week. That first evening was relaxing, bomb and sniper free, the next day spent with Rescue Force, the camp here now as big as Mawlini, with recruits emanating from all of the South America countries. Hacker was still putting them through their paces, and Hueys buzzed around, the Cuban people now used to them.

On the third day we toured our well-run orphanage in the morning, meeting with the government in the late afternoon. There Jimmy broke the bad news.

'We believe that an earthquake will strike Cuba soon. In four weeks.'

They were mortified, thoughts of Haiti coming to mind. 'How serious an earthquake?'

'Not like Haiti,' Jimmy was keen to emphasise. 'But still quite bad. It will strike in the south east, so we'd like Rescue Force to be ready.'

'Of course, there are many of your people here.'

'We'd like to use additional French and British doctors if that is OK. Some from Africa.'

'You will need many?'

‘Better to have too many, than too few,’ Jimmy told our hosts.

It took a while to reassure the officials, and we moved onto oil, the Cubans allocating us extra concessions. Jimmy then surprised me with a request to open a few factories on the island. The factories would employ local people and be owned and run by CAR, and would make household items. Like washing machines.

Leaving the meeting, Jimmy simply suggested that Cuba needed a boost. Cuba’s relations with the US were now amicable, albeit a frosty kind of amicable, and trade was increasing. What Jimmy now desired was a rapid increase in Cuban GDP, and he handed me the task. As if I didn’t have enough to do already.

An12

In Kabul, Taliban fighters had seized two UN aircraft after gun battles. One aircraft was too badly damaged to take off, the second now pulling away from Kabul and heading southwest. The news reached us in time, a warning given to Kandahar airfield. Lobster took Baby out of the bag and jogged to the north wall.

Meanwhile, a fortuitous turn of events was about to benefit us, not Rahman. With complaints of large-scale civilian deaths already made, TV crews had arrived in Kandahar, even a western crew hoping to get an exclusive, a team of Italians who had been based in Islamabad.

An hour after the alert had been given, with Lobster stood waiting patiently, all eyes now on the dull grey cloud base, a plane could be heard approaching. The An12 broke through the clouds at three thousand feet, turned east and then west, finally figuring out where the airfield was. It nosed down towards Lobster, coming at him head on a mile out.

The EMP had a crude aiming slide, but Lobster waited, just to be sure. Judging the aircraft to now be within a mile, his colleague held the EMP whilst Lobster peered through the slide’s groove. He delicately moved his finger to the release button, just registering its surface texture, and took a half-breath. Exhaling slowly, Lobster took a final aim and pressed gently – so as to not move the EMP.

He lifted up and breathed normally again. Nothing. They waited.

Then the peace of the morning registered with them, a distinct lack of aircraft engines on the breeze. The pilot of the An12,

whoever he was, lost power and momentum quickly, but did the wrong thing by trying to keep the nose up. His airspeed dropped rapidly and he stalled, the aircraft soon nosing down and entering a spiral, unrecoverable without its engines working.

As the soldiers, and the residents of Kandahar observed, the An12 spiralled down into the town's main crossroads, the accidental aim being just about perfect. The blast was huge.

'That was no normal crash,' Lobster realised. 'That plane, it had explosives in the back!'

The TV crews had caught it all, but with no idea that an EMP device had been discharged. It looked, for all intents, that the pilots had deliberately targeted the city centre, the damage extensive, dozens of buildings now on fire. The Taliban leadership had been promised a victory by Rahman, the destruction of the terminal building at the airfield. Now, all the world saw his attack kill innocent civilians through their TV sets.

I watched the images silently, stood in front of the TV in the diner. Turning to Jack, I said, 'He won't try that again.'

Shelly stepped in with a girlfriend from school, and two boys, both of whom were a few years older than her. I headed towards the door, offering polite – yet forced smiles at the lads.

'Good to meet you, Mister Holton,' the first lad offered. 'I read all the books.' The second lad was equally as pleased to meet me. I shook their hands.

'Any chance of a helicopter ride?' the second lad risked.

'I'll leave that to my daughter to arrange,' I said as I left. In the house, I reported the foursome in the diner to Helen.

She made a face. 'At least she brings them back here, where we know where they are. At this age you just need to give them space.'

'Maybe if we injected them again they'd age backwards,' I quipped.

The following Friday evening we flew down to Goma hub, arriving at dawn, soon being whisked toward our new home, Shelly keen to see her designs come to life. Turning south from the airport, we passed the conference centre, the towers of the stock exchange visible in the distance. Beyond them, tall cranes attended new bank headquarters, eight structures being built at once.

Leaving the city, we passed Spiral IV on the right, and turned onto a new road heading towards the lake, its verges being carefully tended by dozens of landscape gardeners. Half a mile along this new road we noticed signs advertising properties for sale off-plan.

Jimmy said, 'We're building these to sell, and Po and Yuri have land at the end of this road.'

The lake came into view, that view soon blocked by a row of tall hedges that had obviously been transplanted from elsewhere; they had not grown to the height that they now reached in this location. Our coach slowed, halting outside large iron gates, affording us our first glimpse of the new house, a pink finish to the walls. It was definitely Miami style. Guards manned the gates, and our coach slowly navigated around a large fountain, space enough for the coach to halt on a gravel forecourt.

Stepping down, I looked up at the mansion, very pleased with it, Shelly and Lucy running forwards. Enclosed on three sides, we stepped towards the main entrance, its grand old wooden doors ajar, a housemaid stood ready. Inside the main door I found a small desk, a bodyguard stood near it. He would be there to police visitors. The main hallway was huge, four sofas facing out from a centre feature of tall green plants. Not rubber, I tested their leaves.

Corridors led off ahead, left and right, the girls running up the marble stairs to find their rooms, our luggage now being brought in. I turned right, finding a large dinning room, then a kind of staff room and cloakroom opposite it. Beyond that I found a lounge as big as those in the UK. Turning left, towards the lake, I noticed a series of offices; high long windows, desks and computers, one of our corporation staff sat behind one.

At the end of that corridor a guard opened a door and I stepped out to a view of the gardens and pool. To the left, in the shelter of the house, sat a huge fountain, colourful goldfish moving sluggishly through the water. Separating the fountain and pond from the pool ran a hedge some five feet tall and neatly trimmed, the other side of which I found neatly mown grass. The grass led to a pool some twenty metres long and ten metres wide, invitingly blue. I ran my fingers though its cool water, checking for crocs.

Beyond the pool I found a large area of grass dotted with round bushes, the view of the lake interrupted. I walked on, noticing a sign: no swimming in lake! It seemed like good advice. I reached the end of our garden and joined a concrete jetty, walking along it some thirty yards into the shallow lake. At the end, I halted next to a red and white buoyancy ring for swimmers in trouble. I had to wonder what use it would be during a croc attack.

The lake was dead calm and quite inviting, despite the sign, the other side of the lake shrouded in haze. I could not see Rwanda. Turning around, I got the full effect; the pool, the garden and the

house. As I stood there, I could not decide if it was more French chateau, or Miami drug dealer's pad. It was, however, utterly stunning, and put Jimmy's house to shame.

Ambling back along the jetty, two bodyguards waiting off to one side, I could see the neighbouring houses under construction. It would be a nice neighbourhood when finished. Re-entering the house, across the pond from where I had joined the garden, I found the indoor pool. Upstairs, I found my room labelled, Helen inspecting wardrobes.

'Palatial,' I said as I entered.

'It's gorgeous,' Helen agreed. 'It'll make going home seem a bit odd.'

I had to wonder what was going through her mind regarding the house in Wales. I stepped into the bathroom, finding a large bathtub, Jacuzzi, walk in shower and large cabinets. Back in the bedroom, I peered through the windows at the garden and pool before unpacking. And those items I now unpacked would be staying here, ready for when we were in attendance.

Later, I poked my head into the girls rooms, loudly asked to "go away", then checked out some of the guest quarters. Upstairs, in the attic section, I met some of the ten permanent staff, discovering the staff kitchen and bar, the small room offering a view of both the gardens, and the front forecourt. I made a point of greeting each member of staff, making them feel welcome, but telling them to get plenty of books to read for when we were not visiting.

That evening we ate in the dinning room, practise for the staff at creating and serving formal meals, five of us around a table big enough for twenty. The following morning I sat next to the pool with a cold beer, laptop under a sunshade, and checked emails as the girls swam, Helen sunning herself. It was just about perfect.

Around noon a speedboat shot past, turned around and tied off on the jetty, Yuri and his latest squeeze walking down to us under the careful eye of the bodyguards. A maid brought them drinks as Jimmy joined us.

'Your boat is not here?' Yuri asked.

'Boat?' I repeated.

'I ordered two speedboats for us, plus two for the bodyguards,' Jimmy explained.

'For us – ours?' I asked, getting back a nod.

Thirty minutes later our peace was disturbed by a speedboat on steroids.

'Now we're definitely Miami drug lords,' I quipped.

We grabbed hats and sunglasses, and the girls, and inspected the speedboats, soon pushing off. I took charge of one, Helen left seat, with Yuri and his lady in the back. Jimmy and the girls took the second speedboat, Shelly driving, our bodyguards in the two chase boats. I was suddenly glad that we didn't have any neighbours yet.

Shelly closed the throttle with a roar, the front of her craft lifting up and flying across the water. I decided not to copy and pulled away gently, soon turning left and heading slowly for the marina as we chatted. Shelly passed us once, roaring past at speed, the bodyguards not trying to follow her.

Approaching the marina entrance we noticed a few other speedboats, plus a handful of sailboats. Unfortunately for them, there was little wind in their sails today. The large sign in the water gave the speed limit, and a severe warning for those who broke the limit, a police officer with binoculars at the end of the marina's long jetty. I steered us inside at a sedate three miles per hour.

Arriving at the main marina I turned left, halting at a quiet spot, a handful of tourists out walking. 'This is the way to get to work,' I said.

Noticing a quiet café, we grabbed seats, the local police soon arriving, but keeping a discrete distance. Half an hour later, Lucy motored slowly towards us, tying off alongside our speedboat and joining us.

When Jimmy sat, I commented, 'These boats will piss off the neighbours.'

'Only if driven like an idiot close to shore,' Jimmy pointed out.

'There was no one on the lake,' Shelly protested.

'There're police patrols now,' Jimmy informed us. 'And gunboats.'

'Gunboats?' I repeated.

'Protect this place from attack across the lake,' Jimmy said.

After a bite to eat we reclaimed the speedboats, chugging along at three miles per hour till beyond the jetty, then opening up. Back at the new mansion, now officially the Governor's Residence, we made ready for our first formal meal, President Errol, the head of the corporation, and a few senior staff invited over. They had admitted to taking a peek at the place before it was completed.

The girls were not due back in school till Wednesday, so on the Monday morning we drove down the new highway, open only for us and the builders, and to the heart of New Kinshasa. Halting at a portakin, we stepped down to find an area devoid of features, flat for at least three miles in all directions. The highway cut through the

wasteland, heading south, branches forking off and heading east, and what looked like a million yellow bulldozers now roared slowly about, flattening the land and digging trenches.

I put a hand over my eyes and scanned the horizon, not seeing any buildings yet standing, a few wooden cabins dotted about. When a man in a yellow hard hat approached, I said, 'You haven't done much yet. When'll it be ready?'

He gave me an exasperated look. 'We have three shifts of eight hours. It's round the clock, sir.'

We examined his drawings, Shelly keen to see the layout, and I tried to imagine what it might look like some day. Back at the house, Yuri brought around a small twenty-foot sailboat, the girls keen to have lessons. That left me by the pool with a cold beer, emails being answered. Jimmy and Helen used the office to catch up, soon ahead enough to warrant a swim.

When the household staff set-up two massage tables I took notice, Helen and Jimmy lying face down and being attended by Chinese ladies. I guess they had caught up on their work. That or they just didn't care. When the girls returned we ate around the pool.

'Sooo much better than Wales,' Shelly suggested.

'In the summer, the flies will be a problem,' Jimmy idly commented. 'Windows and doors will need to be kept shut, flytraps used. It's not all great down here.'

'I had an email from Jordan,' I mentioned. 'They're asking for more desalination, another plant.'

Jimmy thought about that. 'It'll lead to tension with Israel. The West Bank will run low on water soon, and between them and the ocean sits Israel.'

'Anything we can do?'

'No much, not without going head to head with the Israelis - who'll be happy to see the West Bank dry out! Build a desalination plant north of Tel Aviv. If the Israelis have more water, it's less pressure on the Palestinians.'

'Yemen is falling apart,' I ventured.

'That's a Saudi problem - they can pay for it if they want. My next big spend will be North Korea, dragging them from the Stone Age and into a modern era. They have a good chance at developing their GDP and helping the world economy.' He took a breath. 'And, next year, we'll start building properties in Greece, everywhere apart from Athens.'

Helen and I exchanged looks, the girls not following.

'How many ... houses?' I probed.

‘As many as we can afford. If we can build a million, we’ll build a million.’

Sudan

With Helen flying back with the girls, Jimmy and I set off to meet a high-ranking delegation from the Sudanese Government in Nairobi.

Travelling out from Nairobi airport in a coach I could see a few electric scooters, our electric taxis everywhere, and just about every bus seemed to be one of ours. We had commissioned an extra oil-fired power station north of the city, and that cheap electricity now translated into cheap transport for the population. That gave low earners a little extra cash to spend on improving their lives, and it gave the better off money for luxury goods, inevitably imports from the west.

Arriving at the government buildings, we paid our respects to the President, a quick chat before meeting the Sudanese delegation. The Kenyans were happy with the new marina north of River View, Mombassa, and the effect it was having on tourism and property prices. They were even happier with the new F15s and the RAF training squadrons, making me wonder what was truly important to them.

We found the Sudanese sat waiting, a six-man team with translators. After a minute of suitably false diplomatic greetings, with suitably false smiles, we settled opposite each other in a large and quite dark room. At least the air-conditioning worked.

Jimmy began with, ‘Ethiopia has agreed to join our economic cooperation group, and we’ll be test drilling for our own oil there very soon. But that closer association with Ethiopia should not be seen as a worry to anyone in the region, not to Sudan. But we are interested in inviting Southern Sudan into our group.’

That pissed them off greatly, but they controlled it. It also seemed to worry them.

Jimmy continued, ‘We have no intention of taking Southern Sudan by force, and have no intention of creating conflict in the region. We would like to invite Southern Sudan to join our group, but only so long as the rights of North Sudanese businesses and citizens are respected.’

That surprised them.

Jimmy added, 'We would be certain to protect the interests of your citizens, and more than that – we would wish your cooperation on new projects, transport and oil pipelines. We would not move into Southern Sudan unless it's done so with your blessing.'

'What ... type of arrangement are you interested in?' they asked.

'We would develop Southern Sudan as an independent state, but would do so whilst awarding contracts to Sudanese companies. When we improve the roads, and the rail links, your businessmen will benefit from it. We'll build airports, and we'll provide cheap fuel and new power stations in the region. You can be sure that any profit we make would be spent in the region, as we have done here in Kenya, and in the Congo. Our record speaks for itself.'

'And the police and army of Southern Sudan?'

'Would be the same as everywhere else, and under our influence. We would supply them to keep the peace, not to impose a Christian dominance on the region.'

'And the government?'

'After the citizens see what idiots the SLA are, and how inept they are, we'll help to elect a few better politicians.'

That stopped them dead. 'You don't want to see the SLA in power?'

'Former guerrilla fighters do not make for good politicians.'

'The SLA would not be running the region, you would?' they queried.

'The cooperation group of African nations would be running the region,' Jimmy emphasised.

'You could influence the SLA now – and move in now,' they posed.

'We could, but we won't. We wish to only move in with your assistance and cooperation, because that way we could develop the region the fastest. It is about money and development – not politics.'

'We are in agreement,' they stated, and I had to blink, not least because they could not have said that without prior permission.

Jimmy opened his case and handed over documents. 'There is no hidden small print, and we could not hold you to it anyway. These documents detail the military, police and civil structures that you agree with us operating. The SLA have already signed such a document.'

That was news to me; the bugger had kept that quiet. Our guests signed, the Kenyans coming in to witness the signing, photographers and reporters from the African Times allowed in. We stepped

outside as a group, TV cameras waiting, and issued a lengthy statement.

With that done, we thanked the Sudanese, chatting with the Kenyan President again for ten minutes, plans for train links and roads north through Ethiopia. We handed the documents to a senior executive from CAR, telling him to get oil derricks ready. Next came a meeting with Ngomo.

‘Are they keeping you busy?’ I asked.

‘Shuffling the papers, smiling for the cameras,’ he said as we sat.

‘A year from now, step down and run for office,’ Jimmy flatly told him.

Ngomo stared back. ‘A year?’ he finally asked.

‘A year, and destiny calls to a son of Kenya.’

Ngomo nodded his head reluctantly.

‘How’s Kandahar?’ I asked.

‘Surprisingly quiet,’ Ngomo replied. ‘No major attacks.’

‘It’s winter there,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘They don’t like the cold weather. But spring is coming. Anyway, we have a deal with the Sudanese. So I want four thousand Rifles up there on peacekeeping and disarmament patrols. Then I want you to find Rifles near retirement, even if they’re a year or two short, and recruit them to the police for that area. We then want to create a Southern Sudan Rifles, but based in the far south to start with, training in the Congo. Let’s not worry the Sudanese.’

‘I think we could find four hundred police straight away,’ Ngomo put in.

‘They must be willing to travel, and to live up there,’ Jimmy emphasised. ‘Oh, and I want poaching stamped out. I’m going to re-introduce a few animals and open safari tours in the Rift Valley.’

‘I’ll get some men on it. When do we break out of Kandahar?’

‘If no one attacks ... then in four weeks they can go hunting, but the main force will land in May.’

‘How are the western boys doing?’ I asked.

‘They learn very quickly, more than us poor Africa boys,’ Ngomo said with a smile. ‘Now they are fit and strong, and good at the technical exams. They pass quickly.’

‘Do they argue and fight?’ I asked.

‘Yes, but with their own countrymen, not the others. When you see groups going off-duty for a drink, they are mixed. Some stick together, but others are trained in mixed groups – and they drink together.’

‘Will they be ready in time?’ I asked.

‘For the Taliban, yes,’ Ngomo was sure of. ‘The white boys, they only needed to learn to look death in the face and laugh. And they talk like Rifles now.’ He put on a false voice. ‘What do you need a helmet for? Are you planning on letting someone shoot you in the head? Why dig a trench, unless you are planning on being buried in it!’

‘Won’t be easy for them to re-integrate,’ I noted.

‘No,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘But most will stay with the desert brigade, or go into bodyguard work.’

On the way down to Mombassa we enjoyed the benefits of a greatly improved highway, even taking the time to stop at a dodgy burger bar en route. We made record time, pulling into Ebeye with the sun still well above the horizon. Anna’s daughter greeted us, leading us inside to her mum and dad.

‘You don’t work together do you?’ I asked Anna and Cosy. ‘You know what they say about husband and wife teams that work together.’

‘She’s the boss,’ Cosy said, shaking my hand. ‘That makes life easier.’

Anna gave us both hugs before making tea.

‘You trying to do my job for me?’ I asked Anna. ‘You sorted my skills shortage before I did.’

‘It’s all part of the education process,’ Anna said as she sat. ‘If we know what Africa is short of we can teach it at age twelve onwards.’

‘More computer programmers,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘We seriously lack good computer people. More than enough nurses and soldiers.’

‘Should those programmes be scaled back?’ Anna asked.

‘A little, because we should be trying to go high-tech - where we can. Anyway, we have the Southern Sudan deal, so I want three large regional orphanages opened up. I’ll leave the detail to you. Then, in a few years, colleges bolted on.’

‘You’ll develop that region,’ Cosy asked.

Jimmy nodded. ‘It needs it. Badly.’

‘Have you been enjoying the marina?’ I asked.

‘Yes,’ Anna enthused. ‘It’s lovely. We go down there for meals of an evening; it’s closer than Mombassa town. And better, really.’

‘Meet us there tomorrow afternoon at 3pm, I have something you can enjoy of a weekend,’ Jimmy told them.

We booked into the golf hotel, soon in the rooftop bar and enjoying a cold beer, joined by the manager to go through business. Seems that the golf tournaments were well attended, the nearby

hotels all booked solid for those particular weeks, the marina jammed during golf tournaments. Still, it was good for the local community.

We dived off the beach early, the first guests of the scuba centre at 7am, a hearty breakfast enjoyed afterwards at the beach bar. We lazed around for a few hours, cleaning up to head off to the new marina, its facilities completed just six weeks ago and in time for the last golf tournament.

Carrying our jackets over our shoulders, we walked along the back of the beach, across to where I first found the turtle of indeterminate sex, and to the fence. Guards let our party through, and we ambled across a car park to a grassy area the size of a football pitch. At the other side of the park I noticed the backs of bars and cafes.

Reaching those bars and cafes, we entered the marina at the southern end, our field of view blocked by what seemed like a thousand sailboats. This marina was again a horseshoe design, but on a grand scale compared to Gotham City. I figured the water basin to be a third of a mile across.

Turning left, we followed the quayside, slowly navigating through the tourists, many stopping to snap us. The ground level seemed to offer mostly cafes, seats in the sun for their patrons. Above them ran a walkway, backed by what appeared to be mostly restaurants and bars, and above them sat two storeys of apartments.

Jimmy pointed up at the apartments. 'Most of those apartments are short-term rentals for boat crews. This is the best marina for ... well, it's the only decent fucking marina between Suez and Cape Town.'

'Popular then.'

'And it's perfectly suited to reach the Seychelles.'

Jimmy stopped, recognising a boat name. 'Hallo?' he shouted, followed by a sentence in German.

A face peered out from the galley. It became a body, that of an elderly man. 'Mein Gott! Silo.'

'Can we come aboard?'

'Yah, yah.'

We stepped across, two women emerging, and I suddenly had a chill. Jimmy had met these people before, on the Long Voyage to Canada. They had stayed on the Seychelles together, and he had slept with both ladies – as did our IT guy Gareth – only it would never happen now.

'Warmer than Baden Baden,' Jimmy said.

The man stared back. 'I was born there!'

'Good guess,' Jimmy quipped, a glance at me. 'Schnapps?'

'Why not,' the old man replied with a shrug. They fetched glasses and Schnapps, soon telling us of their voyages around the region. We couldn't invite them to our other marina, we explained, since it was bit landlocked. Jimmy did, however, give them permission to drop anchor inside our breakwater at River View instead of paying mooring fees here. They were most grateful, and most surprised.

At 3pm we found Anna, after exchanging positions by phone. Jimmy led us all along a central pontoon and to a yacht, a ninety-foot yacht. The crew welcomed us aboard, cold drinks ready.

In a sumptuous lounge, looking like it was used for filming porn movies, Jimmy said, 'You can use this whenever you like, sleep in it, entertain guests. But the Rescue Force senior staff will also want to use it. There's scuba gear, jet skis, all sorts on it.'

'Could do with this in Goma,' I complained.

'A bit big to transport,' Jimmy sarcastically stated.

'We don't have a lot of free time,' Anna put in.

'Make time,' Jimmy told her. 'Be a director, not a worker.'

'I've said that once of twice,' Cosy echoed, a look exchanged with Anna.

We slipped our moorings and powered slowly out through the breakwaters, turning right and heading south, four bodyguards on the quarterdeck. At River View, we eased through the hook of our own curved breakwaters and into the shallow lagoon, dropping anchor little more than ten yards from swimmers in the surf. Having explored the boat I stripped off and dived in, trunks found in a cabin.

Swimming back I could see the bubbles of divers below us. Climbing aboard, a diver surfaced close by, tearing off his mask and spitting out his regulator. It was Heinz from the dive centre.

'Paul, there's a bomb on your hull!'

I grabbed Anna's daughter, stood close, and threw her unceremoniously over the side. Lifting my head the bodyguards, now curious, I shouted, 'There's a bomb! Jump into the water!'

I could hear several splashes as I ran through the boat. 'Get off the boat! There's a bomb. On the second deck I could see Anna, Cosy, and the crew jumping over the side. Jimmy started the engine.

'Jump off!' I shouted as I neared him.

'Too many people close by,' he said, starting the engine. Scraping the anchor as we turned, he powered up. I had to hang on; this damn thing had more power than our speedboat. At speed, we curved through the breakwater, missing the sides by inches, and out

to sea. I could then see what Jimmy was aiming at, a sailboat a hundred yards ahead. He increased the acceleration, aimed to pass the sailboat, and nudged me towards the side. 'On my mark.'

We passed the sailboat.

'Now!'

I hit the water at thirty miles per hour, a little disorientated under the water, soon treading water as the sailboat appeared alongside me. Jimmy appeared behind me as inflatable rings were thrown out attached to ropes, the boat's mainsail dropped.

'What the hell did you in jump for?' a British man in his fifties asked.

'Bomb on the boat,' I told him.

He stared at me. 'Oh.'

We all stared after the yacht as it powered out to sea.

'Well, if the bomb doesn't go off,' Jimmy began. 'Someone in India will get themselves a nice new yacht.' He checked his watch. 'Five to four.'

'A timer?' I asked.

'Someone knew we'd board it at 3pm, so maybe they allowed an hour for us to be out at sea.'

A Huey passed overhead, an RF Huey heading after the yacht. 'Stupid fucks,' I said. I grabbed the boat's radio and altered the settings to those that I knew were RF Kenya. 'Paul Holton to dozy Huey pilot?'

'Paul, this is Romeo-Tango twelve. We're closing in on you.'

'No you're not, dumb fuck. We're on the sailboat you just passed!'

The Huey turned around. And so did our yacht. I pointed. 'It's turning.'

Jimmy checked his watch. 'One minute to four. That would be a good time to blow it.'

Our yacht was now heading down the coast as the boat crew offered us bottled water, the Huey circling. At two minutes past four the bomb went off, smoke belching from the rear of the yacht as it continued down the coast.

'That wouldn't have killed us,' Jimmy scoffed. 'Aim must have been to sink us at sea. Fucking half arse terrorists. Can't the terrorists these days get anything right?'

The boat's crew were a bit bemused by it all, especially Jimmy's attitude. They set a course for the marina, and I used the radio, asking the Huey to follow our sinking yacht. It wasn't a difficult

task, the damn thing had a smoke stack a mile high already. And my clothes were on board. Bugger.

The marina had been evacuated, flashing blue lights everywhere, soldiers and police officers on the quayside, two Army Hueys overhead. Coastguard boats, heading out, noticed us heading in and followed us. I walked barefoot up onto the quayside in a windcheater that the boat crew had loaned me, and we accepted a lift back to the hotel, finding a damp Anna and family, four damp bodyguards – their suits ruined.

After checking that Anna and her daughter were OK, we led Cosy away. ‘Someone knew I’d be on that boat at 3pm. They set the timer for 4pm, thinking we’d be at sea. It was small device, limpet, and a bit amateurish.’

‘Sudan?’ Cosy asked.

‘I seriously doubt it,’ Jimmy told him. ‘Their delegation came ready to make a deal.’

‘Al-Qa’eda?’ I asked.

‘If it is, then they’re being a bit personal, which is not like them - at all. Plus I think they’d have gone for a better bomb. Cosy, check on divers in the area who are short of cash. Ex-military divers. Make that your top priority.’

A few hours later, the police informed us that they had recovered our yacht. I blinked. Then they explained that it had taken on water, which put out the fire, and hit a beach just a mile away. There it now sat, high and dry, being examined. Another officer appeared with my clothes, and I have to say I was surprised, smiling widely. My wallet was as I left it, my iPhone listing a couple of hundred missed calls.

I walked straight down to reception, drew twenty thousand dollars from the manager, and found Heinz in the beach bar, handing it over. ‘You saved us. Well done.’

‘An honour, sir.’ He offered the money back.

‘Spend it as you see fit, look after the staff.’ I left him to his beer. Back at the golf hotel I found Jimmy stood in front of a TV crew. I joined him.

‘You are OK, Mister Holton?’

‘Yes, fine. I even got my clothes off the yacht, my wallet and phone. No harm done. Now, I would like to apologise to the tourists at the marina who were inconvenienced. When the marina re-opens we’ll be arranging free drinks, so I urge everyone to return tomorrow. We’ll also promise to visit less often, so it’ll be safer in the future. Thank you.’

As we walked off, Jimmy gave me an odd look. 'You're starting to sound like me.'

'So long as I don't start looking like you.'

Anna and her family appeared an hour later, fresh clothes on. They joined us at our table. Cosy said, 'A diver was found dead an hour hours ago.'

Jimmy took a moment. 'Are PACT on it?'

'All over it, fifty men here,' Cosy reported.

Jimmy nodded. 'And this ... individual?'

'Former French military diver, retired down here ten years ago.'

'So, he needed a little money. But there's no way in hell he'd talk to al-Qa'eda.'

'Could this be about Southern Sudan?' I asked.

'That was my first thought,' Jimmy agreed. 'There're many international companies in Southern Sudan, any one of which could be fearful of us moving in. And the Sudanese had this meeting pencilled in two weeks ago.' He faced Anna, and paused. 'Anna, I'm horrified, and mortified, that you and your family were in danger.'

'It would have been more of a loss if you left us,' Anna countered with quickly, her daughter as seemingly devout in her belief in Jimmy, and not reacting to that odd statement from her mother.

'Then we shall all have to be more careful in future. Unfortunately, there are some very difficult years ahead for the world. We will all be tested.'

With Anna and her family gone, I called home a second time, Helen awake. And concerned. After the call I noticed a text message, from NASA of all people. They wished to meet, and invited us over. I found Jimmy in the bar.

'NASA have invited us over,' I puzzled.

'NASA?' Jimmy repeated. 'Wonder who rattled their cage.'

'Not trying to blow us up, are they?' I quipped.

'No, they'd have taken several years to design an elaborate bomb, blown themselves up a few times, but finally perfected it a few years after we had left the yacht. Having missed us, they would have then borrowed a good old fashioned Russian bomb to try and do the job properly.'

'You don't sound at all bitter towards NASA,' I dryly stated.

'We'll pop in the next time we're over there.'

'Do we need to tighten security?' I asked.

'No, because we keep inventing new enemies. Can't stop them all. We'll just have to be ... lucky.'

We drove out at 1am, arriving at Nairobi for an early morning flight back. Was a time when we used to drive ourselves along this route, I reflected. Back then no one knew us, but the mission was just as important. Now we had a small army around us, and everyone knew us.

Lucy was waiting for us at Heathrow, a big hug for her dad, which was nice. I kissed Helen and took a seat, a thoughtful sandwich waiting for me. The two-hour journey gave me time to catch-up on emails, and to gossip with Lucy about Shelly's boyfriends. My elder daughter did, apparently, play the field a bit.

In the weeks that followed, a French oil company was linked to the dead French diver, which was very cheeky given our relationship with the French Government. Jimmy summoned the French Security Minister and offered to EMP Paris – just for starters – if they did not investigate thoroughly.

The DGSE took a quiet and stealthy approach, bugging the phones of those they suspected, and handing the evidence to the French President. He handed it to us, and suggested that the men would be arrested and questioned upon their return to France. Jimmy had other ideas. The men disappeared from Southern Sudan and woke up in Somalia, where they faced unspecified terrorist charges. A military tribunal was hastily arranged, the men hanged in public, much to the consternation of the French Government and the French public, the bodies incinerated instead of returning them to their families. When pressed on the issue by the media, the French Government admitted that the men were under investigation for terrorist offences in Africa.

The Sudanese revoked the company's license to operate in Southern Sudan, and the remaining workers were escorted out, their derricks and equipment bought by CAR at a fair price. In Paris, the chairman resigned, two executives being arrested, the chairman dying from unknown causes the next day.

How many more, I wondered. How many more would try and stop us before they knew who Jimmy was, and what the mission was. I figured there'd be a few.

Cave warfare

In the weeks that followed, the Pathfinders in Kandahar sent out patrols and killed a number of Taliban fighters, but in small groups, being careful to hide the bodies where they could. They would sometimes venture out on three-day patrols, setting ambushes on roads. But so far, no large force was moving their way.

The body count was good, but nothing like the previous incursion. Jimmy upped the stakes, and sent four Mi24s to Kandahar. Their purpose was not to pound the enemy, not yet, but to insert small groups many miles away, up to a hundred miles away. Lobster joined a few missions, using EMPs on nearby towns, few phones or radios now working within a fifty-mile radius. And still no counter-attack.

Lobo then planned an attack on a known training camp, but Jimmy modified the plan before we set off for the States.

Four Mi24s flew out after dark a few days later, landing within ten miles of the training camp that the CIA satellite had highlighted. Without Baby in the bag, Lobster hiked with the twenty-four-man patrol through the night, hiding on a ridge at daylight. The next evening they pushed on, moving to within two miles of the camp.

To this particular north of the camp ran a high ridge that overlooked the valley, a perfect spot from which to observe the camp, or to launch an attack. Ignoring it, the patrol turned south across the valley floor and to a smaller ridge. Hidden away in natural caves, Lobster took out his radio scanner and set-up an observation point. After six hours of scanning the ridge, and rubbing his cold hands, he had detected nothing. He employed a thermal imager, but again found nothing of interest, some movement in the camp in the valley.

But two hours later he picked up a live radio or two, oddly positioned halfway up the ridge. Using his thermal imager at maximum magnification, he could see warm air billowing from a cave. The camp was a trap, the main body of fighters waiting in the caves above. This camp sat only ten miles from the Taliban lines against the Northern Alliance, but who had the trap been set for?

As dusk fell the following evening, a patrol of four men moved out slowly, carrying very little. They took three hours to slowly move towards the camp, placing Good Morning grenades against walls, or under bridges crossing culverts, and withdrew just as stealthily.

At 9am, with fighters going about their business, the first grenade blew, demolishing a building. Fighters in the camp ran about, looking for enemies to shoot at, and eyes peered out from the caves

above. Radio chatter went off the scale, the thermal imager used to pinpoint the caves, Lobster and his colleagues finding no less than twelve of them. His fellow sergeant operated a laptop that scanned the airways and recorded messages for later analysis.

An hour later, the second grenade blew, taking out a bridge over a culvert, the explosion echoing around the ridge several times. Fighters ran about searching, but found nothing. Twenty minutes later, a third grenade took out a building, the fighters now taking heavy casualties.

Lobster's colleague with the laptop reported, 'They think its artillery.'

Six more grenades detonated, the camp devastated, many fighters killed or wounded. But the men in the caves stood firm, figuring the action below a prelude to an attack. And there was no easy way to approach the caves from above or below that was clear to the Pathfinders. As night fell, Pathfinders dropped into the valley and killed goats with silenced pistols, carrying them back to their own deep caves, where they now cooked the animals. Munching on fresh goat meat, Lobster sat staring across at his adversaries. And waited.

Two days later, a patrol of men dropped from a cave, possibly needing supplies, possibly believing that holding out in the caves was folly. The camp below had been evacuated by its survivors, a dozen bodies left lying around, plus body parts. The patrol stepped slowly through the rubble, appearing to look for supplies. Lobster checked his chart, lifted his radio and punched in a four-digit number, pressing the green button.

A battery grenade, fitted with a remote detonator and left behind for this very purpose, exploded, killing the patrol, the blast something of overkill. Faces peeked out from above, but no further patrols dropped to the valley floor. Lobster again waited, a tin of Spam opened.

At noon the next day, the entire force holed up in the caves came out, some sixty men, and moved east whilst avoiding the camp. The Pathfinders packed up quickly and followed behind, locating the patrol through its radio signals, and its thermal image as the sun dropped behind the hills. The patrol of fighters reached a large compound situated on a valley floor, and moved inside.

A single Pathfinder was sent up the ridge with a satellite phone and binoculars, soon reporting that the men were sat about fires and cooking. With the lookout still positioned on the ridge, a single man moved forwards, taking an hour to reach the edge of the valley floor. He took another hour to reach the compound, killing two guards

quietly with dart guns at close range. He placed his bag on the wall, and quietly pulled back. At the road he simply ran, observed from above. The required radio signal was sent, the equivalent of twenty battery grenades detonating simultaneously. The compound disappeared for a full two minutes, shrouded in dust.

When the dust cleared, no one was seen moving around. The pathfinders withdrew, a long walk through the night to the nearest helicopter pickup point, their tally being a good hundred fighters killed. En route they re-visited the caves, finding sounds coming from deep within, as well as cooking smoke. In a coordinated move, ten battery grenades were thrown inside with ten-second timers, giving the occupants a headache at least.

Ten minutes later, and with most of the caves having failed to collapse, dazed fighters were killed silently as they exited, the fighters stunned and deafened, their middle ear balance gone.

Back at Kandahar, Lobster gave a verbal report of the mission, and of the tactics employed.

‘The fighters, they played the spider,’ Lobo pondered. ‘But why would they think we would attack out?’ He put four man teams in the helicopters, and placed them near known training camps, two weeks of passive observations begun.

On the way to the airport, Jimmy took a call. Facing me, he relayed the story of the caves and the camp.

‘Do we have a leak?’ I ventured.

‘First, I only told the “M” Group after the force went in, but the Chinese and Russians knew – and they’re not about to talk to al-Qa’eda. And second, the teams at Kandahar had no intention of attacking outwards, they were ordered to wait and defend, expecting attacks at the airfield.’

‘Rahman?’ I asked.

‘He knows nothing other than a small Somali force landed at Kandahar, expecting them to behave as they did the last time.’

‘So why were they setting traps?’

‘I don’t think they expected the Northern Alliance to attack south, especially not in winter. And the Northern Alliance have been losing ground lately.’

‘Could they know about the invasion?’

‘They could suspect it, since both America and Somali have been threatening to invade. But such an invasion would be high profile, and highly visible; Rahman will be expecting conventional US forces, not Rifles. And he’d have time after they land to organise traps. Besides, he’d figure on American airpower, the camps getting

bombed from the air, so which poor sods would play at being bait for that, their mates snug and cosy in the caves?’

‘Does Rahman know about the Rifles?’

‘Of course, he had a hand in Yemen when the Somalis were there, so he knows their tactics and abilities.’

‘That’s it then. He expected a similar operation.’

‘Why? There’s a handful of Somalis at Kandahar, they had no helicopters to start with, and that camp was sixty miles away. Did he expect the Rifles to walk that far, attack and return? No, never.’

‘Coming back to a leak then?’ I posed.

‘A leak ... telling al-Qa’eda what? About the invasion? That’s due in May, a few cold months in a freezing rock of a cave? If there is a leak, it’s a partial leak. Besides, by time the invasion comes around the fighters will be pissed off with living in the caves and move out. This is premature.’

‘When did you order the attack out?’ I asked.

‘A day before they attacked out!’

‘So if there is a leak, it would be in Kandahar,’ I suggested.

‘If there was a leak in Kandahar, they would have given the plan away and our people would have fallen into a trap, or been attacked at the helicopter landing zone.’

‘Someone watching the airfield?’

‘Lots of people watching the airfield, for all the good it would do them. No, my thoughts come back to Rahman, and how he thinks. He saw the Somalis in Yemen, and he may well believe that this time there’ll be a larger incursion – a second wave, and he advised his buddies accordingly.’

‘Do you think he’s made his way there?’

‘Fingers crossed, but I doubt it. From what I know of him he likes his creature comforts, like Dubai. A cave in a mountain is not his style, unless he’s either running scared, or feels that he needs to show how tough he is to the frontline troops.’

‘He lost face with the Kabul plane hijacks,’ I pointed out, my eyebrows raised.

‘Hopefully, he now thinks that he has something to prove.’

‘I can’t see any of the Rifles leaking info to al-Qa’eda,’ I said, sighing. ‘Or anyone in the “M” Group, not that they knew. Have the Rifles changed tactics?’

‘I told them to throw the manual out the window and to make random moves. Not even *they* know what they’ll do next. And there’s no way that Rahman could know about the advanced weaponry. Some of the gadgets – I haven’t even told the “M” Group

about. He's up against the Rifles, twenty years in the making with a training programme from the future, armed with weapons from 2025.'

'What would have happened ... if the Rifles *had* approached that camp and attacked?'

'They would have still won, but may have taken casualties with some close-up fighting. But the men in the caves were beyond seven hundred metres, they had no sniper rifles or fifty calibres. The Rifles would have set charges and decoys, then picked off the fighters, but might have been surprised from the rear and above.'

'God help whoever gets close up to the Rifles,' I said, and opened my laptop.

The next day, a pleasantly warm day in Houston, Texas, we were transported from the airport to NASA's Johnson Space Centre, a large FBI protection detail. I remembered the film, *Armageddon*, with Bruce Willis; he arrived with an FBI escort, and he was trying to save the world. But I couldn't remember if he survived or not.

Stepping down, an official shook my hand and led us inside.

'The Bruce Willis film –' I began.

'*Armageddon*, I was an extra,' the man excitedly explained.

'Did he die?'

'He did, yes.'

'Bummer. That's the thing about trying to save the world, you get killed for your efforts,' I quipped. That earned a very odd look from our guide as we progressed, almost a saddened look.

Without any prompting, and with me wondering why, they showed us the huge swimming pool for weightless training, a G-force trainer and a few other toys.

I said to Jimmy, 'Are they trying to impress us with all this?'

'They spent a lot of taxpayers dollars on it, so they like to try and justify it. It's in their blood.'

We finally arrived at a guarded room, the title giving it away. It read, 'The Silo silo.'

I stopped and looked up at it. 'You need to get out more often, guys,' I told our keen guide. He lowered his head sheepishly and led us inside. We found a large room full of desks and computers, white boards and slide screens six feet high, charts everywhere, pictures of us two, even of the girls. 'Yep, definitely need to get out more.'

They introduced us to a long line of experts in something or other – I was lost after the first few titles, but at least it was a keen crowd. I had no idea what to expect, but Jimmy seemed to be at ease with our hosts.

The main man, our guide, began with, 'I would like to point out that everyone here is security cleared, and that we know as much as the President knows.'

'Not much them,' I quipped, getting some odd looks and a few smiles. 'And you've already made one mistake.' They seemed collectively mortified. 'Where the fuck's my cup of tea?'

They looked at each other as if each other was to blame for that oversight.

'That's the thing about experts,' Jimmy loudly stated. 'They get the clever stuff right - yet miss the simple stuff. And ... don't worry about the tea, we'll rough it.'

They sat at their desks, a panel of six senior men at the front. 'We'd like to ask some questions and - since you are here - we're guessing that you may answer some of them. Oh, and we thank you for your time. It's a great honour.'

'Fire away,' I said, sitting on a desk.

'The drug. Was it developed for long distance space flight?'

'No,' Jimmy answered, disappointing them.

They decided to be clever. 'Was it developed to withstand the rigours of any type ... of journey?'

'No. It was developed to withstand the rigours of decades of warfare after World War Three,' Jimmy told them. 'And, if I was to hazard a guess, I'd say that many people were experimented upon - quite cruelly - to develop it.'

'Not developed for a long distance Chinese space programme?'

'The Chinese ... now have very little interest in long distance space flight,' Jimmy answered.

'Some argue that you favour the Chinese over others?'

Jimmy made a face. 'They accept my advice and act upon it in a refreshingly timely manner. Americans fold their arms, decide if they believe the advice, then think about how they could use it to their own advantage.'

'Do the Chinese use it to their own advantage?' they risked.

'The Chinese have stuck to every agreement I have ever made with them. If they broke any of those agreements they would not get the same assistance. I like to see things in black and white, in a grey world.'

'Any of you driving electric cars?' I asked. Only two raised their arms. 'Pathetic,' I offered, not pleasing my crowd. 'Are you not interested in saving the planet?'

They shifted in their seats.

'May we ask ... a few direct questions?'

‘You can ask,’ I said. ‘But that doesn’t mean you’ll get an answer.’

‘Then my first question is – is there a great deal more that you know, that the “M” Group doesn’t?’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy answered. ‘A great deal more.’

‘And if something were to happen to you?’ they posed. ‘Like a bomb on a yacht?’

‘Certain documents would be handed over,’ Jimmy told them.

‘And those documents would cover ... everything?’

‘No, they would give you an outline. After that, you’re on your own,’ Jimmy replied.

‘You take a great many risks,’ they posed.

‘What ... like dodging your CIA?’ I snarled. ‘If you want to see us stay alive, ask the other branches of your fucking government to stop screwing with us.’

‘Well, we have no suitable response to that,’ they admitted.

‘The answer to your question,’ Jimmy began, ‘is that we have developed a great many projects in secret over the years, and rightly so, and that *secrecy* has caused both suspicion ... and interest in us, to the point of people shooting at us. It could not have been done any other way.’

‘You are familiar with Colonel Thad Pointer?’

‘He still alive?’ I asked.

‘No, he died a while back. But he more or less proved that key phrases of the Magestic letters were created by him ... for the specific purpose of time travel, and communication between such travellers.’

‘Then why don’t you fully believe him?’ I pointed out.

‘Because if there were time travellers, NASA or Air Force, we don’t think they would behave ... as you do.’

I smiled. ‘What’s wrong with our behaviour?’

‘Well, you take risks for one, and ... enjoy the highlife.’

‘And how would a NASA time traveller behave?’ I pressed, still smiling.

‘They would come in from the cold and debrief.’

Jimmy nodded slowly. ‘And if they had ... *debriefed* and outlined the future, then that information would be available to American Presidents. And, if an incumbent was flagging in the polls he may wish to use that information – on say future gold or stock prices – to boost the economy. And if that incumbent saw a report that stated he was due to leave office with the lowest approval rating of any idiot since records began, he might want to change that. Since he’s the

President, he'd have the right to do so. And, if in the future, a real arsehole gets into power, and sees what the future holds for the planet, he might just consider that the best bet is to fire the nukes now and get it over with, whilst you have an advantage. Bang, we lost the planet.'

They could all see the flaw in their argument.

'What would Nixon have done?' Jimmy asked. 'What would Reagan have done if he knew about the end of the Cold War? Maybe Reagan would not have bothered to make friends with Gorbachev, and maybe the Cold War did not end as it was supposed to. That's the thing about altering a time line, there's an excellent chance of completely fucking screwing it up. If I was a NASA chief, about to send someone back through time, I'd want that person to alter the timeline from the shadows.'

They could now see the logic.

Jimmy added, 'But what do you think would happen if you admitted to be interested in creating a time machine? Surely the Russians and Chinese would want to get there first, because whoever gets there first could alter history. The Russians could go back to 1941 and give the Japanese nuclear weapons. And what would happen at the UN when you admit to wanting to create a time machine? It would be chaos, and global war would be a certainty - to try and stop you. Because if NASA developed a time machine first you'd go back and alter things, sure, but from an American perspective. And, in case you haven't read the newspapers in the last forty years, most other countries don't agree with an American perspective. They would try and stop you.'

'By believing that we're some sort of time travellers, you're spurred on to believe that you could not only develop a time machine, but that you should - in order to complete the circle and avoid a paradox. But by starting to make a time machine you'd open the doors to World War Three. And after World War Three had destroyed the planet, you'd have an increased urgency to finish your time machine - to go back and fix it, to stop World War Three.'

'And then just start the war all over again,' I added.

They were a bit stunned.

'If you want to save this planet, put all ideas about time machines away. If you care about your own children, and the billions that will die, work to debunk time travel,' Jimmy told them. 'Before it's too late.'

They were silent for many seconds.

'How ... how could you break that circle?'

‘You could look at my record to date, and have faith,’ Jimmy told the man. ‘When you step aboard an airliner ... the pilot has your life in his hands, so too the heart surgeon. This, is no different.’

A man raised his hand. ‘What more could we be doing to help you?’

‘Finally, an intelligent question,’ Jimmy stated, pointing at the man. ‘There are areas of research that I could direct you towards, areas that will help various problems this side of 2025 and, assuming the world survives beyond 2025, would help the planet afterwards. Other than that, anyone here who wants to see the blue planet go on – should refuse to work on theoretical time travel, and work on projects to save mankind.’

That caused a few odd looks. We were telling them to give up their favourite pastimes, one that consumed their every waking moment.

‘So,’ I asked. ‘Any other questions? No? Then why don’t we call it a day? I’m sure that you have some proper problems to solve with your expensive NASA slide rules. I hear that the next generation of plasma screens are exciting.’

Jimmy gave me a look, but did so grinning, and we headed to the door, soon being shown out. I would have liked to hear the debate going on after we left. Our escort drove us around to Senator Pedersen’s ranch, he and his wife greeting us. Both had been injected, and looked fit and well. Very well. We chatted for an hour, Pedersen asked to attack any NASA projects that might involve theoretical time travel. That caused him and his wife to stop dead, and to stare.

‘Jimmy, is there something I should know?’

‘No more than you already do. Just fight any wasted NASA budgets on time travel. And quietly.’

‘I sure hope you know what the heck you’re doing, Jimmy.’

‘Me too,’ I quipped.

Pedersen took a moment. ‘That new city coming along?’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘And your property will be worth ten times what you paid for it. Or more.’

‘Good opportunities in this new place?’

‘Very good, but the original Goma hub will be a rich suburb. Grab some houses off Spiral IV or V.’

‘You gunna float CAR someday?’

‘It was always my intention, and maybe in a year,’ Jimmy revealed. ‘But there are some advantages to keeping a tight control. Anyway, keep beating up the banks, and I know you’re a Texan and

an oil man, but help with the electric cars before your competitors outpace you.'

'Chinese going for this new coal-oil idea?'

'In a big way; if you fall behind you'll never catch up.'

'Interested in that myself, and my associates from Kentucky and Virginia.'

'It's the future,' Jimmy told our host.

With iced teas downed, we rejoined our vans and headed to the airport, to a flight to New York and a TV interview. Make-up on, ties tightened, we stepped out to applause, claiming a sofa at an angle to our host.

'Welcome again, Jimmy and Paul. No Helen?'

'Looking after the kids,' I said.

'And another on the way we hear.'

'Yes, another on the way.'

'Are you happy, or nervous?'

'I'm very happy, because my daughters are a bit too independent these days. They have their friends and their hobbies, and their dad is not cool.'

'So, Jimmy. No plans to marry and have kids?'

'I'm still practising. I have the book and the video, but just can't seem to get it right.'

The audience laughed.

'And yet, a few of our better known models and actresses have helped you to ... practise.'

'They did, and I learnt a thing or two.'

'So, what the hell happened to your new yacht?'

'The yacht was intended for my staff in Kenya, for them to enjoy. We built a new marina, but apparently the mooring fees were too high, disgruntled sailors putting a bomb on our boat.'

'And who was behind it?'

'The counter-terrorism boys say that a French oil company was behind it, a company with interests in Southern Sudan, where we're now active.'

'And why were they mad at you?'

'Because they thought we might grab their business in the region. They thought we might leave the oil profits for the starving millions in Southern Sudan, which we will do, but not to the disadvantage of any oil company or western mining company – their rights will be protected.'

'So you hope to do for that country what you've done elsewhere in Africa?'

‘Yes, we’ll feed the poor, building roads, hospitals and schools. All very subversive ideas to French oil companies.’

‘And you’ve just started to build an entire city – from scratch.’

‘Yes, we aim to move a million people from west Congo to east Congo, where the resources are.’

‘We have a picture here –’ The backing screen came to life. ‘- of the new marina in Goma. Looks great. And this is the golf course, and this is your new house.’

‘My new house,’ I put in. ‘Designed by my daughter, Shelly.’

‘There’ll be many of those built in the near future,’ Jimmy put in. ‘And nice apartment blocks. The area is nicer than most westerners believe, worth a visit, or a new place to live and work, to open a business.’

‘Business conditions are good?’

‘Every factory is at capacity, turning away orders,’ I said. ‘We offer land free to new factories, give grants towards buildings, tax breaks. If you have a factory that makes household goods you can’t go wrong.’

‘A lot of American investment there?’

‘Some, yes, led by Hardon Chase,’ I replied. ‘And a great deal of work now for American companies building the new city. Once it’s finished - or even now, any American can open a business there or work in the region. If you have a job that makes you fifty thousand dollars a year you can live like a king, mansions like mine very cheap. You could buy a five bedroom house for fifty thousand dollars.’

‘And your house?’

‘Cost me less than two hundred thousand dollars to build. Forty bedrooms.’

‘I can build a house like that – for two hundred grand?’

‘Might cost you a bit more - I know the builders. But still cheap.’

‘I’d have valued that house at closer to twenty million.’

‘Over here you would,’ I agreed.

‘So you guys were also caught up in Mogadishu when the terror attacks took place?’

‘Yes,’ Jimmy answered. ‘They were al-Qa’eda attacks, the group from Afghanistan.’

‘And right now there’s some fighting going on over there.’

‘Yes, the Somalis re-took the airfield in Kandahar, intent on fighting back at the terrorist training camps in Afghanistan.’

‘And Hardon Chase is in favour of sending a force to root out those camps.’

‘Well, you can fight them over there, or wait till they arrive over here,’ Jimmy said. ‘They hijack planes, set-off car bombs, and make a happy home in Afghanistan because it’s a lawless country. The terrorist leaders seem to be in Afghanistan, plotting their attacks on the west, and on Africa and the Middle East.’

‘And who is the leader of this bunch of nuts?’

‘Their leader is supposed to be someone called Rahman, a rich Arab,’ Jimmy replied, and I wondered why, because Rahman was not their leader.

‘And what’s his gripe?’

‘No one knows much about him, other than he funds terror attacks against Africa and the west.’

‘Are the Somalis going to invade Afghanistan?’

‘No, definitely not, and I’m doing what I can to try and persuade them against any escalation in the fighting.’

‘Do you think America should be involved over there?’

‘I think it’s probably inevitable, because as time goes on al-Qa’eda will launch more and more attacks, all the time sheltering with the Taliban. If their base of operations was destroyed then they wouldn’t be able to function as well. And I know your own CIA has stopped numerous attacks against American targets in the region. It’s only a matter of time before they bring down an American plane.’

‘You’ll be pleased to know that I have an electric car; they’re now available over here.’

‘About time,’ I said.

‘I’ve charged it once, and had it a month, still on seventy-five percent power. For what I do around New York, I reckon I could go six months between charges.’

‘China, India and Europe are way ahead of you,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘Most of their buses are electric, and our electric buses are often free to ride on. If you’re not careful, those other countries will reap the benefits for their economies and leave you behind.’

‘Any electric aircraft planned?’

The audience laughed.

‘No, but we are working on a new fuel,’ Jimmy offered. ‘We’ve also developed a converter that turns coal into oil quiet cheaply. It’s being rolled out in Africa, Russia and China.’

‘Why not here?’

‘How long did it take to get the damn electric cars imported!’ I pointed out. ‘Your oil lobby is keeping our toys out of America!’

That wasn’t strictly accurate, but I enjoyed the dig at them.

Jimmy then dropped a bomb. 'I intend to buy up all the old coal seams in Great Britain and re-open them, converting the coal to oil.'

'Is there much coal there?'

'Enough to keep Britain going for a hundred years,' Jimmy answered, and I hid my grin, wondering what the British PM would make of it. But the one thing the British PM could not do now would be to ignore the matter, the British public would not let him.

'They could stop importing oil?'

'They could, although they have some oil in the North Sea.'

'So what are going to invent next?'

'We don't invent things, we find cutting-edge technologies and ideas - and fund them when others wouldn't,' I pointed out.

'So, any new projects?'

'We'll be looking at an aircraft fuel that is safer and more efficient, one that doesn't create any pollutants,' Jimmy suggested.

'We look forward to that. Ladies and gentlemen, Jimmy Silo and Paul Holton.'

Leaving the studio, Jimmy said, 'I had an idea about the bomb on our boat, and the strange tactics employed in Afghanistan. Coal oil may have awoken a potential adversary early.'

'Who?'

'North of Yemen.'

'Ah. They have a lot to lose. More than most.'

Jimmy called Ngomo, and spoke in a native dialect for a few minutes. Lowering his phone, he said, 'We'll play a few games, and see who comes out to play.'

'How could they know about Afghanistan?'

'They have money, lots of money, and that kind of money can buy ex-CIA staff, senior staff, electronics experts, and others. They may have tapped the satellite phones we use somehow.'

'Do they know about the EMPs?'

'Obviously not. So maybe they don't know about the other gadgets. But the one good thing in our favour, is that Rahman hates the Royal House of Saud.'

'Why did you label him as the head of al-Qa'eda?'

'Piss off the real leadership, who might just blow his nuts off.'

Back in London, Sykes met us at the airport. Jimmy told him, 'Assume that the secure satellite phones are not as secure as we may like, that ex-CIA agents may be helping the Saudis, and that the Saudis would rather I not develop oil, and coal-oil technology.'

'Oh dear,' Sykes let out.

‘Go back over the detail of that French oil company, find me a link to the Saudis, and put the Saudis here under surveillance, just in case.’

‘That’ll please the PM no end!’

On the coach, we plotted and schemed against the house of Saud, set a few traps, and planned a few tricks.

Sangin, south central Afghanistan

Lobster dumped the body of an al-Qa’eda fighter, the fourth one. Under cover of darkness he walked to the edge of the poppy field, ducking behind a compound, and remotely detonated a napalm grenade. Jogging along a hard-worn dirt path, he left the compounds behind and entered a dried riverbed, soon two hundred yards away, the locals stirring. Turning, he led his team south at the double, and to the helicopter RV point.

A hundred miles to the east, his colleagues had been busy. As dawn broke on a fine day - after a few days of rain, fighters emerged from their compounds, mounted their Toyota pickups and making the short journey to the Pakistan border. In a line of traffic, the fighters convoy was ripped apart by a Good Morning grenade. Two vehicles, ten miles apart and already across the border, disintegrated in border towns, the death toll high.

Inside Afghanistan, the jeeps of fighters blew up in several places in the eastern valleys.

In the house, in a basement command room, I studied the map. ‘We waking them up?’

‘Hopefully, Rahman will get the message: sit and take it, or fight back. He must know that it’s the Pathfinders, and his policy of sit and wait will be sorely tested by the fighters and the Taliban.’

‘He can’t openly blame the Africans, when there’s no frigging evidence,’ I said. ‘They’ll think it an accident with explosives.’

‘The Pathfinders sent a message about an attack, but did so a full day *after* they had placed a team on a mountaintop. The local fighters were then seen to set traps for them.’

‘So that seals it, they *have* hacked the sat phones. Do we tell anyone?’

‘No, we make use of it. My sat phone calls to Ngomo are on a Chinese satellite – fortunately – but most are routed through an American satellite. Ngomo is now using native dialects to send important messages and get updates, so that’ll fuck over anyone listening in. But, we want them listening in for the moment. A few hours from now a flight of UN aircraft from Djibouti and Cyprus will land reinforcements at Kandahar, at least those listening in will think so. Hopefully, they persuaded their political paymasters.’

All that day I had a Reuters window open on my computer screen, scanning the latest news stories. Finally I noticed a story about a UN flight, forced down over Saudi Arabia, little more detail than that. I rang Jimmy and told him.

‘In some ways it’s good news,’ Jimmy said. ‘But in other ways it’ll be bad all round. I don’t want to do anything to rock the Saudis, and they have a strong influence with America. It’ll need some careful dancing and fancy footwork.’

A second plane was forced down, this one a 737 with UN diplomatic staff on board, and met by Saudi soldiers at the airport. A hell of a row was just about to kick off. Unfortunately for the Saudis, they stated that they believed Somali reinforcements to be on board the aircraft. When he found out, Abdi issued a few words for the Saudis.

I sat with Jimmy later, beers in hand, Jack joining us in a lounge.

‘It’s a mess,’ Jimmy said with sigh. ‘I had expected the Saudis to be difficult, but not quite yet, and not in this fashion. But, since we’ve altered so much, it’s just one more new variable.’

‘Surely the Saudis will lose faith in the intercepts now,’ Jack ventured.

‘Hopefully,’ I agreed.

‘The truth is, coal-oil and electric cars will have an effect, but not that much of an effect,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Emerging markets and a growing global economy will still keep pressure on oil production. And, as people save money from petrol, they’ll spend it on other things that use oil or plastics, or air travel. Someone in Saudi Arabia has his sums wrong, but I doubt we could convince them of it.’

‘Will they try and kill you again?’ Jack asked, clearly concerned.

‘Probably, but next time they’ll be a bit more professional about it. That French oil company had a nudge, and an incentive if they cooperated. They were played, and the bomb was amateur time. Fortunately, the Saudis are not very good at overseas intelligence, they’ve never considered it necessary. Unfortunately, they have a shit load of money to hire good help with.’

Shelly stepped in with her boyfriend, the lad two years older. For a change, they came and sat with us.

‘Hello Mister Silo,’ the lad offered. ‘Mister Holton.’

‘I’m Jack the gardener,’ Jack offered.

‘Your some sort of British agent,’ the lad countered with a smile.

‘You flatter me, young man,’ Jack responded. ‘I’m old and married, with a cat. And Shelly will confirm that I’ve never climbed up the walls, or shot anyone.’

‘That’s true,’ Shelly admitted. ‘Jack is an old pair of slippers.’

‘I prefer your young man’s label,’ Jack told Shelly.

‘Drink?’ Shelly asked her boyfriend.

‘What am I allowed to drink?’ the boy asked Jimmy.

‘You can have a beer,’ Jimmy responded. ‘Better than glue sniffing round the back of the bike shed.’

Shelly fetched two beers, putting me on the spot. Her stems prevented the beer from having much of an effect, but still ... I was dad.

‘Shelly has been injected with the super-drug. Alcohol doesn’t have much of an effect,’ I said defensively. ‘Still, if I see her drinking too often...’

‘A drop of wine at night is good for her,’ Jimmy cut in with. ‘So long as it’s not too much, just the half glass.’

‘What are you planning on doing for your ‘O’ Levels?’ I asked the lad.

‘They’re called GCSEs these days,’ he corrected me, but without trying to be rude. ‘I’ll be studying Russian, French and Economics, hopefully a degree in economics afterwards.’

I was impressed. ‘What does your father do?’

‘He’s a boring old bank manager. Can I try one of your electric cars?’

‘Not with a beer in your hand,’ I said.

‘You can try the cars with supervision,’ Jimmy said. ‘And with Shelly sat next to you. But if you crash - and hurt Shelly, there’ll be nowhere on this planet you could hide from me.’

The lad swallowed, and stared back. ‘Yes, sir.’

I glanced at Jimmy from under my eyebrows, not sure if I approved or not. ‘There are fast electric golf carts if you want race around the grounds. They’re non-lethal.’

‘Can I meet the SAS soldiers here?’ the lad asked.

‘Shelly can introduce you,’ I said. ‘You’ll find some up on the roof. And no, you can’t shoot the squirrels with sniper rifles. If you want to shoot, come out to Africa with us.’

‘I’d love to.’

‘If you behave,’ Shelly told him, holding her look on him, the little bossy-boots dominating the poor lad.

‘Do you ... help Shelly with her homework?’ I idly enquired.

‘Hah!’ Shelly let out, giggling.

‘No,’ he admitted. ‘She helps me. Shells sat the exam for university entrance the other week - and passed!’

‘She takes after me,’ I said.

‘No I don’t,’ Shelly insisted.

‘Who do you take after then?’ Jack asked.

‘I’m a genetic aberration,’ Shelly said, poking her tongue out at Jack. ‘I’m unique. I have mum’s good looks and figure, and someone else’s brains.’

I gave Jimmy a peeved look. ‘There’s gratitude.’

‘She’ll appreciate you more when she has her own children,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘When I’m sixteen,’ Shelly joked, the lad now looking worried.

I focused on him. ‘You want to have kids when you’re older?’

‘No way. Maybe ... like, when I’m thirty or forty. I want to get injected at twenty-five, and stay twenty-five forever.’

‘Not a bad plan,’ Jimmy reflected, staring into his beer. ‘And people will have kids later in life now that the drug is out there.’ He faced Shelly. ‘You’ll live to be around a hundred and fifty at least, and you’ll be able to have kids up to age one hundred. But if you have kids, and they don’t get injected, they’ll end up older than you, going grey when you don’t. And when your first kid is starting university, your dad will look just like he does now.’

‘That’s so cool,’ the lad put in, Shelly deep in thought. To Jimmy he said, ‘You were shot three times and it didn’t kill you.’

‘I was lucky, I’m not immortal.’

‘Most people think your immortal, Mister Silo,’ the lad suggested. ‘And an alien.’

Shelly seemed to have come to a conclusion. ‘I could follow a career till I’m forty, sit another degree, then follow a second and third career.’

‘Yuk,’ her young man said. He lifted up and peered into the large fish tank, now populated with fish instead of jellyfish.

‘My first degree,’ Shelly added, ‘would be just the first.’ She seemed happy with her conclusion.

‘I’m hoping that you’ll help me invent a few things,’ Jimmy told her.

‘The school will let me sit my GCSEs next year,’ Shelly informed me, and for the first time.

‘They will?’

‘Yes. I can then pass a single higher level before I start sixth form, leaving with four, or five maybe – instead of the usual three. And I want to go to university at seventeen.’

‘Good brains should never be slowed down,’ Jimmy said, stopping me from saying what I was about to.

Shelly grabbed her young man and led him out, beers in hand.

‘University at seventeen?’ I softly repeated.

‘I think she’ll take a year out first,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘Concentrate on your baby, not that one; she’s a free spirit.’

Afghan war drums

Three weeks later, lookouts posted on various mountains reported groups of fighters gathering for a chat around the campfire, a few groups moving west, the various movements being keenly collated at Kandahar. There also appeared to be Pakistani fighters amongst the groups.

Lobo looked at his battle board, and said, ‘War drums. They are coming.’

That evening, an AN12 from China touched down, disgorging supplies and a dozen men, Big Paul at the head of the group of British soldiers. Jimmy had altered his plans, and war had been declared.

Big Paul gave Lobo a lazy salute. ‘How’s the weather, sir?’

Lobo returned the salute. ‘Cold and miserable. Have you brought some nice food?’

‘Yep, and some extra ammunition, and earthquake mortar upgrades.’

‘Upgrades?’

‘Greater range; they’ll top out at five miles instead of three,’ Big Paul explained as Lobo led him inside. ‘I’ve got new sat phones for you, boss, and these *are* secure. Use the others when you want to fuck over the Saudis.’

‘Good. And how is Mister Jimmy?’

‘Haven’t seen him for a month or so.’

An hour later, Lobster sat on the perimeter wall, a small crowd gathered below as the new mortars were tested. Using the tube zeroed on the crossroads, a round was lobbed out. Everyone waited, a distance rumble reaching them eight seconds later.

Lobster shouted, 'My laser says seven thousand yards!' He jumped down and approached the senior staff and Big Paul. 'Nowhere near the crossroads, sir. A mile or more beyond it!'

Lobo said, 'Have two tubes set aside, zeroed on the approach roads to the east. And let's label these up properly this time, or we'll miss by a mile. Literally!'

'We've got airburst shells as well,' Big Paul put in. 'They have a white strip around the heads, four second fixed timers unfortunately, maximum range of two thousand yards.'

'Put them to one side,' Lobo asked. His sat phone trilled. Finishing his call, he said, 'We'll have company late tomorrow, so we'll disperse tonight.'

'Jimmy says to expect a clever attack,' Big Paul put in as he followed Lobo to the terminal building.

'What exactly is ... a clever attack?'

'Something other than just driving down that road, as they did last time.'

'Last time, they marshalled within mortar reach, and we hid explosives at the best marshalling areas.'

'So they won't hit time.'

In the command centre, Lobo stood over the map, pointing at it. 'Those are the marshalling areas they used before. We haven't mined them yet.'

'Might be worth a few mines, just in case, but they'll expect that.'

Lobo lifted his head to Big Paul. 'If you were them, how would you attack?'

'First off all, I wouldn't. I'd cut you off and cut your supplies.'

'Fair enough. So they surround us and spread out. But to stop aircraft they need Dushka —'

'Or missiles.'

'There is food in the town that we can steal, goats and sheep nearby,' Lobo thought aloud.

'That's good, but we'll still need ammunition in time. That's their strength ... and our weakness. I'd say we can't afford to just sit here. If they have surface to air missiles, then maybe they have short-range rockets to hit this place with, to wear us down. Those, and the Dushka, will keep our heads down and inflict a casualty or two a day.'

Lobo's phone went. 'Sorry.' He took the call. When done, he said, 'Curious. Fighters bring large lorries, metal covers the windcreens.'

Big Paul smiled widely. 'Lorries full of explosives, suicide driver at the wheel. They'll ram the main entrance.'

Lobo turned to an officer, 'Dig small holes three hundred yards along the access road, and blow a very big hole.' The man ran out.

Another officer said, 'The land to the south is flat and hard, a lorry can cross it.'

'There are mines,' Lobo stated.

'May not stop a lorry,' Big Paul cautioned.

'So, they will be clever in their attack after all.' Lobo faced an officer. 'Walk out there, figure out the best route a lorry will take. Tonight, dig holes and place charges along it, eight or ten.' The man stepped out.

'We'll have to hit those lorries with mortars before they get inside a thousand yards.'

'I've fired a mortar side on,' Lobo said with a grin.

'You have? Jesus. Well, that'll do ... *if* you can hit the lorries.'

Lobo faced a sergeant. 'Take one tube and fix it to the arse of that digger, elevation of fifteen degrees.' The NCO stepped out. 'So, what else will they try?'

'Their best bet is to cut our supplies,' Big Paul insisted. 'Attacking this place is suicide, but they don't know about the special weapons, so their attack will be better than last time - but still not good enough.'

'I do like a confident man,' Lobo quipped.

After dark, teams formed up, heavy backpacks loaded with supplies, extra bags strung between teams of two men. Walking to the east, groups of eight moved out at intervals, a total of a hundred and twenty men. Sixty men were dispatched to the west, two hundred remaining at the airfield. The perimeter walls had been repaired, trenches dug, concrete used to line the trenches and make rocket-proof covers. The men assumed they'd face incoming rounds and rockets, and made ready.

Sat in his room, the officer scanning radio frequencies peered at a large blip to the south. He altered parameters, and expanded the signal. 'Mister Lobo! Sir!' Lobo stepped in. 'Sir, we have a body of at least four hundred due south, twenty miles out.'

'That land is flat,' Lobo pondered. 'They're wide open.'

'We have no spotters there, *because* ... the land is wide open, sir.'

‘Maybe they know that.’ Lobo stepped back into the command centre. ‘Captain, send a patrol of ten men due south, lightly armed and moving fast. Give them a good supply of battery grenades and Good Morning grenades. There’s a large force to the south, but I don’t want them engaged, just harassed and observed.’

‘South?’ Big Paul questioned. ‘It’s wide open.’

‘They are, I believe, doing the exact opposite of what a sane person would do.’

‘They’re being clever. We should pull a patrol off the east and send them to mine that road, stop vehicles where they can.’

Lobo ordered the change, an additional twelve-man patrol turning south. He stared at the map. ‘Twenty miles? They could be here in the morning.’

‘If they drive along that road they’ll be hit by our mortars, and they know we have mortars. So they’ll walk across country in small groups.’

‘Which will waste a great many mortars. When a force is behind you, there is only one thing you want.’

‘A force behind them,’ Big Paul realised.

Lobo faced a captain. ‘I want ten of our best snipers made ready, plenty of ammunition, supplies for two days, camouflage nets.’ He tapped the map. ‘Have them walk out southwest five miles, turning south for ten miles. Then they come back to the east and up behind this force after it has moved. At dawn they should be hidden.’

The patrol was put together.

‘Could hit them now with the Mi24s,’ a man said.

‘They may have missiles,’ Lobo said with a sigh. ‘And they expect just such an attack. They will not *bunch-up* for us, not this time. Contact our spotters in the east, ask how the fighters are travelling.’

The report was not good. ‘They travel with each jeep a hundred yards apart, sir.’

Lobo exchanged a look with Big Paul, ‘Bad sports,’ Lobo quipped. He faced the man. ‘But that’s a mistake on their part. Have them attacked with lasers, darts and silenced pistols. Blow the roads.’

‘Now who’s being a spoil-sport?’ Big Paul asked.

‘When your enemy makes a mistake ... use it! They spread out to avoid the helicopters, but make themselves vulnerable to small group attacks. Besides, I think tomorrow will be ... interesting enough, without letting them all arrive in good order.’

By dawn, the map had been annotated with dozens of red marks denoting planted grenades, all on varying frequencies. Big Paul sat with Lobster, eating Spam and chatting about marinas and boats.

Lobo stepped out to them. 'Radio jammers are in use north of us, and east.'

'That's naughty,' Big Paul said. 'Are we vulnerable?'

'It is a varying frequency disruptor, so radios will be subject to interference, yes. At the moment they're just out of range, but getting closer.'

'Can we pinpoint them for a mortar breakfast?' Big Paul asked.

'We are trying that now, but we cannot pin them down to an area. They are mounted on jeeps, and moving!' Lobo stepped outside and peered up, the dawn crisp and chill, the clouds broken. At the mortar section, he ordered, 'Try and hit the main road through the town with six rounds.'

Back inside, he collected Big Paul and Lobster, a command meeting called, many officers in attendance. 'OK, overnight we saw some action. Convoys of approaching fighters - to the east of here, were attacked in several places, a few dozen jeeps stopped, their fighters killed. Tally was maybe forty killed on the road northeast. East of us, a force of a hundred men were engaged, most killed, some retreating. We picked up a few casualties when random mortar rounds were fired towards our men.

'Mortars?' Big Paul questioned.

'Fitted to the backs of jeeps,' Lobo informed him.

'If they make it here, they'll be hard to hit,' Big Paul warned.

Lobo nodded. 'I have recalled forty men to a position just three miles east, where I think the fighters may marshal. To the west, a large convoy was hit with grenades and dispersed. That convoy has continued towards us this morning - with reinforcements, now northwest of Kandahar.

'To the south, we blew the road in several places and destroyed a dozen jeeps. We placed a patrol close to the main force, but found them very well spread out, fifty yards between jeeps. Good Morning grenades have been used, but not very effectively. And we have a sniper unit moving behind the main force as we speak. They report that the main force is close to a thousand men, and that jeeps have metal armour on them. That main force is moving north slowly.'

'Then they'll attack after dark,' Big Paul suggested. 'And from several directions at once. How many in total are around us?'

'An estimated two thousand.'

'Be a long night then.'

At the house, Jimmy studied the map, and the enemy dispositions. 'Good attack plan,' he commended.

'They're spread out,' I realised. 'Too spread out for mortars and the helicopters.'

'Yes. But being spread out means a low concentration of fire being brought to bear at any one point. Anyway, I've got a surprise for them. Or two. Maybe three. We'll see if Rahman can outwit me.'

In Kandahar, the communications officer stepped into the command meeting. 'Sir, a problem. They're using a device to try and set-off our charges outside. It's stepping through the frequencies.'

'That's naughty,' Big Paul quipped. 'How many digits on your devices?'

'Five,' the communications officer stated. 'They are using four.'

'Take them a while then,' Big Paul noted.

'If they switch to five digits, we'll lose our charges now,' Lobo realised. 'Can you pin down the location of that device?'

'In the houses across the stream, sir.'

Lobo lifted his radio. 'Mortar section: level the houses across the stream. Quickly!' Lobo pointed at the communications officer. 'I want updates every ten minutes.'

A minute later, the rumble could be felt both through the air, and through their feet.

Lobo ordered, 'Ready a squad of ten men to clear that area if the mortars don't work.'

'Try the new anti-personnel rounds,' Big Paul suggested, Lobo ordering them used.

The radio device fell silent ten minutes later, but the communications officer indicated another to the south, and moving closer. Big Paul stepped out to the mortar section, ordering the new rounds selected. He relayed the bearings and range from the communications officer, and fired. Three rounds took the second device off air. Back inside, he said, 'That main force will have more, and maybe five digit.'

'There is nothing we can do,' Lobo admitted. 'Even if we retrieve the charges, they're no good just sat here.'

'Then put out a few other charges on old four digit codes, but further away. When they blow they'll convince the bad guys they have the right frequencies.'

'A splendidly mischievous idea, Mister Paul. You are indeed a sneaky bastard.'

The men laughed, Lobo ordering charges moved further out and reset.

With a grin, Big Paul said, 'I'll dish out the ammo I brought.'

At dusk, the communications officer gave up, putting down his laptop. Finding Lobo, he said, 'Hundreds of signals from all directions. Main force is three miles south and east, moving at walking pace.'

Lobo clambered up to the roof. 'You'll have to go below soon,' he said to the men there.

'We made a hole in the roof, sir. We can drop down.'

'Ah, good. So, what do we have?'

'They're spread out, each ten yards apart - at least. And they seem to be carrying things.'

'What things?'

'Can't make it out, sir.'

A blast caught their attention, on the road south, about two miles distant.

'That'll be a Good Morning grenade, sir,' a man said. 'They go off every now and then.'

A round cracked the air overhead.

'Duska at maximum range, sir.'

'Keep your heads down,' Lobo told them. 'Use your bolt hole when you need to.'

Below, reports of intermittent engagements came in; harassing actions, distant echoes of battery grenades registering in the command post as dull thuds.

Half an hour later, the communications officer reported, 'Main body is two miles, some fighters within five hundred yards.'

Lobo lifted his radio, finding it crackling. Jammed. He called a runner. 'Tell the mortar section to fire south at random, two miles, thirty rounds.'

On the roof, the spotters could see the distant flashes in the south, but then heard outgoing small-arms rifle fire from the north wall. They focused their thermal sights on the compounds across the stream, finding them alive with orange dots that represented the faces of fighters. They sent a man down with the report.

Big Paul heard the report. 'Let me have a crack at them, sir.' He stepped out.

Five minutes later, at the north wall, Big Paul set-up a belt-fed GPMG in the midst of a growing exchange of fire. But this belt of ammo came with yellow tips. 'Cease fire!' he shouted, surprising the men near him. The outgoing fire ceased. He took aim, and fired in

bursts of two or three seconds over a wide arc, soon through a two hundred round belt.

He stopped and waited, the men at the wall now hearing odd “popping” sounds on the breeze as miniature exploding rounds with delayed actions detonated, each deadly for anyone within a few feet, causing injury up to twenty feet away. The incoming fire had also ceased.

He handed the weapon over, directing a soldier to use the belt boxes he had brought over. As he turned away, he could here intermittent “pops” from across the stream.

‘What was that?’ Lobo enquired.

‘Exploding rounds, timed with delays up to fifteen minutes; they catch people from behind and from the side. They’re light rounds, only good for two hundred yards, and tend to bounce and spin when they hit the ground. It’s a bit like a shower of grenades, but when you stop firing the enemy moves forwards, getting splinters.’

‘How much ammo did you bring?’

‘Thirty boxes of two-hundred-round belts; they’ll be useful on the south wall later if the visitors are spread out.’

A man stepped in. ‘Dushkas have our range from the north, sir.’

‘Warn the men, dig in.’

A rocket slammed into the roof, dust falling.

‘Check the men up there!’ Lobo barked.

‘You’re well dug in here,’ Big Paul noted, not too concerned.

‘But the Rifles don’t like to sit and be shot at,’ Lobo reminded Big Paul.

A face appeared around the door. ‘Mortars coming in from the north, just out of range at the moment, sir.’

‘Mobile launchers,’ Big Paul noted. ‘Clever little puppies.’

An officer lowered his sat phone. ‘Large explosions a few miles south, sir.’

The communications officer stepped in, tapping marks on the map. ‘They have reached here.’

Lobo selected the correct code for a radio detonator, handed it to a runner and sent the man to the roof, the resultant blasts registering thirty seconds later. ‘For what it’s worth,’ he sighed. He ordered mortars onto that position, as well as random mortar fire at the town and the crossroads.

‘Two men wounded by incoming, sir,’ an NCO reported.

Lobo said, ‘Get me the southern-most patrol of snipers.’ He was handed a sat phone. ‘Report.’

‘We are behind them, sir. They have lorries with metal grills, jeeps with metal on. A second group is forming at the previous marshalling area, maybe two hundred men.’

‘Move north and attack the rear of the main force. That will confuse both groups. Leave Good Morning grenades behind. Out.’ He faced an officer. ‘The larger patrol we sent south with grenades?’

‘Sergeant Ket’s troop.’ The officer reset the codes and called, handing over the phone.

‘Ket, Lobo. Report.’

‘We are west of the main body, leaving grenades and sniping at them, sir.’

‘Try and split the force, draw them to you. Hit them hard. Out.’

An officer approached the map, the map now being lit by paraffin lamps found in the terminal. He tapped the map. ‘We have three groups to the east of the main force, attacking from the side. East of us we have halted all approaching groups, heavy fighting, some casualties.’

‘North?’ Lobo asked.

‘No eyes-on, sir. And the west is a mess; they circled us.’

‘Bring the team in the west back in at the double.’

‘Lorries approaching!’

‘Battle wagons,’ Big Paul noted.

One of the Mi24 crews stepped in. ‘We’re sitting and taking it, boss,’ a man said in British accent.

‘They have surface to air missiles,’ Lobo answered the man. ‘Maybe many of them. I want you when I can see a bottleneck.’

The pilot shrugged, slapped his thighs and stepped out.

‘Lorries on the main road!’

Lobo ordered the horizontal mortar tube readied, positioned to be facing the main approach road outside the front gate. As soldiers on the wall observed, the lorry – taking fire, trundled on, turning onto the main airport road. It could have done with working headlights, clipping the sides and correcting many times as it progressed, picking up speed.

It hit the first hole, dropping into it and smashing its cab, exploding prematurely at the three hundred yard mark. Ears were ringing, heads shaken at the wall, as the second lorry approached, its engine sounds accurately relaying its position in the dark night as its driver scraped gears. It turned onto the main airport road, benefiting now from the amber glow of what was left of its predecessor. It slowed and eased around the hole, setting off a mine. But it kept coming.

At the gate, the mortar tube's firing pin was pulled back via a wire, a round placed inside and pushed down with a broom handle. Gently. When aligned with the lorry, the mortar sergeant let go the wire, the striker hitting the base of the mortar shell and sending it off. The cabin of the lorry disintegrated, a secondary explosion knocking the mortar crew off their feet, briefly illuminating the fields along the access road.

A Toyota pickup now approached, metal plates welded onto it. On the roof, Big Paul took charge of an M82 fifty calibre, loading a fresh magazine. He turned on the thermal sight, got comfortable, and fired at the engine grill, penetrating it with a Teflon round. The Toyota halted. Big Paul raised his aim, hitting the metal plate across the windscreen, this time with a round that exploded like a grenade inside the vehicle.

Whoever was left alive detonated his own explosives, tearing the white Toyota pickup apart, pieces landing on the terminal building roof. Big Paul slid left, focusing on the south road, three vehicles discernable as orange heat blobs on a green screen, the vehicle's bonnets red hot. Literally. He hit all three in turn, halting the vehicles progress. But none exploded. Deflated, he handed the weapon to a soldier and headed down through the hole.

'Took out the reinforced Toyotas,' he reported. 'Looks like men on foot within five hundred yards.'

'Our snipers report that the men carry shields.'

'Shields? Do they have Salladin with them?' Big Paul asked. 'And siege towers?'

'Metal shields with poles between them, carried by two men,' Lobo explained. 'They resist small arms fire.'

'Clever. Heavy, simplistic, stupid – but clever!'

'Our south wall is now within small-arms range,' Lobo informed Big Paul. 'We're taking fire.'

'Get me your best snipers with M82s up on the roof, I'll grab the rest of Teflon rounds.'

'Do we have a thousand?' Lobo dryly enquired, thumbs in his green webbing belt.

Big Paul let his broad shoulders drop. 'About two hundred, boss.'

Back on the roof, unseen rounds cracked the air overhead. Big Paul handed over magazines, directing fire south. 'Hit the closest targets first.'

Below, he searched through his pallet, dodging incoming rounds, and organised four men to lug ammo boxes. They jumped into one of the buses captured at the airfield, and made the hazardous journey

to the south wall, a window shattering. At the wall, they zeroed in on a GPMG now firing out.

‘Stop!’ Big Paul shouted. ‘Unload!’ He opened a tin, handing up a belt. ‘Aim low, at their feet, spread it around.’ He slammed his back to the wall as the gunner opened up, firing into the dark night.

‘Feels strange, sir.’

‘Lighter rounds, exploding rounds.’

The gunner stood observing a sprinkling of tiny flashes penetrating the darkness, like fireflies in the jungle. He fired left and right, soon a slice of his forward vision filled with small flashes.

‘Aim high,’ Big Paul shouted over the clatter of outgoing fire. ‘Spread it around.’ With his head down, he led his men back onto the bus, and back to the terminal, the bus’s roof punctured twice.

Inside, Lobo commented, ‘They have halted, four hundred yards beyond the south wall.’

‘Picking up small injuries.’

‘As they get close to the wall, we can hit them from the side,’ Lobo mentioned.

‘Sir! The convoys to the east are withdrawing.’

‘Which convoys?’

‘Those ten miles out.’

‘Sir, a strange report. The patrol furthest south, they report fighting further south than they are.’

‘Who do we have down there?’

‘No one, sir.’

‘Are they shooting at shadows?’ Lobo wondered.

‘When the Good Morning grenades go off, they fire at random, that’s all,’ Big Paul suggested.

‘Sir, the front ranks have halted, taking many casualties. They are bunching up at five hundred yards.’

‘Mortar them,’ Lobo ordered. ‘Anti-personnel shells. And put some starburst up there, let’s see them.’

‘Sizeable force in the north, across the stream, sir.’

‘Send twenty men across, try and flank them.’ He attended the map. ‘Blow the remaining charges before they think to do it.’

Ten seconds later, the ground shook, a rumble reverberating through the terminal hall for many seconds, dust falling through the gloomy light.

‘That main force can’t have more than four or five hundred men facing toward us,’ Big Paul thought out loud. ‘They’re engaged on all sides.’ Two of his SAS troopers carried a third in, hit in the leg. ‘How’s he doing?’

‘Stray round over the wall. He’ll live. He won’t be any better looking, but he’ll live.’

Big Paul faced Lobo. ‘If they’re in disarray, then a baby EMP will help.’

Lobo nodded. ‘Lobster?’

Lobster stepped in. ‘Use a baby EMP to the south.’

After an hour of intermittent outgoing mortar fire, the main force in the south began pulling back, the force across the river engaged close up and wiped out. The Rifles across the stream now moved north through the town, street by street.

‘Sir! Report from the south patrol, heavy fighting south of them. They are attacking north, taking ammo off the dead fighters.’

‘Who the fuck ... are the bad guys firing at?’ Big Paul asked. He accepted a coffee and sat with his team. Ten minutes later his sat phone trilled. ‘Yeah, boss?’

‘I landed some Rifles south of you, they’re pushing north.’

‘Ah, fucking wondered what was happening. How many south of us?’

‘Six hundred. Landed another six hundred in the east, and I’ll re-supply you when you’ve secured the area. How’s it going?’

‘We held our own, dealt with the tricks. Could have taken them at dawn I reckon.’

‘Don’t take any prisoners, bury the bastards. Out.’

Big Paul stepped into the command centre. ‘That fighting to the south ... Jimmy landed six hundred Rifles, more in the east.’

‘Bloody hell,’ Lobo let out. He faced his men. ‘Radio our people in the south, tell them to exit to the west and get the hell out of the way. Warn everyone. And drop as many mortars as we can on that group bunched up to the south.’

Lobo’s sat phone trilled. ‘Yes?’

‘Got the kettle on, Samuel?’

‘Joshua?’

‘Who else would rescue your arse?’

‘We’re holding our own, old friend.’

‘Well stop playing with yourself, and expect us around dawn. And don’t shoot at us. Out.’

Lobo smiled. ‘Major Samuel Obantou is here.’

His fellow officers all smiled widely.

At dawn, Big Paul and Lobo stood on the roof in a chill wind, no incoming fire having disturbed their peace for an hour or so. Lifting binoculars, they could see a line of men half a mile across, moving

forwards and firing at bodies. An hour later, with the sun high, the first patrol walked in.

A captain saluted Lobo. 'This where the action is, sir?

'Good to see you, Captain.' They shook.

'We need your bus, sir. Our packs are twenty miles away.'

Lobo ordered the main road cleared, the bus sent out. As that was being organised, a patrol of French soldiers walked in, led by a Rifles NCO, the track through the mines now well defined. Other patrols walked down the main road, past the remains of the lorries and Toyotas.

'Go and steal as many goats as you can from the town,' Lobo told an NCO. 'We have extra mouths to feed.' He faced his adjutant. 'Send men north, find any Duska or missiles within three miles.'

An hour later, Major Obantou walked in, flanked by six men, a handshake for Lobo. 'Nice place you have here.'

'It catches the sun in the mornings,' Lobo commented.

Big Paul asked, 'Any Dushka, Major?'

'Three, that I saw.'

'Missiles?'

'We captured one. Why, are there more?'

'We think they have more,' Lobo explained. 'We kept the helicopters down. Patrols going out now.'

Fresh teas and coffees were issued, the arriving officers handed tinned meat. After all, they had dropped their packs and walked north at the double.

'How did you get here?' Lobo asked.

'Hercules aircraft, from Russia. We circled around you and landed on a road, lighting the road for the next plane. We walked five miles and found the first group of al-Qa'eda sat about campfires eating. Twenty miles to get here, fighting all the way.' He raised a finger. 'And none got away. I think maybe eight hundred dead.'

'Casualties?' Lobo asked.

'Ten dead from stray rounds, twenty wounded. We left them out there and pushed on. Couple of Toyotas have gone back for them.'

'Open field attack,' Lobo reflected. 'Large numbers.'

'We fought like western soldiers,' Obantou noted.

'How many westerners did you bring?'

'Two hundred; French and British. There are Americans in the east and a Russian helicopter squadron, a small Chinese unit moving south from their border, some Rifles with them.'

'So much for a May invasion,' Lobo said.

'We had a leak,' Big Paul put in.

‘A leak?’ Obantou repeated, horrified.

‘Sat phones were intercepted,’ Lobo informed his friend. ‘Intelligence agents working for the Saudis.’

‘Saudis? What’s their interest here?’

‘Their interest,’ Big Paul explained, ‘is in hurting Jimmy, because he’s keeping oil prices down.’

‘Ah.’

Big Paul added, ‘The Saudis wanted this mission to fail, and to expose Jimmy as backing it, which will be impossible now that there are American soldiers here.’

Obantou explained, ‘We have digital cameras and special machines for fingerprints. We are asked to check all the dead to see who they are, and where they came from. Maybe we killed a big fish in the night.’

In Karachi, Rahman lowered his phone, his hand shaking.

In Wales, Jimmy said, ‘Full English breakfast, Cookie. C’mon, get the lead out.’ Lucy eased down opposite, her blue school uniform on. ‘You’re up early babes.’

‘I have a test to study for.’

‘Did you not study last night?’ Jimmy teased.

‘I remember more if I study in the morning.’

‘Then it’s a good job you’re an early riser.’

‘Usual, Luce?’ Cookie asked.

‘Yes, please.’ She faced Jimmy, and took a breath. ‘Uncle Jimmy, I worry about people trying to hurt us.’

‘Don’t, let me do the worrying for you. You’ll get wrinkles.’

‘But many people try and hurt us.’

‘They try and hurt me, not you.’

‘I don’t want anything to happen to you.’

‘I should hope so too, I’m your mostest favourite uncle.’

‘Why do they want to hurt you?’

Jimmy took a moment. ‘Many different people in the world want different things, and ... they all think that they’re right, and that they’re doing what’s best. Others don’t agree, so we see problems. But if I stand up to people, then countries like Africa do better, and the children get fed. And ... it’s a nice feeling, to put yourself in harms way to help others. Its called ... being *public spirited*.

‘And what you’re a bit too young to understand, is why someone might give their life for what they believe in. Now, if someone pulled a gun on you, your father would jump in the way to save you. So would I. But, we could just think of ourselves, run away, have a

good life, even have more kids. So why give ourselves for someone else?’

Lucy considered the concept. ‘To do good?’

‘That’s the act, but what’s the reasoning? Well, the reason ... is that good people are willing to give everything to fight the bad people, even if they’re killed. It’s called ... a sacrifice. To your father, *your* life is more valuable than his, and to stand by and watch you be hurt is too much to bear.’

Suddenly serious, Jimmy sipped his tea, staring into it. ‘But, sometimes ... sometimes we don’t act fast enough, we don’t stand in the way, and we spend a very long time hating ourselves afterwards ... for not doing it.’ He lifted his gaze. ‘You see, sometimes, living with yourself is worse than if you had been killed. And if you have to live with yourself, and feel like a coward, then you’re keen to throw yourself in the way. To ... make amends.’

‘What did daddy do that he is ashamed of?’ Lucy puzzled.

Softly, Jimmy said, ‘It wasn’t your father I was talking about, it was me.’

‘But you’re never afraid,’ Lucy puzzled.

Jimmy ran a finger over an eyebrow. ‘Once, a long time ago, I didn’t do what I should have. And, every day since then I’ve been trying to make up for that.’ He forced a big breath. ‘So, young lady, it doesn’t matter if I die doing good work, because I’m happy to die if it helps to do the good work. So if I’m killed doing this work, don’t be sad for me, OK?’

Lucy reluctantly nodded.

‘Promise?’

‘I’ll try, but I’d miss you.’

‘I should hope so. Who else puts up with you?’

Lucy poked out her tongue as Cookie placed down her toast. ‘I’m the nice daughter.’

‘That you are, Luce,’ Cookie agreed.

‘You called Michelle a Stinky Frog,’ Jimmy pointed out.

‘She’s bossy.’

‘She’s not bossy, she just ... needs my time when you also want my time.’

‘She calls me “child”,’ Lucy complained. ‘Go away *child*.’

‘You are a child,’ Jimmy gently insisted. ‘And don’t be in a hurry to grow up. You’ll be a grown-up a long, long time, so have fun while you can.’

Two hours later, and with the kids off to school – although Jimmy suggested we refer to them as “young adults” now, Sykes

turned up with a British Army officer and an American Colonel, the Colonel looking familiar. Jimmy called me down to the house and we settled our guests in the diner, drinks made, pancakes offered.

Sykes began with, 'These good gentlemen are interested in the night's action in Afghanistan.'

'And quite some action it seems to have been,' the British officer noted.

Jimmy explained, 'Close to two thousand five hundred fighters approached the airfield, and with a good plan of attack. First, they moved under cover of darkness, and well spread out. Unfortunately, they were so spread out – fearing attack by Mi24 and mortars, that they were easier to attack by small groups. That was a mistake on their part.

'Next, they had Dushka and rockets hitting the airfield, keeping the defenders heads down. They employed sophisticated radio jammers – western issue, but their operators were hit with mortars.'

'Earthquake mortars?' the Colonel nudged, Jimmy nodding.

'We then saw lorries packed with explosives and covered in metal plates being used by suicide drivers, an attempt to demolish the front gate and wall. The lorries were hit by earthquake mortars being fired horizontally – a novel approach. We then saw the main advance of fighters, spread out and carrying metal plates between two men as crude body armour. And they worked, 7.62mm rounds bouncing off them.

The Rifles got around them with machinegun-fired exploding rounds, rounds with timers. They lay around under the dirt for anything from ten seconds to five minutes, exploding like a mini grenade and catching people from the side or the rear; not enough to kill, but enough to wound - and to piss off attackers. They're low on momentum and kinetic energy, hardly enough to kill someone.'

The Colonel said, 'The aim being to deny an area to the enemy for fifteen minutes, and wound large numbers.'

Jimmy nodded. 'Effective against people dug in. You simply fire off at thirty degrees and let them gently rain down, some exploding overhead. A jam in the breach can be fun though.'

The Colonel's eyes widened. 'You'd blow yourself up!'

'They tend to explode down the barrel, but you could blow your face off, yes,' Jimmy said with a smile. 'And with the main attacking force all spread out, they were attacked from the rear by a second force that I landed, caught out in the open.'

'And the casualties?' the British officer enquired.

‘On their side there were few survivors, probably two thousand dead.’

‘Jesus,’ Sykes let out.

‘On our side: fourteen dead and thirty-five wounded. They should be flown out today, and no westerners killed yet. And those casualties would have been lower if they hadn’t gone at the enemy the way they did.’

‘Can’t slow down the Rifles,’ I put in.

‘What would have happened without landing the second force?’ the Colonel asked.

‘The airfield would have been surrounded and probed for days, but they would have won out in the end. The front rank of the fighters with metal shields just about reached the minefield as they started to get hit from the sides; they were stopped dead. If they had advanced they would have been massacred.’

‘So why the second force?’ the Colonel asked.

‘Two reasons. First, I wanted the main group of fighters wiped out. Thoroughly ... wiped out. And second, there were western experts helping the fighters attack.’

‘What?’ the Colonel barked. ‘Western soldiers?’

‘No, not on the battlefield, but at the end of a sat phone, working with the Saudis.’

‘Saudis?’ the Colonel repeated. ‘What the fuck have the Saudis got to do with this?’

‘I’ll explain,’ I said. ‘I’ll even go slow.’ The Colonel cocked an indignant eyebrow. ‘We produce a lot of oil, we won’t join OPEC, and now we’re producing coal-oil converters, all hurting the Saudis in the pocket. They wanted the mission in Afghanistan to fail badly, and for us to get the blame.’

Sykes was worried. ‘What will you do?’

‘Nothing,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘Now that there are American forces on the ground the Saudis will have no choice but to back off – and to keep quiet. And for the record, I’m sure that ex-CIA figures were assisting the Saudis to assist al-Qa’eda; our sat phones using American satellites were hacked and intercepted.’

I explained, ‘We planned dummy missions and they took the bait.’

‘Jesus,’ the Colonel blew out. ‘I’ll leave you to report that. So what about the action in the east?’

‘Your main body, three hundred men, went in with two hundred Brits and two hundred French, fifty Russians. They landed on a nice straight road, then split into four groups. One created a command

centre, three attacked out at training camps – which were low on men because of the attack at the airfield. They killed some three hundred - for zero casualties on our side, demolished the camps, blew up some hidden weapons stores, and are now walking back to the command post.

‘That command post is easy to defend, it has some water, and it’ll act like bait for the fighter groups of the east. From it we’ll launch attacks at the fighter’s training camps, but mostly they’ll set traps and sit and wait. The aim is to kill the al-Qa’eda fighters, Taliban fighters that want a go, and Pakistani Taliban fighters. If the force is seen as being too strong or too capable, it’ll be less use as bait.’

‘They’ll just sit there?’ the Colonel questioned.

‘The objective, Colonel, is to attract Arab fighters to Afghanistan, now - and two years from now - and then to kill them. Better do it there than in populated areas. And this year’s young fighters on a pilgrimage to Afghanistan to attack us, are next year’s potential airliner hijackers.’

‘A giant magnet,’ Sykes suggested. ‘As with the Somalis in Lebanon; they draw in the volunteers ... and we shoot them full of holes.’

‘And a Chinese unit, with Rifles and some British, are moving south along the eastern border with Pakistan, killing silently as they go,’ Jimmy added.

The Colonel mentioned, ‘A lot of generals jumping up and down, wanting to get into Afghanistan.’

‘Getting in ... is not the problem. Getting out ... is the problem. If you put a conventional army in you’ll push the fighters over the border, and when you leave they’ll come back. This operation is like drawing puss from an infected wound; you keep drawing till the puss has gone, you don’t just change the dressing to a bigger one. Afghanistan is for Special Forces only, mountain goats and sore feet.’

I kept an eye on Reuters that day, but no news emerged from Afghanistan, some mention of car bombs in the Pakistani tribal areas. Mister Lobo policed up the area, fingerprinting and photographing the dead fighters – some not quite so dead, before burying them. That took all day, and gainfully employed four hundred men. Kandahar town was duly searched, stragglers shot, many residents deciding to leave. Again.

Sniper positions were taken in the taller buildings in the town, patrols set-up around the outskirts. Lobo was still in charge of the airfield, Obantou in charge of mounting attacks in outlying areas, the

airfield now buzzing. Four An12's had landed, free from interference by missiles, and stores were plentiful. Pallets brought large tents, camp beds and stoves. From the town, Lobo liberated concrete, plus a large amount of wood and tools. Small huts were soon being knocked together, concrete bunkers constructed, local carpets used to line damp walls.

Several large animal pens were organised across the airfield, goats and chickens placed in them, now being tended by soldiers who knew a thing or two about animal husbandry from their childhood. A water pipe was laid to the stream and hidden, fresh water pumped, the airfield soon habitable.

Additional aircraft brought more tents, and the first few jeeps, four monster IL76s landing. Long distance patrols would now be easier. Across the stream, the nearest compounds were demolished, a good field of fire created.

The first modest attack came a week after the initial battle, mounted DHSK approaching from the northwest; halting at maximum range, firing and withdrawing. Snipers were duly hidden in the region, picking off the Toyota drivers. Meanwhile, most of the serious fighting was centred in the east, Obantou sending men that way for joint operations.

Eastern units of al-Qa'eda fighters, and the local Taliban, launched well thought out attacks against "Duckland", so named by the American soldiers because they were sitting ducks. The defenders even kept their lights on at night. Their field of fire was little over six hundred yards, but their colleagues were hidden up to three miles out. Columns of determined fighters would approach Duckland along goat trails, attacked silently where possible, often allowed to fire on the base first. That firing allowed those of our troops positioned behind them to pick them off quietly.

Numerous columns of Taliban fighters ventured out through cold nights, but none returned from the spider's web. Supplies for Duckland came in by Mi24 or parachute drop, analogies to Vietnam being made, suitable signs erected: "Kansas: 12,000 miles that way. Keep clicking them heels." One significant difference with the Vietnam operation, was that the soldiers here were all volunteers, and could apply to leave whenever they wished.

Jimmy took a particular interest in Duckland, and often involved himself in the make-up of their supplies, making sure that the men on the ground enjoyed treats, even beer. A selected group of British, American and African officers had been placed at Duckland, their aim to keep the moral high and the teams integrated, whilst dissent

was stamped out. Soldiers who took a dislike to foreign nationals were rotated out, those that integrated well were rewarded with patrols to lead, units to command.

Two British SAS troopers were removed, three Americans, all just a little too rude to either the Somalis or the Chinese. Our own little command centre, in the basement, was now manned by six officers, all of whom were made to wear casual civilian clothes and referred to as “landscape gardeners”. Two extra satellite dishes appeared on the roof, and I stayed in touch with Big Paul by videophone, our part-time bodyguard now at Duckland and organising things for Jimmy. He was, however, now Major Paul O’Brien, British Army; his cover story. Soldiers from Duckland were rotated to Kandahar for a change of scene every few weeks, flown out of Afghanistan by IL76, Pakistani airspace avoided.

The Iranians could not decide if the incursion was a good thing or not, since they were at odds with the Taliban themselves. They didn’t like American soldiers close by, and their media reporting was mixed and contradictory.

Day by day I read reports, glanced at digital images, and read “score cards”, the reports of unit kills to casualties. Our International Rifles were sniping from a distance and killing thirty fighters for every wound received, few fatalities on our side. Duckland, was becoming a duck shoot, strict orders from Jimmy not to take risks or engage enemy fighters close-up.

Olympics

As the summer approached, the London 2012 Olympics drew near, a mad dash to finish off buildings and facilities that should have been completed a year ago. Jimmy had thrown some money at the project in frustration, keen to see London ready.

The biggest single problem was the rail link from central London. It was modern, clean, fast, but could never have handled the size of crowds expected. We brought in thirty electric coaches and painted them in London Olympic Logo colours, aiming to run them free from London to the venue. For the duration, certain speed cameras, round humps and roundabouts had been altered, or they would have

been very slow bus journeys. We also provided free coaches from other cities direct to the venue to ease traffic chaos.

When the PM asked about terror attacks, Jimmy replied, ‘Yes, and no.’

‘Meaning?’ the PM pressed.

‘Yes, there were meant to be some, but I dealt with the people years ago. Then Rahman appeared early, and so I think he’s a threat. Then we moved into Afghanistan early, and so that drew fighters over there. So, I have no idea other than to say that there were supposed to be a few small attacks, and that there may well be.’

‘Great.’

‘The attacks will all be on the tube and rail link, bombs in bags left behind. The bombs will have timers, so simply open them when you find them and turn off the timers.’

Having briefed the PM about the minor nature of the threat, all hell broke loose. Rahman made his move, and did what Jimmy expected, but not what anyone else in the world had expected.

No more than an hour after we left the PM, news came in of hijackings in Oman, Yemen and Pakistan – an obviously coordinated move. An attempted hijacking in Djibouti was thwarted. Kenyan F15s took off ready, screaming north over Somali. But the hijacked planes turned towards Afghanistan, at least that was my initial thought. The Planes from Oman and Yemen moved north, and I suggested we evacuate Kandahar airfield. Jimmy said that he doubted Kandahar the target, and that the airfield was currently fogged in. The hijacked planes would never find it.

The Pakistani plane flew west, not on a course for Kandahar, but not far off, all three planes converging over the Straits of Hormuz, the Iranians launching fighters. The hijackers then radioed to say that they would land in Kuwait and release the hostages, and the three aircraft, each flying at no more than ten thousand feet, headed west.

With the aircraft locations being tracked in the basement command centre, I suddenly held my breath. They all turned south, now on a course for Dubai. And it was too late to do anything about it. The first aircraft, an old TU154, flew straight for the tallest building in Dubai, the world’s tallest building, and missed, clipping a wing. It spiralled down to earth and demolished a residential apartment block, few injuries on the ground.

The second aircraft nosed down into the business district, hitting an office block at ground level and setting it ablaze, the third aircraft hitting the famous Burj al Arab hotel squarely and demolishing it.

Hardon Chase was on the phone. ‘Christ, Jimmy, they just wrecked Dubai!’

‘Rahman used to live there, so I guess he had a few issues, a few disputed parking fines. Anyway, Mister President, I think you should be very loud in your condemnation of al-Qa’eda, of Rahman, and their training camps in Afghanistan – whilst you’re still in office.’

‘I think I should threaten to send more soldiers!’

‘I think you should.’

‘You do?’

‘Yes. Move the rest of the force in, four thousand of the men we’ve been training.’

‘On the back of a wave of support,’ Chase realised.

‘It’s been done before,’ Jimmy noted. ‘Just keep the conventional forces out, because if we screw this up the planet will regret it. This is a pivotal moment for planet earth, Mister Chase, so keep it on a tight leash, stay clam, and pay attention. This is a crossroads; we turn left or right. Make a mistake here and 2025 will be a certainty.’

‘Will there be more hijackings?’

‘A few, but nothing on this scale. And I’m figuring that our programme to install scanners will get a boost. Right now, I’d love to see the looks on the faces of the Saudis!’

‘Jesus, yes. I think they just switched sides!’

‘Some lessons come with a price, often a heavy price.’

‘You knew?’ Chase nudged.

‘We needed the popular support for our soldiers.’

In the days that followed, al-Qa’eda claimed responsibility for the hijackings, detailing Dubai decadence and western ways as the reason for the attack, Rahman fingered as the mastermind. Chase met with his Saudi friends and threatened to send soldiers to Afghanistan as part of a multi-national force, those soldiers filmed arriving at Kandahar airfield a day later, also filmed giving food to local kids.

Six hundred men moved west to create a camp, three thousand east. Duckland II and Duckland III were created, fifty miles apart, Hueys now transported to Kandahar to be utilised for supply runs, and to be filmed dropping food for locals. The PR machine had arrived. Bob Davies asked about sending Rescue Force in, and was threatened with being fired if he ever mentioned that again.

Looking back, I’d say that the Olympics went off OK, but not great, and certainly not as good as the Chinese Olympics. Two small bombs were found and diffused, and our electric buses saved the day

for frustrated tourists. All the visitors had to do was to suffer shit London hotels and expensive restaurants; food served by waiters that spoke little English. Hell, it was cosmopolitan for the visitors, many finding waiters from their home towns for a bit of a chat as they argued over the bill.

During the games, tourists had wandered into the wrong estates in East London, and had been attacked or robbed. People complained about the costs, the bad service and the serious lack of white English people in London. The waiters were all foreign, the hotel workers all Polish, the late night unlicensed minicabs all run by Senegalese who spoke very little English and carried knives. Tourists returning home after the games suggested that London change its name to Nairobi, or Warsaw.

By trying to shove a great many tourists into London for the Olympics, the organisers had accentuated the worst features and characteristics of the city, and then displayed them for all the world's media to see. London was tolerable much of the time, but not when the cramped tubes became even more cramped, when you couldn't get a seat in a restaurant, or even navigate the pavements safely.

All the leaves are brown, and the sky is grey

Autumn brought a change of scenery from my office window, and a change of attitude. The baby was due to be born soon, and we had been spending more and more time in Goma, at our delightful new mansion. Even Jimmy preferred it to Wales, and we would sometimes relocate the entire household "M" Group down there for weeks on end, household "M" Group meetings held around the pool.

The mansions next door to us had been finished, and the owners and occupiers had opted for no high fences, residents sometimes just wandering into each other's gardens for a chat. The road outside had been finished with nice wide pavements either side, and we would often stroll along them after our evening meal. A gate had been placed at the start of the estate, security good, and we made friends with many of the residents.

After our evening meal, we would often walk the four hundred yards down to Po's house, whether he was in or not, and peer at his imported Koi Carp. His garden was larger than ours, and typically

Chinese; quiet areas to sit and contemplate. Next door sat Yuri's house, nice on the outside - drug lair and porn set on the inside, beyond him a house owned by the head of our corporation. That man wasn't a rich individual, but he had split the house building costs with three others, all now enjoying a twenty-bedroom house.

I had commissioned a park at the end of the road, a deep canal from the lake cutting into it and crossed by ornate wooden bridges, many fish available to be studied as they rested in the shade of the bridges. We would often sit on benches as the sun lowered, ambling back as the streetlights began attracting moths.

The girls now had their rooms the way they wanted them, and we dare not even poke our heads in. They kept clothes and possession down here, computers, and often travelled down with just hand luggage. Most of their summer school holidays had been spent in Goma, giving the grown-ups time to tackle the mountain of work that revolved around the new city.

That city was now coming along. The workers camps had evolved into small towns in themselves, restaurants and brothels popping up. The sewer system had been completed, but was yet to carry human effluent to the nearby sewage plant. The roads had all been pegged out, many completed, making the city appear like the drawing of a street map when viewed from the air. I actually had a large aerial photo of the city that I used to plan things on.

Straddling the road leading southwest, twenty apartment blocks had been raised, workers claiming temporary abodes, but many would stay on. Shops had been occupied on the ground floor of the apartments and were kept busy, a clinic and a police station built nearby.

At the heart of the city, massive concrete foundations and walls grew upwards where the main shopping centre would someday stand, the basic outline of the marina complete. The first government building was finished but unoccupied, apartments being finished off nearby. That first building would house the city council, and they'd have a hand in the ongoing construction plans.

The one feature that had been fully completed was the second golf course, and we would often drive down our new - and empty - eight-line highway, passing underneath the concrete monster that was the city centre, progressing another six miles of lonely highway to the course. This new course was now being frequented by those golfers seeking a new challenge, or by those wishing to play a round when a tournament clogged the first golf club. The courses' hotel was just about complete, and would probably see some early trade

from golfers, certainly being used as an overflow hotel when tournaments were on.

The Radisson SAS hotel had been completed in Gotham City, near the exhibition centre, and would be typically rammed during Expo week. Three other hotels had popped up, and each received the same warning from me about filling the rooms – that was their concern, not mine. Spiral III and IV were complete - and all sold off-plan, Spiral V in progress, Hilltops mostly complete and again all sold off-plan. Yuri owned a nice house in Hilltops and we visited often, the property offering a great view over Gotham City, our Russian friend now owning some twenty houses and sixty apartments. Still, with all the steel we were buying off him he had a few quid to spend.

The banking quarter was mostly complete, and from Hilltops it reminded me of Canary Wharf in London, the tall glass office blocks backed by the lake and canals. Casino Row had been completed - and occupied in a millisecond, its apartment balconies facing south to the marina, and I could imagine living in Gotham City full time. Unfortunately, the world would not let me, the future creeping closer, the days being struck off the calendar.

Sat in my office in the UK, I scanned reports of food production, finding them up dramatically across the board, food prices being kept low; we now exported more than half of what we produced. Oil production in the region was up, cheap fuel being sold to those of our neighbours without their own oil, their economies booming. We had even started shipping oil through Angola and selling it on the open market, mostly to South America. Long trains would snake south, some of them seemingly a mile long. They would pass other trains coming in, those trains loaded with materials for the new city, but more often they'd bring in luxury imports for the region; cars and jeeps, the odd boat, TV's, household goods, stereos, even furniture. Our African middle classes were growing, our GDP rising.

Po had constructed a textiles factory, police and army uniforms now being produced in quantity and sent all around Africa. His plastic household goods sold well to Africa housewives, and wood furniture sales were growing. He'd import large batches of unwanted and outdated electronics, build radios and TVs, and sell them easily enough in the region. For people who had never viewed a TV before, an older model was not an issue, not even a black and white set.

Central African TV now enjoyed a regular audience of a hundred million people, and our six o'clock news service was an institution,

not to be missed by African families as they sat down to their evening meal. We even saw our first few white newsreaders appearing. Advertising revenue was high, more than covering the basic running costs, and production of new programmes was cheap enough. Combined with the African Times, we had the media sewn up, opinions influenced, scandals highlighted, dodgy practises put under the spotlight. If a minister's brother had a scam going, then an hour-long programme on it was enough to not only stop the scam, but to remove the minister. Citizens often reacted badly to these programmes, in that they would try and take the law into their own hands, stoning the said minister's house.

Sat checking reports, I noticed the building plans for the various embassies. I called Jimmy as the house. 'Jimmy, the Chinese embassy in New Kinshasa, will it have a pond?'

'Probably.'

'Be a big pond?'

'Maybe.'

'Be twenty-six thousand acres of pond?'

'They're building a ... Chinese quarter. It's officially their land, subject to the same rules as an embassy, but like a mini Hong Kong inside the city.'

'Is that ... wise?'

'They want to try and counterbalance the excesses of Hardon Chase, who thinks he owns New Kinshasa.'

'Again, is this ... wise?' I pressed.

'Let them knock themselves out and compete, it all helps us.'

'Does Chase know?' I teased.

'He has reconnaissance satellites, and a large number of warm bodies in the CIA. So if he doesn't know ... it's his fault.'

I found Helen at home at 5pm, her feet up. 'Suffering, dear?'

'A little. My feet hurt more than the first two times.'

I sat and rubbed her feet. 'Not long now.'

'Could have a "C" Section anytime.'

'Well, whatever you prefer, it's kicking enough. It woke me last night, your bulge in my back.'

'Could be a boy then.' She heaved a breath. 'I'll talk to the doctor today, get him to pencil me in for Saturday Morning. Are your parents coming down?'

'Getting a bit too old to be bothered with such trips. Mum is seventy-two, dad is eighty-four, and they don't like their routines interrupted.'

'Jimmy's mum went into hospital today.'

‘Oh?’

‘She’s seventy-eight and looking frail. Still won’t have the drug, not that Jimmy wants her to.’

‘Long story,’ I sighed.

‘I think I understand some of it,’ Helen mentioned.

‘Saturday then; a new baby to play with. We could give the girls a few rooms in the main house, and wind back the clock a bit.’

‘Should we get Cat back?’ Helen wondered.

‘She has a kid of her own now. Must be ... two years old by now, so she can’t watch ours.’

‘Sharon knows someone, and Jimmy said the woman was OK. And Trish will help out.’

‘Your dear assistant ... does not strike me as the family type,’ I pointed out.

‘I think she made a play for Jimmy a while back, but I haven’t mentioned it.’

‘If he wanted to – he would have – and not cared about hiding it. So he must have told her no.’

‘She had a brief fling with one of the bodyguards.’

‘Yeah, which one?’ I pried.

‘Mark,’ I think. ‘Always see him with Ricky. Doesn’t get on with Rob.’

‘I know him. And she can do better.’

Shelly stepped in, blue school uniform, dumping down her bag. ‘How is it today, mum?’

‘Twins, I think,’ Helen said.

‘I’ve got a book on baby care,’ Shelly informed us. ‘I know it all.’

‘A keen volunteer,’ I noted. ‘Excellent. And good practise for when you have your own ... at sixteen.’ I exchanged a look with Helen as I stood.

Jimmy keenly accompanied us to the private hospital Saturday morning, he and Shelly arguing over who would look after the baby the most. And so far, we had not finalised a name, or even discussed it much, no hints coming from Jimmy.

Two hours later a little pink girl arrived, third in a row, and I held my new daughter for Shelly to study, tiny fingers gripped. I spent the night in Helen’s room, our new arrival a screamer, being picked up at noon the next day.

Everyone at the house had a peek at the new arrival, gifts offered, our new nanny waiting. Ruth, a friend of Sharon’s, and a forty-year-old with two grown daughters, took our bundle as we took a nap.

When I came down later, Ruth was watching Shelly change the nappy. I cracked open a beer and sat watching with an amused grin, turning the TV news on.

When Helen came down, walking slowly, she found our new daughter asleep on the lap of our eldest daughter. Ruth made Helen a tea, and we sat quietly observing Shelly's maternal instincts.

Lucy was interested, but not that interested, and plonked down next me. 'What'll you name her?'

'How about Liz,' Shelly suggested.

'Funny,' Helen said, 'but I was thinking about Liz.'

'It has my vote,' I added. 'Elizabeth Holton.'

Elizabeth Jane Holton was welcomed to the world, and Shelly surprised us all with how good she was with Liz. Boyfriends would be told that she was busy, because it was her turn to watch or feed the baby, and those young men invited around to baby-sit seemed a little put off by both the presence of the baby - and Shelly's fondness for babies. Poor acne-faced lads would flee in the face of early parenting, making me smile. At that age, I would have run as well.

Things were looking good, till Jimmy suggested that next year we may need to voluntarily expose ourselves. I knew it was on the cards, but I was not looking forward to it.

Little more than a week later, the former British Chancellor, a man who had wanted to be Prime Minister before his heart attack, went public. He labelled the existing PM as a puppet controlled by Jimmy, he detailed our ability to predict the future – cleverly not mentioning anyone called Magestic, and that we were preparing the world for a number of future disasters. I sat with the girls, and Ruth the babysitter, and watched the whole interview, all twenty minutes of it.

Ruth finally said, 'If Jimmy was running the bloody country ... he'd do a better job of it!'

The girls asked a few odd questions, so I told them to ask Jimmy, playing the employee card well. We avoided interviews that evening, only to find that the former French President had gone public as well, but specifically mentioning Magestic. The tabloids favourite horoscope reader claimed that he was predicting the future, and the papers that sponsored him made a big deal of it to boost their circulation.

Jimmy was not that bothered, suggesting that he was ready. He admitted to worrying for us and the baby, but did not see any major problems ahead. It was business as usual.

That evening, we invited in a BBC crew, setting up in a lounge. Before the interview, which I figured would be for the both of us, I went for a walk around the grounds. Jimmy had the same idea, and we bumped into each other at Jack's rose garden.

'Nice day for it,' I quipped, the sky overcast.

'You know how long you've been at this? Twenty six years.'

'Jesus, that sounds like a long time. But it doesn't feel like a long time.'

'It never does. We sleep, we wake, and we start the good fight again.'

'Do you know what you'll say?' I asked.

'Why, are you worried?'

'A bit. Back at the start of 2010 I was terrified, less so now; the idiots on this planet can't even join the dots.'

'They got the drug, the electric cars, and people are easily dazzled by shiny trinkets. And those very same people have been wondering about UFOs for fifty years. Some believe, most don't. It's similar; plausible, yet unproven.'

'Can you drag it out?'

He took a moment to study me. 'Do you want me to try?'

'Well, feeling a bit vulnerable now,' I admitted as I pulled leaves off a long-dead rose head.

'Next year, we'll have to make a decision. There're a few nasty earthquakes coming up, plus pandemics. We can either fight those from the shadows, or get the people behind us.'

'You obviously know what happens after exposure, hence this house.' I waited.

'It won't be so different, just that everything you do or say will be reported and scrutinised. If baby Liz does a poo, it'll make the tabloids. Some will think us gods, others will want us dead. Africa will still like us, the Chinese and the Russians will be OK, America mixed – with the Bible belt wanting to belt us. At least we've had six good years of President Chase, that has helped a lot, and he'll look after us.'

'And his replacement?'

'Unknown at the moment, but I do have a candidate or two in the wings. Besides, after exposure we'll get more power and the world leaders get less. People power.'

'Sounds like we should have done it before now.'

'No, I needed to work behind the scenes.' We turned, heading back. 'Grab your family, all of them, dress nice, and we'll do the interview together.'

‘I may have said this before, once or twice, but is that wise?’

‘They’d find out quickly if I revealed anything, so why hide it.’

‘Are you ... going to reveal anything?’

‘Not voluntarily, but the interviewer may tickle me.’

I led the four ladies in my life across to the house, into the lounge and to Jimmy, the interviewer looking a bit put out. Camera angles were altered, microphones made ready. As I made ready, I figured that the interviewer would have no choice but to avoid shitty questions.

We were finally ready, and I heaved a big breath.

‘Thank you all for being here today, and congratulations Paul and Helen.’

So far, baby Liz was behaving, being cradled by Jimmy, but I was kind of hoping she’d burp, or puke on Jimmy’s trouser legs.

‘Thank you,’ I said. ‘But Helen did all the work.’

The interview faced Shelly. ‘And now you have a baby sister. Will you be helping out?’

‘I already change and feed the baby,’ Shelly proudly stated. ‘I want one of my own as soon as I can.’

Jimmy turned his head to her. ‘Don’t you think you should meet a nice guy ... and get married first?’

‘Oh, Jimmy, you’re such an old fuddy-duddy.’

Jimmy gave the camera a peeved look. ‘I think, Shelly, that you should avoid telling nice young men your desire for kids on the first date.’

‘Boys are sooo easy to control.’

Jimmy faced Helen.

‘Don’t look at me, she doesn’t get it from me. I always wanted to be happily married first,’ Helen pointed out. ‘And preferably a rich man that could look after me.’

‘What about you Luce, do you want to have kids?’ Jimmy asked, and I could see the interviewer wanting to jump in.

‘Not till I’m old like mum,’ Lucy said.

‘Thank you, darling,’ Helen quipped.

‘Your mum is not old,’ I told Lucy. ‘And she still looks great. Even after ten kids.’

‘You only have the three,’ Jimmy pointed out.

‘It feels like ten some days,’ I replied, ignoring the interviewer.

‘If you want to give up Lucy - I’ll adopt her,’ Jimmy offered. ‘Save having one of my own.’

‘You’re still practising,’ Lucy told Jimmy.

Jimmy looked into the camera and wiggled his eyebrows. 'Practise is important in many areas of life, but especially when it comes to making a relationship work. I'm not very good with the ladies, so I have to keep practising.'

'The French Finance Minister likes you,' Lucy put in. 'She said you have a good head and figure.'

Helen and I exchanged looks, grins suppressed.

Jimmy explained, 'She said ... that I had a good head *for* figures, Luce. That's not quite the same.'

The interviewer could wait no longer. 'Mister Silo, the recent comments about the influence you have over the Prime Minister -'

'He never brings us anything,' Luce complained. 'Not even on our birthdays.'

Jimmy wagged a finger at the camera. 'Bad Prime Minister, bring some gifts next time, huh.'

'He looks taller on the TV,' Shelly mentioned. 'I'm almost as tall as him.'

Jimmy wagged a finger at the camera. 'Bad Prime Minister, don't be so short. The voters of this country expect you to be taller. Get yourself an inch or two where it matters.'

'On his baldy head,' Luce added, and I was waiting to see just how the hell the interviewer got this back on track, the girls' presence another brilliant move by Jimmy.

'The comments that the former Chancellor made, what do you say in reply?' the interviewer squeezed in before any semblance of his professional pride disappeared.

'What comments were they?' I asked, just to be awkward.

'The former Chancellor claimed that you, Mister Silo, were heavily influencing the Prime Minister.'

'It's never been my policy to interfere in UK domestic politics, which is why I get so many people complaining that all my time and energy is spent on Africa. I have no particular interest in local politics, and I'm hardly ever in this country. I think the former Chancellor is just mad that he never became Prime Minister – and I'm sure that he would have made a very poor Prime Minister.'

'Which one is he?' Lucy asked.

I turned my head. 'He's the fat one who looks like he's had a stroke on both sides of his face.'

Helen bit her lip.

'And the allegations of the ability to predict the future?' the interviewer got in.

Jimmy began with, 'I predict ... that British Rail will still be crap in twenty years, that air travel will still be a chore, that the computer industry will still be led by the gaming industry, that politicians will still be corrupt, and that I'll still be practising.'

'The former French president backed-up the claims –'

'I don't like the French,' Luce put in.

'You like French Brie,' Jimmy reminded her.

'That's nice,' Lucy agreed, the interviewer still frustrated.

'And you liked Paris, the Eiffel Tower,' Jimmy added.

'But not French people,' Lucy complained. 'They wave their arms around a lot.'

'French men are nice,' Shelly put in. 'The French Military Attache was nice.'

Helen turned her head. 'A think he was a little old for you, darling. But he was very charming in his uniform.'

'He was?' I asked my wife. 'May I remind you that you're happily married ... with ten kids.'

She shrugged. 'Men in uniforms.'

'Coming back to the French Military Attache – why was he here?' our interviewer asked.

'I bought coastal patrol craft for Kenya, off the French Navy,' Jimmy explained. 'And afterwards we sat down to plan the domination of the world from a cave in Switzerland.'

Helen said, 'If we carve up the world, I want Switzerland; beautiful country, great people.'

'I want to ban adverts between programmes,' I added, figuring the interviewer would either explode, or give up.

'Mister Silo, what do you say to the charge that you – or the "M" group – are secretly running the world?'

'First, the "M" Group are running the world. They represent more than half of the GDP, and more than half the world's population. And second, if I was running the world, there would be hope for a better future.'

Liz burped, making me smile widely. She had been saving it, and her timing was great. Jimmy handed her over to Helen. Facing the interviewer, he said, 'No more silly question, we have some important family-time things to attend to.'

'We're off air,' a man said a few second later, and only then did I realise we had been live.

Jimmy thanked the poor interviewer and shook his hand, leading us out and around to our house, getting the kettle on.

‘I saw it on the TV,’ Ruth said with a huge smile. ‘That poor interviewer. But the baby came across great, they zoomed on her a few times.’

We settled about the coffee table, Shelly holding the baby.

‘You did well, girls,’ Jimmy told my daughters. ‘That nice man wanted to ask a few difficult questions, but we spoke about nonsense.’

‘Will that deflect them?’ Helen asked, causing me to glance at Ruth.

‘They can think what they like for now,’ Jimmy replied. ‘And, at the end of the day, people just don’t care.’

‘You should be running the world,’ Ruth said. ‘Couldn’t do a worse job of it.’

‘There speaks a member of the public,’ Jimmy pointed out to Helen and me. ‘The public ... crave a better path, a different way.’

Ruth said, ‘Yeah, but the ones in power will never give it up without a fight.’

‘A good point,’ Jimmy noted. ‘So we won’t be trying to take it off them. Not yet.’

‘Well, you got my vote.’ She checked her watch and stood. ‘Best check in on my own brood. See you in the morning, Helen. Bye all.’

‘They’ll keep pressing,’ I suggested.

‘They have no legal right to force us to talk,’ Jimmy reminded me. ‘All we need do is keep reminding everyone how nice we are, how nice we look, and how useful our gadgets are to the world. And you heard Ruth; the people want hope in a difficult world. You’ll be fine.’

‘And the timescale? I asked.

‘Not long. Probably months.’

2013

Lobster had rotated out of Kandahar after three months, four weeks spent with his family, which was about three weeks and a few days too long. He was relieved when he returned. Big Paul was in his element, and sometimes attended patrols out of Duckland. But he also rotated back, providing Jimmy with detailed verbal reports that lasted into the small hours some days. They were plotting and scheming, but very little of it was to do with defeating al-Qa’eda.

Our favourite Rescue Force writer had been allowed into both Kandahar and Duckland, to collect information for a book. That book was actually destined to be five books in four languages as it charted the training and deployment of chosen individuals; British, American, French, Russian and Chinese. A film was also planned, a great amount of detail put on paper by Big Paul and Jimmy. As with the exploits of Rescue Force, Jimmy knew exactly how to reach our target audience.

One day in October, when I wandered down into the basement command room, Jimmy showed me a set of images taken at Duckland. Under a sign that labelled far off cities, their compass bearings and their distances listed, groups of men posed for the photographer.

‘It’s on track, and going well,’ Jimmy enthused, handing me the photograph with a smile.

‘The campaign?’

‘No, dope - the integration.’

I studied the image, that of soldiers from several nations, all happily posing together, a mascot of a rubber duck.

‘That’s Section 112,’ Jimmy said. ‘Russians, Chinese, Americans, Brits and a Frenchman. They’re a distance sniper section; they eat, live and breathe sniper rifles, and they compete for the best kills.’

He handed me a second photograph. ‘Big Paul organised a weekly rotation of cooking duties. That’s the Chinese cooking for the whole camp, special ingredients flown in. They’re the most popular amateur chefs, Chinese night keenly awaited. The Brits do a curry night, which is passable apparently, the French cook the local goats, and the Yanks fly in burgers and hotdogs.

‘The soldiers took over a compound and house, made it as pleasant as they could, put up a large white screen and show films most nights, beer issued. I’m flying in a lot of beer, but the Rifles don’t normally drink unless back at Kandahar. But the African boys love the movies, most of which they’ve never seen – like E.T., or Star Wars!’

‘All the creature comforts,’ I noted. ‘And the success rate?’

‘Slow attrition; we set traps, and they walk into them. Very low casualty rate, but that’s not the point. The bonding between soldiers is working well, and you can hear them criticising their political paymasters. It’s changing attitudes at the lowest level; grunts sharing blood, sweat and tears. I’ll have books written about it and sent everywhere, we’ll fund films about it.’

‘It’s a dry run for 2025,’ I realised.

‘And more than just that, it’s a dry run for future politics.’ He tapped a photograph. ‘That’s Sev, a Russian who carried a wounded Chinese soldier twelve miles. And these two Chinese, they carried an American six miles across a mountain, keeping him alive. The material is great, and I aim to get a dozen books and movies out of it.’

‘It’s not going to stop political attitudes, they’re just grunts.’

‘I told you before: ignore the politicians and deal with the people, especially Hollywood. A few years of movies about Duckland and national attitudes will change a great deal. When you started that combined college you opened the door, and set the politicians thinking. They wanted to be involved for their own selfish reasons, to try and influence the next generation of African leaders. What they didn’t realise ... was that they’d put their instructors in the same room, and then their soldiers. Once that process starts it very difficult to stop. In Duckland, Americans and Russians are eating, living and fighting together.

‘After these soldiers leave the army they’ll meet up, a few working in private security together. You set in motion ... a disease that will infect the world, and one that builds on the student exchanges we started in 1986, and the mixed safaris in Africa; one world, one threat, one cause. Of everything we’ve done, this is the most important part, building that integration up – but not at the political level, at the lowest level; grunts in the field. The “M” Group of leaders are fine, but those faces change – and they can change their minds!’

I took more of an interest in Duckland after that, peering at faces frozen in time in photographs, imagining what they were doing, what they’d be eating tonight. I bought a number of laptops with video cameras and shipped them out, opened up a special account with Skype, and bought some satellite time. Soldiers in Duckland could each have five minutes a day to talk to family, or they could barter their airtime. I even took to chatting to a few, calling at random and asking about conditions.

Shelly joined me once, but that was a mistake, because she got flirty with the soldiers - and I got irate with my little tramp.

As Christmas approached, I organised a lady Santa with large breasts to chat to the boys, and to wiggle her best assets. I sent gifts and booze, silly hats, a few soldiers reprimanded for fighting the Taliban in red Santa hats. My own Christmas was a delight because I had the baby to hold, and I never got fed up with just staring at her.

We enjoyed a traditional Christmas at home, big tree, lots of decorations, Queen's Speech on the TV, then flew down to Goma on the 27th, baby Liz injected by Jimmy just in case.

For the second year running we stayed in Goma for New Year, senior staff invited over, rooms provided for many RF rescuers. We again found ourselves in the Chinese restaurant and watching the fireworks on the lake, the next day spent at Yuri's place in Hilltops. I simply sat in the sun with a cold beer and watched the city, planes coming and going, a dip in the pool when I warmed up.

It was the calm before the storm, and 2013 would change everything, not just US Presidents. I knew that, Jimmy had told me, but I kept it from Helen, hoping to drag out every minute.

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Part 14

New Years Day, 2013.

This time last year I was wondering about another baby, and now the little darling was waking us often, more so than my first two daughters. I eased out of bed and lifted the baby out of the cot, bringing her back to the bed. Laying her on my bare skin, she seemed to calm quickly, Helen turning over but not waking. For once, we were a little groggy from interrupted sleep. We didn't feel as bad as those who had not been injected, but we felt it none the less. With the baby on my chest, she settled down.

A long way off, Big Paul, known as Major Paul O'Brien to those who actually believed his cover story, stood in front of a large group of soldiers at Duckland. In a chill wind, he placed on a special set of webbing, followed by a type of helmet straight out of Star Wars. His assistant connected a wire, and Big Paul turned toward the assembled men.

'This, boys and girls, is the future of warfare.' He lowered a curved Perspex flap to cover his left eye. 'What I now have, is a silly hat connected to a battery pack on my webbing. On my head is an EM scanner, a thermal imager, a scanner that tells me if a laser is pointing towards me, a laser range finder, and a laser target illuminator.

'First, the EM scanner. As I look at you, I can see little streaks of blue lightning where your radios are. If I turn and face the valley, I can see small lightning streaks from that patrol approaching, some on the hills. I can also get a tone when a signal is detected.'

He turned back. 'I can also see orange blobs through the green Perspex, showing me your body heat – and that someone has just farted. Again, if I turn and look down the valley I can see the patrol coming in as thermal images.

'If I press the top right button of my nice new helmet, or this button on my webbing, I get figures popping up that tell me that you're six metres away. If I turn and face the hill, I get fifteen hundred metres. If I press a second button and hold it, I can illuminate a target for an air strike.

'If I alter a few settings, I can get a tone for every radio signature nearby. So, if I'm out on patrol in the cold and dark – and it's always cold and fucking dark - and the patrol's radios are off, any bleep in my ear is an enemy radio source close by. Right, we have ten of

these, so the patrols going out tonight can have a play and report back. If you lose one or damage one – don't report back.'

With the baby breast fed, and with me feeling both jealous and hungry, I led Helen to the pool area for breakfast, long before sane and normal people were up and about. The sun threatened to rise.

Jimmy joined us, followed by the girls, and we were soon on our third course of pancakes, Shelly tending the baby. As I watched, Shelly dipped her little finger in syrup and let the baby suck on it.

'Syrup good for babies?' I asked Helen, my wife shrugging.

Jimmy took a call. Lowering his iPhone, he said, 'Someone just hacked an American credit card company, and took sixty million dollars out.'

'If it was a British student,' I began. 'That'll just about cover their tuition fees.'

'Just the start,' Jimmy informed us. 'There'll be more of those.'

'Can you stop them?' Helen asked.

'Some I can, and will, but some are necessary to ... change attitudes and procedures.'

After breakfast, and with late-rising mere mortals commuting to work through Gotham City on our nice electric buses, Jimmy led us to the parliament building. In an empty office we found a large street plan for the new city.

'OK,' he said, taking the baby. 'You can each name a street or two.'

I picked up a pen as the girls studied the myriad of streets. I marked Holton Avenue on a side street. Helen marked Helen Road, coming off Holton Avenue. Around the corner, a giggly Lucy marked Lucy Boulevard, just to be awkward. Shelly marked a cul-de-sac as Silo's End, getting a clipped head from Helen.

Jimmy marked a long street as Mandela Avenue, a second as Kimballa Avenue, a third as Hardon Chase Avenue. Next to the proposed Chinese quarter, Jimmy marked up Wen Street and Po Street. Shelly marked off two streets in Latin, a few in French. Future residents would, I was sure, finally figure out how rude their street names were when translated.

'Don't do the whole damn thing,' Jimmy said. 'We've arrange for people to go online and sponsor a street name. They can buy building names as well.'

Back at the house, our corporation guy brought a fax out to us as we lolled around the pool.

Jimmy faced me after reading it. 'Property prices down five percent in the States, flat in the UK, two US banks stretched, one British bank stretched.'

'We knew we'd get to this point, and we warned them,' I said from behind my sunglasses. 'Will it be a problem?'

'A correction was always inevitable, but this year will see a few other problems as well. And that credit card fraud could take down the credit card company, their parent bank and their insurers – not from the money itself, but from the loss of confidence. Markets will take a hit when they open tomorrow.'

In Duckland, Lobster placed on his new toy, adjusting the straps. Grabbing the rest of his gear, he kicked up dust as he joined his patrol, the evening bitterly cold. Leading from the front, he waved the three men forwards.

Outside of the base's mud walls he lifted and cocked his weapon, the men copying in turn. 'Radio check,' he transmitted.

'Mickey on.'

'Sven on.'

'Yuri on.'

'Use the force, Luke,' came from someone, giggles heard through the dark.

Lobster shook his head, his new headgear a little uncomfortable and his chinstrap rubbing, then put one foot in front of the other and plodded forwards, hoping his quick pace would warm him. A mile down the valley, reaching the last OP, Lobster depressed the radio button for HQ. 'Lobster to Duckland, radio check, over.'

'Loud and clear, Lobster,' crackled back.

'Lobster at the outer limit, southwest valley, back at dawn. Out.'

'Watch out for the Sand People.'

'Who are the Sand People,' Lobster asked, getting giggles back.

'And Imperial storm troopers,' came another voice.

Lobster switched on his new toy, lowering the green Perspex eyepiece. Raising a hand to halt his patrol he swung his head back and forth, finding no EM signatures or thermal images ahead, just a cold rock valley devoid of life. Turning, he could see the thermal images of his team, blue lightning flashes where their radios were located.

He lifted his head to where he knew OP12 was hidden, finding both EM signatures and faint thermal images. He used his radio. 'OP12, this is Lobster in the valley below. Can you use a laser rangefinder towards me, please.'

A few seconds later, his eye display highlighted the laser, a tone given.

‘OP12, the gadget works, your laser set off the warning. What range do you have for me?’

‘We have you at eleven hundred, Lobster.’

‘Mine says that as well. It works! Out.’ Lobster led his men on as it started to rain, the temperature dropping. At the least the damn helmet was warm.

An hour later, trudging along familiar tracks, Lobster noticed a blue flash on his eyepiece. He raised a fist, his team taking cover. Edging forwards for a better view, Lobster could see the blue lightning streak clearly, and clearly labelling a small bush on the opposite side of a track, impossible for anyone to be hidden there, no accompanying thermal image to be found.

Lobster took ten minutes to scan the valley and its hills, his body cooling as he stood still, but finally noticed a faint blue dot on a distant hill. He lifted his eyepiece and fetched out his manual EM scanner. Swinging it around, it confirmed the EM signature coming from the bush, as well as the distant hill. He closed in on his team, leading them to a group of rocks for shelter, the three men nothing but dark outlines.

‘There’s something giving off an EM signature in a bush, a radio signal on the hill.’

‘It’s a trap,’ they agreed.

Sven opened his backpack, taking out a small device and switching it on. He selected ‘0000’ and set it running. Little more than a minute later the bush exploded, showering them with rocks.

Lobster depressed his HQ radio button. ‘Lobster to Duckland, emergency. Receiving, over?’

‘Go ahead, Lobster,’ crackled back.

‘Lobster to Duckland. Enemy placed a radio-controlled bomb on a track, enemy OP in the hill waiting for some trade. Please warn everyone, sir. Out.’

‘All variables, all variables, this is Duckland control. Watch out for radio-controlled booby-traps. Anyone without an EM scanner is to pull back. I repeat, if you don’t have an EM scanner then pull back. Out.’

‘They would have got us,’ Mickey realised, the man only recognised by his voice. ‘So let’s go meet these arseholes.’

‘If we’re quick, we can skirt around, three or four miles, and hit them from the other side,’ Lobster suggested. ‘On me, stay close.’ He lowered his Perspex eyepiece and led the men off at the double.

An hour later, four miles along a parallel valley, the weather was terrible, rain and snow falling, the visibility little more than ten feet. Lobster's face felt red hot, his fingers numb and throbbing with the cold, everything wet through. He could now discern his intended targets as four orange dots producing two blue lightning streaks. Everything else was cold and black.

Lifting the eyepiece, his eyes sore with the cold and rain, he could see nothing in any direction. With the eyepiece lowered, he could see his prey plodding slowly along, their heads down against the wind and rain; the Taliban were just as pissed-off with the weather as he was. What his new eyepiece did give him, in addition to its other features, was a better representation of the contours of the track in front of him. He moved off.

Five minutes later he was to within a hundred yards of the four fighters, normal human eyes not having a hope of spotting the four men, the wind howling past cold ears. Through his eyepiece, he could see the fighters so clearly that he could make-out the men scratching their backsides; he could even see each footfall. He closed to within thirty yards, lifted his rifle and hit all four men using an approximation through the eyepiece. They probably didn't even hear the shots. Stepping slowly forwards, each step measured, he could see the thermal image of one man, still moving, and fired again.

Stood next to the bodies of the fighters, Lobster put two rounds into each thermal image as they lay sprawled, his team checking the bodies close-up with their torches. Radios were removed, papers and personal effects, the bodies covered over with sand and rocks by cold and numb hands.

About to turn back for base, Lobster's eyepiece came to life, a hundred orange dots on the horizon, but no lightning streaks. They were surrounded on three sides. He got on the radio, secure that not even his own men could hear him in this howling wind. 'Lobster to Duckland.'

'Duckland here, go ahead Lobster,' Lobster could just about hear over the roar of the wind.

'Lobster to Duckland, one hundred strong force moving north at grid four-two. They are radio silent and using the storm to approach, sir.'

'Lobster, there's no one near you, pull back, leave grenades, over.'

'Lobster out.' He turned, pulling his team in close enough to talk. They knelt and huddled, faces almost touching. 'There are a hundred

fighters out there, using the storm to advance on the base. We've been ordered back, but in this weather we have the advantage.'

'They're blind!' Sven said, shouting to be heard and squinting against the driving snow. 'They could walk right past us!'

Mickey added, 'In this weather, they'll shoot each other!'

'Then we go down the middle,' Lobster said. 'Yes?'

The men were in agreement, Lobster leading them off as a tight group. Through pitch-blackness, driving rain and snow and a howling wind, Lobster led his team into a gully. His team fixed their thermal sights, took opposite sides of the gully and opened fire, the reports of their outgoing shots hardly registering in the wind. Fighters, walking with their hats held down and leaning against the wind, started to fall.

Ten minutes later fire was returned, cracking overhead or hitting the dirt nearby. It had taken a full ten minutes for the fighters to realise that their colleagues were being shot, literally tripping over the bodies. The main body of fighters halted, now turning inward, and presenting a wall of orange dots on Lobster's eyepiece.

Noticing a group bunched up, Lobster lifted a battery grenade, set it for one minute, and ran forwards. Fifty yards from the approaching group he pulled the pin, threw it a few yards ahead and ran back to the gully, counting as he went. At fifty seconds he shouted, 'Grenade! Cover!' His men slipped lower.

The blast washed over them, rocks raining down, the sensation of sand landing on their cold and exposed skin. Half an hour, and three grenades later, Lobster figured that fifty fighters had been killed or wounded, many from their own indiscriminate crossfire.

Judging the direction of the wind, Lobster and Mickey lowered their weapons and stood in the gully centre. They took out their lipstick grenades, turned dials, banged the grenades against rocks and threw high, with the wind. Thirty grenades were thrown, the results unknown, the wind so strong that they didn't even hear the pops, a few distant flashes noted.

With the fighters scattered, and seemingly walking in random directions, Lobster did the unusual - and led his men further down the valley, between the fighters. Firing as they went, they picked off another twenty surprised fighters, finding a gap in the lines and racing through it. Dropping into a dry gully, Lobster led his team on at a fast pace, sand and gravel crunched under foot, soon well ahead of the main body of fighters and approaching a tightening of the valley sides.

Finding a large compound, the smell of smoke coming from within, Lobster skirted around it and to a ridge, hiding his team whilst observing the distinct blue lightning flashes coming from the compound. The team sat patiently, watching the fighters enter the compound for shelter.

An hour before dawn, the majority of the fighters were now sheltering inside the compound, a few stood guard outside. In total, Lobster figured as many as forty men could now be inside, a few stragglers back along the valley. Chilled, he led his team down. At twenty yards they opened fire, the reports hardly registering in the storm. Lobster set a battery grenade to five seconds, pulled the pin and did what he was taught never to do. He threw it. He threw it as hard as he could, turning and running with his team.

The blast knocked Lobster and his men to the floor, ears ringing, the wind and rain offering no barrier to the blast. Lifting up and turning, Lobster could see no fighters moving, and led his team back to the ridge, two of them now limping. They reclaimed their position behind large boulders. Sven had been hit in the ankle by a flying rock, Mickey hit in the back of the knee by a rock. They had been too close. Huddled in the rocks, they checked ammo.

‘Do we go?’ Sven asked.

‘No, we stay to dawn and finish them off,’ Lobster suggested. ‘No more than ten left walking.’

‘I think my ankle is broken,’ Sven put in. ‘Whatever I do, I do it slowly.’

‘Get some rest,’ Lobster said. ‘We wait. Shiver quietly!’

An hour after dawn the wind eased, the rain falling vertically instead of lashing them sideways, their view nothing but shades of grey as the men controlled their shivers, now wet through. A dull rumble could then be heard by the team, heads turning like radar. The rumble increased, soon clear that the valley was being hit from the air. An Mi24 roared past, the first of four, several passes made.

Lobster eased forwards and used his radio. ‘Lobster to air attack squadron, over.’

‘Lobster, that you? Where are you, buddy?’ crackled back.

‘We’re west of the compound you just hit, in the rocks. Can we have a cas-evac, over?’

‘Main force is north of you, clearing the valley. When they’ve secured the area we’ll come back for you. I’ll give them your position. Out.’

An hour later, Lobster was stood before the CO, American Colonel Nash. ‘Did the new headgear work?’

‘Yes, sir. Without it, we would all be dead.’

‘We found two other roadside devices, so all patrols have signal steppers and jammers now. What happened in that valley?’

‘We ran after the men with the radio detonators, sir. But the weather was so bad, that when we killed them we found that we were surrounded. So we played the Meerkat and the Hawk, sir.’

‘Meerkat and Hawk?’ Nash repeated.

‘We duck down and pop up another place, sir. We moved to the middle and duck down in the gully, firing out. They fire back and shoot each other, sir.’

‘You got them shooting at each other?’

‘Weather very bad, sir, but we can see them. And we use the grenades.’

‘How many men did you kill, sergeant?’

‘Maybe ... seventy, eighty, sir.’

‘Eighty!’

‘They go into the house to be warm, sir, all close together. I throw the grenade, sir.’

‘You threw a battery grenade?’

‘Sorry, sir. We all a bit hurt after.’

Nash glanced at the Rifles Major responsible for Lobster. Facing Lobster, he said, ‘We’ll be giving you a promotion, a field commission.’

Lobster was deflated, letting out an ‘Oh.’

‘Oh?’

‘I like being the sergeant, sir.’

‘Yeah? Well, tough shit. You’re now Second Lieutenant Lobster.’ Nash handed over the shoulder rank. ‘Put them on.’

Lobster put on his new shoulder rank, and returned to being stood at attention.

‘At ease ... Lieutenant.’

Lobster widened his stance, placing his hands behind his back.

‘You have squads Delta three, four and five, mostly Africans. Go and say hello.’

Lobster saluted, turned and left, feeling a little strange. In his old quarters, his team noticed the new rank as Lobster sunk into his bunk.

‘They promoted him,’ Sven said. ‘Bastards!’

‘With success, comes responsibility,’ a Kenyan said, hiding a grin. ‘With a lot of success, comes a lot of responsibility.’

Lobster lay on his bunk, staring at the grubby ceiling, and thinking.

I lay on a sun lounger, wondering if I should reveal to Helen what Jimmy had just revealed me. I decided not to make a decision, not yet, and my guts were turning. Things would change, things would change forever, and I desperately wanted to stop the clock, or to rewind it.

I lay in the sun, but felt chilled - and now afraid, my mind alternating between fear, stoicism, terror, courage and – ultimately - indecision. Jimmy had just informed me that when we finally made a TV broadcast about who he really was, that he'd ask everyone on the planet to watch it at the same time. Everyone. Two o'clock in London, morning in the Americas, late afternoon in Russia and the Middle East, and night in China. Everyone.

Before we left Goma, Jimmy took me around to the airport, to one of the huge maintenance sheds across the airfield. We passed a tight security screen, finding a Central Africa Airways 747 being worked on.

Stood below the huge monster of a plane, Jimmy said, 'US Presidents have Air Force One, we have this. It has EMPs front and back, anti-missile flares, reinforced airframe, EMP proof electronics, parachutes, life rafts, emergency food and water, satellite communications, fuel tanks with self-sealing rubber, the works.'

'Jesus,' I let out, Jimmy leading me inside the 747.

The First Class lounge was similar to other 747s, the Business Class section ripped out, a large wooden conference table in its place, screens on the walls. Behind that I found a dozen small rooms, each with a bed, some with showers. I walked down a central corridor, noting the small rooms off it, finding four small offices beyond the bedrooms. Beyond that I found a section of seats, most arranged like train seats so that passengers would be facing each other across small tables. At the rear was the survival gear and communications equipment.

'Bit of a step up?' I mentioned.

'But necessary. How did you think the world will react to who I am?'

'Well...' I shrugged. 'Kinda hoping we can rewind the clock a bit.'

'Unfortunately we can't, and now comes the hard part. But don't worry, you can always blame me. Play the *employee* card.'

Leaving our new plane, my hand was shaking, and I made a fist.

We flew over to the inauguration of Robert Fitz, the Republican candidate, the man having won by the smallest of margins. It was just as cold as Hardon Chase's inauguration, and we only spoke briefly with President Fitz. He seemed nice enough. He was shorter than Chase, grey hairs over his ears but still black on top, and hailed from Virginia. It wouldn't be difficult for him to pop home and see the folks from the White House.

He would have his security briefing soon enough, followed by one from Jimmy at some point. We said goodbye to Chase, and found the man genuinely moved by all we had done for him.

'I did it,' he said. 'I did a good job, and I leave with my head held high. They're even naming things after me.'

'We'll want you in on the next "M" Group meeting, and to brief the new guy thoroughly, whether he likes it or not,' Jimmy told Chase.

'I'd invite you over,' I said, 'but you bring all those damn bodyguards.'

Chase laughed. 'It's going to be strange, being on the outside.'

'Could go back to the senate,' Jimmy suggested.

'Maybe. Maybe you'll find something for me to do.'

'I have a few ideas already,' Jimmy said with a grin. 'Start with a book on the "M" Group, right from day one.'

'Yes?'

'Yes,' Jimmy confirmed.

The last ever "M" Group meeting

Back in the UK, I allocated many of my tasks to my team, and got to work on Southern Sudan and Cuba. Po helped to organise factories for Cuba, and I met little resistance when I nudged BP and Shell to buy Cuban oil for the North American Market. They would, however, not advertise the fact widely.

As directed by Jimmy, I handed over my projects and responsibilities, taking a back seat to the detail and concentrating on directions. I had a week before the last ever "M" Group meeting, something that was also worrying me. I found myself staring at the baby a lot these days, and taking long walks around the grounds when the weather permitted. In some ways I resented being caught

up in all this, but I also knew that being on the outside would be worse; not knowing what might happen.

Things between Helen and me were fine. If anything, we were closer now that we both feared exposure and the start of the troubles. We had the baby, and Shelly had returned to us, wanting to spend more time with us now the baby was here. If the world would just go away, then things would be perfect.

A day before the next “M” Group meeting, to be held in Berlin, Jimmy called in all of the household staff and guards, local police watching the estate as we met in a lounge, hardly room for everyone. It was crunch time.

The household “M” Group stood off to one side, the security staff at the rear. Sharon, her daughter, Trish and the secretaries sat on the sofa, our IT guy Gareth stood up, his hands in his pockets as usual. The wives of Jack and Keely came in, as well as a few of Jimmy’s relatives, the local police chief attending. The lounge was cosy, to say the least. I stood with Helen, Ruth and the girls, my team behind me.

‘Are we all here?’ Jimmy asked as he entered. ‘If anyone is not here, please raise your hand.’ People laughed. ‘OK, some of you already know who and what I really am, some of you suspect – but don’t say anything, and some of you don’t care so long as you get your beer money.’

Faces turned towards the security staff.

‘In the months ahead, and thereafter in the years ahead, things will get worse – in that security will need to be tighter; you will all need to change your lifestyles a little. In the months ahead, many of you will be allocated bodyguards, some of you will have to avoid certain people, hobbies and trips, and a few of you may even have to give up your jobs in civvy street.

‘You will all need to be more careful about who you talk to, and the chance of being bugged is very real. Bugs these days are very small and very efficient, and many people will try and bug many of you. You will all find that more people will wish to be your friends, trying to get information about me – and my activities. And our security staff will suddenly become more popular with the ladies down the pub.’

‘How much more popular?’ one asked, making us laugh.

‘So popular, that if you talk to the wrong girl I’ll not only sack you, I’ll make sure you spend ten years in a cell. Does that answer your question?’

No one commented.

‘You will all be pumped for information everywhere you go. And you should all assume that your homes and cars will be bugged, trackers fitted to cars. If you’re having an affair – you’ll be caught by the tabloids. If you’re up to something no good, you’ll be found out. Everything you do ... will be put under the spotlight. So, if you have a few skeletons in the closet, best remove them now and be prepared.

‘Now, this has all come about because we’re off to the next “M” Group meeting tomorrow, and a few tough decisions will be made. Following that meeting, there’s every chance that the public will finally realise who I am, and what I’m up to.’

He turned his head. ‘Sharon, you’ve been an excellent secretary for a long time, and you’ve suffered the problems of working here without asking too many questions about me. You deserve a medal.’

To the group he said, ‘You *will not* ... reveal to anyone outside this room what we discuss next, not yet at least, and probably not then.’

Everyone was now listening intently.

‘I’m not an alien, although a few of the girls I have dated believe me to be from another planet. I have no special powers, but my body has been genetically altered, and there are drugs floating around my system that medical science would fail to understand for another twenty years or so. I am ... Jimmy Silo, my parents were my parents, but I’m a time traveller.’

Those that didn’t already know glanced around.

Lucy asked, ‘Can you go back and forth?’

Jimmy took a moment. ‘I can.’

That surprised a few people, even in the “M” Group.

The police chief raised a hand. ‘Might I ask ... why you’re here, exactly?’

‘I was coming to that.’ Jimmy took a breath. ‘In the years ahead there’ll be series of disasters, hundreds of millions of people will die.’ Now he had their attention. ‘There will then be a single disaster that threatens the entire planet. If unchecked, then most of the people on this planet will die. My job ... has been to prepare people, to plan ahead, to inform the world leaders of what’s going to happen. That ... is the function of the “M” Group. I have already averted a few wars, reacted to earthquakes, and helped to bring together the world leaders in a mood of cooperation and peace.

‘Unfortunately, I can no longer work behind the scenes, because the problems that will affect us from next year onwards are too serious for the “M” Group alone. More people will need to be

involved. Now, many of you play a key role in supporting me in what I do, and I not only need that to continue, but I will need more from you. If I'm killed, documents will be released that will help the world to go on, but those documents by themselves are not that much use without me. If I fail ... then just about everyone in this room, and everyone you know, will perish.'

He let us think about, and I looked down at the baby in her cot, suddenly finding a little courage.

Jimmy continued, 'The work that I do is important, and necessary. But I am only human, and I eat, sleep and fart like normal people. So I need your help. Mostly, I simply need you to carry on doing what you've been doing up to now. There will be changes, and it will not be pleasant when the tabloids are going through your bins or sticking a microphone in your faces. Just remember what's at stake. OK, I'm sure that some of you have questions.'

'Will there be a global war?' one of my team asked.

'Yes, there will.'

'Will global warming kill us all off?' another asked.

'No.'

'Will there be pandemics?'

'Yes, a great many. Plus financial crashes, small wars, giant earthquakes, terror attacks, computer viruses, fuel shortages. Unless you plan on living in a self-sufficient cave that's earthquake proof you'll feel some or all of those in the years ahead. Beyond that, don't ask me for specifics, since there's a risk of panic amongst the population.'

'There's a risk of panic in here,' the police chief said.

'Can you fix it?' Helen asked, an odd question from my wife, especially now.

'No, I can't fix it. I can only guide you through as best as possible. Some of the things that lay ahead ... cannot be fixed.' He faced the group. 'Some of you ... will have a hard time dealing with the new reality. But consider this: without my presence here, you'd have faced those problems with no preparation, and mankind would suffer greatly. With my presence here ... comes hope, hope that we can change things, that we can prepare for them, and that the suffering will be limited. It's a fight, and it's a war, and I need my foot soldiers to be strong for the next twenty years. Those of you who have not had the Mason drug, get yourselves injected as soon as you can.'

'That drug comes from the future?' Trish asked.

‘Yes it does, and it’ll be necessary when diseases ravage the population. Now, I would appreciate that you not discuss this too much, not least because you may be overheard. I will, however, be going public in the months ahead. If any of you wish to take a nice holiday now I’ll pay for it.’

‘Can I go to the Seychelles?’ I asked.

‘No.’ Jimmy led my family back to our house, and sat the girls down. ‘Now, you may be a bit afraid –’

‘I’m not,’ Shelly cut in. ‘You can fix anything, you’ll find a way.’

‘That’s a nice vote of confidence, but there are difficult years ahead. I need you two to be strong, to look after your baby sister, and to watch out for people asking you questions. The best way to deal with people like that ... is to tell them lies, anything, just not the truth. Tell them I take my head off when I go to bed.’

‘Can we tell them how many women you’ve slept with?’ Shelly asked, getting a pointed finger from Helen.

‘Make up a figure,’ Jimmy told Shelly.

‘How old are you, Uncle Jimmy?’ Lucy asked.

‘Way over a hundred years old.’

‘But you don’t age because of the drug,’ Shelly stated, Jimmy nodding towards her.

‘Will you be OK, Luce?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Yes, I’m not afraid,’ she bravely stated, but I had to wonder.

We flew off to Berlin the next morning, heading for the last ever “M” Group meeting, the other participants not aware of that fact yet. We booked into the same country retreat outside of Berlin, meeting many of the same old faces around the bar. I was now on first name terms with aides from many countries, some of who seemed to meet-up at the bar to whinge about their political paymasters.

News then reached us of a terror attack, Rahman suspected. An oil tanker had been hijacked in the Red Sea, its tanks opened, the ship deliberately steered close to Sharm-el-Sheik tourist resort and on to Eilat, the oil slick huge. If the aim had been to kill off Egypt’s decadent and western-style holiday resort, it seemed like it would do the trick.

That evening, Jimmy avoided chatting to anyone, telling them to wait to the morning session – even the new US President, Fitz. At that session, Jimmy called order, Chase sat next to his replacement. It did not look like there was any love lost between them. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, politicians, hard-working aides.’ They smiled, Fitz seeming a little lost. ‘This will be the last “M” Group meeting.’

They were shocked, to say the least. Especially Fitz, and this was his first meeting.

‘The last?’ Fitz questioned. ‘I just got here!’

‘You’ll see why later.’ Jimmy collected his thoughts, taking in the faces. ‘Three months from now we’ll meet again in London. At that time I’ll be going public.’

Everyone knew it was on the cards, but they looked just as concerned as I now felt.

‘It would work against us if we prepared for the problems that we’ll face next - in secret. Those problems ... will affect some of the nations here, but will also affect others, and those other nations have the right to know. Not only that, they would be unhappy to have been kept in the dark about problems that faced their countries. Ladies and gentlemen, things are about to change, and in dramatic ways. You must all now prepare for the time when the world knows; when the world knows not only who I am, but what my mission here is. And, for those of you still not bright enough to join the dots, I’m a time traveller, and there is no one called Magestic.’

The Indians and the Germans were genuinely surprised, and I had to wonder if they were paying attention in class. Fitz seemed pleased, as if he had guessed right all along.

‘The others knew?’ the Indians asked.

‘Some knew,’ Jimmy responded. ‘We tried to keep in quiet as long as possible, and to use the Magestic clairvoyant as a decoy as long as possible.’

‘A bunch of NASA scientists walked out and quit,’ Chase put in. ‘After you spoke to them.’

‘Good. And may I have your assurance, Mister Chase – sorry, Mister Fitz, that you will not try and build a time machine.’

‘If we don’t build a time machine, then how come you’re here?’ Fitz countered with, a logical question.

‘There are a great many things that you don’t know, Mister Fitz. And if you spend money on a time machine ... you’ll get nowhere. The time machine that I made use of was developed by a single individual, long after your NASA and Air Force scientists had failed. That individual is now in my safe custody. And, without a vital second piece of information, that individual would have never completed his work. Your Chinese and Russians colleagues have no problem at all with you trying to develop a time machine, and wasting your money, Mister Fitz, but I ask you not to waste the money – or to give the world a false hope that people could travel back to meet loved ones, and Elvis!’

‘You may make the attempt,’ the Chinese offered Fitz, echoed by the Russians.

Fitz was not pleased. ‘Do you know something we don’t?’

‘Yes,’ the Chinese answered, no more forthcoming than that.

‘Moving on,’ Jimmy called, Fitz still focused on the Chinese. ‘I now require that all of you increase your spending on civil defence training and preparation – with the exception of China, who already has the structures necessary. Japan, your civil defence is good, but prepare also for pandemics. Russia, you need a lot of time, money and training to get ready. Mister Fitz, I’d like to see you increase the budget for FEMA considerably, and preparations made for pandemics.

‘India, you’re so far away from being prepared that you’ll need my help and guidance. You, of all the nations here, will be the least prepared for pandemics and other disasters – and also one that suffers the most. Take note: you have one year to get ready. Europe, your people are good, but you need more part-time Rescue Force staff, and a greater spend on civil defence. Same for you, Israel.’

‘Did you develop Rescue Force to assist with pandemics?’ the British PM asked.

‘Only in a small way; they’re there for earthquakes. The best way for you to prepare civil defence staff, is to create training camps along military lines, and to give unemployed people a year’s contract. By time they’ve finished their contract the pandemics will be upon us.’

‘Will the existing vaccines for things like Swine Flu help?’ the British PM asked.

‘They can’t do any harm, but should not be relied upon. The super-drug will help more, but flu viruses are adaptive,’ Jimmy explained. ‘Anyway, you all need to consider public unrest as a potential consequence of full disclosure, you’ll need greater security around all government buildings and establishments, and you need to prepare yourselves for some difficult questions. People will accuse you of keeping secrets, of keeping them in the dark, and there’ll be an issue of trust. Some of that I can diffuse when I make a speech at the next meeting.’

‘You said there would be no more meetings?’ Fitz puzzled.

‘No more in this format, or with these faces, because from the next meeting onwards many other countries will be involved. There’ll be pressure to televise them, which we’ll resist. There will also be protests by all sorts of groups, including individuals who’ll want to know if I knew of certain bus crashes, train crashes – and

could I have saved their loved ones. Many people will try and take legal action against both myself, and some of the people here. The reaction will be ... odd, to say the least.

‘I will be accused of profiting by my knowledge and position, and of failing to save certain people, of failing to intervene in conflicts – of starting other conflicts. The one thing that the people of the world won’t do ... is simply accept it and cooperate.’ He faced the British PM. ‘You’ll need to rush through some legislation to stop anyone from suing me, or I’ll spend the next twenty years in court, answering charges of not preventing deaths where I could.

‘Some countries, especially those around the Middle East, will try and extradite me, or force down planes when I’m on them. The one thing they won’t do ... is fall happily into line. For many parts of the world, and for many individuals, I will not be seen as a saviour, but a prophet of doom. And many people will try and avoid any reality at all ... about facing the future. Better for them to kill me ... and to pretend that the future will never happen.’

‘We are happy to offer you safe living conditions in China,’ the Chinese offered, getting looks from Chase and Fitz.

‘Thank you,’ Jimmy responded. ‘OK, moving on, and into unpleasant waters. Europe, you must start to cut public spending and introduce austerity measures; you must start to build reserves for when things go wrong. That ... applies to all of you, but some are better prepared than others. Stockpile rifles, medical supplies, barbed wire and tinned food.’

They stared back.

‘Europe and America, try and cut personal debt and credit card use – those credit cards that can be trusted, and make ready for a period of turbulence. If you have reserves, you can ride the turbulence better. And all of you need to prepare for imposing Martial Law.’

‘Martial Law?’ the Germans repeated.

‘When the pandemics, and other problems hit, your people will take to the streets, regardless of soothing words from their chosen leaders.’ He faced Fitz. ‘I need you to prepare your military for emergency assistance operations and disasters, either inside the States or in other countries. What you did – what your predecessor did - with Hurricane Katrina, plan on doing it on a larger scale. And, next week, I want you to create Rescue Force America, funded directly from your military budget and under the control of FEMA.’

‘We supposed to get any sleep tonight?’ Chase asked.

‘You’re a long time out of office, Mister Chase. You can sleep now that the man next to you has the ball to run with.’

‘How many rescuers would you like in this new force?’ Fitz asked after a moment.

‘Four hundred to start with, plus good use of part-timers. Allow your firemen to rotate in and out for a year, as well as your military medics. India, kindly increase the size of your own Rescue Force unit, and fund it yourselves. You’ll need them. OK, we’ll now take a thirty minute break, where you can formulate questions.’ Jimmy led Helen and me out.

Fitz and Chase came after us, directing us into a side room. ‘I’m going to have a hell of a job with the public ... if there’s any suggestion that the time machine was not NASA,’ Fitz suggested.

‘NASA scientists had a hand in it, so too your Air Force. That bit’s true, so you can use it.’

‘So why aren’t the Chinese unhappy about us trying to build one?’

‘Because your best brains couldn’t get the damn thing to work. After a few years they gave up, handing the project to someone who trusted me more than them, and he got it working in secret. By time it *was* working, I was President –’

‘President? Of where?’ Fitz asked.

‘Of the world,’ Jimmy answered. ‘Of course, there wasn’t much left of the world at that point. So I took charge of the time machine, and I sent myself through, the door closed behind me. And the only person who could work the buttons was not about to talk.’

‘So it is ours!’ Fitz insisted.

‘America designed and paid for it, but others finished it off and got it working – as with so many inventions on this planet,’ Jimmy quipped. ‘Anyway, make-up whatever you want, I’ll back you.’

Placated, Fitz sloped off followed by Chase. After a bite to eat and a cup of tea we resumed, questions ready for us.

‘Let’s go around the table, shall we,’ Jimmy suggested. He pointed at the Indians, sat on his left.

‘Will there be religious unrest?’

‘A good question. Yes, there will, but not in your country. The Muslim world will want me dead - as a false prophet. There’ll be plenty of Americas who will challenge me as if I was the second coming, and the Pope will not be a big fan of mine. Indonesia will leave Rescue Force.’

‘Ungrateful bastards,’ I put in. ‘After all we’ve done for them!’

Jimmy pointed at the French.

‘Will Europe break up?’

‘Unless we are very, very clever – Greece, Spain and Portugal will leave the Euro, but stay in the European Union. They were not ready to enter the Euro in the first place, and their cultures and economies are too far from the sensible frugidity of the Germans.’

‘Sensible ... frugidity?’ the Germans repeated, Chase and a few others hiding a grin.

‘Did you have a question?’ Jimmy asked the Germans.

‘Many, starting with the greatest threat to Europe.’

‘The greatest threat?’ Jimmy repeated, taking a moment. ‘I suppose, the greatest threat is the rise of The Brotherhood, as it is for all here. Before that, economic problems caused by global conditions will test you sorely, but you’ll do better than most. Push the coal-oil and electric cars, and save money for difficult times.’

He pointed at the Chinese. ‘When OPEC drop the dollar, will America turn aggressive?’

‘A very good question. First, I’m hoping that we can all work together to stop OPEC dropping the dollar, or at least to prepare for it. But, in 2017, a hard-line leader may emerge in America, and the American people may turn aggressive. First, they’ll turn aggressive against their own Hispanic immigrants, a kind of civil war. They’ll then spend so much time fighting each other that they’ll not be much of a threat to other nations. But that is one possible scenario – one which we hope to avoid.’

He pointed at the Russians.

‘Will Russia experience civil unrest?’

‘No, because they have a good and strong leader that the people trust.’

Chase cocked an eyebrow towards me, Fitz studying Jimmy intensely.

Jimmy continued, ‘Your biggest concern will be riding the waves of economic cycles that go on around you. You must not count on stability in western financial markets or economies, and you must try and internalise your markets more. Overall, you’ll do better than most.’

Jimmy pointed at Ben Ares.

‘How do the problems - before 2025 - affect us most?’

‘The pandemics will kill some of your citizens, and both the Palestinians – and the world – will blame you for not helping the Palestinians with vaccines. Water will run short, at least short for the Palestinians, and when the American and world economy crashes

you'll suffer greatly – not much help coming from Uncle Sam. Best save a few Shekels ready.'

Jimmy pointed at Chase, then moved his hand to Fitz.

'Internal American discord; what can be done?' Fitz asked, as if it was a well-worded question that he was pleased with.

'What should have been done, is that you should have policed your border with Mexico when I said. An alternate would be to expel all illegal immigrants now – but that would cause a lot of unrest. The one bright spot on the horizon, if you could call it that, is that immigrants and the poor will perish more than rich white folk when the pandemics hit. Unfortunately, it's not something that the survivors will ever let you forget.'

'And if they all had the super-drug?' Fitz asked.

'That's two questions,' I pointed out, getting a look from Chase, a hint of a smile.

'Let me take a moment to explain the super-drug, and the pandemics,' Jimmy began. 'If the super-drug was used widely now, say ten million die now. But if it was used widely now, a hundred million would die later. If the drug is not used widely now, say that the same ten million die now, but only fifty million die later. It's a numbers game, pure and simple.'

He pointed at the Japanese.

'Our question is the same as the Israeli. What will be the main problems for us before 2025?'

'Pandemics, and riding the economic waves created by various factors. If you lived in isolation you'd not have a problem, but you're dependent on exports. When the world economy catches a cold, you follow.'

Finally, Jimmy pointed at the British PM.

'Will widespread use of coal-oil affect the petrol-dollar level?'

'Another good question. Well, if coal-oil is not used, then oil prices will climb higher before they crash; a steep rise followed by a steep crash. Use of coal-oil helps to smooth out the rise and the fall, and takes money away from the Middle East, which is important.'

'Why is taking money away from the Middle East important?' Ben Ares enquired.

'When The Brotherhood rise, they'll destroy the Middle East – and its financial institutions. So why boost those financial institutions now?'

'Should we warn them?' Fitz asked.

'*Should* ... we warn them?' Jimmy repeated. 'You tell me. Hands up if we should warn the Saudis about the rise of The Brotherhood.'

No one raised their hand, not even Fitz.

‘Would they listen to someone who told them that they’d be destroyed?’ Jimmy asked Fitz directly. ‘Besides, if – in 2025 – the Saudis do fall, you’ll all benefit financially.’

‘You have no love for the Saudis,’ the British PM noted.

‘They’re a one-trick-pony: they make money from oil and keep it.’ He held his hands wide. ‘What have they ever done for the world? What will they do in the future, besides try and kill me?’

‘They’ll attack you, even after exposure?’ Fitz puzzled.

‘Even more so,’ Jimmy emphasized. ‘And the Iranians will declare me the devil, putting a price on my head.’

We broke for lunch, a good two-hour break for the various groups to chat, plot and scheme.

The Japanese came and found us. ‘May we offer a proposal.’ Jimmy kicked out chairs for them. ‘We are conscious of our lack of natural resources. As such, we would like to offer to help where we can, in return for better access to African ore markets.’

‘We could produce more ore, and you could stockpile it,’ Jimmy offered. ‘But in the next few years, North Korea will open up, and they have good resources. Besides, you have coal, and I’m happy to see you convert it to oil.’

‘The quantities would not be sufficient.’

‘They would if you adopted electric cars and buses,’ I pointed out.

‘We are moving quickly in that direction. As for Africa?’

‘There’ll be no shortage of ore on the global markets,’ Jimmy assured them. ‘And we’re about to open up Southern Sudan and Ethiopia.’

‘The Chinese, they will have a ... large area of New Kinshasa,’ the Japanese delicately mentioned.

‘You’re looking in the wrong direction,’ Jimmy told them. ‘Look at the land behind Vladivostok. It has more resources than ... others realise. And make friends with North Korea. Quickly.’

Now curious, the Japanese withdrew.

In the afternoon session, we discussed Afghanistan at length – our aims and objectives, as well as the high Taliban body count. Jimmy reported that he was happy with the campaign, that many fighters were being killed, and that more were pouring over the border to line up and be shot. Somalia was now quiet, free of al-Qa’eda fighters, and Lebanon had quietened down a little. The magnet was working. Sharm-el-Sheik was ruined, Jimmy lamenting its loss, but few others were concerned. Ben Ares was not pleased

about Eilat, but his beaches had escaped the worst excesses of the oil spill. Currents were now pushing the slick down the Saudi side of the Red Sea. The Saudis were getting their oil back, but not as they might have wished for.

We sat down to a sedate evening meal, no one looking forwards to exposure, and broke early in the morning, the meeting just a one-day session this time. The next meeting was set for three months, at which time we'd go public. My fears had now solidified to a date in my iPad.

Coal oil

Poland, Belgium, and a few European other nations wished to buy the coal-oil converters. Jimmy informed them that they could, so long as they informed us of production levels, and if they'd use the resultant oil internally or not. And, after some bullying, they agreed to use the clean version of coal-oil to fuel new power stations, and to increase their use of electric cars. They signed agreements to that effect with the EU commissioner witnessing the deals.

The Germans agreed the deal straight away and moved quickly to build its first coal-oil converter, two refineries already nearing completion in the UK. In the Congo, our first mine was producing coal, and our refinery had been producing oil for a few months. And the resulting petrol was now being tested by local drivers. Most of the coal-oil was destined for our own power station, to power New Kinshasa, which currently had more power than its few residents could utilise in a lifetime.

South Africa agreed the terms for the coal-oil converters, as did North Korea, and the Saudis were worried, planning on cutting back on OPEC production. They petitioned the Americans to influence us, and we continued to ignore invitations to meet with them. I voiced my concerns about antagonising them, but Jimmy held fast in his disdain for them.

America had its first coal-oil refinery under way, its engineers visiting the refinery south of New Kinshasa for comparisons, and for useful tips. Our own refinery was using coal extracted at ten dollars a tonne, and produced coal-oil at twenty dollars a barrel, a small fact that we kept hidden from the world.

With a little arm-twisting, the Chinese invested further in western housing markets, and we prevented property prices from falling further. Things were stable, the days ticking off the calendar, but a few countries had gone over the top with their civil defence preparations, a few budgets being leaked to the press. A CNN special programme joined the dots, and quite accurately claimed that the last “M” Group meeting had spurred the rise in civil defence budgets. We were in trouble, and the public were worried. I had to wonder if we’d get through the three months.

Still, the wonders of coal-oil were cheering stock markets and members of the public alike, and we were popular. OPEC met to cut oil production, something that the people of the world applauded, since it would obviously mean that oil lasted longer. Cuban oil production was increasing rapidly, African oil deliberately cut back for the export market and increasingly used internally.

The net effect of cheap food and cheap oil for Africa was an unprecedented economic boom, as well as a baby boom, both of which we desired in equal measure. The estimated population growth for Africa for the past twenty years had been little more than twenty percent, a great many deaths expected from AIDs. That figure had been revised to an almost one hundred percent increase, the greatest increases witnessed in the Congo and Somalia.

To assist North Korea, I dispatched a ship full of the housewives favourite yellow buckets, stuffed full of useful items. I sent two million, and with sanctions against North Korea lifting I diverted oil tankers that way. Further, I bought wheat from the US and shipped it across, and Po organised cheap radios and electronics, Po himself keen to open up the North Korean market. He’d seen what we had done in Africa, and he fancied himself as something of an entrepreneur on Jimmy’s level.

We persuaded the Chinese that North Korea would be a good investment and they moved in, offers of capital made, requests to build factories and to dig mines. North Korea was the new Klondike of the Far East, Japan also now closely involved.

Someone Stateside then leaked the military’s preparations for disasters, and its budgets, Robert Fitz under pressure early on in his administration. Rescue Force America was widely advertised, and at any other time would not have caused a stir. Britain, France and Germany could all be seen increasing their civil defence budgets, and the public were curious. They were also concerned, the press starting to ask difficult questions.

In the UK, our own security had been beefed up, that fact leaked in a millisecond. We now had more protection than the Prime Minister and the Queen combined, more difficult questions asked by the press. Since we were avoiding interviews, the speculation grew.

Jimmy's mother passed away two days before my father, and on top of everything we endured a round of funerals and wakes, enduring relatives that we'd not seen for many years. Jimmy was oddly relieved, not saddened, clearly indicating that he had seen his mother die before. He called forwards the next "M" Group meeting, the one that would not be an "M" Group meeting. An additional twenty-five countries had been invited, President Errol representing our group of African countries. We did, however, separately invite Ngomo, Abdi, Solomon from Zimbabwe, and ten other senior army officers.

In a separate meeting, Jimmy briefed the senior staff from CAR, and those from our corporation, the men quietly stunned and in need of a drink. We met with the PM and his team later, Jimmy issuing useful advice on what may happen after disclosure.

The former British Chancellor then gave another interview, and repeated his claims that we were preparing the world for a series of disasters. Now, however, he had a ready audience, the British Government moving soldiers around and increasing its civil defence exercises. All police leave was suddenly cancelled, and that sealed it, silly season had begun.

I just wanted it over with now, I was fed up, the number of idiots outside our gates increasing. Even prior to disclosure we had become virtual prisoners, now it was just silly. What I wouldn't have given for a few battery grenades. I now received silly emails from customers and suppliers and locked them out of the system, cancelling contracts when people asked silly questions. Little work was getting done, and I had to wonder how I'd get any done afterwards.

Exposure

15th March, 2013, was a date etched into my heart. My iPad had counted down the days, and now it was here. Zero days to go.

Jimmy had come over to the house the night before and reassured us at length, but we all knew it would be difficult. The girls were

more curious than afraid, Shelly thinking it cool. When her girl friends were at the house they'd all go googly-eyed around Jimmy, blushing.

The big day arrived, and we slipped out at 5am, no nutters cluttering up our gate yet.

Our new coach was bullet and bomb proof, it even had air filters and fire suppression systems. It afforded us a smooth ride, and we glided up to London with a discreet police escort, all five discreet cars. At least they didn't have their lights flashing.

The safest venue we knew for a press conference was our nightclub, and the TV cameras were already set-up as we arrived. There would be six live feeds, each working under the agreement that they would broadcast to anyone around the world who wanted a feed.

Two days ago, the world had stopped to pause when Jimmy requested that everyone in the world watch the address. That piece of news was released around noon, people in offices simply stopping and staring at each other. They already knew that the various world leaders were on their way, and now this request for everyone to watch their TV screens. The tabloids went crazy with speculation, the TV news discussing nothing but the planned meeting. Jimmy had, however, ordered the African times to reserve the front page only, and to keep the rest of the paper as normal.

Yesterday, the day that the leaders left their own capitals to fly off for London, recorded messages were played by the various national leaders, asking their peoples to watch at certain times in certain times zones. The Chinese were asked to stay up late and watch, the Japanese would be up very early, the Americans would catch the feed around 9am on the east coast, earlier on the west coast. Europe and Africa would receive their feed at noon on the day in question, the Russians at 3pm.

When I considered how many billions of people would be watching I had to wonder about Jimmy, since he was just as calm as ever. And, as ever, he had no prepared notes. He spent most of his time reassuring us, and we were not even due to speak.

We booked into our club's hotel, security very tight, many of the original "M" Group leaders already in attendance. At 10.30am we organised a mini "M" Group meeting, our own PM elsewhere.

'So, all ready?' Jimmy cheerfully asked.

The Chinese were fine, so too the Russians, the Indians nervous, the French and Germans clearly ill at ease. Ben Ares seemed to be

happy to be at the centre of things, and the Japanese asked again about African ore – making me smile.

‘What will happen today,’ Jimmy began, ‘will be my big speech. If I get it right, you’ll have less hassle later, and fewer questions hopefully. If I get it wrong, they’ll kill us all.’

‘No pressure then,’ I quipped.

We discussed the format of future meetings, and the greater use of UN structures. I downed a beer in a bar stuffed full of TV crews, ignoring all their questions and pleading ignorance; Jimmy who? I greeted Ngomo, Abdi and Solomon, the men very curious about the meeting. They explained that they had been allocated seats at the back of the Red Room.

Jimmy eventually nudged everyone downstairs, “M” Group leaders sat on the stage behind Jimmy, chairs labelled in advance, translators made ready. Jimmy worked the line, chatting in many languages.

‘Historic moment,’ Fitz commented, but did so as if he didn’t want to be here. ‘And no auto-cue.’

‘I speak from the heart,’ Jimmy said with a smile.

‘The entire world is watching, Jimmy, so I sure as hell hope you know what you’re doing,’ Fitz added.

‘If I don’t, Mister President, then everyone dies.’ He held his gaze on Fitz for a second before testing the microphone atop a podium. ‘Settle down, please,’ he cheekily told the TV crews and invited reporters, numerous national leaders now sat around tables normally used by club diners. He checked his watch, then waved a few people away from the stage, a number of armed officers positioned in the front row. He tapped the microphone ‘Testing, testing. Silo to earth. Come in earth.’

Helen and I exchanged looks, our eyes wide. We were sat just off the stage, and I was thankful to be out of shot. No sooner had I thought that than I noticed several cameras focused on me.

Jimmy checked his watch, conscious of satellite time. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, invited guests, members of the media, world leaders, and those watching this broadcast around the world – welcome to Silo’s nightclub, London, the venue for this meeting today.’

Well, if nothing else, club attendance should be up after this.

‘This meeting, and the statement that I’ll now make, was always planned, and was inevitable. I had expected to make this speech a few years ago, but time has moved on – and it was not necessary till now. Now it is necessary, necessary ... and vital to the future of this planet.

‘There has been much speculation in previous years about things that I’ve done, or who I may really be. Speculation about an ability to predict earthquakes, the release of the super-drug, of electric cars, and of my work in Africa. The people of this planet saw me shot three times, and yet walk out of hospital the next day. Part of my miraculous recovery was down to the Manson drug, part down to advanced genetic modifications made to my body.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, people of the world, there is no easy way to tell you this,’ Jimmy said with a hint of a grin. I held my breath and closed my eyes for a moment. ‘I am more than a hundred years old, and I am a time traveller.’

A chorus of whispered comments shot around the gathered press and guests, the non-“M” Group national leaders all sitting up and checking their translations.

‘Those world leaders that make up the “M” Group have known for many years, some have known for twenty years or more. Our aim ... was never to deceive anyone, or to give any nation an advantage over another. We have worked behind the scenes to develop medicines - vaccines and drugs, as well as future technology that could help the world today. Millions of lives have been saved, oil costs have been kept low, new technologies released to help the world, and further new technologies will be released in the future.

‘Many of you will have questions, the first few being – who invented the time machine, when, and why? The time machine that I made use of was developed by NASA scientists working with the United States Air Force and Army at a future date, after 2030.’

I frowned at that date.

‘It was developed after a global war had destroyed most of this planet, and was a last desperate act, made by desperate people.

‘People have asked me in the past – who sent you? The answer is, I sent myself. When the time machine was completed, most of what was left of the US military was based in Canada, along with refugees from Europe and many other countries. I was the political leader of those refugees, later appointed president of what was left of the western world. I made a choice to send myself back, and to send no one else.

‘I came back through time, the exact mechanism of which will be kept secret to prevent others trying the methods. No one ... should ever again try to develop a time machine, since the good people ranged behind me know what the future holds, and how to avoid the same mistakes. But the people behind me, and the other political leaders of this world, should never be left alone to decide the fate of

the planet. The leaders of this planet ... work for the people. They answer to the people, it's the people that elect the leaders, and it's the people that will suffer the most if past mistakes are repeated.

'In the years ahead there will earthquakes. I know where and when they will occur, and Rescue Force was specifically developed to help with those earthquakes. It has taken me more than twenty-five years to develop Rescue Force, and they will be sorely tested in the years ahead. Theirs ... is an important role.

'In the years ahead there will be outbreaks of disease, and for that I brought back through time the super-drug. Unfortunately, that drug is not enough to defeat every disease, and some diseases are adaptive; I cannot save everyone, I don't have answers to everything. If you expect too much, you will be disappointed.

'In the years ahead there may be wars, terror attacks, and there may be severe economic crashes. We have already smoothed out some of the bumps along the way and prevented many problems – all the while working behind the scenes.

'My being here is a cause for concern, a concern for the disasters that lay ahead. But my being here is also a great benefit, in that I brought with me a route-map for you to navigate the problems of the future. All that's needed is that the people listen – and don't make the same mistake this time around. Unfortunately, in the years ahead, some countries will suffer disasters, whilst others will prosper. If the countries of this world do not cooperate in helping each other, those countries that fail will drag down the others, and they may cause instability leading to war.

'We cannot simply sit back when a country suffers an outbreak of disease, because if that disease is not dealt with in the country of origin it will spread to everyone. We now live in a very inter-connected world, and airliners can transport a disease right around the world in a day. It is not enough to think that someone else's problem will not affect you, but it's easy to be selfish, especially if we were to ask the rich nations to assist the poor nations.

'But if those poor nations were to descend into chaos and anarchy, then they'll produce terrorists, and those terrorists would land on the shores of the rich nations soon enough. And, in the decades ahead, a very great disaster will strike the world, the main reason for me being here. If most of the world's countries were to cooperate with each other between now and then, and cooperated with each other at the time of the disaster, you would have a fifty-fifty chance of surviving that problem.

‘If the countries of this planet fail to cooperate in the years ahead, or fail to cooperate fully in the decades ahead when disasters strike, you will have a very low chance of surviving.’

I could see some of the leaders growing uneasy.

Jimmy continued, ‘What’s in front of you all ... is a test, a test for mankind. Work together, and we all survive. Pull in ten different directions ... and no one survives. I can give you the route map, I can tell you what will happen, but I cannot force you to work together. That part ... is up to the good people sat behind me, and those listening to this broadcast. I’ll supply you with super-drugs, advanced technology, and warnings of upcoming disasters. But that’s not enough to fix the problems that you’ll face.

‘What’s required, is what I don’t have. What’s required ... is someone sat watching this broadcast who may wish to be a politician in the future, and not because that person likes the sound of their own voices, or because they wish to make some money. What’s required, is a few bright young people who wish to be heroes – and to help mother earth.

‘In the years ahead I’ll be creating volunteer programmes, centred in Africa. If you’re a scientist, an engineer, a politician or a thinker, and you’re prepared to work long hours for little pay, then I’ll have some work for you.’

This was all news to me, and I stared up at Jimmy.

Jimmy continued, ‘I have the route map, but I need a little help along the way. I ... am asking for your help, so that I can try – at least – to save everyone.’ He took a breath. ‘The various world leaders of the “M” Group will now speak in sequence while I go for a sandwich. An hour from now I’ll answer questions, so the press should think up a few good probing questions. Thank you for your time.’

Jimmy stepped to me and led me off as President Fitz took the podium. And we did go for a sandwich, as well as a cup of tea and biscuit.

‘Go alright?’ Jimmy asked us.

‘I thought so,’ I offered. ‘Did you appeal to the people to bypass the leaders?’

Jimmy nodded. ‘Never underestimate people power.’

We watched the speeches on a TV set in the computer room, most just waffle about cooperation and planning for the future. Then it was question and answer time. Jimmy led us down, the leaders now off stage, maybe for a sandwich of their own.

Jimmy took the podium. 'I'd just like to say that I did have a sandwich, and a nice cup of tea. I'll make like a US president and point at people who wish to ask questions, so could those with questions please raise a hand, a finger or stand.' He pointed at the first journalist.

'Did you say that you travelled alone?'

'I did. My staff are just that, staff, although I think of Paul and his family as my own family. Next.'

'How old are you exactly?'

'That's a rude question and I'm not saying. Next.'

'What was the global disaster that caused the time machine to be built?'

'After consulting with the various leaders, we've decided not to reveal that yet, since it may actually cause the problem to occur early. If you wish to save your own life, don't push the issue. When you get the answer you'll help to create a paradox – and harm us all. I appreciate that you're a journalist, but deep down you probably do care about your fellow man. Next.'

'How much money have you made for yourself?'

'I've made two hundred billion pounds, of which I have twenty million left in my account, the rest being spent on either Africa or Rescue Force operations. Next.'

'Is the Manson drug a cure for all diseases?'

'No, it's not. Next.'

'Why have you never had a family of your own?'

Jimmy took a moment. 'I had a family once. They all died. Next.'

'Why did you not inject your parents?'

'That was their choice. I would never force the drug on someone unless they were dying, or incapable of making a choice. Next.'

'Were the kids in Ebode orphanage injected?'

'They were, yes, starting in 1987. They were all dying, so I had no problem with injecting them. We've injected half a million African children. Next.'

'Why was the drug not released back then?'

'Because I was trying to work in the shadows for as long as possible. Now that it's out in the open my work will be much harder. If it had remained a secret I would have had a better chance of fixing a few things. Your interest in me will seriously reduce my ability to work. It will cost lives, directly. Next.'

'Why go public now?'

'Too many people leaking information, like that toe-rag of a former Chancellor, and the idiot former French president. The

speculation was making it difficult to work. I'll now try and find new ways to get things done. Next.'

'You said it was fifty-fifty if this global problem could be fixed.'

'Less than fifty-fifty; it'll be fifty-fifty if the various governments work together, less if they don't. Next.'

'What if American, Russian and China fall out?'

'Then most of the people on this planet will die.' Jimmy held his stare on the woman. 'That includes you, and everyone you care about.'

Jesus, I thought. The cameras were all still on.

'Did you trade the stock markets knowing which stocks would do well?'

'I did, yes. What's your point?'

'Is that legal?'

'I don't think it qualifies as insider trading. And the money was used to develop the drug, electric cars and other things. If you're not happy, ask the Africans I saved to give up their lives and to wind back the clock. And if there are any more stupid questions then we'll end this session.'

'Who are you accountable to?'

'A good question. I'm accountable to the people of this planet yet to die, to those who wish me to find cures for diseases and fixes for problems. I'm accountable to those people who'll die in ten years time because I failed to stop a war or a terror attack. But most of all, I'm accountable to the six billion people who died, and to those who put their faith in me in Canada. I brought back the ghosts of six billion people, all wishing me to succeed.'

He pointed at the man who asked the question. 'Do you have a family?'

'Two kids?' the man reluctantly admitted.

'Well, the chances of them growing up and having families of their own is slim, but their chances are better now that I'm here. And now that I am here, idiots like you want to do nothing other than trip me up. In the years ahead ... a number of pandemics will strike, and your children may well die, or they may benefit from a cure I find. So this is what I want you to do. Go home and say to your wife: our kids may die, but at least I had a snipe at the man that may cure them. Then, maybe your wife will stop and ask: why are you sniping at our children's best hope to stay alive?'

'Then, maybe, if you have any lights left on in your soul, you may stop to think about what you're doing. No one voted me into office, no one asked me to come here, no one asked to release the

super-drug – which has saved fifty million people already. I ... made the choice to come back, I ... stepped into the time machine, and I've spent the past twenty seven years fixing things, most of which you don't know about, and may never get to know about. I ... made the choice, and I'll continue trying to fix things whether you like it or not, idiot. And if the people in this country don't like what I'm doing ... I'll move to China, or Russia, or down to my beloved Africa. Because in Africa, they thank people when they receive help.

'In the years ahead, a lot of people are going to die, fewer if you stop to listen. I just hope that it doesn't take the death of one of your children for you to stop being a sniping journalist – and to finally ask for help. The clock ... is ticking.'

He walked off, collecting Helen and me, a hundred questions shouted, cameras flashing. We collected the African army officers and led them upstairs, ordering the press removed from the club. In the Indian restaurant we settled our guests, drinks ordered.

'My god, Jimmy,' Solomon let out.

I told Solomon, 'When you were first in Kenya, working in college, we knew, and helped you.'

'And me, Jimmy,' Abdi began. 'You helped me to be where I am.'

'Of course; I needed good people in place, not fat and corrupt politicians. For you lot, the work is just about to start. There'll be difficult times ahead, and I need strong men, men with courage, not men who want to put money in their pockets. There'll be disease, war, financial problems. For all of you, the real war is just about to start, the battle to save this planet. And in 2025, a full-on war.'

We spoke for forty minutes as we ate, and we had a very loyal bunch of future leaders sat listening attentively. I figured they'd do anything for us. After two beers, our next group of guests arrived, the British newspaper editors and TV chiefs, the PM in on the meeting. We welcomed them all, drinks organised, tables pulled together in a bar.

'First of all, gentlemen, let me re-iterate that I'm flesh and blood, and quite human. As such, if you piss me off I'm going to react to it like a normal person, only a slightly more aggressive one. So let me make myself perfectly fucking clear on a few things.

'If you try and send someone over my fence, or to talk to Paul's girls, or hang about outside my gate, I'm going to get pissed off about it. I'll identify the guilty party, stick you on my shit list, and the next exclusive goes to your competitors. And let's be clear about this: this is the story of the century - you don't want to be left out.

‘Another caution. Don’t ... try and follow us around. If you do that in Russia, China or – god forbid – Africa, they’ll arrest your reporters, or shoot them full of holes. If one of your snappers tries to get close to Paul’s house in Goma he’ll get himself shot. Not because we don’t like you, but because many people try and shoot us, and our guards are twitchy.

‘If you want an interview, email us and we’ll arrange something. If you want to follow us to China, do it officially and we’ll buy your beer for you. Sneak around, and the Chinese will take exception to it. Try and sneak around Africa and your people won’t come back. Ask us nicely and we’ll get you cheap rooms in Goma, we’re not monsters, and we’ve always looked after the hacks in the past.

‘But if I can’t get out of my gate tomorrow for snappers, I’ll identify them and you’ll lose out. Now, if I ask you not to run a story, and you do, there’ll be a penalty. If you run a story about something I ask you not to, you might just crash the stock market, and that’s your pension funds as much as anyone else’s.

‘Now, In the years ahead things are going to get tough, Martial Law is a distinct possibility -’

‘Martial Law? Here?’ they questioned.

‘Yes, here. Pandemics, financial crashes, wars, terror attacks. What I need from you, what this country needs from you, is less of your usual selves, and more Churchill. And I’ll give you one story now that you may not print. There are twelve people sat in front of me. On a simple statistical average, one of you will die, and two of you will probably lose children to disease in the years ahead.

‘The problems that we’ll face in the future will be right up close and personal, right in your own families. When you want to be reporting about some distant war, you’ll be reporting about neighbours and friends. And if things go wrong ... well, you’ve all got fifteen years left to live. Forget your fucking pension funds; if the world at large doesn’t get it together then you’re all dead, your kids, your fucking pet dog!

‘World War Three was due to break out ... oh, in about six months. But because of my work for the past twenty-five years, the Russians, Americans and Chinese are talking to each other. There’ll be no global war in six months.’

‘We’ll be bringing in emergency legislation,’ the PM told our guests. ‘Powers to curb you where necessary, and to stop panic in the streets.’

‘You’ve just worried the whole fucking world on TV,’ a man pointed out.

‘They needed to be woken up,’ Jimmy told him. ‘But from now on I’ll try and play things down. Panic achieves little.’

‘Will the superpowers cooperate?’ a man asked.

Jimmy made a face and shrugged. ‘Based on past experience, I’d say we’re all screwed. But I have a few tricks up my sleeve, like coal-oil and electric cars. A lot of the time I work behind the scenes, which is why I never made it public up to now. In the future I’ll have to hold open meetings and ask people nicely. In the past I threatened, bribed and bullied people into doing the right thing. Now I have to say please and hope for the best.’

‘How much access do we get?’

‘Depends on how you behave; piss me off and I’ll move to Africa and run the show from there. In the meantime, I’ll give joint interviews to you all at the same time and tell my staff to talk to you. That process will go on till you print snaps of my staff’s cleavage, or stories about their teenage years.’ He held his hands wide. ‘It’s all up to you. And please, don’t make tomorrow’s headline The Terminator.’

I laughed. ‘You do look like him.’

‘What’s Paul’s role?’ they asked.

‘Understudy. If I’m killed he gets documents and carries on.’

‘You take a lot of risks, always getting shot at.’

‘Like I said, I was working behind the scenes. People never knew who I was or what motivated me. To one particular leader, about to start a war, I mentioned what I knew about his youth – and he stopped the invasion.’

‘You know what *we* did in our youth?’

‘Yes, I’ve had investigators following you all for twenty years, *and* I know what you’ll do in the future. I have dirt on you all. If you throw mud at me, I’ll throw mud right back, simple as that. I told you, I’m human, and I get pissed off easily enough.’

‘If there was a problem,’ the PM began, ‘the full weight of my government, our intelligence services, and the full weight of the American government would be brought to bear.’

‘Sounds like censorship,’ a man complained.

Jimmy faced me. ‘Do you ever wonder if you getting through?’

‘Let’s just move to Africa,’ I said, and I half meant it.

Jimmy faced the men. ‘Print crap about us, you don’t get to sit in on the press conferences. Simple. It’s up to you. Cooperate, and your people get free trips and good stories.’

Jimmy retrieved a set of CDs, handing them out. ‘On there are digital photos of us, all our businesses around the world, background

notes, contact details for press officers, stories about African development, the works. Now, if you'll excuse us, we have solicitors to chat to.'

'In trouble already, Jimmy?' a man asked with a smile.

I said, 'Prepping them to sue your arses!'

We led the PM out, and to a second bar, twelve solicitors and barristers waiting.

'Fucking hell, Jimmy. Time travel!'

'Yes, time travel, so I need you to stop people suing me for trading the stock markets, and to fend off all the nutcases that will sue me for not saving their pet dog from dying. There'll be a few people wanting to sue me for not warning about certain world disasters; sinking ships, crashing planes.'

'Did you know about them?'

'For the most part, no; I can't remember the whole of human history!'

'I can only say that this is ... unprecedented,' a barrister put in. 'It'll be new territory.'

'Well start planning,' I encouraged them.

'The biggest problems will come when people start dying,' Jimmy told them.

'Dying?' they asked.

'There are a few nasty pandemics around the corner,' Jimmy explained. 'And when people lose their families, they'll try and claim that I could have done more, or sooner.'

'They'd have no precedent,' a man said. 'You're not responsible for the world – although, when you came back through time you did kind of take on that responsibility.'

'I don't like you,' I told the man. 'You're on our side, so start thinking and planning.'

'We'll be rushing through some legislation,' the PM put in. 'Kind of ... *you can't sue Jimmy* ... legislation.'

'Best way to do that,' a solicitor began, 'would be for the UK Government to take all responsibility for Jimmy's actions, as you might for a police officer or soldier.'

'I've seen Jimmy invade countries and topple leaders,' the PM stated. 'So there's no way we're taking responsibility for him!'

We thanked the PM, and left the legal brains to think up precedents, and no doubt charge us a great deal for their time. And claiming the free beer we gave them on expenses. In a quiet bar upstairs, we sat.

'You OK?' Jimmy asked us.

‘So far, so good,’ I said. ‘I could see you losing your rag with the press though. I wanted to hit a few of them.’

‘It’ll be manic,’ Jimmy warned us. ‘But never forget why we’re doing this.’ Ten minutes later, Jimmy headed off to address those world leaders that were not “M” Group.

In our room, I turned on the TV, and we sat on the bed watching the news for hours, flicking channels. The Russian leader was home already and giving interviews, so too the French President and the German leader.

At 5am we raided the mini-bar for chocolates, having to wait for breakfast, and again watched the news. It was Sunday morning, and the BBC were showing the turnout at various churches in Africa, the sermons apparently about us. They cornered a slow moving Kenya housewife in a floral dress, and asked her about Jimmy Silo being a time traveller.

‘We prayed for a miracle, and God sent us Jimmy Silo, saviour of all Africa.’

I smiled. At least some fucker appreciated us. I rang down and asked for the papers, wondering just how long it would be before we got the barristers involved. The broadsheets concentrated on the science and politics a lot, time travel and global wars. The tabloids were mostly “revealed” and “admitted”, and “we knew all along” stories. But the Sun Newspaper was behind us, a wartime headline of “The fight starts today!” and “We take back our planet!” Good old British wartime spirit, I thought, showing Helen.

Then I noticed a sexy image of Shelly, taken by a school friend. ‘Tart!’ I said. I could not decide if I wanted to sue them or not, they had stayed just inside the line, and I could not decide if I was mad at my thirteen year old daughter more than them.

Jimmy sent us back to Wales, staying on in London to give interviews. We didn’t see him for four days, interviews given to just about all of the world’s agencies, Jimmy taking more time with the foreign press than our own.

I then noticed the formal request for help, full page spreads in many papers. The Silo Foundation, the one that ex-President Harvey ran to promote student travel and green issues, was asking for donations, and staff to work cheaply in Africa. It asked for scientists, engineers, researchers, computer experts, microbiologists, the works.

When Jimmy returned, that evening, I asked about the appeal. ‘It may surprise you, but there are millions of people out there who want to help, even to the point of working in Africa for peanuts. We’ll recruit them and put them to work.’

‘Where?’

‘The Congo. Do we ... have anywhere we can build offices, labs and apartments?’ he asked with a grin.

‘You knew, didn’t you.’

‘I knew, but it had to look like your idea.’

‘We’ll house them in New Kinshasa,’ I released.

‘Create an area in the northwest, full of apartments and labs. Oh, and a few churches.’

‘Churches!’

‘Most of the people who come will be Christians.’

‘Oh’, I said after a moment. ‘And...’

‘And ... they’re motivated to help.’

‘Don’t they expect the good lord to provide?’ I teased.

‘Many Christians are more practical than that; they’ll see me as an instrument of The Lord. Get on it quickly, please.’

Praise the Lord!

Things hadn’t changed that much after exposure, people around the estate got used to the idea, and I got back to work. We had enough builders around New Kinshasa to build a city, let alone a research facility, so I diverted resources. Six apartment blocks were started, labs, even the churches, and I figured that they would not take long.

Meanwhile, a team in the Goma Pentagon began checking the CVs of applicants, and sixty kids from Shanghai arrived back in Africa, many earmarked to head-up research projects, most of them already practising Christians. I had to wonder about blinding laser rifles and battery grenades being developed by good Christians.

The police guarding the estate had painted double red lines on the roads outside, and convenient verges on which to stop were blocked off with small wooden fences. Cars that stopped were immediately fined, drivers taken out and questioned. A second offence meant that the car was removed to the police yard, a hefty fine to get it back.

A bus company offered to run tours to us from Cardiff and Bath, but we hit them with an injunction straight away and won the costs, a very expensive fiasco for the company. Powerful video cameras were installed at the gates and photographers and hacks were recorded, all identified. The first paper to annoy us lost all rights to

attend interviews for a year, a fact we made clear to the others, the number of photographers lessening.

Our friendly local farmer drove past at 5am one morning, the police conveniently not about, and spread pig shit over the verge where spectators normally congregated. If they wanted to stand and stare, they could now endure the pong. Two people climbed the outer fence, both getting nipped by the dogs and arrested.

We then employed a useful tactic, that of pre-recorded film of us at certain locations being released. People thought us in Goma when we were at the house, or in London when we were in Cardiff. We were seen landing in Beijing, Hong Kong and New York at the same time. Some poor old hacks had actually flown to those locations, at their expense, which was the whole point.

Our own version of Air Force One was ready, but when being test flown, its defences were unfortunately tested. An F15 flew up behind the 747, tracked on radar by the 747, and hit with an EMP. Scratch one F15, the pilot ejecting and breaking his arms. Next, they fired a modified missile, one with no warhead, and the 747 hit it with an EMP, the F15 this time twenty miles away and taking no chances.

The plane flew up to London overnight, and we met it at Heathrow Airport, twelve journalists invited aboard, a note sent to the paper that pissed us off about their lack of invitation. Two of the journalists were American, the rest from British papers, the BBC planning on meeting us in Goma. Flying down, we enjoyed in-flight beds and showers, the girls exploring the plane at length.

Lucy surprised me by her visit to the cockpit, her hour-long visit. She sat asking difficult questions, and seemed to know the 747 inside out. I spent time with the reporters, but most of them simply wanted to sleep. We landed at Goma hub around 5am, the terminal quiet, and pointed the press towards the airport hotel as we headed the short distance around to my house.

At 6am I plunged into the pool, the perfect antidote to a long flight. I found a very large bug that I couldn't identify, doing breaststroke, and flicked it out. At 10am, and with the press fed and gathered, we showed them around the Pentagon building, allowing them in on a few meetings, projects described. The reactions from the parliament staff there were mixed, some reacting to us just as before – in awe of us – a few just scared rigid as we passed. Jimmy would take time to talk with the security staff, many of who were ex-Rifles, a lapel badge identifying them to other Rifles. Jimmy would enquire about campaigns served in, their home towns and

family. He was now more like Prince Charles than the prince himself.

The press were all bought lunch at the outdoor café, a view of the mini-marina and canal as we ate, before further meetings were tackled. At 4pm we led everyone to the main marina, the Indian restaurant we choose instantly packed out. We eased back with cold beers, answering questions, mostly about Africa.

The attending press were then all handed five hundred pounds worth of casino chips – labelled as a promotional offer, and we bumped into many of them there later. Five different glossy magazines had been invited to the mansion, turning up the next morning, all of us posing for shots, the mansion photographed at length. We hoped it would ease any curiosity in the place.

That afternoon, Po, Yuri and Marko came around for a scheduled meeting, scheduled to be in the sun around the pool with a cold beer. Po was mind-blown by it all, Marko and Yuri coping well enough.

‘Why me, why me?’ Po asked, sat in a little white hat to keep the sun off. ‘You help me.’

‘I knew that you would be a great asset,’ Jimmy began. ‘And your family has a destiny, a part in the battle ahead.’

The little fat Chinaman grew an inch. ‘Destiny,’ he repeated, giving it some thought.

‘And us?’ Yuri asked.

‘I also knew that you would be assist me.’

‘Do you ... want anything from us?’ Yuri asked. ‘Do you need money?’

‘No, I just need you to carry on being yourselves,’ Jimmy replied. ‘But thanks for the offer.’

‘How’re the burger bars?’ I asked.

‘Six thousand are operating,’ Yuri replied. ‘A few more planned.’

‘And the bookshops?’

‘Almost four thousand. Also doing well. We offer incentives and vouchers from bookshop to burger bar to coffee shop.’

‘And the farms?’ I asked.

‘Now the largest privately owned farm in Russia,’ Yuri proudly stated, a finger raised. ‘Millions of tonnes of produce. We aim to start exporting within five years.’

‘But first,’ Jimmy insisted, ‘we’ll make sure that the poorer Russian people have good food.’

‘Da, da.’

With the guests gone, a short walk down to their own houses, Jimmy said, 'Tomorrow I'm taking Air Force One around the world, you stay here and do some work.'

'Helen?'

'Has a baby to watch, so she can help you get things moving along down here, especially Southern Sudan. I marked on the map where to drill, which made the CAR boys laugh.'

'Maybe we'll get lucky and strike oil,' I sarcastically noted.

The next morning we said goodbye to Jimmy, and I opened my office – otherwise known as my laptop by the pool, and sat checking emails. My greatest problem that day was a little sunburn on my feet. We were isolated from the world and enjoying the weather, but not insulated from the world.

The Iranians had branded us a liars and false prophets, some talk of death threats, and Saudi clerics repeated those calls, possibly with a little nudge from the House of Saud. Hezzbolah went so far as to offer money for our deaths, and I had to stop and wonder about their logic, since the Somalis in Southern Lebanon worshiped us, and became more aggressive with their reluctant landlords. The Africans were also in no mood for such threats, and Arab businessmen found Africa an increasingly hard place to do business.

The Sudanese were in a bind, because many of their clerics were vocally opposed to us, yet the Khartoum Government wanted our cooperation in Southern Sudan. And there started the first sparks of a problem, with Sudanese business owners putting up posters about us in full view of heavily armed Kenyan Rifles. The posters were ordered down at gunpoint, windows broken, shopkeepers threatened.

In the two weeks that followed I grew used to the mansion, enjoying the facilities – and the peace and quiet; anyone arriving at the road's outer gate getting a rifle up their nose. New Kinshasa was growing rapidly, some thirty thousand people now gainfully employed, more cranes and bulldozers than anyone in human history had ever seen gathered in one place. Towers grew by a floor every few days, and you could not see across the city any longer.

Sixty of our standard apartment blocks had been raised along the northwest road, stretching out as far as the eye could see. At the end of it, a large compound had been fenced off, a wall now under construction. Inside, the first few buildings were taking shape, as well as a tall apartment block for our volunteer army, and a quick concrete church completed, stained glass windows and all.

With a gentle nudge from senior ministers at the Pentagon, I sanctioned a mother of a cathedral in the city centre, five other

churches to be dotted around. I was sensitive to the local religious beliefs, and had no desire to upset the populace before they even took up residence in their shiny new city.

Our stock exchange was now busy, especially the commodities futures exchange, and futures contracts were traded for raw materials produced right around our region, which now included Ethiopia, Southern Sudan and Angola. It was the single largest dedicated commodities futures exchange, and most days had more hungry mouths than materials to sell. More raw material futures were now traded here than in New York, and several New York firms had moved in. There started another problem.

Some companies would buy up mines, and sell futures against their own holdings, which was not illegal – that's how futures contracts got started. It did, however, lead to some accusations about price fixing and poor disclosure. I kept an eye on it, and when I noticed spikes in materials I ordered their production increased, knocking prices back down. A few greedy fingers got burnt.

Our northern rail link now turned east and moved through Southern Sudan to either Kenya or Ethiopia, on to the port south of Mogadishu. A large railway marshalling yard was created in Southern Sudan to help, and traffic on the northern rail link increased significantly, helping to pay for its expensive creation. You could, if you were daft enough, now board a passenger train near Mogadishu and travel all the way across to Sierra Leone. Ideas about romantic train journeys would not live up to expectations for students, since the scenery often consisted of mines and oilfields.

Steffan Silo was busy on the Angolan line, rail and road link, and had made no mention yet of his brother's time travelling. He was also involved with the mono-rail, which passed close to my mansion, and the first loop was now ready. People could stop at the various stations along the route, the one small problem being that you'd step down into a muddy building site.

For practise, the trains were running, and curious tourists would take the hour-long trip to peer at the new city, the track elevated through most of the monstrous building site. The golf hotel was finished, as was the nearby regional airport, and Dash-7s were moved over from Goma hub airfield, a few 737s as well. People started calling it the Golf Airport, till I pointed out that the other airport was just a stone's throw away from the golf course.

With the girls back in Wales, in school, Helen and I enjoyed the peace of the mansion, just the two of us and the baby. And the twenty household staff. And the twenty guards. I introduced baby

Liz to the pool, and once in she could not get enough, often screaming if I took her out. We had another fish in the family, and I had to wonder about my aquatic genes.

Most days I video-linked to Major Big Paul at Duckland. He was having the time of his life, in the thick of the fighting, Skids and his mate now out there. That pair had gone through the training near Mawlini and in the Somali highlands, got themselves signed off and flew in. They now ran long-range missions on foot, fully kitted out with the latest gadgets. With the body counts produced, I had to wonder if al-Qa'eda had anyone left.

In addition to the four thousand men we had on the ground, we were supplying the Northern Alliance with weapons, nudging them to keep the Taliban at bay in their regions. But a few days after I spoke to Big Paul last, a rocket landed near Duckland, a few minor wounds inflicted. It was a big rocket, a range of thirty miles or more, and could have been made by either the Iranians or Syrians. It was a worrying development, but we were sure that the Taliban could not smuggle many into Afghanistan. Kandahar airfield was then hit, two killed and a dozen wounded.

Majors Lobo and Obantou set-up OPs along western Afghanistan, finding and intercepting a consignment from Iran. I was worried what Jimmy might do. I should have been more worried about Skids and company, because they flew in, grabbed the missiles with a few Russian technicians, drove them to the Iranians border and fired them off into the nearest Iranian border town.

A quick inspection by the Iranians revealed that they had been hit with their own rockets, a bit cheeky, but blamed American warplanes. There were no American jets in Afghanistan, and few commentators believed the Iranians.

When Jimmy had finished his three-week global tour he returned to Goma, arriving with French Michelle. Shelly was much better with Michelle these days, and was known to borrow make-up – and not give it back. Jimmy relaxed around the pool that afternoon, but called a meeting the next day, Ngomo and Abdi in attendance. We placed a map of Afghanistan on a table in the lounge and studied it.

‘The Iranians are now supplying their old enemies the Taliban,’ Jimmy began. ‘For no reason other than to piss off the Americans, and us.’

‘It is a long border,’ Ngomo cautioned.

‘There’s something that we should consider,’ Jimmy told us. ‘The ... big picture. In a few short years the Iranians will move towards completing their first nuclear bomb, and Israel and America will

strike at them. When that happens, there's a good chance of setting the Middle East ablaze.'

I already didn't like where this was going. 'What'll you do?'

'At the moment ... I don't know. There is still pressure from the Russians and Chinese on the Iranians, but that just means the Iranians get better at hiding their nuclear ambitions.'

'We can place men on the border,' Abdi suggested. 'Maybe even a trip or two across the border.'

I liked the sound of that even less.

'That would cause Iranian soldiers to move east, and start a long and drawn out conflict along their border,' Jimmy pointed out. 'It will tie-up their army, but why would it change their minds about nuclear weapons?'

'Will the Iranians try and use nuclear weapons?' I asked.

'No, they're not stupid,' Jimmy responded. 'But the Israelis won't take the chance, they'll strike first, maybe even a nuclear strike. But there is one possible solution.'

'And...' I nudged after a moment.

'An assault, by soldiers, against the leadership, against the Revolutionary Guard,' Jimmy stated.

'How?' I asked.

'An airborne assault into Tehran, radars jammed, EMP used. If enough of the senior commanders were killed it would mean that the entire leadership changes hands.'

'Jesus,' I let out.

'Anyway, I'll discuss it with the Americans and Israelis. It would cause problems, but not as many problems as the Israelis firing nuclear weapons at Iran. That could set the world ablaze.'

I could see Ngomo and Abdi considering the plan. We spoke about Afghanistan and made a few plans, reinforcements sent to the west of Afghanistan to stop convoys.

After just a day in our company, Jimmy took Air Force One on a trip around Africa, returning ten days later. I was up to date on everything, I considered, and handed over to the parliament many of my projects - once I was happy with the direction. We flew back with the same group of reporters, the poor hacks having spent more than three weeks aboard the damn plane. Their seats had their bum outlines permanently marked into them.

The reporters did, however, have a better attitude towards us now, first name terms used both ways. I showed them the baby and allowed snaps to be taken. When chatting, I mentioned the Iranians supplying rockets to the Taliban to fire at US troops. That was kind

of a mistake, but also kind of planned, the US media picking it straight away and jumping up and down. When I told Jimmy what I had done he just made a face, not concerned. He was more concerned that he was not getting enough baby time with Liz.

Back at the house, a senior police officer approached. 'Might I have a word, Mister Holton.'

'Not if you call me Mister Holton. Paul will do.'

'Your daughter took a shine to one of our young officers –'

'Did he ... take a shine to her?' I asked.

'No, he was just being polite. But –'

'But I'll deal with it. She's ... maturing quickly.'

'And looks a lot older than thirteen in make-up,' he felt he had to mention.

In the house, I sat Shelly down. 'Darling, if you get flirty with boys over sixteen – like adult police officers, you'll not baby-sit again. Or come down to Goma with us. Am I being reasonably clear?'

'I wasn't flirting –'

Helen cut her off with a jabbed finger. 'Watch it, missy.'

Ebb and flow

The austerity measures that the European countries were now implementing were not being well received by the public, but they were being solidly counterbalanced by savings in fuel and transport, as well as massive healthcare savings. Coal-oil had everyone excited, and we were doing our best to slow them up, knowing that any surge in cheap oil would be bad all around.

The civil defence planning was picking up a pace, so to the worry about it, men in spacesuits seen walking in and out of inflatable tents. Panic had not gripped the streets yet, but a few headlines could have been better avoided. Stocks of emergency supplies were being piled up ready, and soldiers were being trained in barrier control and riot control. The good news was being counterbalanced by the worry, but at least there was some good news to be had.

More than two thousand electric buses now bumped along British roads, and the Green Party and the environmentalists had nothing to say. Even our oil-fired power stations were green. In the Netherlands, some sixty percent of cars were now electric, Sweden

not far behind, Denmark and Germany introducing the cars in great numbers. BMW and Mercedes were, however, working on electric versions of their basic models. If anything, they stood to make more money than using their usual fossil fuel engines.

One day, Jimmy called me down to the house, sounding excited. 'Pity we could not have finished this when we were in Goma,' he said, showing me photographs of what appeared to be large vats.

'VAT14?' I whispered.

'No.'

'Oh. Then what?'

'The Shanghai kids, now based in Goma, have developed a two part chemical process. They drop coal into a bucket of the stuff, and the next day they add another chemical. Give it a stir, and the next day you have coal-oil.'

'Shit. That should do away with the refineries.'

'You are a dumb fuck sometimes.'

'What?' I protested.

'What are you missing?' he pressed.

I scanned the photographs again. 'Dunno. I give up.'

'What's the most expensive part off the process?'

'Mining,' I confidently stated.

'And so...?'

'And so ... I still don't get it.'

He rolled his eyes. 'They find a coal seam, drill down, make a hole, pump in the first chemical, pump out the liquid, add the second chemical ... and we have oil. No more underground mining.'

'Ah ... that is good. It'll save a lot of money.'

'You're wasted as my assistant, you know that.'

'Yeah, fuck off, grumpy. What'll the unit cost be?'

'Five dollars a barrel.'

'And ... we'll be keeping this very, very quiet, yes?'

'Oh, yes,' Jimmy emphasised. 'Just us, and the Japanese, who may have offered a shit load of money for it.'

'I thought the Chinese would sell them oil.'

'They will, this'll not satisfy the Japanese.'

Helen showed me a newspaper story. Seemed that the Pope had decided he didn't like us very much, and asked his followers not to be fooled by gimmicks. That put him at odds with Roman Catholic bishops in Africa, who dare not speak out against us. I felt a schism coming on.

That following week I Googled us, finding a million entries. I narrowed the search to the US bible belt, and found plenty of

dissenters. Yep, we were, apparently, false prophets, and they prayed that we would repent.

The main house now accommodated four high-ranking officials from the British Government, their aim being to rein us in, or at least to have some input into what we released to the media. Jimmy knew them all and was happy enough to have them around. They were all in their forties, too old for Shelly, so I was happy with them as well. But they had been joined by a senior White House representative. His job was not to replace Keely, but we all knew that it was. Jimmy told the man that Keely stays – or else.

The French, who had sponsored most of the human genome project, created a huge laboratory for the study of the flu family, Jimmy meeting with them to tell them what he knew. The senior research staff were the only ones to know of the numbers that would die, and duly sworn to secrecy. We donated the money we received from the Japanese to the centre, and more than three hundred of the world's best scientists got to work about the beakers and pipettes, their first task being to measure the interaction between the super-drug and the flu family.

The demand for the super-drug spiked, till Jimmy went public and explained that it was best used when someone fell ill, and could be lessened if used years before. People obviously wanted the Manson drug, but were not about to get it, each of the various governments holding out – not least because that was the agreement they had all made with Jimmy.

Days ticked off the calendar and I got used to our new reality. Lucy cried when they ran a story about her, but Shelly loved the publicity, her Facebook site popular. I then pointed out that she was missing a trick. She created her own propriety website, removed the Facebook account, and placed Google Adsense adverts down the side, making a steady income, and buying whatever she wanted online via Paypal. What a difference to when I was a kid. I used to get my pocket money on a Saturday morning, pop around the shop and buy sweets. It was a different world.

Seeing Shelly's pictures on the website, Helen suggested a few professional shots be taken, and a photographer was duly organised. I made sure that there were no sexy snaps, and was amazed with the result. Shelly now looked like her mum, and was becoming a beauty. As well as a minor celebrity in her own right.

The start of summer, 2013, turned out to be warm in the UK, a trip taken up to the castle in Scotland. We let the photographers in on day one, affording them plenty of time, then placed guards on the

hills. A few long distance shots appeared, and I put a gossip magazine on my shit list, banning them from any future press conferences.

Jimmy flew off to North Korea and circled the world in Air Force One, leaving Helen behind with the baby. He took Trish along, causing speculation of an affair, the mile high club joined. Jimmy said no, and he didn't care enough to lie.

During a September meeting with the Americans, held in San Francisco, Jimmy pushed people hard on the austerity measures and pandemic planning. US President Fitz tried to introduce a few initiatives of his own, but got nowhere.

President Fitz also tried to nudge a slow down on oil production, and again pushed for a meeting with the Saudis. We politely refused, and I had to wonder if he was paying attention. He also exhibited less of an interest in Africa than Chase had done, and I got the feeling that we'd be working around him.

Back in the UK, Jimmy sat down and ordered housing projects in Greece, particularly around Thessaloniki. It was all labelled as property investment, and others copied our move – the right thing being done for the wrong reason. The British PM knew about the pending Athens earthquake, but few others. Jimmy had hinted at it during various "M" Group meetings years previously, but no one seemed to be talking about it openly, Jimmy struggling with when to inform the Greek Government.

The argument was simple: tell them, and if it leaks out the Greek economy is ruined overnight. Don't tell them, and be accused of not giving them time to prepare. Being a bit sly, Jimmy planned on releasing the news about Athens when the world was focused on a pandemic. Release a bad news story on a very bad news day, he had once said.

Since Jimmy had informed the world who he was a few dozen lawsuits had appeared, most defended quite easily. Some were easily deflected in the press: your government knew twenty years ago, go talk to them.

October saw Jimmy being moody and distant. One day he simply said, 'It's time.'

He meant the start of the troubles, the start of the end, and worried Helen and me by injecting the girls directly with his own blood, a top up for the baby. He made a statement to the BBC that afternoon, stating that he expected a SARS pandemic to breakout in Asia in the next few weeks, and that the death toll would be high.

Flights to Asia dropped away overnight, and the Asian nations got themselves into a flap. Vials of super-drug were flown out, the Chinese on a charm offensive and either selling the drug cheaply, or making donations.

People in many Asian countries began wearing facemasks, and I started watching the World Health Organisation website for updates. One day there was nothing, the next day a thousand were infected in Singapore, the following day a thousand dead, including a few people who had been injected with the super-drug. Panic spread quickly.

Flights were duly cancelled by the various governments, not that there were many passengers to be carried. I started focusing on the outbreak rather than my work, and that was a mistake. I started feeling that I was on the sidelines instead of being in the mix and helping out.

A few days later, and Hong Kong was seeing fatalities. The disease reached Tokyo, Indonesia, and Malaysia. Jimmy had been waiting, timing his move for optimum use of Rescue Force. On a rainy Wednesday morning we drove over to Mapley and met Bob Davies, our sour mood obvious as soon as we arrived.

‘What we do next ... will cost us fifty lives,’ Jimmy told Bob and myself. ‘But we dare not just sit and do nothing.’

‘Is this going to get out of control?’ Bob asked.

‘It will,’ Jimmy affirmed, no energy in his voice. ‘Call in the communications officer.’

When the man was sat behind his screen, Jimmy said, ‘Set filter to everyone, all reserves and affiliates.’

‘Filter set,’ came back a few seconds later.

‘Sound full emergency recall.’

The man glanced at us, took a breath, then moved his mouse. An alarm sounded, followed by an automated message.

Doc Graham stepped in. ‘SARS?’ he flatly asked.

‘SARS,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘There’s not much we can do, but we must try. And we must try and reach the villages and towns when their capitals no longer care. You’re in charge of the field deployment, headquarters to be Hong Kong. But keep a good reserve ready to help North Korea; they’ll suffer a lot.’

The PM called after we had returned home, worried that our RF teams may be needed here in the UK. Jimmy assured him that a few hundred people would make no difference here, that they would achieve more in Asia.

At the house, Jimmy led me into the grounds, the rain holding off as we lost the daylight. 'I know I'm doing the right thing,' he began. 'But it still makes me feel like shit. I keep wondering if ... if maybe I could have done more. But all my research has shown the Flu family to be adaptive. The more you hit it, the more it changes. And if you hit it with too much ... you make it much stronger.'

'I think most sensible people will buy that,' I offered, wondering what was going through his mind.

'With all the technology to hand, I keep wondering if I should be focused elsewhere. Truth is, defeating al-Qa'eda is more important than the lives of all the people that will die from diseases. Still, your head tends to argue with itself.'

'If we swamp the world with the drug now it'll be no use later,' I said, repeating Jimmy's own words.

'Let a million die now to save ten million later. Yes, but try and tell that to the families. Try and look them in the eye and say it was necessary.' We walked on. 'It's been easy up to now.'

'Easy for you, maybe; it hasn't been easy for the rest of us.'

'It's been easy for you all ... compared to what happens next.' He sighed. 'I can see the light at the end of the tunnel, it's just the bodies I have to step over to get there that's the problem.'

'When Karl died, I went for a walk, down to the river,' I began. 'And Rob started talking about his dogs. He had buried six old dogs here, but also saw the new pups arrive. Life renewed.'

'A good analogy,' he agreed, managing a forced smile. 'The countries affected will rebuild their populations, but it will take a while. And, in the next few weeks, the world's stock markets will go to shit.'

'Did you ... bet a few quid?' I risked.

'I couldn't take the risk. And I wasn't in the mood.'

That evening I sat with Helen and the girls, and we watched the TV news on our large plasma screen. The Rescue Force deployment got full coverage, more than those victims that they were on their way to help.

The next morning, in my office, I checked the W.H.O. website, finding an estimated five thousand dead in Singapore. I had to check the figures, and then Googled 'SARS death toll'. The total was around twenty-five thousand already around Asia. Fact was, many people had been ill for a week before figures had started to be collated, and those figures were being collated at the morgues. That meant there were more sick people in the hospitals, or in their own homes.

That evening, a British holidaymaker died after his return from Asia, and our health service went on full alert. Police officers were filmed wearing masks on London streets. Mass injections of the Manson drug were carried out around the government, the police and the emergency services.

The next day I again checked the websites that I had tagged, finding an estimated thirty thousand dead. By lunchtime, three more Brits had died, a few Germans, Italians, and I was finding it hard to concentrate. When two people died in Nairobi, I recalled many of our nurses from Africa villages and pointed them towards the cities. The villages were isolated enough, so they'd have to cope. If anything, they were the lucky ones.

Thinking on, I contacted Ngomo and put the Rifles on alert to help out, and to keep the peace if need be, President Errol already in panic mode. I instructed our hospitals to kick out anyone that could be sent home, and to cancel all non-essential operations. There was little more that I could do, and I started pacing up and down, wearing out the carpet.

As I sat down to eat that evening, eleven people had died in the UK, a hundred around Europe, the first few cases appearing in the Americas. The one bright spot was the news story of sick people getting the super-drug and recovering. It lifted my spirits.

Rescue Force were now spread around Asia, but as yet not needed in all of the places they had targeted. In Singapore they were utilised, since the hospitals could not cope with the mass influx. I called Po and asked how Hong Kong was, finding that he had fled with his family to Goma, where they had banned all visitors for the duration. It was not a bad idea.

Australia lost its first few people, New Zealand a handful, mainland China on lockdown after losing a hundred people. Then our IT manager, Gareth fell sick. He had been injected, so it was a mystery – as well as a shock. A bank of tests revealed it to be gastric flu, and unrelated. We all collectively sighed, then shouted at Gareth for worrying us. We took back our grapes, porn magazines and get-well cards.

The British PM was considering closing schools and public places, on the phone to Jimmy most every day, but it was a waiting game, Jimmy unable to give accurate figures till the pandemic took hold. And it wasn't worth destroying the British economy over. Jimmy re-assured the PM, whilst being gloomy with me.

That weekend, I tried not to think of the outside world too much and to spend time with the family, the TV news off. The household

“M” group were all concerned, the mood not good, the harsh reality of 2013 starting to bite. They had known these days would arrive, but problems on paper were just that; intangible and easy not to worry over. Now, reality was here, and biting us on the arse.

Monday morning, I checked the websites and stopped dead. Frozen. Sixty-five thousand people were dead. I made a tea, very slowly, stirring it at length and staring into the brown liquid. I drank the tea, but I didn’t remember even making it and started a fresh one, wondering why the cup was dirty.

I stared out of my office window at the trees bending in the wind, then Googled for African casualties, finding the number at two thousand already, a few hundred in our own region. I emailed the corporation and enquired if anyone we knew had died, shocked to find that one of our housekeepers was dead, another sick, a junior minister dead. I had expected high casualties, but I now felt somehow responsible. More than that, I felt that I would be held responsible by the public: they were dead, and it was my fault.

If I ever had an understanding of what a surgeon felt like after losing a patient, and informing the family, this was it. I told my staff that I was going down to the house, and drove my electric car down past the lake. I was so used to not having to charge it that I was startled when the damn thing started to bleep. ‘Twenty miles to go,’ the digital readout said.

In the main office I found Helen at her screen, the baby in her cot next to Helen’s desk. I slumped down and sighed. ‘Some of our housekeepers in Goma have died. And a minister.’

Jimmy lifted his head for a moment, but said nothing. What was there to say. I sat and stared at baby Liz, the cold harsh reality of life and death all around me now.

Without looking up, I asked, ‘How long will it go on for?’

‘Three months,’ Jimmy softly replied. ‘So if it’s affecting you now, we’ll not get much done.’

‘It’s that feeling of helplessness,’ I said, still focused on baby Liz. ‘Wanting to do more.’

‘Welcome to my life,’ Jimmy said, sighing loudly. He stood and stretched, checking the biscuit tin. Sharon and the others were trying to just knuckle down and get on with it, and I wondered why it was affecting me the more. Perhaps I was used to making calls and fixing things, too used to achieving results.

‘Po’s locked away in his mansion in Goma,’ I mentioned. ‘So much for isolation.’

Jimmy took a call. To no one in particular, he said, 'They estimate around thirty thousand sick in this country.' He knocked the kettle on.

I stood. 'Is there anything more we could do?' I asked in a strong whisper.

Jimmy focused on me for a second, the others watching. 'No. And ... this is just the start. This pandemic hasn't even got started yet, and the next round will be worse. What's important ... is that the tree of mankind survives, the buds, and not all of the leaves. New shoots will come around, new babies will be born, mankind will go on.'

I nodded absently. 'Tourism in Africa will be dead by the end of the week. Couldn't pay people to get on a damn plane.'

'I had the hotel and safari staff sent home on full pay.'

'There's that at least, I suppose. Are the press after you?'

'Fifty emails a second,' Sharon reported from across the room.

'There's not much I can say without making it seem worse,' Jimmy told me, and returned to his screen.

I wandered out, and decided to walk back to my office, the wind fresh on my face.

Two days later we stood at a hundred and fifty thousand dead. According to the graph I was looking at it was slowing, the rate of increase slowing at least. What had been an exponential curve was rapidly becoming a bell curve. There seemed to be some hope. The figures hit a plateau and started to fall, but I was reading the chart wrong. I cursed the stupid website. The chart was of the daily deaths, the final total being the sum of all the days.

After calming down I still took some hope from the graph, since the number dying per day was reducing. I Googled the total, finding it to be just short of eight hundred thousand people dead - so far. In the days that followed, the rate of deaths slowed and I took some comfort from it, even though I knew we had months to go. The stock markets recovered.

Jimmy then gave an interview to the BBC, on condition that any news agency could get a feed. They set-up in the lounge.

'Mister Silo, how has this pandemic played out - compared to how you expected it to.'

'It's the same.'

'How long have you known ... that this would happen?'

'Obviously ... a very long time. It was one of the reasons I came back; to deliver the super-drug.'

'The drug is saving many, but close to a million have still died.'

‘I’ve said this before, many times: the Flu virus family mutates and adapts. The scientists of the future found no cure for all variants of it, and I don’t have a cure for it.’

‘Forgive me for saying this, but you have – in the past – enjoyed life, and lived the high life with a smile –’

‘And I aim to again some day soon.’

‘How do you sleep ... knowing what you know?’

‘When I took the decision to come back, it was after six billion people had died. I’ve seen a lot of death, much of it very close up, and I lost everyone I ever knew or cared about. But when I came back, it was in the knowledge that failure was a certainty, and that any lives I saved were a bonus. I had nothing to lose by coming back, and you ... have everything to gain. You have the benefit of foresight, and with a little luck – and some cooperation – we’ll not see as many people die.’

‘It’s not about trying to save everyone, because I can’t do that, I could never have done that. It’s about finding a million floundering fish on the shore, and picking up as many as I can and putting them back into the ocean. I know I can’t save everyone, but the joy comes in trying and succeeding to save those that I can. If I let it get to me I couldn’t operate, I could not function, and I take pleasure in just seeing people walking about and going about their daily lives, because we should be in the middle of a nuclear war right now – but we’re not.’

‘A million have died from SARS, and to most people that’s a great tragedy. To me it’s a great victory, because six billion are still alive. I work from six billion down to measure my success, you work from the ground up to measure a failure.’

‘Are we through the worst of this pandemic?’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘No, there’s more to come. And this is first of several pandemics.’

‘How many people do you expect to perish?’

‘I won’t be releasing that figure. Since there’s nothing anyone can do, it’s best to try and enjoy what you have.’

‘I hear that Rescue Force staff have died, even those injected with the drug.’

‘Yes, twenty have died so far,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘But they helped hundreds, injecting the sick and saving them. And as for the risk, those medics could sit here and wait to fall sick, or they could do something useful – and make a contribution at least. I’d like to

tell the people ... that there are difficult times ahead, but they are nowhere near as difficult as they could have been. Don't be sad if a hundred die, be happy that a thousand are still living, and be happy that there is a route map.'

Having watched the interview, I was in two minds. He had just scared the crap out of the world, and given them hope in equal measure. The PM watched the interview, held a COBRA meeting, and closed all schools, pubs, clubs – anywhere where people could pass on the disease. People were still asked to go to work, but to wear masks on buses and trains.

At my desk, I received an email from Mawlini. Mac had fallen ill for a day and recovered, his young lady dying. It hit me hard. Later that day I received another email, informing me that one of Rudd's kids had died, despite being injected. That hit me harder. I wore down the carpet, rubbing my forehead for an hour, working myself into a spin and not finding any release. I went home early and hugged Helen for what must have been five minutes, both trying to reassure the other.

We managed to have a nice meal, the kids off school till further notice, but at 8pm Shelly took a call, one of her close friends now dead. My daughter lost it, and there was very little we could do in the way of being comforting parents, because we were both a step away from losing it ourselves. With the TV turned down low we just sat there, trying to cheer each other. I felt like running away with my family, but where was safe?

In the week that followed, one of Coup's assistants lost his wife, Bob Davies lost a brother, and the Prime Minister himself lost two relatives. The figures started to rise again on the graph, and the politicians spoke of austerity measures and economic gloom. They had been warned, and I had to wonder if the fuckers were paying attention at all.

Singapore and Hong Kong were hit hard, Shanghai lost many, and North Korea faired badly, four hundred RF staff doing what they could.

Han came up to my office the day I read those figures, just out for a walk to clear his head. A lot of people around the estate were taking those walks these days. 'Am I disturbing you?'

'Not getting much done,' I said. 'We've closed most of the parliament building in Goma and sent people home.'

'And the new city?' Han asked as he sat.

'They're all working on, few falling ill amongst the workers. Seems that dirty hard works helps. What news from China?'

‘Not good, but as expected. Two million sick, half a million dead. It is ... a numbers game.’

‘You’re starting to sound like Jimmy.’

‘If I emulate him in any way, then I will be a very happy man. And sometimes, I envy your position at his side.’

‘It’s not all fun. Some days I resent the responsibility.’

Han nodded. ‘I have known for some time what would happen, but now find the news of it like a house falling on me. Jimmy has known all along, and more, and yet has spoken gently, has encouraged, and has guided others in a way that I would not be able to do, not if I lived to be a hundred.’

‘Was a time when that was a joke. These days most people can live to be a hundred.’

‘Indeed. And my respect for our leader will grow, I’m sure. How he carries in his mind this information, and does not fold, is beyond my comprehension.’

‘He went through a lot, more than I can say.’

‘And yet, he is not certifiable ... and in a rubber room. Our best psychiatrists seem to think such a feat impossible, and yet Jimmy stops to ask if I am coping. I cannot measure, nor do I believe anyone will ever measure, how strong he is, or how valuable his presence here is.’

I took a moment, glancing away. ‘I’ve tried not to use him as a benchmark for myself.’

‘That would not be wise ... for any of us,’ Han noted. ‘I find myself ... angry towards myself sometimes when I look in the mirror. Angry that I am not ... stronger. And true strength, that is in the mind. I have a greater understanding now of your Churchill – I read the book twice. To be under so much pressure, to send so many people to their deaths, to gamble all on your own beliefs.’

‘Takes a certain kind of person,’ I put in.

‘Are you ... that type of person, Paul?’

‘Based on the past few weeks ... no. Jimmy has faith in me, though god knows why.’

‘You have known a lot of information about the future a long time, yet have managed to smile and make jokes on many occasions. I have found this ... inspiring. Either you are stronger than you think ... or a complete fucking idiot.’

I laughed loudly. ‘You’ve been around us Brits too long. Don’t talk like that when you go back China. Please.’

That evening, I borrowed Han’s book about Churchill, and I started to read, even in the office the next day. It was suggested that

Churchill would have a glass or two of Whiskey last thing at night, say “sod ‘em all”, and get into bed. He slept better after he had cursed everyone in general and no one in particular. He also took power naps around 5pm, and swore by them. I, on the other hand, slept very little, and I wondered if that fact made a difference to the human psyche.

Winter closed in, the nights dark, the mood darker. Jimmy took a flight to France, to the lab working on the virus, and was filmed chatting to scientists, even offering in advice. It was an image of hope for people the world over.

Meetings of the world leaders were still on hold, no one keen to fly. Fitz had not been injected, but the White House had a stock of the Manson drug just in case. And the poor old US President; he was new in the job and landed with this. So far, six thousand Americans had died, a small number compared to many other nations. As Jimmy suggested, most of the dead came from poor backgrounds, but so far there was no suggestion that they were denied access to the super-drug.

Jimmy told me the disease was not suppose to ravage the west, just Asia for now, and it seemed that ninety percent of the fatalities were in the Far East.

Christmas came, and few were interested in celebrating, bars still closed. Jimmy toured hospitals as if he was the Prime Minister, trying to cheer staff and patients alike, and gave a rousing speech that I could have seen Churchill making. I could see the politician that he used to be, the refugee commissioner in Canada. He had the knack for the rousing speech alright.

Christmas at home was sombre compared to previous years, but Jimmy insisted that we all eat together and exchange presents, and the bustle of the main house helped a lot. We drank too much, played music and wore silly hats, trying if we could to ignore the outside world, if only for a day.

New Years Eve was spent in the main house again, Cookie making a meal. Jimmy had made another rousing speech - a New Year and new hope, and encouraged people to get drunk and set-off fireworks, but not necessarily at the same time. The Queen had supplemented her Christmas Day speech with a New Year's Eve speech, again calling up the wartime spirit. She did, however, mention the ‘second chance’ that everyone had been given, thanks to the arrival of Jimmy, and concentrated on hope for the future.

New Year's Day saw one of Po's daughters, Ling, fall ill and die, leaving two children behind. The virus was popping up in strange

places, seemingly with no connection, and no way to spread the disease. The one bright spot was the fund Jimmy had launched for the French research centre; the fund was now being donated to in large amounts.

The start of 2014 saw Jimmy considering Greece. He accelerated the building work, and decided to speak to the Greek Ambassador, inviting the man down to the house. After giving the poor man the news we feared for his health, and nudged several whiskeys down him. On top of the pandemic, Greece was now facing complete ruin, an earthquake due to devastate Athens.

The Greeks had a year, and it was as the Queen had mentioned in her speech: there was hope, where there was none before.

2014

It took till February for the SARS pandemic to abate, and by then some five million people were dead, most of the victims to be found in Asia. Jimmy formally announced that the pandemic was over, and encouraged everyone to get on with their lives in a speech:

‘This pandemic ... has caused a lot of suffering and loss, but that suffering should not be made worse by people becoming despondent, by people walking around with their heads low. What’s needed ... is defiance in the face of adversity, the bulldog spirit that the British people had during the war years. Give two fingers to SARS, and say to yourselves – we will not be beaten, we will not give up, we *will* go on.

‘The stock markets have suffered, the economy has suffered, businesses have gone bust, people have lost their jobs. If you mope around feeling sorry for yourselves you’ll make it much worse ... for everyone. Think of your families, think of your children ... and make an effort to cheer them. Take your families out when the weather allows, go and see those relatives you haven’t seen for a while – even the ones you don’t like! Take a weekend break, take a holiday, and spend some money. Put some money back into the economy.

‘I would like to appeal to everyone to hold a small party this weekend, and to invite friends over, or to go out. The pubs are now open, the restaurants, so are the cinemas. If you want to do what’s

best for this country ... get out and enjoy yourself. Draw a line under this experience, learn from it, never forget it, but draw a line and move on.

‘There’ll be other challenges ahead, but life will go on. You can face those challenges head on, or you can sit and worry. Either way, if the diseases want to come and find you they will, the risks are just the same. And never forget, that some countries fared far worse than we did. Some countries in the Far East suffered greatly, and Singapore lost ten percent of its population.

‘Here, fifty thousand people died, many of them elderly and infirmed, those least able to fight back. But of the quarter million people who fell seriously ill ... all were injected, and most made it. That’s a quarter million reasons to celebrate, whilst not forgetting those that died.

‘People of Britain, if you want to do what’s best for yourselves and this country, then get on with your lives, and don’t be ashamed to enjoy yourselves, don’t be ashamed to smile when others have died. This battle is not about how many died, it’s about how many we saved.’

After the speech, people started calling for Jimmy to be Prime Minister, a chorus of approval that would not go away. A Facebook survey put eighty percent of the population backing Jimmy for Prime Minister.

Unfortunately, not everyone in the world was convinced by us. The Iranians issued death threats, and claimed that we had created the virus to make ourselves popular. Other clerics claimed that god was punishing those that believed in the false prophet that was Jimmy Silo. Stateside, the bible belt were also calling it God’s wrath, and a punishment for interfering in the time line. I started watching Fox News on my laptop, since they were actively questioning us now, even some suggestion that we profited from sales of the drug. Basically, Fox News was saying ‘Who the hell do they think they are’.

When they suggested that we could have done more, assuming that we knew all along, I arranged an interview with them via the video conferencing kit we had in the basement. Jimmy must have known, but he didn’t try and stop me.

‘Mister Holton, what do you say to claims that you knew all along and could have done more.’

‘We informed the world leaders twenty years ago, and the CIA had the blood product before that.’

‘Blood product?’

I was just about to stop the world dead.

‘The super-drug and the Manson drug, they’re just varying strengths of Jimmy’s blood.’

‘Of his ... blood?’

‘At first, Jimmy injected people directly with his blood, kids dying from AIDS, health workers. After that we developed ways to reproduce what was in Jimmy’s blood. Basically, anyone injected with the super-drug has been injected with varying strengths of Jimmy’s blood. I was injected directly, so too my family and many others.’

‘Mister Silo ... drew his own blood ... and injected you?’

‘Yes. He didn’t bring any drugs back from the future, he brought himself back. His blood is much stronger than the Manson drug, a lot stronger.’

‘And ... who else did he inject?’

‘We injected all of the African soldiers, the Rifles, and all the children in the orphanages. An injection of his blood cures just about everything, but he only has so much blood.’

‘Well ... that’s incredible ... as well as gross.’

‘Have you been injected?’

The interviewer took a moment. ‘Yes.’

‘Then you have his blood in your system; you’d best hope he knows what he’s doing. And your government and CIA knew twenty years ago. If you got a problem about preparing ahead, you can take it up with them. Fact is, Jimmy’s blood doesn’t cure all SARS variations; they’re adaptive. If you don’t know that word, look it up in the dictionary.’

I realised that I had probably said too much, and cut the interview. Upstairs I informed Jimmy.

‘Most people know, but no one has quite shouted it from the rooftops yet,’ Jimmy said. ‘You’ve got the message across ... loud and clear.’

‘Will it affect things?’

He made a face. ‘I had expected someone to leak it earlier.’

That weekend, the bars and restaurants were packed out, damp British beaches well attended, parks and zoos seeing booming trade. The bulldog spirit was back.

Big Paul returned to us a few days later, the prodigal son returning.

‘Nice holiday?’ I quipped.

‘The breakfast bar was dodgy, the pool dirty, and the locals were not friendly. Exchange rate was good though.’

I fetched him a tea in the diner. 'How's it going out there?'

'Good. Spirits high, body count is good, casualties low.'

'Any more missiles?'

'No, and we fucked off the Iranians by giving the Iranian resistance in the south east of their country some weapons, food and money.'

'Least we could for our Iranian friends,' I quipped. 'How's morale?'

'Solid; no problems. Two Chinese lads died from SARS – that was a blow – a dozen fell ill and recovered. Isolation was a good thing for us I reckon. Couple of the lads lost family back home, but we told them to stay put. A few went all Rambo and shot up the ragheads.'

'What do they think about us?' I broached.

'They love you to bits, especially the African lads. They now call themselves Sons of Silo, and there's a vampire detachment -'

'Vampire?'

'They took Jimmy's blood,' Big Paul said with a grin.

'Not much to do in the evenings ... I'm guessing.'

'Not much; the lads do twenty-four hour patrols just to stay active.'

'Are we winning?' I asked.

'I'd be surprised if there were any of the original fighters still alive. We get a lot of Pakistani Taliban crossing over for a punch – up, and now more Arabs. They come from Yemen, Syria, Saudi, all over. And the Taliban now know that anyone seen carrying a gun is dead meat before he realises it. They drive around with white flags on their cars.'

'And the Northern Alliance?' I asked.

'Lazy bunch of useless fucks. Can't be trusted, and they won't attack the Taliban because they know we're doing their job for them.'

'Lebanon is quiet, and Somalia,' I said. 'All the fighters heading for you.'

'We've buried eleven thousand various fighters,' Big Paul said, a glance over his shoulder. 'They're a dumb bunch. We set traps, and they take the bait. But because no fucker survives, no one across the border knows about the traps. So they keep coming.'

'International cohesion holding up?'

'Fuck, aye. You'll see Americans punching out other Yanks if they insult a Chinese lad in their patrol. They're all tight as fuck, and they all compete to see which patrol can out-do the others. One

team, led by a US Ranger, walked sixty-two miles, shot up forty fighters, and walked back without a break.'

'A bit of dick measuring gong on,' I realised.

'They're soldiers ... and they've been injected,' Big Paul emphasised, his eyebrows raised. 'The Taliban can smell the testosterone miles away. Oh, first group of Germans joined us, took some ribbing about the war – and their late arrival, but they're good lads. All fucking Jimmy's size, so they don't get a lot of shit.'

After the furore of the blood disclosure had ebbed a little, and the weird speculation about Jimmy's body had eased, Fox News were back on the attack. Their latest line was *'Who put Silo in charge? I never voted for him. He says he was leader in the future, but we don't know that. For all we know he could have escaped from a future prison and come back.'*

I liked the last one, it made me smile for a whole day. Jimmy had admitted that he was not supposed to be here, so maybe he had escaped the future like some weird sci-fi movie. I was waiting for Jean Claude Van Dam to appear, to take Jimmy back to the future in cuffs.

The Iranians, and various clerics, were now claiming that Jimmy brought back diseases from the future, accidental or otherwise, and were back to the claim that we were profiting from the sale of the drug. Those calls found a few followers in the west, and Fox News picked up on it, also posing the potential problems of contamination and contagion.

There was one flaw in the argument. If the diseases had been brought back from the future, then they would occur in our future anyway. We could suffer them now and look for a cure, or wait till later. I found myself sat drawing paradoxes until my head hurt.

With the return of Rescue Force there would be no parades, we thought it inappropriate, despite the good work that they had done. We held a ceremony at Mapley and Mawlini for all those who had died, and attended two funerals of senior staff – but only after we had been invited by the family. I had expected a little tension from the relatives, since we had indirectly sent their loved-ones to their deaths, but they were all fine with us.

Jimmy then said that we'd visit Singapore and the Far East after Goma, and we hopped on the plane the same day, the girls back in school.

The girls time off school had not affected them at all. If anything, they admitted to having had more time to study. Shelly was

currently reading a book on microbiology and immunology, and a quick glance at it left me feeling inadequate as a parent. My daughters were way brighter than I was at that age, or ever could be.

On the way down to Goma I chatted to the reporters, many of them, familiar faces, but left them to sleep after eleven o'clock. I woke them as we began our descent into Goma hub, fresh coffees made, doughnuts handed out and gratefully received. At Goma, we kept the press with us, and they joined our coach to Forward Base.

Our first stop was the new officer training college, the recruits turned out ready. Most were now in their second year and old hands at the military life, around a quarter having come from the ranks. The officer cadets were lined up on the parade ground as our coach pulled up, the sky threatening a downpour. As we stepped down, a burly sergeant screamed at them to come to attention, a loud echoing report of their boots hitting the floor.

We waited for the press to assemble, and for TV crews to position themselves. That done, we joined the senior officers and walked forwards, the drill instructor saluting as we passed. Now we really were like Prince Charles.

Jimmy led the way, and to the edge of the front rank. Each recruit offered a nametag on his chest, along with his country of origin, and that made things easier. 'Where are you from in Kenya?' Jimmy asked the third recruit from the edge.

'North of Mombassa, sir.'

'Have you been home lately?'

'Yes, sir. My family is there.'

'Married?'

'Yes, sir. Four children.'

'Then you came from the ranks,' I said.

'Yes, sir, from the Rifles. Twelve years.'

'Have you been to the new marina?' I asked.

'Yes, sir. It's very nice.'

We worked our way along the line, noting recruits from many nations, including now Mozambique. At the end of the line, the senior officers led us off the parade ground and inside a large building, the press in tow. In the first room we stopped to view recruits stripping weapons, men who had not come up through the ranks, their instructors from America, Britain and Kenya. We waited for the press to take snaps or to film, and shuffled along the corridor.

In the next room we found a lecture underway from a white guy in a suit, the fella looking to me like an old professor. Today's

lesson was geography. We stepped in, the recruits scraping their chairs and standing.

Without realising it, I was about to make African TV. Jimmy was on the far side and chatting to recruits when I noticed a familiar face and closed in. 'You look familiar.'

'We fought together at Scorpion Base, sir. From the roof.'

I smiled widely and put out my hand to shake, pulling the man in for a hug and a slap on the back. 'Good to see you're still with us after all this time,' I said, holding onto him. 'And now an officer.'

'I was given a field commission in Afghanistan, sir.'

'Then you know Major Paul O'Brien.'

'I know him from before, sir. Many times. He was at Scorpion Base as well.'

'Married yet? Kids?'

'Yes, sir. Three children. I moved them to here when I came. From Mawlini.'

'Good housing here?'

'Oh, yes, sir. It's a nice apartment.'

'Do you have any pictures of the kids?'

The man took out his wallet and showed me a picture of his girls.

'They're good looking girls. Are you sure that they are yours?'

He laughed. 'Maybe your wife had a good looking lover while you were away, because these girls are too good looking to be yours.' I handed back the snap. 'What's your name?'

'They call me Lobster, sir, because one time I think I ask for Lobster in a café.'

'Good luck with the course. Study hard.' I turned away to the left, unaware that a TV camera had filmed the entire exchange over my shoulder.

Jimmy gave a rousing speech to the recruits, values and virtues, leadership and the future of Africa, before the senior officers led us to the Congolese Rifles base. We toured the ranks, had a go on the range, visited soldiers in hospital with broken legs, and finally returned to Goma around 5pm, the press dumped at the main airport hotel.

Helen and I reclaimed our rooms in our lakeside house, an hour to wash and eat before a series of TV interviews for Central African TV. They went well enough, since we were certain not to be tripped up, and the next day - a Friday, we let the press follow us around the Pentagon building. On the Saturday we simply chilled out around the pool, Yuri dropping in.

He reminded us of the death of Po's daughter, Ling, the body incinerated locally. We had been lovers, and it hit me hard again to be reminded of it. In total, some fifty people had died locally. Russia had fared quite well, only ten thousand dead, a low number for such a large population. That evening, we decided not to be seen out enjoying ourselves, and ate in.

In the morning, Jimmy suggested we crash the opening of the new cathedral in New Kinshasa. I stopped and blinked. The city was still a building site, but some ten thousand people already resided in the city, and many residents from Goma would be travelling down for the ceremony. Helen and I exchanged looks, got dressed up and followed Jimmy down to the cathedral.

The building stood out because of its size, but also because there were few buildings around it yet. We stepped down from the coach and walked forwards, the white marble steps empty, the local worshipers all inside already. I could hear the distorted echo of someone issuing a sermon through a badly tuned speaker system.

Bold as anything, Jimmy led us inside, and he kept going, straight down the aisle, the seats packed on either side, everyone in their Sunday best, ladies in colourful hats. Those who noticed us first all gasped, many standing up. That created a wave of whispers and a Mexican wave of people standing as we walked forwards.

The priest halted his sermon, just as surprised as everyone else, and we closed in on the man. I halted at the altar steps with Helen, feeling awkward and not knowing where to sit, or even whether to sit.

Jimmy stepped up to the priest. 'May I?' he asked, gesturing to the microphone. Wide-eyed, the priest stepped back, Jimmy taking the microphone. 'Please be seated. None of you need stand for me.'

Everyone sat down, and sat quietly stunned. I recognised President Errol in the front row and waved. He quickly made room and we sat, the guards hanging back.

'Some of you will have lost friends and relatives, and people that you know, in the recent outbreak of the SARS virus that swept the world. And how we deal with loss, with adversity and misfortune, says a lot about who we are. A strong community can pull together and help each other, can offer comfort – and even practical help and assistance.

'Countries in the Far East have suffered terrible losses. Compared to them, your suffering here was nothing. What we suffered in Britain was nothing in comparison. Some countries lost a million people, but that is not to lessen any what some of you have suffered.

Our housekeeper died, and our friends in Africa lost loved ones, even children.

‘But what separates a tragedy, from a setback, is how you cope with it afterwards. If you let it ... then this setback will become a tragedy, and you will make things worse for yourselves ... and for Africa. They say ... that if you expect the worst then you cannot be disappointed. Where you now sit ... used to be mud and jungle, a war ground for greedy western mining companies and guerrilla fighters. Now look at it.

‘I did not make this place, I simply showed you the way. All I did was to take the boot of the western mining companies off your necks. You did the rest with your own hard work, and you continue to do it.

‘But there are difficult times ahead for the world, and it will be easy to walk around with your heads low, with no smiles on your faces. You must be defiant in the face of adversity. My friend here, your priest, may advocate prayer – and I will not argue about its benefits. But after prayer comes action, action in the face of adversity, a determination not to give up what you have built.

‘A few days ago I visited the combined officers college here. That college is training soldiers from all over Africa, training them how to be good officers, but also training them how to be good Africans. Kenyans train alongside men from Ghana, Mozambique, Zimbabwe or Angola. In years gone by, the Rifles of many nations have fought side by side, to bring peace to Africa, and now they fight side by side with white soldiers in Afghanistan.

‘In Afghanistan, black soldiers and white soldiers are not equal – because the white soldiers know that they’re not as good as the African Rifles. In that war, black African officers lead white soldiers from Europe. Change ... is possible.

‘Today ... many of you will be feeling saddened by the deaths around the world, and the deaths here. But if you want to triumph over this adversity, then all you need to do is to decide that you will not give in to adversity, that you will not walk around with your heads down, that you will move on with your lives.

‘If you wish to succeed in your hopes for the future, then take your families out and enjoy yourselves, lift your faces from the floor, and don’t think about those that have died – focus on those that are still here. Don’t say that fifty died – and what a shame, say that a million lived – and what a great victory that was. If you want to make me proud then don’t be sad, be defiant in this fight. I thank you for your time.’

He stepped down and collected us, President Errol standing and starting to applaud, the congregation soon joining in as we walked along the isle smiling nicely at the congregation. I hadn't even noticed the cameras in the corner from our own TV station. I as lay around the pool later, our own TV station pumped out the speech to over a hundred million people, followed by my conversation with Lobster.

The next morning we flew down to Harare, Defence Minister Solomon making sure that the trip was leaked. Coming in to land I spotted crowds outside the airport, but I had no idea of what was to come. Stepping down from the plane we boarded two coaches, waiting for the press to get their gear together, and headed out of a side gate, no customs for us or our press corp. I knew the airport authority had scanners inside, lots of them; I had upgraded them a while back.

Outside of the airport I noticed a crowd on the side of the road and waved, smiling genuinely. Africa had always made me feel welcome, and this was a contrast to feeling that certain websites and news stations left me with, that of being pretenders to the throne. We drove on slowly, the roads busy, and the crowds continued as we progressed towards the city.

We slowed at one point, traffic ahead of us, and I noticed what seemed to be an entire school of smartly dressed kids on the side of the road. They even appeared to have been ranked in order of height. 'Driver! Stop here!' I shouted.

Jimmy could see what I could see, and smiled as he followed me up. We stepped down to a field of blue and yellow t-shirts, most of the kids up to my waist, and all waving flags. They were not Zimbabwe flags, so I held one for a look, finding the emblem of our cooperation group, the pentagon shape. I stepped towards the teacher through a sea of waist high yellow and blue, the kids grabbing my hands, touching my arms.

It then struck me, the memory of my first visit to Ebede orphanage. I had held my hands up, as if I might catch something nasty. Now, I moved through the field of children feeling not only completely at ease, but that I wanted to pick them all up and hug them. One girl looked a little lost in the melee, and I dropped down, grabbing her and lifting her up. 'OK, babes?'

She hid her head in my shoulder as I navigated my way through to the teachers. 'You didn't come out just for us, did you?' I asked over the cries.

‘No, we spend a lot of time on the roadside,’ a coloured woman said in a London accent.

I frowned at her. ‘Where you from, love?’

‘Hackney.’

‘What you doing down here?’

‘My church sends groups down. I’m here for a year.’ She lifted her eyebrows and nodded toward the girl I was carrying. ‘You adopting her?’

‘Are they orphans?’ I asked looked around.

‘They’re from a state run orphanage, but Anna from Ebede sponsors us.’

‘They all getting what they need?’

‘They’re all former AIDS kids, so work that out for yourself.’

I lifted the chin of the girl on my shoulder, and pointed to the woman I was speaking with. ‘Is she a bossy-boots?’

The girl nodded, although I doubt she knew what she was nodding about. I turned, looking side on at the heads of hundreds of screaming kids. Jimmy drew close, asking the teachers questions in a dialect. He shook hands with the lady from London.

‘Rose.’

Rose stopped dead, her mouth opening. ‘How the hell do you know my name?’

‘We’ll meet in the future.’

She held a hand to her mouth. ‘God, that is so weird.’

‘Where’s your orphanage?’ I asked her.

She pointed over her shoulder. ‘Just over there.’

‘Drag this lot back there and we’ll meet you there,’ I told her. I stepped away, still with my shy bundle, finding Helen on the steps, the press off the coach and snapping away. Helen took the girl as we boarded the coach for the short trip around the corner, Jimmy walking with the multi-coloured mass of kids. As they progressed, they appeared like blue paint seeping into yellow paint.

At the orphanage, we jumped down again, Helen taking the girl inside, and quite taken with her. The older pupils now came out, more yellow and blue t-shirts, and I followed Jimmy’s large frame as he entered the orphanage clinic, the press hot on our heels.

Upstairs, we found a ward that seemed better than the original at Ebede, but not much better. I drew level with Jimmy as an RF doctor greeted him, a lady from Australia. Pointing at a kid, I asked, ‘Not injected yet?’

‘Just arrived,’ the medic answered.

I gave Jimmy a look, a tip of my head.

Taking off his jacket, he told the medic to get a needle. In full view of the press, and two TV cameras, the lady drew blood and injected the kid directly. Time was such a thing would have horrified the medic and stunned the world. It had stunned me at the time. Now the world had its image, a direct blood transfer, and I figured it would make a few front pages, a few hundred front pages.

‘We best go,’ Jimmy told me. ‘Can’t keep the President waiting.’

Back aboard the coach, I could hear some of the press calling their offices in London, mention of the blood transfer. Our transport trundled slowly on, the citizens of Harare lined up on the sides of the road. But as we advanced, I realised it was just the start, the crowds thickening. Passing what seemed to be an area of parkland I couldn’t see the grass; it was like a rock concert. There had to be ten thousand people in this one section alone.

We snaked through the streets, seemingly everyone giving up work for an hour or two to come out to wave. The city centre was just as bad, the roads cleared of traffic for us. Finally we made the parliament building, the roads lined with soldiers and police, and eased to a halt. Jimmy let the press off first, and when we stepped down they snapped away as we met the waiting ministers, Solomon stood proud, a roar coming from the crowds.

He saluted. ‘Welcome to a free Zimbabwe.’

‘Is the beer free?’ I asked as I shook his hand.

‘It is for you.’

We followed him inside, waving as we went, locals photographing us. In the cool and dark interior we met the President, our host presenting his cabinet; all greeted, hands shaken. The press were asked to wait, and we accepted teas around a large oval table, all sitting down together as if we were about to hold a cabinet meeting.

The president thanked us for all of our assistance, and for finding the only spot of oil in the country, although they now knew how we managed to be so lucky. Ore production was up, cereal crop production growing at a fantastic rate, orphanages packed out. Tourism had been good, but died during the SARS pandemic, now starting to recover a little.

After thirty minutes of general chat, they led us to a second floor balcony, and now I really felt like a rock musician, looking out over more people than I had ever seen before in one place.

‘How many are here?’ I asked over the dull roar created by the crowd, several different groups singing, but badly out of tune with each other.

Solomon said, 'We think maybe a million came out to see you.'

'Why are we so popular?' I asked out the side of my mouth, waving at the crowds.

'The economy, jobs, the soldiers, the orphans, the food. They puff their chests and feel proud of their country, and of Africa.'

The president leant towards me. 'The people have their pride back, and the people have hope. You will hear "one Africa" on many tongues, because it is easy to be nice to your neighbour when your belly is full.'

Jimmy took the microphone and switched it on, issuing a few greetings in a local dialect, as well as Bantu – the Zulu language, getting a loud response.

After five minutes of waving, Jimmy suggesting that any speech would not be heard, we reclaimed our press posse and headed around to the Rifles base. As with the officer's college, the soldiers were turned out smart and lined up ready, and we made like royalty again. I inspected a line, asked questions of deployments and bases visited, getting quite good now at asking innocuous questions.

The press got their fill of us with the soldiers, filmed and snapped before we returned to the airport, a flight up to Nairobi. We touched down at 3pm, another line of coaches waiting, more soldiers and police. I was becoming Churchill.

Outside of the airport, I realised that the Kenyans did not wish to be outdone by the Zimbabwean public. They had all turned out, but this time waving Kenyan flags. The journey to the presidential palace was not long in miles, but it dragged on, everyone waved at. Helen's arm was flagging.

At the palace, the familiar grass verge was lined with Rifles, a funnel made, the politicians waiting at the top, Defence Minister Ngomo in his best uniform. He was no longer a soldier, but a politician who wore a uniform, a subtle change.

I shook his hand. 'Didn't shine them shoes for us, did you?'

'Don't tell anyone, but my wife does a great finish to them.'

Laughing, we stepped into the quieter and cooler interior, a repeat of the previous meeting held, but this time more relaxed, a few rude jokes swapped. I even got a beer. Kenya had lost six hundred dead, but you would not have known it by the mood.

Back outside, the day warm but the heavens threatening to open on the crowd, we took alternate sides of the street and worked our way along, shaking hands and being snapped.

We had built our own hotel down here years ago, but this would be the first time we had ever used it, the upper floors cleared out for

us. Booked in, luggage dumped, I took Helen to the roof as it started to rain. The pool looked good from the doorway.

At 7pm we dressed up, Ruth watching the baby, and descended to the ballroom, the rich and powerful of Kenya and Africa invited. I spent ten minutes with Abdi and his gang, chatted to the Tanzanian Defence Minister, spoke to Ngomo, spoke with a group of Ethiopian ministers, and with senior soldiers from the Congo who were all working at bases in Kenya.

At 8pm, our own team turned up, Rudd taking the smile off my face.

‘How you coping?’ I asked, noting how old Rudd now appeared.

‘We’re adjusting,’ he flatly stated.

‘Anything you need?’

‘It’ll take time, that’s all. As Jimmy said, we count our blessings, not our problems or losses.’

Jimmy closed in and shook Rudd’s hand. ‘If you had told me, I would have flown straight down. I may have been able to save your daughter.’

‘It was very quick,’ Rudd explained. ‘One day a headache and shivers, the next day gone.’

‘If there’s anything you need, let us know,’ Jimmy told him.

‘When you came to me, in 1987, you knew my future,’ our Dutchman asked.

‘Yes, but not about your daughter. I came to change things, not leave them as they were.’

‘I was not suggesting you could have, I was curious about my role, my destiny.’

‘You helped us greatly when we needed it,’ Jimmy told him. ‘You’ve carved your name into the tree of time, and you did a good job, Rudd. But our fight’s not over yet, there’re tough times ahead.’

‘More pandemics?’ Rudd asked.

Jimmy nodded. ‘And worse. Make the most of it now, while you can.’

Anna and Cosy brought us up to date on orphanages and colleges, and I then cornered Mac and Coup.

We shook. ‘You OK, Mac?’

‘Aye, fucking peachy.’

I waited.

‘I was fond of the lass, bit of a blow. Didn’t know how much I missed the lass till she was gone; big empty bed.’

Coup asked, ‘What Jimmy said, about tough times ahead...’

‘It’ll get bad, real bad. Rescue Force was created to be the spearhead, which is why we spent so much time on it.’

‘We expecting the four fucking horsemen of the apocalypse or something?’ Mac asked.

‘Yes,’ I answered. ‘And all that stands between us - and complete fucking disaster - is the big guy.’

‘If anyone can make a difference, he can,’ Coup put in. ‘He’s got my fucking vote.’

‘How’s morale at the base?’ I nudged.

‘Mixed,’ Coup answered. ‘The deaths took an edge off, a few familiar old faces gone.’

‘What’s Tubby doing these days?’ I asked.

‘He ain’t fucking Tubby any more,’ Mac said. ‘Call him Lanky.’

‘He’s lost five stone,’ Coup said with a smile. ‘We preferred him as he was.’

‘You’re the senior staff, so keep an eye on morale, and get ready for another deployment soon enough.’

‘Like the last one?’ Coup asked.

‘Worse,’ I warned. ‘Next few years will be hell on earth. Literally. If you got time to take a holiday and enjoy yourself, take it now.’ I turned my head a notch. ‘Mac, we need that base and region working at a hundred and ten percent efficiency. We need you doing what you’re good at, because we’re going to be knee deep in bodies otherwise.’

Mac took a moment. ‘Good times over, then,’ he sullenly stated.

‘For a while at least. You can take a breather in 2019.’

‘I’ll mark the day in my fucking filofax.’

‘Mac, you used to be a soldier, so start thinking like one again, or the people who depend on you will be under the sand, not in the fucking rooftop bar. You following me, Mac?’

Mac reluctantly nodded.

At midnight, guards carried Mac to his room, drunk despite the stems, and I grabbed stale sandwiches off the buffet as the stragglers were booted out.

In our room, I said to Helen, ‘We’ve come a long way, Jimmy and me, but this feels like the start, but it’s not. 2025 is the start line. When Jimmy came back, he knew that he had all those years to go. The man must have patience.’

Helen opened the mini bar. ‘He told me once that he kept going because he was afraid of failure, which seemed a bit obvious. I think he keeps going because he doesn’t know anything else.’ She opened

a soda. 'He's doing the right thing, passionately, but I wonder if he remembers why, and why he got started.'

'You think he's done this a few times before.'

'How else could he know so much? And he drops hints.'

I sat on the bed and eased off my shoes. 'He said something to me, years ago, about taking over from him. I don't know what he quite expected, but if we screw up 2025 I'm not jumping into some fucking time machine and going back. No fucking way I could re-live forty years, or hold it together.'

'I couldn't,' Helen admitted with a sigh as she sat next to me.

'Don't ever repeat this, but Jimmy once said that he wasn't supposed to be here.'

'Was ... someone else supposed to go back?' Helen puzzled.

'God knows. What I can't figure out, is why others didn't travel back as well, after him.'

'Shelly sent a message.'

'No, he's sure now that it wasn't Shelly. It's related to her, or something she invents, but not sent by her. And if they can send stuff back, why not a laptop full of useful information?'

'You'll give yourself a headache. C'mon, bed, old man. I've already checked in on the baby.'

'I'm fifty years old on my next birthday. God, that sounds a lot. When my dad was fifty he was grey, moving slowly and wearing slippers.' I flopped back and looked up at the brass ceiling fan. 'Fifty years old. Jesus.'

'They had some of my old school friends in the papers, and they did look old. Frightened me when I thought that I should look like that by now.'

'We're Peter Pan and Wendy.'

'Wendy would have grown old normally, she was a child. Besides, I don't think they had kids in the movie, or even dated.'

'Yeah, well it's been forty years since I saw it last. Wasn't Robin Williams Peter Pan?'

'Our girls think Harry Potter is an ancient classic.'

We checked in on the baby in the morning, and enjoyed a quiet day around the pool as Jimmy headed off for meetings and interviews. Baby Liz loved the pool, and her waterproof nappies allowed her to splash about with me. I missed this. I missed this a lot.

Jimmy returned in the evening, the chores done, and we set-off around midnight for Singapore, a direct flight. I sat with the press, baby Liz in hand, and they all made silly noises, taking it in turns to

hold her. The hacks got a good nine hours sleep after a little booze, and we landed in Singapore with the sun shining brightly.

The small island state had been hit hard by SARS, just over one in ten of its small population killed, some eighty percent having fallen sick at one point. We had placed three thousand members of Rescue Force on the densely populated island, including four hundred Chinese medics, and they virtually took over when the hospital staff themselves fell ill.

I had questioned the deployment of the Chinese around the region with Jimmy, since China itself suffered greatly. He said, 'If you and your neighbour are both sick, you achieve little by nursing yourselves, and everything by nursing each other.' It was politics pure and simple, the politics of world peace, and part of the grand scheme.

Cars were waiting at the airport, a coach for the press, and it seemed that everyone had turned out again, the sides of the roads lined from the airport to the city centre. The island's leaders met us outside of the presidential palace, a wonderful whitewashed building with a red roof, gardens and palm trees at the front. There were no crowds here, just the politicians, all of whom now greeted us in turn.

They bestowed upon us the Singapore Honorary Citizen Award in front of a bank of TV cameras, jumping in the cars for a short trip around to a main hospital. The roads had been lined with temporary metal grills, police stood in front of them. In the road itself stood most of those rescuers who had worked down here, all offered a free hotel stay and free flights by the grateful people of Singapore. Dozens of uniform blocks of rescuers stood like soldiers, three deep and twelve wide, the majority Chinese.

We stepped down to a roar of cheers, and I was getting used to the silly royalty bit of waving back. The President led us inside the hospital, and there began a numbing handshake process, all bleeding ten million hospital workers greeted. It felt like it would go on forever. Back outside, Jimmy took the podium, the president waving his hands for the people in the crowds opposite to settle.

'Thank you, Mister President, for your invitation to visit ... and for your warm welcome. Although this is a sad time, with such a great loss of life, the nation of Singapore is secure ... and it will go on. We have very little to celebrate today, but must take comfort from the fact that we saved more than would have otherwise been possible. A great many people were injected with the super-drug, and we managed to save many, thanks in no small part to the

dedicated and hard working Rescue Force personnel we have with us today.

‘Many of those rescuers are Chinese, people who were once seen as a communist enemy. Their own country lost many citizens, more than were lost here, but they sent their medics overseas nonetheless, a show of solidarity with the peoples of Asia. Those people have nothing to fear from China, and your Chinese brothers are not so different to you or I.

‘As I said in Africa recently, the best way forwards for those communities that have suffered is to hold your heads up high, and to move on with determination. You must all be defiant in the face of adversity, you must fight mother nature when she accidentally harms her own creation, and you must resolve to go on.

‘And you will know when you have finally reached the correct decision. You will know ... when you care as much for your fellow citizens as you care for your own family, when you are just as happy to take your neighbour to hospital as you own children. For Singapore to continue, and to thrive during the adversity ahead, you must consider first the good of the nation, and second the good of the individual. It does not matter if the individual falls, so long as the body of the state goes on.

‘The next generation will be born, the green shoots will grow, and they will have a much better chance if the current generation considers that new growth to be more important than the existing forest. There are further adversities ahead, but from what I have seen of your spirit of cooperation I am sure that Singapore will cope well. Thank you for your time here today.’

Jimmy led us forwards and we split up, chatting to the rescuers in a variety of languages, Helen practising her Chinese. I found a few faces I recognised and exchanged a few rude comments with Mawlini veterans, asking others about what had happened here. At the height of the crisis, during one particular week, RF medics accounted for eighty percent of the staff at this hospital and they held the line, many working three days without sleep.

I also learnt of the six pregnancies of local nurses, and four pending marriages to RF staff, determined to keep that out of the press. Dirty buggers.

After an hour of greeting the rescuers, we headed off to a hotel for a clean up before the pre-arranged state dinner, tuxedos hired for the occasion. As we set about the main course, aides ran in, whispering in the ear of the president; a car bomb had gone off

outside our hotel, many citizens and police officers killed. An Indonesian Islamic group had already claimed responsibility.

Rescue Force teams, those staying at our hotel, poured out and dealt with the aftermath, the wounded given the best chance of survival. As they were doing what they were good at, we stepped out to the waiting press and approached a bank of TV cameras.

Jimmy began, 'We are reminded today, that there are those in the world who seek only death and chaos. If the car bomb was from an Indonesian Islamic group – as claimed, then all of Indonesia has been stained with this crime. Rescue Force medics have always been there for Indonesia in her times of need, and now some of those medics lay wounded in hospital, their colleagues helping the innocent citizens of Singapore.

'It is now up to the people on Indonesia to decide if they live with this stain, if they wish to kill and hurt those who help them, and in the name of Islam. If there are citizens of Indonesia watching this who know who the terrorists are, come forwards and inform your police - or hang your heads in shame.'

We turned about as a group and headed back to the same hospital, soon in the waiting room and sat with police officers and civilians with minor wounds, RF medics helping out.

The next morning, as we flew off for Hong Kong, a quarter million people marched through Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, in protest at the bombing, a few arrests made already, action promised by the Indonesian Government. Helen and I had been a little traumatised by the bomb, since we had driven past the blast point with the baby in the car. It was a sobering reminder of the dangers we faced, and took the edge off my recent optimism. Up to that point it had been a good trip.

'Two steps forwards, one step backwards,' I commented to Helen.

In Hong Kong the security was tight. The police whisked us around to Po's hotel, Po himself greeting us with Marko and Yuri, the trio thick as thieves these days. We left the press to book in, and headed for the Chinese restaurant, opened early for just us.

Over starters, we caught up on gossip and business, the Russians now involved in projects in Hong Kong and mainland China, New Kinshasa going well, house prices rising in Gotham City. The building costs of those houses were, however, going down with a surplus of available builders and suitable materials; mansions were being thrown up all around the place. Builders contracted to work on

New Kinshasa were making good use of their weekends to throw up houses on plots of land that were free.

They informed us that the research centre was just about complete, some six hundred people already in place from a variety of nations. If anything, there would have to be a second centre built to accommodate them all. Wages were low, food costs even lower, and apartments free of charge.

Jimmy had already listed research projects, and the Shanghai brain-trust kids that had returned to Africa were running most of the projects. Some were involved with coal-oil, some working on SARS, a few working on innocuous projects such as concrete supply; cheaper, stronger and quicker.

The one secret project that they were working on, no one other than the autistic kids allowed to touch, was a type of plankton. I knew about it, but was sworn to secrecy, Jimmy not very forthcoming about it.

The Russians updated us on our super-farm south of Moscow, and our coffee shops, the coffee shop chain now something on an institution in Russia. And I still didn't understand why Jimmy had started them.

With Ruth watching the baby, we headed down for a massage, sauna and Jacuzzi, safe in the knowledge that the hotel was secure. Back in our room, I made use of the room's built in dedicated web computer to scan the news, always keen to see what the Americans were saying. CNN reported the massive crowd turnouts in Africa, some detail of the rousing speeches, whilst Fox News questioned our parenting. We did, apparently, leave the kids home alone.

I showed Helen and she was furious, asking if we could sue them. I promised to check with our US lawyers. Thinking laterally, I contacted the house and asked them to invite CNN in, and for CNN to see how the girls live when we're away, including interviews with the girls. Helen was not sure, since Shelly would probably be in make-up and a sexy outfit. She rang our daughter to make sure.

Hancock, still the head of RF Hong Kong, welcomed us to his building the next day, and we dedicated a plaque to those rescuers who had died. RF Hong Kong stood at four hundred rescuers typically, and they had lost twenty-six, a hell of a blow to their ranks.

In the main hall, the teams assembled, Jimmy taking the microphone. 'Some of you have lost loved ones, all of you have lost friends and colleagues, and the casualty rate has been higher than any other deployment that we have ever undertaken. But the

casualties have not finished yet. There are tough times ahead, and more will die. But each of you injected dozens of sick people, maybe even hundreds each, and you saved their lives. On the scorecard, we're doing well enough.

'The work of looking after the sick during pandemics puts you at greater risk, but what would you be doing otherwise? You'd be working in a local hospital, and when the pandemic struck you would have been at just the same level of risk. Or maybe you would have been sat at home, watching a loved one slip away. Yours ... is a simple choice: fight standing up, or wait for death to come calling.

'There will be other disasters in the future, there will be more casualties amongst rescuers, but who here would swap their place on the front line ... for innocent women and children?' He let them think about it.

'You volunteered to risk your lives to save others, and there is no more noble a calling. But you'll all be at greater risk in the future, and each of you should look to your own conscience about whether or not raising your family with a civilian job is more important. I have no problem with anyone who wishes to do so, we have enough people wanting to join to replenish the ranks. Many of you ... have done enough. You've earned your honour, you've put in the years, and no one can take that away from you.

'But make no mistake; in the next ten years you'll see a major deployment every six months. You'll be knee deep in death and destruction, and many of you won't survive. Consider that when planning your future, because in that future you'll be on the front line continuously.'

After that morbid speech we toured local hospitals and chatted to the staff about how they had coped, the former colony having lost three hundred thousand people. Most of the medics here had been injected with the super-drug, but a stronger variation than was typically used, a fact that I had not known. Chinese mainland medics had also received it, their dosages similar to that of the Rifles. Here, doctors worked thirty-six hour shifts and slept for five hours, returning to the wards bright-eyed and bushy tailed after their brief rest.

With the tour complete, we enjoyed a relaxing evening in Po's hotel, insulated from the world, before flying north to Beijing the next morning, the same group of reporters still with us. I had a dig at the American press, and at the suggestion that we were doing a bad job at parenting.

‘I went to boarding school,’ one man said. ‘I saw my parents a few days a year, and that was all.’

I raised a finger. ‘Good point.’

Another hack asked me, ‘What do you say to the growing American argument about your legitimacy?’

‘What argument is that?’ I questioned.

‘That Jimmy has power and influence, but was not elected, or is even subject to scrutiny.’

‘He’s subject to scrutiny all the time. By you lot! As for elected, we could always put it to the vote. How do *you* think the people would vote: keep him ... or send him back?’

‘I guess they’d vote to keep him,’ the man agreed.

‘Sixty percent of the world’s governments are dictators, presidents for life,’ I pointed out. ‘Tell the fucking people to vote on them first. And we’re heading for another dictatorship right now, also known as America’s largest lender.’

‘The pictures of Jimmy injecting that kid in Harare made every front page,’ a woman put in. ‘And fifty reporters are camped outside the orphanage to see how the kid does. So far, the child is up and walking, waving out of the window at them.’

‘You lot been injected?’ I nudged.

They exchanged looks, most admitting to the basic drug.

‘Might make a good story if one of you were injected directly,’ I suggested. ‘You can chart your own transformation.’ I pointed at a portly forty-five year old man. ‘You’d be a good candidate; it would take twenty years off you, mate. And a few stone.’ I could see him considering it.

Landing at Beijing, I should have figured that the Chinese would wish to outdo the Africans and the citizens of Singapore. The well-organised communist super-power had the streets lined with thousands of soldiers, happy smiling citizens stood lined-up behind. It made me wonder if they had been nudged by the party superstructure, or if we were genuinely popular here.

Booked in to Po’s western-style hotel, we boarded a coach, the attendant pressed in a second coach, and headed around to Tiananmen Square through streets lined with orderly citizens.

I turned to Helen. ‘First time I came here I thought they’d lock us up forever. I was terrified. Now we’re posing like politicians, and I’m not sure which I’d prefer. I think being afraid was better than all this nonsense.’

‘Can’t wind back the clock.’

‘Apparently, you can,’ I told my wife, and we exchanged looks.

The square itself was crammed, crammed with orderly and uniform blocks of citizens and children, all waving the Chinese flag; the air was thick with propaganda. We halted at the rear of a large podium, no idea where our press gang had got to, and were led forwards. Up on the podium, I found the Russian President and his Foreign Minister, greetings exchanged in Russian. I greeted the Chinese Premier with a bow and handshake, Jimmy being gestured towards the microphone. He was just about to upset Uncle Sam. Again.

When the crowd had settled, Jimmy began speaking in fluent Chinese, the Russians checking their earpieces. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for being here today, and for your warm welcome. I would like to thank the Chinese Government, and the Chinese people, for the contribution that your Rescue Force medics made during the recent SARS pandemic. Despite your own country suffering at the hands of the disease, you generously sent your medics abroad to show solidarity with other nations in this region.

‘Some commentators in the western media, especially in America, criticize your political system, and have criticized the deployment of your medics as propaganda. Well, I don’t care. I’m more than happy with what you did, and who can argue with the method, when the end result is what matters. Your medics saved lives, and many of your medics fell ill and died in the process. They have earned their honour, for themselves and for China.

‘If sending your medics abroad is propaganda, then I hope your leaders adopt a policy of far more propaganda in the future. Because in the future there will be great trials for us all, great adversity, and many challenges. And during that period of adversity you will cope better than the western countries – for the simple reason of your ordered society.

‘When disasters strike in the future, your government will tell you to move, or to do something, and you will do it in a quick and orderly fashion. In the west, and in America, when disasters strike, the government there will ask its citizens to move, but those citizens will dig their heels in defiantly, not least because they don’t trust their own government. When disasters strike in the west, a great many people will die because they do not have your ordered society. They ... are a society of individuals.

‘You may all sleep sound, knowing that when a disaster strikes your government will be well prepared, well organised, and that you and your neighbours will be better off – so long as you listen to what is being asked of you.

‘The next ten years will be very difficult, but you are in a better position than most to cope with the problems that come your way. Over the past fifty years, many in the west have hoped to defeat your communist government, yet now come around with the begging bowl, asking for loans. I, for one, am very glad that you held onto your political system. It may not offer you the same freedoms as some in the west claim that they enjoy, but during the next ten years ... staying alive, warm and fed will be far more important than calls for freedom of speech from the western media.

‘People of China, rejoice in the fact that you think and move as a single body, for you will have the best chance of surviving the trials ahead for mankind.’

I turned to Helen. ‘Oh dear.’

‘Our next stop is the States,’ she whispered.

‘You have to wonder about the timing, don’t you,’ I whispered out the side of my mouth.

Our hosts led us to a meeting room, a mini “M” Group meeting held with just the Russians and Chinese present, sure to upset US President Fitz, if he wasn’t pissed off already. We discussed Afghanistan, Africa, drugs and technology. Then we got onto Iran.

‘Gentlemen,’ Jimmy called. ‘You are all on warning ... that if you cannot persuade Iran to halt its nuclear programme, that I will consider a military option.’ They were shocked. ‘I will do so, because if I don’t then Israel will strike, setting the Middle East ablaze. And if Israel does not strike, America will, also setting the Middle East ablaze and risking the rise of The Brotherhood early. You have less than a year before I strike.’

We left them with that problem to wrestle with, soon heading across the Pacific and to Seattle, the press checking the correct translation of Jimmy’s speech. Our plane had a satellite uplink and messages could be sent out, the laptop connected to it in constant use. Time was when this lot would have used pigeons from the front line, then Morse Code telegrams, then phones, now emails with built-in spell-checkers. Progress.

Our reception at the Boeing Seattle plant was always going to a warm one since we were good customers, and arrived wishing to order more planes, the Boeing technicians interested in the modification made to this aircraft. Therein started a problem, a big one.

A Boeing official told a CNN crew that our plane had advanced defensive systems, future technology, possibly radar jamming. That took a millisecond to reach the news, the American FAA calling for

an inspection to be made, since such technology could be a hazard to other aircraft.

Jimmy took a few calls, refuelled the plane and we left US airspace for the Pacific, Fitz wondering where the hell we were going as we headed south. On a long meandering flight, we crossed Mexican airspace with permission and headed towards Cuba, our meetings with Caterpillar and others cancelled. Touching down in Cuba, the attending press were all curious, and now pissed because they missed their chance to film us around the States. Jimmy was also not a happy bunny, since the USAF had helped with our 747's refit. Fitz knew exactly what was on the plane, and should have dealt with the FAA. Fact was, our 747 *was* a danger to other planes if it wanted to be, and we could jam radars.

We refuelled in Havana, maybe even with fuel from our own oilfield, and set a course for London, calls from Fitz ignored. Back in the UK, we gained permission to land at Cardiff airport, missing the swarms of press at Heathrow, and arrived back to hugs from the girls. They described the interviews they gave, and we had a copy of the interviews on their laptops, our daughters well behaved.

At the house, Jimmy called the household White House aide a few choice names before firing up the video conferencing equipment, CNN selected for the interview.

Settled, the lady interviewer asked, 'What exactly happened?'

'Your aviation authority started asking to inspect my aircraft, as well as suggesting that it should not cross American airspace.'

'Why did they do that, exactly?'

'They believe my aircraft to possess radar jamming that could interfere with other aircraft.'

'And does it have radar jamming?'

'Your military aircraft have had that technology since Vietnam, and your military aircraft have been flying over American airspace ever since. Every day your Air Force planes fly about with the same technology, and your own Air Force helped me to customise my aircraft. Unfortunately, your various government departments don't seem to talk to each other any more. Hardon Chase would never have allowed this to happen, so maybe President Fitz is sleeping on the job.'

Sat off camera, I held my hands to my face.

'Your country will face a great many disasters in the years ahead, so if your government departments don't even coordinate properly on the simple stuff, then a lot of American citizens are going to die because of your government's incompetence.'

‘Have you spoken to the President?’

‘Not yet, I didn’t wish to disturb his sleep – since he seems to spend a lot of time sleeping.’

‘Oooh’, I let out. ‘That’ll hurt in the morning.’

‘What do you say to those who criticize you for favouring the Chinese.’

‘I’d say wait for the next outbreak of SARS, when millions of Americans will fall sick. Let’s see if your wonderful bloody health service copes as well as the Chinese. You may have the cutting-edge technology, but can you nurse the masses and the poor when they fall sick? And fall sick in the millions.’

‘What do you think we could be doing differently?’

‘For one, your government could take its thumb out of its arse.’

I put my hands to my face again.

‘And then you can get FEMA up to speed, before its too late. You have less than a year.’

He cut the interview, and I stood shaking my head at him.

‘Fuck ‘em,’ he said. ‘Fuck ‘em all. I’m sick of trying to force people to do what’s best for them.’

‘I think you got their attention, boss.’

Keely came and found me later, avoiding Jimmy. ‘Fitz has sacked the FAA officials responsible, and he’s feeling the heat. And up to now, Jimmy never put a figure on SARS round two. Stock markets took a hit, lot of difficult questions being asked.’

I sighed. ‘You’re the strongest country, and you have all the technology. You could be doing more to fix this than anyone, and you’re the one that’s always the most difficult to deal with.’

‘A nation of individuals,’ Keely said with a sigh. ‘Chinese can mobilise the masses, but we’d face the lawsuits to stop us trying. Problem is partly a lack of faith in the federal government, partly history. People do their own thing on the farm; towns have mayors, states have governors, and the political pendulum swings back and forth.’

‘You came together for the Second World War, do you think that kind of mobilisation could be done again?’

Keely shrugged, making a face. ‘Be a lot harder now.’

‘And wage freezes, Martial Law, food rationing?’

‘Would not be popular. Black market would take over,’ Keely suggested.

‘Well,’ I sighed. ‘If you lot can’t get it sorted - we’re all screwed.’

‘Need another Pearl Harbour,’ Keely suggested.

‘Got news for you; there’re ten of them around the corner. At what point do you get organised?’

‘Hopefully, after the first one,’ he said as he left me.

Greece

Little more than a week later, someone in Greece leaked the news about the pending earthquake. The Greek bourse dropped like a stone, European bourses following. Jimmy gave an interview in London:

‘The Greek Government were warned in secret at the start of this year, about a future quake that will cause much damage in Greece. It was the decision of the Greek Government to try and make preparations quietly, and to avoid the crash on the stock markets. In preparation for that quake, I’ve been building houses and apartment blocks in Greece, and have encouraged others to do likewise, and for the Greek Government to do likewise.’

‘Why are you building apartments before a quake?’

‘The quake will strike the Athens area. We’ve been building in other areas to try and house people afterwards.’

‘How bad with the quake be?’

Jimmy took a moment. ‘I had hoped that the Greek Government would make an announcement, at a time of their choosing. Athens ...will be completely destroyed. Rescue Force will be deployed, but I would hope that the citizens heed the warning ... and leave in good time. And let me state that Athens *will* be rebuilt, house by house, stone by stone, and I’ll do all that I can to assist in that process.’

‘When will the quake strike?’

‘It’ll strike in January.’

That led to an emergency meeting of the European Union, where formerly secret plans were now unveiled, the saving of the European economy being a big part of those plans. Rebuilding Athens would be a costly project. Coming on top of the SARS pandemic, the mood in Europe slipped a little.

Residents of Athens began moving out, often to relatives in the country. New building work in the city was halted, making many people redundant, but that building work then picked up a pace in Greece’s other principal cities, EU grants awarded.

I had waited for some sort of backlash from the Greek press, but none came; we could not be blamed for the worst ravages of mother

nature. But what we could be blamed for was something that Jimmy had kept to himself. He called me down to the house one day, and said, 'There'll be an outbreak of a disease in Lagos, Nigeria, and we'll take a lot of flack. Well, we'll take a lot of flack from the Nigerians.'

'Why?'

'Because we'll seal their borders with soldiers.'

'What?'

'This disease ... it makes Ebola look like a head cold. The one good thing we have in our favour, is that it needs contact to spread for the most part; touch. I have a team in Lagos looking for the first case, patient zero. And then ... and then we get tough, real tough.'

'How ... tough?'

'Shooting families trying to cross the border. That tough.'

'And if the disease gets out?'

'A lot of Africans will die.'

I went and told Helen, and I had to sit and think about it for a while.

With the summer arriving and the weather improving, I took the family up to Scotland again, enjoying a five-day break, Shelly bringing along her latest boyfriend. At least this one had lasted more than just a few months. She told us he was fifteen, but we figured him to be older, not pushing the matter. We were just glad that she wanted to come with us.

Back from the holiday, Jimmy took a call, the dreaded call. Six people had died in a Lagos clinic, all bleeding out of their eyes and orifices. He rang President Errol and told him to declare a pandemic emergency, and to seal the Nigerian border with soldiers, stopping anyone from leaving. Our good President was stunned.

Jimmy rang Bob Davies at Mapley. 'Bob, Jimmy, get the communications officer ready.'

'Deployment?'

'Hell is about to erupt.'

With the communications officer sat listening, the call now on speakerphone, Jimmy said, 'Set filter to all RF staff worldwide, all supplementals. Set destination to be Goma Hub, and sound full emergency recall. Bob, send Doc Graham down, instructions will be waiting for him.'

Next, we ordered our airline to halt all flights to Nigeria, calling the household "M" group representatives together and giving them the news. Han knew, he had been working on the antidote. Jimmy now ordered that antidote flown to Mawlini.

Within a few hours, all flights to Nigeria had been cancelled the world over, a surprise to the Nigerians. We had set-off for London after the “M” Group meeting, a statement to be made at the club, the world’s press invited. Along with the Nigerian Ambassador. Central African TV was at the centre of the bank of cameras, going live as an emergency broadcast.

Jimmy sat at a desk on the stage, a bank of microphones almost blocking his image. ‘Time is short, and we have to act quickly, so I apologise to the Nigerian Ambassador, but most of all I apologise to the Nigerian people for what is about to happen. And what is about to happen will leave a dark stain in history.

‘I have known for a long time of the outbreak of a disease in the slums of Lagos, a disease similar to the Ebola virus. I have, this year, had doctors working in those slums to see if we could find patient zero, and to contain the disease.’

He took a moment. ‘I have, for a very long time, considered the best approach, the best way of handling this. Warning the people of Lagos would not have seen a change of lifestyle, a clearing of the slums, or a halt to this outbreak. I have wrestled with this for a very long time, and there is no solution other than that which I will now implement. I hope that the world forgives me some day.

‘The one thing in our favour has been my travel through time, and as such I have – after a great deal of research – found a cure for the disease. This cure does not act as a vaccine, but it will cure someone in the early stages of the disease. I will now describe the symptoms.

‘A person will feel sick, lethargic, and will suffer vomiting and liquid stools with a high temperature. That sickness will last four days. If, after four days, the victim bleeds from the eyes and orifices, then they are beyond help. If a sick person is injected on day one, day two, or sometimes day three, they can be saved.

‘I have tens of thousands of the vials on their way to Africa and they will arrive tonight, to be administered by Rescue Force. Rescue Force medics, injected with the Manson drug, will be resistant to this new disease, Lagos Fever, and those medics will fly into Lagos.

‘Despite the availability of that drug, simply injecting those who fall ill will not stem the spread of the disease. The disease ... will run its course.

‘I will now address the leaders of Africa, because it will be the African nations that suffer the most. All of the borders with Nigeria must be closed straight away. People should be allowed to move into Nigeria, but no one should leave. Soldiers must be deployed to the

border, and force used to keep those borders closed. I repeat, force must be used to close the borders.

‘Those countries that are close to Nigeria should arrange for soldiers on the streets, including Kinshasa. Any Nigerian, who has left the country in the past four days, should report to the nearest hospital for a check-up. Anyone in Africa, who knows of a Nigerian who is sick, or someone else who has visited Lagos and is sick, should report that fact to the police straight away. Don’t go near them, and don’t touch them.

‘We are fortunate, in that this disease is primarily spread by touch or body fluid. All doctors, nurses, and medical workers in Africa should wear facemasks and gloves when in contact with any suspected victim, even in reception. I hereby ask for all hospitals in sub-Saharan Africa to be put on an emergency footing. All non-essential procedures should be cancelled, and anyone who can send home should be moved.

‘To the authorities in Nigeria, I have sent detailed emails, but there is little you can do other than allow me to handle this my way. My medics will land in Lagos soon, and they are immune to the disease. They can take over from your other medics, who will certainly die if they come in contact with such people. I have, earlier this year, secretly injected many of your medics with the Manson drug. They know who they are, and they should take the front line in this battle.

‘To the Nigerian authorities, I give the following instructions; fail to follow our procedures ... and you will lose millions of your citizens.’ He took a moment. ‘If you find a patient bleeding from the eyes, terminate their lives immediately, bag the bodies very carefully, and incinerate them safely, perhaps even on the hospital grounds.

‘Close all schools, cinemas, and ask your citizens to stay at home unless their work is important. Mobilize your police and army; you will find masks and gloves that I have secretly stashed in your country. Panic, will be a problem, but reassure your people that they can only get this disease by direct contact. Close all marketplaces, or any place where your citizens may rub up against each other.

‘To the medical community in Nigeria I say this: don’t try and take samples of blood for study, the blood is deadly to workers in laboratories. If you wish to study the disease, be extremely careful, and make use of those injected with the Manson drug. I have arranged for thousands vials of the Manson drug to be flown to

Lagos. The army should take charge of that shipment, since citizens may wish to grab it and inject themselves.

‘On the note of the Manson drug, it will not cure someone is who is already infected. For the Manson drug to be effective, a person would need to be injected months earlier.

‘To the African leaders, I say this. Put soldiers on your borders, look for sick people who may have been to Nigeria, but don’t close your borders or stop people from working. Don’t let this disease harm your economies.

‘To the soldiers on the Nigerian borders, I say this. If you have to, shoot people dead to stop them crossing the border, don’t take bribes. When you hold out your hand to take the money, you’ll be infected and killed yourself. If you see someone sick at the border, shoot them, and burn the bodies without touching them.’

I had been watching the press, most of who were now stunned.

‘To the countries of the west, and all countries outside of Africa, go back through passenger manifests and check new arrivals. Remember, there is an incubation period of four or five days, sickness coming on during the second day. But remember also that the disease is passed by touch and close contact, so don’t panic. If you do find a suitable case, treat as for a highly infectious disease. Do not ... even think about an autopsy. The body fluids of the dead remain contagious even when frozen. Incinerate the bodies as soon as possible, and with minimum contact.

‘Vials of the antidote are being flown to many of the world’s capitals as we speak, so please take charge of them, and use them sparingly. If a health worker feels ill, inject them straight away.

‘Now, the plans that I have enacted are the best plans that *anyone* could come up with. They will probably come in for some criticism, but I don’t care. You’re not in charge of this outbreak, I am, and I’ll do it my way – and history can judge me for what I now set in motion. I take responsibility, because I can’t trust any other group, or group of nations, to work quickly enough.

‘And now is a good time to tell you how I developed the antidote. Almost thirty years ago I injected large numbers of orphans in Africa, orphans dying from AIDS, knowing full well that my blood would cure them, but that my blood would interact with the AIDS virus, causing a mutation.

‘Those kids grew up with that mutation dormant, and had kids of their own, those offspring tested for a special variation of the dormant disease. One in every three hundred children injected, who had kids, went on to create the right antibody, something that I have

been working on in secret year by year. We identified that mutation little more than two years ago, and have slowly produced as much as we can, a slow and difficult process that has taken a great many years.

‘It has only been in the last year that we developed enough of the antidote to be effective. An earlier outbreak would have cost many more lives, so we were very lucky. I’ll now take questions, so wait till I point.’

‘What’ll happen if this gets out of Africa?’

‘Millions will die.’

‘How many will die in Africa?’

‘That’s hard to quantify. If we’re in time, and the antidote works, tens of thousand, no more.’

‘And if it doesn’t work?’

‘Tens of millions.’

‘Could the Nigerians have been warned sooner?’

‘And done what?’ Jimmy posed.

‘Warned their citizens.’

‘And what would they do? The slum dwellers have nowhere to go, no change of employment, no change of sewer system. Nothing would have happened differently.’

‘You said to put people down?’

‘Yes. Delay will cost lives,’ Jimmy answered.

‘And you’re asking for the soldiers to shoot people dead on the border?’

‘Yes, most definitely. If the disease reaches other Africa slums then it’ll put the whole of Africa at risk. Perhaps a hundred million people could die, and that’s not a risk I’ll take. And if it does get out it’ll spread to the west.’

The Nigerian Ambassador had already left by time Jimmy had finished speaking. When the questions got silly, Jimmy cut the press conference and we left, our hopes now in Rescue Force, and the Rifles on the border.

Back at the house, I Googled “Lagos fever case” and found three reported cases in the west; New York, London and Paris. The authorities were taking no chances, medics seen in spaceman suits, inflatable tents set-up outside hospitals, armed police nearby.

That evening, we sat and watched the news as a family, all glued to the TV as images of the Rifles on the Nigerian border appeared, RF medics landing in Lagos, panic in New York and London as suspected cases arrived at hospitals. But the images from Lagos were not good, the streets jammed by people trying to leave, the

exact opposite of what was good for them. The Nigerian police and army had been fully mobilised, masks donned, and the hospitals appeared to be ringed by armed men.

I had to stop and wonder how even years of preparation by the Nigerians could have planned for this. How could anyone plan for a panic?

Rescue Force had been spread around the neighbouring countries, and in particular their border towns and villages. If someone was sick, then Rescue Force were the front line. Other medics, also injected with the Manson drug, spread out around Africa and set-up in hospital waiting areas. Our main task force, Task Force Alpha, made up of some four hundred medics, had flown into Lagos with the antidote, and now had the very unpleasant task of being the first to examine both sick people and potential carriers.

Two days later, after the panic had ebbed and the streets had cleared, the second group, Task Force Bravo, moved across the border in jeeps, Rifles with them for much needed protection. Their task would be to enter the slums, and to spread to out other towns and cities. This group was made up of some three thousand medics, all of who had been injected by Doc Adam a few years back.

I followed the deployment with keen interest, and watched the W.H.O. website with dread. Four cases had been dealt with in New York, all fatalities, two health workers falling sick but surviving after being injected. I caught the same story on the TV news later, the bodies removed in a convoy surrounded by police, streets closed ahead of it. The ambulance used was duly torched by the ambulance staff, whether the health authorities desired that or not, police stood around watching the odd pyre.

In London, eight Nigerians had died, ten injected in time, a single health worker dead. But in the rest of Africa the news was not encouraging, dozens of cases popping up in nearby countries. Senegal, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Liberia, and the DRC. Kinshasa had seen a hundred cases between them, Kimballa in no mood to mess about and burning the bodies before death was pronounced.

The biggest problem was that Africa had plenty of sick people at the best of times, the early stage symptoms of the disease indistinct from many other diseases. In Nigeria, sick slum dwellers were clubbed to death, their shacks set alight. Around the neighbouring states, people falling ill with the right symptoms were injected with the super-drug at the same time as the antidote, hoping to clear up the symptoms of a normal bug in a day or so.

But Nigeria's main border crossings were where the real tragedy was unfolding, as desperate families attempted to flee, cars and lorries stacked high with household goods. Dozens had been shot dead, their bodies left in the road as a reminder to others, the Nigerian border guards long gone. We could only make a guess, but the numbers shot dead on lonely jungle border crossings were in the hundreds, perhaps more.

Where Nigerians did make it to neighbouring states they would often be attacked, stoned, or set on fire. There was no safe haven for them.

On day five, Jimmy organised a massive convoy of food trucks, driven over by RF medics and Rifles, food given out in the streets, especially in the city slums; the last thing we needed was a malnourished populace susceptible to disease. I diverted exports from our region, and in the blink of any eye I had shipped more than enough food.

Having organised the food, I felt a hell of a lot better, and I made sure every press agency knew what I had done, how many thousands of tonnes I had moved. It was the one bright spot, less of a feeling of helplessness. I stood at my office window, knowing that the partially evacuated slums were getting more food now than they had done before.

Day six saw a report from "The Detective Unit". I had to stop and look twice at it. The Detective Unit was made up of a quarter of RF Bravo, and their task was simple enough in theory, damned hard on the ground. They would start with an infected patient, and track back to relatives and friends, screening all of them for symptoms. Then they would check in on neighbours, places of work, or anywhere else that the person could have been.

Several deaths led back to a prostitute, long since dead, her rotting corpse found in a brothel full of her dead colleagues. Since the building stood isolated from the next abode, it was torched after large amounts of wood and oil had been placed about the bodies. Discussing the Detective Unit with Jimmy, he said that they had the best chance of halting the spread, so fingers crossed.

Cases in the west died out, literally, and after ten days no new cases were detected. Containment had worked, and our hard line stance was winning us fans in the media in the States. But then a plane from Spain landed at JFK with three sick passengers, two of them Africans. The plane was isolated, the passengers peering down at armed police, even soldiers.

Jimmy contacted President Fitz and told him firmly to get the passengers and crew onto the tarmac, or they would all get infected. Public opinion, and FEMA, were against that and the poor passengers and crew had to stay aboard, water dumped onto the aircraft steps. Uttering a few harsh words, Jimmy sent a plane from Goma, twenty RF staff with the antidote. They landed in the early hours, walked across the tarmac and boarded the plane, injecting everyone with both the antidote and the super drug. A sick African, already incoherent, was placed in a body bag and allowed to suffocate covered in Lime.

Refuelled, the plane was allowed to leave, this time to Africa, the American passengers protesting at length at not being let off. It landed in Senegal, was refuelled without anyone getting off, and flew on to an isolated airport in our region, a decontamination team waiting. Our other RF medics in New York, forbidden contact with anyone, re-boarded their plane and followed the other aircraft back. The net result of the fiasco was three dead Africans, but a grateful bunch of American and Spanish passengers.

Day fourteen saw two hundred new cases in Lagos, the dead totalling around twelve hundred in the city, so far. All that week I checked the stats, every hour or so, as I managed the food and water deliveries. It was the last thing I did at night, the first thing in the morning, and by the end of the week the number of new cases was down to a hundred a day. Jimmy was optimistic.

On the borders of Nigeria, camps set-up by RF had found and treated around three hundred sick people trying to flee, but ultimately too weak to make the journey. The numbers that they were encountering were also falling.

In the west, there had been no new cases for almost two weeks, and emergency procedures were gradually being relaxed, airport passengers still being screened. A group of people returning from Mexico with upset stomachs were isolated, but at least they were not refused entry this time. The passengers from the first flight to have been stopped had all undergone five days of isolation in the DRC before being flown up to Madrid. There they were again checked, being allowed finally to fly on, lawsuits planned against the US authorities for the passenger's horrific ordeal.

Five weeks after the start of the emergency, Lucy came up to my office and sat with me, wanting to help out. We checked the stats together, finding that the daily death toll was down to just eight people in Lagos, few outside of the affected region. Life was starting to return to normal for Nigeria, but I was still diverting food.

Then, on a Friday morning, no new cases were reported, and I insisted we throw a house party and a celebration. Jimmy invited over a handful of TV crews, and they set-up on the lawn in front of the house.

‘Today, we saw no new cases of the disease in Nigeria, and as far as I know there were no reported cases anywhere else. We have something to be thankful for, very thankful, and that’s Rescue Force. They all stepped into danger, and many of them worked in horrendous conditions, knee deep in dead bodies – infected bodies.

‘Theirs ... was a super-human effort, and one that we can all be proud of. They will remain in Nigeria and the neighbouring states for another few weeks, some longer, to see if any new cases occur.

‘But the greatest tragedy were those killed on the borders, those innocent people – and healthy people – who tried to force their way across the borders, and were killed because of it. We could not take the chance of the disease getting out and infecting the world. If it had, millions may have died around Africa.

‘I would like the people of Africa to make tomorrow, Saturday, a day of celebration. Celebrate our victory over adversity again, look to your families and friends, and hold your heads up high.

‘To the countries outside of Africa, you may need to review your procedures for dealing with these things, especially how you deal with passengers falling sick on long flights. The fiasco in New York should not be repeated, and sick and healthy passengers should not be forced to share the same air in a confined cabin. OK, questions?’

‘Will there be more of these?’

‘Yes there will. But the important thing for the people watching this to know ... is that there’s nothing they can do, and they should try and get on with their lives. Walking around feeling depressed will achieve nothing. When your number’s up, it’s up.’

‘Is Greece the next big deployment of Rescue Force?’

‘It is, but I hope that they get a good rest first. They deserve it.’

‘Have you spoken with the Nigerian Government?’

‘Every day since this started. They were ... very unhappy at the beginning, unhappy at how I organised things, but can now see the wisdom behind it. We all regret the loss of life of innocent citizens, but the borders were legally closed by the neighbouring countries, the Rifles simply enforcing the law of those same neighbouring countries. Those shot dead were trying to break the law.’

‘There have been no “M” Group meetings for many months. Why is that?’

‘I’m in touch with the various governments on a regular basis. The next meeting will be soon, but will incorporate a great many more countries.’

The party went well that night, and we felt that we had achieved something. Even Fox News were off our backs for the moment. I woke feeling good Saturday morning, better than I had for a while, and video-linked to Duckland for an hour, chatting to the troops. I took a walk down to the river, threw sticks for the dogs – which just got chewed instead of retrieved, and filled my lungs with summer air.

That following week, the RF teams started to withdraw, but underwent a strange ceremony. They all made their way to a regional airport in Nigeria, stripped naked and burnt all their kit, walked through showers rigged up, put on boiler suits and flew back. It made me smile, most of the lady doctors very fit, and very tasty with it. Not to mention immodest.

I walked down from the house one day, after a good day’s work, only to find Jimmy holding a young lad by the neck, off his feet and pinned against my house wall, Shelly crying. Jimmy threw the lad to floor and ordered him banned from the estate, the police removing him.

‘What the hell happened?’ I asked as I closed in, Shelly running off.

‘Your dear daughter found herself a nice eighteen year old lad.’

‘Eighteen! Christ.’ I went after Shelly, finding her on a bench by the river. I sat without saying anything. After a full minute, I said, ‘This place is full of police officers. If you date that lad he’ll go to prison. Do you want that?’

She didn’t answer.

‘We want the best for you. Jimmy wants the best for you.’ I sighed. ‘Can you not find a nice lad that’s ... you know, a little younger?’

‘They’re all stupid little boys.’

I nodded slowly. ‘So was I at that age. I would have loved to date a quality bird like yourself.’

She managed a smile.

‘If this was Africa, you’d have been married off by now,’ I added.

‘Maybe I should live there.’

‘Maybe you should just wait. You’re fourteen ... going on thirty-two. School first, exams, then you can go to university and be just as

big a slut as the rest of the girls there. That's what university is there for.'

I took a breath. 'Look, babes, we have a few other things to worry about, and I'd rather not have to worry about you. OK?'

'OK,' she agreed.

'Where do you want to go for the holidays?'

'Goma.'

'Good call. Pack your bucket and spade, and that one-piece bathing suit.'

She laughed. 'You're an old fart, you know that.'

'Pipe and slippers soon, babes.' I studied the side of her head. 'Will you be OK?'

'Can I go to the casino in Goma, drink and gamble?'

'Of course you can, it what's being fourteen is all about. Just don't forget that one-piece bathing suit.'

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Magestic

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Part 15

Goma, June, 2014

Both of our girls had elected to spend their school summer holidays with us in Goma, and Helen and I were glad to be “far from the madding crowd”. Here, at our lakeside mansion, we knew that reporters could not reach us. At least not reach us and stay alive.

The house had everything we needed, and I was even getting used to fishing bugs out the pool in the mornings. We used a pool-cleaning lad, but he started at a normal human hour, whereas I liked a dip at 5am. I found a dead snake one morning, figuring that maybe the chlorine killed it.

The guards on night duty offered to check it around 4am, which only left a small window of opportunity for a bug to land, to creep across the grass, or to slither into the pool. So when I found a baby croc I figured it made use of the window of opportunity. That or the guards were taking the piss.

I plunged in, put my goggles on and played with the croc for a while; I swam after it as it tried to get the hell away from me. I eventually caught it and lifted the little snapper out, taking it to the carp pond and dropping it in. It seemed right at home and snapped at a tiny fish within minutes, ignoring the hideously coloured carp and goldfish. Feeling mischievous, I left it in the pond, wondering who’d spot it first, and if it would grow to be huge by snacking on slow moving goldfish.

Lucy spotted it later and was delighted, finding a large plastic plant tray that suited our new family member. She cleaned out the plant tray, added a few rocks and some water, and plonked the smallest family member in. As I sat by the pool observing, she scooped out small fish fry from the lake and carried them back, dropping them in for the snapper. I wandered over.

‘What you planning on doing with it?’ I asked.

‘We’ll keep it till its bigger, and let it go. Could we ... dig a pond for it, put a small fence around it?’ she risked.

‘Sure. Out by the lake.’

By the end of the next day our garden offered a pond lined with tarpaulin, a twelve-inch high fence, water and rocks. And a small croc. Stood looking down at the croc, Lucy thought it needed a mate, and so patrolled the shoreline with a net, brining one back after a few hours. She diligently caught small fish, it wasn’t hard, and dumped them in with the crocs.

She would spend hours sat staring at them, then tried a little smoked salmon on the snappers. The salmon was a big hit, as was the tuna she tried next.

But sat around the pool one day, I asked Lucy, 'At what age do the mummy crocodiles abandon their young?'

'After only a few weeks I think. These are independent.'

'Are you sure?'

'Oh, yes.'

'Are you really, really sure?' I pressed.

'Yes, why?' Lucy asked.

'Oh, it's just that a ten foot croc is coming up the bank.'

Lucy stood, Jimmy following her up and onto the grass. The guards now noticed it, closing it with pistols drawn.

'Don't shoot it,' Jimmy ordered. 'Luce, go get a chicken. Not a frozen one!'

Lucy ran past me as I closed in on the monster. If there was trouble, I was sure that it would go for Jimmy first. I was also sure that I'd push Jimmy towards it if need be; he was the crocodile wrestling type.

Lucy returned, followed by Helen, my dear lady wife wishing to know why our daughter was running through the house with a dead chicken. Jimmy took the chicken and walked forwards, tossing it to the croc. Our garden croc gobbled up the offering.

'It's the same one as in the marina,' Jimmy suggested. 'Not that many around here.' He turned. 'Helen, ask the corporation to put an iron fence across here, with a little gate. Keep the croc out of the lounge.'

The guards kept it under observation as it slid back to the lakeshore, the monster intent on sunning itself for a few hours.

'That's what happens when you feed youngsters,' I said to no one in particular. 'They grow and stop being cute.'

Our fence was installed the next day, and our visitor got a chicken any time he popped in, something of an attraction for our human visitors. When the BBC popped in we made no mention of it, and it took thirty minutes for a presenter to scream and come running.

Jimmy flew off a few times, leaving us to our family peace, and one day I invited around Second Lieutenant Lobster from the officer training college. He turned up in a suit, his family all dressed as if off to church. We found trunks and bathing suits for the kids, nudging them towards the pool as I sat in the shade with Lobster, talking about Afghanistan.

Lucy adopted Lobster's youngest as her own, which pleased me, and they sat chatting for hours as Lobster and I sank a few cold beers. The memories of Scorpion Base came back, of dangerous helicopter stunts, heat and dust and the imagined sound of Hueys. I missed it all.

One of guards, just coming on duty, had to do a double take when he saw Lobster, striding across quickly. Lobster jumped up with a huge smile and hugged our guard, a fellow Rifle of course. I told the guard to sit, and ordered him a beer.

'An officer? No.' The man could not believe Lobster's new status. It seemed as if Lobster had betrayed his fellow grunts.

The following even, I invited Lobster and six of his Rifles buddies out for a drink, our guard off duty and tagging along; this was a boy's night out, no women allowed. We started with a few beers in a loud bar in the marina, broke for an Indian meal, returning to the loud bar afterwards. I was, however, certain that anyone wanting to pick a fight with me would meet some determined resistance.

We reminisced about past adventures, and joked as only soldiers could. A few young stock market traders turned up, and I bought everyone in the bar a drink, soon chatting about derivatives, London, and damp old British weather. It turned out that these guys were making about the same money as they would back London, but costs here were a tenth of those in London.

One trader said, over the music, 'My rent is two hundred pounds a month, my food about twenty quid. I spend more on beer!'

If only I was a young trader again, starting out, and here instead of London in 1980s. Now, the 1980s seemed primitive; no computers worth talking about, few mobile phones. It seemed like a lifetime ago. It was thirty years ago.

I introduced the Rifles to the traders, both social groups being worlds apart, but the traders found the stories from the Rifles fascinating. They were also wary, since the Rifles were not only tall and built like tanks, but their reputation preceded them. Great strapping soldiers adopted the skinny white traders, picking them up off the floor when drunk.

Leaving the bar as a group, desiring some fresh air, a senior army officer seemed to stop and take exception to the men being here, and to their drinking. He had not seen me. I was waved over, enquiring as to what the problem was, the officer apologetic.

'Major,' I said, nudging him away from the main group. 'If these young officers are to understand the western mentality - to work

alongside western soldiers, and possibly work in the west, then they need exposure to us westerners in social settings. If they can't cope with a simple social function, then what good are they on exchange courses?'

'I see your point, sir.'

'How many of your young Rifles officers could work undercover in the west?'

'I don't know, sir.'

'I do: none of them, because they'd stand out in London. Maybe, working undercover abroad is something you should consider, because they're sadly lacking in an ability to blend into western social functions. And besides, I invited them out. If any of these men were to be judged upon being here, I'd get *very* upset about it.' I sent him on his way, the man in no doubt that I meant business.

I collected the gang and we again attended the Indian restaurant, sat under the stars and chatting away. I had not been drinking like this with lads for a while, and these were all lads, some of them half my age. It was a good release. I may have looked thirty, but my mind was approaching fifty.

Back at the house I found Helen sat reading in our room. 'Good night?' she asked.

'It was good to let my hair down without worrying about the fucking world, or the fucking press. But a funny thing happened. This senior army officer came past, and he was horrified that the lads were out drinking. They were dressed smart, behaved, not drunk. But what a difference to the west, when the lads here are treated like second-class citizens in their own bleeding country.'

I sent Ngomo an email: pop in when you're next in Goma. I was going to shake things up.

He dropped in a few days later, on his way to the college of all places. With him was the new head of the Rifles, a Colonel, both of my guests in uniform.

'You look warm in those uniforms,' I said, pointing towards the shade, cold drinks ordered. 'I won't keep you long. Listen, I invited some young officers out the other night –'

'We know,' Ngomo said.

'You do? Was there ... a problem?'

'No, no. It's just that gossip goes around the Rifles faster than official communiqués. If you want something to be told to everyone, you tell your driver ... and ask him to keep it quiet!'

I laughed. 'Anyway, it struck me that your very excellent killing machines had little comprehension of western ways. Surely it's a

gap in their education if they can't talk to western officers, and meet on a social level without feeling like their talking to white colonial masters.'

'They have lessons on etiquette in later years, formal meals,' Ngomo informed me.

'And trips to countries outside Africa?' I nudged.

'Only if they intend killing those they visit,' Ngomo noted.

'Then I want that looked at; a tour of Hong Kong and China, England, America. An education, gentlemen, is as much about experience as exams in the classroom. Do you teach them military history?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Then take them to the battlefields of Europe, and engage them with the westerners down here, small groups out drinking. I want Rifles officers to be able to hold their own in a conversation about world politics with a westerner. We have tourists here, so impress them with your young officers. Use the tourists for practice.'

'I'll arrange it,' Ngomo said, seemingly curious about the outcome.

'What happened to the two British officers that were at the battle at Scorpion Base?'

'One is head of training at Mawlini,' Ngomo informed me. 'The other is head of training here, for the Congolese Rifles.'

'Have the guy who's here put in charge of social training, please. Next, I want you to build a Rifles bar and café in New Kinshasa, a big one, with events and shows. I want one bar for enlisted men, one for sergeants, one for officers – but in different areas. And I'd like to see sergeants and above using the facilities here. I don't want anyone to feel that they're not welcome.'

Two days later, with Jimmy off somewhere, the British PM rang. 'Paul, got a moment?'

'For you, always.'

'Cut the crap. Listen, we're trying to finalise a deal with the Saudis, selling them military hardware, but they're trying to twist our arms about meeting you.'

'Dunno where Jimmy is –'

'Not him, you. They want to make an approach, and thought they'd try you first ... as being the *less violent* option.'

'Oh. Well, Jimmy has never asked me not to speak to them, so send them over, but no large groups, just two of them. And in western clothes.'

'I'll call you back.'

And he did, the gentlemen in question flying down the next day. I asked for ten Pathfinders to be present, fully kitted, just to make a point. I had them remove their shirts - I slapped Shelly for her comments, and had them put their webbing back on. Now they looked extra menacing for my guests.

Gathering my three ladies, I said, 'We have a Saudi prince coming over, and therefore sensitive to our decadent western ways. You can either wear full length burkas, or bikinis, it's up to you.'

I was sitting by the pool when my guests arrived, a cold beer in hand. A maid stepped out and announced their arrival, so I asked for them to be brought out. When the two men in suits drew near I pointed towards chairs, not bothering to stand up. Helen and the girls had elected for bikinis, and my guests glanced their way as they sat.

'Beer?' I asked. Deliberately.

'We do drink, you know,' the first man said. 'A habit many of us pick up at Oxford or Cambridge Universities, in your fine country.'

'I went to Kingston Polytechnic myself. So, cold drinks?'

'Beers will be fine.'

I looked up at the maid and she trotted off. 'So, what can I help you gentlemen with?' I sipped my beer.

'We'd like to see if there is a way of us cooperating, for mutual benefit.'

'Such as...?'

'It may surprise you, but many of our senior figures have been injected with the drug.'

'Your clerics wouldn't like that.'

'Our clerics ... are not running the country, and we're not as backward as you may think.'

'Oh, I don't think you're backward, I just fail to see what use you are to the world ... and to our plans to help the world.'

They stared back. 'There was a time when I would have considered our country as ... players ... in the global economy.'

I took a moment. 'Players? You pressure the British and American governments, and they nag us to play nice with you. But coming back to my last comment: what use are you? What have you ever done for the world, what are you doing for the world, and what will you be doing for the world outside of your own borders - and outside your narrow view of things?'

'I'll admit that we haven't put a man on the moon, nor sailed the seven seas, set-up colonies or invented much. But we have also not invaded anyone, nor do we try and interfere with other nations.'

‘Really? After the Russians left Afghanistan you funded the rise of the Taliban and their extremist religious views. Now, those Taliban, and their al-Qa’eda chums, represent one of the greatest threats to the world.’

They took that in. ‘Given what your Rifles are doing in Afghanistan, our ... miscalculation will be expunged. The stain will be wiped clean.’

‘What is it that you want? Really ... want?’ I rudely asked.

‘As I said, to cooperate, since we’re not going to get anywhere using threats, persuasion or pressure.’

‘Cooperate on ... what? On raising oil prices? We’re keeping oil prices down so that the world economy doesn’t go to shit. And if it does go to shit, oil purchases from you will fall. Damned if we do, damned if you do.’

‘If there is a ... middle road, we’ll look at it. We want eighty dollars a barrel, you want sixty-five. Nudging prices towards seventy would be a ... compromise. CAR would make more, and the world economy would not ... *go to shit*.’

‘CAR is not about profit, it’s about fixing the world. I’m disappointed you haven’t figured that out yet.’

‘With more profit, you can fix many more things.’

‘Take that cynical attitude with me and you’ll be thrown out ... head first.’

‘Sorry,’ the man offered. ‘Since you obviously do care more about fixing things, than money.’ They exchanged looks. ‘We have a few former CIA people working for us, and they seem to think that 2025 will see the rise of a Muslim terror group that threatens the whole planet.’

I took a moment. ‘Around 2025, a disaster will destroy the world economy,’ I said, altering the truth a little. ‘Those economic conditions give rise to a terror group based on al-Qa’eda, and that group will see money – and oil – as the root cause of all evil. They’ll start by blowing up all of your oil wells, tearing down your satellite dishes – so no porn, and then your sparkling cities.’

‘And don’t you think that this a great concern to us?’

‘Guys, you sell oil, you make money, you stick it in the bank to make more money – what is it that you do besides that?’

‘Our job, is the same as for any government: we look after our people.’

‘Your people ... live on a small round planet. If a disease breaks out in Lagos you’re at risk ... just like everyone else. No country on

this planet can ignore the other nations any more, we're all too interconnected.'

'Is our ... isolation a cause of disdain for Mister Silo?'

'It is,' I confirmed.

They exchanged looks. 'Coming back to cooperation. Is there no way that we can combine our resources, given that we are *both* highly motivated *not* to see this terror group rise?'

'Raise your right hand and swear like good little boys that OPEC will not drop the dollar for oil trading.'

'Is that a cause for concern for Mister Silo?'

'Well, let's see. You drop the dollar, US import costs treble overnight, the US economy goes to shit, a hard-line American leader takes office and invades Saudi Arabia to take your oil, sparking a global conflict, which leads to the world economy crashing – and the rise of a terror group in the Middle East. You ... connecting the dots yet, boys?'

'They are connected?'

'It's all connected; a puzzle of a thousand pieces. The world is like ... ten people sat in a canoe. If one stands up, the stability is gone. If one tries to dive in, the rest fall out the other way. But if we all agree to stay sat still and row carefully the canoe keeps going.'

'America made a huge mistake when it got clever ... and got oil traded in dollars; it's printed dollars to keep itself a super-power. Conversely, you dumb fucks have done nothing other than sell oil, and build big cities that could never be supported when oil revenue runs out. You're tied together, and both as daft as each other. When one falls, you both fall.'

'What Jimmy is trying to do is ... to undo the knot in the rope, and to get us all to 2025 in the fucking canoe together. If he fails, you'll be the first to be destroyed, the very first.'

'Then we have much in common, and much to discuss.'

'He's a time traveller, and he's had that conversation with you before,' I said, taking a guess. 'Don't come back unless you truly understand the problem, and you're truly willing to cooperate. Start with your fucking clerics.'

They stood. 'And if we do have solid ideas?'

'Then I'll listen, and be just as charming.'

'We would not wish you to change, Mister Holton,' they said as they left.

Helen came over and sat. In her bikini. 'Well?'

'They know about 2025, but not exactly what. They say they want to cooperate – which means they think we'll keep oil low and

their coffers less full. They may come back, or they may just try and shoot us.'

When Jimmy returned, two days later, I informed him, but he already seemed to know.

'Where you nice and polite?' he asked.

'No.'

'Good.'

'And if they want to play ball?' I pressed.

'Their economy is all oil, nothing else. They're in a bad position and they know it, large modern cities with lights on in the desert, squandering money like it flows out of the ground. When the world economy goes to shit they'll hurt quickly.'

The next day, I received an email from one of the Saudi men I met, asking if there was anything specific he could be looking at. I suggested Yemen, and desalination in Jordan, not knowing what would happen – if anything, and left it at that.

Back to school

We flew back to the UK for the start of the school term in September, and heavily tanned. 'Hello stranger,' we got a lot of around the estate. It felt a little strange to reoccupy the house, but after a day back and we forgot about Goma. It had been a good break, and Jimmy had left us alone for one very good reason: SARS II. He wanted us to have a good break.

A week after we returned, Jimmy emailed the World Health Organisation, asking them to prepare the world for second outbreak of SARS this winter. That evening, the entire country came to a halt, people putting their faces in their hands. The world followed in its despair as the news spread, countries like Singapore traumatised.

Jimmy called a meeting of European Union member representatives, to be held in London, and we journeyed up in the coach a few days later, leaving at 5am. The meeting was held at the club, security tight, the keen police sniffer dogs doing their stuff, noses to the carpet. The ministers arrived in groups for the ten o'clock meeting, drinks and nibbles provided till the latecomers arrived and took their seats in the Red Room.

'Thank you all for coming,' Jimmy began. 'And I won't keep you too long, not unless you have a long list of difficult questions.'

‘First, the second SARS outbreak will not be restricted to Asia. This time it will be well spread right around the world, with no particular centre. Rescue Force personnel will not be dispatched, they’ll be utilised in their own countries, with Rescue Force Europe responding to the Athens earthquake. May I ask the Greek representative just where you are with your principal evacuation plans?’

The man stood. ‘The government and civil servants have moved, as have principal industries and businesses. There are, however, still a quarter of the city’s residents either living in the city, or aiming to stay. They believe that they can sleep outside, protect their properties, and rebuild afterwards. Some people reinforce their houses as we speak, and aim to remain.’

‘And will you force them out?’ Jimmy asked.

‘That ... is an option, but resistance will be stiff. We may well injure and kill people trying to remove them. And maintaining an effective cordon will be hard when that cordon is ten miles out. Some will move back in.’

Jimmy responded, ‘If they sleep outside in tents, then they may well survive. And we’ll have Rescue Force on hand. But there’ll be no sanitation or running water for many months, existing sewers will leak, and the conditions will be poor. That will come on top of a SARS outbreak, so the people living in those poor sanitary conditions will be at an even higher risk.’ He held his hands wide. ‘People who are cold and hungry will be susceptible. If SARS takes hold in that group, it’ll stay – and kill many.’

‘What casualty level are we expecting from SARS?’ a man asked.

Jimmy took a moment. ‘Hard to estimate, but worse than last time. Much worse.’

They glanced at each other, shocked.

‘You’ve all produced more of the super-drug, so use it as before,’ Jimmy told them. ‘And ... as you can appreciate, the economy of the world will suffer. You should all take additional austerity measures now, and expect the worst. Don’t ... be afraid to get tough. Impose wage freezes, or cut wages, raise taxes a little, cut public spending. At the height of the outbreak you can expect at least ten percent of your working population to be off work, a great many man-days of productivity lost.’

‘The Greek economy has already suffered, and will continue to do so. On that subject: after the quake, the hotels in Greece will be filled with the displaced. When summer comes around you’ll want those hotels for much needed tourism. As such, it may be an idea for

other European nations to assist Greek refugees. Spain has a surplus of vacant apartments and houses; they should be considered.

‘There are already many Greeks staying with relatives around Europe, but that number will obviously increase in the months ahead. Such a shortage of accommodation in Europe will help to keep property prices up, an odd benefit. OK, questions?’

They went round and round in circles, as if they could debate the Athens quake or SARS from happening. When frustrated, Jimmy thanked everyone and sent them off, the PM popping in to see us.

‘Do we have everything in place ... that we should have?’ the PM asked, clearly concerned.

‘Do you have a large dose of hope, and a little luck?’ Jimmy asked him.

‘I have a time traveller to guide me. Luck doesn’t come into it,’ the PM insisted.

‘SARS is tricky, and the numbers can vary, not least because I’ve altered a great many things already. Many people received the drug early, so they should resist it, some others more prone to it. It’s a hell of calculation.’

‘And the estimated dead here?’ the PM asked.

‘Given the use of the drug early, I’m hoping to keep it to a quarter million.’

‘Two hundred and fifty thousand dead?’ the PM said in a strong whisper. He rested his elbows on his knees and let his head drop. ‘I thought it was bad last time.’

Jimmy sighed loudly. ‘Yeah, well wait for round three.’

The PM lifted his head. ‘Round ... three?’ he asked in a strained whisper.

‘You’ll hardly catch your breath before 2019,’ Jimmy told him.

We flew off aboard our 747, heading to New York and a scheduled round of meetings, our aircraft now cleared to disturb American skies. The same group of reporters tagged along, familiar seats grabbed, familiar routines entered into. Some had eye covers to sleep under, a few used neck cushions, and some liked a little tipple before bedtime.

SARS II had not broken yet, no one asking about it specifically. Questions were mostly about Greece, plus the usual pumping for information about future disasters. Seems that they were keen to crash the markets and ruin their own pension plans.

We took a hotel room instead of the apartment, and I figured I might sell it. We had left it empty so long we worried about bugs, and not cockroaches in the bath.

Our first meeting was in the UN building, with some of the old “M” Group nations: America, Russian and China. The various leaders greeted each other, a long break between these meetings, but the Russians and Chinese met often, President Fitz not much of a traveller. Settled around a table, Fitz seemed a little distant.

‘Gentlemen, politicians, history makers,’ Jimmy began. ‘We did well during the SARS outbreak, and the Nigerian crisis was ... handled. I would not say that Lagos Fever was handled well, since I traumatised a nation and held them prisoner in their own country. The Nigerians are now grateful for a swift and firm response from me, since they can now see how bad it may have been otherwise.

‘The Greeks are ... where I expected they would be at this time, and casualties will be limited. Some residents will remain in the city, and many will be killed. Others will die from disease by remaining in the city afterwards. Russia, I would appreciate you responding with your Rescue Force unit, a ... show of solidarity with your European partners. OK, coal-oil. May I ask where the Russians are?’

‘We have the first two refineries working well,’ they reported. ‘And we think that we could reduce production costs further.’

‘Given the damage that’s about to be done to the European economy, I would appreciate that your oil and gas prices are ... *helpful* till Europe recovers. Keep your future customers warm this winter. China, where are you with coal-oil?’

‘We have eleven refineries working, and production costs are encouraging,’ they reported.

‘Good. Mister Fitz?’

‘Two refineries are online, but extraction costs are still above where you think we could get them. But, overall, we can produce it cheaper than importing it, so it’s being rolled out in numbers.’

‘OK, moving on to SARS – and round two. This winter will see a second outbreak, basically a slow cooking first round. Russia, you will suffer more than before. America – you’ll take a full-blown pandemic. You’ll need your soldiers ready, national guard, the works.’

‘And the number of dead?’ Fitz asked.

‘As I told the Europeans, it’s hard to pin down, since I’ve altered a great many things. The early use of the drug will help – in most cases. My best guess would put the dead above a million.’

Fitz was shocked, and I wondered about our new President; Hardon Chase knew these figures. I also wondered about how he'd react with the other bad news we had to deliver to him today.

Jimmy informed him, 'The pandemic will last about three months, as before, and your economy will take a hit. Your "M" Group representatives have known about this for many years, so I hope that you're ready. If not, I guess the American people may lower your approval ratings.

'And whilst we're on your approval ratings, Mister President, we have a difficult matter to discuss next.' Jimmy took a moment. 'I warned your predecessors that a disaster would strike America in 2017, and they assumed that maybe an earthquake would hit Los Angeles or San Francisco. That disaster will strike in early 2017, so you have more than a year to enhance your planning.

'Now, if revealed too soon, the markets will crash – but recover. If revealed too late, people will have little time to evacuate. Whichever way we do it, people in the affected areas will wish to take legal action for us not warning them twenty years ago. I could not have done that, and I have deliberately left it this long so that the businesses in the affected area could profit from twenty good years.

'All of you here, and other nations, will be affected by the disaster. Mister Fitz, I will now give you the chance of having the location revealed to you alone, but I *will* warn the others six months from the date. You would have more than six months with that knowledge.'

'Six months will not make much of a difference,' Fitz flatly stated. 'But I might have liked to know when I took office.'

'No ... you wouldn't have,' Jimmy countered. 'You would not have slept much. I took that decision for you, whilst asking for your military to make plans. Might I ask if those plans are ... well advanced?'

'The military seem think so,' Fitz stated, but without sounding confident.

'Do you wish the six months period?' Jimmy repeated.

'If you've held off up to now, then I assume it was for a reason, and ... I'll have to assume that it was a good one.'

'Revealing the disaster, during the SARS outbreak, might be a good idea,' Jimmy suggested. 'That's only six weeks away.'

'OK, let's have it,' Fitz urged, the Chinese and Russians waiting patiently.

'In early 2017, an earthquake will strike Hawaii –'

'Hawaii?' Fitz repeated. 'Not the west coast?'

‘Both,’ Jimmy said. ‘Hawaii will be destroyed, but the resulting tsunami will hit Los Angeles and San Francisco – and points in between. Alaska will be hit, so too Vladivostok, and the Chinese coast.’

‘How much damage?’ the Chinese asked.

‘Extensive in some areas, simply a bad flood in others. Start planning soon. Japan will also be hit, and all islands in the Pacific, New Zealand, Chile and Mexico.’

‘How much damage to Hawaii?’ Fitz asked.

‘When its over, just a few peaks will be left above water,’ Jimmy informed him. ‘Total loss.’

‘Total ... loss?’ Fitz repeated, staring wide-eyed. I had to wonder if the States had the right man for the job.

‘Total loss,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘With extensive damage to your west coast.’

‘The ... the cost!’ Fitz gasped.

‘The cost ... in human lives ... is the important one,’ Jimmy emphasised. ‘The entire group of islands will need to be evacuated, plus all Pacific Islanders. You’ll also need to evacuate parts of the west coast.’

‘Something like this ... takes years to plan for!’ Fitz protested.

Jimmy slid across a data stick. ‘On there is the plan that you and your military would have come up with ... with years to plan. You’ll find it very detailed. And you’re welcome.’

‘You ... you prepared this?’ Fitz asked as he took the data stick.

‘He’s a time traveller,’ I put in. ‘Go figure.’

‘And after Hawaii?’ Fitz asked, waving the data stick. ‘What else will go wrong?’

‘Lots of things,’ Jimmy said.

‘Did you get an “M” Group briefing?’ I asked Fitz. ‘And, more importantly, were you paying attention?’

Fitz took a moment. ‘It’s one thing to discuss theoretical scenarios –’

‘Just when the fuck were they theoretical?’ I loudly asked. ‘You best get on the case, Mister President, because you’re going to be knee deep in bodies soon enough.’

Jimmy silenced me with a look. Facing Fitz, he said, ‘If you have any doubts, then step down, because I need the man in that seat to be a rod of iron, and so far I’m not seeing that. A great many people have their lives in your hands, and they deserve the best they can get.’

‘I need to think about this,’ Fitz said, standing and leading his team out.

‘Did he just walk out?’ I asked when the room fell quiet again.

Jimmy exchanged uneasy looks with the Russians and Chinese.

‘Was this man not supposed to be President during this period?’ the Chinese asked, Jimmy shaking his head. ‘You did not manoeuvre him, or object?’

‘I knew him as a moderate, and a reasonable man, but not as a president. A great deal has changed.’

‘This is ... so not good,’ I helpfully put in, a look exchanged with Helen.

Jimmy told the others, ‘Stay in town, please, we’ll meet again tomorrow. A day is a long time in politics. And I’ll give your “M” Group representatives details of the measures you can take to prepare for the tsunami.’

Fitz flew straight back to Washington, I caught it on the news, no communication for us. Then the skulduggery started. An admiral popped in to the hotel via the back door, and in civilian clothes.

Sat in Jimmy’s room, the admiral said, ‘We have doubts about Fitz.’

Jimmy and I exchanged looks. I said, ‘It doesn’t appear as if he can handle the pressure. He walked out of the meeting.’

‘He ... walked out?’

‘He walked out of a briefing on the most important things he’ll ever hear,’ I added. ‘A briefing of upcoming disasters to hit the States.’

The admiral looked Jimmy square in the eyes. ‘And if he doesn’t make the right move at the right time?’

‘Then I will,’ Jimmy assured the admiral. ‘But I would do so at the risk of alienating your people and your Congress. I’d have to make the press statements that he should be making.’

The admiral said little more and left us.

‘They going to top him?’ I asked.

‘No,’ Jimmy said, giving me one of his fatherly, disapproving looks.

In the morning, I caught the local TV news, and stood quietly stunned. Fitz had stepped down, his Vice-President taking over. He had quit. I knocked on Jimmy’s room. When inside, I asked, ‘Does this right royally screw things up?’

‘It does,’ Jimmy gloomily stated. ‘The new Vice-President is even more moderate, and even less suitable. He’s a nice guy, he’s been around a long time, but he’s not Hardon Chase.’

The new president, Oliver Samuels, called us inside of an hour and invited us down to Washington. Kind of pronto! We boarded the plane and headed down, avoiding a million difficult questions from the press. On the plane, I got our hacks together.

‘Now listen up, and listen well. There are a few things happening, big things. Fitz has stepped down, and we’re not going to discuss why. If you screw with us you’re off the plane and you’ll never be invited back on. Until I say otherwise you’ll not ask any questions other than about the baby.’ I wagged a warning finger. ‘You each represent your papers and TV channels. Don’t ... fuck with me!’

They used the satellite link, and the whole world was suddenly focused on Washington. We met Samuels in the Oval Office with his Chief of Staff, Samuels already sworn in, Fitz already gone, the former President’s stuff being packed up.

Samuels blew out, long and hard. ‘Whatever you said to him, he decided he didn’t wish to preside over it.’ He appeared as if he was ashamed of his running mate.

‘President Samuels,’ Jimmy began. ‘You’re a good man, and with a lot of experience, but can you ... preside over large-scale disasters? Are you a ... wartime leader, a ... Roosevelt?’

‘I doubt it, but I care deeply about this country, and I have a very strong sense of moral duty. I won’t be quitting.’

‘It’ll be a difficult three years,’ Jimmy warned.

‘I’m a believer in the people, Jimmy. And ... I’m a believer in you. I saw what you did in Nigeria, and I know how much you care about Africans. Can’t have been easy to put soldiers on the borders and order them to shoot; it would have given me a few sleepless nights.’

‘You have my number, and I’m available twenty-four hours a day for the right man,’ Jimmy told Samuels.

Samuels nodded. ‘I’ve given the data stick to the joint chiefs. So, do you want to give me the heart attack now, or after a coffee?’

We gave him the detail.

When done, Samuels stood in the window. ‘I wonder how Roosevelt felt after Pearl Harbour, because right now I have a feeling in my gut that I haven’t felt since I asked my wife out on our first date. I was seventeen, and terrified.’ He sat. ‘Is everything I need on that data stick?’

‘It is, and your military can call if they have a question. May I be so bold ... as to suggest that you invite down the Russian and Chinese leaders, right now, and show a united front; something to

inspire the people. Fitz's sudden departure will leave people wondering.'

'I still don't know what to tell the press,' Samuels admitted.

'Tell them ... that Fitz did not feel that he was suitable for the challenges ahead.'

'They'll tear Fitz apart,' Samuels baulked.

'There's no way we can cover this over,' Jimmy warned. 'He walked out right before a crisis. But, you could say that the cabinet and disaster planning committee had no confidence in him ... and expressed as much.'

'That may be better for the image of the office,' Samuels thought aloud. 'Anyway, I have an emergency disaster planning committee meeting to preside over if you'll excuse me.'

'And the Russians and Chinese?' Jimmy pressed.

'If they can be here this evening, I'll do the photo-opportunity.'

'I'll arrange it,' Jimmy offered. 'And we'll stay the night in a hotel - if you have any questions.'

At 6pm we lined up in front of the White House and forced smiles, Samuels making a statement. It still sounded like Fitz had run off.

At the hotel, I switched on the US news, and it was not pretty, the Democrats calling for an election. Fitz had won with a small majority and mid-term elections were due soon enough, so I suspected trouble ahead. After two beers I called the Democrat leader, Sanchez, and invited him around for a chat. He appeared an hour later, Jimmy coming down to the hotel bar to meet him. Sanchez was tall, as tall as Jimmy, with jet black hair and an intense look. But looked to me more Afro-American than Latino.

'You going to tell me what the hell happened?' Sanchez asked.

'You going to use it?' I asked.

'I'm not about knock the stock markets down even more,' Sanchez angrily replied. 'We have enough problems.'

'If you did, you'd wake to find me at the end of your bed,' Jimmy calmly stated.

Sanchez took a moment. 'I won't be discussing this.'

Jimmy and I exchanged looks. I said, 'We briefed Fitz on the doom and gloom to come, and he bottled it.'

'Before you judge him too harshly,' Jimmy began, 'you should consider that you ... don't know what he knows.'

Sanchez stared into his beer. 'When things get tough, it's the poor that suffer first.'

'Very true,' Jimmy agreed.

Sanchez added, 'It's them I work for, and work for passionately.'

'I know, I know you well,' Jimmy told our guest.

Sanchez stared at him for a moment. 'You going to ask me not to rock the boat?'

'Do you think you can do a better job than Samuels?' I asked him.

'You tell me,' Sanchez countered.

'Your time will come,' Jimmy told him. 'Rush it, or wait. Problem is, we do need stability right now.'

'You'll interfere?' Sanchez asked.

'If I thought you were a bad candidate, or an obstacle to my plans, you would have died in your youth,' Jimmy told Sanchez. 'I won't interfere in simple domestic politics, but I will say this: if you get into office in three years, 2017, you'll preside over the end of the troubles and the start of better times.'

'I'm not looking to be popular and remembered, I'm looking to do what's right now,' Sanchez forcefully stated.

'Then maybe you are the right man,' Jimmy conceded. 'But you'll need to convince the Senate that Samuels can't hold it together, and I think Samuels is good man. But let me give you a good piece of advice: tone it down till February, or it'll look like you're scare mongering and using the crisis for personal gain. And since we both know you're better than that ... you'll take my advice.'

An hour later, Samuels called me, maybe because I had called Sanchez. 'Paul, you had a meet with Sanchez?'

'Yes. He'll not back off.'

'No?'

'No.'

'I'll take a wild guess here, and say that you may know something I can use.'

'We can't be seen to interfere like that. Jimmy says you're a good man, and so is Sanchez. But here's an idea for you: appoint Sanchez to the disaster committee. Hell, put him in charge of it; bi-partisan politics!'

'Paul, you may have just given me a silver bullet. Thanks.'

That worried me, and I went and told Jimmy.

'If Sanchez takes the post it'll tarnish him, even if he does a good job. No one will want to see the doomsayer in office afterwards. People like to put problems behind them, and after the SARS outbreak is over Sanchez may remind them of it too much. Besides, Sanchez would see it as poison chalice. If he takes it, he deserves all he gets.'

Avoiding the press, we flew back, the official line being that the White House Disaster Committee expressed a lack of confidence in Fitz, but no one was buying it, especially not Fox News, who tore into Fitz – leaving a sinking ship. For once I agreed with them.

En route, I asked Jimmy about Fitz.

‘He wasn’t briefed till he won the election, and by then it was too late; the start of the troubles. If you want to be a president or a prime minister, it’s usually because you passionately believe that you can make a difference. On the campaign trail you formulate plans, and you dream about implementing them. To most, being the national leader is similar to what you’ve done with New Kinshasa: it’s about building things, improving things, making people’s lives better. It’s about ... hope for the future.

‘That hope was taken away from him, and he saw nothing ahead of him but disasters, disasters that – even if he handled them well – he’d get no thanks for. His job, now Samuels job, is a thankless task; that of presiding over a country and economy going backwards. Who wants that? Which person, dreaming of creating a New Kinshasa, wants to hear that it’ll be badly damaged in a few years? It would be soul destroying.

‘Fitz wanted his presidency to be like a baby, and to watch it grow and mature. He got a deformed child on life support, and couldn’t handle it. It takes a very special kind of person raise a kid like that, someone with more patience ... and hope, than the rest of us. I took away his hope, and instead of getting angry at Mother Earth and fighting back, he chose the easy option.

‘In some ways, he did the right thing for the wrong reasons. He should have gone before things got tough, but to do that in the right way would have been to recognise his own limitations, not abandon the baby on the church steps. History is unlikely to remember him well.’

Partisans

In the weeks that followed, Sanchez met with Samuels and accepted the post of Joint Disaster Planning Chief. I shook my head. But then Sanchez went public without discussing it first with Samuels, and made a statement.

‘In 2017, a tsunami will strike the Pacific region. Hawaii will be extensively damaged, the west coast of America, South America and Asia. We are now making plans for a mass evacuation.’

I went and found Jimmy, relaying the speech.

‘Not bad,’ Jimmy approved. ‘They can plan openly without revealing the true damage. It’s a good approach. He’ll get some flack for lying, but he’s thinking on his feet.’

We knuckled down and got ready for SARS II, the W.H.O. website permanently open on my xPad. It was basically an A4 type of iPad, and gave the user larger icons to play with, more information displayed. On my office walls I now had three iScreens, A3 size iPadS that were permanently displaying various web feeds, news feeds, or sites that I was interested in; standing-up computing had arrived. People stood in front of A3 screens on the wall, altering the display with a finger touch. Helen had one in the kitchen, and often used it for her baking recipes. Hers was voice activated, so she could instruct ‘Next page’ or ‘Scroll down’ when sticky fingers were best kept away from computer screens.

I sometimes annoyed the girls by using an A3 sized pad to read the newspaper websites. My eyes were fine, but I could get a lot of detail on one page. I just looked a bit silly when sat with the large pad.

In the main office, Jimmy now had six A3 pads on continuous live feeds, and scanned them for breaking news. He looked like a city trader, but was trading ideas and information, not bonds or stocks.

Then, one day in mid-October, a screen bleeped, a set of keywords detected. I stood and walked around to it, facing the iScreen on the wall. ‘First SARS deaths recorded in Asia.’

It had begun.

‘Computer, send message to Silo: It’s begun.’

I could see the little winged message icon flying off before I altered the parameters and removed the current keyword search, altering it to ‘2014 SARS death toll’.

Jimmy held a press conference, and was back to the rousing speeches, as well as a few practical tips. He had arranged for twenty million anti-bacterial soap dispensers to be produced for the UK, plus more than a hundred million packs of anti-bacterial wet-wipes. The hand-washes that normally adorned hospital walls were now to be found in shops, toilets, and even on the tube. A gang of people had been recruited to manage the tubes hygiene, wiping down handrails all day long.

Facemasks were produced in the billions around the world, and the tubes became very impersonal, if they weren't before. Enterprising individuals returned to producing custom masks, packs of a hundred; blue, pink, heart shapes, Playboy logos, or funny lines.

'I'm not worried about germs, just ugly.'

'I have a full-body condom if you're interested.'

'Let's have online sex. It's safe!'

The facemasks then evolved into pictures and graphics. You might see a skin coloured facemask with a beard. When lowered, the man was clean-shaven. Or a woman! Some displayed sharks teeth, others displayed big pink lips. Black masks were available, and Afro-Caribbean's could be seen making a statement about their ethnicity.

One enterprising company accepted digital images of your lower face, and printed the image for you. Mask on, you looked pretty much the same as before.

Jimmy and I visited Mapley and checked on the preparations for Greece, and for RF staff assisting in the UK. We ordered all leave cancelled and a full recall of national units to assist in their home countries. That done, Jimmy said there was little more that we could do.

The girls were a little depressed, the memories of lost friends still fresh, and still painful. I told them to buy anything that they may need, and that we may face a long and difficult winter. We opened up a basement room for planning, but not for SARS. This was for the Pacific evacuation. Emails were sent to all Pacific Islands, informing them to either plan for evacuation, or to move their small populations to mountain peaks on the day in question.

I then noticed that Jimmy had contacted all boat owners in the Pacific, informing them clearly that if they were a mile offshore that they'd be fine during the tsunami. Marinas made plans to empty on that date, and we started hiring every ocean going tub that we could find. Cruise liners were booked, but so were rusted old tubs. If they could transport people across the Pacific we offered to hire them in 2017.

Hawaii supported almost one and half million people, and retirees could now be seen to be returning to the States. Florida was safer. Hotel chains lost trade at first, but then lowered their prices, making good use of the "see if before it's destroyed" tack. Jimmy sent them shitty emails. Inevitably, indigenous peoples dug their heels in, suggesting that they'd take to the hills on the day of the tsunami, and

that their grandparents and ancestors had seen it all before. I checked online, and they had. Just not like this.

Sanchez announced that the island would be evacuated by force of arms, and that led to speculation about just how bad this tsunami could be. But the focus of attention soon shifted when a hundred Japanese tourists on the islands fell sick. A dozen died quickly, and Hawaii lost its tourist trade in a day. Three days later, and many of the Japanese tourists were dead.

China was seeing SARS cases in all provinces, Singapore was doing OK so far, but India was recording an exponential increase in cases. I watched the screens, staring at black figures on a white background ticking over, and returned to feeling useless. By that weekend the world was in panic mode, and those that were not panicking were depressed about it, or falling sick themselves.

The suicide rate was as high as it had been the previous winter, and growing. I sat looking at a morbid website, a graphic of Death with his sickle, the numbers ticking over. Worldwide, an estimated twenty-five thousand SARS related suicides had been recorded, if this site could be believed. From what I read in the local press, they may well have been right.

I busied myself with projects around New Kinshasa, often just staring at aerial views of the new city. There was little I could do to affect things in the world, but I could raise new buildings in Africa.

The following week, all non-essential air travel was banned. Bars and cinemas closed, public meetings now banned. I linked-in to sites that fed me details about Singapore, happy to see that they were not top of the SARS league, the league of deaths as a percentage of population.

Then I found an odd story, that of sailors discovering an island with no one left alive. The indigenous population, some three hundred people, had all died, no drugs available. Standing, I studied the trees outside, grey squirrels sat staring back at me. That feeling of hopelessness was back, and kicking me in the balls.

December was as terrible as the weather outside, the media coverage and the doom and gloom stories worse than reality. Jimmy held a press conference.

‘News media outlets the world over are exaggerating the pandemic, and making it worse than it actually is. Mankind will survive, and so will the vast majority of the people. The governments of each country should try to dampen the morbid fervour in the media, to stop them running away with their fears. The estimated number of people who will die is rubbish.

‘I take this opportunity ... to appeal directly to the people, to stop watching the news and reading the papers, unless those media outlets return to reporting things other than the end of the world. This ... is not the end of the world.’

Two British tabloids took the initiative and moved the gloom off the front pages and returned to smut, sex and political scheming and scandal, as well as stories about women that Jimmy had slept with. Progress.

Christmas Eve, 2014, saw an estimated nine million people dead. Despite that, we closed the doors on the outside world and tried to have some semblance of a Christmas for the sake of the girls. Truth was, we were doing it for ourselves as much as anyone. I woke every day with a bad feeling in my stomach, and went to bed dreading the dawn.

Christmas day saw Jimmy set out for the local hospital without telling anyone where he was going, the press given the slip. He walked into the children’s ward with his security in tow, and enquired about the kids. Eleven were suffering from SARS, had been injected with the super-drug, but were not responding. Jimmy took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeve, demanding the kids be injected. With the parents close by, the doctors were not about to argue unless they wanted to be thumped.

The kids were injected in turn with small doses, Jimmy moving onto the adult ward, a plug still in his arm and taped down. The same doctor identified the worst cases and, with a small crowd observing, injected each in turn. Twenty-five patients later, the medics were concerned for Jimmy; he had donated more than two pints already.

‘Keep going,’ Jimmy insisted.

With another pint extracted, Jimmy sat and ate a meal, drank plenty, and again offered up his arm, a raging debate going on amongst the medics. Jimmy grabbed an empty trolley and lay down, another pint extracted. ‘Wake me in exactly three hours.’

When he was nudged awake they took his blood pressure, finding it low, but not a concern. Another pint was taken, Jimmy closing his eyes again.

Word had leaked, the press labelling it as “The Christmas Miracle”. And the miracle did not stop there. For the next four days, Jimmy stuffed his face with meat, drank a great deal, and slept most of the day, giving blood three times a day. The Prime Minister expressed his concern at the risk to Jimmy’s health, as did many

world leaders, but Jimmy would not budge, even when visited by the girls and me.

On the fifth day he failed to wake, and the Prime Minister flew straight down, taking charge. He laid down the law: if any medic extracted any more blood they'd be arrested. Jimmy slept soundly, pulse and breathing normal - normally low - and the world waited. In Africa, people were traumatised to think that they might lose him, vigils held at many churches. A collective depression swept over the sub-continent.

When the news had reached me I cursed the big fella at length, sending a text message that simply said 'Arsehole!', knowing full well that he couldn't read it yet. I paced up and down, falsely reassured the household staff - which they could see through, then paced some more, wondering just what the hell I would do if he died.

People started calling me instead of Jimmy: matters of intelligence, fighting in Afghanistan, the works. Big Paul discussed a move by the Iranians to put more soldiers on their border with Afghanistan, some suggestion that Iranian aircraft were over-flying Afghan territory, and that they were supplying arms to the Taliban. I gave Big Paul permission to harass them at the border.

President Samuels called, sometimes just to chat, and I think he was looking for a little inspiration as well. I was soon the contact point for all of the world leaders, and starting to realise just how often they called Jimmy. The pressure was mounting, and that feeling in my gut would not go away.

Stood at the window in my office I leant forwards, my forehead against the cold glass, my hands in my pockets. The grass was wet, the leafless trees bending in the wind, the clouds low and angry as they raced past. Death was easy to picture in the wintertime. Fitz came to mind, buckling under the pressure, his hopes dashed. I know found myself feeling sorry for him, and wondering if I had what it took.

When my phone trilled it was Sanchez. I moved away from the window with a damp red mark on my forehead, but at least he couldn't see it. 'What's the time where you are?'

'9am, just about. So what the fuck is Silo up to?'

'I wish I knew, mate. It wasn't planned.'

'He still asleep?'

'Sleeping like a baby, or like someone who just gave ten pints over a few days.'

'Sounds like he's frustrated.'

‘Huh?’ I asked.

‘Desperate act, achieving little,’ Sanchez said. ‘But if I had his blood, and I could save a few more, I’d be doing the same fool thing.’

‘I guess. How’s it over there?’

‘We can put a man on the moon, we have the world’s largest and best military, but can we get health workers in to the projects – no.’

‘Jimmy said the poor would suffer the most.’

‘They are. A few health workers were shot up and robbed, so now they go in with soldiers, and just in daylight. First sign of trouble they leave, and by time they’re back there’s a few more dead.’

‘It’s a big country,’ I said. ‘Spread out.’

‘It is,’ Sanchez agreed. ‘They find bodies in remote cabins days after they died. Probably be a few found in a year or two.’

‘You don’t sound at all bitter,’ I sarcastically noted.

‘I’ve been watching the Chinese on the TV, running around in orderly lines, ticking names off registers, more health workers than sick people in most places.’

‘Careful, Mister Presidential Candidate, your right-wing media may not like such dissent.’

‘Fuck ‘em. What do they know.’

‘The reason Jimmy likes the Chinese system ... is for what you just described. They’re like busy little ants, efficient ants when it comes to stuff like this. Even with all your marvellous technology, right now the average Chinese citizen is better off with communism.’

‘Lot of people over here were pissed when he made that speech in Tiananmen Square. But he knew, he knew what would happen. We’re losing people because we can’t get to them, and they can’t get to hospital. Been a few shootings in public hospitals, a few riots. Could do with Rescue Force and the Rifles.’

‘Again, not something your media should be hearing. You’re the leaders of the free and democratic world, remember.’

‘What’s that word you lot use? Not quite “whatever” and not quite “shit”.’

‘Bollocks?’

‘Yes, *bollocks*,’ Sanchez said.

‘It’s nice to know that us poor Brits can bring something to our colonial cousins.’

‘I’m still going to try and unseat Samuels.’

‘You’re better placed where you are,’ I told him, not sure why I was telling him that. ‘Best of both worlds: you can help, but the blame stays with Samuels.’

‘I’m not worried about blame,’ Sanchez insisted. ‘If you worried about that you’d never get anything done. Too many politicians are about image and popularity rather than making tough decisions.’

‘I’m starting to warm to you, Mister Sanchez. Keep talking like that and you’ll start sounding like Jimmy.’

‘Why’s he not on the campaign trail himself?’

‘Here, in the UK? No way. He’d get more done outside of politics, and be less tarnished. People don’t like you politician types.’

‘He takes to the soap box often enough in the UK.’

‘Been to Hyde Park corner in London?’ I asked.

‘I have, I was a student who flew to Moscow thanks to you pair. So, why isn’t Jimmy involved with UK politics, he gives the Churchill speeches there?’

‘Oh, I’d take a wild guess and say that he’d be right fucking unwelcome by the existing parliamentarians. Not least because he would look so much better than them.’

‘Again, is it about being popular, or making a difference?’ Sanchez argued.

‘Jimmy will only get one chance to piss off the UK and US electorates,’ I cautioned. ‘Things have gone well up to now, and your Hardon Chase was a good ally, but we have our enemies over there, not least Fox News. And who’s to say that the next incumbent will cooperate, rather than want us shot.’

‘Appeal directly to the people,’ Sanchez suggested.

‘Now you are sounding like Jimmy.’

‘Maybe. I want what’s best for the poor in America, he wants what’s best for the poor the world over.’

‘Jimmy once said to me that politicians contain more hope than ability when they start, confusion in the middle, and more ability than hope at the end.’

Sanchez laughed. ‘Maybe.’

‘If you get the hot seat – and something goes wrong – you’ll lose not just America, but the planet. Give that some thought before desiring that cold marble seat in the clouds.’

‘Cold marble seat ... in the clouds? What, you think I want to be Zeus?’

‘Given that a wrong move by a president will end all life on this planet, you need to stop thinking about Alabama, and consider the big picture – or you’re the wrong man for the job.’

‘Cold marble seat in the clouds, eh?’

‘Was a time when I thought that the States should stop wasting US taxpayers dollars on policing the world. Now, some leadership might be a good thing, so long as it is leadership – and not you lot looking out for what’s best for your own taxpayers.’

‘I’ll dig out my soap box and dust it off.’

‘Got any kids?’ I asked when I noticed a picture of the girls on my desk.

‘Two. Six year old, who’s going on twenty, and a three year old Downs.’

‘Downs ... Downs Syndrome?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh.’

‘What’s ... *oh* supposed to mean?’

‘Something you just reminded me of.’

‘Let me know when Jimmy’s awake and back in the world.’

I went back to the window, thinking about my own abilities. I was a good father, I was certain of that, a good man as far as my aims in saving the world went, but I didn’t handle death of a large scale very well. Jack wasn’t busy, so I summoned him.

‘Jack, you’re up on military history, wartime leaders. And, presumably, the mentality of the leaders.’ I held my hands wide for a moment. ‘I don’t find that I handle all the death and destruction as well as I figure I should.’

‘Well, first of all, you’re comparing yourself to Jimmy, and none of us are going to measure up; we’ve not been through what he has. We don’t even know exactly what he’s been through. Second, you’re not supposed to handle it well; if you did we’d all worry about your sanity. Third, most great leaders were scared shitless and made lots of stupid mistakes, history romantically papering over the cracks for us. Some were brave, some just didn’t understand the dangers, and most were too scared of the populace to reverse a brazen decision.’

‘When I see the stats for the dead...’

‘You, me and the rest of the world. My wife cries herself to sleep or prays, and most sane people lose a lot of sleep. Paul, you’ve done a good job, and your lack of tolerance for large-scale death is a good thing, not a sign of weakness. No point in saving humanity ... just to lose our humanity.’

With Jack gone, I stood in the window again. ‘No point in saving humanity ... only to lose our humanity.’ I needed to fight the war, and come home from it, without the Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome.

Back at the house, I sat and stared down at baby Liz as she slept. ‘Wouldn’t leave you on the church steps. Shelly, maybe, but not you; you’re perfect.’ I stared down, thinking. ‘Who’d want to govern a damaged country? Who’d want to govern a damaged world?’ I adjusted her blanket. ‘Hope’s important, isn’t it, little one.’

‘Who you talking to?’ Helen asked, popping her head in from the kitchen.

‘The baby.’

‘Sounded like you were having a conversation.’

‘She’s the only that doesn’t answer back!’ I stepped into the kitchen and leant against a cabinet. ‘If she had born deformed, what would you have done?’

Helen’s brow pleated, and she stared back at me for several seconds. ‘What’s brought this on?’

‘Something Jimmy said the other day. He likened Fitz leaving, to the birth of a deformed baby.’

‘Why, for God’s sake?’

‘Fitz wanted a good term, he wanted to make a difference, and he inherited a mess, with more mess to come; a no-win scenario, just crisis management of a bad situation. He left the baby on the church steps and fucked off.’

Helen stopped cooking and took a moment. ‘Dependent children have their own attraction. I was in school with a girl who had a Downs daughter, and she was happy enough. But, it would test many people.’

‘I think maybe Jimmy drew the analogy about Fitz, but was thinking about himself. He once admitted that he didn’t think he could fix things, but he obviously came back anyway. Fifty years of trying to fix things, all the while knowing that you’ll probably fail. I couldn’t do it.’

‘Success or failure is not the point, he has to try,’ Helen suggested, attacking a carrot.

I nodded absently to myself. ‘We could try and leave Shelly on the church steps.’

‘I tried. She called a taxi, billed it to us, and came in late.’

New Year, 2015

New Year's day, Jimmy woke and stirred. 'Good sleep,' were his first words. Followed by, 'I feel pretty good. Got the kettle on, love?'

The police escorted him out, under orders to prevent the further giving of blood, and to the helipad, the hospital grounds crammed with people just stood waiting for news. On the raised helipad, Jimmy stopped and stared down at the crowd as they stared back up. He waved. They waved back.

Back at the house, we all had a go at him about trying to donate more blood than was practical.

'I could have given more, I did when you were all hurt by that car bomb at Skids place. Now, stop fussing, children.'

I returned to scanning figures, finding that half a million had died in the States. And, as Jimmy had said, and Sanchez had echoed, the deaths were skewed towards the homeless and the poor. Sanchez, meanwhile, was making a name for himself with his soapbox, shouting his way to better resources for the health workers. He rallied retired nurses and doctors and gave them jobs, organising district clinics in poor areas, dedicated health buses – touring the poor areas, and soup kitchens. The man was growing on me.

The preparations for the evacuation of Athens were going as well as we had expected: not well. The residents had dug their heels in and riots had broken out. Stood in front of the TV I said, 'Go on, set fire to it and break the damn windows, its all coming down anyway.'

Rescue Force Europe was duly mobilised, and moved to Macedonia and Bulgaria, a line of white jeeps ten miles long. Forward units moved into Athens and set-up tents in parks and on football grounds, soon being joined by a few local residents. But if you were not looking for the story you would not have found it, the main news focused on SARS, and the climbing death toll.

With a hundred thousand now dead in the UK, Athens shook and fell, the Acropolis reduced to rubble and dust, the cradle of democracy shaken to its foundations. Rescue Force moved in, searching for some thirty thousand die-hard residents who would not budge, whilst tending small injuries further out from the epicentre, all the while finding and treating people for SARS.

The economy of Greece was in tatters, the economy of the world not far behind. Confidence was gone, retail shopping and the entertainment industry well down and having a knock-on effect. So

far, no country had imposed Martial Law, the worst of the fighting being in the States as injections were requested at gunpoint.

In Africa, three million people were dead, again mostly slum dwellers, Nigeria having not long recovered from Lagos Fever. But since the TV news crews if Africa did not got into the slums much, the ordinary citizens of Africa were getting on with their lives, blissfully ignorant of the parts of their cities that they never visited.

African Rescue Force units were busy in the slums and villages, saving those that they could. Some slums offered hardly a case, others lost tens of thousand of people, ghost towns created. SARS was being indiscriminate. In Gotham City and New Kinshasa, the numbers were relatively low, the areas not densely populated, and the workers in New Kinshasa again faired well.

The city was coming along nicely, several government departments having moved up from old Kinshasa, some sixty thousand people living and working in the city so far. The marina was finished, the shopping centre nearly ready, the first few high-rise buildings finished and occupied. Three buildings under construction would eventually dominate the skyline, each some twenty-five storeys high.

North of the city, new gated-estates were popping up every day, the houses sold as soon as they became available. With the completion of the city's towers, and new areas of apartment blocks, an additional thirty thousand people could move in, a few new ministries moved over. Kimballa himself was due to move his people during May, his Presidential Palace suitably splendid, a house built for him just down the lake from mine.

"Millionaires Row", as it was now officially titled, had been extended by three miles, mansions popping up all along it. They would be built by the corporation for very little, put on the market, and would make a decent profit for the corporation in these troubled times. At least, they were troubled for the outside world. Africa was doing well, internalising its markets, no sign of a slow down at all, only tourism suffering.

The following week, South Africa just suddenly caught a cold all at once, some half a million people dead in a few days. The bug swept around the country in a wave moving anti-clockwise and removed two million citizens before it even paused for breath.

The end of January saw the Indians release provisional figures of five million dead, collation of those figures a month behind. SARS had found a home in the Indian slums and swept through with little

mercy, the slum dwellers not even conscious of where they might find a doctor with a suitable injection for them.

Singapore seemed to have developed an immunity, and only ten thousand had died, but China was hit hard, some six million dead. Their stats were odd, in that rural families tended to die ahead of city dwellers all breathing on each other. Japan lost a million, North Korea again suffering, its peasant farmers suffering. Russia lost half a million, and the Iranians again claimed that we manufactured the disease. And that was after they reported their own cases and we flew them a suitable number of injections.

Meanwhile, on the Iranian/Afghan border, Somali Rifles were sneaking across with Good Morning grenades, hiding them on the dusty tracks used by the Iranian Army, and inflicting high casualties. The Iranians were high on blame, low on evidence, Big Paul taking the “harass” order literally.

The Iranian foot soldiers, taking casualties from invisible weapons, were not keen to go out on patrol. When their barracks blew up, they were not keen to stay either. The provocation eventually worked as Jimmy had desired it would work, and a modest force of Iranian tanks and armour moved across the border in the hope at least of finding and killing someone, or anyone, and gaining evidence of the ghosts that plagued them.

They found nothing, not so much as a track. They were, however, filmed crossing the border and entering Afghanistan. The UN Security Council met, facemasks worn – hands washed after shaking, and condemned the aggressive move.

After four days of driving around and finding nothing to shoot at, the Iranian armour retraced its steps and headed back to the border, running straight into a line of anti-tank mines and losing a dozen tanks before they could react. They manoeuvred around the stricken tanks, only to encounter more mines as nightfall came on. In the morning, they backed up, only to find that the box had been closed, dozens of Good Morning grenades strategically placed.

An entire armoured brigade was lost, the Somalis moving in to finish off the survivors before leaving the area quickly. The carnage was filmed from the air, the Iranians now asking tough questions, and fully believing that American armour was in Afghanistan. Their spies inside the country said otherwise, reporting not so much as an American jeep.

For the Revolutionary Guard it was a setback, and a loss of face, as pictures of the defeat were emailed around Iran, pictures of Somali soldiers stood next to ruined Iranian armour. It would lead to

a little blame setting, and a few meetings of the ruling elite. As had been hoped for. Jimmy made a call, the world preoccupied with SARS, with little care for Iranian border disputes.

Shelly turned fifteen, and dressed like a twenty-five year old for her party, her school friends trying to flirt with me. They also appeared twenty-five, and when one sat on my lap I could see Helen ready to clobber someone, whether it be me or the girl. When I was fifteen, girls certainly didn't look like this.

Despite what was going on with the world outside, the party was not sedate by any means, and I was glad to see Shelly let her hair down. I was concerned at the booze, the make-up and the slutty clothes, the talk of men and of studying abroad. But besides all that, yes, I was happy that she was happy. Mostly.

In our basement, we still had a command centre for the Afghan campaign, officers still present and producing reports, and now we made ready for what Jimmy called the most dangerous and foolhardy adventure so far. We were off to a good start, I thought. Without consulting with the Russians, Chinese, or even President Samuels, Jimmy readied what was labelled as an insert into south-eastern Iran, to supply the anti-Tehran rebels weapons and ammunition.

Six An12's made ready in Kabul, loaded with weapons and supplies, and flew down to Kandahar. At the airfield, the supplies were unloaded, much to the surprise of the pilots, who were escorted off, a wad of dollars for each man. Somali Rifles, trained as pilots, plus a few mercenary Somali pilots, took charge of the aircraft, five hundred Somali Pathfinders boarding the planes after a few extra bits of kit were added to the An12's structure.

At 9pm, the aircraft lifted off in sequence, and Jimmy said, 'This is crazy, irresponsible, and a huge gamble. But ... but I'd don't give a fuck anymore. I can't have the Iranians spoiling my plans between here and 2025, we've achieved too much. So to hell with it; we'll practice a little brinkmanship.'

The aircraft reached the Iranian border little over an hour later, the nearest Iranian military airfields now subject to the kind of radar jamming they could not have allowed for; 2025 technology. Following a course that would cross the least number of towns and cities, the planes pressed on un-harassed, radars returning to an operational state after the aircraft had passed. Sleepy Iranian Air Force operators did not launch fighters.

At 9pm, Iranian time, web servers had been attacked, all soon crashed. The computers at Khatam ol-Anbia missile defence base

had been hacked days before, and now displayed false readings to their operators. All was well in the skies above Iran.

At 10pm, a TU154 aircraft on approach from Armenia, now at eight thousand feet and descending towards Mehr Abad Runway, central Tehran, heading west to east, fired its built-in powerful EMP and took out most of central Tehran, plus its airport. The Tu154 turned northwest, returning to Armenia since radio contact was now not possible with Tehran. And because they had never intended landing.

Two hours later, and with the target airport blacked out, the An12s touched down in sequence, their lights out, advanced night sights employed by the pilots. They landed on full flaps and minimum speed, halting less than halfway down the runway. Free of their cargo of Somali soldiers, they powered up fully and took off again. Inside of nine minutes, five hundred Somalis were on the ground, airport workers hearing the activity, but not seeing it. They were still trying to get their lights back on, nothing now working. Dark shadows bumped into each other in corridors, questions asked, matches lit to inspect faces.

On the runway the weather was terrible, freezing rain falling on patches of snow a few days old. A low cloud cover afforded the Somalis a pitch-black night, the almost perfect darkness aided by a lack of lights coming from the city. And those that did venture out onto the streets wore hats held down on this atrocious night.

In six columns, the Somalis marched unseen into Tehran. Few residents were on the streets at this hour, the city quiet, a sprinkling of motorists cursing their uncooperative cars and walking home. Police officers in the wrong street died quietly, hit by dark shadows, the officer's bodies hidden where possible.

Around Iran, various agencies were now worried, all contact lost with Tehran, something that had never happened before. But the disadvantage of a strong central government was paralysis and confusion. One infantry commander, based just outside of Tehran, was concerned, and sent soldiers off in lorries to see what was wrong. They soon found their path blocked, and peered out through the rain at an oddly darkened city.

The Somalis split into smaller groups at designated points, and within an hour had reached their objectives, moving through the dark to gates manned by cold and confused guards, silenced weapons used to blind or kill. The main parliament building was penetrated, Somalis soon on the roof and planting explosives before withdrawing, some thirty guards killed in the process.

Two Somali groups approached the main barracks used by the Revolutionary Guard commanders when they stayed for meetings, accommodation provided for mostly junior ranks. Lasers, targeted with thermal sights, blinded gate guards sheltering from the rain, darts silently finishing the men off. The first group reached its objective without raising the alarm; an accommodation block. Through the dark and the rain, ghostly shadows of men placed battery grenades around the ground floor, moving onto the next block.

A whistle blew, someone trying to raise the alarm, a silenced shot taking the man down from a hundred yards. But boots could be heard on concrete above the howl of the wind. A line of Somalis knelt down and waited. Some twenty Iranian soldiers, well wrapped up against the cold and rain, ran forwards, not seeing the dark outlines of the Somalis till it was too late. One Iranian soldier managed to fire a burst into the air before falling. If the Iranians who heard the shots could have, they might have turned on the lights.

The Somalis withdrew to a dark corner, and figured that the barracks may empty of its sleeping officers. The Somali officer in charge raised a radio detonator and pressed, the accommodation blocks blowing and collapsing, most of Tehran now registering the blast. The game was up, not that the Somalis cared.

Across the darkened city, senior commanders grew worried, the lack of illumination accentuated by the rumble of distant blasts. They did not have long to wait for their fears to be realised. Three city hotels, favoured by the guard commanders and reserved for the current round of national meetings, imploded and collapsed.

On the edge of the city, smart villas exploded, senior commanders killed, no way for the facts of the emerging crisis to be communicated about the country. In the city centre, a smart apartment block was paid a visit by the Somalis, its address plaque checked with a torch to see that it was the correct apartment block. They shattered the door glass with silenced weapons, moved inside and climbed to the fourth and fifth floors. Door locks were duly shot off, standard grenades tossed in.

After forty minutes of clearing apartments, two Somalis wounded and one killed by a guard commander keen to survive, the Rifles withdrew, panicked residents on the stairs ignored.

After two hours of action, the Somalis jogged back across the city, firing at police and soldiers where they were encountered, Iranian police now making use of torches and lamps, which just quickened their departure by highlighting their positions. The

weather remained dreadful, the Somalis jogging through the driving rain back towards the airfield, some units taking forty minutes to return.

At the airport terminal, the first Somali unit to arrive back crept forwards, picking off Iranian police and soldiers through the dark, before forming a line between the buildings and the runway. A signal was sent. Circling, and maintaining a holding pattern north of the city, the An12s now began their descent and approach, benefiting again by a GPS approach system, but also now benefiting by a two signals from the ground, transmitters placed either end of the runway.

Breaking through the low cloud, pilots with advanced thermal imagers adjusted their track and touched down. The first aircraft was the fuel tanker, its cargo pushed off halfway along the runway and onto the edge of the tarmac by cold wet hands. No longer burdened by its heavy cargo, the An12 powered up and lifted off, heading east through the gloom.

At the airport terminal, people could again hear the aircraft across the darkened airfield, the Somalis with the advantage of being able to both see Iranian staff moving around, and to shoot them effectively from two hundred yards.

With the returning Somali units grouping on the northern side of the runway, the second An12 landed, soon being keenly refuelled in a well-practised routine. With its loading ramp down, a hundred and ten Somalis stepped aboard. Refuelled, it opened the throttles and powered down the runway in almost total darkness, the pilots viewing the runway well enough to see the grass moving in the wind.

When the last aircraft touched down, the Somalis who had been lined up facing the terminal walked backwards, four men left behind till the loading was complete. They then walked backwards when signalled, scanning the airfield and firing at movement. At the aircraft tail, they scanned the airfield one final time, and jumped aboard. Five minutes later they were heading east.

In the morning, the residents of Tehran woke to a silent world; no traffic, no radios, no TV. No irate drivers were tooting horns as they made their way to work – the furry dice swaying, coffee shops were cursing the electricity grid, police officers were kicking uncooperative motorbikes. Residents asked neighbours if their electricity was off as well, and people walked to work, only to find their computers fried. Tehran had been pulsed back into the Stone Age.

At the house, Jimmy called for an “M” Group meeting, but had also called for Israeli New Dave, as well as the Saudi Ambassador. The Whitehall minders were in on the meeting, as was our resident White House representative.

Jimmy began, ‘Last night, Tehran was hit by a powerful EMP blast.’

Our British Government minders were immediately concerned, if not shocked.

New Dave said, ‘We wondered what the hell happened; we lost contact with our people there. And this morning, the entire military is on alert. They can’t talk to each other, but they’re on alert.’

‘You hit Tehran with advanced weapons?’ the Saudi Ambassador asked.

‘I did,’ Jimmy told him. ‘Because otherwise, the Iranians would have tested their first nuclear device within a year, causing the Israelis and the Americans to strike at them. If that had happened, the Iranians would have closed the Straits and blocked all gulf oil. They would then have fired missiles at Israel, and at American bases in the region, the most likely outcome a complete disaster for everyone.’

‘Now, in addition to the EMP device, Somali commandos landed at the airport, undetected after penetrating Iranian radar, and destroyed several barrack blocks housing the Revolutionary Guard. They also demolished a few hotels currently hosting members of the Guard, and destroyed numerous villas and apartments. The loss of life amongst the Revolutionary Guard is high, but the Somalis *did not* target the religious leaders.’

‘The Tehran Government has been set back many years, and they’ll have to recruit a few more officers. They will, however, now realise that they’re vulnerable, that we can reach them if we want to. The religious leaders will realise that we could have taken them out as well. Hopefully.’

‘Ladies and gentlemen, if the Iranians do not halt their nuclear ambitions, then next time I’ll take the gloves off. In the meantime, I would appreciate all of you using what influence you have to play down the Iranian’s complaints, and to keep it out of the media as much as possible. I would, however, expect the Iranians to want to hit back at the Somalis, and to attack the Somalis in Kandahar.’

‘You’ve set a trap,’ the Saudi Ambassador said.

‘If they cross the border they won’t return,’ Jimmy said with a menacing smile. ‘And you, Mister Ambassador, are well aware of

the cost to you of the Iranians closing the Straits, or firing on oil tankers.’

With the guests gone, the “M” Group and the other officials called their national leaders to give the good news. Each “M” Group government registered its protest, but had more pressing problems to deal with. Jimmy had timed it well, and not just a rainy night for the attack in Tehran.

I scanned the media, finding only that commercial aircraft were being turned away from Tehran because of a power outage. The next day the story was similar, no mention of an attack. Could they be trying to cover it up, I thought to myself. On the third day the media was reporting claims of terror attacks in Tehran at the hands of Somali extremists. Begs the question how they got into the country.

A full four days after the attack, Iranian fighters took the skies, screaming towards Kandahar as the weather improved. Twenty miles inside the border, Somalis sat on a line of diesel-powered generators that vibrated and belched smoke, a continuous wave EMP device positioned on a rise a hundred yards away, and pointing east at an angle of forty-five degrees.

With a cold leg of lamb in hand, the Somali officer in charge peered up at con-trails, watching as the neat lines broke into spirals and dissipated. Thirty-five Iranian fighters ploughed into the ground, none closer than twenty miles to Kandahar. A change of plan was called for by the Iranians. In anticipation, the Somalis moved the continuous wave EMP devices, repositioning them as dusk came on, three additional units deployed.

Medium range Iranian rockets were prepared, erected and fired, all slamming into mountains, one landing in Pakistan, one veering towards Kabul. The Somalis in Kandahar went about their business unmolested, the local Taliban reporting no hits by aircraft or rocket.

A second wave of aircraft crossed the border the next morning, screaming low down valleys, banking and turning wildly as they progressed. The last thing the pilots saw was the ground coming up a bit too quickly, twenty aircraft lost.

This led to an odd response from Jimmy. He nudged the Somalis to open indirect talks with the Iranians. The Iranians refused to negotiate.

At the height of the SARS pandemic, the numbers falling sick horrifying, and the world traumatised by the deaths, the Iranians moved tanks towards the Afghanistan border. They crossed unopposed, avoiding the area where their previous tank brigade had been destroyed, and kicked up a dust storm as they trundled east.

Tanks, armoured personnel carriers, attack helicopters; they moved forwards in attack formation, whilst finding nothing worth attacking, penetrating sixty miles by the second day.

Oddly enough, the first shot fired was by a Taliban group not happy to see the Iranians moving across the border. The second shot would come in Tehran, as the parliament finally convened. The Afghan agent in Tehran, a member of the Northern Alliance, lifted his radio detonator as he stood on the roof of an apartment block, and pressed. The roof of the parliament building blew, collapsing the building, no one surviving. The President, his deputies, and the entire congress were all now dead. They should have negotiated.

The Iranian commander leading the tank advance was no fool. He had his force well spread out, and he had scouts up ahead. He even had mine clearing equipment, and they diligently checked the roads ahead as they advanced, adopting a random route and trying to be unpredictable. But on the third day he had to manage an eighty mile supply line back to the border, more again beyond it. Now, as his fuel trucks moved along roads on the Iranian side, they blew up, culverts and bridges along the border also blown. With EMPs fired at the attacking force at the same time, no advance warning of the lack of fuel would be coming.

Within a day of reaching Kandahar, the Iranian commander split his force, determined that some at least would reach Kandahar and attack. He split his force and moved them east into the desert, four prongs heading northeast towards their target. They made good progress and halted at dusk, just ten miles shy of Kandahar, the city lights visible to some units. Planning a combined dawn attack, they made camp, secure in the knowledge that they could see anyone approaching in this barren and flat land.

Corporal Mohamed Aleen, Somali Rifles, lifted his head and thanked Allah. He was under a tank, not under its tracks. At 1am, with the tank crew asleep nearby, he placed his battery grenade under the tank and crawled slowly out to a cold and dark night, no stars visible. Seeing a guard patrolling, he hit the man with a dart, frozen till he was sure that no one heard the man drop. He crawled away whilst covered in a desert coloured camouflage wrap.

Far enough away from the tanks, he lifted up and stepped softly forwards. With his back to the tanks, he switched on three pins of barely discernible green light and ran forwards. Those three lights lit up like a Christmas tree for the night sights watching, and no one fired on him. Seeing a gully, he jumped in, soon aware of other dark shadows moving about.

‘Who are you?’ he whispered.

‘Squad Three.’

‘Where’s Squad Five?’

‘East, half a mile.’

Corporal Aleen lifted up and headed east.

An hour before dawn, the Iranians were awake and moving, flysheets torn down, coffee made, tanks mounted. Then the first bodies were found, the alarm given. A mad scramble was made for tanks and armoured personnel carriers, whistles blown. It was too late.

Radio signals were sent, tanks blown apart, nearby soldiers killed or wounded, the battery grenades enough to lift a tank and drop it. Corporal Aleen peered through his binoculars, acting as spotter for a sniper with an M82 fifty calibre.

‘Officer, right of the two burning tanks. The man waving his arms.’

Their forward view was obscured as sand lifted from the muzzle blast, a chorus of reports now registering as other snipers engaged targets. From behind him, the corporal could hear mortar crews opening up, wondering if the Iranians knew that they were surrounded on all sides, and that six thousand Somalis held the land that they had made a happy camp in.

The battle raged till noon, many tanks firing at shadows and gullies, but rarely hitting anything worthwhile. Anti-tank RPGs, improved by the Shanghai kids, tore off tracks and immobilised tanks, the crews picked off when they emerged. By 3pm, the clouds clearing and the desert warming, no resistance was left, isolated pockets of Iranians firing outward with small arms and being picked off by snipers crawling forwards, their shrouds the colour of the sand.

At nightfall the Somalis pulled back, teams with thermal imagers moving forwards to find hidden individuals. By dawn it was all over, the Somalis marching back toward Kandahar, thirty killed, fifty wounded, quite a few men lost under tank tracks.

The Iranians got the message, although I wasn’t sure if they would try and strike back all the more once they had recovered. They knew for certain that no force, and no aircraft, would return from Afghanistan.

Little in the way of public condemnation of the events made it to the western media, but Pakistan seemed very loud in its condemnation of the “terror” attack on Iran. The rest of the world found it odd that the Iranians, of all people, were claiming to be

subject to terror attacks. And by the Somalis of all people. Inside Iran, the super Persian psyche also had a hard time with that claim.

Aftermath

March, 2015, offered us a false hope as the number of new SARS cases fell. They continued to fall for a whole ten days, then shot back up. It was as if someone was not counting properly, and catching up later.

Oddly enough, people got used to the new reality. They went to work, delivered babies, threw parties, and hoped for the best. Life trundled on. The girls did not seem to be as badly affected as the first time, and some of the kids that the girls hung around with even made jokes about the pandemic.

The TV news had stopped counting the dead, and had modified their programming as their viewer audience fell off; people got fed up with the doom and gloom and so avoided the news, favouring soaps and movies. Jimmy made noises to that effect, encouraging people to just get on with their lives. He flew over to Greece and toured the ruins - hard to tell now which were ancient ruins and which were more recent. Tented communities had sprung up, and people had started to rebuild their shattered homes, the Athenians proving resilient. TV interviews, of retired Greek couples, displayed their defiance in the face of adversity. 'The quake could not get us out of our house, and neither will SARS.' It made me smile.

The economy was a worry, because the retail sector was hurting, hotels, airlines and holiday companies failing by the day. They reached a low and bounced off the bottom, getting used to their new reality.

March was the worse month, but when the number of new cases fell in April, Jimmy said that it was probably over. I watched the figures fall, or rather saw the rate of increase fall, and took hope by it. In truth, all of us had hardened to it, that human ability to get used to a new reality, as people did during the six years of the Second World War.

During it all, Liz learnt to toddle, Lucy great with her younger sister, and getting more baby-time than Shelly these days since Shelly had boyfriends to see. Shelly pretended that she was seeing the same lad, but the security informed us about three different lads.

My daughter was something of a puzzle to me, because she was extremely bright, easily qualifying as a nerd, her room was immaculate, nothing out of place, and she was never late for anything except getting home.

Yet she had this cavalier attitude to boys, Lucy reporting to us that Shelly would always ask the boy out, set the dates, and be a right bossy-boots with her boyfriends. If they wanted an extra date she would stop seeing them. If they couldn't make a date she'd stop seeing them. Basically, the poor lad would have to wait by the phone and do as he was told. It wasn't even as if we could tell her that her studies would suffer, since she was a good three years above the brightest kid in school.

By May, things were improving, the weather putting a smile on people's faces, the number of new cases falling off rapidly. Jimmy made a speech.

'If you want to help yourselves, then help the British and European economies. Go to the coast, start going out again, take a holiday, especially in Greece. The best thing that you can do to help the people of Greece, is to take a holiday there this summer. I appeal to all of the peoples of northern Europe to take a break if you can, and to visit Greece if you can.'

It made him popular in Greece, his approval rating in the UK still around ninety percent. Bits and pieces of the attack on Tehran hit the papers, but no one really cared, the Iranians now consolidating, and quietly ignoring Afghanistan and the Somalis. I asked Jimmy about them.

'Their gut instinct is to fight, but they can see their losses, and so can the populace. If they lose more soldiers or planes, or suffer another EMP, the people will be well pissed off at them. They may not be elected, but they still need support.

'The attack was a hell of a trauma for them, and for a few other nations as well. People now know that we can fly over their airspace undetected, taking out their cities, and the cost to the Iranians has been huge. I sent messages through third parties, and suggested that if they give up their nuclear programme we'll drop sanctions. They have a new President – well, they have a new everybody in government – and the new guys must be thinking that the same could happen to them.

'But the truth is, I don't know how they'll react in the long term. If they push ahead with a weapons programme I'll hit their major cities, and EMP them back into the Stone Age. It's either that, or America strikes, and that's best avoided.'

‘Where are we, exactly, in the grand scheme of things?’ I asked.

‘Hardon Chase, or his equivalent, was supposed to be at our throats for eight years. What happened instead, was that Hardon Chase assisted us more than I could have ever hoped for, so we’re we’ll ahead in many areas. My original route-map was what would have happened without any interference, with a few possible permutations and offshoots.

‘We’ve passed through SARS I and SARS II, Lagos Fever and the Greek quake, and now we have the Hawaii quake on the horizon. Sanchez is doing far better than expected, and we might get away with minimal backlash.’

‘Backlash?’ I queried.

‘Well, it could be argued that if I told businesses on the Hawaiian Islands twenty years ago what I know, then they’d not have built premises or hotels. There’ll be legal action, or attempts at it, plenty of complaints; as much from the indigenous islanders as anyone else.’

‘You didn’t cause the damn quake.’

‘No, but some may argue that I should have warned them sooner.’

‘No one would have believed you back then,’ I pointed out.

‘Which will be my defence. Anyway, couple of weeks from now we’ll need to get on the plane and go rally the populations, see if we can’t kick start the world economy. We’ll start by subsidising holidays to Africa.’

At my desk, I opened an email from Bob Davies and clicked on the link it offered. A website listed the total number of people injected, and the resultant survival rates. It pinned the survival rate at over ninety-five percent, and the number of people injected at just over two hundred million. With a finger on the screen, I doubled-checked the digits. Twice. I re-read Bob’s note: ‘Paul, you just saved almost two hundred million people. Not a bad day’s work!’

The screen remained in focus, but everything outside of that narrow view seemed oddly distorted for a while. With my face feeling a little flush, I slowly stood, turning towards the window, an image of the Alsatians chasing squirrels up the trees. Thirty-five million people had died worldwide, most never having been injected, and most had passed away unnoticed in the world’s slums. That was the figure I was concentrating on, and I now cursed myself for not listening to Jimmy’s boring and repetitive speeches, the one’s about concentrating on the survivors and not dwelling on the dead.

Putting my hands in my pockets, I stared out of the window, feeling pretty damn good about things all of a sudden. And proud of Jimmy, a strange new feeling for me. It wasn't that I wasn't proud of the big fella, but I just never thought of him in those terms; he wasn't the kind of person you patted on the back.

If nothing else, no one could take this away from him. I told my secretary that I was popping down to the house, and I walked past the lake, one of the guards fishing. I waved, he waved; it was that kind of day.

At the main office, I said, 'A website is claiming that two hundred million were injected, and saved by the drug.'

Jimmy eased back from his screen. 'About right.'

'About right? Is that all you have to say? You saved a quarter billion people!'

Everyone was now focused on Jimmy. He eased up and checked the biscuit tin, saying, 'What do you expect me to say?'

'How about seeming pleased, ya big ugly lump.'

'I am pleased, but there's more work to do.'

'I think I can honestly say ... that I speak for the planet when I say ... you've earned a day off.'

'Day off? Can't even get decent biscuits in here,' Jimmy quipped.

'Because you eat them all before lunch!' Sharon complained.

'I'm a growing boy,' Jimmy said mock defensively.

I threw my hands in the air and let out a sigh, a look exchanged with Helen. Back in my office, I searched on the kind of stats that the website had displayed, finding many links to it, and comments about it. It seems that we'd never pay for a drink again in several countries. I rang the Prime Minister and discussed the figures, our PM having his own UK stats, and I hinted that he say something nice about Jimmy. A firm hint. No sooner had I lowered my phone than Jimmy walked in, a rare visitor to my office. He walked around my desk without saying anything and peered out of the window.

'No biscuits up here either, we hide them from you!' I told him.

He nodded absently. 'It's good to save lives, which sounds a bit obvious and a bit naff, but I look at 2025 and see the ... waste of it all; to save so many now, and to risk them all later. It ... takes the edge off the excitement.'

'We saved a quarter billion people for fucks sake. If we can do that, why can't we fix 2025?'

He stared out of the window. 'Some days I hate myself.'

I frowned hard. 'What? What the fuck for?'

He heaved a big breath, putting his hands in his pockets, still staring out of the window. 'None of us can detach ourselves from our memories, things we've done in the past, things we allowed to happen. If I was a robot it would be better, but my path to this point has been littered with death and destruction, and misery.

'I can see their faces, I can see the bodies, and part of me is angry for running out on them to come back through time. These people - the people here - they're not really *my people*. My people ... are the cold and dishevelled people in post-apocalyptic Canada. That's the real place, this is the ... other place; warm showers and full bellies. What happened back there ... that'll never go away, no matter how long I live.'

'But ... aren't you doing it for those people?'

'There's more to it than that, it's not so simple. There's a lot you don't know yet.' He turned. 'And, hopefully, you'll be there to save me at the end.'

'Save ... you? At the end of what? 2025?'

'No. When you know ... you'll know; 2025 is not the final battle. 2025 is ... D-Day 1944; a gamble, strategy, an all or nothing fight that could go either way depending on the weather. And get some biscuits in for me next time, you earn enough.'

The British elections had been delayed due to SARS, the opposition parties not kicking up a fuss, but Jimmy gave the PM a nudge in June to call a snap election, a few weeks of sedate campaigning endured by the British public. The opposition parties were in disarray, not least because the existing PM had done a good job during the winter crisis.

The existing PM again wished to step down, by Jimmy encouraged him to keep going, even using phrases like 'the country needs you', guaranteed to tug a few patriotic heart strings. The PM won by a reasonable majority, now entering his fifth term as one of the longest serving elected heads of state.

Summertime

The improving weather lifted spirits, and not just in the UK. In the UK, people took Jimmy's advice and went to the coast, all hotels fully booked, zoos and parks jammed by long lines. The northern

Europeans flew down to Greece, many Greeks sleeping in tents to free up hotel rooms occupied by displaced families; the tourist revenue was more important.

We offered subsidised flights down to Goma and the world got on a plane, the collective sigh of relief being huge. The lodges in Africa filled up, and the animals of the savannah once again stared back at the strange pink animals in green jeeps staring at them.

Jimmy and I went around the world in Air Force One, now officially called Silo One, and were greeted by huge crowds wherever we landed. Even the Pope had changed his tone, the American Bible Belt having belted up.

The reporters that flew with us were still friendly, but now it was a different kind of friendly. The world had been curious about us for a long time, and we had achieved celebrity status long before exposure. After exposure, people had been stunned to find new possibilities in space and time, had opened up to new ideas and radical thinking, and most had been in awe of Jimmy. Now, having been to the edge of destruction and back, the people were on our side fully, and for the most part grateful. Now, the people had a firm hope.

I worried about that hope, because I knew Jimmy's reservations about 2025 and beyond. I worried that the hope placed in us would be dashed in the years ahead. The new kind of friendliness displayed by the press was one where they stopped being hacks and regained their humanity, often listening to us talking without trying to write it down.

It was a good summer, marred only by a few bombs going off courtesy of the Iranians. Jimmy had been pressing the Iranians to talk, and they finally agreed after a few threats were made. They came to London and we greeted them at the club. Given that they had set-off bombs in Africa, I was in two minds about whether or not to shake hands, or smack them in the face. Still, we had hurt them first.

Settled around a table in the computer room of the club, Jimmy began with, 'I regret the attack on you by the Somali Rifles, despite what you may think. And I regret giving the Somalis advanced weaponry.'

That was stretching the truth a bit.

'This has all come about because of – in simple terms - your long standing disputes with Israel, America and the west – a clash of cultures since your revolution. It has also come about because of al-Qa'eda's attacks on Somalia, the Somali incursions into

Afghanistan, and the huge mistake you made by supplying your otherwise adversaries – the Taliban – with weapons to hit Somali and western forces in Afghanistan.

‘Following the supply of rockets to the Taliban, which you may obviously try and deny, I became more involved. But that involvement was not the main reason I supplied the Somalis with weapons, it was not even your nuclear weapons programme. It was because I knew for definite that Israel and America would soon attack you, bombing your nuclear reactors and development facilities, and that the resulting conflict would have led to a Middle East war, the closing of the Straits, the destruction of the world economy ... and may have led directly to a global conflict.’

They sat looking stony-faced, but listening intently.

‘I am, as you are aware, a time traveller. If you don’t believe that, you must ask yourself where the advanced technology came from; the technology that defeated your radars and crippled your capital. If you believe with your own eyes the damage done, then you should also believe that I’m a time traveller, and that I possess future technology and weapons.

‘Now, we’re here to try and solve this problem, gentlemen, not to escalate it. And I’m willing to negotiate, to compromise, and to offer incentives. I won’t insult your intelligence by doing anything other than talking directly. If you give up your nuclear weapons ambitions and ease off on supporting Hezzbolah, we’ll not only leave you alone, we’ll lift sanctions and try and help your economy. That, gentlemen, is the crux of this meeting.

‘Now, I know you have the right to self-defence, and that Israel has nuclear weapons, and that it’s an imperfect world. However we got to this point, we are at this point, and if you fine gentlemen continue to set off bombs, and continue with your nuclear ambitions, then what happened to Tehran will happen to every Iranian town and city. You’ll go back to the Stone Age. If that doesn’t work, then I’ll supply the Somalis with weapons that will kill every last one of your leaders, and we’ll keep doing that till the tea boy or the gardener is running your country.’ He eased back and waited.

The lead man glanced at his colleagues. ‘First, Mister Silo, we are grateful that you sent us the super-drug. Despite our clerics condemnation of you and the drug, it was widely used and saved a hundred thousand lives, my own family included. And may I say that since the politicians of our nation ... perished, along with many of the Revolutionary Guards, there has been a ... shift of policy. Some elements remain ... outside of direct control, but attitudes that

had hardened are becoming ... more pragmatic in their approach. We are ... obviously ... sat here, willing an end to hostilities.'

'At what price?' I asked.

'The lifting of sanctions would be an obvious starting point, access to advanced medicines a second point.'

That made me stop and think. And puzzle the point.

The man continued, 'And ... knowledge of the future.'

'Knowledge of the future?' I repeated.

The man addressed Jimmy. 'You could have sat back and let the Americans attack us, and allowed us all to sleep walk into a wider conflict. Instead, you tapped us on the shoulder. A hard tap, but still a tap on the shoulder. Your demonstration in Afghanistan was ... most spectacular, and some in my land believe that we would be unable to resist and invasion of African soldiers armed with weapons from the future.'

'You stopped short of that to ... let us fall on our swords by way of example, and we are not the mindless barbarians that your media portrays us to be. We sat and thought about it, those of us that were left, as we battled SARS with your drug. By the way, a surplus of the drug was used to cure cancer, and a variety of other ailments, a groundswell of ... murmurings created as a result. Those murmurings have continued to grow, and to open people's eyes to the wonders of the future, not the dangers that it may throw up.'

'The opposition movement has gained strength, and our leaders are listening to the hearts of the people. There is no greater lesson ... than that which unfolds before your very eyes.'

'And your nuclear programme?' I nudged.

'Could be negotiated away, although it would never be admitted to in public, or to our people. It would be sidelined as an ... unnecessary expense at a time of great shortages. Any suggestion by the western media that we are even negotiating would call a halt to such discussions.'

'That's fine by us,' Jimmy suggested.

'And the knowledge of the future, Mister Silo,' the man nudged.

'The future, your future, is dangerously close at hand, and very dangerous. My aim ... is to save the planet, and if I have to destroy your country to do that ... then I'll do so.' He let them think about it. 'The Americans and Israelis were, and are, well advanced in their planning and determination to attack your nuclear facilities. That would have led to a wider war, economic collapse, global war and the rise of various ... barbarian groups, groups intent on returning us

to a simpler way of life, such as the abolition of money and oil. The world, their world, would not be a nice place to raise your kids in.

‘My mission here is to stop that from happening, and a Middle East conflict is the most likely trigger point. I will go to any lengths to stop a global conflict, so I need to stop a Middle East conflict first, and therefore we’ll need to stop the Americans attacking you. To do that ... you’ll need to halt your nuclear weapons programme. In return, we’ll lift sanctions and readily assist you with drugs and technology.’

‘May we meet again in a week’s time?’ they asked.

‘I’ll make myself available for you at a moment’s notice,’ Jimmy offered them. ‘And, for what its worth, I apologise for the loss of life, and the damage done to your country.’

‘For what it’s worth, Mister Silo, I believe you to be sincere,’ the head negotiator said before we ended the session.

A week later they were back, no bombs having gone off in the mean time, the same team of four men arriving. The media had asked about the visits, and were told that we were trying to negotiate a peace in Afghanistan.

‘Welcome back,’ I offered, a handshake initiated.

After they had settled, the lead man began with, ‘Thank you for the supply of drugs. You sent them despite us having an agreement in place.’

‘I would have sent them with no agreement in place,’ Jimmy commented. ‘It’s not your people that I have a problem with.’

‘We will halt the nuclear development programme and, since you seem to be able to hack our computers at will, I believe that you will be able to monitor the situation.’

‘I will,’ Jimmy told them.

‘We will play no further role in Afghanistan, and ask that you do not supply the dissident group in our southeast with weapons.’

‘Agreed.’

‘You’ll ask the Americans to lift sanctions?’

‘I’ll ask the Americans to turn a blind eye to people breaking the sanctions, whilst slowly unwinding the sanctions. It must be seen to be a long and negotiated process. In a week, an American team will visit you and start the negotiations as if from the start. They, will be the public face of the negotiations that we have, and that team will need to seem to be successful; step by step, inch by inch.’

‘Of course,’ they agreed with diplomatic smiles. ‘And may we enquire about the coal-oil converting technology.’

‘You have half the world’s oil,’ I puzzled.

‘Which is needed for valuable export revenue,’ they explained. ‘We’d like clean oil-powered electricity generation in our country. And it may surprise you to know that we got hold of your electric cars early on.’

‘Iranians ... driving electric cars?’ I puzzled. ‘Seems wrong somehow.’

‘There are a great many things about us that you may not fully understand, Mister Holton. We are hoping to obtain electric buses as well.’

‘I’ll sanction the Chinese selling them to you,’ Jimmy offered. ‘And subsidised.’

‘We are most grateful. And what are your thoughts about sharing your knowledge of the future?’

‘There are a few things that will affect you, that I could not disclose without others ... taking an advantage of. For your sake, I will keep them quiet for now.’

‘And future pandemics?’

‘You’ll be warned, advised, and given all the drugs you need – provided that you stick to the agreement we have. I won’t interfere with your internal politics, nor will I ask that you give up your Islamic Revolutionary ideology, nor try and shape your future. I will, however, stop you interfering with other nations.

‘I do not ask that you kiss and make-up with the Americans or the Israelis, or rescue cats from trees. I ask only that you give the Americans no excuse to attack you, because you can be certain that any wider Middle East conflict will result in Tehran being hit by nuclear weapons. You don’t want that, and I don’t want that.’

‘May I ask, if Israeli and America had been furnished with advanced weapons?’

‘No. Most of the advanced weapons I possess I leave with the Chinese for safe keeping, since I know they’ll not be tempted to use them. The Americans and Israelis have advanced infantry weapons only.’

‘Could you bring down a ballistic missile?’ they risked, and odd question.

‘I could. But such missiles were designed during the cold war, and were designed to be EMP proof, so I would only be partly successful.’

Following the meeting, we met with the household “M” Group and gave them the good news, Samuels readying a team to “pretend” to negotiate for the folks back home.

New Kinshasa

With our absence over the winter, New Kinshasa had grown considerably, a formal ceremony marking the move by Kimballa's government due soon. We flew down, reclaiming the lakeside mansion, and I found that I had missed the place. I also found the crocs missing. They had apparently, got a bit big and had been let go. Let go was something of an overstatement, because the two crocs would, apparently, pop back every few days for a free feed. Kids eh, you try and get rid of them but they just keep coming back.

After my first 5am swim I wandered to the lakeside, finding the monster croc on the grass the other side of the fence, two smaller crocs near the water's edge. I fetched a chicken and tossed it to the monster, two lumps of ham for the youngsters, whilst wondering if this was wise.

Thinking about it, I called the zoo and asked them to catch the monster, for the zoo to give it a happy home and possibly a mate. That led to gentle complaints from the marina business association, who saw the croc as part of the attraction. I relented, having a grill fixed into the waterfront. It prevented the monster from landing on our garden, but let through the little snappers. That led to the monster beaching itself three doors down, killing and eating their dog, some of the fish in their pond, and another grill being fitted.

Figuring that I was partly responsible, I commissioned a grill all the way along the row of houses. That led to the monster coming ashore in the park, where people tossed it chickens. I fenced off the park, and peace was reclaimed, the monster returning to being a water-hazard for boats in the marina.

As Helen and I relaxed at the mansion of an evening, Shelly and Lucy perfected their card counting skills at the casino. The croupiers knew they were both card counting, but also knew that they could not be banned, the girl's winnings modest. Besides, they were a tourist attraction in themselves, my daughters both as tall as Helen now, 5'10", and very popular with the young traders in Gotham City. I made it known that they were underage, and the local men were wary of long jail terms. Or being fed to the croc by me.

After four days of simply relaxing in the sun, we drove down to New Kinshasa, amazed by the city's transformation. Tall apartment blocks cut into the skyline on all sides of the main road south, the

shopping centre and restaurant district finished and in use, the daily spend by shoppers growing week by week. First, we formally opened the marina, a giant horseshoe a third of a mile across and backed by cafes on the ground level. I noticed bars above the cafes, restaurants above those, with apartments rising up another six storeys, each abode offering a balcony facing the water.

The pontoons were half full, many boats moving down from Gotham City, getting boats into the country was still a costly and difficult affair. I cut a large red ribbon in front of a crowd, even though most of the facilities had been open for weeks. Having been photographed, and a quick interview given, we moved as a group through to the shopping centre, Shelly happy to be centre stage, as well looking forwards to some good shopping with Helen, their clothes and shoes now interchangeable.

We entered at the ground floor, finding eggshell coloured marble floor and walls, and we lost Shelly and Lucy in the first shop. Pressing on, we found a large central atrium, four glass lifts taking keen shoppers up a total of six floors, circular balconies above us. Following Jimmy, we took the lift to the top floor, and found bars and cafes, plus restaurants that were obviously targeted at the lunchtime crowd. At the railing, we peered down at the six floors.

‘Very nice,’ I said. ‘Be an attraction in itself.’

‘It is,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘Tourists pop down.’

I pointed. ‘From the first floor you can walk out to the mono-rail, from the second floor you can walk out to bars and restaurants, and from the forth level upwards you can join apartment blocks and offices. So, if you don’t like the rain, or the bright sunshine, you could spend all of your time indoors; office, apartment, shopping.’

We took the stairs down, ambling through the café quarter and finding a wide assortment of restaurants and bars, all enclosed and protected from the elements. At the end of the row of bars we continued on, seeing now that we crossed the main road through the city, and passed more shops. Talking the lift down to the first floor we walked on as a group, finding the walkway lined with businesses; solicitors, accountants, and a Chinese acupuncture centre amongst them.

Walking on a good three hundred yards further, people stopping to photograph us as our party proceeded, we eventually reached daylight, a glass ceiling covering the walkway as it split into three directions. We turned north, the signs above our heads labelling the walkway as ‘Government Offices.’

The start of those offices was reached after another hundred yards of enclosed business fronts. A huge open courtyard revealed itself, a glass enclosed walkway right around the first floor, gardens and ponds at the centre. We passed through security checks, and followed the walkway around, glancing down at people in suits glancing up at us, and eventually found the main parliament building. Kimballa's government were waiting for us inside, a rapturous applause given as we entered.

The large room reminded me of many of parliaments the world over, rows of concentric wooden seats in a horseshoe facing the speaker. These seats, however, looked brand new, and none of the children had carved anything into them yet.

Jimmy took the podium, Kimballa stood applauding off to the side. 'I thought this was the Chinese restaurant,' Jimmy said. 'Got lost in those walkways.'

Smiling and chuckling, the smartly dressed members of parliament took their seats, many now missing because of the SARS outbreak. Truth was, Unit 402 had taken the opportunity to inject some of the more corrupt elements of the ruling class with a drug that produced symptoms similar to SARS. Very sad, they will be missed.

'This day ... has taken a long time to arrive,' Jimmy said. 'A united and prosperous Democratic Republic of Congo.' They applauded. 'There was a time when few people would wish to venture into these lands, now tourists fly here from Europe and America. Progress, ladies and gentlemen.'

They applauded again.

'The people of the Congo now have a beautiful modern city, they have peace, jobs, cheap food, and good health care. For my next trick, I'll make husbands and wives get along with each other.'

Everyone laughed, and I noticed now the TV cameras at the back.

'But with this new city comes new responsibility, a responsibility to improve standards, to maintain the standards achieved, and for citizens to get along with each other in a law abiding and polite manner. But more than that, there comes a responsibility for the government and citizens of this new city ... to recognise the international cooperation that went into it, and to open its doors to citizens of all nations and colours, and Africans of all nations and tribes that may wish to work here or run a business.

'That does not mean that just anyone who turns up is allowed to live and work here, since we will be imposing tight controls. But it does mean that we expect to see the English and the French working

alongside Congolese, that we expect to see Russians and Chinese working alongside Kenyans, that we expect to see students here from around Africa.

‘This city lies at the geographical heart of Africa, and we must make sure that it is at the heart of African prosperity in the future, but – and most importantly – at the heart of African cooperation. This city ... should be an example for Africa, a beacon at the centre of Africa, an example of what can be achieved in these lands. Africa has the resources under the ground, but also has the resources above the ground in its people. If the people don’t fight each other, if tribalism is reduced, if corruption is stamped out, then prosperity is there for the taking for future generations.

‘I have put almost thirty years into Africa, and I have put my own blood into Africa. Now I ask that you do not let me down, that you do not let down the next generation, that you build on what I have started and move forwards. If you wish my legacy to be fulfilled, give more power to the pan-African cooperation group, and start living like neighbours, not rivals. Your children are sat watching, and they expect from this current generation ... to grow up in an Africa of opportunity, not warfare and poverty.

‘You have been shown the way back to the Garden of Eden, what you do with it is up to you. Thank you for your time today.’

They all stood and applauded, Jimmy waving as Kimballa led us out and through to his splendid office, his desk offering a view of the massive internal courtyard.

‘A rousing speech, Jimmy,’ Kimballa offered as he poured drinks. ‘You must run for office yourself.’

‘I have enough power as it is,’ Jimmy replied. ‘Any more and it may corrupt me.’

I cocked an eyebrow without Kimballa noticing, sitting with my drink. ‘All moved in?’ I asked our illustrious president.

‘Yes, I have moved home, family, and office here. The house by the lake is most magnificent, the southern golf course most distracting. My wife and daughters shop in the new centre, for which I curse you for placing that temptation before them. They are spending faster than the IMF could replenish it.’

‘It all goes back into the economy,’ I said.

‘Indeed. And that economy is internalising fast, exports slowing.’ He waited.

‘That’s intentional, since the outside world will suffer economic problems of its own in the years ahead,’ I informed our gracious host.

‘And you would know better than most what lies ahead,’ Kimballa noted. ‘The Angola road and rail line is working well, quite congested, and the northern rail line is at capacity. But will your operations in Southern Sudan and Ethiopia not take business away from us ... here?’

‘What’s the hurry?’ Jimmy asked. ‘Leave some resources under the ground for the next generation.’

‘Indeed, yes. It’s only a matter of observation.’

‘We aim to fix many countries,’ I put in. ‘And have them trading; things made here being sold in Sudan and Ethiopia.’

‘Indeed, yes.’ He raised a finger. ‘The new football stadium will be ready soon, maybe to host the African Games or World Cup some day.’

‘World Cup cities always lose money,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘It’s not worth it. Same for the Olympics. But African football tournaments would be a good idea, Mister President.’

‘When you call me Mister President ... it somehow seems odd, since we both know who wields the real power.’

‘Real power comes from persuasion, from finding common interests and developing them,’ Jimmy told Mister President. He took a moment. ‘How do you see yourself being remembered after you retire? What will the plaque on the statue say?’

‘I am wondering if you already know that,’ Kimballa replied.

‘The future can be altered, obviously. But, but I would hope that it may say that you presided over a new city, a new country, and a new kind of cooperation between not only Africans, but between many nations. I would hope ... that you see your job more as ... host of the party ... than anything else, your job being to make sure that the guests are happy - happy with their surroundings, and happy to do business here. You see, you need only lay the carpet for the trading to begin ... and to benefit us all.’

‘Host of the party, eh?’ Kimballa repeated. ‘And the plaque under my statue?’

‘Would label you as a great reformer of attitudes, and the father of modern Africa.’

‘And would my statue ever see the light of day next to yours?’ Kimballa posed.

‘That, Mister President, depends entirely on the kind of party you throw.’

Kimballa became serious. ‘I am conscious, Mister Jimmy, of your ability to see the future, and I am conscious of what you did with my father, and with myself. The wealth that we have enjoyed, and the

status that I have enjoyed with your guidance, will probably never be fully appreciated by those outside of a small circle. Whilst living in your shadow, I have enjoyed a status that I was not worthy of, and sometimes I feel that I have been ... hanging onto the coattails of true greatness.

‘I want you to know that I appreciate all that you have done, for both myself and the country, I just wish that I could have done it alone. I wish ... that with hindsight, I could see what you see. Once shown, many things are simple, yet hard to conceive of without that initial ... nudge. Many days, Mister Jimmy, I curse your name for the mirror you put in front of me, the one that makes me look so small.

‘But it is not you that I am mad at, it’s the small man in the mirror who accepts the help, when it was he who should have been the better man.’

‘It’s not too late, Mister President,’ Jimmy told him. ‘You have the city, and you have the cooperation group, and you have all the cards to play. You need only leave a mark in history, and to do that you need to be less like the African leaders of the past, and more like me. Welcome foreigners to this city, and create a Garden of Eden in the heart of Africa, and you’ll have a few good words on your statue.’

‘We’ll even keep the pigeons off it,’ I offered, making Kimballa laugh.

We left Kimballa to order cheese on sticks for the party, and boarded a coach, soon driving around the city, glancing at up buildings. Shelly and Lucy got back to the house with arms full of shopping, guards carrying the rest of the girls’ purchases. I guessed my daughters had won plenty on the card tables, but Helen informed my that a few shops would pay them to be photographed within, or to return and be seen at certain times. It was exploitation, pure and simple, underage exploitation; my card-shark daughters were exploiting the poor shops.

With Helen and the girls trying on some of the things that they had bought, I wandered down the garden and to a lonely young croc. ‘Just you an me kid,’ I told it. ‘The women folk are trying on shoes made out of your parents.’

Sanchez called.

‘Is it early or late where you are?’

‘Middle of the night in Hawaii.’

‘How’s it going?’ I enquired.

‘They’d rather lynch us than move out.’

‘That good, eh. Would it help if we had a word?’

‘It may do, but we’ll be enacting emergency powers next year, forcing people out. Problem is, they think a ten-foot wave is going to hit, and they’re all surfers looking forwards to it!’

‘Tell them its a hundred foot wave,’ I suggested.

‘The economy is helping; it’s helping by dying. Businesses are relocating, tourism is down, and our military bases are scaling back or moving out. Navy is a big employer here and they’re moving out, so people are starting to get the message. Now we have a few states competing to see who can get the navy jobs.’

‘Doesn’t your Pacific fleet need to be ... in the Pacific?’

‘Yes, so San Diego is a choice, but we know it’ll be hit as well. Might have a few temporary headquarters till its over,’ Sanchez mentioned.

‘You playing nice with Samuels?’ I nudged, the croc staring up at me.

‘I like the man more than the party, and the party politics; we get on fine.’

‘Could this be the start of bi-partisan politics, a wartime coalition in the face of danger?’

‘Take more than this for the Democrats and Republicans to get together,’ Sanchez baulked.

‘Maybe you could do something about that, Mister candidate. And maybe we’d support your efforts. Because in years to come an emergency may need a coalition of the good, the bad and the ugly.’

‘Which one am I?’

‘You’re the bit-part Latino supporting actor, for now. And in case your calendar is not already saying it loud and clear, the next brave soul to take-up office the White House will be inaugurated right in the middle of your largest disaster to date. He, or she, will inherit a mess of biblical proportions.’

‘That fight interests me more than anything else about the job,’ Sanchez suggested. ‘If Samuels wins he’ll keep me on as disaster coordinator – he’s already made that commitment. And if I win I’ll be doing the same job. Either way I’ll be the point man for the disaster, and the aftermath!’

‘Your economy recovering?’ I asked.

‘We’re getting Cuban oil, and coal-oil is starting to make a difference; plenty of optimism around after the winter. If SARS comes back next winter, well...’

‘It’ll be tough, yes. But Jimmy says that it will just be a small outbreak this winter. You have enough ships and planes to move everyone?’

‘In theory. Plan is to tell the truth three months prior to the event and fly most of them out, cargo containers for personal belongings. We’ve started to offer low-income families relocation grants to the mainland, some moving, a few homes boarded up. Property prices crashed, no one can sell, so a lot of claims against the government.’

‘You’re not to blame for an act of God.’

‘We are if we give advance warning, it seems. Compensation will be huge, same on the west coast.’

‘There’s no pleasing some people,’ I quipped. ‘Anyway, pop down here with the family, get yourself seen, widen your horizons, have a look at New Kinshasa and the voluntary workers.’

‘Actually, I was thinking of making the trip.’

‘Put it on expenses.’

A few days later we entertained Rudd and his family, his kids mostly grown up and working now. We had a pool full of people, baby Liz fascinated by the new faces, and new people to splash around the pool with. They were joined a day later by Anna, Cosy, and their grown daughters, the house now buzzing. The small crocs were a big hit, scraps tossed, the monster sometimes spotted from the jetty. Swimming in the lake was definitely out, not that the murky lake water was very inviting.

Of an evening, we would frequent the marina and casino, and my girls took to Anna’s young ladies. We tried the restaurant strip in New Kinshasa, but just caused a crowd of people to follow us, so ruled that out in future. We did, however, make good use of an up-market restaurant overlooking the marina in New Kinshasa, the select few patrons being just those that could afford the pricey offerings.

With Rudd, Cosy and their families gone, we welcomed Sanchez and his family, his wife quite a dusky looker. His elder daughter was now six, the Downs Syndrome daughter three. I had wondered how my girls would react to the Downs kid, but I also wondered how I’d react myself.

Shelly asked medical questions and spouted off the current genetic theory, Lucy offering to take the girl swimming. With Helen showing Sanchez’s wife around the house, something that my dear lady wife never tired of, I led Sanchez to the poolside shade and ordered cold beers.

‘Nice place,’ Sanchez offered as he stretched out his legs. ‘Very nice.’

‘A lot of the time we’re virtual prisoners, so this helps.’

We accepted cold beers off a maid.

‘And you’ve been building this up for twenty-five years,’ Sanchez noted. ‘Part of the grand scheme of things?’

‘Have you had a full security briefing?’ I asked.

‘No, I’m just the disaster coordinator. Why?’

I called Jimmy, now in Nairobi. ‘Is Sanchez supposed to know about other stuff?’

‘Yes, brief him, but call Samuels first.’

I hung up. ‘I have to call your boss first.’ I checked my watch and called Samuels. ‘Mister President, do you have any particular objection to Sanchez knowing a bit more about us and the future?’

‘Not if you don’t. I guess it’s your call more than mine.’

After the call, I faced Sanchez. ‘You’re allowed to know.’

‘Know ... what?’

I considered my words, and took a breath. ‘In 2025, a ... disaster leads to world economic ruin, and that gives rise to a Middle East terror group who’s only aim is to stop oil flowing, close banks, and generally march us all back towards the Stone Age. They’ll find a lot of converts and take over the Middle East and North Africa, attacking Israel and Europe. But, because no government supports them, there’s no one to attack or nuke; they’ll all be spread out. If unchecked, they’ll take down the whole world.’

‘Jesus,’ Sanchez let out, shaking his head.

‘We built up Africa, because the first place they would have attacked would have been here. Now, with the Rifles built up, we can not only hold the line, but probably take North Africa, if not a large part of the Middle East. If this place stays strong, we can deny North Africa to the terrorists.’

‘And this ... disaster?’

‘Your worst nightmare come true. But it’s so secret that I don’t even know yet, very few do ... in case it leaks.’

‘And the world economy is hit?’

‘Yes, and no. What we’ve been doing for the past twenty-five years is massaging the economy, introducing electric cars, coal-oil, the works. The aim is to be in a good shape for 2025.’

Sanchez gave me a look over his sunglasses. ‘After 2017, it’ll take a decade to recover!’

‘Less if we employ advanced technology,’ I assured him.

‘And the most likely outcome for 2025?’

‘A full-on global conflict.’

Sanchez took in the pool, and his daughters swimming, sipping his beer. ‘If I served two terms, I could make a difference, and be there for the disaster.’

‘You must like stress a lot,’ I suggested. ‘That’s a hell of a challenge to take on board.’

‘I’ve taken on board more,’ Sanchez insisted, and I wondered about his Downs daughter.

I called for a Huey, the helicopter landing in the park at the end of the road, and I showed Sanchez the sights from the air, Gotham City and New Kinshasa. He was blown away.

‘You built all this, with your own money?’ he asked through the headset.

‘Yep. Like it?’

‘Like it? It’s amazing.’

‘There’s a lot more we’ve built that you can’t see, in Kenya and Somalia, and now Southern Sudan. We’re busy little bees when we get going.’

‘How many people live here?’

‘So far, four hundred thousand, but more are arriving all the time.’ I directed the Huey to the volunteer’s compound, landing on the grass outside, two Pathfinders stepping down from the Huey with us, gate guards running across. I knew the layout, and where most of the labs were, and directed Sanchez forwards, passing smiling faces as we progressed.

Choosing a lab at random, we pushed open the doors and stepped in, everyone looking up from their computers and microscopes.

‘And these are all volunteers?’ Sanchez asked.

‘Low pay, but free food and accommodation. Most are Christians.’

The senior man in the lab, a doctor in a white lab coat, walked up and keenly shook our hands.

‘What are you working on?’ Sanchez asked him.

‘In here we’re mostly interested in the interactions between the super-drug and various diseases. Some SARS work. We cooperate with the unit in France.’

‘Is it all medical?’ Sanchez asked.

‘Oh, no, all sorts. Even have some military work.’

‘Military?’ Sanchez queried.

‘For the Rifles. New kit, scanners, all sorts.’

‘And ... you don’t mind working on military hardware?’ Sanchez posed.

‘Jimmy knows what he’d doing. If we didn’t believe that, then we’d not be here,’ the doctor firmly replied. ‘He’s developed weapons that stop vehicles, but don’t harm the occupants.’

‘Would you like to show us around?’ I asked the medic, the man keen to lead us to the other labs.

After thirty minutes of introductions, handshakes and project descriptions, we came across a large lab with a huge pool of water.

‘Sea water,’ the medic explained. ‘They’re doing something with plankton and algae.’

I glanced left and found a row of large glass tanks, each labelled in sequence, and each labelled as a “vat”. ‘What are the vats for?’ I asked, a volunteer stepping up to me.

‘We’re experimenting on algae for Jimmy, some odd requests and directions that we don’t fully understand.’

‘Algae,’ I repeated, and I thought of a remark that the Japanese had made when they first came to the house to confront us.

‘Do the Japanese experiment with algae?’ I asked.

‘I think they do, edible algae, as well as some with medicinal properties.’

‘How many vats do you have?’

‘Twelve.’

I led Sanchez out, back to the helicopter. Flying back, he asked, ‘How many volunteers are there?’

‘We’ve taken on board nine thousand, but more want to join, a lot more, so we let them run crèches, do shopping and laundry, stuff like that. A second compound is being built to accommodate more. A total of sixty thousand applied.’

‘Sixty thousand? Scientists? There must be more good will on the planet than I realised.’

‘Very few Americans,’ I added. ‘Four hundred. The volunteers are mostly Europeans and Asians.’

‘Sounds about right,’ Sanchez complained. ‘College buddy of mine went to France to work on the human genome project, the research available to everyone. The American labs patented what they found.’

‘You’re a bit of a socialist, my friend. How will that sit with the right wing media when you’re in office.’

‘Is Jimmy a socialist?’ Sanchez asked, an odd question.

‘He’s tough when he needs to be, but socialist at heart. He likes the Chinese ordered society, and clean streets, law and order. He once told me: he wants the children to play nice together. I guess that sums him up.’

‘Will he back me?’

‘Do you want him to?’ I countered.

Sanchez shrugged. ‘I’d tell you that I know I can do the job, but he knows if I can or not for definite. Besides, if I was reckless he’d trip me up with a sentence. But I don’t want to take office if it’s a hope rather than a reality; I don’t want to be there if I’m going to make things worse. I’m not going to put my belief in myself ahead of the nation, or the world.’

‘For most presidents, that’s all they have; a belief that they’ll do a good job.’

‘Yeah, well Nixon thought that, and probably half the dictators in Africa as well. If so much is at stake, I don’t want to just give it a go, not if Jimmy knows otherwise.’

‘Don’t repeat this, but when Fitz walked out, Jimmy said that Fitz had been handed a deformed child, and left it on the church steps.’

Sanchez studied me for several seconds. Turning away, he said, ‘He couldn’t face it.’

‘He’d preside over a mess, with the prospect of a bigger mess to follow. He had no hope of making things better, just of lessening the suffering. If you get in, you can’t fix it, but you can lessen the suffering – whilst probably not getting any thanks for it.’

Sanchez took a moment. ‘It’s still worth trying.’

‘Then you’ve got my vote. I like Samuels, but he doesn’t shout enough. He’ll need to kick some doors in, not ask nicely.’

Back at the house we greeted our abandoned wives, drinks around the pool before a night out in the marina. In the days that followed I spent a lot of time with Sanchez, showing him around Gotham City and New Kinshasa, Jimmy returning and chatting with Sanchez at length, long into the night.

With Sanchez on a plane home, the US news media labelled him as “king in waiting” and “approved by Silo”. That annoyed Samuels, who called me, and I explained that we were just being friendly, and that no formal endorsements had been given – or would be.

A week before we were due to leave Goma, the Saudis asked to meet again, the same two men. I agreed the meeting without even discussing it with Jimmy first, but checked online to see what they had been up to in Yemen. I found a number of projects that they had started, projects designed to employ the most people for the least money, another desalination plant, and a few mining projects. They had kept to their side of things, more or less.

Jimmy then agreed to meet with them, and we greeted our guests by again being sat down with beers when they arrived.

I pointed them to chairs. 'Beer?'

'Please.'

A maid brought two beers over as the first Saudi said, 'Would you like us to create a Rescue Force unit in the kingdom?'

'No,' Jimmy flatly stated. 'But if you feel you need one for your own people, then by all means create a similar body.'

'We have assisted Yemen ... as you suggested,' they pointed out. 'Certainly a sign of good faith.'

'And does a stable Yemen benefit us ... or you?' Jimmy posed.

'It would benefit us first,' they admitted. 'But you did ask.'

'Asked you ... to do what benefits you,' Jimmy thought aloud. 'Hmmm. If I ask you to drink water when you're thirsty, will it signal that we'll soon start taking long hot showers together.'

I bit my lip as they exchanged looks.

'There is one thing that you could do,' Jimmy suddenly said. 'You could adopt Djibouti and Eritrea, your objective being ... peace, stability, law and order, perhaps a few jobs.'

'And in return?' they cheekily asked, getting a look from Jimmy.

'What do you want?' I asked them.

'How about we start simple, with say ... advanced solar panels.'

Jimmy smiled. 'It's a better request than I would have figured. OK, if you help Djibouti and Eritrea we'll talk about advanced solar technology.'

'Every great journey starts with a step in the right direction,' one of the Saudi's said as he stood. 'And coming down here to ... chat, affords us the time to visit the facilities here, which are most excellent.' They paused. 'And if we desired to build a hotel here?'

'You'd be welcome to do so,' Jimmy told them, surprising me. 'Liase with Paul. Good day, gentlemen.'

With our Saudi guests gone, presumably off to the casino, I asked, 'You warming to them?'

'Maybe they realise what they didn't before. I could just tell them what'll happen, but they'd not believe it. They need to prise it out of me for it to be ... valuable to their noble Arabic heads.'

A few days later, Jimmy surprised me with a meeting of leaders from some of the North African states, the French in on the meeting at our conference centre. I found that we were being graced by representatives of Morocco, Western Sahara, Algeria, Mauritania, Mali and Niger. PACT, and the Rifles senior officers, were waiting at the back, so I had an inkling as to what this was about.

Jimmy took the podium. ‘Gentlemen, you all suffer at the hands of dissident groups and terrorists. I will now offer you all the use of the Rifles to ... remove, arrest, or quell those dissident groups.’

‘Where do we sign?’ they asked after a small stampede, the French Foreign Legion now relieved of assisting with that problem.

Within a few days, groups of Rifles drove into the desert, troublesome tribesmen and al-Qa’eda cells alike having no idea what was heading their way. The orders given to the Rifles were simple: no evidence, no bodies.

Autumn

After a good break in Gotham City, we returned to the chill winds of Britain and reclaimed our house. The girls got themselves ready for school, which took an hour, and I knuckled down to some work, free from any pending doom.

The world had lifted its head and adopted a reluctant smile, the economy moving in the right direction. In the DRC, we had expanded our coal-oil converters, the cheap ones, and now gave away fuel oil like it flowed out of the ground. Additional power stations were built at the edges of our region, the aim being to sell cheap electricity across our borders.

Despite the cheap oil, our German friends had been busy in the mountains to the west of our region and in northern Zambia, hydroelectric turbines lighting towns and villages, the fishing industry booming. And when I told Helen it was booming, I meant spawning. A group of the brain-trust kids had been let loose with a few tanks full of catfish. They picked out the largest specimens and bred them, selecting the fastest growing offspring for a breeding programme, making sure that the resultant eggs had a high maturity rate.

Not to be wasteful, surplus small fry, literally, were transported to the dammed sections of the rivers and let loose. Those that remained were monsters. The kids then got the microbiologists and researchers involved, and between them developed a boost to the fish’s appetite, reproductive cycle and natural growth hormone. They were tampering with nature, Silo style, the chief mad scientist having spent twelve years studying Jimmy’s blood properties.

They produced catfish big enough to eat people, but the fish did not do well in the wild. Their supply of food was limited, their mouths bigger than their prey, which might just swim out of their gills. Not to be disheartened, they simply told the fish farmers to cull any fish over two metres, and instead concentrated on fish numbers, the rivers of the region soon swarming with fish, their growth aided by a supplement that was dropped into the water on a regular basis. Congo catfish became a staple diet for Africans.

In Zimbabwe, another group of our volunteers worked on wheat and corn, soon improving the yields. The greenhouses had spread out across our region and into neighbouring states, tomatoes now common, melons, all sorts. Much of my surplus produce journeyed north by train to Chad or Southern Sudan, those regions improving. Apartments were popping up, roads were stretching out; our police patrolled the towns, our soldiers patrolled the countryside.

We had respected the rights of the businessmen from Sudan, and law and order prevailed, justice swift and final. The existing scattering of mining and oil companies were given the benefit of a better infrastructure, but we sunk our own wells and opened our own mines, doing well from the start. The first few safari lodges had been built on land previously the domain of dangerous guerrilla fighters more than dangerous lions. Fences were put up, signs erected, poachers shot dead on sight. And our zoo in Goma ran the breeding programme, soon a few prides of lions panting in the midday heat, available to be glimpsed by tourists.

A large central airport was taking shape in Southern Sudan, our airline dominating the available slots. But our move into Chad was not really a move, certainly not an organised one. I sent the Government there a note to say what I was doing in their country, and they acknowledged it. In southeast Chad, and southwest Southern Sudan, national Rifles bases had been duly constructed, young recruits put through their paces, many now in their second year – and glad of the steady pay.

Steffan Silo had surprised me in an email, since he emailed me after he had finished a project, not at the start, and not asking for permission. He converted some of our electric coaches to have fewer seats and more toilets, plus an in-bus mini-shop and stewardess. The coaches had then been made available to a tour company for students, many of who now joined the coaches in Mombassa to journey right across central Africa to Sierra Leone. Several routes were available, some heading down to Angola, and the coaches

stopped at safari lodges for meals and showers – plus a view of cute animals.

Having launched the service for students, and advertised it, the trips were packed out, extra coaches now being converted. The drivers were mostly ex-Rifles, and they carried pistols in case lions got too close, or bandits – which were as much of an endangered species as the highland gorillas these days. We still hung ‘em high.

At my desk, I felt a hell of a lot better than I had for a long time, free at last to just build things, to move things around or to start projects. The internalisation of the markets was working well, the population growing, GDP growing, imports growing. Inflation was not a problem yet because we enjoyed an odd skew to things in the region; wages were rising, but food and fuel costs were falling. People had extra cash and bought luxury goods from the west, our intention and desire all along.

By October, I had filled our planes and even laid on a few extra 747s, the lodges full of people just glad to be alive. First time visitors to Gotham City were amazed, all making trips down to New Kinshasa to have a look around. The tourist dollar had suffered during SARS, but we were catching up.

Our commodities exchange was stable, and stably making us good money. Foreign banks had moved in, offering finance to mines and other businesses, and we did not try and compete; we wanted them here. New Kinshasa offered large showrooms for furniture, the sofas on display being made in local factories, the raw materials imported from around the region, the finance sometimes coming from foreign banks.

Nice cars could be seen around New Kinshasa and Gotham City, even a few Jaguars and Bentleys. BMW and Mercedes built showrooms in the city, Toyota, GM, all sorts. But of all the world’s capitals, this was the cheapest to live in, and I smiled when a magazine ran a comparison of capitals. A nice apartment in Tokyo was a about a million quid, New York was expensive, even Moscow. The same apartment in New Kinshasa was forty thousand pounds. They compared access to golf courses, bars and restaurants, health spas, also measuring congestion and journey times. New Kinshasa beat them all hands down, and we started to see the rich young men move our way.

Young traders from the exchanges lived in ostentatious ten bedroom houses, fully serviced by three maids, and they enjoyed their own chauffeurs. They played golf, used the hotel spas, and drank in the marina. They didn’t bother to view the savannah and the

lions, they were in New Kinshasa for the amenities; nightlife was more important than cute balls of fur, flies and heat.

For those returning to the west, adjustment was a shock; expensive apartments, steep rent, rude taxi drivers, congestion, and doing your own clothes washing. Many returned to us, starting their own businesses.

I opened a college as planned and offered evening classes. That led to a small riot, and I was stunned. What was the problem? Thirty thousand people had applied to study there. I shook my head and stared at the email. After recovering my initial shock, I ordered buildings grabbed and used, the college to be expanded ten fold. Seemed that the Congolese all wanted English lessons, computer lessons, maths lessons, all sorts. I advertised for teachers and hired an extra two hundred straight away, even making use of some of the volunteer army – who were keen to teach Africans.

I opened up the universities in the evenings, teachers making extra money, and the classes were packed out. Learning, it seemed, was a growth industry.

Lucy came up to the office one day at 4pm, back from school, and showed me an exam paper. She had scored ninety-eight percent on a maths paper for eighteen year olds.

‘Wow, babes; you’re not just a pretty face. Did you ... want a small reward?’

‘Well ... maybe a little something.’

‘Such as...?’ I waited.

‘Flying lessons.’

‘Flying lessons? You want to take after your old man, eh. Thing is, babes, we love you to bits, and flying is dangerous, especially small aircraft and helicopters.’

‘I was more interested in airliners.’

I sat staring, wide eyed. ‘You want to learn to fly ... airliners?’

‘I’m not old enough, obviously, but I can still learn.’

‘You already have Microsoft Flight Simulator, so I’d guess you already know how to fly,’ I said.

‘It’s not the same. So...?’

‘So, I’ll ... pull a few strings and see what I can arrange. Doing it in Goma Hub would not be a problem, but up here they have rules about fourteen year olds flying 747s. They have to give them cushions to sit on, and the passengers get twitchy.’

‘Our 747s fly down overnight on a Friday, the crews stay in the hotel, and fly back the next day.’

‘And...?’ I nudged.

‘There’s a spare seat in the cockpit. I could observe.’

‘If you went alone, we’d get some criticism from the authorities and the press.’

She shook her head. ‘International aviation law allows minors to fly if they’re due to be met at the destination. And the security staff would go with me.’

I smiled. ‘I’ll arrange it. Stay at the house when you’re down there, and behave.’

‘What can I do with four bodyguards around?’ she teased.

‘You’re expert and giving them the slip, young lady, so don’t worry me. Does your mum know?’

‘She said yes, but to come and see you because you wear the trousers.’

I stood, Lucy running out before I could slap her.

The following Friday she flew down to Goma hub, observing the pilots and asking questions, reading the manuals in the First Class lounge, then asking more questions. That led to her first attempt in the simulator, a simulated 737 flight that could not kill the imaginary passengers. That led to some expensive equipment in a room in the basement of the main house, three powerful computers linked together, a chair and joystick, three A3 screens simulating controls and forward view.

Lucy would disappear on a Friday around 6pm and emerge at dawn, having flown a 737 or similar on a long flight. She even had a headset, voice recognition software and tower interaction. Could have been worse, she could be interested in boys.

In the mornings, the security staff would ask of her, ‘Where did you go, Luce?’

‘Just down to Cairo and back,’ she’d respond.

A British Airways captain turned up one day, in his uniform, and sat with Lucy for many hours, simulating emergencies. The same man got her onto a 757 simulator, and I had him checked out.

Sykes called me back. ‘Lucy was a bit cheeky in asking him for help, but I think she read an article on the guy; his wife had cancer six years back, your drug cured her. Wife went on to have a baby.’

‘Ah, she played on his good will. Little minx.’

‘He treats her like a daughter, and Lucy’s fond of the man’s two year old daughter. Besides, pilots love talking shop, so he finds her pilots with downtime and they sit her in the aircraft on the tarmac. She’s already found a few mistakes in the manual, and Shelly ran the maths on something the other week, proved the manual wrong.’

I laughed. ‘Yep, that’s them. They don’t get it from me!’

‘Iranians are quiet. Too quiet.’
‘You think they’re up to anything?’ I asked.
‘Your smart lads hacked their computers, and they say no. Satellites say no. Even the Israelis say no.’
‘You’re just an old sceptic, Mister Sykes.’
‘Let’s hope so.’
‘Any word on Rahman?’
‘Gone quiet as well. Last heard of in Karachi almost two years ago.’
‘If he crossed into Afghanistan, then he’s dead meat.’
‘Hope so,’ Sykes said.

As the winter approached, very few SARS cases were reported, and Jimmy told the world that he did not expect a pandemic this winter. The joy was palpable the world over.

Christmas neared, and the worst we had to endure was weeks of Christmas shopping adverts on the TV, and Christmas songs from the seventies. Optimism had returned, as well as people buying crap for other people that they didn’t really like. Pubs and restaurants did good business, and our illustrious PM lowered fuel taxes, people finding that they had a bit more money in their pockets. Coal-oil was making a difference, and was being employed as an effective economic tool. Electric buses and cars were common, and progress was being made.

Jimmy made a speech in early December, encouraging everyone to get out and enjoy Christmas, and many people took it as a command. They jumped onto flights to Cuba as well as Africa, our Cuban hotels subsidised to encourage pale Brits to sample the island. Americans could now holiday in Cuba legally, and the Cuban tourist dollar was growing rapidly. A full US embassy was now open, finally, relations improving month by month, Samuels nudged by Jimmy on a regular basis.

Senator Sanchez visited Cuba, leading a team of Democrats, and was impressing me with his attitude. We spoke almost every week, and he’d often sound me out on ideas, hoping I’d sound them out on Jimmy. Samuels, on the other hand, called Jimmy once a week or more, even asking questions of domestic policy – but not party politics.

Christmas came, and I took Helen out when I could, booking an entire restaurant for an evening and taking the household gang and “M” Group. I used the gym more often, a spring in my step, and downloaded ebooks to my iPad, reading things that I would not have

normally bothered to tackle. I liked reading about the great leaders of the past, autobiographical accounts.

Big Paul returned to us a week before Christmas, drunk that first night back, his heavy carcass carried to his house. I caught up with him the next evening, a meal at a curry house, gossip and tales of battles in Afghanistan, our boys now sneaking across the Pakistani border on occasion.

Despite my elder daughter's maturity, my house was full of decorations, a large tree adorned with flashing lights, baby Liz enjoying all the pretty colours and now uttering a few words. It would be a proper family Christmas, free from worry.

With the women folk out shopping, Jimmy popped around on the 23rd, lifting up Liz and asking Ruth to give us a moment.

'All OK?' I asked.

'Fine, no problems on the horizon ... for now. But it was this little lady I wanted to talk about.'

'If she crashed one of the cars ... I'm not responsible.'

Jimmy smiled. 'I don't know what this little lady will do when she grows up. But I do know why she's here.'

'Liz ... has a destiny?' I puzzled.

'No.' He took a moment, letting Liz pull at his hair. 'You remember that talk we had, about your dear lady wife and ... her wanting to leave.'

'Seems you were ... wrong.'

'No, I'm never wrong. I ... took action to assist you.'

'You ... spoke to her?'

'No, I spoke to Mister Sykes and his medical team, and they doctored Helen's quarterly contraceptive injection. And, as such, we now have this little chubby lump.' He looked up. 'I hope you're not mad at me, but I ... desired that you be spared the disruption and heartache. I knew Helen would never think to leave with a baby.'

I wasn't sure how I felt; I wouldn't have swapped Liz for anything. And Jimmy knew Helen well. I blew out. 'Wow. And ... the future?'

'Is up to you two, but my guess is that you're beyond the itch. If not, you may just end up with six kids. You know, after you split up with Helen, years later she would have adopted.'

'Adopted?' I repeated.

'That gave me the idea. You see, Shelly and Luce are not around much, and having time to dwell is not good for Helen. She needed, and needs, this little lady to occupy her time.'

'She would have adopted,' I repeated, thinking about Helen.

‘And Shelly has asked about a room in the main house, or even her own house. So I’m thinking about a cottage for her in the grounds.’

‘A cottage? Where?’

‘Just next to the other houses, thirty yards from your back door; she’ll still be able to pinch a bag of sugar. She likes cottages.’

‘Oh. And if I try and put my foot down with her?’

‘She’ll stay in the main house anyway, then go off to university in a year or so. Best not give her a reason to be ... distant.’

‘She’s distant enough now!’

‘No, she’s just a twenty-five year old Phd graduate in the body of a fifteen year old girl, soon to be sixteen. Give her the space she needs and let her come to you.’

‘Lucy is getting distant as well,’ I noted.

‘No, you’ll need to boot her out. Flying is a phase, and she’ll have many.’

Liz screamed loudly, a shrill piercing sound of joy.

‘Ouch, young lady. Quieten down,’ Jimmy told her.

‘Good luck with that. She listens as well as her sisters.’

Christmas Eve went well, Shelly bringing a boyfriend around, although we had stopped asking for names, and Lucy brought a male friend over, a joint interest in aircraft. Christmas day was a family affair, a huge lunch, followed by watching the TV and the Queen’s speech, followed by a huge dinner, then lots of booze.

On the 27th, an Iranian official called me directly. ‘Mister Paul, we can’t reach Mister Silo, and this is an important matter.’

‘How can I help?’

‘We are now certain that a group within our country has taken low grade uranium.’

‘Taken it ... where?’

‘We don’t know, but overseas.’

‘And this group...?’

‘Seek revenge, Mister Paul.’

‘I’d appreciate an email with a few names, pictures, whatever you have.’

‘We will cooperate; we want no part of this.’

‘Thank you.’ I rang Sykes. ‘Listen, Iranians have just been on. One of their splinter groups has grabbed low-grade uranium and skipped the country. Alert everyone, everywhere.’

I called PACT and gave the same message, ordering Geiger counters bought and used at all ports.

In the days that followed, nothing happened, Jimmy not too fussed oddly enough. New Years Eve went well, many of the staff up from Mawlini or Mapley, Anna and family, Rudd and family. Mac had a new young lady, and she was a young lady, and Anna had adopted a baby, an orphan, bringing the boy with her.

‘Don’t you see enough babies at work?’ I asked her, taking the child.

‘It’s not the same. And now my girls have moved out.’

I took a moment to think about Helen. ‘Big empty house with no screaming kids, eh. Doesn’t Cosy need looking after?’

‘He travels a lot.’

‘Lucy flies all around the world now,’ I mentioned.

Anna seemed worried. ‘Why?’

I smiled. ‘She has a sophisticated flight simulator in the basement, on it all night sometimes.’

‘Ah. I heard she takes flights down and back. They’re both very bright.’

‘They’re ... almost Shanghai worthy,’ I knowingly reported. ‘Yours?’

‘Average bright, but not ... you know.’

‘A fluke then ... with us.’

‘And the baby?’ Anna asked.

‘Unexpected, even by Jimmy,’ I said.

We entered 2016 gently, no bumps in the road ahead, just Hawaii to plan for, and a few things that Jimmy was keeping to himself.

Rahman

We had spoken too soon about Rahman, and he reared up with a vengeance in February.

Sharm-el-Sheik had been cleared of oil, eventually, and stretches of it were open for business, the Egyptians in need of the tourist dollar. In their case, mostly in need of the tourist Euro. Europeans and Russians returned to the area, scuba diving in the crystal clear waters and finding little damage to the coral from the oil. Nature had adapted.

But tourists returning home from the desert resort had felt ill, some very ill. Soon, some six hundred were known to be sick, food poisoning suspected. The doctors soon ruled that out, and tested for

heavy metals poisoning. That led one doctor to test for radiation when strange symptoms presented themselves.

The news burst onto our TV screens, panic and flashing blue lights glimpsed around the world. I went and found Jimmy after I heard.

‘No big deal,’ he said.

‘No big deal? We have thousands of people contaminated, and it’s the Iranian uranium! Rahman is claiming responsibility.’

‘First, make a statement. And second, do you know why the US Army developed the Manson drug?’

I waited.

‘To help soldiers deal with low-level radiation. It cures radiation sickness better than ... anything you could hope for. Those suffering just need a single injection of the drug, and some protein.’

I made a statement, asking for all people suffering the ill effects to be injected. And to be fed a good steak dinner! Patients recovered quickly, the Egyptians nursing an empty airport, a resort with no holidaymakers. Again. They found the uranium in the main water supply; tourists had been showering in it, the Egyptians now just a little mad at Rahman.

Unfortunately for the Egyptians they would have to rip up miles of piping, steel piping, a costly exercise. Still, they were unencumbered by tourists, the roads nice and quiet.

The Saudis, and many Middle East countries, put Rahman on their most wanted list, and now the Iranians wanted him as well. We met with the Iranians in London, and they apologised, Jimmy warning of consequences for further leaks of fissile material. But we did thank them for the timely warning, and left it at that, Jimmy reasonably sure that they didn’t have a hand in it.

With that minor concern dealt with, the people of the world now tougher and used to worse threats, Jimmy issued warnings about the banks, and declared that it was time to break them up. Retail arms should be separate, he stated, market makers should not have investment arms, and sizes should be restricted. If not, the consequences would be worse than SARS.

The people sat up and took notice now, more so than they would have done back in 2013 or earlier, and people pressure meant that the leaders were under pressure. Jimmy then suggested that if the banking reforms were not enacted, he’d give a list of safe banks for people to use, and a blacklist of those to avoid. Such a move would have been a death blow for a western bank. They knew it, we knew it, and the European Union enacted a piece of legislation to break up

the European banks by function. That included separate offices, boards, and directors, so that the banks could not cheat.

British banks began the process quite quickly, the US banks not so impressed and giving Samuels a hard time. Jimmy made a statement, suggesting that large-scale bank failures were a possibility, and that savers could lose money in certain banks – without naming them yet. He also publicly stated that a banking crash was on the cards if the banks were not reined in, and warned of dire economic woes for the world.

The economies of the world had taken a hit during the SARS years, and the austerity measures adopted by some countries had kept them afloat. Property prices had been volatile during the SARS years, falling in many western countries, but the public's lack of interest in moving house during those years kept prices high from a lack of available stock. Overall, western property prices had been static from 2013 till now.

The problem that Jimmy described, was one of the banks trying to squeeze large profits out of small markets by using high leverage. Many US banks had invested in the Chinese property market because it was still growing, and had been burnt, holding onto losses that would be recouped when Chinese residential and commercial prices recovered. The banks now sought new ways to make money, and that led to greater risk, hence Jimmy's desire to see a split-up of the banks. Samuels was under pressure, Sanchez very vocal in his condemnation of the big banks.

Spring

Spring brought heightened tensions in the long running Israeli-Palestinian saga, water shortages key to the issue. Israeli settlements had continued to creep over the years, and Palestinian families – with no legal or paper proof of home ownership, despite several generations of occupation - were moved out. Some went to apartments that we had funded in the east of the West Bank, others simply moved just a few miles, feeling the ever encroaching Israeli colony just a few years later.

Water grew short in the land of milk and honey, and was primarily diverted towards Israeli settlements. Desalination plants helped with drinking water for thirsty Dead Sea pedestrians, plastic

bottles supplied by us, but farmland was an issue. Palestinian crops failed.

The UN accused the Israelis of trying to starve out the Palestinians, but proposed UN resolutions were either blocked by the States or ignored by Israel, Jimmy not getting involved.

The crisis reached boiling point in March, widespread fighting breaking out in both the West Bank and Gaza, Gaza also now suffering water shortages.

Jimmy had given the Saudis a gentle nudge back in October, and suggested a seawater pipe up from Aqaba to the Dead Sea. It would pump in salt water, which would not make much of a difference to the tourists desire to float in salty water for its claimed medicinal benefits. That salty water could then be pumped to a desalination plant north of the Dead Sea, the fresh water produced being pumped to a point near Nablus.

The Israelis objected, since the slight changes in salinity could affect their very, very small tourist trade in the area, a trade that had died during the SARS years.

It was an expensive project, but not that expensive. And, if it eased tensions, could a great benefit. President Samuels had gotten involved for the simple reason that we had not asked him to, and a joint US/Saudi pipeline was considered. A pipeline directly across Israel would have been a shorter route, but getting planning permission to cross the land would have taken forever, not least because no one on the Israeli side wished to help Palestinian farmers.

The Jordanians had then asked if the project could be extended, and to fork into Jordan, just north of the Dead Sea. Jimmy said that was a good idea, and went so far as to say that the Jordanian branch should be built first. That branch of pipe, on Jordanian land, and not dumping salty water into the salty Dead Sea, and paid for by Saudi Arabia and America, eventually reached a desalination plant on the Jordanian side of the Dead Sea valley.

We had a hand in the desalination plant, and used oil-power instead of osmosis or slow evaporation. It pumped out water that was suitable for crops, yet a little brackish for human taste. With the Israelis still arguing over the pipe in the West Bank, the Jordanian pipe brought forth life to parched and dusty crops, any surplus water being piped further north and dumped into the Jordan River. That water, the river water, could be accessed by the Palestinians, which was what Jimmy wanted all along, knowing that the Israelis would

drag their feet whilst hoping the Palestinians would dry up and blow away into the desert.

On the Gaza side, we sponsored a pipe that drained fresh water from the Nile tributaries before they entered the Mediterranean, and therefore no one to object about it, and pumped water to a bottling plant on the Egyptian side. That plant cleaned the water, selling the bottled produce to both local Egyptians and to the citizens of Gaza – when the border was open. Otherwise, deep tunnels would be used to lug water. Those tunnelling under the border then hit upon the idea of a long rubber hose, and pumped water directly into the large outdoor prison that was Gaza.

When the media latched onto the pipeline - and Jimmy described it as ‘shameful’ that the citizens of Gaza were dying of thirst, the Israelis relented and allowed a pipeline to be built, but of a fixed bore and pressure. I had to wonder about the stipulations. They were irrelevant, bureaucratic, but stamped Israeli authority on the project.

Yemen also suffered a lack of water, despite Saudi assistance, and jobs were hard to come by. Old men would sit in the cafes, lamenting about the formerly great port of Aden and it’s servicing of the ships passing through the canal in days gone by. The Saudis had invested in the port, but ships passed by it, port costs an important factor on long sea voyages.

At the house, Shelly’s cottage had been built, conveniently labelled as a birthday gift. Helen wasn’t pleased, but these days Shelly was more like a friend to her, and no longer a daughter. They swapped clothes, make-up and recipes, and in many ways became closer because of it.

Shelly was due to finish school soon, having already passed five higher grades, and would take a year out before going to university. As Jimmy had suggested, she was already thinking of California, tsunami or not. I concentrated on Lucy and Liz, quietly pleased with what a woman Shelly had become, and having to constantly remind myself that she was sixteen.

We never just popped into Shelly’s cottage, we waited to be invited, and our daughter kept the place immaculate and well ordered. Lucy was a regular visitor to the cottage, when she was not flying off somewhere, and kept us up on the gossip. Helen would be called across the short distance to the Shelly’s new abode on occasion to help with cooking. Not tins of beans cooking, but something so complex that professional chefs would sensibly avoid the weird concoctions.

My daughter cooked for us on occasion, inviting us across for a meal, often a few others from the house for a party. And I had to stop and think what things would have been like between Helen and myself now without baby Liz. Shelly would be gone, Lucy off flying or sat behind a simulator, and it would be just the two of us in front on the TV with the one remaining cat – the other having adopted Jack and his wife in preference to us. Or we'd sit reading, or doing a little work, or cooking and entertaining guests.

Instead, we were often on the floor and playing with toys, constantly running around after Liz and grateful when she was asleep. Were we beyond the itch, I had to consider, and were we defined by our kids?

I had spoken to Sanchez about his own early years with his wife. He had said, 'We both came in so damn tired that we had a quick bite to eat, made love and went to bed at 9pm. We stayed together because we helped each other, and because we were too damn tired to date anyone else.'

Other couples I had spoken to enjoyed energetic lives together; badminton, mountain biking, trips around the country. We were virtual prisoners, and such a life would not have been possible for us. We had the house and the facilities, but after fifteen years they grew a bit old. No, we had our work, and we had the family, and we had each other.

June saw the start of unrest in America, as people started to question what was going to happen in early 2017. Large parts of the west coast, those just above sea level, had been earmarked for abandonment. Not evacuation and return, but abandonment. Conspiracy theories abounded, and the public disquiet grew. I chatted to Sanchez, Jimmy chatted to President Samuels, and we decided to fly over and make a speech.

Silo One, which I still called Air Force One, filled up with hacks and snappers, many of them familiar faces, and we set off across the pond, our first stop being Washington. We shook hands and accepted lukewarm coffee from the Disaster Committee, the Joint Chiefs, and then decided to put some of the blame for non-disclosure on our shoulders.

In the White House briefing room we stood with Sanchez and Samuels, Jimmy taking the microphone.

'Ladies and gentlemen, people of America, concerned citizens,' Jimmy began. '2017 is approaching rapidly, and tensions are rising, as you might expect. But the full story of what will happen in 2017

has been kept secret ... in the best interests of this nation, its economy, and its security.

‘Let me be quite clear, in stating that I advised the good gentlemen behind me not to reveal the full details. That was my decision, and taken because I knew what the result of early disclosure would be.

‘In January, an earthquake will shake Hawaii, and the Hawaiian Islands will be *completely destroyed*. Anyone remaining on the islands will be killed, that ... is a certainty.’ He paused, maybe for dramatic effect. ‘Those islanders who believe that they can climb the mountain peaks and survive ... will find those peaks crumbling around them.

‘The resulting tsunami will destroy most of the Pacific islands, waves up to fifty feet high slamming into shorelines. Some islands, the coral atolls, will find themselves briefly beneath thirty feet of water. Unless you have gills, you’ll die.

‘The east coast of Russia will be hit, Alaska, China and Japan. All hit with devastating tsunamis. As far away as New Zealand and Australia, the wave will come ashore. Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Mexico ... they will all be hit, varying degrees of damage. Coastal communities will be destroyed.

‘Here, in America, the west coast will be badly hit, low-lying areas affected. Water will reach Sunset Boulevard. Those houses that sit on land above fifty feet will be secure, although some of those perched on cliffs at the coast will be damaged. Seattle and Vancouver will suffer damage, San Francisco, and San Diego. Some coastal communities will be completely destroyed.

‘To the people of Hawaii, and the Pacific Islanders, I say this: make your plans to move out now. If you’re at sea, and offshore when the tsunami strikes, you’ll be fine. Boats will not be sunk, they’ll rise up and down with the wave. Even if you’re in a canoe, and a mile offshore, you’ll be OK.

‘Ocean going liners, used for the evacuation, will be safe so long as they’re not in shallow water ... or in port at the time. Following the tsunami, many islands will be habitable afterwards, but only with a great deal of rebuilding. Pacific islands more than five hundred miles from Hawaii, with tall mountains, will be fine to remain on, so long as you’re higher than a hundred metres when the wave strikes.

‘All nations around the Pacific Rim need to start making plans, and you have eight months. President Samuels, and his Disaster Committee, have detailed plans for dealing with the disaster, as well as plans to assist with other nations, and I’m confident that the plans

are suitable. I am also certain that some people will try and remain in their homes before the quake and tsunami hits, and that thousands will be killed.

‘Following the quake, there will be adjustments to be made, here in the States. Displaced persons will need to get used to the new reality, the reality of living in a different place, and for some they’ll be giving up homes that they were born in, or have spent their whole lives in. California will need federal aid, since California’s economy has already been hit by the downturn in the global economy during the SARS pandemics. If not managed properly, a problem will become a crisis.

‘I will assist all that I can in the period leading up to the disaster, and afterwards. And I can help in my own unique fashion afterwards - with advanced technology to save costs, and to help the economies of both California and America. On that note, you are just one small step away from a huge banking crisis, some of your banks behaving irresponsibly and gambling with trillions. If those banks fold after the disaster, America will suffer greatly.

‘You have all known for a long time of the damage to the economy that SARS has brought, and you all know of the damage to the economy that will be caused by the tsunami. You need to act now, and you need to act decisively, and I’m not talking about the American Government. I’m talking about the banks and the corporations, and about individuals.

‘If you’re in an abandonment zone you can expect your house to be destroyed, or to be badly damaged at the very least. Remaining will achieve nothing, but you will have the right to return to your property when the areas have been made safe. Sanitation, water and electricity will be out for a long time, roads damaged. Do not ... expect a quick return.

‘Some of the small fishing communities and estuary towns in California will suffer a wave that is funnelled and multiplied. That wave could reach a hundred feet high, and slam into your communities at a hundred miles an hour. Some of the communities that will be affected will be a hundred miles up the inlets and estuaries, especially in Alaska.

‘The cost will be great, the clean-up will take years, but you all have the chance to save your lives, and the lives of your families. Without the warning that you’re now benefiting from, the loss of life would be over six million people. This disaster would have struck ... with or without effective planning by your government. Please be grateful that your government is doing all that it can.’

Jimmy stepped to the side, Samuels stepping up to take questions. He pointed at the first person.

‘Mister President, what will be the economic cost?’

‘The cost will be great, but I won’t give you a figure. A bill will be presented soon regarding federal funds to be earmarked for the disaster.’

He pointed.

‘Has special provision been made for California?’

‘It has, since California will take the brunt.’

He pointed.

‘Is the US assisting Pacific nations financially?’

‘We’re looking at assisting with evacuation and relocation, as well as reconstruction.’

He pointed.

‘And should that money not be spent here?’

‘Assisting the economies of the smaller Pacific nations will be helping our economy, since they’re trading partners.’

‘Many indigenous Hawaiians are refusing to leave. What will you do?’

‘We’ll evacuate all those we can, the Army then trying to remove the rest, but we’ll not use lethal force, nor will I allow the soldiers to be endangered. They’ll leave a full two days before the quake.’

‘You’ll leave people there?’

‘It’ll be very difficult to arrest that many people, especially in remote areas, or if they take to small boats. If they do take to small boats they should survive, and we’ll have the Navy close by to try and assist afterwards.’

‘Did you get enough warning?’

I thought that was a bit cheeky.

‘We have more than enough time to evacuate the islands,’ Samuels insisted.

‘When was this first known?’

‘It was first made clear to me when I took over from President Fitz.’

‘Mister Silo, when did you first know?’

Jimmy stepped forwards. ‘A very long time ago; I witnessed it happen. What’s your point?’

‘Could you have warned people sooner?’

‘And what would they have done ... sooner?’

‘They had a right to know. People moved there to retire.’

‘Up until a few years ago, your CIA tried to kill me on a regular basis, because I gave your leaders information about the future,

information that made the CIA a little redundant. I informed Hardon Chase of the disaster, in general terms, early on in his first term and he made plans for it, the benefit of which you're now receiving. And if you had known twenty years ago, Hawaii would have suffered twenty years of a poor economy – or you would have simply chosen not to believe it.

‘What I do, everything I do, is done according to a detailed plan; the right move at the right time, the correct release of information. There are still a great many things that you don't know, and I'll take the decision to tell you what you need to know, when you need to know it. You saw with Lagos fever that I will wait for the right moment, that I will act decisively and harshly if I need to. That is for the good of all of the peoples of this planet.’

‘Do we not have a right to know?’ someone asked.

‘Your elected government has a right to know, and has known for a long time. You don't have the right to know, because you're a journalist. Because if I told you the world was coming to an end tomorrow you'd try and make a story out of it. You'd try and sensationalise it, you'd try and frighten people, and you'd harm your own economy and your own future. Journalists, especially American journalists, are like drug addicts: you're constantly looking for that next fix, that next big story, regardless of the damage that you may do to people's lives, or to your own economy.

‘So let me make myself clear to you, and all the other journalists. If you had tripped across my identity earlier, if I had been exposed, shot or imprisoned, then no drug would have been available to fight SARS, no drug available to fight Lagos Fever, and by now you would all be in a global nuclear war. If you had done your jobs properly and exposed me early on, then you'd all be dead right now.

‘This disaster ... is not the worst problem that America will face in the years ahead. You can trust my judgement, the judgement to keep those future problems quiet - and dealt with by your leaders, or you can try and print the detail of those future problems, secure in the knowledge that your enemies around the world will take great heart from your problems, and plan on attacking you economically and in other ways.

‘America's strength - is in its strength, and if the people of the world believed that America will fall, economically or militarily, then that process would become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If you print a story that suggests there are tough times ahead for the American economy, then investors and businesses will go elsewhere, maybe to China. If you print a half-truth, or a downright

lie, about future disasters, or exaggerate them, then the American economy will suffer, Americans will lose jobs, and you'll spiral out of control.

‘What’s needed, is a new code of conduct for responsible journalism, and legal action against the traitors ... and the unpatriotic individuals who seek to justify their own salaries by harming the future this country. It’s the job of every journalist to seek the truth, but by seeking the truth about the future you’ll destroy yourselves.

‘The coverage of the Hawaiian quake has already been distorted and exaggerated, the US economy harmed, the dollar value harmed. You will survive this disaster without much effort, because there are more people willing to help than you realise, and - as with SARS – a year after the disaster it will be a memory. You will go on, and you have the potential to go on and be just as strong as before. Your economy will recover, you will rebuild the damaged areas, and greatest thing you have to conquer ... is your fear of the unknown.

‘But that’s why I’m here, to shine a torch into the unknown and to guide you. NASA, the United States Air Force, and the best brains you had built the time machine. You need to have a little more faith in them, and less faith in the crap reported by the media, crap reported by small people who see nothing other than the next headline when they should be looking at the next twenty years. Does that answer your question, dumb fuck?’

I blinked, so did everyone else, and I wondered if we were live, certain that we were.

Samuels led us out, and a good thing too. ‘Jesus, Jimmy,’ Samuels uttered as we walked along the corridor.

‘I can see that I’ll need to be more involved,’ Jimmy said.

And more involved was an understatement.

Volunteers

Over the years, the amount of gold that we had mined and refined in our region of the DRC had grown, but we had stockpiled much of it in our vaults. Those vaults had been expanded, and now a shit load of gold ingots sat shining in neat blocks, the exact amount known only to a few. Part of the reason for keeping it in reserve was to keep

gold prices stable, and part was to build a reserve for our bank, someday destined to be the Central Bank of Africa.

In addition to the gold, we had hoarded diamonds, only selling what the Jewish brokers thought appropriate. That meant we kept back eighty percent of what we mined. Building New Kinshasa had used up all of the money that we had made from selling the drug, electric cars and other things, but coal-oil had filled in that hole. CAR, with a major stake in the Zanzibar oilfield, had also made a great deal of money in the meantime, and our monthly oil cheque from the Chinese and others was huge, an obscene amount of money.

Before our trip to Washington, Jimmy had showed me the figures, and I had to use a pen to work out the billions. We couldn't sell the gold or the diamonds without lowering prices, but with gold now at two thousand dollars an ounce we sat on a hugely valuable lump of metal.

Jimmy had told me to re-work African debt, to pay off western banks and to make us the lender of first choice for the African Governments. I instructed our bank through my team, and high interest loans were duly re-worked to low interest loans, and we did nothing other than move digits around in computers. The western banks and governments, that we now owed the money to, had a block of gold in our vaults in their name. That could be used to buy oil from us, ore from us, or property in Africa from us. The blocks of gold changed ownership, and the poor old ingots didn't even know how rudely they were being passed around.

Within a few days I had re-worked half the debt in our region, and we were now the Central Bank of Africa in deed, if not in name yet. Our corporation, wishing to reduce our debt, simply swapped the debt for land and businesses, concessions and rights. The African nations had reduced their debt by selling their assets, which we would operate for them to their benefit.

A massive amount of debt had been wiped out, the net effect being that our cooperation group and corporation now owned a large part of Africa, which everyone in Africa was happy with. Very happy with.

Following the 'dumb fuck' comment, and the minor fall-out with the media, Jimmy had looked at the dollar level, and began using some of the gold to buy dollars from European nations, in particular those countries that were switching to electric cars and coal-oil. The dollar ticked up a few points. We needed the dollars anyway, to pay

wages in our region, but had no desire to see the Fed simply print them.

Back at our hotel, following the now infamous ‘dumb fuck’ comment, which went right around the world, Jimmy said, ‘The volunteers in New Kinshasa – how many are there?’

‘About six thousand official helpers, three thousand unofficial,’ I replied.

‘Create a command structure: worker, assistant, team leader, manager, director. Six workers to an assistant, ten assistants to a team leader, ten team leaders to a manager, six managers to a director. And do it today. Then I want the Silo Foundation, using the volunteers, to open offices in the UK, France, and here in the States, one office in every city in California, one in New York and one in Washington. C’mon, lad, chop, chop.’

I got to work and sent a dozen emails, made two-dozen calls, and took a few calls back, before we flew across America from Washington to San Francisco, booking into a hotel.

The next morning, we jumped into our vans with our security and set-off on a magical mystery tour, the first aim being to lose the press. We drove into a factory complex, then cheekily just drove out the other side, the press stuck at the first gate. An hour later we were at a small fishing hamlet north of San Francisco, pulling up at a secluded house. Jumping down, the security spread out as if we were going to storm the property, and we walked up the path.

A woman in her late forties appeared behind a screen door. She opened it with a squeak and met us on the porch.

‘Doris,’ Jimmy said, offered her a hand.

‘Silo and Holton. Or is it Batman and Robin?’ she said.

‘Organ grinder and monkey is how we prefer to be called,’ I told her.

‘Brad at home?’ Jimmy asked her.

Doris took a moment. ‘Working, he *is* the mayor.’

‘I know,’ Jimmy said. ‘Could you call him home for a quick chat. It is ... very important.’

She took a moment. ‘This something about the future?’

‘It is,’ Jimmy replied.

She let us in and called her husband, Brad Sullivan, who turned up after a pleasant coffee and a pleasant chat about the rare birds that Doris kept.

Brad was tall, almost six foot, silver haired, but fit looking. He walked with a confidence, no fear or surprise. He shook our hands

without saying anything, studying us carefully with an intrigued look, then sat opposite.

‘Paul, this is Brad. Brad, you know who we are.’

‘But not why you’re here,’ Brad put in.

‘We’re here to give you a job,’ Jimmy began. ‘It’ll not only be the most important job you’ve ever held, or will ever hold, but it’ll be the most important job in California in the future, sometime later one of the most important jobs in the States.’

Brad exchanged a look with his wife. ‘And this ... job?’

‘Would require some discretion, a lot of hard work, some trust that I know what I’m doing, a belief in time travel ... and a belief in the fact that I know what you’re capable of in the future. You see, Brad, this community will be hit hard by the tsunami, and you’ll do a good job at rallying the community, and then rallying the county, then organising self-help groups to rebuild when you get just a little irate with the federal authorities.’

Brad turned to his wife, both faces lighting up. ‘I’d ask you if you had a crystal ball, but I guess you do have a time machine. We’ve been discussing that recently, my church group are preparing to help those that will be affected.’

‘And if I gave you ten thousand willing volunteers, and a billion dollar budget, what could you do then, Brad?’

‘I ... could do a hell of a lot,’ Brad assured us.

‘I know you can,’ Jimmy confidently stated. ‘And this morning I transferred ten million dollars to the town account to help with disaster planning. I’ll need you to quit your job in a month, and then ... and then I simply need you to do whatever your heart tells you to do, Brad. Every time you make a request to the Silo foundation for funds they’ll be met.’

Jimmy handed over a card. ‘My personal number is on there. Don’t be afraid to call if you have questions, I’m just an ordinary guy, and I’ll have a lot of time for you in the future.’

We stood.

‘Welcome to the team,’ Jimmy offered. ‘Oh, and if you create a group or body, call it ... The Ark.’

‘The Ark?’ Brad repeated.

‘All of the creatures, and all the people, came in to escape the flood,’ Jimmy said with a smile.

We left the stunned couple and headed back, soon in New York. Not done with attacking journalism, Jimmy made another speech.

‘There was a time when journalism was a skilled and honourable profession. Sadly, those days have gone. The pursuit of the truth is

secondary to the pursuit of ratings, or the spin put on a story to suit the political paymasters of the newscasters. Papers, and TV stations, are now owned by corporations that are in bed with politicians, and the truth is coloured to suit the political and business aims of the owners.

‘But that political propaganda, which now dominates American news broadcasting, is supplemented by the increased use of internet news, which now accounts for more than fifty percent of the news platforms for most people. Some internet news outlets are simply reflections of TV or newspaper outlets, but many are from private bodies or companies that are not even registered as news agencies. And they certainly do not employ skilled journalists.

‘Blogs, comments, and the websites of individuals all give out information, and most of that information is believed, or has an influence. There was a time when only the newspapers had that influence. They were followed by the TV news, by radio, and we soon came to the TV news shows that were more show - and less news. Controversy, and political spin, became the norm, the actual news lost in the detail.

‘Now, we see that people get their news and their opinions from the internet. Anyone can create a website, and anyone can post a blog, and anyone can influence the public. As such, we have a great deal of crap flying around about all subjects, and the paid journalists compete with the blogger sat at home - who makes a little money from advertising banners. The money put into news research has died, and the salaries of good journalists are under pressure, as well as their numbers.

‘The news has become less about the truth, and more about popularity, people wanting to read stories with a political spin that suits their own politics, rather than facing the cold hard reality of the truth. If unchecked, the world faces a crisis of its own making, and that will be the loss of truth and perspective in our media. People believe what they read, but what they read is no longer produced by responsible and regulated outlets, it can be produced by anyone – by a teenager in his bedroom.

‘If that acne-faced teenager approached you in the street and tried to tell you something, something about an important topic, you’d not listen. But when that teenager produces a respectable looking website, people read it and are influenced. Wrongly influenced.

‘America faces a threat, a very great threat, and that is the dumbing down of the news, and of your knowledge of the world around you. In case you hadn’t noticed, your enemies don’t allow

the same misinformation, and your enemies benefit from your internal dissent and confusion. And in case you haven't noticed yet, most of the world's countries are growing their economies faster than America; the outside world is creeping closer to your shores.

'You can bury your heads in the crap that you hear and see through your media outlets, or you can peek over the wall to see what's really going on in the world ... before it's too late. America, your enemies are delighting in your infighting and confusion.'

We left the good citizens of the States with that thought and flew back.

Back at my desk, I was pointed towards a website – hopefully an accurate one – that detailed the growing rise in financial fraud. It seemed that much of this detail had escaped the mainstream press, possibly during the SARS pandemics.

A disgruntled young trader at an American bank had bet the wrong side of the market deliberately - because he had not been promoted. The bank lost over four hundred million dollars. Another trader had lost money to a friend at a bank in Israel, and then skipped to Israel – who can't extradite its own citizens abroad, not even to the States. A third man, an investment adviser, took two hundred million dollars and skipped to Israel, quite safe from prosecution.

A worker at a credit card company managed to take a hundred and fifty million dollars before skipping to South America, and a US investment bank went bust owing six billion dollars to its investors, the directors of the company believed to be in Israel, the money in an Israeli bank. I could see a pattern emerging, and discussed it with Jimmy.

Jimmy said, 'I warned them a long time ago, but some people never listen. It'll tarnish Israel at a time when they need US support the most. They won't extradite citizens, and their banking laws make Switzerland look transparent. If you really want to launder or hide some money, try an Israeli bank.'

I contacted the hacks that I was friendly with and gave them a nudge, sending them the website link. That following week, Israel was under the spotlight for all the wrong reasons, coming in for some harsh criticism from Sanchez – which was probably not a good move politically.

Gold fingers

We holidayed in Goma again, possibly the last time that Shelly would be with us, and my crocs were almost too big to get through the railing. The monster croc, however, was looking a bit worse for wear these days, having been hit by many boats, and chewed by propellers. He had one good eye, a front leg missing and the end of his tail gone, numerous marks across his back scribed by propellers. Still, it gained him sympathy, and plenty of food.

Figuring that I should do something, I ordered a zoo style pit and pond to be dug in the marina park, a fence erected, a grilled tunnel to the main canal. We tempted the croc in, closed the grill, and our attraction was now safe from propellers. All he had to do was sun himself, eat and sleep.

Back at the mansion, I sunned myself, ate and slept, doing some work when it was cool. And I safely avoided propellers in the pool. I continued to reschedule African debt in my round about sort of way, and we soon owned large parts of Africa, that ownership in the trust of the cooperation group. The African media reported it widely, "Free from debt" the headline that had caught everyone's attention.

New Kinshasa continued to grow, the sewers now functioning as intended and with worthwhile quantities to pump, the phone lines busy, the buses full much of the time. The police patrolled the streets, and anyone who had just wandered into the city with their belongings was picked up, given a free ride back to wherever they came from, a little food, and some money. And a warning not to come back. Poor Congolese citizens, from other towns, tried to set-up shanty camps, but they lasted no more than a few hours.

In the city centre, more armed police patrolled than in any other of the world's capitals. They were courteous, polite, helpful, but ex-Rifles, and if you pissed them off you were in trouble. Drunken white folk were treated with kid gloves, helped home or to the police station, fifty dollar fines issued and a ride home given. It became known as "taking a police taxi".

'Don't drink too much, you'll get a police taxi ride home.'

The main problem for the city police were the Russians, all of who seemed to be out to prove how much they could drink, and how tough they were. Jimmy's instructions to the police were simple: if they hit you, hit them back, but harder. Russian traders and businessmen would get asked nicely to go home, resist, and get clobbered by the Rifles, heavy fines imposed. And when the Russians tried to complain about their harsh treatment, they were

offered a line-up of black officers in order to try and identify the officer involved.

‘They all look alike,’ was often heard in a Russian accent, the officer known to have hit them not even in the line-up.

A week into the holiday, Shelly sat us down and told us what she had planned. We didn’t have a say in it, we were just the parents who raised her. She would stay here with us for four weeks, then tour China and Japan – she had already arranged security with the ambassadors directly, then spend a little time in New Zealand and Australia, visiting their oceanography centres, before checking out the oceanography centres in California after the tsunami.

There was little we could do to slow her down, and she had already been accepted to several foreign universities, not having decided on which one yet. We were not unhappy, our daughter was very bright, and we knew that she would go off to university, just at eighteen and not sixteen.

We had Lucy, and we had the rapidly growing Liz; now walking and talking, and due to be tall like her sisters. She could already swim lengths underwater, and I had to wonder if I was descended from the people of Atlantis.

I entered into email correspondence with Brad in California, his email signature having a Christian symbol of the fish, an alternating quote of the day underneath. He had created an office and advertised for volunteer helpers, very low wages offered, but transport and food thrown in. That office had been too small, so he found a larger one and took on several part-time helpers just to administer the volunteers. He soon had an army of some three thousand volunteers, but had used up just twenty thousand dollars.

As I sat in the sun, growing African GDP, Brad grew his volunteer army. Three thousand became six, six became twelve, and by the end of August he had topped out twenty-five thousand. They had adopted the ranking system of our volunteers, and the higher echelons were paid proper salaries. Offices appeared all along the California coastline, and The Ark moved into Alaska.

For my part, I bought them a hundred electric cars and thirty electric coaches; Alaska was a long way from Los Angeles. The name, the Ark, was painted onto the cars and buses, soon appearing on the vehicles of volunteers. I sent Brad an email saying ‘Spend some money!’

He gave it some thought, then bought four second-hand Hueys with winches, figuring they’d be needed at the time of the tsunami.

After that purchase, he created twenty regional distribution sites, and stuffed them full of tinned meat and bottled water, tents and camping stoves. People would find themselves homeless.

That led to volunteers creating storage sheds in their gardens, emergency rations being stored for local use by the homeless after the wave had hit. I emailed him to sanction an extra fifty million dollars for that very project, an additional fifty million for the regional stores.

Meanwhile, the US military had created their own stores, but well back from the coast and in just three places. Military aircraft and helicopters were available for distribution, as well as rescue at the time of the wave, and soldiers would be on hand. But what Brad was doing was on a different level, the local level, where isolated communities of just a few hundred people produced a handful of volunteers each.

That led to an operation that was parallel to the government's own efforts, that of a census of those properties and families at risk. That project, in turn, led to a website called The Ark, which listed each community and each house that was at risk. Anyone could go online and register their property, or indicate someone else's property that may be at risk. Letters went out, and the website grew into a self-help site.

It also trebled the volunteer army in a week, the numbers now approaching a hundred thousand people. By time I returned home from Goma there were a hundred and twenty-five thousand volunteers listed, some given rank and responsibility if they were from a suitable background. Local sheriffs would ignore the official government or state websites to concentrate on The Ark website, visiting those local residents listed as in the danger zone, most in out of the way locations, some on islands.

Another California website sought all the world's yacht sailors, and asked them to come to either California or Alaska. Their task would be simple: they'd get free food and a few dollars, in some cases quite a few dollars, to take yachts to sea on the day in question. And, hopefully, the marinas and berths would still be there for them to return to. Some twenty thousand people were seeking yacht crews, many boat owners planning on taking their own boats out that day.

It seemed that preparations were well advanced, right up till two major US banks filed for bankruptcy. They took down twenty-six smaller banks in California, and things started to look ugly. The banks had not been hurt by the recession, but from taking risks and

trying to maximise profits in a market where US house prices were falling, especially in California.

Those falling house prices were skewed, because following the tsunami there would be a hundred thousand people looking for new homes. Problem was, their old homes were worthless, and their insurance could not be settled till after the tsunami, a hundred insurance companies going bust in advance of the predicted claims. Sixty percent of all household claims were now on the shoulders of the State and Federal Government Emergency Aid Package, where the average householder would likely receive twenty-five cents on the dollar, and then years after the claims had been made.

I had a bad feeling where this was going. Jimmy was up to something, and I went and confronted him. Actually, I walked out to where he sat in the sun and grabbed a cold beer. Stretching out, I began, 'The US Federal Government, they'll come in for some criticism for paying out late on homes damaged by the tsunami, and then only twenty-five cents on the dollar.'

'Since many of the insurance companies have gone bust, they could argue that they don't even need to pay that amount.'

'And won't that piss off a lot of people?'

'It'll piss off those who used to live on the islands, and those who lost properties.'

'Around two million pissed off people,' I noted. 'Is President Samuels ... thinking along those lines?'

'I doubt it, but he's not stupid.'

'And The Ark?' I nudged.

'Will be popular –'

'Whilst the Federal Government is not,' I finished off. 'Is there something I'm missing?'

'What do *you* think?'

'I think ... that you should be pushing Samuels harder to do something now.'

'There's little he can do; the claims will need to be processed. Many will be inflated, many fraudulent, and now we see people buying land on the coast for next to nothing, putting up a few wooden planks and hoping to claim a million dollars. The American criminal class are nothing, if not inventive.'

'You're up to something,' I suggested.

'While I remember, create apartment blocks in new Kinshasa for an extra ten thousand people, because after the tsunami we'll be offering those that lost their homes in California a new deal here. A kind of ... new Klondike.'

‘OK, coming back to the part about you being up to something.’

‘And increase the budget for Brad at The Ark.’

‘If I have to, I’ll beat it out of you,’ I threatened.

He gave me a look. ‘I aim to make good use of a ... natural disquiet with the Federal Government to ... increase my influence. And for that I’ll need an opportunity, some money, and some willing volunteers. An ... *army* of willing volunteers.’

‘You ... planning on running for office?’ I asked.

‘No, nothing so simple; my plan is far more complex than simply running for office. Besides, I’m not a US citizen.’

I sipped my beer. ‘What’s Samuels doing about NASA?’

‘Well, following the Russian, Chinese and Indian decisions to abandon anything beyond simple satellite launching, he’s been under pressure to do likewise. Fact is, they’ve delayed the next Space Shuttle for so long that most of the skilled people have left. He’ll delay it again and again, especially after the tsunami. The Democrats don’t want the money spent, and I’ve been influencing people against it.

‘Besides, NASA knows there are ways of reaching other worlds without rockets, so they’re not too vocal about it either. There’re thirty NASA scientists working here. No, the space race is well and truly over, and NASA will be buying rocket engines off the Russians for some time to come.’

‘Those coffee shops in Russia...?’

‘Will be used in the years to come. And then you’ll see. Maybe.’

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Part 16

Plotting and scheming

From our mansion in Goma, we said goodbye to Shelly as she set off on her travels, a kind of student gap year - only with four bodyguards, one nominated as temporary guardian. Helen and I were both a little saddened at our daughter's departure, a little miffed at the cheek of it and the lack of our input, but turned inward and concentrated on young Liz.

Jimmy assured us that Shelly would be fine, but then qualified that by saying that her antics should be ignored, and that we should welcome her back when she was twenty-one. I questioned the 'antics', but just got a lot of shrugging out of Jimmy. I returned to my routine of checking emails in the sun.

Two weeks after Shelly had left us, off to Singapore, Jimmy said that it was time for me to be let in on a few secrets. We boarded a Huey one morning, the Army bird cheekily picking us up in the park at the end of our street, and set off for a mine. We actually set off for the regional airstrip south of New Kinshasa, grabbing a Dash-7 for a two-hour flight to the aforementioned mine.

For half an hour I sat up front, re-acquainting myself with the controls and chatting away to the pilot. It turned out that he was from Canada, and that his grandfather flew Mosquito aircraft for the RAF during the war, which his great uncle had helped to design at de Havilland. His wife was French, and her grandfather had been a member of the French Resistance, and who had escaped a prison in northern France bombed by Mosquito aircraft – something of a paradox worthy of Jimmy himself. Landing at a small airstrip, we were met by three Army Hueys.

After a pleasant ten-minute flight in the Huey, we landed at a mine, fifty Rifles stood waiting for us since the mine was a bit out of the way. Boarding jeeps, we made our way around to the mine shaft itself. Hard hats were issued, lights switched on, and we descended almost six hundred feet into the dark, clanking all the way down.

'No music in the lift?' I asked the lift operator, causing a concerned and puzzled frown. 'You know, elevator music – Girl from Ipanema?'

At the end of our long descent the metal doors clanked open, a group of managers keenly waiting for us and leading us onwards. 'Welcome to Nhebou mine,' the first man said.

‘What do you mine here?’ I asked, getting a lung full of warm and pungent air.

They shot Jimmy a look, saying, ‘Gold, sir.’

‘A secret is for keeping,’ Jimmy told the managers as we progressed along an uneven surface, a pearl-string of lights strung out overhead, pipes running along the walls, one hissing water. We stepped around the puddle it was creating.

A hundred yards in we took a left fork, halting at a seam that was currently being worked on. At least it would have been worked on if they had not downed-tools for us. It also looked like they had all scrubbed-up for our visit, very clean miners stood smiling next to very clean mining equipment.

Without any further assistance from the managers, or Jimmy, I approached the wall and pointed at the shiny yellow seam. ‘Gold.’

‘Solid gold, sir. Not ore.’

‘Not ... ore?’ I queried.

‘No, sir. It requires little processing. Smelting, yes, but not as much processing as ore that contains little actual gold.’

I scanned the seam, which seemed to be around six feet high and thirty yards long. ‘So how much is this bit worth?’ I asked, pointing along its length.

‘Two thousand dollars an ounce,’ a man informed me. ‘And in front of you, perhaps eighty or ninety tonnes.’

‘I hope your maths is better than mine,’ I told the man.

‘Roughly ... six billion dollars right there,’ the man said.

I took a long moment, putting my hands in my pockets. ‘Oh.’ I faced Jimmy, and waited.

‘They’ve been mining here for twenty years,’ Jimmy told me. ‘And I tucked away the gold for a rainy day. This seam would have been discovered in 2024 with some clever equipment.’

‘So you got in here first,’ I noted.

‘It’s the world’s richest gold seam, sir,’ a man volunteered.

Jimmy led me back up to the surface after we thanked the very clean managers, and the very clean miners.

‘So why keep it secret?’ I asked as we clanked slowly upwards, still no music in the lift. ‘People know we have gold mines here.’

‘Price,’ Jimmy said.

I took a moment. ‘If people know that it’s not quite so precious ... it’ll lower the value, and if we sell too much ... we’ll lower the value ourselves,’ I figured.

‘Now that the world economy is suffering, people are switching out of stocks and into gold, so I’m selling more – but discretely.’

‘And the total reserve?’ I nudged.

‘Is a paper figure, because if we tried to sell it ... then it would be worth a hell of a lot less,’ Jimmy told me.

At the surface, we gave back the hard hats and greeted a few more of the mine team, and I could see now the extra security that this place offered; there had to be a couple of hundred Rifles here, pillboxes, machinegun towers, the works. I also noticed armoured personnel carriers and armoured trucks for transporting the gold.

In the Huey, I placed on a headset and asked Jimmy, ‘What will you do with it all?’

‘The next year or so will see the stock markets down, gold up, so I’ll offload what I can and buy dollars for the region, but not from the Fed. We should be able to keep gold prices stable, or even knock them back a bit by selling. And I’ll use it to manipulate the US stock markets.’

‘There’ve been many things that we could have used this for in the past. But we sold stuff instead,’ I said through the headsets.

‘I had to play the role, and not let on what we really have to play with. Besides, people already accuse me of profiting from my knowledge of the future. At least this is ring-fenced, falling under the region’s mining operations.’

‘If you use the gold to buy dollars from third parties, you’ll prop up the dollar.’

‘Yes, that’s one aspect. And one that the Chinese and Russians don’t need to know about yet.’ He held his look on me.

‘And if you don’t help to prop it up?’ I nudged.

‘OPEC gets twitchy next year, when Hawaii knocks the markets down.’

‘I always figured they would try and drop the dollar because of the surplus of dollars sloshing around.’

‘That’s a factor, the US economy is another; it’s a case of bad timing and coincidence. When things go wrong around the world, people typically buy dollars as a safe haven. But when the thing going wrong is in America itself ... it’s a different case.’

Landing at the airstrip, we reclaimed our Dash after an oddly short visit, and returned to New Kinshasa. There, we boarded a Huey, but headed to Forward Base, landing at the huge Congo Rifles camp. A detail met us, jeeps taking us around to a part of the camp that I had not visited before. We passed through several high fences, all well manned, and to a large building that appeared to be just an admin block. Inside, Jimmy led me down a few steps. Then down a few more, security tight at each turn.

We eventually came to a vault door, open ready, bank staff waiting for us. Jimmy greeted them and shook hands, stepping inside. There we found a very long room, the central corridor separated from the blocks of gold by strong metal grills, several forklifts dotted about.

‘It’s a shit load of gold,’ I said to no one in particular, my words echoing a little.

‘And if the British Prime Minister knew about it he might suggest that we aid the UK economy.’

‘Why don’t we?’ I posed.

‘Because the UK is not the biggest kid in the classroom, or about to throw a temper tantrum.’

I took in the gold ingots. ‘Do we have more money than God?’

‘Not far off it; this could make a serious dent into any project we choose. But, as I said, knowledge of it would knock prices down before we could sell.’

‘Like the diamonds,’ I noted.

‘Yep. And we have a shit load more of those than we declare.’

‘Was this the main reason for moving into the Congo?’

‘No, but a factor. My move here was to make money to fund the Rifles, and to sustain them.’

‘Why show me now?’ I asked.

‘Because in the months ahead we’ll spend more than we seem to have, and you would have asked questions.’

‘Will this lot be shipped out and sold?’

‘Some will, but most will sit in the main bank vault. The way it works - the gold in that vault is used to get us dollars, so the ownership of it changes hands in a computer, it doesn’t actually go anywhere. People then buy oil and ore from us, or land and property, and the ownership comes back to us.’

‘Do they check that it was there in the first place?’ I teased.

‘We get inspections, but they can only verify that the physical gold that they own is there, and that its tagged; the bars have numbers. And if they ask for it, we can ship it out. We also have a declared and monitored reserve that they can inspect, and that’s always more than enough to cover the gold that they lodge with us.’

‘Is this gold ... in line with what you expected?’

Jimmy took a moment. ‘No, it’s more, and we can do more with it. I could have helped various markets and economies in recent years, but I didn’t on purpose. I want the US to feel the pinch so that I can look good when we help, get the people on our side.’

I lifted my eyebrows. ‘Sure you’re not running for office?’

‘I am ... kind of.’

Back at the mansion, he gave me a figure to spend, so long as it was in the States. I asked for a hint as to what exactly I should buy, to which he just shrugged and went for a swim.

I sat with Helen and grabbed a cold beer. ‘Got a slightly bigger budget to buy things with, but from the States only. To both help here, and there.’

Helen considered it. ‘Boeing is in Seattle, west coast, and they’re bound to be hit by the tsunami. I mean, the region will be hit.’

I raised a finger. ‘Good idea.’ I called my contact in Boeing, waking him. ‘It’s Paul Holton. How you doing, mate. Listen, how quickly could you get me another ten 747s?’

‘Ten. New?’

‘Brand new, yes.’

‘They’d have to be slotted in and made. We could find you ten surplus -’

‘No, no, I want them new. Consider this a firm order and ... you know, get the slide rule out and lathe working. What about 767s?’

‘Could let you have six that were cancelled...’

‘I’ll take them, send me the paperwork, thanks.’ I hung up and faced Helen. ‘That’ll keep the locals around the lathe for a while. What else does California and the west coast produce?’

‘Films.’

‘Can’t buy those.’

‘You can offer film finance,’ she posed.

‘Films ... about things that we like; Africa, Rescue Force.’ I called Oliver Standish at Pineapple Music, knowing that he lived and worked in Los Angeles now. ‘Oliver, did I wake you?’

‘Yes!’

‘Sorry. Listen, do you know anyone in the movie business, you know, movie funding.’

‘We do a little of that ourselves if our artists are involved. Katie Joe just made a movie.’

‘She did?’

‘She starred in it.’

‘If I sent you some money, could you get me a list of films, you know – scripts, and let me choose some to fund through you, to help the local economy over there.’

‘Sure.’

‘Let people know that we’ve more money than sense, but are interested in films about Africa, Rescue Force, stuff like that.’

‘There’s a pile in my office, and some of them are disaster movies; they’re popular for writers these days thanks to you.’

Smiling, I said, ‘I want summaries, and I’d like them soon. We’re going to loan your company a billion dollars to start with. What’s a film cost?’

‘Anything up to two hundred million with special effects.’

‘In that case, make it five billion.’

‘You serious?’ Oliver asked in a hoarse whisper.

‘Very serious. Be a love and help out an old mate, eh?’ I hung up. ‘What else, babes?’

‘Electronics in Silicon Valley,’ she suggested.

I Googled the west coast’s exports, but found out that aircraft made up the largest part of its exports. Sat there for an hour, I ordered up sixty small aircraft from a variety of manufacturers, two-dozen helicopters, and ten luxury jets. Hell, there were enough rich people around New Kinshasa to utilize them.

But it still didn’t seem to add up to much, not compared with the money I had to play with. Thinking about a recent air crash in Russia, I called the boss of Boeing, pulling him out of a breakfast meeting. ‘Listen, if I ordered up some aircraft for countries and airlines other than ours, could you ... well, make it look like they paid for them instead of us.’

‘I ... suppose we could if the State department helped. Why?’

‘Well, in simple terms – and just between us – we want to help the aircraft industry there, but have enough aircraft for our own airline.’

‘That’s ... odd, but given that its you, not so odd.’

‘So, could we do it?’ I asked, puzzling his last statement.

‘Send you the bill, sure. Keep it quiet? I’m no secret agent, Paul. The President may be able to help.’

‘Is there any way that you can think of to do it?’ I pressed.

‘Can’t you give the other people the money, and ask *them* to buy from us?’

‘That ... may be an idea, actually. Keep this between us.’

‘How many aircraft are you figuring on sponsoring, Paul?’

‘Don’t know yet, we’ll see how it goes. Thirty, forty, maybe more.’

‘My team will be with you in the morning. You still in Goma?’

‘Yep. I’ll get the kettle on.’ I hung up and dialled Han. ‘Han, you awake?’

‘First, it is the same time here as Goma. Second, I have been injected, and sleep three hours a night – as do many.’

‘Good. Listen, I want you to do me a favour. Ask your government to nudge your state airline to buy ten new 747s from Boeing, and ten 757s. We’ll pay you in gold down here.’

‘That is ... most generous. And may I assume that you are attempting to fill the order books of Boeing to assist the west coast economy after the tsunami.’

‘You’re not daft are you. Will you do it?’

‘As I heard recently ... I am not seeing the downside.’

I laughed and hung up, calling Yuri. ‘Yuri, you awake?’

‘I’m down the road. What time do you have in your house?’

‘I thought you might have been in Russia. Anyway, need a favour. I want you to buy ten 747s off Boeing, and ten 757s, and somehow donate them to a Russian carrier, and we’ll pay you in gold down here.’

‘I was thinking of starting my own airline.’

‘Do it quickly, you’ll have twenty aircraft.’

‘And the reason for this very generous offer?’ Yuri asked.

‘The economy of the American west coast will be hit after the tsunami, so we’re doing what we can ... in our own small way.’

‘I see.’

‘Go start an airline, Yuri. But I want the planes ordered soon.’

I stripped off and took a cool dip, thinking on. Boeing made planes, and the parts came from all around the west coast and the States; there would be a knock on effect to suppliers down the chain.

President Samuels rang at 9pm that evening. ‘Paul, you’re spending a lot in California, and with Boeing. Is the reason what I think it is?’

‘It is. And ... you’re welcome.’

‘Good of you, Paul. You’ve been buying dollars as well, so you have deeper pockets that we realised.’

‘Something about gift horses comes to mind...’

‘Not complaining, just that the folks over here watch you like hawks, and try and figure your every move.’

‘Well, we’re up to no good as usual ... making money to buy stuff from your west coast, and not just oranges.’

‘It was clever of you to have your own region and a friendly government; you can do what you like without a government going through your finances. You know, a lot of folk have tried to get through Kimballa, but the man spouts the bible to them, and mentions what will be on his statue after he’s dead.’

‘He’s thinking about his legacy. What will yours be?’

‘I’d hope it will be a good one; we’re on top of the disaster planning.’

‘And the nice man running against you?’ I nudged.

‘We don’t attack each other in our speeches, too much. I still like Sanchez, and we work well together. He has a passion for helping the poor, and some of it is rubbing off on me.’

‘That’s an odd admission, from the man who represents *all* of the American people.’

‘I didn’t mean it like that. I meant his socialist agenda.’

‘And your Republican Senate?’

‘Would like to see Sanchez strung up.’

‘Then I guess you’re a bigger man than your senators. And before you ask, we don’t know who’ll win, because neither of you were supposed to be in the running. It’s all new.’

‘Well, its neck and neck at the moment, mostly on Sanchez’s strength of personality,’ Samuels admitted.

‘We love you both equally, you know that; equal presents at Christmas!’

‘Senate is pressuring me to get you to address the new Time Travel committee.’

‘They have a Time Travel committee?’

‘Yes. You’re not obliged to appear...’

‘But?’

‘But it may help if you answer a few questions.’

‘I’ll ask the big guy,’ I offered. ‘Anyway, off for a meal, and a walk, and a drink in our glorious creation.’

‘Have a good evening, and thanks for Boeing.’

That following week, I thought of things to buy from California and Washington State, ordering tens of thousands of copies of Microsoft products; legitimately licensed copies. Africa tended to be five or ten years behind the rest of the world, and in some areas this new fangled Windows Operating System was still an idea. They were looking forward to the delivery of Windows 3.11. On the news I saw that Boeing had announced a full order book, and reassured many workers about their employment for the next few years or so.

I had mentioned the Senate committee hearing to Jimmy, and he just made a face, saying it was too soon. We returned to the UK in September, Lucy off to school, and Liz toddling about quite happily. Liz was talking ahead of her years, and we figured we had another genius in the family, neither of us knowing where it came from.

Brad from The Ark kept me informed of everything he was doing, and I urged him to spend more money. He then received a little help from the American branch of our volunteer group, and the two groups started to merge in places. I gave the volunteers a good budget and sent them off to assist Brad, our own volunteers less worried about wasting my money.

October saw the stock markets fall further, the price of gold rising. Sat behind my screen, I said, 'Fuck it.' I called the bank in Goma and told them to sell more gold and to buy US stocks, figuring it would be a good investment anyway. In just a few days we had knocked gold down sixty dollars and the markets up a few points. I increased the gold sales, and took another fifty dollars off the price of an ounce, firming US stocks.

Jimmy then popped up to my office. This time, I had biscuits.

He sat on the windowsill behind me. 'You know what you're doing?'

It was not so much as question, as a 'Do you realise what your doing,' type of statement.

'Selling gold and buying stocks when every other fucker is selling stocks and buying gold?'

'You ... we, are helping to prop-up the US stock markets; little old us two. If I had mentioned that in 1986 -'

'I would have thought you crazy. Yes, we have advanced along the road a bit.'

'Quite a bit,' Jimmy emphasised. 'And one of your abilities is to see complex things in their simple forms, their basic elements.'

'Maybe I'm just thick.'

'You're sarcastic, and that helps.'

'I studied sarcasm in Kingston Polytechnic. It was supposed to have been economics, but I slept in class. So, how much more money can we throw at the US markets?'

'It's not the money, so much as the timing and application. Choose a day when there's bad news and the markets are falling, so that the market makers are short, then buy heavily. It'll catch them out and cause a good upward move as they scramble around to cover their short positions. You know the four banks we don't like, so bust them up. And never forget that America is a free country, and a commercially minded country. Power is in money, not in the government.'

I took receipt of a new bit of trading software from Jimmy, a program written by the brain-trust kids, and it allowed me to place bets across a thousand accounts, all open with the four US banks we

didn't like. The money was routed through various offshore tax havens, through Switzerland, and ultimately down to our bank. I transferred five billion dollars and got to work. Since I wanted the stock anyway, for the long term, I couldn't lose.

That following week I watched the screens, buying a few stocks that had tumbled and introducing a hell of a volatility spike to them. The individual stocks would drop three percent before rallying ten percent with my order, only to fall back a few days later.

When Samuels announced additional budget cuts, the tickers turned red, and I was sat waiting. Around 6pm GMT, 2pm EST, I stacked the deck and let rip with a cool three billion dollars worth of small and medium sized orders. At first my trades were being absorbed by the sellers in the market, but the market makers were soon caught short, unable to fill my orders. Tickers started turning blue for no reason other than a shortage of stock held by the market makers, the traders that I was targeting wondering just who the hell was buying. And buying so much.

I left the markets alone the following day, US financial commentators scratching their heads at the previous day's sudden buying. Prices dropped back, and the next day dipped lower, so I again ordered up two billion dollars worth of small and medium sized blocks, guaranteed to annoy the pit traders – as well as keep them busy.

Time Travel Committee

In early October, Jimmy said that it was time, time to face the Senate committee as guests, since our foreign nationality and diplomatic status prevented us being summoned. We flew over to Washington without announcing the committee appearance to the press, but it had leaked on the US side. We left the terminal from a side entrance.

We were soon 'on the hill', being shown to a waiting room till being called, the Secret Service keeping us company. Once in the Senate hearing room, they naturally asked us to swear to tell the truth. We both refused right off, which caused a little head scratching from the chairman. We sat without being invited to.

Jimmy began, 'I do not ... offer to answer all of your questions, and I do intend to keep some things vague, since what I say may

have a direct bearing on the stock markets, and on people's lives. If that's a problem, then we can call a halt to this right now.'

'We'd like to proceed, since we may not get another chance at this, Mister Silo,' the chairman suggested.

'We're not going anywhere,' I told him. 'We'll still be around next year.'

'We can only hope so,' the chairman said with a false smile, and I had to wonder what the committee was about. I decided to be bold.

'May I ask you a question, under oath or not,' I asked.

'Well, that's not normally how these hearings work.'

'Yes or no?' I pressed.

'Ask your question,' the chairman offered after a glance at his colleagues.

'What's the remit of this committee, its stated function?'

'This committee was set-up to explore and debate all things temporal.'

'Was it set-up to debunk ... all things temporal, like Scully on the X-Files?'

Jimmy gave me a look, a few sniggers coming from behind me.

'We're here to investigate, and then to draw conclusions and make recommendations.'

'Fire away,' I said, easing back.

'Well, let's start at the beginning. Mister Silo, what was *your* remit ... in coming back through time?'

'That's an easy question for me to answer, but not so easy for you to grasp the reality of. I came back thinking that you were all doomed, and that anything I did could not make it worse, but could only make things better. If, at any point during the past thirty years, I had made a mistake, it may have been tragic, but it would not have been such a catastrophic loss as you may think from where you're sat ... since I come from a place in time with very little hope.

'My remit, my objective, was to warn the various leaders about what would happen, and then to try as best I could in steering the world away from disaster.'

'And you felt that the best way to do that was in secret?' the chairman asked.

'Most definitely. I considered, most strongly, that if I made my identity clear to any government other than the British, that I would be locked up and used to the sole advantage of that nation, especially you lot.'

'Would you like to ... expand upon that?'

‘I firmly believed that the CIA would try and identify me - and to grab me, which they did over a great many years. Fortunately, I had the assistance of the UK Government to stop such attempts. Thirty years ago, the CIA were aware of my ability to predict the future, and made efforts to grab me and to kill me.’

‘To kill you?’

‘Yes, numerous attempts were made to kill me, as well as attempts to bribe me or to force me to work for the CIA, and to the advantage of individuals – for their own financial gain – or to the sole advantage of the States.’

‘You have admitted, publicly, that NASA and our military built the time machine. Would you not have been obliged to debrief with NASA?’

‘No, since you could never be trusted, and still can’t be trusted.’

That wrangled them a little. ‘*We* ... could not be trusted?’

‘Those who built the time machine ... knew that the people here would probably not accept or understand the depth of destruction and despair that led to the time machine being built. Although they wished to warn you, they also knew that such information could be used for the advantage of unscrupulous American politicians. Which I guess covers most of you.’

I hid a smile, badly.

‘You don’t trust our government?’

‘I trust certain individuals, those whose pedigree I know for definite. I trust the good man to your left, and the very good man on your far right. I trust Samuels and Sanchez, and a few others.’

‘I see,’ the chairman said, his pride obviously hurt. He passed the questioning to the second man. That man thanked the chairman – at length, and changed tack. ‘The American people are being expected to place a great deal of trust in you –’

‘They don’t have to. They can sit on the beach on the day of the tsunami and tell themselves that I’m wrong.’

‘And would you allow people to die like that?’

‘Like what? Like fools? I’ll help those that want my help, and those that need my help, and those that deserve my help. But I won’t stand in the way of a fool that wishes to end his life. Besides, your citizens are your concern. I notify your government, and they handle their own people as they see fit. I’m not a politician.’

‘And are there things that you know, that you’ve not told the President?’

‘A great many things.’

‘And if they affect us, do we not have a right to know?’

‘No, you don’t, because you’re bunch of children still trying to figure it all out. You care more about your own ratings than saving lives or doing what’s right.’

‘You see us as children? I’ve been in the Senate for more than thirty years -’

‘And I’m a great deal older than you, a great deal wiser, and a great deal more experienced. And then some.’

‘Well, that’s your opinion –’

‘His approval rating is higher as well!’ I put in with a grin.

A third man took over after a nod. ‘Mister Silo, we only have your word as to who you really are ... and your real motives,’ one of the panel posed.

‘And it’s that scepticism that betrays both your youth, and your lack of qualification to be sat there. Your government, and the people of this world, have had thirty years to judge my motives. If you haven’t got it all figured out by now then you have a problem, not least in your own lack of abilities. But you’re under no obligation to listen to me. Others ... do.’

‘You have been accused of favouring the Chinese and Russians.’

‘I favour anyone who listens and acts. They listen, and they act - you don’t. When I tell your people about the future, they sit back and fold their arms, expecting me to try and prove what I say. Then they see how they could use that information for the benefit of this country.’

‘Since they work for this country, and are paid by this country, they *should* be looking out for its best interests.’

Jimmy slowly nodded. ‘And there lies the problem at the heart of this, and there lies the reason why I don’t trust you, nor will ever give you a full picture. You *are* children, and you don’t understand, so I’ll explain it for you. I’ll even go slow.

‘There are two concepts, both of which you still fail to understand. First, it matters not to me, or to any truly enlightened person, which country prospers or fails, survives or dies. It matters ... that mankind survives. But you will, I’m sure, find many people in this country, and especially in your government, who are determined to keep America on top – no matter what it takes, even if you decide to fire your nukes at other nations. There are people in this country who consider that America must survive, even if it’s to the detriment of all other nations.

‘Second, the challenges ahead can only be tackled by everyone pulling together. To give you an analogy, one mentioned recently,

we are all in a canoe together. If one nation gets up and rocks the boat we all sink. Only through global cooperation will we succeed.

‘You, sir, don’t understand either concept, which is why I have nothing but contempt for you, and for some of your colleagues. I’ve told you before, and I’ll state it again: if the countries on this planet fail to work together in the years ahead, they all fail. You’ve had SARS, quakes, Lagos Fever, and now an economic downturn. But that’s nothing compared to what lies ahead; that’s a stubbed toe. What lies ahead will be like a house falling on you.

‘And the reason I work in secret, and the reason I work around people like you, is that you don’t even accept the dangers, let alone try to get the people of America ready for them. Russia and China will fare well because they listen, and they’re preparing. You’re still deciding if you believe me, when China is ten years ahead in detailed planning. You haven’t even got off the drawing board yet. America is so far behind in planning and changing that you’ll probably never catch up.

‘You’re sat there with your stupid questions about my ability to captain the boat, when the boat sailed ten years ago. You’re discussing a Sunday afternoon stroll when you should be at home building a shelter and stacking the tins and water. Do you think you represent the American people? We’re in the last quarter, and you haven’t even found the football field yet.’

They took a moment, the room deathly quiet.

‘You’re saying that President Samuels has not listened?’

‘He’s listening, but he can only do so much. The rest is down to businesses, to the institutions, and the people. And it’s the people who will ultimately change things. In Africa, in New Kinshasa, we have thousands of American volunteers giving their time for food and board, to work on projects I give them, research to tackle future problems.

‘They’re prepared to sacrifice their homes and their careers to help me. They’re not there to help their native America - their homeland, they’re there to help the planet. And the first concept they deal with when arriving ... is that we’re all in this together, and that no nation has more of a claim than another.

‘Whilst on that topic, we’ll be offering some of the people of Hawaii and your west coast a new home and a job in New Kinshasa, to do what we can to help them. People in the abandonment zones can petition us for a place in Africa.’

‘In Africa?’

‘It’s a vibrant and modern city, with plenty of jobs. And if they’re not happy they can always return home,’ I said. ‘We’ll also be spending what money we can on helping the displaced.’

‘And that money, it came from your knowledge of the future?’

Jimmy said, ‘No, it came from our belief in Africa. But if you’re not happy with that then we’ll not spend any money to help the displaced people. What would you like us to do, Senator; help them or not?’

‘I don’t think you should be profiting from your knowledge of the future.’

‘If we’re profiting from the knowledge,’ I posed. ‘Then the knowledge must be true. And if it’s true, then why are you still a pain in the backside?’

Jimmy gave me a look as he stood. ‘We’re done wasting our time with you. Do what you want, and we’ll help the displaced of America whether you like it or not.’

We left, being snapped by the photographers. Samuels was on the phone straight away, mad as hell; the hearing had gone out live. We were summoned to the White House like naughty schoolboys.

Samuels and his team were waiting, and all a little sour faced. ‘You want to explain some of that attack on us!’ Samuels loudly asked.

‘It’s not so much about you, as ... those that may follow you,’ Jimmy said.

‘Follow me?’

‘Other Presidents and political leaders. Besides, I need the people on my side to help you, just in a roundabout sort of way, and yes – I move in mysterious ways – and no, I won’t explain why all the time.’

‘You said we’re ten years behind the Chinese!’

‘You are. Their electric vehicle usage and coal-oil expansion could push their GDP up twenty percent from the ten its at now. And now that I’ve worried the people, you can try and enact more austerity measures and get more bills passed, especially if the Democrats take a few seats off you.’

‘You gave Sanchez ammunition!’

‘If he tries to use it I’ll stop him. And he will listen,’ Jimmy insisted.

The Chief of Staff said, ‘You showed nothing but contempt for the panel.’

‘Did they deserve otherwise?’ I asked.

Jimmy explained, 'Today's rant ... puts me in tune with the little guy in small town America, and will strike a chord after the tsunami, because no matter what the federal government does to try and to help people - they'll not be appreciated. After the tsunami, people's trust in the federal government will fall, and there's nothing you can do. But, if I'm seen more as a people's champion, I can give you a good write up.'

'Nothing I do ... is accidental, or emotional. There are things that you guys can do, and there are things that require people power - plus a change of attitude in the populace. My aim, was to install a feeling of urgency, and that will help.'

I said, 'And it's still fucking ridiculous that your senators still don't trust us or know what we're about.'

'You've been buying dollars,' a man noted, directing his comment to me.

'Yes. What's your point?' I curtly asked.

'Just wondering ... why?'

'To prop up the dollar,' I carefully mouthed.

'And yet you just lambasted our political system on national television.'

'Which you obviously weren't watching closely, or not paying attention,' Jimmy said. 'It's about saving everyone. You included!'

'You have deeper pockets than we calculated,' the same man said.

'The GDP of our region is higher than we report,' I said. 'Much higher. We're buying dollars off Europeans and others and paying the staff in dollars - which helps you lot.'

'And you just ordered enough planes to keep Boeing busy for a decade,' Samuels noted. 'For which we're grateful,' he quickly added.

'We're using spare cash to buy anything produced on the west coast,' I informed them. 'It all helps.'

'Not sure I understood ... about offering our citizens homes and jobs in Africa,' Samuels began. 'It makes us look ... less powerful in the world.'

'For the next ten years, the name of the game is integration,' Jimmy told him. 'I'll be pressuring you to accept more Chinese and Russian tourists, and closer ties. Before 2025 you need to be closely linked, because we don't want any nation to say that they're doing more than another. That ... tension, could cause a fatal split. And, in case you bright gentlemen haven't figured it out yet, New Kinshasa

is a melting pot for nations. From it, I expect new companies to grow, with directors from many nations on the board, as with CAR.'

'Could we get some warning about shows like that in future?' Samuels asked. 'Maybe some input?'

'No. What I do is beyond your time in office, and beyond the life spans of all of you,' Jimmy stated, and I had to puzzle the odd remark. So did the others. 'There's still a lot you don't know. And, when you understand ... you'll understand.'

They glanced at each other.

'Might we know how much you intend to spend – as a private individual – on helping after the tsunami?' the Chief asked.

'Why?' I cut in with.

'It may make us look bad.'

'Again, why?' I asked. 'If we help ... you waste less tax payer's money.'

'And that makes *you two* look good,' a man noted.

'Which is part of the aim,' Jimmy pointed out. 'Unless you feel that my task would be easier ... if I were less popular?'

'Should our efforts not be coordinated?' the Chief asked.

'They will be,' Jimmy insisted. 'But I can't be seen to *sit by* when people know that I have ... *deep pockets*.'

'Could you put a figure on it,' the Chief nudged.

'Approximately fifty billion dollars.'

That had an effect. They exchanged shocked looks.

'And don't you think that may make us look bad?' Samuels asked.

'No. You're trying to spend the appropriate amount, and trying not to waste taxpayer's money,' Jimmy told them. 'Besides, you're spending a hell of a lot more.'

'Which will be lost in the detail,' the Chief said.

'Would you like us to spend less?' I asked.

No one answered, they didn't dare. We went around in circles for a while, the ruling elite worried that we were up to something – which we were – they just couldn't figure it out. And, with an election just weeks away, they were all twitchy, seeing our attack on the senate committee as an attack on them.

We reassured the most powerful men in the world, and I felt a bit odd, sat there watching how the most powerful men in the world were reacting to us.

Jumping back aboard Silo One, we flew off to Seattle, landing at Boeing's own airfield. The last time we landed here we had to leave US airspace and skirt around it, now I felt a little more welcome, if

only by Boeing. The senior executives met us as honoured guests, even though it was now 8pm and dark, and drove us to the home of one of the board members, a suitably large and secure estate. They even had accommodation for some of our security detail, the rest having to book into a motel just down the road.

Dinner was ready as soon as we had arrived, and we settled about a large table, being waited on by three wives and two maids. It wasn't long before we got into talking aircraft sales; they certainly weren't bashful. They raised the issue of payment on account, since we were ordering a great many aircraft. Our credit was good, very good, but they wished to re-hire a few people they had laid off recently, both in their own plants and in subsidiaries.

'We can pay your Fed, but in our region, and they can pay you,' I suggested. 'We're trying to hang onto our dollars to pay the workers in our region.'

'How much would you like?' Jimmy asked.

'However much we can get away with,' they joked. 'And, we'd sweeten the price for a good upfront payment.'

'Again, how much would you like?' Jimmy pressed.

They exchanged looks. 'One point five?'

The man meant billions, each 747 topping out at one hundred and eighty-five million dollars these days, without the extras.

'Let's call it two point five, to ease your cash flow,' Jimmy offered.

They exchanged looks. 'You serious, Jimmy?' the main man asked.

Jimmy nodded. 'The west coast will need jobs after the tsunami. Hell, it needs jobs now. The money would be a zero percent loan, and when you deliver the aircraft you can bill us and adjust it.'

'Well, I wasn't going to offer you the good desserts,' the main man joked. 'But now you can have ice cream.'

After the lengthy meal we sat about an artificial log fire, many of the men off to wives and families. We sat drinking, and chatting about the development of Boeing aircraft. I mentioned Lucy's flying and they were impressed, offering her the use of their simulator if she ever visited. I made a mental note not to tell her; she would have probably asked me to fly her over straight away. And we had already lost one daughter.

In my allocated guest room I fired up my laptop and loaded the communications software, dialling Helen. The screen came to life a few seconds later, a view of her elbow. 'Can you hear me?'

‘Yes, just picking chocolate out of Liz’s hair,’ Helen informed me.

A shrill cry suggested that a little more soap was needed, and a little less tugging.

Exasperated, Helen lifted Liz to her knee and faced her laptop, the backdrop being our lounge. I could now see brown chocolate in Liz’s blonde hair.

‘Hey, baby. You been eating chocolate?’

‘No, it wasn’t me,’ came back, a shake of the head.

‘How’s it going?’ Helen asked.

‘Samuels was pissed at the way Jimmy spoke to the senate committee, he’s worried about the election. Now we’re in the house of one of the guys from Boeing; had a meal and a few drinks, just settling down. How was your day, babes?’

‘I’ve been handling projects for the volunteers, for Jimmy. We’ve got more volunteers now than projects, and more applying all the time. The corporation are building more apartments for them all. Oh, and Lucy has a boyfriend.’

‘*Boyfriend*, boyfriend?’

‘I saw them kissing out the window.’

‘How old is he?’ I asked.

‘Same age.’

‘Well, we’ve got that to be thankful for.’

‘She’s going for the intellectual type.’

‘Where are you, daddy?’ Liz asked, puzzling the laptop image.

‘I’m in another country, a place called America.’

‘Are you up in the airy-plane?’

‘No, babes, but I will be tomorrow.’

‘Down to L.A.?’ Helen asked.

‘Yep. See Oliver Standish about making a few films.’

‘Will you see Brad?’ Helen asked.

‘No, keeping a low profile as far as he’s concerned. For the moment at least.’

‘Right, well I’ve got a shower to put this young lady under.’

‘Say hello to Lucy for me. By Liz.’

She shrieked and struggled before the screen went blank, and I didn’t envy Helen’s task. Liz was a toddler, but she ran faster than we did, and could get down the stairs on her bum in a flash and outpace us.

I opened my emails and began at the top.

Our coal-oil refineries had grown to six facilities, output up thirty percent. I marked it as read and moved on. Next, I discovered that

the various governments involved with the next generation nuclear plant in Somalia were arguing about further funding. I simply ordered the corporation to send money over.

My phone beeped. Lifting it, I could see Shelly's cartoon image waving. I touched the screen and a real image of Shelly appeared.

'Hey, dad, you with Boeing?'

'Just had a meal with them. Is it on the news?'

'No, silly; I check your itinerary with Sharon at the house.'

'Where are you?'

'Los Angeles.'

'We're there tomorrow.'

'Duh, I know,' came back. 'I'll want a lift.'

'A lift?'

'To Hawaii and New Zealand.'

'We're going to New Zealand?' I asked.

'It's suppose to be secret, but Sharon told me.'

'You know more than me, babes.'

'Always, daddy. Always.'

'So ... what you been up to?'

'Had a look around three universities here.'

'Any you like?' I asked, knowing more than she did about her future.

'Yes, I like the marine biology course here. But I might try and add microbiology to it.'

'So, what do you want to be when you grow up?'

She smiled. 'We'll see. Oh, in case you see it, I've done some modelling work; clothes, watches, jewellery.'

'Making a buck?'

'I made three million bucks actually.'

'Well don't forget me, I may be poor some day.'

'Hah! Jimmy will never be poor. I'll see you tomorrow at Oliver's house. Night.'

Her image disappeared, and I returned to my emails.

In the morning we flew down the coast, a coast that was soon to be devastated. En route, I read a paper that one of the security guys had brought with him, a story about a clever bit of software that worked out which areas would be hit, and how badly. Some coastal towns would be completely spared, others destroyed, and a few towns ten miles inland would be badly hit after water had funnelled up their estuaries.

At the bottom of the article was a picture of Brad, and I read on, seeing that he was using the software to warn people, and to set-up shelters for the homeless near the areas that would be affected, even soups kitchens. It gave me an idea. I fired up my laptop and composed an email for him.

‘Brad, don’t re-invent the wheel. Work a deal with McDonalds, KFC, and others. Print up vouchers and give them to people already on welfare as a test. After the tsunami, give vouchers to those that lose their homes, one free meal a day at least. Thinking on, if you can find some way of doing that - but in a little more low-fat and healthy kind of way, that might be good as well. We’ll fund it, you go talk to the companies.’

Returning to my paper, after staring out the window and down at the coast in question for a while, I read an economic forecast for the States that was all doom and gloom. Not only that, they seemed to be constantly referring to “when” it happens and “after” it happens. I had to wonder if they were paying attention.

At Oliver’s house, we informed our security detail that there were no spare rooms, and they set-up a rota system, booking into a local hotel. Oliver and his wife greeted us, Shelly giving me a kiss on the cheek, but hugging Jimmy.

My dear daughter was now taller than me, and more like her mother every day. With sunglasses on, I had to look twice. Settled around the dinning room table, and tucking in to some tasty ribs, we got down to business.

‘What’s the progress with the film scripts?’ I asked Oliver.

‘There are fifty-two in a box ready for you,’ he said with a smirk. ‘In addition to the ones I sent you.’

‘Fifty-two?’ I queried. ‘If they’re anything like the last lot, we’ll be at this a while.’

‘No shortage of scripts around here,’ Oliver pointed out. ‘Every waitress and limo driver has a script.’

‘And this batch ... they’re all suitable?’ I asked.

‘Most are disaster movies, and most have Rescue Force in them. Some are about Africa, some about time travel, and many about future calamities.’

I faced Jimmy. ‘You’d best check the shortlist as well.’

Jimmy nodded. ‘Leave a box here for Shelly to go through. It’ll give her something to do, and make her even more popular in movie circles.’

I faced Shelly. ‘You’re popular in movie circles?’

‘I have friends in the business,’ she coyly admitted.

‘You make friends quickly,’ I quipped, getting a look from her. ‘But don’t they have strict rules over here about drinking and ID cards?’

‘They do,’ Oliver said after Shelly sat staring back at me. ‘And, thanks to the papers, all the bar staff know how old Shelly is.’

‘I only drink occasionally, and in private,’ Shelly stated.

‘Cutting down then,’ I noted.

‘You don’t need to worry about her,’ Jimmy told me. ‘Because the first time she causes us any bad publicity I’ll have her returned to the UK in handcuffs.’

Shelly now shot Jimmy a look. He slowly turned his head to her. ‘Toy with me, young lady, and I’ll take all of your toys off you.’

She lowered her gaze after being stared at, an awkward silence created.

I faced Oliver. ‘I’ll go through the scripts on the plane, and tell you which one’s I like – if any. Those that Shelly likes, send me copies to have a nose at.’

‘There’s a script that I’ve brought,’ Jimmy told Oliver. ‘Which is more like four scripts in one. It’s about the soldiers who went to Afghanistan, to fight in the integrated units. That one is your priority, and we’ll want it made in English, French, Russian and Chinese. The military staff in Kenya will cooperate, and you can shoot on location in the Somali or Ethiopian highlands.’

‘I’ve got all the studios chasing me,’ Oliver said with a smile. ‘Even had a few celebs drop by and ask for work.’

‘Quite a few,’ Oliver’s wife added.

‘Will L.A. be hit badly in January?’ Oliver asked a while later.

‘Some areas,’ Jimmy replied. ‘Fortunately, you have a built up area that will act like a dam to the wave; the buildings will act like breakers. The authorities will dig trenches in the sand, and that will disrupt the wave, and they’ll place concrete blocks across streets. The water will seep inland a fair way, but the brunt of the damage will be taken by the first block or two.

‘The Venice Beach area will be less of a beach and more exposed rock, the sand will be in-land in peoples bedrooms; six feet high. The marinas will be flooded, but mostly undamaged. San Francisco will miss most of it, but the towns further up the estuary will be badly affected; tsunamis like shallow water and funnels. Then they rear up and do the damage.’

I faced Shelly. ‘Are you planning on being here when the wave hits?’

‘No, I wanted to have a look around the Caribbean this winter.’

‘And New Zealand?’ I added.

‘They have an oceanography course that I wanted to look at.’

‘Don’t they produce a prospectus?’ Oliver asked.

‘Yes, but I want to see the facilities and the local town. Oceanography courses have a lot of practical elements.’

‘Time at sea aboard ship,’ I put in without looking up.

In the morning we reclaimed our aircraft, several of the security staff having remained onboard overnight, and I started on the scripts as we climbed away from Los Angeles, heading for Hawaii.

One of the scripts had a character called Paul Hilton, and he was a bit of an effeminate sidekick to Ricky Stone, a time travelling super-hero. It got a big red cross on the front page. Cheeky bastards.

En route, I sat and had a beer with Jimmy, Shelly reading a book on microbiology opposite us. ‘The newspapers seem to think that the tsunami will knock the US economy down.’

‘It will.’

‘So ... why don’t they factor that in now?’

‘They have, to some degree, but there’s a big difference between being diagnosed with cancer, and one day finding your hair in the sink. They still think there’s hope, and no ... they haven’t quite grasped it. Oh, Sanchez will be meeting us there.’

‘Is he electioneering?’

‘No, we have to break some bad news to the islanders, a sizeable number of who aim to remain and to take to the hills; there could be a hundred and fifty thousand staying behind. But ... but tomorrow around noon they’ll get a wake up call, courtesy of Mother Nature.’

‘A quake?’ I asked, wide-eyed, Shelly looking up.

‘A modest one. It’s the timing signal, and it’ll fix the exact time of the main quake, just in case my memory is not what it should be. There’ll be three more between now and the big one.’

‘If Sanchez wins, he’ll be inheriting a crisis, since they don’t seem to be prepared.’

‘Samuels is prepared, but I haven’t pushed him as much as I should have.’

‘You want the people to bash the federal emergency package,’ I noted.

‘Has to be done, I’m afraid. You see, no matter how hard we try, we could never get the government to do what we want, because it’s not a united government. You have a president, a congress, a senate, powerful lobbyists, and a politically biased media. You also have the Pentagon and other interested groups, and they all pull in different

directions, making it near impossible for the President to get anything done.

‘Whoever wins next month their majority will be small, and so far it looks fifty-fifty. So there could be a president with a small majority in congress, and maybe a minority in the senate. It’ll be a disaster; the main emergency bill will never get passed.’

‘And we’ll help in the meantime,’ I noted.

‘If the bill isn’t passed, Wall Street will crash, and financial liquidity will be squeezed further, causing a genuine recession.’

‘How much of that gold will we use?’

‘A lot of it.’

‘If it was used to develop Africa...’ I posed.

‘Yes, it would be a super-power in itself. But if America descends into a full-blown recession, then right-wing elements will surface - strong nationalist leaders, and they’ll think about aggressive moves - starting by not paying creditors like the Chinese.’

‘They’ll default?’ I puzzled.

‘Deliberately. The Fed will print dollars and hyperinflation will take over, because with a US recession comes global recession, and oil sales dry up; those holding dollars would sell them.’

‘And the value of the dollar drops, the costs of imports rise and makes the recession worse,’ I thought out loud. ‘A double effect.’

‘It’s an integrated global economy,’ Jimmy said. ‘When the biggest kid on the block falls, they all fall. That in turn makes the biggest kid on the block a big hungry grizzly bear with an empty belly - and sharp claws.’

‘Bring back Hardon Chase,’ I quipped.

‘Funny you should say that...’

‘What?’ I asked after a moment.

‘I’ve got him together with Brad.’

‘Chase can’t be the President again.’

‘No, but he can advise Brad,’ Jimmy said.

‘Brad...? President Brad?’ I glanced out the window. ‘You crafty old sod.’

In Honolulu, security was tight, something of a protest going on outside, a protest about our visit. That angered me greatly; we weren’t about to cause the damn quake, we were just the messengers.

We left the airport via a side entrance, an army escort provided since there were tens of thousands of soldiers already on the island. We met Sanchez at a hotel, a well-guarded hotel, and he joined us as

we travelled around to a meeting of the local politicians and community representatives. The police had barricades out, soldiers on duty, the crowds kept back. And this lot did not want our autographs.

I struggled to understand their attitude. It was a natural disaster, and they'd be alive afterwards, not dead. I could understand complaints about compensation, but what could anyone do. Some of the placards I noticed said 'We will not give up our homes!', and I had to wonder what the hell was going through their minds.

Moving through the government offices, Jimmy checked his watch, asking for a room where we could talk with Sanchez. They found us a room, even cold drinks, and we sat with Sanchez and his party, his disaster team, which included a number of senior military officers.

Jimmy asked for a quick briefing on where we were with preparations, and the military detailed their plans, some of which shocked me. Jimmy indicated to Sanchez how we would help the people after the quake, before leading us toward the arranged meeting.

Entering a large room, we found a dozen desks pushed together, fifty people sat around them, many being ancestral Hawaiians, only two women present. Police stood off to one side, making me think about how friendly this crowd was going to be. Jimmy checked his phone, noting the time. We sat facing our inquisitors, most of them offering us stony-glances or folded arms.

Jimmy then offered one particular man a long sentence in what I presumed was a native tongue. The man stared back for a moment, unfolded his arms and replied, he and Jimmy entering into something of a conversation. Jimmy finally broke to English. 'It would be rude for us not to converse in English, since there are many *white folk* here.'

He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a glass sand-timer. Turning it so that the majority of the sand was at the top, he placed it in the middle of the table, everyone focusing on it as the sand started to run out.

'First, let's get the bad news out of the way,' Jimmy said. He faced Sanchez. 'If I may?' Sanchez nodded. Jimmy faced the men arranged opposite us. 'In a week's time, all oil and fuel will be cut, no more deliveries will be made.'

The assembled locals glanced at each other, shocked. And angered.

‘On the 12th of December, the last food ship will arrive. After it, no more will come. On the 6th of January, all power and phone lines will be cut.’

A chorus of indignant comments rose up, which soon led to raised voices and a few fists banging the table. Meanwhile, Jimmy leant forwards and rested on his arms, studying the sand-timer, and seemingly ignoring the melee around him. I focused on it as well, so did a curious Sanchez.

With most of the sand out of the timer, and a few of the rowdy locals also now focused on it, the building shook, ceiling panels and dust falling. Everyone apart from Jimmy looked up, the police wanting to evacuate us. Jimmy quietly told Sanchez that we were safe, and Sanchez loudly told everyone to settle down as Jimmy turned the sand-timer over.

When the overlapping conversations had eased a little, Jimmy said, ‘Where were we? Ah, yes, you were about to tell me that you’ll stay in your homes. Well, ladies and gentlemen, you can stay in your homes if you wish. But I ask that your children be put aboard boats and allowed to be a mile offshore. That, is not much to ask, and they can return to your homes afterwards; after ... nothing happens.’

He again focused on the sand-timer, and so did everyone else now. ‘The sand runs out of the timer. It feels nothing; no pain, nor joy, no sorrow. It simply runs out of the timer.’

With the sand just about out of the upper capsule, another quake struck, louder this time, more dust falling from the ceiling. Jimmy sat calmly, Sanchez and his party exchanging looks, and looking like they wanted to be the hell outside.

Jimmy turned the sand-time on its side and broke it with the side of a fist. Making eye contact with the indigenous man he had spoken to previously, he said, ‘Only I can stop the timer. You, my friend, will perish in ignorance.’

He eased back. ‘Your ancestors had a better appreciation of Mother Nature, and of her fickle moods. I’m sure that there were many times when your people felt the earth shake, and witnessed volcanoes exploding. And, I’m sure, that those things had an effect on their desire to get into a canoe and move on. You landed here around the time of Christ, but now it’s time to move again, and some of you will go back to Polynesia with my help and my money.

‘Some will go to America, to Los Angeles, and I will again help with money. Some will also accept my invitation to come and live in Africa, and to help my cause. Those that remain will become legend, joining their ancestors a little too soon.’

He stood, the police still fussing and wanting to move us out. Pointing at the timer, he said, 'I can fix the timer, and I can make the sand go back up. I ... can wind back time, you ... cannot. If you think you can, the timer is there.'

He nodded at Sanchez and his party, and we led a relieved group out. Oddly enough, the protestors outside had dispersed.

On the coach, Sanchez said, 'That was a hell of a parlour trick.'

'I knew the date and time of the quakes,' Jimmy informed Sanchez. 'And I knew it would have more of an effect than just words.'

At Sanchez's hotel, we settled around the bar, the residents being allowed back in, not least because Jimmy said there would be no more quakes today.

'Samuels is pissed at you,' Sanchez noted, an invite to explain the situation.

'He saw my attack on the senate committee as an attack on the government,' Jimmy explained.

'Was it?' Sanchez asked.

'No,' Jimmy insisted. 'Besides, you may be in that government soon enough. Then you'll see just how little power you really have, especially with a small margin.'

'And the economy?' Sanchez nudged.

'Whoever gets in will preside over a mess,' Jimmy said.

'I won't be leaving the baby on the church steps,' Sanchez carefully mouthed. 'I expect it to be hard, that's why I'm doing it.'

'You'll have our support,' Jimmy assured him. 'But there's no quick fix.'

Sanchez eased back. 'We've moved out a million people already. The retirees were easy enough to move, the military, federal employees. Businessmen and the rich have all gone.'

'Leaving the poor ... and the ancestral Hawaiians,' Jimmy noted.

'The poor are being offered accommodation across the States, fifty thousand a week moving out. Money that we earmarked to move the better-off is being used as incentives for the poor, grants and loans.'

'I think you'll find them a little more willing to move after today,' I told Sanchez.

He lifted his eyebrows and nodded. 'Biggest problems are the smaller islands.'

'Don't be soft with them,' Jimmy urged. 'Use the military. Cut power sooner; water and phones. Tear down schools and hospitals, sports centres. Those homes that are empty, torch them. You have to

move them away from a normal and tranquil lifestyle and ram home the reality.'

'Cruel to be kind,' I softly added. 'And we'll be offering money for the displaced, a lot of money. That should help.'

'I have people arriving here in a few days,' Jimmy told Sanchez. 'They'll offer homes in Africa and other places. We'll see if we can't move a few people out for you.'

Back on the plane, Shelly was still reading her book. 'I thought the quake was early for a minute there,' she said, marking her page.

'Just the foreshocks,' I told her. 'Jimmy just scared the crap out of the locals. He timed the meeting.'

'We off now?' she asked.

'Yes, Auckland, New Zealand.'

After take-off I opened the newspaper again and started to read.

Landing in Auckland after midnight, and worried that we seemed to be landing on the water of the bay before finding the runway, we found that there were no angry crowds to meet us, no crowds at all. We elected to stay on the plane and catch some sleep.

At 8am we ventured out, a few reporters observing our coach leave the airport, and made a very short journey to the New Zealand Housing Association buildings, where the Prime Minister and his colleagues awaited us. Shelly came along, wishing to meet the Prime Minister. I had my suspicions as to why, and the man thought that she was Helen. Shelly was not best pleased to be mistaken for her mum, but it brought a smile to my face.

The Prime Minister walked us inside, chatting about the flight and our specialised aircraft. I suspected he was a little jealous. In a meeting room, we settled about an oval table, pictures on the walls of Captain Cook, of old sail boats and indigenous peoples in traditional dress, whaling boats with harpoons.

'Something of a mystery, this meeting,' the Prime Minister noted. 'And we were asked to keep it quiet.' He held his hands wide. 'We're all intrigued.'

'Then I'll get to the point,' Jimmy said. 'If you were given financial assistance, would you take a few Hawaiian families?'

They glanced at each other.

'Well, how many?' the Prime Minister asked.

'How much ... would a house cost to build?' Jimmy asked. 'And what would be the burden on social services in the years after their arrival?'

‘Property around Auckland is high, cheaper further out. A three bed house would be around a hundred and twenty thousand English pounds, but cheaper further out.’

‘How much cheaper?’ Jimmy nudged.

‘Down to forty thousand for single story starter units,’ they explained.

‘OK, I’ll make this simple. First, are you happy to accept Hawaiians?’

‘We’ve already discussed it, and a few have settled here already,’ they explained. ‘So we have no particular objections about taking a few, other than the cost - and the current state of our economy.’

‘And if I asked you to take more than just a few?’ Jimmy nudged.

‘It would have to be put to the people, but the social burden would be the issue.’

‘And if I paid local companies to build new apartment blocks, thereby helping with employment.’

‘That would be an incentive, yes.’

‘And if I gave you five billion pounds towards the social burden?’

They blinked.

‘Well, we could take quite a few.’

‘Could you do something for me as we break for a cup of tea: work out a unit cost to build a basic apartment, and factor in the school, medical and welfare costs of a typical family. Then tell me what ten thousand migrant families would cost you. And I would appreciate a rough figure today.’

They blinked again, but got on it, paper and pens out as we stood and looked at the pictures on the walls, Shelly introducing herself to the Prime Minister and mentioning that she may wish to study here. I shook my head, not knowing who she got the cheeky nature from.

They came back with a figure, little more than a hundred thousand pounds per family, allowing for a social burden of six years.

‘Fine,’ Jimmy told them. ‘I’ll be flying over five billion in gold, and I’d like you to take on board as many families as you can – but primarily ancestral Hawaiians. You’ll also be able to claim some money from the American Government for the families – but that will take a year or two.’

Back at the plane, I cornered the head of Shelly’s security detail. ‘So, what’s the little darling been up to?’

‘I’m under orders from Jimmy not to say, sorry, you’ll have to ask him.’

I moved closer. 'She's my frigging daughter, not his!'

'Yes, sir, but he pays my wages, and he'd pull my head out the socket. Sorry, boss. But Jimmy does keep a careful eye on her, and ... interferes if he thinks it necessary.'

'Such as?' I probed.

'One young actor, twenty-five, took a shine to her. Jimmy rang him, and the lad stopped taking her calls.'

'Oh,' I said after a moment.

'I speak to Jimmy about her almost every day,' the man offered. 'She's quite sensible really, she studies and reads a lot, she's never falling down drunk or making a scene. And if the men get pushy she decks them.'

'She's decked a few men?'

The man nodded.

'Takes after her mum,' I noted.

'In Singapore she visited the hospitals, the children's wards. Flies the flag for you.'

'She does?'

'She visits the Rescue Force units as well. Embarrassed the Chinese Premier though; he offered a hand to shake and she kissed and hugged him.'

I smiled. 'Take care of her.'

We left Shelly in New Zealand, with her security detail, the poor young men of Auckland about to feel a right hook, and headed towards Goma and a surprise meeting of certain world leaders. I found out en route and was concerned, since the Russians, Chinese and Japanese were involved, but not the British or Americans. It was bound to get out, and our dear Prime Minister would be asking questions.

He had recently stated that he would not serve another term, and even hinted at stepping down sooner, possibly in the spring. I guess he had enough. Finally.

Arriving at the mansion in Goma I found Helen and Liz, quite expecting them to be there to surprise me, Lucy in school. I kissed Helen and grabbed Liz, the little lady struggling to get away and get back to some serious face stuffing. It was almost 5am, and I chose a quick dip as a way of fixing the jetlag, the duty guards saying hello.

I was soon fresh and awake, and chasing Liz around the house. I didn't know about swimming, this little lady was a sprinter. Catching her, I put her over my shoulder and carried her to the pool, threatening to drop her in and waking the neighbours with her shrill

calls. When I placed her down she dived in anyway, surfacing and giggling.

‘You change her!’ came from a window above me.

I dipped back in the pool, soon joined by Jimmy, a rare partaker of early dips.

‘Can’t be bugged here,’ he said.

‘Problems?’ I asked, keeping an eye on Liz.

‘Not really, but we’re dealing with paranoid people, and in a recession.’

‘Samuels will be on the phone as soon as he knows about the others coming here.’

‘They’re here for the opening of their embassies.’

‘They’ve been open a while,’ I puzzled.

‘Official opening,’ Jimmy suggested, making a face.

‘And this meeting?’

‘A new world order,’ Jimmy enthusiastically stated. ‘I let Han know how much gold we have, since it alters the playing field, and the Russians have had a hint. They can also see the GDP of our region growing faster than they have a graph to put it on. Some analysts have our region becoming a super-power in its own right in a decade.’

‘Will it?’

‘That’s not the plan. Plan is to prop-up the Americans.’

‘And Russia and China might like to see America diminished a tad.’

‘Old ideas and prejudices are hard to remove. We’ve made a lot of progress, but...’

‘We need Russia and China to be nice to the States for a few years, and that means they take a few points off their chart. Should be an interesting meeting; we’ll need our poker faces on.’

‘We can exaggerate the gold and diamonds a bit –’

‘Don’t frigging need to!’ I pointed out. ‘I’ve been checking on national gold reserves, and we’ve enough to worry the IMF!’

‘Which is why we keep it quiet. There’s also the question of the African people not wanting to share it, so we have to make it look like we’re benefiting the African people as investors – more than assisting the US. And that gold mine – I’ve wiped the records several times, so no one quite knows how much was produced, and the managers are all hand-picked men who believe that things like our imports cost more than they do. They’ll also soon think that I’m lodging gold overseas for African credit.’

I did change Liz myself, after she had run through the house wet and left a soggy trail, and sat down to breakfast around the pool with Helen and the toddler. Liz was, as her sisters had been, well behaved and quietly attentive when there was food about. The arrival of sustenance was reverently anticipated before being savagely devoured.

I informed Helen of some of the gossip about Shelly, and Jimmy's interference, but she seemed to know. She certainly didn't react to it. We enjoyed a quiet day, Liz happy to slosh around the pool with our African nanny, and we dined out at the Gotham City marina that evening.

The next morning we met the Russians, Chinese and Japanese delegations at the conference centre, in a room above the main hall, familiar old faces greeted, a new Chinese Premier welcomed. The former Chinese Finance Minister and Foreign Minister were in on the meeting, as were Han and Ivan. When everyone finally settled, and it took twenty minutes, Jimmy kicked off the meeting.

'Ladies and gentlemen, communist dictators, hard-working aides.'

I smiled, the new Chinese Premier not quite knowing how to take the salutation.

'We've asked you here today ... for a private meeting about an important topic, although I'm sure that the opening of your embassies is more important than my ramblings.

'In just a few short weeks we'll have a new American president-elect, who may well be the old president. Both men ... are good men, and I can work with either. But whoever wins will face a greater problem than they realise. They have not prepared as well as they should have for the Hawaiian quake, and the federal aid package will take time to get through Congress.

'The election will be a close-fought thing, and as such there will be no clear majority in either house. That means ... that the aid package may take many months to agree to, longer to implement. That will lead to ... unrest, in some quarters. The American people will also react badly to the damage caused by the tsunami - worse than may be expected.

'I expect the US markets to crash, and I expect the US banks to deliberately try and make that crash worse to make themselves some money. The markets will be volatile and down, and bank liquidity will be affected. The knock-on effect will hit European bourses and the other markets. Within three months, the global recession will

bite, and will affect us all. Well, it won't affect Africa too much - we're internalising our markets and using our own mined products.

'It is my aim, as far as Africa is concerned, to absorb excess materials - and to use them internally for a year or two - returning to a fuller export order book afterwards. I don't anticipate a fall in GDP, rather a rise of at least fifteen percent.

'But we're here to discuss America, and what we can do - and will do, to assist the American economy, because great dangers lay ahead. If the US economy falls to where I expect it to, we can expect a global recession. If they fall just a few points lower we can expect the rise of protectionism, and then national unrest leading to the rise of nationalism; hard liners taking office is a definite possibility.'

'They will become aggressive?' the Chinese asked.

'We have always known that they would, if a certain set of factors was in place, conditions reached. If they do become aggressive, then all is lost. Because if they do become aggressive, then the global recession will become much worse, and unity at 2025 will be extremely unlikely. With no unity at 2025, the chances of defeating The Brotherhood are slim.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we started these meetings - many years ago - with this detail before us. Since then we have all enjoyed cordial relations, and we have all prospered. But we all knew this day would come. Well, the day is here, and we need to make plans. My plan, is to prop-up the US economy as much as I can over the next one to two years, even if that is done to the detriment of others. Doing nothing ... is not an option.

'There will now be a ten minute break for tea, and for questions and proposals to be formulated. Thank you.' Jimmy stood and led me towards the refreshments, chatting innocuously about boats on the lake.

When we reconvened, Jimmy began with, 'It is my aim to formally ask all of your three nations to do what you can to assist the US economy in the short-term, whether you like the proposition or not. I have, in years gone by, provided you with coal-oil technology and the super-drug, which has boosted your economies. Kindly keep that in mind. First, let's take questions. China?'

Han asked, 'Given your financial strength in Africa, and your reserves, would not the development of Africa as a super-power counterbalance The Brotherhood.'

'A good question. What would happen, is that the Brotherhood would find it difficult to attack Africa, and so would be inclined to attack Europe and Russia instead. If there was no unity in place in

2025, I would leave the African armies here to defend their homelands. They would not be deployed to work alone.

‘Now, given the situation in Africa – which is far better than I had anticipated – Africa and South America would do well after the rise of the Brotherhood. You ... would not fare as well. Russia?’

‘If the three of us worked together, could we not quell the Brotherhood?’

‘Yes, certainly, for a time at least. That would leave the three of us exhausted and broke, America building up its strength and separated by a nice big ocean. And, following the destruction of the Middle East, America may consider it had more to gain by a fight with you in your weakened states.’

They didn’t seem to like that scenario.

‘What say the Japanese?’ Jimmy asked.

‘You ask that we attempt to assist the US economy ... out of fear of bullying?’

‘Yes. And bullying is a good way to describe how your future relationship with a hard-line American leader may go. Trust me, I know.’

Han said, ‘You are asking that we assist economically the richest nation.’

‘I’m asking that you assist the country with the largest army, a willingness to use it, and nationalist leaders waiting in the wings. If you don’t assist, and those nationalist leaders rise, you’ll be looking at a global conflict in parallel to the fight against The Brotherhood. I said it at the start, and I’ll say it again: taking on The Brotherhood will require global cooperation, or failure is a certainty. Trust me, I know for definite; as much as I know the detail of the quake about to hit. But when the American political quake hits, it will do you all far more damage.’

‘What did you have in mind?’ Han asked.

‘That you adjust your import/export ratios a few percent points in favour of the US. If that’s successful, then I’ll try and redress the balance afterwards. I will also provide you with additional information and technology.’

‘You will use your reserves to assist the US economy?’ Han asked.

‘If necessary, I’ll use all of my reserves, leaving Africa exhausted and weakened.’

Han nudged, ‘That will leave the African armies with less of a chance to fight The Brotherhood.’

‘If America sees the rise of nationalism, it won’t matter a damn.’

‘Do you have figures?’ the Chinese asked.

‘No,’ Jimmy told them. ‘I ask this: that you assist as much as is practical, that you record the steps that you take, and – if successful – we will try and square the books afterwards. And, if not successful, you’ll all be dead anyway. I will leave the percentages up to you, but they will colour the nature of my assistance to you in the future. Fail to help, and we will have nothing much to say to each other till 2025.’

‘If, in the meantime, you enter into a conflict with America, I’ll develop Africa as the world’s remaining super-power, and hold off against the Brotherhood as long as possible. We’ll now take a two-hour break. Thank you.’

Jimmy led Helen and myself back to the house for a bite to eat.

I nudged Jimmy towards the pool. ‘If a nationalistic leader gets into the White House, he’ll have a hard time up against the blacks and Hispanics in America.’

Jimmy nodded, and waited.

‘What, civil unrest? Civil war?’

‘Ninety-five percent of American power and wealth is in the hands of less than five percent of the people, and they’re white folk. In the last two decades, the rich have gotten much richer and the poor have stood still. That gap will cause problems, but the police will want their bellies filled by those who can pay. Poor Hispanics can’t pay.’

‘If Sanchez wins –’

‘He’ll get the blame for the economic tumble, and be ousted before his term is up. The big banks influence the Fed, and they’ll make his policies look bad. They’ll trip him up.’

‘I sometimes wonder if the elite few know what they’re doing,’ I grumbled.

‘You and me both. They’ll collect all the money in America and live in gated complexes, the top one hundred richest people, unable to venture into the wilderness outside. If they knew the world was ending tomorrow, they’d raid their own banks and take the customer’s cash home, just to be the richest at the end.’

‘We should bust them up a bit more.’

‘Unfortunately, the Fed would then step in and help. And most people working in the Fed used to work in the big banks. They’re all dinner buddies; poacher and gamekeeper at the same table.’

‘And Brad?’ I asked.

‘A rare thing; a man who cares more for his fellow man than himself.’

‘Present company excepted.’

Jimmy smiled. ‘Maybe.’

‘So Brad will counter-balance the nationalists?’

‘And the banks.’

‘Could just hit them with an EMP,’ I suggested.

‘The thought had crossed my mind once or twice. But we’d hurt the small investors. Still, two of the big banks will get a wake-up call the day after the election; I have the autistic kids in there right now, having a look around the bank’s computer systems.’

‘That’ll hurt.’

Back in the meeting, we gathered our thoughts and waited for everyone to settle.

‘What say the Chinese?’ Jimmy asked.

‘We will work out a percentage and discuss it with you.’

‘That change, in your financial relationship with America, will need to take effect in February. Long-term changes are of little use. What say Russia?’

‘We will put together a package that may assist the dollar, but our own economy is suffering already.’

‘It will suffer a great deal more in February, and you must move quickly to lower the living costs of your own citizens. You have coal-oil, and you have my farms. If you assist enough, I will show you a way of producing coal-oil at ten dollars a barrel.’

That interested the Russians, the Chinese as well.

Jimmy began, ‘If we work together, we can dampen the worst effects. And, if my strategy works well enough in the next month, there’ll be less for us all to do. Kindly consider any additional questions, and have your aides come to the house. Thank you all for attending, and enjoy the facilities in New Kinshasa.’

‘Oh, almost forgot. I’ve greatly extended the facilities at the naval base in northern Somalia. There’s now a hostel, hotel and bars and restaurants. I would like to see both Russian and Chinese ships docking and using the facilities, the aim being to make friends with your potential adversaries. And ... let’s hope that drunken sailors don’t start a war.’

Back at the house, I stripped off and dived into the pool to join Liz, but my mind was on all things American; the biggest kid in the classroom.

Spaghetti western

A month later, Sanchez won the election by two states. Samuels would soon be just a memory, my good buddy Sanchez in power. But in the weeks that followed he rang less, which was disappointing.

With the election out of the way, Jimmy let loose the dogs of war. Money disappeared from a major bank, turning up in the Cayman Islands in the name of one of its directors, the details leaked. The FBI arrested the man at dawn one day, the news full of it.

An email then surfaced, allegedly from the outgoing chief of the Fed. It stated that he would 'work his magic' and get the charges dropped, but hinted at a good job for his efforts. He was fired straight away, and I doubted that he would get a good job for his efforts.

Our least favourite bank then lost a few hundred million on an up-bet when the markets were falling. Thing was, no one in the bank could remember making the trade. That was followed by the leaking of a series of faked emails. Since the emails were in the bank's own system, they appeared completely genuine. They gave a damning picture of what Jimmy knew would happen, but could not prove. One email read:

'When the tsunami hits, they'll be a great opportunity to short the market and sell the upside to our customers. We'll blame the tsunami, it's not our fault.'

Another said: 'If we shake the markets down enough, we'll get rid of that fucking spic immigrant Sanchez the day he takes office.' And that was from the CEO of the bank we didn't like.

Jimmy went public and condemned the men, suggesting that short selling should be banned when the tsunami strikes. The media were mixed, some still supporting the banks, who must have been wondering what the hell was happening.

The next email suggested that the senior figures in three banks were colluding to collapse the markets, both to make money and to 'get rid' of Sanchez. The detail was confirmed by two traders who turned themselves in to the FBI and SEC, confessing all. They did, however, confess to the New York Post first, and Jimmy confessed to having bribed them; as well as having put the men in place twenty years ago.

The banks were reeling, and the people were angry, Sanchez livid before he even took office. Jimmy sent Samuels an email: 'Take swift action now, or I will. And you won't like what I do.'

The Fed, the FBI and the SEC met with Samuels, and conspiracy charges were brought, although Jimmy was doubtful if they would stick. Samuels publicly condemned the banks in question, as did Sanchez. Jimmy suggested to the media that no down bets be allowed for a week either side of the tsunami, but no one stateside was happy with it.

The banks professed their innocence, but a week later another series of emails came out, traders confirming the intention to place down bets overseas. The public and the media were now actively debating the role of the banks and market makers, and a third trader stood up to confess all, detailing down bets made overseas and ready for the tsunami. He publicly stated that the banks aimed to wipe twenty percent off stocks, and then to buy the shares for themselves after the fall, to make a profit on the rebound.

Christmas approached, and Samuels was receiving more heat than his entire term in office combined had produced. He would be glad to be going. We enjoyed a family Christmas, Shelly flying back in to join us, Bob Davies and his wife coming over as well.

Rescue Force was put on notice, to be ready on the second of January, all leave cancelled and all training exercises cancelled. All Rescuers were told to have a good Christmas, because they would be away a long time. Cuba would lead the South American teams, spreading out along Chile, Ecuador, Colombia, and the Central American states up to Mexico. The Europeans would be spread around the Pacific, New Guinea and the Australian coast.

The Chinese and Russians would be taking care of their own coastlines, and the Africans would join the Europeans around Polynesia, ships with temporary helicopter decks being utilised. That left the considerable and capable US military to assist the west coast of America, since foreign assistance would not look good for the world's greatest super-power.

Then there was Brad, and his own army, an army of volunteers now some hundred thousand strong. In some small towns, just about everyone had signed up, even some of those who would be flooded themselves. Despite the US military build-up and planning, Jimmy insisted that Brad would do a better job of it.

He said, 'The military and civilians don't mix, especially not in America. For a soldier to tell a civilian to "*move along there*" is like striking a match over petrol.'

Christmas went well, a few SARS cases noted, but no panic in the media. For many, this would be the first peaceful Christmas for a

while. Shelly flew off on the 27th, heading to Barbados, and we flew down to Goma for New Year's Eve.

New Year's Day, Jimmy called Bob at Mapley from beside the pool. 'Bob, you awake?'

'Sat ready.'

'Send to all Rescue Force units: recall, form up on the morning of the 2nd. Expect earthquake at 06.25 on the 15th, tsunami to hit Pacific Rim four hours later. Full kit check tomorrow, unit formations, deployment the next day.'

'Got that.'

'Hueys?'

'On their way already, aboard the ships they'll operate from,' Bob confirmed.

'National civil defence readiness?'

'All reporting ready.'

'Passenger ships?'

'If it floats, it's heading to the Pacific.'

'And Hawaii?' Jimmy asked.

'They reckon that there's less than two hundred thousand left, and the army goes in tomorrow.'

'Any hiccups?'

'More people on mountain tops than I'd like, a few killed trying to get up the damn mountains.'

'Thank you, Bob. And ... good luck.'

'We've had twenty five years, so we should know it by now!'

With the call ended, I asked, 'Do we do anything now ... to assist the US economy? I mean, ahead of time?'

'No, because the markets *will* fall, even without the manipulation. Still, the Chinese have said that they'll buy stock that day, the Russians will buy some, and we'll buy a shit load.'

'There's a gold audit at the bank by the IMF tomorrow,' I pointed out.

'Yes, that should be ... interesting,' Jimmy said with a smile.

The next day, after the IMF had been to count our gold ingots, the British Prime Minister called. 'Jimmy, the IMF had you down as having more gold than China.'

'We mined up a bit more lately,' Jimmy responded.

'A bit more? You've increased your deposit ten fold!'

'And we'll need it to help the global economy in the years ahead.'

'And the British economy?'

‘You’re not about to fall apart. Others ... are.’

‘Oh,’ the PM said after a moment. ‘Need a word as soon as you’re back.’

‘You are always upper-most in my mind.’

‘Cut the crap.’

The French came on next, the Germans, and even the Indians. We were popular for all the wrong reasons. I decided to be cheeky, and offered substantial loans at great rates to various African governments, so long as they bought US goods with the money. I had six willing takers.

Another Wall Street bank trader gave himself up to the FBI the next day, another Silo plant that had been paid off, and the US disquiet with the banks grew. We were also seeing problems with the residents of the abandonment zones, police and soldiers used to move the people out - and to keep them out.

As with Hawaii, power and telephone lines were cut, roads blocked; gentle nudges to get people to move. Brad had set-up thousands of mobile homes with the money we had allocated him, many more being rented for just a month or two. When Jimmy saw the detail, he said that they’d still be in those mobile homes five years from now.

The big day

On the afternoon of the fourteenth we drove over to Mapley and claimed the apartments, the time difference to Hawaii being eleven hours.

The US military had collected what they claimed were the last two hundred thousand residents, but Jimmy had his doubts. The TV news was full of the boats around Hawaii, some quite small and looking flimsy for the sea conditions; they were dwarfed by the few remaining ocean liners, the medical ships and the US Naval vessels.

The cameras then focused on downtown Honolulu, fires raging in many buildings, the towers set alight by people either remaining, or by the last few to leave. Tall columns of black smoke rose high into the sky, a clear sky laid on for this spectacle of Mother Nature.

CNN was now showing images from Los Angeles, of surfers in the water, the coastguard trying to scoop them up. There were even people on the sand being chased by the police. On the hills along the Pacific west coast of America, millions stood waiting and watching,

something of a party atmosphere, more than a few barbeques going. The clock counted down to 06.25 local Hawaiian time, remote cameras having been placed on the hills of Hawaii and now feeding back live images via expensive satellite links.

‘Hope I got the day right,’ Jimmy said.

‘We’ll be in trouble if there’s no quake,’ I quipped.

At 06.23, the cameras placed on the island all shook, and all stopped working twenty seconds later, the TV stations switching quickly to views from the nearby ships, or from 747s circling overhead. I had to wonder about the aircraft, because they’d have nowhere to land if they had a problem.

Images of the burning towers appeared, the towers crumbling and collapsing. It was like a Charlton Heston disaster movie, only with better special effects. The next shot was of a hill on the island, the tallest hill. As we watched, it slid down into the water, the start of the tsunami, a giant boiling mass of white water spreading outwards.

‘Is that the thing that causes the tsunami?’ I asked, pointing.

‘Part of it. Mostly, the underwater range collapses and creates the main tsunami.’

Boats could be seen rising and falling sixty feet as a smooth and rounded wave passed them, an ocean liner getting its lowest decks damp. Jimmy walked out, and up to the roof, the rain holding off.

I followed him. ‘Don’t like the movie?’

‘Seen it, know how it ends,’ he said without turning, taking in the airfield.

‘And the casualties?’

‘I reckon there’s at least thirty thousand still on the islands. Waste of good life.’

Back inside, we sat and ate a meal, not much said, and returned to the control room after. A wave had just slammed into an island, sweeping people into the sea. Jimmy uttered a few rude words and stepped out again. I sat watching as island after island was hit in turn, quite a few people not high enough in their observation platforms. One island was filmed from a hilltop, the wave sweeping the houses below away as if they were toys. When the wave had passed and the water level fallen, nothing remained, not a building or a single tree.

Images of Rescue Force Hueys appeared, winching people from the water or from trees and roofs. It was frustrating to say the least, since everyone had been given plenty of warning. Still, people remained with their homes and ended up being killed, or needing rescuing.

I paced up and down for a while, but was always drawn back to the news with a morbid fascination. When the wave hit Los Angeles I was on my feet along with everyone else, witnessing an angry boiling monster coming ashore, more sand than water. The authorities had dug deep channels in the sand, and that seemed to be slowing the monster, but also making it angrier. It slammed into the houses and flattened them, aerial views showing the water slowly advancing inland.

Inland, the damage was being done by the presence of the water, not the force of the water, and the first block of houses seemed to have taken the brunt. Rows of concrete blocks seemed to have slowed the water, churning it. Problem was, it kept coming over the tops of the barriers.

They switched to a town up the coast from L.A., a town on an estuary, a wall of water over fifty feet high rearing up and smashing houses aside. Japan was shown next, one area particularly badly hit. Luckily, the first row of high apartment blocks took the brunt and slowed the water. Auckland was hit, moderate damage caused, and northern Australia suffered wide areas of flooding.

When the wave came ashore in Chile it found several estuaries that had been perfectly unlucky in the shape and depth. One such estuary head was filled from the side, a wall of water almost a hundred feet high being squeezed from the sides as it advanced. It enveloped a town of what appeared to be wooden houses, a view of locals on a hill. As I watched, my hands to my cheeks, the brown muddy water reached out and grabbed hundreds of people off the hillside.

The Rescue Force managers were despondent, images of spectators in many areas coming in, and hundreds being swept away.

What struck me most was the cost of the damage, not just the loss of life and the human suffering. Everyone had been given a warning and should have been evacuated, but you could not move their houses, and around the Pacific Rim I figured on a trillion dollars of damage.

When I had seen enough damage for one day, I checked the DOW Jones, finding it falling sharply, already down four percent. I shook my head, walking out to find Jimmy. Joining him in the canteen, I mentioned the drop on the DOW.

He nodded absently for a moment. 'I've arrange a few more emails for the next few days. It'll put the people at odds with the banks. And I sent Brad another two billion dollars towards food. Oh, and vouchers for MacDonalds – a good idea of yours.'

‘Sanchez will be sworn in in a couple of days,’ I mentioned. ‘Hell of a start for him.’

‘He won’t have many people appointed, so the disaster plan will suffer,’ Jimmy softly noted. He checked his watch, and lifted his phone. ‘Begin,’ he told someone.

When he lowered his phone, I asked, ‘Stock buying?’

He nodded. ‘Catch the short sellers, because they’re shorting the stock without holding any.’

After a cup of tea I went back to my laptop and focused on the Dow Jones, starting to witness a few wild spikes, blue tickers amongst the red. Within twenty minutes the index was showing signs of recovering, blue squares across my screen, and within an hour the DOW was above it’s opening, making me smile. The market makers had tried to short the stocks, even with the exposure they had received, and we’re now caught on the wrong side of the action, scrambling around to cover the sales of stock that they never had in the first place. Team Silo had just taught them a painful lesson.

Driving back at midnight I was despondent, but I couldn’t quite work out why. It wasn’t the loss of life – I was angry at the people for staying in their homes. It wasn’t the damage either, not in itself, it was just the waste of it all. I was so used to building things around Africa, that destruction on this scale upset me.

Getting into bed, and cuddling up to Helen, I said, ‘What a waste.’

‘Waste?’

‘All that damage.’

‘It was a act of nature.’

‘I think ... I think I understand the big guy a bit better now. For him to see things like this, or worse, to see it all washed away, and knowing that the whole damn planet may be washed away – it must affect him.’

‘He can picture 2025, we can’t, no matter how often he describes it. It’s not real till it hits you in the face, till the water comes through your lounge,’ Helen said.

‘And that’s the problem with the leaders; he gives the warning, but how many really listen. I think we’ll get to 2025 ... and people will still be surprised by it. Crisis? What crisis?’

The next day, Jimmy occupied his mind with work and Africa, and ignored the damage done around the Pacific Rim. He called me down, and we video-linked to the Prime Minister.

‘How’s it going?’ the PM asked, meaning the efforts of Rescue Force.

‘It’s not that I wanted to talk about,’ Jimmy bluntly told him, sounding tired. ‘I need a favour, and saying no would upset me.’

‘Oh,’ the PM said with a quizzical frown.

‘I’d like Russian long-range bombers to land at our RAF bases in Scotland, unarmed bombers of course, and I’d like Russian ships to dock at Falmouth and Plymouth on a regular basis, your naval vessels docking in Murmansk and Sebastopol, as well as in China. I want your ships docking at the naval base in northern Somalia as well. And the new docks in Liberia; I want Royal Navy ships there on a regular basis when they’re passing.’

‘And the Russians and Chinese?’ the PM asked.

‘Will be happy to cooperate.’

‘And the reason for this show of friendliness?’

‘World peace. For which I expect you to play a large part, given the calibre of man that you are. You can get the French to cooperate as well.’

‘And in the grand scheme of things...?’ the PM asked.

‘We’ll have a recession to deal with for a while, then we start work on global cohesion geared towards 2025,’ Jimmy told him. ‘That means that you’ll be at the front of those calling for closer ties and greater cooperation, earning yourself a few extra pages in the history of the planet.’

‘I’ll step down in a year, I promised my wife.’

‘Pipe and slippers?’ I asked.

‘A damned good rest,’ the PM stated.

‘And when do I rest?’ Jimmy asked him. He waited.

The PM took a moment. ‘I’m not you, Jimmy, and I have no idea how you keep going; try not to judge others by your own high standards. I’m quitting while I have a family left, and hoping to see more of them.’

‘You’ve done enough,’ Jimmy told him. ‘Sorry if I sounded ungrateful for your efforts; I must be getting old and cranky.’

With the video cut, Jimmy said, ‘States. Monday.’

Back in my office, I received an urgent email from the corporation in Goma. Someone had told Kimballa that our African reserves would be used to help America, and that he had asked about it. I threw my hands up in the air and cursed. Not wanting to bother Jimmy with it, I booked a Friday night flight down to Goma hub, only to find Lucy tagging along; sat in the cockpit and tagging along.

I settled down to a little light reading until I needed a nap, catching four hours. We landed at 5am, and I took Lucy around to the mansion, chatting about things aeronautical, and we enjoyed a dip together as the sun put in an appearance. Waiting till 8am, I called Kimballa, inviting him around to the house. He arrived at 9am and found me on the patio, pancakes ready.

Once seated, I said to him, 'Can we have a private talk?'

He dismissed his aides.

'Mr President, you've been asking questions about our gold reserves, and the idea that we'll use them to help America.'

'And was I not supposed to?'

'It's your country, Mister President, you are allowed to, but it may have saved some time if you simply called us. We are, after all, old friends.'

'Indeed, yes. So why the secrecy surrounding this gold?' Kimballa asked.

'There's secrecy around a lot of what we do, and justifiably so. As for the gold, we've hidden it to keep gold prices up. If people think it lays on the ground here, the price will fall.'

'And that will be bad for our gold exports.'

'It would,' I confirmed.

'And this talk of helping the Americans?' Kimballa asked.

'May I ask where that information came from?'

'An officious looking letter arrived anonymously.'

I took a moment, sipping my drink. 'Someone wishes a division between us.'

'Many have tried, but none successfully. Besides, the people don't love me as they love Jimmy. I am not about to offer a contest.'

'Jimmy knows the future, and in the future – if we don't act – America may elect right wing leaders. Those leaders will wish to use America's strength to secure resources ... such as oil and ore.'

'Of which we have plenty,' Kimballa noted. 'They would be aggressive?'

'How do you treat a lion with an empty stomach?'

'You throw it some food, and run like hell the other way! You are saying, that we give the lion some food to stop it from eating us?'

'I am. But it's not us ... that would be the first target, and any aggressive move would destroy the world economy.'

'No one would buy our oil and ore then,' Kimballa noted.

'Mr President, the Americans have been sending money to Africa for fifty years, giving a little back is not so unjust.'

‘Indeed no, and it would make for a very strange newspaper headline.’

‘Which is why we’ll make sure that it doesn’t reach the newspaper headlines, unless to say that we are investing in America for future generations of Africans.’

‘Future generations ... who don’t want to be eaten by the lion. Do not worry, Mister Paul. Before you came, this region was the devil’s own playground. Now it is Eden, and how do you say – centre stage, yes?’

‘Centre stage,’ I confirmed with a smile. ‘And you, sir, can see the big picture I’m sure, and appreciate world politics.’

‘World politics is simply a larger version of Africa politics, and my father was well used to neighbours with hungry bellies and sharp claws. We were raped every day, but far enough away in Kinshasa not to care.’ He sipped his drink. ‘Am I allowed to know – as a good friend – what the future holds?’

‘Many of the worst problems have been dealt with,’ I told him. ‘The next big headache is America, and the global economy. That’s a two-year problem. After that, we need a much greater integration between the various nations, and some global cooperation, to face a challenge in 2025. If that challenge isn’t dealt with, we lose the planet. And all this, this will all be gone.’

‘This city will be destroyed?’ Kimballa asked, horrified.

‘Africa would be invaded and enslaved after 2025, that’s why we built up the Rifles. If Jimmy can’t figure a way through, all of Africa will be destroyed, and all the world.’

Kimballa gulped his drink. ‘I watched the TV when the earthquake struck. When the clock said the time, I was both very pleased that Mister Jimmy can say these things, but horrified at the destruction. And now you say that in less than ten years we may lose everything we have built.’ He shook his head. Facing me, he said, ‘Is there more that we can be doing?’

‘Just support us when we need it, and help us when we ask. Throw a good party, Mister President, and get the nations cooperating as much as you can around the city. And next time you get an anonymous letter about us, just pick up the phone, day or night.’

I enjoyed a day around the pool, Lucy sat reading, and we headed to the airport around 9pm for the last flight out. Boarding the flight, Lucy went back up to the flight deck and strapped in, helping with the pre-flight checks.

On Monday morning we took Silo One across the pond to New York, re-fuelling and heading straight on to San Francisco for a series of TV interviews – and not down to the inauguration of Sanchez. Booked in to our hotel, the first duty was the tour of a neighbourhood that had suffered damage at the hands of the tsunami, an unfortunate shape under the water causing a funnelling of the tsunami as it neared. The tsunami had passed under the Golden Gate Bridge as a twelve-inch high ripple, rearing up in a few places before gathering height inland and causing a great deal of damage.

As we stepped down, well wrapped up against the cold, Brad navigated his way through the local government officials, past fire chiefs and army officers, and shook my hand.

‘I had almost forgotten what you look like,’ I told him.

‘A lot’s happened since that brief first meeting,’ he said with a smile. He shook Jimmy’s hand. ‘No one is going to forget what *you* look like.’

Brad introduced us to the dignitaries, fire chiefs and army officers, all of who had a role to play in the disaster planning. That led to individual fireman and police officers, all with a tale to tell of dramatic rescues. Seems that a lot of people had collected on the shore in the hope of seeing the tsunami, and saw a little too much of it.

A few families were presented to us, people who had moved out in advance of the wave and were now trying to dry-out their sodden properties. Since those properties were constructed mostly of wood, I had to puzzle how the hell the people would ever reclaim their homes.

Jimmy then took the microphone, the assembled dignitaries assembled behind him, a crowd of spectators in front, the press off to one side. ‘People of San Francisco, thank you for inviting us here today. The metropolitan area was unaffected by the tsunami, so now you can’t complain about all those damn hills.’

People in the crowd laughed.

‘But a few areas were subjected to water damage, the damage upstream being considerable. Brad here –’ He pointed. ‘- of The Ark Christian charity group, and in conjunction with the Silo Foundation, has been planning for this disaster for six months, and is well prepared to help the homeless, and is already doing so with an army of willing volunteers.’

‘I would like to take this opportunity to thank Brad for his leadership, and for his unswerving belief in the importance of his task, as well as his faith in me. I would like to appeal to all of the

people of San Francisco who were unaffected, to spare a thought for those who lost their homes, and to donate clothing, food or money to The Ark, and other bodies working to help the displaced. If you live in this city, and park at a steep angle, be glad – but then be generous.

‘Now, I’d like to take a moment to look at the bigger picture here. I warned you, all of you, about the earthquake and the resulting tsunami. I warned you ... of the timing to the minute, yet many still did not believe, some chose not to believe, and some did not wish to believe. People died on the islands, and people died here.

‘You Americans have a saying: wake up and smell the coffee. Here’s a Jimmy Silo saying for you: wake up and pay attention - or you will die.

‘NASA, and your military, spent a great deal of time, effort and money to build the time machine, and some of you just don’t get it. It was made by you, for you, to help you – and you’re still not paying attention.

‘The pandemics are mostly over, you’re all through the worst of it, the worst quakes behind us – for the moment. The next three years will see little in the way of disasters; it will be a period of consolidation, but we have deep economic problems to face.

‘Those economic problems ... are mostly to do with a simple lack of confidence - and a lack of bank liquidity available for business finance - because of the stupidity and greed of Wall Street bankers. As the earthquake was destroying Hawaii, your bankers were trying to crash the stock markets so that they could make a killing. As the dying was going on out here, the scum of the earth were trying to make a killing on the stock markets. If your bankers could sell the dead bodies of the victims to make a buck, I’m sure they would try.

‘Write to your congressman, and your senator, and make your voices heard: banking reform is needed. And it’s needed before your banks bring down the whole damn country.

‘People of San Francisco, people of America: you are through the worst of it. Go out and get on with your lives, hold your heads up high, go to the bars and nightclubs, and celebrate what you have left, not what you’ve lost. Put money back into the economy, start a new business venture. President Sanchez is a good man, but he needs your help, and he needs the congress behind him.

‘In the weeks and months ahead ... I’ll be organising meetings of the world leaders, and I’ll be more involved with things over here. I’ve just appointed former President Hardon Chase to the Silo Foundation; a man I can trust, and a man that you can all trust. He’ll

be working with Brad, and I'm sure that they'll do a great job together to help the victims.

'And let me take this opportunity to point out to the people of America, that most of Brad's people are unpaid volunteers, willing to help their fellow Americans – to help complete strangers. One of the basic tenets of Christianity is missionary work, spreading the word through good deeds and actions, leading by example.

'Brad's people are not judgemental, they're not from the whites-only churches of the Bible Belt - people who claim to be Christians whilst holding right-wing political views. Brad's people don't wear a badge that proclaims their faith, and they don't try and sing loudest in church in Sunday. They demonstrate their faith in actions, the action of helping those less fortunate.

'Brad's Christians don't need a merit badge or a pat on the back. For them, it's not about how others see them, or how others judge them; it's about how they see and judge themselves. In Africa, in New Kinshasa, there are almost five thousand American volunteers. They receive less than nine thousand dollars a year, food and lodging, and they work on projects for me when they could be here making two hundred thousand a year.

'In the decade ahead, there will be great tests and trials for the people of this planet. The best hope you have ... is from people like those volunteers, who will say that until the planet is safe, until the disasters have been dealt with, they'll put their lives on hold and help out.

'How do they compare to the bankers who bet the market would fall? There are some very rich people in this country, but they make less than nine thousand dollars a year, and they move unseen, and mostly without thanks. But they know that I appreciate them, at least I hope they do. Thank you for your time, it's cold, so go home please.'

Brad led us away. 'Had you down as a non-believer, Jimmy.'

'I am.'

'You do a sermon better than any preacher I ever met.'

Back at the hotel, Hardon Chase was waiting. We had booked a meeting room and now filled it with Brad's people, Silo Foundation staff and American volunteers from Africa. We hung up our warm coats and sat around several tables pushed together, a group of hotel waitresses serving us coffee.

Brad made use of a white board and map, outlining his operations with military precision. I was handed food vouchers and examined

them, noting that “The Silo Foundation” was printed at the bottom. Each voucher was valued at seven dollars.

When Brad was done, Jimmy stood up. ‘We’ve got Hardon Chase on board, and he loves the sound of his own voice.’ They laughed. ‘So I want Mister Chase fronting the appeals, and to doing most of the speeches. Town by town, Hardon, just like electioneering, but please – don’t kiss any babies.’ They all laughed again.

‘We have the food vouchers, so start giving them out in metropolitan areas. Brad, I’ve added an extra two billion to the account, so use it.’

Brad’s people glanced at each other, seemingly shocked at the amount. Brad said, ‘We’ve raised two hundred million already, and we have clothes and shoes by the tonne.’

‘And mobile homes?’ I asked.

‘About twenty thousand,’ Brad responded. ‘But we have tensions when the Hawaiian refugees take them.’

‘Where’re they settling?’ I asked.

‘All over, but mostly southern California.’

‘I’ll earmark an extra two billion just for the homes,’ Jimmy told him. ‘So go out and buy some more mobile homes. Now, what’s needed ... is swiftness more than completeness. In order to stabilise the population and the economy, we need the next six months to count, not the next six years. And we need the next month to count more than the next six months.’

‘The longer the homeless struggle, the more disquiet, the more unemployment. Brad, make a plan to try and spend as much as possible in the near future; don’t even think of pacing yourself. Get the food vouchers out there, the clothes, and the homes ordered.’

‘Mister Chase, there are a great many run-down areas in California, and those empty houses could be grabbed. Talk to the governor, shout, and make him listen. You have the budget I gave you, so use it to refurbish old properties and to move families in. If you can employ local people to do the work then all the better.’

‘Second, Mister Chase, employ those out of work on the clean-up details. We want a great many people being paid low wages to shift sand and debris. Brad, use money to pay local skilled workers to clean up; it’ll put money back into the economy. And both of you, get on the plane to Alaska and make them feel a part of this. OK, where are we seeing problems?’

Hardon Chase began, ‘The Hawaiians are mostly trying to settle in either Los Angeles or south towards San Diego. It’s causing tensions in some neighbourhoods.’

‘Then you need to make a speech or two, Mister Chase, and point out that Americans come in all shapes, sizes and colours. OK, what else?’

Brad put in, ‘We get a lot of complaints from people unable to go near their land because it’s still taped off, roads closed, soldiers stood there doing nothing.’

‘Again, get Mister Chase on it,’ Jimmy said. ‘And let the press know.’

‘How many have applied to come to Africa?’ I asked.

‘About four thousand,’ Brad replied.

‘Then your people are not selling the proposition well enough,’ Jimmy told him. ‘I want twenty thousand, and inside a month.’

‘It’s a small fraction of the homeless,’ Chase wondered.

‘Once they’re settled, they’ll attract more,’ Jimmy replied.

The group discussed strategies for forty minutes, and we left them to it, heading to the restaurant. No sooner had we sat down than Sanchez’s new housing chief walked over. He sat without being asked, and took a moment to stare at us.

‘Problem?’ Jimmy asked, seeming none too concerned.

‘The President is concerned, and he’s been in office a day.’

‘I believe his concerns started long before he entered office,’ Jimmy responded. ‘How can we help?’

‘You seem to be undermining our efforts by helping directly, and working around our people.’

‘Your people, are federal government people, and as such will move slowly due to the constraints placed upon them,’ Jimmy told the man. ‘And ... and I think the bill your trying to pass will be delayed and blocked.’

‘You think that, or you know that?’

‘I think it, since Sanchez was not supposed to be in that seat right now. The Republicans will try and trip him up, and they won’t want to spend so much on horrid poor people.’

‘We have a majority.’

‘A slim majority, and some of your east coast Democrats don’t want the poor folk on the west coast benefiting too much.’

The man eased back. ‘You think it’ll be blocked till its lower.’

‘I think ... that the longer its blocked, the more pressure on Sanchez, the more disquiet and unrest, and that will help the Republicans in the mid-terms. And, I think you know that as well. So, in the meantime, I’ll try and help as best I can, so that the *disquiet* is ... quieter.’

‘The Chinese are suddenly very cooperative on trade deals and quotas. Your doing?’

Jimmy nodded. ‘And ... there’ll more like that to come, because if the disquiet reaches a certain level, it will become civil unrest, rioting, and state martial law, unscrupulous politicians using the opportunity to their own benefits, which will just make it worse. Tip over the edge, and you’ll drop a long way before you come back.’

‘Will you pop into Washington on your way back?’

‘Do you want us to?’ Jimmy posed.

‘Yes,’ the man said as he stood. ‘And some are saying you snubbed the inauguration.’

I commented, ‘Whenever we go to inaugurations, we stand around for hours in the cold and then only get to chat to the new president for five minutes.’

‘Some things are more important than they appear,’ Jimmy enigmatically told the man.

With our guest departed, I asked, ‘Are we really helping Sanchez this way?’

‘I had expected a Republican administration, and that we’d be at odds with them. I don’t want to upset Sanchez, but he has his hands tied. Most powerful man in the world? Hah! He won’t even get a bill passed. And that bill should have been passed months ago.’

‘You didn’t nudge them,’ I pointed out.

‘No, because I wanted to be at odds with the US Government, it’s just unfortunate that Sanchez is in the hot seat.’

‘There another way?’ I pressed.

‘It’s not Sanchez, it’s the US system: President, Congress, Senate, lobbyists and the media; plus a rigid two party system. A good dictator is so much better than a weak democracy, and the US system is weaker than the British system. No,’ he sighed. ‘Whichever way I look at it, paralysis is the name of the game.’

We gave a chat-show interview that evening, and again attacked the people for not listening, whilst making it appear that the Federal Government was not listening – but subtly. In the morning we headed down to Los Angeles, Brad and Chase onboard, and were whisked straight around to a housing development.

Using our money, Hawaiians were renovating an old apartment block that they would then occupy. Jimmy greeted the lead builder in a dialect, and we made like electioneering politicians again. They showed us the progress, we asked questions, and outside made a statement. Overnight, someone had leaked the amount of money we had allocated to Brad, and a lady reporter asked about it.

‘We will spend as much money as we can afford to spend ... to help the homeless of Hawaii and the west coast,’ Jimmy told her. ‘America has been a great supporter of our efforts in Africa, and a great investor in Africa. It’s only right that we try and spend some of the money we’ve earned in Africa ... on American taxpayers.’

Speech made, we led the team to the governor’s office, where a planning session was held. Brad and Chase raised their voices, and tables were thumped with fists in a heated session. Jimmy played the role of honest broker and calmed all sides, but he himself had a go at the governor for not emphasising enough the racial mix already in place, or doing enough to integrate the newcomers.

Outside, the press were waiting, another speech planned. But when a member of the press asked about investments made in movies, Jimmy had the cue he wanted. ‘We’ve been trying to think of ways of investing money in California to create jobs. One way is to sponsor films, since the film industry employs a great many people around here. We’ll be funding around twenty film projects in the near future, and we hope that it will stimulate the local economy and help with jobs.’

Leaving an exasperated governor behind, we rejoined the plane with the team and headed down to San Diego, Jimmy giving Brad plenty of his time, and plenty of advice on how to handle the support mission. In San Diego, we again visited a housing project that we had funded, made another speech – a very similar speech, before retiring to a hotel near the airport.

After a working meal, we sat the team down and went through strategy in great detail: who was going to do what. Chase had his itinerary, and was revelling at in being back in the limelight. Brad was more down to earth. He shunned the press and just wanted to get on with it, Jimmy encouraging him to be more vocal, and to use the press for his means.

Leaving the team in the morning, we flew direct to Washington, to the chill weather, and to a chilly reception.

‘All moved in?’ I asked Sanchez in the oval office, shaking his hand.

‘Just about,’ he responded, sounding tired.

Jimmy shook his hand. ‘Did Samuels leave you a “good luck” note on the desk?’

Sanchez nodded, gesturing us to seats, his Chief of Staff in on the meeting. ‘So, you think I’m a lame duck President already.’

We were off to a good start.

‘Prove otherwise,’ Jimmy challenged.

Sanchez stared back for several seconds. 'I figured you'd be a bit more supportive.'

'Here's how it works,' Jimmy began. 'Pay attention, and I'll go slow.' Sanchez cocked an eyebrow. 'You call and ask a question - I'll answer it. If you busy yourself playing at being President, I'll work around you. If you do something I don't like ... I'll pull the rug out from under you.'

The temperature in the room dropped a few degrees.

Jimmy continued, 'The problems that you'll face are mostly down to the system, the fine system of American democracy - that is anything other than democratic. You have a small majority, you have the lobbyists up your backside already, and the banks are trying to trip you up before you start. Your own east coast elected representatives - those that there are, don't want the added social burden of extra homeless in their states, and will vote against shifting people east from California - which is bursting at the seams and collapsing under the weight. Get a bill passed inside six months and I'll run around this building naked.'

'That could boost tourism to the capital,' I quipped.

Jimmy told Sanchez, 'You can start a war, nuke the world, but you can't get around a two-party system, and a two-house system, neither of which really benefits the American people. So here's what I'll do. I'll fix the homeless as best as I can, so that the Republicans can't use them as a stick to beat you with. That will take some of the pressure off. I'll also make the speeches that back you up, and I'll condemn the east coast senators who don't want Hawaiians in their back gardens and garden states.'

'And, as you're already aware, I've nudged the Chinese, Russians and Japanese to assist the dollar and your economy. Take away all of what I just said and you'd have a full-blown recession and civil unrest in months, the rise of nationalistic leaders following soon after. Right now, you have all the right conditions for the rise of fascism.'

'Fascism?' the Chief repeated.

'Hard line right wing politicians ... who will want the land of the free for the rich catholic white folk,' Jimmy carefully mouthed. 'They'll even attack the Hawaiians as not being ... proper Americans - if you let them.'

'You're making me feel pretty damned useless,' Sanchez noted.

'It's not you, it's the system,' I told him. 'Ten different groups pulling in ten different directions. If you want to make a difference,

put a sign on your desk: do what's right, not what's popular, and to hell with being re-elected.'

Jimmy gave me an approving nod. 'I think every politician should have one of those.' He faced Sanchez. 'Problem is, you'll need to horse trade away your soul to get the aid package passed. And, you've already spent money on bailing out certain banks, and more will be needed to help liquidity. Passing the aid package that you want will be a miracle. So, leave the homeless to me, and do what you can – without selling your soul.'

Sanchez stood up and walked to the window. 'I never figured I'd be trying to swim upstream with my hands tied.' He coughed out a laugh. 'No, that's not true. I figured that a small majority would cripple me.' He turned. 'And the banks and other institutions don't want a Democrat - or an Hispanic - in the White House.'

'Realising that is half the problem,' Jimmy said. 'Getting angry about it, and doing something about it, is the other half. Investigate the banks, attack the banks, and break them up. Use the tools to hand, such as the FBI and SEC. Shout at them, and employ a few hard-asses.'

Sanchez sat. 'OK, Mister Silo. I'm open to suggestions.'

'First, have your navy dock its ships in Russia and China, and allow those nation's ships to visit here. Give the world a peace dividend, and I'll make sure that you're seen as the peacemaker. Go visit a coalmine and look at coal-oil, giving it a big push. The oil industry won't like that, but fuck 'em. Increase your output of coal-oil. Commit to it first, publicly, then do the paperwork afterwards.

'Make the Chinese deal look like your own; the Chinese will back that. Visit China and Russia, and come away with deals. Visit Goma, and come away with deals, deals that mean jobs for Americans – and shout it loudly. I'll shout it loudly for you as well. Be seen ... to be doing all you can to sell brand America, whilst leaving Congress to argue amongst themselves and look small.

'Next, we're going to expand upon G8 and G20 and create a body called the World Financial Cooperation Group, with a permanent staff. It will work in a similar way to the old "M" Group, and I'll have a hand in it. A kind of ... *hand out the sweets if you behave* kind of hand in it. The first meeting will be in a month, in New York, and it will go some way to assisting the US economy and, hopefully, the world economy. Pick a senior figure to represent you on its permanent panel.

'That meeting ... will cover more than just bank interest rates and currency levels, there'll a whole host of other things that are

essential for the development of global cooperation between now and 2025. This, is the start point of the endgame.’ Jimmy took a sheet of paper from his pocket. ‘A speech for you to give today.’

‘I have a speechwriter,’ Sanchez quipped as he read it. We waited. Sanchez finally lifted his head. ‘And the other nations will back me on all this?’

‘They will, or they’ll feel my toe up their arses,’ Jimmy firmly stated.

They made us lunch as Sanchez studied the speech, he even made a few alterations. In the press briefing room, we stood behind Sanchez as he delivered the speech, plenty of fire in his words. He took questions about what he hoped to achieve from the meetings, before inviting Jimmy forwards.

Jimmy held up his hands to stop questions. ‘First of all, let me say how appalled I am ... at some east coast politicians and governors, who see the homeless of Hawaii as not being proper Americans. The quake struck Hawaii, an American state that you all loved well enough for a good holiday. Hawaii was destroyed, the west coast damaged, and now America has decided that it’s not a whole country, but divided by states, with some states wishing that the homeless of the west coast - and the Hawaiians, are restricted to California.

‘On the west coast, Brad and The Ark have raised a team of a hundred thousand Christian volunteers to give their time to help in their communities, to help those that lost their homes. Seems that the people of the west coast are far better than the people here. So let me be clear: I am ashamed of the so-called Christian communities of America, and so should you all be. The Ark are carrying you all on their backs, and they’re putting you all to shame.

‘Some east coast politicians have even doubted the right of the Hawaiians to settle here in such large numbers. Well, your rich white folk never had a problem retiring to Hawaii. The ancestral Hawaiians didn’t like it when you tore down the countryside and raised condos and hotels, but you did it anyway. You raped their land, and now they ask for a home in return – which is only fair.

‘America was founded by immigrants, whether they be African slaves or Jews escaping the Nazi in Europe. The Hawaiians are not immigrants, they’re Americans, and they *are* Americans because you took their lands in the first place, as you took this land from the red Indians. Fail to make them welcome and it will be a stain on the reputation of America for centuries to come. Thank you, and no questions.’

Financial cooperation group

A month later we were back, many of the world leaders gathered in the UN building. The G20 countries gathered, along with the IMF, our African finance minister and us. And, as ever, the coffee was lukewarm and from a plastic urn. The UN's catering had not improved any.

Helen sat behind me, Sanchez and his team to my right, Jimmy to my left.

Jimmy began, 'Thank you all for attending here today, the first meeting of a group that will become very important in the years ahead. As most of you know, a problem will strike in 2025, and that problem will need a great deal of cooperation from the various nations if it is to be dealt with.

'First, let me state that the problems between now and 2025 are mostly economic and political. That means, in simple terms, that war is still a possibility, but only if economic hardship leads to civil unrest followed by political miscalculations, protectionism and nationalism.

'As we sit here today, the world is far more interconnected than at any time in history. The financial markets are connected and, unfortunately, when one sneezes they all catch a cold. America leads those financial markets, and it now has a head cold. Without going into detail, let me explain the consequences of an American recession.

'First, it would lead to civil unrest in America because of the displaced peoples of Hawaii and the west coast. Second, it would lead to the rise of nationalistic politicians and the idea of economic protectionism. That will have a knock on effect around the world.

'The place to discuss trade tariffs and currency rates is here, not in the media, and not shouting at each other. And let me also be clear that I will reward those nations that cooperate, and deliberately fail to assist those that do not cooperate. If you think that a threat, you'd be correct, and you can have it in writing if you like.

'There are twenty nations assembled here today, the world's largest economies. If I see twenty building blocks on the table, I can build a solution to the 2025 problem. If I see only seventeen, I still have a chance. If there are ten, we have no chance ... and you all

face a global catastrophe. The people around this table will need to put in the building blocks pro-rata, but that is an over-simplification. If one nation here is suffering, the others should compensate through larger building blocks. That may reverse itself a year later, or five years later – and we will keep score.

‘This group is about fairness, it’s not about rewarding lazy countries or tolerating idiotic spending plans. If someone here ignores the advice of the group, then I expect the group to act to economically punish that nation, to bring them back into line. That may sound harsh, but we’re talking about the future of the planet, so I don’t care.

‘Now, some nations here will wish to go over old ground, and say that the developed nations have the advantage, and that the developing nations have the right to grow. You do have the right to grow, you also have the danger of being completely wiped out in 2025. So give some consideration to the fact that assisting your economies between now and then may be in vain. Your countries may be completely destroyed.

‘India, Saudi Arabia, Turkey – you would be destroyed early on during troubles in 2025. All of you would have your economies ruined in a day, followed by civil unrest and martial law. South America, you would fair better than most, and Africa would do well to start with.

‘If the nations here are not cooperating – to my satisfaction - in 2025, the complete destruction of our civilisation is assured, just as the destruction of Hawaii was assured.

‘Now, leaving aside the doom and gloom, let’s get onto a few practical steps. First, I would like the finance ministers of each of the nations and groups represented here today, to meet every three months, right here. Second, we all have the chance at a peace dividend, and as such I want all of you to look at cooperating in the reduction of certain types of weapons. India, I will be asking all nations here to put pressure on you to sit down with Pakistan and reduce your military expenditures. There will be incentives offered, penalties for dragging your feet.

‘American, Russian and China, you know what weapons systems will be of no use in 2025, and can adjust accordingly; give the people of the world a peace dividend, and some hope. Europe, you need to be less mechanised and more mobile. Think infantry. South America, you need to develop your naval power more than land-based forces.

‘Next, economics. You all need to draw a line from here to 2025, and make a seven-year financial plan, the aim being to avoid the boom and bust cycles and bubbles. America and Europe, you need to rein in the banks and restructure them, or they will drag you down. Russia, you need to loosen your banking regulations and provide more loans to entrepreneurs. You also need to consider breaking up some of the larger privately owned companies, especially if they have a monopoly. Be tough with them; the profits sat in western banks belonging to rich Russians benefits no one.

‘Next. Mexico and Brazil: I will offer to assist you to set-up police and army special units to help deal with crime and drugs. Mexico, you’re one step away from disaster, so kindly take-up my offer. Brazil, as the most responsible country in South America, I offer to help you raise a Rifles regiment. After 2025 you’ll need them.

‘Saudi Arabia - I don’t like you very much.’ They blinked. ‘So how you conduct yourself here may help that prejudice. I would like to see you cut back production, and to coordinate that production not just with OPEC, but with those nations producing coal-oil.

‘OK, there’ll now be a one hour break as private side meetings are held. Thank you all.’

Sanchez led his team to a room, joined by the Chinese for a bargaining session. The Brazilians wanted a private chat to Jimmy, and the Saudis wanted to talk with me. I led the Saudi team to a side room, the same Prince I had met in Goma shaking my hand. We ended up with just myself facing eight of them.

‘Mister Holton,’ the Prince began. ‘We are asking questions about 2025, but are not finding answers.’

‘Will you cut production?’ I immediately tabled.

‘We will cut production soon ... because it is prudent to do so. If you require a few extra percentage points, I’m sure that it could be arranged.’

‘Good,’ I said, offering my best attempts at a diplomatic smile.

‘There has been mention that we would be completely destroyed, something that is not good for business –’

‘Should we have lied to Hawaii?’

‘No,’ the man said after a moment. ‘And we fear a similar fate.’

‘Who would take your people?’ I asked, but I should not have.

‘That, is something of a taboo subject, and one which causes us great pains.’

My mouth was moving faster than my brain. I was about to say something that I didn’t think through. But, looking back, maybe I

was thinking clearer than I had ever done before. 'Perhaps, it would have been wise for the Hawaiians to find a new home years earlier. Perhaps, you should buy a few villas around the world ready.'

'Such a ... Diaspora, would mean life for the people, but not life for the nation. The nation would have no centre or soul.'

I eased back. 'Africa has a great many wide open spaces, with no people. Perhaps you could buy a small country,' I joked.

'Perhaps we could.'

I stopped smiling. 'Listen, guys. You drill oil using foreign labour, you don't like getting your own hands dirty. What would you do in a region with no oil?'

'Perhaps we could be more involved in a region *with* oil. We have the money to invest in rigs, refineries and infrastructure.'

'Such regions are in the north, and those regions would be ... the front line after 2025. Your new happy home would not last long.'

'If Mister Silo is aware of ... shall we say, untapped oil in a suitable location, then we could come to an agreement.'

I stared back. 'You serious?'

'We all sat up late at night and watched Hawaii disappear. It had ... an effect. We are now very serious.'

'Stay there,' I said as I stood. I found Jimmy and dragged him out to the corridor, relaying the Saudi request, and trying to sell the idea.

He stood staring down the corridor, hands in pockets. 'I had planned on just letting them go. Because even if they relocate, some of their people will always want to set off bombs.'

'Surely they could be ring-fenced somewhere? Look, you said they'd be destroyed, all the time and money wasted. If they relocate, then that working capital could be used now, this frigging year!'

'Wherever they go, they risk the Brotherhood rising from within their own people.'

'If they're in Africa, they'll be stopped very damn quickly!' I insisted. 'We'll ring-fence them.'

'They could live on an island,' Jimmy thought out loud. 'And the investment capital would be useful.' He sighed, informing his group that he would be back in five minutes, leading me to the Saudis.

Sitting, we faced the Saudi team. 'How many people would you wish relocate, of your twenty million?' Jimmy asked.

'An overseas colony would have no more than a million people, but ... room for rapid expansion,' the Prince told us.

'There's an untapped oilfield off Mozambique, another off Madagascar,' Jimmy informed them. 'But persuading the countries would be tricky.'

‘Not for you, we suspect.’

‘You’d have a fenced-off colony, a formal border, a port built for your needs?’ Jimmy asked.

‘A self-sufficient unit, yes, but with purchases of local food,’ the Prince explained. ‘And, perhaps, a skyscraper or two in New Kinshasa, a hotel or two. A tower in Nairobi.’

Jimmy slowly nodded. ‘Make your peace with the Somalis, and quickly.’ He stood. ‘I’ll discuss your proposal with the Africans. And I’d like to see you more involved with Pakistan. Help their economy, help them fight extremism, help with peace towards India.’

With Jimmy gone, the Prince commented, ‘He is suddenly being ... very accommodating?’

‘Maybe you asked the right question,’ I told them. ‘And, he may not like you, but he has no desire to see you all killed.’

Back in the formal meeting, America announced a deal with China, Russia making concessions, the Saudis cutting production. That cut in oil was not to keep oil prices high especially, as to make coal-oil more attractive to certain nations. And a collapse in oil prices would affect the dollar.

After thirty minutes, a number of deals had been outlined and discussed, a break for lunch called, time to let the aides scurry around and work more deals, especially arms reductions. We joined Sanchez and his team for a bite to eat, discussing the Saudis, the Americans amazed by the Saudi suggestion.

In the afternoon session, Brazil rejected the idea of an Africa style Rifles regiment, for now, but agreed to look at increasing the size of its navy. The Mexicans agreed to the training of its soldiers and paramilitary units, but then surprised us with a request to place African Rifles on their America border as a trial. Sanchez, of all people, was not so keen about that. Not because he wanted immigrants to cross the border unhindered, but because it made the US look bad; unable to police its own border.

We declined the Rifles for Mexico, to appease Sanchez – he had enough problems on his plate, but suggested that a specialised American unit could be made up, and part funded by us to skirt around the federal budget constraints, and the budget constraints of individual states. It would also employ quite a few people, up to ten thousand. Sanchez asked to discuss it later, and we moved on.

A communiqué was produced for the people of the world, deliberately upbeat language, and detailed several agreements, hinting at others. A new three-way disarmament conference would

take place, NATO, Russia and China to sit down and discuss ways of saving money.

With Sanchez delivering the joint communiqué, we met with the Russian team.

‘Your economy is suffering because of the US and global economy, unemployment rising,’ Jimmy began. ‘I would like to make use of the farm profits, and the coffee shops.’

I was suddenly all ears.

Jimmy continued, ‘If it is OK with you, then all profits for this year, and accumulated profits from last year, will go towards a voucher system and free meals for the unemployed, free meals at our burger bars and coffee shops. They are part owned by you, so it will make you look like a kind and caring government.’

They collectively shrugged, no particular objections, a verbal agreement made.

Leaving the building, I asked, ‘Did the Russian Government just make a mistake?’

‘They did.’

‘And the vouchers, people will think them from us?’

‘They will.’

‘And we’ll add some money to the pot to make sure this is extended and widely published.’

‘We will. And now, we’ll see what the news is saying about certain banks, members of the Fed, and certain Republican Senators.’

‘Should be interesting, but I guess you already know.’

He did already know, he had scripted it. Rather, he had the brain trust kids hack the email accounts of certain people and send realistic emails back and forth before leaking them to CNN and the New York Post.

At our hotel, we sat in the bar under a TV screen, beer and burgers ordered, the news not pretty. Two senior members of the Fed, three Republican Senators and two large banks were under the spotlight, suggestion of nothing short of a conspiracy to unseat Sanchez and block the aid package for the homeless. Even the men of our security detail were vocal in their condemnation of the conspirators.

After we had munched on the burgers, we drove straight around to the CNN offices and offered an interview. We labelled the leaked emails as a plot that deserved investigation by the FBI, as a threat to national security – nothing short of terrorism – and encouraged the people of America not to use the banks in question. This was our

strongest attack yet on the two banks, and we labelled the Senators as traitors to democracy, and as terrorists, the members of the Fed labelled as being part of organised crime.

The FBI moved before Sanchez had even nudged them, all of the Fed staff in question and the bank CEO's picked up for questioning. Unfortunately, they could not touch the Senators, because such conspiracy was normal everyday plotting and scheming for them.

Flying out that evening, we left behind good news and bad news. The good news was the America-China deal, arms reductions and other agreed pieces of cooperation. The bad news was the conspiracy, because it took three percent off the DOW.

Land grab

The Mozambique President had flown up to London with the leaders of Madagascar, and I had to admit that a few million would have bought-off either of them. When we told them our suggestion, they just stared back, stunned.

‘We would sell a part of our land?’ they repeated.

‘Yes, and it would become sovereign Saudi territory for all time,’ Jimmy told them. ‘It would be fenced off, but they would buy things from you, as well as move oil across your lands.’

‘They ... will pay for oil exploration near our coast?’

‘They would,’ Jimmy confirmed. ‘Plus a down payment of many billions of dollars for the land. Both of your countries would be significantly boosted.’

‘And ... do you think it is a good idea, something we are supposed to do?’ they asked.

‘I think it will boost your economies greatly. How else will you get so much money for just barren land? You will also get a cut of the oil revenue if they find oil, but they are not doing this to search for oil. They are doing this because their country may suffer a disaster in the future, a ... lack of water and natural resources,’ Jimmy lied. ‘They wish to have small colonies outside of Saudi Arabia.’

‘How much land?’

‘A coastal strip, twenty miles long and five miles deep, little more,’ Jimmy told them. ‘They would build port facilities, and you would benefit from them.’

‘The land is nothing,’ they pointed out, shrugging. ‘Maybe to move some villages.’

They were finally in agreement, offering to discuss it with their cabinets and parliaments straight away, and to get back to us. I figured it was a done deal then, the money too good to refuse for a strip of mosquito infested marsh coastline where no one lived. I emailed the Prince and gave him the news.

Back at the house, Big Paul had returned from Afghanistan, now more soldier than bodyguard. He had lost weight, and appeared more weather-beaten, but was enjoying the Afghan campaign.

‘Had a large group of Arabs come over the border from Pakistan the other week, maybe eighty in total. Gave us something to do, people falling over themselves to be the ones to get in and mix it up.’

‘And the Iranians?’

‘Quiet now, not a peep out of them. We allowed them in to collect their dead, we even helped them. Only problem we had was with some of the drug lords.’

‘How so?’ I probed.

‘We have outposts on the borders, and they see and stop the drug mules in case they’re Taliban drugs. Drug lords didn’t like that, so they all met up to discuss kicking us out. Two hundred of them met in a house in the central region, and ... boom! Wiped them all out in one go.

‘The survivors got pissy, so we bombed the hell out of the poppy fields, and sprayed them with a chemical. Fuck all growing there now that we can see.’

‘And the Northern Alliance?’

‘Useless bunch of corrupt fuckers; we killed a few. They can’t be trusted, and you can’t work with them. You give them money, make a deal to repair a road, but they go home, get drugged up, have sex with young boys and fall asleep. And that’s on a good day.’

With Big Paul off to his seldom-used house, Han joined me. ‘Do you have a moment?’

‘For you, always.’

‘May I enquire ... as to the Saudi role in things?’ Han asked.

I shrugged and made a face. ‘The original plan, Jimmy’s plan, was to just ignore them and let them be destroyed.’

‘He has no love for them. And now?’

‘Well, they want land in Africa – sovereign Saudi land, and they’ll pay a lot for it. So, if their capital can be used up before they’re destroyed, all the better.’

‘And if my government wished a port and inland area for ourselves, as sovereign territory?’

‘I’d see no problem with that. You’re already in New Kinshasa. Where were you thinking?’

‘On the Kenyan coast, close to the Somali border.’

‘I’ll chat to Jimmy and the Kenyans for you.’

‘Thank you, Paul.’

When I told Jimmy, he said it was few years ahead of schedule, but anticipated, and that it was my deal. That Friday I joined Lucy on a flight down, Helen and Liz along, and flew over to Nairobi as the ladies of the family enjoyed the mansion. The Kenyans were intrigued, as well as bemused.

‘Sovereign land?’

‘Listen, I worked the deal your way, or the Somalis would have got it,’ I lied. ‘You sell a strip of land, three miles long and five miles deep. It would be fenced off; passports shown at the border. Inside, the Chinese build a colony like Hong Kong, and it greatly boosts the local area. They’ll build a port facility, an airport, and employ local people.’

‘But if you have any concerns, that’s not a problem, Somali has a lot of spare coastal land, so too Tanzania -’

‘We did not say that we were not interested, we just need a little time to discuss it.’

‘Of course.’

‘And ... they would pay for the land.’

I nodded. ‘An agreed sum. But the main advantage would be the increased trade.’

‘If you say that this is good for us –’

‘It’s a piece of dry and dusty land where no one lives. What’s there to lose?’ I held my hands wide, then pulled out a map. I showed them a spot I thought might be good, and drew the enclave to scale. It looked tiny compared to the overall country. ‘Have a think, but don’t take too long; others are interested.’

I flew back to Goma and joined the ladies, a meal at the house that evening, Yuri and Po around. Well, they didn’t have far to walk.

Po was now just about the richest man in Hong Kong. His family had been wealthy to start with, and the trading advice we had furnished him with had boosted that wealth. His oil and ore interests, those which we had handed him, had made him an extra fortune on top of his other two fortunes. Jimmy had said that Po would be one of the richest men in China, and now I was sure that our little chubby friend was just that.

When I told him about the Chinese Government's interest in coastal land, he went quiet, his grey matter firing up. I mentioned the Saudis, and he was not just fired up, he was down right put out by it. If it was a good deal, why was he not in on it?

'The Saudis want new land because they risk being destroyed in 2025,' I explained. 'It's not about money, they just need a place to live. And as for your government, you'd best ask them. I don't know why they want a port and land, unless they just wish to create an export hub. There's no oil or ore on the land, just swamp.'

'Maybe for a naval port in Africa,' Po suggested. Now it was Yuri's turn to be put out, and I wondered how long it would be till they were asking difficult questions of Jimmy – and then he'd be put out.

Yuri had created his own airline by purchasing an existing airline, and would accept our 747s and 757s as soon as they were delivered. I offered him a slot from Moscow to Goma hub, which he readily accepted. Two hours later, Po and Yuri walked off arguing about coastal land and its benefits, so I figured I best call the boss man.

'Jimmy, Po and Yuri know about the Saudi land down here, and now the Chinese land down here, and I suspect they're plotting and scheming.'

'It's a few years ahead of schedule. We're in a recession, so it's not a good time to be expanding facilities, but it would have happened anyway – that was the idea with New Kinshasa. You're doing it arse about face. We should have had them all cooperating around new Kinshasa first, then buying more African land.'

'Do the Chinese want a naval presence here?'

'Yes.'

'That'll please the Americans,' I quipped.

'It was the Americans that suggested that Russian and China take more of a lead in the fight against The Brotherhood! Including naval firepower. So they can't argue the point.'

'And the Russians?' I asked.

'Might be feeling a little left out, and want their own warm-water port down there. I've expanded the facility in northern Somalia, and there's a new pier just for them, one for the Chinese.'

'So what are the Chinese up to?' I puzzled.

'The same as for New Kinshasa: proximity and influence, commerce and trade. The key decision makers can be closer at hand. Oh, while you're down there, go see the volunteers and thank them all, look over the projects and make them all feel appreciated.'

The next day I sat down with an A3 iPad and launched a bit of software that allowed me to draw with a special pen, and to have the drawings turned into diagrams with square edges. I drew an oblong and dimensioned it as five miles by three. The port was easy enough to position, but then I consider a marina, and so moved the port. Behind the port I positioned a container yard, a railway marshalling yard, and track leading off towards the northwest.

At the far left of the oblong, the northwest, I positioned the airport, also with cargo facilities, but repositioned it to be next to the port. The idea was that the nice houses would be inland, all the noise and pollutants close to the coast. I figured that an industrial area would come next, behind the container port, followed by the business district, which led to the shopping and nightlife district, residential apartments, smaller apartments, then houses and mansions towards the rear.

I based the marina on Shelly's design, added restaurants and bars, and a government quarter. That done, I attached it to an email and send it to Shelly: "see what you can do with this".

The next day, Helen and I dressed smart, Lucy deciding to come along with us and to skip school. We drove into the city, and west to the volunteer's compounds and research facilities, two large university-like compounds either side of a main road.

The chief of the volunteers was a former head of the International Red Cross, his deputy a former Mayor of Philadelphia – an unlikely couple. They greeted us off the coach and showed us around, a thousand handshakes given, microscopes peered down, computer simulations observed. Two hours in and my hand was sore, being led now to a closely guarded area. I cocked an eyebrow at the armed guards, exchanging a look with Helen. This place was guarded better than our bank.

Inside, we found laboratories leading to huge water tanks, all filled with seawater.

'What goes on here?' I asked.

'It's a project to assist with global warming,' they explained.

'Global warming?' I puzzled.

'The world's oceans are the greatest carbon sink. Plankton absorb carbon, and when they die it falls to the ocean floor; from gaseous form to a harmless solid. The dream of many scientists has been to develop short-lived plankton in a laboratory that could be seeded in the oceans, thereby controlling the spread of them. Problem is, they use up the ocean's oxygen and produce methane, so we're trying to breed those characteristics away, or at least to minimise them.'

They led us to a large vat, VAT14 stencilled on its side. I faced Helen and pointed at it, her eyes now wide.

‘VAT14, JDI,’ Helen whispered.

‘What’s so special about this vat?’ I asked.

‘It’s our best hope, and shows great potential,’ they enthused.

I stared at the green liquid. ‘But this is not good enough to help?’

‘No, unfortunately; it’s below the threshold that Jimmy set. We think we can possibly extract some of the DNA and alter it, add a protein marker or two.’

‘What would the protein marker for algae have to do with this?’ I asked, still staring at the green water.

‘You know your stuff, obviously. We’ve been theorising that it could alter the metabolic process; less methane.’

I slowly nodded to myself. Turning, I said, ‘When Jimmy stepped back through time he came with the protein marker for an algae in his blood.’

Our hosts looked like they had seen a ghost. Or two.

‘Do you have a sample of his blood?’ I asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Then I guess your mad scientists know where to find the marker.’

Two men rushed off without a word.

‘Do you know what this means?’ the chief asked, looking like he was about to explode.

‘Not a clue,’ I offered.

‘If it works, we can seed the oceans and grab the carbon!’

‘Will that stop global warming?’ Helen asked.

‘We don’t know, we’re still trying to calculate the effects.’

‘When will you have the result –’

‘In a few hours; I’ll call you.’ He turned and walked quickly away.

‘I guess we’d best leave the mad scientists to it. Which is the way out?’

On the way out, I called Jimmy and gave him the story. He said, ‘You have a bad habit of doing things a few years early, young man. Learn some patience.’

‘So I was right then?’

‘Yes. And by tomorrow they’ll have reached my threshold, and ten minutes later they’ll tell everyone in the world.’

‘You want me to slow them down?’

‘Slow them down? Right now they’re all having brain-sex. No, let it run its course. But give them a good budget to build a facility on the coast of Somalia, a ship or two – research vessels.’

‘Will it stop global warming?’

‘Not completely, but it will give everyone an excuse to keep their economies going at full pelt, which is what the Americans and Chinese want anyway. With this news, they’ll increase their carbon footprints and negate the benefits.’

Two days later the news hit, every TV channel showing the same thing: Silo fixes global warming. Hell, at least we were popular. But that next week came cautionary tales from various scientists who suggested that the release of the plankton could harm the oceans ecosystems, and a sometimes violent debate broke out amongst the world’s academics.

‘JDI,’ I told Helen. ‘Just do it. Jimmy will seed the oceans regardless.’

A dark day

I kept in touch with Brad, and he seemed to be making a difference, he certainly seemed to be making a name for himself. He had spent most of the allocated money, had fixed tens of thousand of properties, and was to be glimpsed on the west coast news most every night.

Sanchez’s bill failed on its first attempt, and Jimmy waded in, criticising Congress. The FBI had dropped its conspiracy charges, since the email senders could not be proven to be sat at their desks at the time, and the mood stateside soured.

Unknown to me, Sanchez had been invited to Israel, never having visited. Also unknown to me, was a demand by Sanchez that Israel halt its settlement building, and that they assist with the West Bank water pipe - still awaiting planning permission. Sanchez then cut the US aid package to Israeli by ten percent, referring Israel’s aid package back to Congress to be ratified.

We flew over a month later for another meeting at the UN building, a dark and rainy day. Arriving, the area outside the UN building was a sea of flashing blue lights. Our security detail got jumpy and sped off, taking us back around to our hotel. There, on the news, they were reporting that a junior Israeli diplomat had shot dead Sanchez.

Jimmy and I slumped into chairs, devastated. From the look on Jimmy's face, I could tell this was totally unexpected; as well as a serious setback. After a minute of saying nothing, Jimmy mentioned, 'The UN don't check diplomats for guns.'

The TV news kept our attention for fifteen minutes. When the phone went, it was the Vice President, Harvey Blake, a fifty-eight year old veteran Democrat, and now in the hot seat.

'Jimmy, it's Harvey Blake. Sanchez didn't make it. And right now I could do with some god damn advice about what to do.'

'I don't think the Israeli Government had a hand in it, no matter how much Sanchez upset them. Blame the individual, not the country, call for calm. I'll be around for a few days, call me anytime.'

The next call was Ben Ares. 'Jimmy, how the hell did you not see this!' he barked.

'It wasn't supposed to happen, and Sanchez was never supposed to be President. We've altered a lot. Quakes don't change, but people and politics do.'

'Is there anything you can do?' Ben asked, sounding terrified.

'Make a statement, Ben, blame the individual and condemn it. Wave diplomatic rights and allow him to be tried here. After that, well ... after that it's a disaster for you either way. I'll do what I can, which will not be much in this case.'

After hanging up, Jimmy faced me. And waited.

'Does this alter the build-up to 2025?' I asked.

'Only as far as Israel goes, and they were never key. Key to the start of the trouble by physical location, key to American aims to defend them, but not key to global cohesion.'

'Will the Arabs try and make use of this?'

'There was a time when they would, but Iran is not in the mood, Iraq is quiet, Jordan timid, and Hezzbolah have lost a lot of men. So, no, I don't think the Arabs will try and use it. But there'll be dancing in the streets of the Gaza Strip tonight.'

'Will the Israeli-US relationship hold?'

'Yes, because that's done at a political level, behind closed doors; the American people don't get to see the money spent – which is way more than that declared. But the American people are the problem, in that they'll be the ones upset, not the establishment. And right now I don't want to say anything to help the Israelis if it puts me at odds with the people. The voters.'

'Ben will expect you to support him –'

‘How can I? How can we defend this? The politicians will blame the individual, the people will blame the Israelis, and the press are largely Jewish-controlled ... so they’ll try and play it down.’

That evening we avoided the press, watching events unfold on the TV, Harvey Blake sworn-in the next morning in a quick ceremony. I was amazed to find comments from Israelis like “Sanchez was no friend of Israel”. Jesus, I thought. How much worse did they wish to make it?

Ben Ares then shocked me by demanding that the diplomat be returned to stand trial in Israel, because he would not get a fair trial in America. What was there to debate in a court? He shot the President dead in front of fifty witnesses. Were they going to call for proof, for forensics, CCTV images? For an autopsy of the President and the slugs matched to the gun?

This was a low point, after things had started to look better. We flew down to Washington, avoiding the press, no press aboard the plane, and met with President Harvey Blake. He struck me as a good man, but he seemed to be a Samuels mark two. He was no charismatic leader, and he had no energy or passion, not like Sanchez. We went around in circles for an hour and got nowhere, no firm movement backwards or forwards, Blake in favour of sending the diplomat home rather than a public trial in the US.

A call then came in, a prison guard having killed the diplomat. That closed that debate, and was probably a good outcome. Either way, a trial would have dragged it out and made it worse.

Both mentally exhausted, we chose to fly straight back without even issuing a press statement. Before we took off I scanned the US news, finding that the media were condemning verbal attacks on Israel. The anger of the people would never be heard through the media, as Jimmy had suggested. I wasn’t in favour of attacking Israel, but I was also disappointed that the American media had closed ranks. Truth was indeed the first casualty in this small war.

In London, we held a press conference. Jimmy said, ‘Israel is a friend, America is a friend, it’s a terrible business, and a terrible waste of a human life. Sanchez was a great leader, and would have gone on to do well, I’m sure of it. The people of America should not blame Israel, since the Israeli Government did not ask the diplomat to shoot the President - it was the depraved act of a lone individual, who may have had problems and issues.

‘We have all achieved a great deal in the past few months, and I hope that we can move on from this unfortunate incident, and continue building – not moving backwards.’

The journey home in the coach was sombre, emails checked and replied to. At the house, we found Shelly, a pleasant surprise, and she had some drawings for me, drawings of the planned Chinese enclave in Kenya. Han had already received a copy.

We tried to talk about anything other than Sanchez, and caught up on where Shelly had been, what she had been up to. She had become very interested in the plankton, and was heading down to Goma to spend a month or two working on it. We'd see a bit more of her.

Brad sent me an email a few days later; he was going to run for Congress during the mid-terms, as an independent. I emailed back, 'Good. You'll do a good job. We can't be seen to endorse you – too much. And its almost two years away!'

When I mentioned it to Jimmy, he sent Brad an email suggesting that he go for Governor of California in two years; a firm hint about destiny.

In the weeks that followed, very few US commentators were lamenting the loss of Sanchez, and that angered me. They were sweeping it under the carpet, and it was business as usual. As for the aid package, I was starting to wonder if new President Blake was awake and on the job. I totalled up what we had spent so far, dispatched another three point five billion dollars, and told Brad to leak the figures. I was angry, and it was time to shake the tree.

The news hit the next day, west coast commentators mentioning the sum of ten billion dollars having been spent on the homeless. Jimmy made no comment, and I didn't care, my blood was boiling. Twenty-four hours later, the commentator asked why more money had come from us than so far released through the federal aid package. Minor protests took place in northern California.

Blake called me, unable to reach Jimmy. 'Paul, I was after Jimmy. Just ... wondered if there was a way to channel your ... generous support, through federal outlets. A ... unified approach.'

'If those federal outlets will be feeding the homeless tomorrow, yes we could. Any delay would not be acceptable; people are cold and hungry now.'

'Well, we're doing what we can –'

'No, you're not. You should have tried to pass the bill before the quake, and now the Republicans are stonewalling it. If we wait till you get a bill passed it'll be next fucking spring!'

I hung up, and stood staring out of my office window. With my hands in my pockets I watched the trees swaying in the wind, the poor old squirrels probably somewhere nice and warm. I called Brad.

‘Paul? You woke me.’

‘Sorry. Look, the President is asking that we fund you through his office.’

‘What? We’d never get anything done.’

‘Exactly, so I want you to squeeze his balls. Get angry Brad, and get vocal. I know you’re a Christian, but fight the good fight, eh. And loudly!’

Brad went too far, and Jimmy shook his head at me the next day. Brad had openly stated that President Blake had tried to stop our payments to the poor and homeless. That led to more protests on the streets, placard-waving volunteers from The Ark taking to the streets, many of them white middle-class Republicans. They were joined by those they were trying to help; the poor and displaced. Even the Hawaiians took to the streets.

A poll in California then put the Governor as having a less than ten percent confidence rating from the people. Since there was just about a million new people in the state, it was not surprising. Those with homes were unhappy at the newcomers, and those without proper homes were unhappy at everyone else.

The Governor made a speech, saying that his hands were tied by the lack of federal support, but was booed by a crowd. The next day he tried to visit a housing project, but was smashed about the head by a worker, the governor ending up comatose and on life support. His deputy took over, but did the wise thing and called an election, the man wisely not wishing to remain in office.

There was some debate as to the legal status of the old governor, since he may have survived. The doctors said he could be back in work in two months, or comatose for two years. The unconscious man’s wife then came forwards and suggested that he was thinking of stepping down, and that sealed it; there’d be an election in California.

A week later, Brad put his name forwards and announced that he would be running, very few of the serious contenders wanting the job, not at the moment. Jimmy explained to me that people he knew in California would arrange cash for Brad’s campaign. I rang our media mogul in the States, the Blake Carrington look-a-like, and dropped a big hint: we like Brad for governor. Or else!

Oliver at Pineapple Music came out in favour of Brad straight away, as did many of the musicians and actors, even without my prompting. Jimmy arranged a bunch of experts, and they flew over to see Brad, training him on the Q&A, and how to handle interviews.

I asked Jimmy if we would be seen as interfering, and he said, 'Fuck it. Book the plane.' We were on the campaign trail, and on the warpath.

First stop, New York. Jimmy told the press, 'If the aid package is not passed, then America will spiral out of control and descend into civil unrest. Your recession will become a crash, and you'll take years to recover. This should have all been planned for a year before the Hawaii quake, when your government first knew about it. Now you're running the risk of falling into chaos.'

'Are you endorsing Brad Sullivan?' they asked.

'That's a very difficult question. In a previous time, Brad was a national leader of America after a great disaster. I knew him then. This time around, he's applying for office when there's no disaster, at least not an apocalypse. It's never been my aim to interfere in politics, but I can't help liking Brad, and knowing that he's a great leader in a time of crisis. I can't unwind what I witnessed in the future.'

I hid a smile. Just who the hell was going to stand against Brad now?

Flying down to Washington, I caught the news on my laptop, a million reporters camped outside Brad's house. President Blake was not happy, but he also seemed to be a weakling and incapable of expressing his feelings well.

'You just gave the Governorship of California to Brad,' Blake noted as we sat in the Oval Office.

'As I spoke the truth about the tsunami, so I spoke the truth about Brad,' Jimmy carefully mouthed. 'I didn't make the world the way it is, or the past.'

'You've got everyone worried about passing this bill,' Blake mentioned, a glance at his team.

'Obviously not,' I said. 'Or they might have passed it by now.'

'You need to start planning for civil unrest,' Jimmy told Blake. 'Because I'm just not sure if you're going to tip over the edge or not. Unemployment is still rising, confidence is falling, and bank liquidity is still poor. One good push and the Republicans will get their wish; chaos. They'll try and unseat your government, and that will be followed by hardliners taking office. When that happens, you can kiss your arse goodbye, because I'll be gone - and not back till 2025.'

'And Chinese support with it, no doubt,' Blake suggested.

'Chinese? Every nation in the world will turn against you,' Jimmy informed the President. 'Your economy will go to shit,

unemployment at sixty percent. After a year or two, militias will rise up and Texas will try and declare independence. Middle America will be like Somalia used to be, only worse.'

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs was in on the meeting, and sat looking sour faced.

Jimmy added, 'If that happens, and the man who I think will get in – gets in, then he'll think up a reason to go to war with China. Then you're looking at a global nuclear conflict, followed by the rise of The Brotherhood within a year. I gave you the tsunami to the minute, and I can map this out for you blow by blow. Screw this up, and you lose the planet.'

Blake looked lost, and I was sure that we had the wrong man in the seat again. He promised faithfully to try and push the bill through.

The Chairman of the Joint Chiefs then said, 'There's emergency military funds that could be used without Congress's approval. But it would need a State of Emergency, at least in California.'

'That's a paper exercise,' Jimmy said. 'The Governor can call one of those when there's a bush fire. It just releases certain federal funds.'

'How much?' Blake asked the general.

'We could find you sixty billion dollars straight away,' the general stated. 'Probably twice that. Hardon Chase set-up the fund after Hurricane Katrina and kept it quiet.'

'And I could add another twenty, plus fifty Chinese. That's probably enough to turn the corner. And, the bill being asked to pass ... would be to back-up the US military and replenish their emergency funds.'

'The people won't like us leaving the military short,' Blake noted.

'I'll deal with the people,' Jimmy offered.

'And the military will back you,' the general told Jimmy, getting a look from Blake.

We were making progress.

'When the money is released, don't spend it all on California,' Jimmy told Blake. 'Use around seventy-five percent on the west coast, the rest going to other states that need it. Don't tell anyone, just allocate it, and let history judge you.'

Blake took a breath, and lifted the phone. 'Get me the Lieutenant Governor of California, wake him if you have to.'

Ten minutes later we had a state of emergency, and we headed towards that emergency in the plane. Landing, the news of the

release of the money broke. Jimmy had transferred twenty billion directly to the fund, the Chinese waiting ready – on the understanding that it was a loan. We headed straight for a press conference as the sun set.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, people of California, people of America. Today, a State of Emergency was declared in California, simply to enable the President to release additional emergency funding from a military reserve. That was done with the full support of the Joint Chiefs. I have added an additional twenty billion dollars to the fund, and loans from overseas have also been made.

‘I now believe that there are sufficient funds to help the homeless, to rebuild, and to stave off recession in California. Some of that money will be used here, some in other states. This move has come about ... as a need to circumvent those conspirators in the Congress and the Senate who wish to see a nationwide collapse and a state of emergency for their own aims. They are playing with the future of America ... and the world.

‘There are people in the Senate today who wish to see riots on the streets, people going hungry, martial law declared – all so that they can unseat this democratically elected government. They would like to see a right-wing government in place, power in the hands of the few, and the poor kept down.

‘I have sat back and tried not to get involved in internal American politics, but you are risking the very future of this planet with your greed and stupidity. I will now take a more active role, but so long as the American people back me –and so long as they wish me to help. I can tell you what the future holds, or I can lead you along the right path.

‘People of America, you stand on the edge of disaster, and for no reason other than your own unscrupulous politicians. To save yourselves, you need only decide to vote for decent politicians, not the snakes that you seem to like electing. The people who voted against the aid package are known to you, they are listed. If one of those congressmen or senators is your congressman or senator, tell them what you think about it.

‘And I would like to appeal to every US citizen that has an ounce of dignity left, to stop using B.N.K. Banking Group. They are acting against the interests of your own democracy, profiting from your suffering and sneering down at you.

‘People of America, I warned you about the tsunami, and some did not listen. I warn you again now of an even greater risk. If the aid package for the homeless is not secured, if the people are left

adrift, then you'll face the disintegration of America. You will all lose your jobs, your savings, and your pensions. Don't let that happen; stand up and be counted!

'And to the well-off and to the rich, I say this. You cannot live behind high walls with guards and dogs, you have to drive to work. And if that drive to work is littered with the desperate and hungry, you'll need an armoured car. No one can live in isolation. Those of you with millions in the banks, and millions in shares: your paper money will lose ninety percent of its value. Then you won't be able to afford those high walls and guard dogs.

'There will be a vote in congress in a week, and that week will be a long time for some. For the country that used to be called the *land of the free*, it may be the last week some of you ever enjoy. Give some thought to what you'll do when you can't feed your children.'

He turned and led me away, the press a bit stunned. So was I.

'Jesus, you laid that on thick. You trying to scare them to death? The markets will drop like a stone.'

'And investors will switch to gold,' Jimmy mentioned as we walked.

'Which we have a bit of,' I realised as we headed back into the vans.

In the days that followed, the emergency money was released. The Joint Chiefs then took the very unusual step of publicly stating their backing for Jimmy. Five Congressmen and three Senators stood down straight away, one was shot and wounded – by his wife of all people. B.N.K. went into freefall, and Blake refused to bail them out; there was nothing left to bail out.

Gold topped twenty-six hundred dollars an ounce within days, and we sold heavily, moving gold out of our region by 747 cargo plane, twelve tonnes or more on each flight. Jimmy had warned just about everyone, apart from the Americans, not to buy gold, and they heeded the warning.

'Redistribution of wealth,' Jimmy had commented. 'Those buying gold have the spare cash; they're the rich. We'll sell a lot of gold, make a lot of money, and use it to help the homeless in America through direct loans to the various states - and at great rates. Gold will fall back to around eighteen hundred afterwards, and the rich will have a dent in their savings.

'I'm going to take a trillion off the top earners and spread it around. A ... modern day Robin Hood; not because I'm a socialist, but because if the process had continued then the rich-poor gap in

the states would have widened to the point where it could never have been closed. The elite would have controlled everything, and they would have gotten away with murder.'

Brad went on to win the election by the largest recorded margin in US history, and congress voted to pass the aid package. We loaned the state of California an extra hundred and twenty billion, in gold, and at a good rate of interest.

When US stocks had plummeted, our friends in places high and low were waiting, and all bought stock, the DOW recovering in days. The rich of America had been 'shaken out', as the market makers had done to so many others so many times before; the Top 500 rich list having to be adjusted. Jimmy and I were number one and two, with an 'Unknown, but estimated two hundred billion dollars' tag. It was way too low.

By the spring, things had turned around; the markets up, jobless totals down, homeless totals down. American had undergone a change, and it had needed the pressure cooker to do so. It also needed us, and our gold, and good timing afforded by a time traveller.

Brad benefited by many visits from us, and benefited from Jimmy's guidance – and detailed knowledge of the finances of California. We sponsored films, we bought Boeings, and we rallied an army of some two hundred thousand volunteers. And to top it all, the ocean was a terrible green colour off Somalia, a huge plume of plankton photosynthesising, a few research ships monitoring the carbon biological pump. Initial research was promising, Shelly aboard one of the research vessels.

When she came off ship, and to the mansion in June, Jimmy slapped her hard.

'What the hell did you do that for!' she protested, rubbing her head. We wanted to know that as well, figuring Shelly had done something terribly wrong.

'That's for stabbing me in the arse,' Jimmy told her.

'I never!'

'You stabbed him in arse?' I repeated.

'I didn't!' she protested.

'You did, just before I jumped through time. With a syringe.'

'I stabbed you ... in the future?' she puzzled.

'What did you stab him in the future for?' I asked her.

'How the hell would I know!' she protested.

'You injected me in the arse with algae protein,' Jimmy told her.

'I did?' she puzzled.

‘You discovered it just before I left,’ Jimmy told her.

‘I hope it bloody hurt!’ she said.

‘It did. I had a sore bum for days.’

I wagged a finger at Shelly. ‘Don’t stab people in the arse with algae. How many times have me and your mother told you about that.’

She put her fists on her hips and gave me a look. Since I got those from Helen, I cowed away, and returned to my beer and my never-ending emails.

Based in the mansion, I travelled around to the volunteers often, Shelly to be seen in a white lab coat when not on a ship. The weekends were busy, because that was when the grown-up brain-trust kids came in. They mostly held down proper jobs during the week, and they all had families, but gave up time on the weekends to help out.

That help translated into some amazing projects. One group had taken the German hydroelectric turbines and modified them. Using some of the electricity produced by the turbine, they had created filters in the feeder pipe itself, zapping bacteria somehow. When the water emerged from the turbine it could be drunk safely by the locals.

Another group had spent a lot of money on a new type of electric motor. It looked like a giant metal disk, a leaden grey colour, surrounded by thick metal walls. Peering down at it, they invited me to step onto the metal disk, ten yards in diameter. I stepped onto it and wobbled, the heavy disk floating on magnets and not making contact with either the floor or the sides. Stepping off, they set it spinning by a fan underneath, turned by a water turbine.

The disk eventually reached a good speed and the instrumentation to one side gave readouts as to the electricity generated, generated by the interaction of magnets in the edge of the disk on the coils in the surrounding walls. Friction for the disk was just about zero, and its own weight and momentum both helped to stabilise it and keep it going.

They were planning a much larger version, and planning on powering a small town with it. That led to an electric bus that just took the piss out of the laws of physics. It was also a bit ugly. The bus, a standard electric bus, held advanced solar panels on the roof, capturing enough energy to partly recharge the bus as it drove around. Above the solar panels sat two small wind turbines, technology similar to the free-floating disk, and they collected extra

energy, but not from forwards motion – that would have created drag.

They explained, ‘When the wind is from the side or rear, the wind turbines collect a significant amount of energy. This bus can travel two thousand miles on a single charge. On a clear day with a stiff side breeze, it can replenish seventy-five percent of its power usage in four hours.’

Next, they took me to a large driving circuit, where standard electric taxis were simply going around and around in circles. They pointed. ‘Under the road surface are two parallel sets of coils, powered by the city’s electricity grid. Under the car are magnets and coils. One side of the vehicle interacts with coils on the left, one on the right. You have to drive in the right lane for it to work.’

‘So it gets energy as it drives?’

‘It gets seventy-five percent of the energy as it drives, but you must drive over twenty miles per hour and less than forty. When not on a road with coils, the battery is used as normal.’

‘Cool,’ I said.

Next came a windmill farm, miniature windmills that sat atop a house and would power the house so long as it was breezy. Keen to show me a live example, we journeyed north to Spiral Five and to a house where some of the team lived. From the outside, I could see three small wind turbines and a mass of solar panels.

Inside, they ran the hot and cold water taps. The hot water was boiling hot, and the cold was well below normal temperature.

‘This house costs nothing to heat, or to power, or to keep cool. It’s not even connected to the local grid any more. The only cost is the capital cost of the equipment.’

‘I’ve seen this technology before, so what’s the angle?’ I puzzled.

‘We are looking at greater power for a smaller footprint and lower costs. It’s a never-ending battle to shave a few dollars off the cost, or to boost the power. The wind turbines, they are sixty dollars each, the solar panels – they are two hundred and fifty dollars for a six foot panel. The trick ... is to try and get those figures down.’

‘How many turbines have you sold?’ I asked.

‘We’ve made more than a hundred thousand of the latest specification. They mostly go to remote villages where you have built schools, but here in the Spirals we have them on every roof. They also power pool filters. My pool, you could drink the water.’ We didn’t test the theory.

That evening, we all dressed smart to attend a function, Lucy and Shelly looking gorgeous, and virtually no difference now between

them and their mum. In New Kinshasa, at a hotel, we stepped into the function, the local business leaders charitable ball. Many familiar faces greeted us, and I found Steffan Silo in an ill-fitting tuxedo, looking a little lost.

‘You enjoying yourself?’ I asked, stood with a drink in my hand.

He shrugged. ‘Part of the work, chat to people about projects.’

‘How’s the Angolan route?’

‘Very efficient; road and rail. And that port is doubling in size every six months.’

‘You involved in Southern Sudan?’

‘I designed a re-work of their rail links and yards. It’s almost finished.’

‘Did I read that the link to Zimbabwe is better?’

He nodded. ‘From here, the main highway goes south, and it just kept going. We couldn’t see a good place to end it, so kept the company on it. There’re electric buses that go all the way up and down, eighteen hours.’

‘So what’s your next big project?’

‘Mozambique. They want road and rail links improved, links into the Saudi enclaves. And a new highway from Nairobi north, and through Somali to the north.’

‘I had a hand in the design of the Chinese enclave for the Kenyan coast.’

He nodded. ‘I’m laying road and rail links for it; a short stretch to hit the main routes into Sudan. Chinese are talking to the Angolans about an enclave near the port we use.’

‘Oh, I hadn’t heard.’

‘Jimmy’s dealing with it. Russians want a warm water port in northern Somalia, so the existing naval base is being extended again. They’re going to put some of the Sebastopol fleet there.’

‘What was Jimmy like, growing up?’

Steffan took a moment. ‘Normal, I suppose. He changed when I was in university. Well, went and came back I guess, he doesn’t talk about it.’

‘You had the full drug?’ I enquired.

He nodded. ‘I do some exercise.’

I left the tall and not-so-charismatic gent, and mingled, soon finding Kimballa.

With a smile, he said, ‘I try to throw a good party, but your Mister Po and Mister Yuri - they dominate the party scene. They throw all the good parties and control it with a ruthlessness.’

‘Fine, let them. Your job is to throw the political parties, and to oversee the nations. If they all get along, then great.’

‘There are twenty thousand Americans here now, including the strange large men with the tattooed face.’

‘Hawaiians, yes.’

‘And many Chinese and Europeans. It is truly a cosmopolitan city, of one point four million people.’

‘What about old Kinshasa?’ I asked.

‘We convert the government buildings to offices or apartments, and make new industrial areas for jobs. It has not become a ghost town - as we feared.’

‘Good.’

‘May I ask, Mister Paul, how much the Americans owe us? Truly ... owe us?’

I took a moment. ‘If you included the shares we bought, over a trillion dollars.’

‘And those stocks, I watch them every day now. I check the DOW Jones each evening, and have charting software on my computer. We are ahead, are we not?’

‘The stocks are recovering, and we’re doing well.’

‘And this money will come back to us?’ he nudged.

‘It will,’ I assured him with a warm smile.

‘You were secretive about the amount of gold, Mister Paul, and you have shocked many people far and wide. The Democratic Republic of Congo is now considered a player, a major player, much to the consternation of Nigeria and South Africa, since we dwarfed them in one move.’

‘Timing ... is everything, Mister President. We waited for the right moment for maximum impact.’

‘Mister Jimmy tried to explain to me why the gold could not be used here.’

‘The Saudis take oil out of the ground, they have nothing else. If we took just gold out of the ground we’d be tied to gold prices, and when the gold ran out we’d collapse in a day. We need genuine jobs, genuine industries, internalised markets, and diversification. Or we’ll have no future when the ore runs out.’

‘Indeed a wise strategy,’ Kimballa noted.

Kimballa was right, we had become players in our own right, and everyone knew it. We had told former President Samuels that we’d help with forty billion dollars, and he had been shocked by that amount. Now, President Blake knew we had very deep pockets, and

many were quietly concerned; our pockets were deep enough to change the political map. The British Prime Minister had been staggered by the amount of money we employed, the Europeans concerned.

They also knew, they all knew, that people power had arrived, and it was firmly behind us. Any thoughts that any world leader may have had about undermining us were washed away. They were wary of us now, and afraid. Power had shifted, it had shifted towards Team Silo.

In Russia, their economy still suffering, we made the news with large-scale voucher use, some two million distributed per day during the winter and spring, now down to around half a million a day. The Russian people had known us before, we'd been popular, but now they were grateful as well. And we had targeted the poorer voters, not the rich few; we had addressed ourselves to the masses.

Jimmy had said, 'The thing that the rich people of the world most dislike, is that they only have one vote, and the unemployed guy has the same one vote. Democracy very inconveniently levels the playing field for them.'

Well, we had targeted the poor masses, gaining a great many votes – if we needed them. B.N.K. shareholders and former employees were trying to sue us, but we held enough of the old shares to block most moves against us. Besides, our US lawyers were arguing that we were foreign diplomats. It would drag on for years.

That summer was a good one, optimism high, and my family life reached a point of happiness and contentedness that I thought I had lost long ago. Shelly and Lucy came out with us often, and charmed everyone with their keen intellects. Helen and I enjoyed the partying and meeting people, and people loved meeting us. We welcomed new residents to the area each week, a resident's party always on somewhere, and Gotham City became exclusive. It became Beverly Hills, many rich Americans and Europeans moving across.

President Blake struggled along, on the phone to us often, but became more popular as the US economy started to turn around. Hardon Chase was being nudged by Jimmy to run for office again, especially in California, and he received ringing endorsements from Jimmy in public. Chase worked well with Brad, despite their differing political backgrounds, and California slowly dealt with the social burden of the displaced.

Bit by bit, Brad moved families to other states, thousands every week, and the social burden was eased. As US stocks climbed,

Kimballa carefully watching the charts, we sold stock in small blocks, often using the money to buy things we needed – but also trying buy them from California where possible. I bought two hundred Jetranger helicopters and allocated them to various police forces.

The development of the two Saudi enclaves and the Chinese enclaves boosted jobs globally, skilled workers brought in, international contracts allocated. Russia developed its naval base in Somalia, next to our original base, and drunken sailors of many nations frequented the bars on shore.

Jimmy dedicated a lot of his time to the base, having restaurants and bars built; Chinese, Indian, Thai and even Russian. A marina was built, complete with pontoons for sailboats, many a naval officer keen to be aboard a smaller vessel. Races were organised along national levels.

As autumn reached us, and I watched the leaves fall from the trees through my office window, the naval base in Somali grew as fast as New Kinshasa; naval ratings would now ask to be assigned there. A scuba centre was opened, firing ranges, assault courses and barracks.

The airfield inland had always been a military airfield, but now accepted planes off carriers on a regular basis. A Russian squadron of Migs turned up, at Jimmy's invite, a training squadron that made use of the Somalia ranges and its wide-open spaces. Fitted with cameras instead of guns and missiles, they would fly out and attack US F14s off carriers in simulated dogfights.

The British and French then complained, so an additional apron and dispersal was installed, more hangars, and European training squadrons moved in. When the airfield was increased in size again, the US Air Force put in two squadrons of its new, and much awaited, Joint Strike Fighters, the F35. Those aircraft sat in a dominant position in the Yemen Straits, and pleased the Joint Chiefs no end.

The Joint Chiefs then approached us and asked about a second base, a little further inland, and for B2 bombers that could reach around the Middle East.

'It'll be ready in a month,' Jimmy told them. He handed them a file, the new airbase having been constructed in secret in an isolated area over the past year. It already offered a suitable runway, all the concrete aprons and dispersals that they could desire, but hangars would be down to them. Barrack blocks had been built, a control

tower, an officer's mess, the works. The fence was already up and secure, Somali Rifles patrolling around the outside.

Splice the main brace

In November, we flew out to the joint naval base in Silo One, a direct flight. I'd never seen so many ships in one place, grey naval vessels from a dozen countries hugging a dozen concrete jetties. And their fuel, that came from us, from CAR wells near the Ethiopian border.

Whisked around to the joint naval command headquarters, we found offices labelled up by nationality, some of them common. In the common command centre, responsible for operations to catch small al-Qa'eda launches crossing the straits, we greeted the assembled officers in turn, a variety of languages used.

Jimmy then called a meeting. He tapped the table map, at the Sinai, with a pointer. 'Gentlemen. When 2025 arrives, we will consider the Sinai as critical. Here, there are two airfields; Sharm-el-sheik and Taba. I'd like plans made to seize them, soldiers in Hercules landing. But the problem is this: despite the very deep waters of the Red Sea, there is no suitable deepwater port available to your ships for re-supply – unless Eilat or Aqaba are used.

'Overland supply is out of the question, supply by air expensive. Building a deepwater port is out of the question, because a hundred yards offshore the water is a hundred metres deep. You, gentlemen, are the experts, so figure it out. Put an international working team together and ... be clever.

'Now, this base, and the nearby airbases, are isolated, and can be re-supplied by sea. There should be no future circumstances that I can think of ... where this base would be compromised. In the years ahead I would like to see the storage facilities improved, taking the view that this base would be important – and important for many years.

'It would also be a staging area for African soldiers ... if they were to be deployed into the Middle East for any future crisis. A handful of troop transporters should be here at all times. Now, around the coast is an area that I'm setting up as training range. You'll be able to pound it from your ships, bomb it in your planes, and assault it in amphibious craft to your heart's content.

‘We’re kindly supplying your ships with fuel, also your aircraft, so make the most of the free fuel and train your people in manoeuvres that involve typically Middle Eastern coastlines and deserts in the years ahead.’

The officers showed us around the command centre before buying us lunch at a nearby restaurant for officers only, the base now something of a small town. There were very few black faces here, most of the bases facilities organised by the various contributing nations. The idea was simple; if there are no locals working here, they couldn’t smuggle in a bomb.

After lunch, we strolled down to the marina, the off-duty sailors enjoying all modern conveniences here, including a Thai brothel and an Africa brothel, hidden away around the back. Since there was no risk of disease, attitudes had changed, and the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy was applying to many things around here. Squash courts were being constructed, tennis courts, a swimming pool. We noticed a small shopping area leading into the marina, the harbour side itself rammed with off-duty sailors sat enjoying the sun and the beer.

As soon as they saw us they stood, many walking over for a chat. We shook hands with those who extended a hand first, and I asked young Russian sailors about life on the ocean wave.

Finding a group of Brits, I said, ‘You lot are spoiled here.’

‘Fuck, aye,’ they said. ‘Shops, cafes, bars, sports, hookers, the fucking works, aye. This is the place most of us try and get a posting to.’

‘How’s the integration with the others?’ I asked.

‘Some keep to themselves, some like to chat. Not many speak the lingo, but there’s a few translators that wander around,’ a second rating informed me. ‘Besides, for football you don’t need the lingo. We play American football.’

‘Here?’

‘Well, we dress up in the kit, but use a round ball, beating the crap out of each other,’ they said with smiles.

I pointed at the sailboats. ‘Do you sail?’

‘Aye, had a go. Done a bit of diving as well. And you get some civvys coming in; they’re allowed to berth here for one day, unless they have a fault. Some stupid civvy had a problem the other week, and was towed in by a frigate!’

Another young sailor said, ‘All the officers go crazy over the sailboats; any excuse to be helping out the civvys.’

I greeted a group of Chinese and made them feel very welcome, a few French, and a loud bunch of US Marines. Seemed like every

which way I turned a t-shirt proclaimed a military unit of some kind. Wandering on, we tripped across the scuba centre and popped in, finding some odd equipment lying around.

‘Navy divers and navy SEALs come in regular,’ the British manager said, a PADI instructor.

‘How did you end up here?’ I puzzled.

‘I’m ex-Navy, and one of the command staff knew me, so asked if I would run the dive centre. We don’t charge much for the lads, but there’re lots of them wanting to dive, so it ticks over. And I get free food and board, live above the centre.’

‘Sounds like the life for a young man,’ I noted.

‘Well, maybe. But I’m divorced, and I doubt her solicitors could make it past the Somali Rifles.’

‘No,’ I agreed with a smile.

‘You mind if I ask a question?’

‘You can ask,’ I told him.

‘Any wars or problems going to affect a ten yard radius of where you’re standing in the next few years?’

‘No, none,’ I said with a smile. ‘But be gone by 2025.’

‘I won’t be here that long,’ he told me.

Jimmy stepped over. ‘Wife still chasing you, Rob. Best not tell her about the house you own in Somerset.’

The man stood rigid, wide-eyed and stunned. ‘Well I’ll be rogered sideways. How the hell do you know that?’

‘He’s a time traveller,’ I pointed out. ‘You figure it out.’

The various ship’s captains were keen to show us around their tubs, and we made a point of visiting one vessel from each nation. We eventually left at 2am, a little worse for the alcohol, and I made a note to ban Shelly from visiting the place.

End of year

The approach of 2018 saw a renewed optimism in many places, and Shelly had surprised us by not starting university this year. She was entrenched in her work in New Kinshasa and absorbed by the plankton. She also figured that she would learn little more in university.

Jimmy was surprised by the move, since he had been certain that she’d opt for a course in California. Well, there was always next year. For the moment, we saw more of her when we flew down, and

it was very hard to think of her as a teenage girl. She had her own circle of friends down here, a regular TV news slot, a dozen modelling assignments and her own security detail. But her room at the mansion still had the original sign pinned to it, a teenage girl's notice to her parents: Shelly's room.

We flew down before Christmas, the household "M" Group and my office team joining us, my team in a hotel. A review of my projects produced a few problems, in that we seemed to be producing way too much of everything. Agricultural production was so high that we exported it just to keep the prices here stable, North African states now benefiting from it. Zimbabwe had returned to being the breadbasket of Africa, and cereal crop production was astounding.

Population growth was a factor, with the supply of the drug and bountiful food, but we had hoped for a spike in population curve anyway. Africa no longer received either food aid or financial aid from overseas, and we began exporting surpluses to India and the Middle East.

In our own region, the bar charts and graphs relating to New Kinshasa were not a problem, they were just unexpected. One point four million people now lived in the city, and the current rate of building and immigration would put the city at two million within eight months. That immigration was being tightly controlled, and people could not just turn up. Still, it was growing quickly.

Looking at the map of the area, I ordered that the road to Forward Base be dotted with small towns to ease the pressure, and that a large suburb be built at the next highway roundabout below the southern airport, including shops and business offices. That gave me an idea, and I followed on by ordering a town to be built at each major junction, some six miles apart. Since there were mines to the south, I decided to extend that process, the towns being centres for workers.

With Goma International Airport getting busy, I ordered the southern airport expanded - for our regional aircraft to be located there; 737s and A320s. In future, if someone wanted to fly to Nairobi, they'd use the southern airport.

On the outskirts of new Kinshasa, I ordered tall office blocks built, aiming to have people work close to where they lived. The Saudis had proposed a number of buildings and hotels, and I agreed them all, but I moved the towers further southwest than they had asked for. Their planned five star hotel, however, would be just a half mile south of the marina.

Our influx of Hawaiians and Americans, including Americans unaffected by the tsunami, was having an effect on business. They had been offered loans at great rates, and most established businesses along the lines of those they had lost. They opened garages, computer businesses, and repair centres of all sorts. Many had been absorbed into teaching, especially the ladies, and young Africans were leaning English with a Hawaiian accent.

Kimballa found the Hawaiian culture fascinating, and ordered a social centre and church built for the community. Learning of the famous boat races and sea faring traditions, he had a large pond dug into a park, fifty yards wide and five hundred yards long. We flew over outrigger canoes and Dragon Boats, and local Congolese children could watch as the Hawaiians raced each other.

The Rifles officers noticed the races, and the odd wager was placed on Rifles soldier teams. Within weeks the races were being taken seriously, nations and units competing fiercely. Kimballa extended the course, now almost eight hundred yards long, roads preventing further expansion. The park's land was invaded in favour of this new spectator sport, the pond widened to accommodate four or six boats, depending on the type.

Hawaiian restaurants popped up, and imported pineapples and exotic fruits were soon being sampled by Congolese housewives, waitresses in grass skirts and coconut bras to be glimpsed in a few establishments.

Christmas went well, way too many presents bought by everyone and dished out, a series of parties thrown. French Michelle was still with us, but Jimmy appeared with a new squeeze on Christmas Eve, a leggy model. Shelly found her to be a kindred spirit straight away, and chatted at length about modelling assignments.

For New Year we lost many of the "M" Group as they headed home, and invited the Mawlini gang over. Mac's new young lady was six months pregnant, Mac set to be a father at seventy-three. He didn't look it. In fact, he had hardly changed in thirty years; still short, bald, tanned and ugly.

Anton and Cassie popped in with a tall daughter, the girl having grown around five feet since I saw her last. No sooner had they set-off to explore the city, than Anna, Cosy and Rudd turned up, but without their kids in tow. It was just the parents, the kids now adults and having their own lives, and in some cases – their own families.

Jimmy popped around to the TV station to deliver a rousing speech of hope at 8pm, New Year's Eve, and we all moved to the roof of the casino afterwards. It had been converted to a quality

rooftop bar, and would offer us a great view of the fireworks. Yuri and Po played host, the two men having been invited to some fifty parties.

‘We say Jimmy ask us come here,’ Po explained. ‘We can no be fifty places.’

‘So you’re saying ... that you’re here to avoid them, rather than to see us?’ I teased.

‘No, no, you family. But business important too.’

I wasn’t sure how to take that, but was distracted by Shelly’s new young man, a Hawaiian biochemist volunteer, a great combination for her. He was over six foot, well built, and caught Helen’s eye.

I asked the lad, ‘Are you the reason my daughter is not going to university?’

‘I hope not, sir,’ he replied.

‘How long have you been dating?’

‘I was seeing someone else when I met Shelly, but broke-up with that girl a month ago.’

‘You were unavailable. Well, bound to attract a girl that way; it drives them nuts.’

‘I keep thinking Shelly is older than me, way older.’

I lifted my eyebrows and nodded. ‘Don’t worry, I get that feeling as well. She still bosses me about. So, how did you end up here?’

‘My family was originally looking at New Zealand or Samoa, but we read about this place and saw the pictures, and decided to give it a go. We were allocated an apartment, and a basic welfare allowance – which goes a long way around here, and I wandered into the research centre one day. They made me welcome, made me a meal, and refused to let me leave.’

I laughed. ‘Press-ganged were you?’

‘Well, kinda given a large dose of motherly love and asked to stay on. Besides, I’m heading up projects here that I would never get to touch elsewhere. I even have a staff, and I’m twenty-two.’

‘Do you work with Shelly?’

‘Sometimes, but she can be a bit competitive. If I know something more in certain areas, she’ll sit up all night till she knows as much.’

‘So why haven’t we seen you around the house?’

‘I have an elderly gran to look after, and I work a lot.’

‘I would have figured that my daughter would have hired you a nurse for your grandmother.’

‘She did, but my gran prefers me.’

‘Well, I’m surprised Shelly tolerates your lack of time.’

‘Me too, sir.’

‘Mali,’ Jimmy offered the young man. I had not even asked the lad his name. They shook. ‘How’s your gran?’

‘Fine, sir.’

‘How did you know?’ I asked Jimmy.

‘I keep tabs on your daughters,’ Jimmy replied.

‘It’s a great honour to finally meet you,’ Mali offered Jimmy.

‘What about me?’ I teased.

‘Well, Shelly told me all about you, so I feel that I know you better, sir. Mister Silo is ... well, unique.’

‘So what does Shelly say about me?’ I pressed.

‘She’s quite proud of your work here, especially of the city.’

‘Oh.’ I glanced at Jimmy. ‘She’s never told me that.’

‘Fathers and daughters, sir; you can’t be a father and a friend.’

‘Very true,’ Jimmy put in.

Shelly stepped up.

I said, ‘I was just telling your young man here about the time you crashed your Hannah Montana golf buggy.’

‘Golf buggy?’ Mali repeated.

‘It’s a big estate,’ Shelly explained. ‘And I was ten.’

‘She rammed into the Deputy Director of British Intelligence,’ I pointed out. ‘Didn’t even leave her insurance details.’

Mali smiled. ‘I don’t get to hear much about your childhood,’ he told Shelly.

‘Well your gran tells me all about yours. Including the wearing of you mum’s earrings.’

‘Let’s agree not to discuss our childhoods,’ Mali suggested, Shelly leading him away.

Watching her go, I said, ‘She’ll be seventeen in a few weeks.’

‘Going on thirty,’ Jimmy added.

‘Should we be concerned that she’s not gone off to university?’

‘She’ll never need a formal qualification for what she’ll end up doing.’

‘Which is ... oceanography, yes?’

‘To start with, then other things. And no, I won’t tell you.’

The fireworks sounded the arrival of the New Year, and beyond them I could see the bright lights of New Kinshasa. To Helen, I said, ‘Shelly told her young man that she was proud of my work down here.’

‘I’m sure that she is,’ Helen responded. ‘You’ve achieved a lot. Even Jimmy says you’ve done a good job.’

‘What about you, babes. Are you proud of me?’

‘You’ve never let me down, or wandered.’

‘How do you know I’ve never wandered?’ I teased.

‘Jimmy promised to let me kill you if you did.’

I laughed. ‘No, he wouldn’t let you kill me - I’m part of his grand scheme. He has a role for me to play sometime later. But times like this, its easy to forget 2025.’

‘Nothing wrong with that, we’ve done enough; a quiet year will do us all some good.’

‘I think about Sanchez often, still pissed about that. He was a good man, a hell of a passion for helping people.’

‘Jimmy says that next year will be better,’ Helen told me. ‘And I’d like to spend more time down here.’

‘Fine by me, love. Does Jimmy want you back following him around?’

‘He said no.’

‘Oh. Well, this is where my work is. I’ll talk to him about it, but Lucy would -’

‘She’s asked about enrolling in a high school down here.’

‘Really?’

‘Besides, she knows more than the teachers.’

‘And she could fly more often,’ I noted. ‘Are you ... unhappy with the house in the UK?’

‘No, its just that we’re prisoners a lot of the time in the UK. Down here we can leave the house without being followed.’

‘Let’s chat to the oracle tomorrow. If my work’s the same, then here’s better than the UK, especially in the winter. And, both the girls would be close.’

I didn’t wait till the morning, I cornered Jimmy when Helen wasn’t looking. ‘Helen wants to live down here, at least be here more often.’

He nodded. ‘I had expected her to make that choice last year.’ He straightened and sighed. ‘If you don’t stay down here with her, then you’ll drift apart. Absence, will not ... make the heart grow fonder. You’re already on borrowed time.’

‘Things seem the same.’

‘They always do, till they change.’

‘And if we *are* down here more often?’ I nudged.

‘Then I’d guess that you would have a couple of years, unless you can come up with some miracle formula. And if you can do that, bottle it and sell it.’

‘I hadn’t thought about what you said, not for a long time.’ I lifted my gaze to the stars and sighed. ‘Best adjust my mindset a little.’

‘You’ve had a good run, more than most. More than me. Anyway, next year is an easy enough year. Stay down here, enjoy it while you can.’

K2 Book 7 is available from www.geoffwolak-writing.com

Magestic

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Part 17

Family. Goma, 2018.

Jimmy was happy enough for me to stay in Goma when he set off around the world, and I spent my days working on all things African. The cooperation group parliament, at the Pentagon building, received more of my time and I sent fewer emails; I visited people instead. Shelly's young man visited the mansion when he could, and Lucy enrolled at the University, surprising us. She passed the entrance exam, which didn't surprise us, and got stuck into a degree course on economics and politics half way through a term.

In February, both Ngomo and Abdi ran for President in their respective countries, and both received endorsements from Jimmy. With the other candidates dropping out, the pair were simply named President and got on with it. They would have won anyway, and with good majorities, but an endorsement from Jimmy was gospel around the region.

We attended both inaugurations, then sat the Presidents down and told them what we wanted - and how we wanted it done. Rifles officers took up posts in the new cabinets, and advisers were brought down from Europe to help out. Abdi checked the Somali finances straight away, and executed six people straight away. Ngomo punched a junior minister within a day of taking office, but then officially pardoned himself.

The President of Burundi was an ex-Rifles officer, as were most of the Defence Ministers in Africa these days. The new Presidents of Sierra Leone and Guinea were ex-Rifles, as were those of Malawi and Mozambique. We had the continent sewn up.

As things improved in the States, money came back from shares being sold, and the coffers filled. There was never a danger of us being short of money, but Kimballa was happier to see the money return for an African rainy day. Exports improved slowly, but much of our raw material was still being used internally, or being sold to the Saudis or Chinese as they built their enclaves.

Our international volunteers built their own factory to make electric buses, the ones that never stopped, and more of the oddly shaped buses could be seen on the roads of Africa. One young lad, a brain-trust Congolese lad, then built a sailboat, but I figured they had been invented already. His craft was a square boat, three hulls and five computer controlled sails. On days that were suitable it sailed the great rivers of the Congo, ferrying passengers in quiet efficiency.

Just to be a smart-arse, he programmed the boat to be captain free, and it followed the water's depths and currents. He put one on the lake, and it passed back and forth to Rwanda automatically. Albeit slowly.

I steadily bought dollars off any country other than the America, and used them to pay people in our region, the US Dollar now the official currency of the DRC. Seeing the size of the gold reserves that we now declared, Kenya, Tanzania, Somali and Southern Sudan switched to the US Dollar as their official currency. A dozen smaller countries followed, and Hardon Chase finally achieved his dream. We turned Haiti towards the dollar, that was easy enough, and the Saudis agreed not to consider dropping the dollar, not now.

I advertised in the US papers, and tempted another ten thousand Hawaiians to New Kinshasa, although most were non-ancestral. That then gave me an idea. I ran it past Jimmy and he just shrugged, making a face. I took that as a yes. Contacting the Madagascar Government, I enquired about an isolated area on the northern coast, and would they like to sell a strip to us - the corporation, a strip ten miles wide and five miles deep.

They were happy to sell the land, getting used to the Saudis in the south now, as well as used to the Saudi money. With the deal signed I gave the corporation the details, and told them to fence the land off, build a harbour and marina, and a small town. And quickly!

I then sent the Hawaiian elders in America a note to say that we had coastal land in Madagascar, and that we could settle people there, primarily ancestral Hawaiians. I asked if they could find families willing to help clear the land till it became suitable for further people.

Within a week I had six hundred families willing to give it a go, mostly because it was us, but they had also heard of the success of the Hawaiians in New Kinshasa. I paid their airfare and signed up the families, most living in self-assembly cabins to start with. When they asked what to build, I said 'Anything you like, you design it.' It took a week for other Hawaiians to realise that they could build anything they wanted, and more flocked to the area.

Things were going well around Africa, but al-Qa'eda reared its head in March. Terrorists hijacked a passenger plane in Yemen, the pilot managing to get out a distress call; that call being picked up by the naval base in northern Somalia. Fighters took to the air.

Contact was lost with the pilot, the plane's course, speed and altitude erratic, but seemingly heading towards the naval base itself. Ten miles short of the base the plane was being tracked by the

missile systems of no less than twenty ships and a dozen aircraft. The order to shoot it down was given by the base commander, the airliner crashing into the sea with the loss of eighty Yemeni citizens.

It was a disappointment, but also a good reminder of the dangers out there. I went for a walk down to the park, finding crocs sunning themselves and expecting a chicken or two. Staring at small fish being chased by larger fish, I thought about the years ahead, and about 2025.

The next day I tackled the African education problem, the problem of adult education. Anna came over with the Education Ministers of a dozen countries, and we reviewed both adult education - and the teaching of basic English. I offered to try and get more of the new American arrivals teaching English, and would advertise for them. In our region, the thirst that local people had for improving their English was amazing, and we now saw extra colleges being built all over.

I asked Anna to move the educational emphasis away from the villages till such time as the urban areas were satisfied, and arranged teachers for the mine workers hostels. Factories would also now offer classes after work.

In the months after New Year, 2018, Helen became more of a secretary to me than Jimmy, and took on board some of her own projects whilst scrutinising my diary and organising my time. Jimmy spent a lot of time flying around and giving speeches, and Helen and I enjoyed the mansion, many items requested from the old house and flown down. When the “M” Group were in attendance in Goma, poor old Cookie in the UK had little to do.

Family life was good, Liz a pleasure most of the time, her older sisters willingly helping out with the babysitting. Shelly and Mali, and Helen and myself, would often dine out together, Lucy having met a friend of Mali’s and hooked up. He was another tall lad, also studying in the university here, and at eighteen was not too old in our eyes.

Lucy’s interest in flying waned, as Jimmy had predicted, and she buried her nose in the books. She had caught up the half-term that she had missed, and filled in the gaps in her knowledge very quickly. The only thing she didn’t like about the university was the armed guard sat behind her all the time, even in the canteen.

Helen and I enjoyed the party scene, and since Christmas we had been out more than in the past ten years, often coming in late and tipsy. I was putting on weight because of it.

When Jimmy next visited he asked me to assist the Turkish and Jordanian economies, to help save any unrest there ahead of 2025. I sent an oil tanker to Turkey and offered future subsidised oil. That helped, and they were grateful for it, but I also struck a deal with a few European carriers to subsidise their flights to Turkey during the tourist season.

Considering 2025, and being a bit sneaky, I offered to fund two new airports in the east of Turkey, my thinking being that they could be used if necessary in any future conflict. I suggested they be placed near the coast to assist with potential tourism, the Turks delighted. I contacted the same French airport builders and commissioned the company for the expensive projects.

For Jordan I also sent oil tankers, but had to send cheap oil to Israel to stop them from complaining. Trying to be practical, rather than just a donor, I sponsored several housing projects in Jordan, as well as farm projects, and commissioned hotels for the Jordanian Red Sea coast and the Dead Sea coast.

Knowing about Jordan's uranium ore deposits, and the dangers of leaving it in the ground after 2025, I offered to buy regular amounts from the kingdom, the unprocessed ore to be stored at the Somali nuclear plant. When the Israelis complained, I said that I was removing the ore from use by The Brotherhood later on, to which they couldn't argue.

At the end of March, Helen and I returned to the UK, more for a visit than to live, and reclaimed our old house. It felt odd, the house oddly quiet even with Liz running around. We caught up with the gossip around the main house, Keely soon to be a father - in his sixties. My UK office team were still busy, but often produced summaries for Jimmy now. They were based here, in the UK, receiving information from the corporation in Africa, summarising it and sending it down to me in Africa. It seemed inefficient, but I couldn't put my finger on why.

When we had arrived back in the UK, Jimmy had allocated Helen and myself a few projects that were unrelated to Africa, and they held our attention for two weeks. I asked Jimmy about our residency in Africa, but he was happy enough to see me remain there - for now.

I had to stop and consider if he was leaving me there for practical purposes, or to save my marriage, a marriage that didn't feel in any danger of failing. I had to stop and consider if I was doing all I could towards 2025, and not being selfish. The next day I confronted Jimmy, and pressed the issue.

‘Paul, your ... future usefulness is not being affected - and won’t be affected - by a few years in Africa.’

‘But closer to 2025?’ I nudged.

‘Then things will change for you.’

‘So what can I be doing to ... you know, help more?’

‘Building up our region *is* a great help; you’re already doing most of what I need.’

‘But the other part?’

‘Start playing politician more - around the region, and include some of the North African states and the Middle East. Go right through Africa and make sure that all the various nations have the same policing and military agendas. You could start on South Africa, but they’re a pain to deal with at the best of times, and they won’t play ball with us. I always figured that we’d work around them.’

‘Botswana?’

‘Ask them nicely to join us; they already have a good society. Oh, Pakistanis here tomorrow, you and Helen in on the meeting. And get yourself some books: global economics, politics since the last war, the UN structures. Read them all at least once.’

I’d been given some homework.

In the morning, the Pakistani President and his delegation arrived, a convoy of limousines with police outriders. Jimmy welcomed them at the front door, leading them into the dinning room, our guests more reserved and businesslike than friendly. They were introduced to the household “M” Group, who then sat off to one side. The Pakistani delegation sat facing us, glances at the panel-like line up of “M” Group representatives.

‘Mister President, thank you for agreeing to meet with us,’ Jimmy offered.

‘We considered that it might be ... important, having received the invite without detail of the nature of the meeting.’

‘It’s the most important meeting any of you will ever attend,’ Jimmy told our guests. That got their attention.

‘I’m hoping that you’re not about to mention an earthquake in Pakistan,’ the President said.

‘What you’ll face ... is far worse than an earthquake.’

We had their attention; they looked horrified already.

Jimmy continued, ‘In the year 2025 there’ll be a problem, which leads on to widespread financial problems, a global financial collapse. As a direct result of that financial crash, many countries

will see civil unrest, protectionism in trade, the rise of nationalist leaders, and the rise of separatist movements and terror groups.

‘The economies of the Middle East will be hit particularly hard, leading to the rise of various terror groups based on existing groupings. One such group will inspire the poor and downtrodden Islamic masses to rise up. Unfortunately, their aim is not so much political as religious, and they’ll advocate the abolition of all modern technology. Such as ... electricity, telephones, and especially the use of oil.

‘They’ll desire a return to simpler times, and will massacre anyone who holds onto such technology, or who doesn’t join them. They will - at least they would have, found a willing audience in Afghanistan, which is why our forces are there. Second, they *will* ... find a willing audience in your tribal regions. Unless the near future is altered, gentlemen, then by 2027 you’ll be fighting a full-scale war at a time when your economy is in tatters.

‘You *will* ... lose that war, and anyone with an education will be massacred. That in itself ... should concern you enough. But you’re a nuclear state and, as such, those around you - and in the wider world - would not allow your nuclear arsenal to fall into the hands of a terror group. If I was to hazard a guess, then I would say that as soon as you start fighting this group, and start losing ground, that you would be hit with a pre-emptive strike using advanced weapons that I’ve designed using future technology.’

‘A strike ... by The West?’ they asked, horrified by the idea.

‘A strike ... by a coalition of forces, using advanced weapons. Your nuclear facilities would be destroyed and irradiated so that your nuclear arsenal could not fall into the hands of the terrorists, something that I’m sure you don’t want any more than anyone else. Now, gentlemen, I told the Americans about Hawaii, and they didn’t really pay attention. If *you* fail to pay attention, you’ll lose everything. You’ll lose your country.’

‘What exactly are you suggesting that we do about it?’ the President loudly asked.

‘That you cooperate with us to prepare, obviously,’ Jimmy replied.

‘Prepare ... how?’

‘First, you must consider that a terrible global financial downturn will strike in 2025. Take whatever measures you can up to that point. And ... re-organise your armed forces to consider the nature of the threat from your tribal areas. Cooperate with us on disarming or killing gunmen in your tribal regions, especially closer to 2025.

And cooperate with us and India by looking for cost savings, by reducing the overall spend on your military.

‘If you’re willing to look effectively at reducing the size of your military - in a treaty with India, then we’ll look at financial assistance for you. You’ll save money on your military, *and* you’ll gain financially from us.’

‘And what would be India’s role in 2025?’

‘When your tribal Taliban groups start to attack India, India will attack you. You’ll have a war on two sides,’ Jimmy explained. ‘But India already knows about this problem, and they’re not keen to see you diminished since you’re an effective buffer for them – so long as you’re still an effective functioning government. They’ll be happy to see you throw away your soldiers holding the line for a year or so and then - you might say - they’ll be happy to see you completely destroyed. Unfortunately for India, they’ll be next in line. They know that, so they’ll cooperate with you towards a common goal.’

‘You’re not painting a very good picture for our chances of survival!’

‘You don’t have a good chance of survival. But I’m giving you the courtesy of this warning, and giving you a way out. I don’t think you’re smart enough to take it, but the offer is there anyway. As with some of the Hawaiians, you’ll sit in your houses till they’re destroyed, dying in ignorance.’

‘And this ... way out?’

‘First, you have to believe my prediction. Second, you have to consider future generations of Pakistanis, and put them ahead of your own careers and popularity. Third, you should do what I say, exactly what I say, and when I say it. If not, I’ll supply certain armies with advanced weaponry and you’ll be hit hard. You won’t see it coming, and you won’t be able to defend against my weapons.’

‘We’re well aware of the attack on Tehran,’ they said, making it a complaint.

‘That was a tap on the shoulder,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘If the Iranians succeed in developing a nuclear weapon, I’ll end their existence in the blink of an eye.’

Our guests glanced at each other.

‘On the way here I was worried about an earthquake,’ the President glumly noted. ‘Now I’d swap for the earthquake.’

‘You *will* be hit by a quake, the damage extensive,’ Jimmy added. ‘And at an inconvenient moment.’

‘The Saudis are worried, very worried,’ the President mentioned. ‘And they are nudging us to cooperate with you as well. These Saudi locations in Africa -’

‘Enclaves to hold their people when they run like hell from the terror groups. But that’s a private matter, so don’t mention it to anyone. They ... are listening and preparing.’

‘If the Saudis are worried, then so should we be,’ the President thought out loud. ‘And if we cooperate ... you can fix the problem?’

‘If you do everything I ask, you’ll have a fifty-fifty chance. Fail to cooperate, and your chances are nil.’

The President again glanced at the “M” Group panel. ‘And can we expect assistance from anyone?’

‘You can expect assistance from a great many countries,’ Jimmy told him.

‘We’ll need time to think, and to discuss this.’

Jimmy took out a sand-timer, placing it on the desk. ‘Take a look at the sand. In a few short years, you and your people will be nothing but sand blowing in the wind, just a memory of a nation that once was. Hawaii still has a peak above water, you won’t even have that, gentlemen.’

With our shocked visitors gone, Jimmy held a household “M” Group meeting. ‘If they don’t cooperate, then in January 2026 I’ll be asking for an EMP strike followed by a nuclear strike, because what the Pakistani Government doesn’t know, is that many of its people will welcome The Brotherhood, and once that process has begun in Pakistan they’ll be no stopping it. In Afghanistan, I’ll be ordering the massacre of males eighteen to forty in many places.’

‘Jesus,’ Keely let out.

‘2025 is creeping closer, so don’t lose focus,’ Jimmy told them. ‘When the battle starts, we’ll all be in the fight of our lives.’

Splitting up

Helen and I returned to Goma, and we returned to the business of growing African GDP, a task that seemed far simpler than dealing with global politics.

That following week I watched as Northern Italy tried to break away from the south, as Belgium effectively split into two nations, and as parts of Spain discussed breaking away. The recession was

having an effect, the various regions figuring that they could do better by themselves. They couldn't. Jimmy knew that and waded in with harsh comments, helping to sway many voters in referendums.

Mexico started to fall apart thanks to its drug cartels, and Jimmy became involved. Despite America's reservations, we put Rifles on Mexico's border with Guatemala, also in Panama, and in Colombia itself. War had been declared on the drug trade, Rifles style.

The Colombians had been suffering greatly in recent years, and the offer of financial assistance from us was readily accepted. We by-passed a US delegation in Colombia, the US working on their own ideas about how to stem the drug trade.

Colombia had been drilling oil since the Second World War and offered numerous small oilfields, all subject to the odd attack by FARC guerrillas. We had previously done a good job of wiping out much of the FARC leadership in the east, but their members were spread far and wide. We would now give it another go. We put a thousand Rifles on the ground in Colombia, acting as independent units to protect oil fields, and to set traps. Offshore, we placed Russian, Chinese and European naval vessels to help create a picket line.

As soon as the deal with Colombia had been struck, we dispatched by ship a hundred thousand individual household wind turbines, a thousand water turbines – each capable of powering four hundred homes, and fifty thousand solar panels. When the TV news in the region started to show housewives extolling the virtues of free electricity, everyone wanted our toys.

We sent the modified German turbines over, fifty of them, and they were soon providing small towns with free electricity. A Bogotá factory was then selected and taken over, the Colombians shown how to make the efficient household wind turbines for themselves. From Zimbabwe, we exported grain to the coast and across to Colombia in huge ships, thousands of tonnes delivered at subsidised rates.

With the hearts and minds of the people won over, and the government happy enough, Colombian police officers and soldiers moved out of certain areas known for drug growing, and the Rifles moved in. Where the Rifles found either marijuana or coca growing the crops would be destroyed, traps set. Anyone returning to the crops would disappear.

The Guatemalan and Panamanian borders were now sealed tight, and both the people traffickers and drug traffickers were not happy, gunmen sent to the border to attack the Rifles. It was not the best

thought out plan, and hundreds of gunmen were duly dispatched to the local cemetery.

The American border unit had never gotten off the drawing board, and we figured we'd work around President Blake. Soon after, at the Mexican/Guatemalan border, a notorious drug gang attacked a police station and killed several officers. Acting independently, a Rifles office offered to assist. Everyone knew who the drug lord was, but getting evidence - and then getting near him, was the problem.

The Mexicans could not see how the Rifles could assist, and refused the assistance. A week later, the local news station was reporting that the drug baron had disappeared, along with fifty of his men. No sign, no trace, prostitutes at the man's villa claiming they fell asleep, and when they woke everyone had gone.

On the opposite coast another drug lord disappeared, a little future technology deployed, a special knockout gas developed by the brain-trust kids, the same gas was being used with great effect in the Colombian hills and mountains. Suspect villas would be targeted, Rifles in respirators simply walking in after an hour and searching around. If they found nothing they moved on, but if they found something interesting they called the federal police, who made televised arrests of confused people just waking up.

Boosted by that success, the Colombians allowed more Rifles in, and we soon had eight thousand men on the ground, having been only permitted to land just four thousand. Hell, they all looked alike.

In Afghanistan, Jimmy gave the order to eradicate all poppies, and to hell with the locals. The Rifles got to work, and the street price of heroin in Europe rocketed. In the States, marijuana was now legal and they grew their own, something else that put pressure on the drug barons of Central America. Jimmy approached Bolivia next, the country ranked number three in the world for cocoa growing after Myanmar in Asia. We offered financial assistance, soldiers, and coal-oil technology - a deal too good to pass up.

As Bolivia received units of Rifles, we entered into talks with the Myanmar regime who, despite maintaining a very large army, seemed powerless to control the nation's drugs trade. CAR already operated oilrigs in two locations off the Myanmar coast, and we enjoyed a limited working relationship with the paranoid regime. We offered wheat and money, and they grudgingly allowed us to invade a small corner of their country.

The locals fiercely defended their coca crops and were cut down in large numbers, the crops destroyed. A chemical was utilised,

another invention of the New Kinshasa volunteers, and it would prevent re-seeding. Global drug prices were soon rocketing.

We knew that the drug war was not a war we could ever win, and that the farmers would move across borders and set-up elsewhere, but we did have an effect. Meanwhile, on the Mexican border, the drug lords were killing each other for an increasingly small share of a shrinking drug trade. With revenues falling, the hired gunfighters could not be paid, and sloped off to do other things.

As the months passed I watched remotely, but with keen interest, as we tackled the drugs trade, but I was also watching with less-than-keen interest as various nations tried to split apart. Separatists groups sprung up in many places, claiming an ancestral right to various bits of land in Asia, and fighting broke out.

A few regions were offered limited autonomy, but others just sank into despair and anarchy, their previously lucrative tourist trade ruined. Northern Italy now enjoyed limited powers, the rich northerners wishing to break away from the poor south, not least because of the crime rate in the south. The Ukraine started to split along ethnic lines, Russian speaking or native Ukrainians. Problem was, the Russian Black Sea fleet was still in Sebastopol in the Crimea, the local population mixed. Part of that fleet had found a happy home in Somalia, free fuel supplied by us, but Sebastopol threatened to explode into civil unrest.

Macedonia struggled with its ethnic Albanians, and Hungary and Bulgaria both faced a redrawing of their borders. The Russian Caucasus were still smouldering, and Islamic extremists there continued to set-off bombs on a regular basis. In the Baltic States, Jimmy waded in heavily when ethnic Russians were discriminated against, but also offered resettlement grants if those ethnic Russian speakers wished to go and live in Russia itself. Since job prospects were better in Russia than the Baltic States at the moment, many took up the offer.

At home in Goma - and the mansion was now starting to feel like home, things were great. Shelly and Lucy were close by, albeit studying a great deal of the time, and I never thought I'd be annoyed that my kids studied too much. Liz was growing rapidly and a real handful, her favourite word being 'no'.

Stateside, Brad was doing well, settled into the job, and things were improving on the west coast. In reality, things were bad on the west coast, but *less bad* than they had been before. Houses had been

cleared of sand in Los Angeles and people were moving back in, thanks more to the volunteers than federal or state workers. Venice Beach was indeed a beach again.

Overall, the US economy was flat, but that was better than where it had been. Stocks were climbing slowly, gold below two thousand dollars an ounce, and people power continued to grow. The Ark expanded right across America, and volunteer groups continued to give their time to renovate derelict houses. There was also a strange reverse migration going on, recent African immigrants returning to Africa for what they now saw as better job prospects, relatives contacting them to ask them to return from America.

I became involved when I read an article about it, and offered free flights and relocation grants back to certain countries, and more than ten thousand took us up on the offer within weeks of the launch of the project. 'Exodus', the American press were calling it, and were also calling it a few choice names as well, since Africa was a pull for jobs, homes and security these days – more so than the States for some Africans. The opposition used it as a big stick with which to beat the nice man in the White House.

I laid on extra planes for the returning children of Africa, the human cargo filmed at the airports, and a wake-up call for the man in the White House. In reality it was good for the States, because homes were being freed up, the social burden on the various states being eased – but it was not seen that way.

Politics

Following Jimmy's advice I had bought a pile of books and set about reading them; economics, world history, politics. And, when stuck, I asked Lucy. Many an evening over a cold beer we would argue about politics and economics, macro and micro.

Also in line with Jimmy's advice, I travelled to the various African capitals more often and made a point of getting involved with local issues. Jordan and Turkey also became regular contacts, and I even visited Saudi Arabia. But I kept getting gentle nudges from Jimmy to improve Jordan's economy, but to do so in secret. I shipped the Jordanian authorities more oil than the Israelis believed I shipped, and more wheat than I declared to Jordan's inquisitive and ever watchful neighbour.

Our UK property company had already built hotels on the Jordanian stretch of Red Sea coast, and I subsidised a certain number flights from Europe to Aqaba. The Jordanian desalination process was going well, their uranium ore extraction increasing, and their farms were expanding. After Jimmy had tapped a particular region of a map for me, I secretly funded the building of almost thirty new apartment blocks in Jordan, many more again in Egypt, on Egypt's northeast coast near Gaza.

The Red Cross, assisting Palestinians in that region of Egypt, received anonymous funds, and less than anonymous grain deliveries from Zimbabwe, plus food from our region. When the news of that leaked I thought, "fuck it", and shipped enough subsidised food to Jordan to make them all fat.

The net effect was that the trickle of Palestinians that left the occupied territories grew. It became more than a trickle because homes and food were available across the borders, safe from Israeli air strikes. The Israelis could see it, and must have been delighted, but they were being oddly quiet about it. I didn't know it at the time, but they had asked Jimmy for a loan, and he was 'considering it.'

When Egypt complained that Palestinians were crossing over in larger numbers as a result of my efforts, I sent the Egyptians themselves food, and a little money towards their Palestinian refugees.

Now that I was actively involved in the region, I read up on the history of the Middle East conflict, but it was not actually a Middle East conflict; it was an Israeli-return conflict. But I couldn't actually find where the country known as Palestine had come from. It seemed that the Romans coined the phrase, but to cover a wider area than just the modern disputed land – occupied by the Israelis at the time. The crusaders used the phrase, but at a time when the land was mostly just frequented by nomads. I determined that the Philistines were more Greek than Arab or Jew, but that the link was weak at best, the Philistines being more accurately located in Lebanon, and never having moved off the coast.

Other than during Roman or British rule, I could not see a time when a nation state called Palestine ever existed; no defended borders, no currency, no separate language. They spent most of their time being occupied by either the Persians or the Ottomans, and could not actually point to a time in history when the area was free of invaders, one of the longest holders of the lands being the pre-Christian era Israelis. After the Israelis, everyone had a go at the land.

I could not find any references to the land ever being an independent state under local rule after the Israeli Diaspora, and started to wonder what the fuss was about. I did, however, like the ancient Roman soldiers slogan for the region, loosely transcribed in “that troublesome toilet of a region”. Seems that Roman soldiers avoided postings there. It hadn’t changed much in two thousand years, today’s peacekeepers not wanting to be there either.

Helen was good with history and politics and would help out when I had a question, and the question of right of ownership was a current hot topic, many countries trying to split apart because their grandfathers had spoken a different language. In Africa, I was proud that English was the norm, and we taught English wherever we could. We were trying to melt the tribes and borders into one, the rest of the world wanting to break itself apart into small regions. The Flemish area of Belgium could be walked across in an afternoon, yet they now exercised limited independence from the French speakers.

In Africa, I had a simple way of dealing with separatists; I’d have them shot and buried. It cut short a long conversation.

India had long suffered Maoists separatists, and I had put pressure on China to disown the guerrillas. It had been a long time since the Chinese had tried to assist the Maoists, and the rebels could be seen carrying weapons they pinched from the Japanese in Burma at the end of the last war. A little nagging persuaded the Indians to allow the Rifles in, and a unit of just two hundred Pathfinders landed in the southeast of India, close to the Bangladesh border.

Twenty members of the Indian commando unit that we had sponsored and trained tagged along, and would act as local guides. The group’s remit was simple: shoot anyone with a rifle in their hands, and the Indian government would deny all involvement. Or they’d blame us!

Our soldiers split into smaller groups and strung out in a line north to south, a giant spider’s web. And waited. They didn’t have to sit quiet for long, soon noticing rebels walking brazenly along with their dated weapons over their shoulders. Engaging and killing the first half of a Maoist patrol, the Pathfinders allowed the remainder to flee, hoping that they’d report the incident and its location. Additional Pathfinder units moved closer, and a few days later a larger rebel unit approached, almost two hundred men. Less than a dozen escaped with their lives, the remainder buried, or simply dumped into rivers and steams.

That resulted in the ideal scenario for us, a large mobilisation of card-carrying book thumping Maoist rebels. The remaining

Pathfinders set traps, and deliberately chose a single hill from which to fight. It gave the impression that it could be surrounded and laid siege to.

The Sunday afternoon Maoists turned up as a rag-bag army, but there were hundreds of them. They surrounded the hill and launched their attack with dated weapons, only a handful surviving. That night, under cover of darkness, the Pathfinders split in two and moved north and south, looking for new trade, and planning on staying a while.

Summer

Jimmy joined us in June, needing a rest from endless travelling. He reviewed the deployments of Rifles around the world with Abdi and Ngomo, and even agreed to place Rifles on the Yemen/Saudi border, satisfying a request from the Saudis.

The Pakistanis had agreed to try and follow our route map, and talks would go ahead with the Indians, the Americans and Saudis present, the Africans hosting the talks. We agreed that the Pakistani Army should not try to enter the tribal regions, and that the combined force in Afghanistan would creep across the border and “disarm fighters”. The Pakistanis knew what that meant, so did we; but the Pakistanis also knew that our people did not get seen or caught, and that no evidence would be left behind. But, most of all, they knew that we’d get the blame, not the Pakistani authorities.

That deal had earned the Pakistanis several large oil tankers and huge grain ships, and Big Paul received his coded orders. He also received more men, many of them American, Russian and Chinese, men trained in the combined units near Mawlini in Kenya, and in the Somalia hills.

‘We suck the puss out the wound,’ President Ngomo had said about the strategy.

Ngomo had, technically, less power than the Kenyan Prime Minister and cabinet, but everyone knew who was really calling the shoots. And these days, the new President of the cooperation group often had the last word.

Jimmy would spend a lot of time with the volunteers in new Kinshasa when he was around, either reviewing projects or issuing

new ones. Locally, we not only had the brain-trust kids to call upon - all four hundred of them, but we had another twelve thousand people behind them.

In Russia, a largely non-political self-help group had been formed, and they sometimes met at the coffee shops. Their aim was to help those Russians that qualified for food vouchers, but they also took onboard research projects for Jimmy. Brad's group was now coast to coast in the States, and he maintained close links with it and its international arms. With a massive army of volunteers, or low paid helpers, a great deal was getting done on the cheap.

The displaced Hawaiians had created their own website, a kind of Friends Re-united, but just for Hawaiians. That kept them in touch with the Hawaiians in our region, their numbers having grown considerably. It also kept them in touch with the new Hawaiian colony in Madagascar, now home to an additional twenty thousand people. A harbour had been built there, plus two marinas, both of which started earning a small amount of money from sailboats docking.

Inland, the Madagascar colony cut down trees and made log cabins, they laid roads, and created small dams for water storage. I sent them German turbines for electricity, plus thousands of the small wind turbines. We had paid for an oil-fired power station, and now shipped down the oil. That power station was wired up to the nearby towns, and cheap electricity was soon being sold to the locals, a surplus produced for the colony itself.

In a chat with a USAF General, I asked if he wanted a base on Madagascar, and dropped a hint that it would create local jobs - for Americans! Oh, and we'd pay for most of it. Since we were building an airport anyway, we could kill two birds with one stone. He sent the idea up the line.

President Blake finally approved the base, since it would cost little and create jobs. It would also allow the USAF to dominate the Mozambique Channel; we had a green light from the nice man in the White House. I contacted the Hawaiians and sold them the idea, since they were not a hundred percent keen on things military.

Northeast of Madagascar, the Chinese had built a deepwater port in southern Sri Lanka, but had been asked by us to extend the port to include a base for naval vessels of many nations, a smaller version of the base in Somalia. With the new port in northern Madagascar, the existing Somali base and the existing facilities on the island of Diego Garcia, the India Ocean was sewn up.

Summer in New Kinshasa saw Dragon Boat racing on the lake, a course some five miles long. Mali would take part when he had the time, and Shelly was still at his side, something of a surprise for Helen and myself. Another surprise, for Jimmy, was that Helen was still at my side. When we chatted late at night over a beer, he said that he couldn't quite explain it. The arrival of Liz had been a factor, the move down here another, and even Hardon Chase had assisted my marriage – albeit indirectly. Instead of us going head to head with the White House for eight years we had enjoyed a relatively easy time.

All of these factors must have had an effect, and Jimmy and I were both glad that they did. I didn't wander, and I never felt like wandering, I was happy with my home life. Many a late night would be whiled around the patio under the stars, chatting away with various people, Shelly and Lucy bringing their boyfriends back to the house.

But Jimmy said an odd thing, something I had never considered, in that Helen had never really developed any close friends. Well, given the lifestyle, none of us could. We had been close to a few other parents back in the UK, but never managed to maintain friendships for long because of all the travel.

Jimmy suggested that Helen's thoughts of leaving might have been curtailed by a lack of outside support, or girlfriends to discuss me - and my marital conduct - with. I wasn't sure if I quite liked that idea, the idea that she was here with me because being somewhere else was too much of a hassle.

At bedtime that evening, I said to Helen, 'Do you think we'll stay together? You know, when we're old and grey?'

'What's brought this on?' she puzzled.

'Something Jimmy said.' I decided to be bold. 'He accidentally let slip that he was surprised we were still together.'

'I'm ... surprised he doesn't know what we'll do.'

'He has no knowledge beyond 2030 apparently,' I reminded her.

'No, but to say that *now* ... he means *now*.'

'Are you unhappy about anything?' I nudged.

'Well, off and on over the years.'

'Like...?'

'Well, when Jimmy first revealed who he was I felt like a prisoner for a long time. Then, later, I realised that the intelligence services wouldn't leave me alone, even if Jimmy let me go. After the kids were born, things were much better...'

'But...?'

‘Well, as I said before, the press in the UK get me down; we’re prisoners.’

‘Those are all outside things. What about us? You ... and me.’

‘I’ve not thought of leaving you for anything you’ve done, if that’s what you mean.’

‘Have you ever thought of leaving?’ I pressed.

‘Yes, but not in the way you think. I often used to think that I’d like to run away and hide, to have a normal life, to be anonymous.’

‘That’s OK, I get those thoughts sometimes.’

‘So ... Jimmy is surprised that we’re still together?’

‘Yep, but things are different, more has gone well for him. And this house was never supposed to have been built.’

‘No?’

‘No, apparently.’

‘If we were still in the UK, and things had been worse, then I can imagine wanting to be away, but that would be away from everything, not just you,’ she said.

‘But don’t forget, the marriage license says you have to give me thirty days notice,’ I joked.

‘I do kind of see us getting old together, assuming we survive.’

‘We could live to be three hundred, love. We might get on each others nerves by then.’

‘God, that’s a long time. What would we talk about?’

‘Well, let’s review it after the first hundred years, then see, eh.’

We didn’t talk about it again, and I figured we’d review it - but after 2025.

Lucy spent plenty of time with us during her summer break, Mali and Shelly off to Somalia to join a research vessel. Our green plankton slick was growing, and the Chinese had seeded their coastal waters, keen to burn fossil fuels with less criticism. Both ocean plumes could be seen from the International Space Station, which was now dominated by Russia and China, no sign of a Space Shuttle anywhere, not even on a drawing board.

Autumn

As my computer calendar turned to September we were still at the mansion, no thoughts of the UK. New Kinshasa had grown by another quarter million people, and additional mono-rails were being

installed. I continued to be involved in all things African, and the regions GDP continued to grow strongly.

Big Paul paid me a visit, on his way to some secret training base, and gave me the low-down on Afghanistan. The international soldiers had moved to the Pakistani border, then across, setting ambushes - and basically just killing anyone carrying a weapon. Bases were set-up in plain sight, traps set, the local fighters keen to attack. The body count was high, which led to more fighters attacking the tempting visible camps, only to be slaughtered by the hidden snipers.

The aim in the Pakistani tribal regions was the same as for Afghanistan: to remove any men keen for a fight. Those that held down jobs or tilled the fields were left alone, those that picked up a weapon and attacked a base were killed. We planned on staying right up to 2025, absorbing any fighters. And, during 2025 itself, making a big effort to cut a line from the Chinese border, through Afghanistan and down the Iranian/Pakistani border to the Gulf. Jimmy said that it would be an important line, and that it would be held at any cost.

Winter approached, and we visited the UK as a family, returning to our old house. Being there together felt odd, and Shelly decided she didn't like her cottage any more; she opted for one of the hotel-style rooms in the main house. Liz hardly recognised the place and wandered around looking at things that seemed oddly familiar somehow.

We re-acquainted ourselves with Cookie and Sandra, Sharon and her daughter, and the security staff. In some ways it was good to be back, and I took a walk down to the first house with Jimmy. His mother and aunt were both now dead, the house the sole domain of the security staff. It seemed smaller than I remembered, much smaller, but was a mansion when we had first arrived here from the London apartment.

The security lads had built their own bar in a lounge and now pulled us pints, and we sat staring at a familiar stone fireplace, almost thirty years since I saw it first.

'Where do the years go?' I asked. 'When I arrived here I hadn't even met Helen.'

'When you arrived here you were with Judy, about to start seeing Katie Joe.'

'Fuck, that was a long time ago.'

'Try being me.'

I took a moment, facing him. ‘Is it hard to keep going sometimes?’

‘Very hard, sometimes. I felt like blowing my brains out a few times, but never more than one or twice a week.’

I smiled. ‘Are we on track?’

‘We’re more than on track, and well placed, and the next few years are not particularly difficult. I’m hoping that Brad will knock President Blake out of the White House, and then we may have a clean shot at 2025. Africa is doing much better than I expected, and part of that is down to you. If the US economy turns up ahead of time we could use the money to boost Africa significantly.’

‘So what headaches do we have ahead?’ I asked.

‘OPEC has been dealt a blow. They’re not thinking of dropping the dollar, they’re thinking about snuggling up to us instead. And getting the Saudis on board – I can see the sense in that now. It’s ... given me a few ideas, a few new directions. Hardon Chase was the best bit of luck, his desire to carve his name in stone gave us a boost. And his investments in Africa should never have been there.’

‘So we’re better positioned for 2025,’ I realised.

‘Better in many ways, but it’s a hell of a tangled web to undo. It has many components, any one of which could go wrong, and I can’t fix them till they do go wrong. Many of the world leaders think they can surround the Middle East and bottle it up for decades – which is crazy.’

‘And if we sent the Rifles in?’ I asked.

‘They’d have to kill every able-bodied male from seventeen to fifty-five, and that massacre would obviously start wars outside the region. No, first The Brotherhood need to rear up and get people frightened, then we can act. But by then they’ll already be moving. And that will happen at a time when the world economy has gone to shit.

‘So, between now and then we need more clean coal-oil, more electric cars and buses, and an expansion of oil fields outside of the Middle East. Problem is, if we open those taps too early we cause the Middle East states to fail ahead of time. We need to discover the oil, tap it, and leave it under the ground ready. Oh, I’ll be floating CAR in a few months.’

‘It’ll be a big player,’ I noted.

‘World’s largest company. We’ll probably keep the voting shares as they are for now, issuing “B” shares that pay dividends – probably at two dollars to start with. I’ll sell the Saudis three percent of the voting shares, and give Cuba three percent.’

‘Why Cuba?’ I puzzled.

‘They have more oil than they realise, and it’ll be important after 2025. And I’m going to give CAR a development loan of fifty billion, zero percent interest over a hundred years.’

‘It’s a gift then.’

‘CAR has a role to play, an important one.’

‘I figured that when you created it,’ I mentioned.

‘Didn’t figure the coffee shops.’

‘No, I was a bit slow there,’ I admitted. ‘Will you need to beat up the Russian Government?’

‘On some issues, nothing major.’

‘Any problems in The West?’

‘Fraud will become a big issue, people less concerned about living a long time; they’ll live for the moment and raid the bank’s computer system. Especially now that people are focused on 2025 – and rumours of impending doom.’

‘Yeah, I suppose. Why build up your savings if the frigging world is coming to an end?’

We wandered slowly back up to the main house after our nostalgic visit, chatting about the floatation of CAR.

Helen and I headed back down to our home in the sun, and I reclaimed my seat by the pool, and my cold beer, another million emails to go through.

But a week later bombs started to go off in Ethiopia and Somalia. PACT were mobilised en masse and descended on the area, Jimmy informing me that the bombers were the forerunner to The Brotherhood. Concerned at that, I gave PACT a firm kick, and visited their offices often. Money was used to recruit Ethiopian double agents and sleeper agents, large bribes offered, and some initial successes resulted in the capture of a few key players. The men were duly interrogated by the Somali Rifles, and soon giving up the names of others.

As winter neared, not that we noticed much of a change of season in Goma, the Rifles were spread far and wide, engaged in conflicts in many regions. The Maoist rebels in India were being thinned out rapidly, the Myanmar drug lords were being shot to pieces - their crops destroyed, and in Bolivia and Colombia drug growing was becoming an even more dangerous horticultural pastime.

In Mexico, our Pathfinder units were now being supplemented by Americans who had fought in Afghanistan. Drug lords would be identified, knockout gas employed, the premises searched without a

shot being fired, the slumbering gunmen stepped over. Where necessary, whole villages were hit with an EMP to stop people warning of impending police raids.

Buoyed by these successes, the Mexicans agreed a wider programme, and Jimmy sent more money. Our teams cleaned-up the Mexican/Guatemalan border and moved north, soon the first unit of Americans on their own border, but just on the Mexican side. In some small towns, whole neighbourhoods were hit with EMPs before being sent to sleep to enable searches.

The knockout gas took a few hours to take hold, making people feel drowsy, and eventually knocking them out for eight hours without side effects; deaths from the gas were rare. That gas was also colourless and odourless, and if a villa was hit at 3pm then everyone yawned and took a nap, but didn't wake up when the police battered down the doors.

The initial raids netted hundreds of assault rifles and large amounts of the precious, and increasingly scarce drugs. The drugs were destroyed on-site, cash removed, the weapons sent to Africa for the Rifles to use or train with. President Blake claimed some of the credit and we backed him up on it, America commandos now being seen in Mexico.

North of the border, the price of cocaine had quadrupled, and that was when you could find it. Addicts were going short. Since many were being injected with the super-drug, their addictions were being lessened anyway. The war on hard drugs had finally turned, marijuana now the most popular recreational drug in the States, and now both legal and licensed in many states - a one hundred billion dollar annual trade. At least the dealers paid tax.

In the space of a few months the people of Mexico had become jubilant, and with each new success we increased the number of Rifles in the country. Suspect villas would be hit with EMPs, then the gas, finally stormed by men who would have succeeded even if the occupants had been awake.

Thailand had been watching Mexico closely, the nation suffering a heavy social and financial burden at the hands of its addicts. They accepted Rifles advisors, knockout gas and baby EMPs, and went to work in their own border regions. But when the police officers themselves tipped off the drug lords, the approach failed. We offered units that were purely Rifles, and the Thai Government reluctantly accepted them in its border regions.

The drug dividend in Europe and the States was huge, the money being saved in police and social resources to deal with the drug

trade. In the UK, the estimated drug related cost was cut in half, hopeless addicts given the super-drug and plenty to eat. Few returned to their old ways.

The usual gang of family and friends gathered in Goma for New Year, 2019, and Jimmy handed me an odd assignment.

‘The cooperation group President, he’s up for re-election in January,’ Jimmy reminded me. ‘Why don’t *you* run?’

‘Me?’ I frowned at him. ‘If I ran ... no one would stand against me.’

He waited.

‘Me, for President of the group?’

‘In effect, you would be President of Africa,’ Jimmy pointed out.

‘Oh. And ... was I supposed to go that route?’

‘No.’

‘I’d be ... fully tied up, and tied to a desk.’

‘You could set your own agenda. And, Helen would be First Lady. And, you’d have your own aircraft, Africa One.’

‘My own plane,’ I considered. ‘Cool.’

‘Think about it, but ... you know, do it because I say so,’ Jimmy said with a smile.

I went and told Helen.

‘We’d be based down here permanently if you took the job,’ she noted, without sounding too concerned.

‘You’d be First Lady, and we’d have our own plane.’

‘First Lady?’ she considered. ‘Oh.’

‘You’d have to buy a few more ball gowns,’ I told her with a mock-serious frown.

‘We wouldn’t have to move, would we?’

‘The current President lives four doors down, love, so no.’

With thoughts of jobs to come I got back to work. Jimmy had told me to off-load more diamonds, which I did, but that brought complaints from the Amsterdam Diamond Merchants Association. They nagged Ben Ares in Israel, and he nagged me. I gave it some thought, but it was Lucy who came up with the answer.

She said, ‘Why not cut the diamonds down here, local labour – which is cheap, and sell to Africans.’

I wagged a finger. ‘That may be a solution.’ I called the Amsterdam merchants, and told them that I wanted them to set-up shop down here, to cut diamonds down here and sell down here – or I’d drop ten tonnes of diamonds onto the market. They flew straight

down, a delegation of twelve of men, all in their black suits and looking very Jewish.

At the mansion, I said, ‘Guys, we have the diamonds, we have more gold then we know what to do with, and we have cheap labour, so I want you to create a jewellery factory down here. I’ll get you good rates on property, and then we’ll sell to the Africans. If you don’t do it – I’ll find someone who will.’

They set off to tour the city and to look at premises. The next morning they were back, happy to give it a go. I offered to create a company with a fifty-fifty split and they agreed, drawing up a rough paper agreement. A week later, thirty skilled diamond cutters arrived, another twenty from Israel, forty from America. I had an office suite waiting, the place very secure, the guards already hired.

Part of my condition was that local workers be trained, and I had found fifty Africans already skilled in making gold jewellery, some experienced in diamond cutting. The Dutch merchants were staggered at the low cost of food, the low cost of labour, and the tax breaks that they could get. They got to work, two shop units in the main shopping centre grabbed.

Their first shop targeted the city’s rich, and stocked the kinds of jewellery found in Europe. It was an immediate hit with the Russians, who all bought expensive items just to show off. Po visited and bought items, and the African leaders purchased items for their wives and mistresses.

As Christmas neared, a second shop was opened, this one for Africans. The jewellery was modestly priced, but still with a good mark-up over cost, and the trinkets sold quickly.

I toured the shop with the main Dutch operator. ‘Fine,’ I said. ‘Now I want a shop like this in every African town, a hundred in the first six months.’

He was shocked, but pleasantly shocked. He grabbed additional office space, and I allowed in ninety Israelis, allocating work permits for ten years. We’d soon have a Jewish quarter.

End of year, 2019

A week before Christmas the US stock markets picked up and climbed, but I held off selling our stock; I was hoping to see a good

year-end posted. California was still struggling, but extra federal aid had been granted, more of the displaced moving on to other States.

At the house, we made ready for Christmas, the decorations up, Liz as excited as a kid at Christmas. We'd all be here for Christmas, the whole family, and I was excited as well. Mali's grandmother came around to stay for a few days, a nurse allocated to her, and we saw more of Shelly and her young man. Liz was now attending a local kindergarten for rich kids and making friends, a few of the children and their parents invited over.

Jimmy arrived back from a world tour on the 24th, bags full of presents from places afar, and another new woman. She was Swiss and a countess; a quality bird, as I referred to her.

On Christmas Eve we enjoyed a meal around the main dining room table, Helen having cooked, and found ourselves on the patio under the stars at midnight. There was trouble ahead, but for now I was happy. New Year's Eve, 2019, we again journeyed to the casino roof and met familiar faces, team and family, politicians and staff.

After the fireworks, I asked Jimmy what the new year would bring.

'Fireworks,' he said. 'In a few areas, but nothing that a man of your calibre couldn't handle.'

'No clues?' I pressed.

'At the right time, young man. Besides, it would be dull if you knew what would happen.'

'Helen is still at my side,' I pointed out. I waited.

'You're nowhere near as smart as we'd both like you to be. What I told you about Helen – I made it up.'

I stared at him. 'Why?'

'Why do you think?'

'If she wasn't planning on leaving, then why say so, numb nuts!'

'To keep you keen on her. And the birth control that I fixed ... that was wasn't for her benefit.'

'Her pregnancy ... was for me?'

He nodded. And waited.

'I ... I would have wandered?'

'In another time, and another place, you begged me to stop you from wandering.'

I took a moment, shocked. 'I would have wandered,' I said to myself.

'Without Liz, and with a quiet house, you would have wandered,' Jimmy informed me. 'I gave you Africa to keep you busy. And

Helen - all she ever wanted was security, and you gave her that. She'll never leave you unless...'

'Unless I wander. Bloody hell.'

'You met a model in New York and made a mistake, but I covered it up. After you got away with that there were others. If you want it, you have a married life for the next hundred years – unless the world goes to shit of course.'

'Bloody hell,' I repeated. I needed a drink, and swapped my beer for a short.

'OK, daddy?' Lucy asked.

'Apparently, yes.'

The next day I gave much thought to what Jimmy had said, and hugged my grown daughters a lot, certain that I would not swap this for anything. That same day I announced that I was running for President of the cooperation group, and it made the news.

It took the African leaders a day to digest the detail, and to puzzle over it, since I already had more authority than all of them combined, but then they started to send in their backings. Since they were the ones who'd vote on it I was already half way there.

At the cooperation group conference in mid January I made my nomination formal and they took a vote, a hundred percent in my favour. I was now the President of sub-Saharan Africa, and my inauguration saw the majority of the world's leaders pop over, even President Blake. We organised a fly-by of military jets, and a march past of thousands of soldiers and Rescue Force staff.

At the reception afterwards, I found Ngomo, Abdi and Kimballa chatting. 'Mr President, Mr President, and ... Mister President,' I offered, making them laugh.

'Mr President,' they returned.

'You are the King of Africa now,' Kimballa noted.

'It's a ceremonial job, no real power,' I suggested.

They all gave me looks.

Ngomo said, 'You run the group, the corporation and CAR. That makes you a very powerful man, Paul.'

'I still can't get my daughters home at a reasonable hour,' I complained, making them laugh.

'You can set a curfew in law,' Kimballa suggested. 'Have them arrested.'

'The Queen of Africa wouldn't like that,' I said.

'You will work from the Pentagon building?' Ngomo asked.

I nodded. 'I'll be a nine to five worker, lunch in the canteen.'

President Blake tipped his head, catching my attention. ‘Excuse me, gentlemen, but the world’s most powerful man wants a word.’

‘Where is Jimmy?’ Ngomo asked, a glint in his eye.

I stepped across to President Blake, still smiling. ‘Mister President.’ We shook.

‘You’ll be running a continent, with a GDP growth the envy of the world,’ Blake noted.

‘Are you after a loan?’ I teased.

‘We’re out of the nosedive, but it’s an odd time. Drugs and crime are right down, Africans are leaving us to come here, and congressmen actually listen to their constituents these days.’

‘Carry on like that, and you may end up with a democracy,’ I quipped.

‘That group, The Ark, they have five million members on paper. And when they don’t like something they fill the streets and change policy.’

‘People power,’ I said. ‘Nothing wrong with that. What’s wrong, is that they think they need to do that, rather than just voting for their representatives.’

‘Well, maybe. Housing is better; if anything, we’re freeing up homes for people that weren’t displaced.’

‘Unemployment?’

‘Still way too high in some areas.’

‘We’ve kept gold prices down so that people switch to stocks, and we’ve eased off on selling US stocks to keep the markets up.’

‘I saw that.’

‘How long you down here?’ I asked.

‘Going to visit an airbase here tomorrow, then home.’

‘How about ... you go visit that naval base in Somalia, as a favour to me.’

Blake took a moment to study me. ‘Might be time for it.’

‘Rumour has it the Russian leader will meet US naval ratings there,’ I said with a wink.

I found the Russian leader, and suggested that Blake will make good capital out of the visit, and how about he just turn up. The Chinese also got a nudge, Abdi asked to put in an appearance.

Mac approached me with Coup, both men dressed smart. ‘Mister President,’ Mac offered with a mock salute.

‘You know, Mac, the first time I saw you in a suit – at my wedding – I thought you looked like a dog turd in flannel.’

Coup laughed. ‘Nothings changed since then.’

‘I’m a military man and field commander, not a desk poofter,’ Mac pointed out.

‘How’s the sprog?’ I asked.

‘Growing quickly,’ Mac grumbled. ‘Food in one end, crap out the other.’

‘She may inherit your good looks,’ I teased. ‘What happened to Hal’s girl?’

‘In college in America somewhere,’ Coup replied. ‘Near where Hal retired.’

‘Is he OK?’

‘Good for ninety!’ Coup noted.

‘He was sixty-five when he joined us,’ Mac put in.

‘The years do go by,’ I noted. ‘And I miss my Huey.’

‘You’re the boss, you can do what you like,’ Mac suggested.

‘Helen has a mean right hook, so I’ll not be taking risks in Hueys. Those days are gone forever.’

The following evening, President Paul Holton, and First Lady Helen Holton, sat with their daughters and watched their own TV channel report the news, images of the American, Russian and Chinese leaders being greeted by Abdi at the naval base, a fly-by organised.

‘Progress,’ I sighed.

The next morning I formally claimed my desk. My team in the UK now reported to Jimmy, two now working down here, and I organised my new staff, just in time for the start of a potential war. I was in a crisis meeting by 11am on my first full day in the job.

The Nile River started its life in tributaries in Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya – the White Nile, flowing north through Southern Sudan and then Sudan itself before reaching Egypt. Uganda had built a few dams, and the Egyptians were very unhappy – on the point of war unhappy.

The river’s level had not fallen, but Egypt’s need for water had grown over the years. Now, additional upstream dams were planned, and Egypt was threatening military action against Sudan, and unspecified others. No one thought that the Egyptians would be daft enough to attack the Rifles, but the Egyptians possessed a reasonable air force. I put our own air forces on alert and set-up air patrols, just in case.

Looking at the problem, and listening to the various experts, there seemed to be no solution. Uganda had the right to create dams, as did other nations, and the Egyptians could not justifiably claim that it needed all of the water - since it was not their water to start with.

First, I asked the Ugandans if they wanted cheap coal-oil and a power station or two – and would that stop them from building dams? They accepted the offer, but only to stop two out of four dams. Sudan was beyond my control, but not my influence, so I considered offering them coal-oil and power plants. But that could have seen a lot of money being spent on a country that was destined to turn against us in a few years.

Maybe they would turn against us because of their water and power shortages, I considered, now in a quandary. I considered desalination plants for Egypt, but much of the water they needed was for farming. In our region, we had more food than we knew what to do with, and so I offered a great package of cheap food to Egypt, in the hope that they'd grow less of their own. The Egyptians were happy with the food, and that eased part of the problem. I sweetened the deal with a hundred electric buses, the ones with the solar panels, since Egypt offered plenty of sunshine.

The population of Egypt was growing quickly, however, and that was a growing problem. We already had a pipe that grabbed fresh water before it entered the Mediterranean Sea, and a plant that cleaned it. I sent the Egyptians a proposal, the building of another plant, but west of the Nile, and one that would supply drinking water to Cairo. It would be financed by a thirty-year loan at zero percent interest.

A week later they accepted, and the plant was commissioned. That turned my attention towards Kenya, and I commissioned a desalination plant next to the Chinese enclave. In the future, drinking water would go west by pipe, and Kenya's precious river water could be used for farming.

The annoying thing was, that the Congo had too much water. A pipeline would have been costly, but was considered. Through our own water bottling plants, I increased deliveries to Southern Sudan.

Jimmy then sent me a note. 'If we get beyond 2027, that region will dry up, and wars will break out.'

Well, that sealed it. I went to see the volunteers and the brain-trust kids, handing them the problem. I asked about the cheapest type of pipe that could be made, and they immediately suggested a type of reinforced plastic. If buried, and out of the sun, it would last. I had it priced up, realising that it was less than a tenth of the cost of steel. But could I build a six hundred mile pipeline across mountains and deserts?

Lucy popped up to the office one day, and looked at the map on my desk. 'You don't need a pipe, use nature.'

‘Huh?’

‘Pipe the water to the Nile head and let it trickle down. You lose on evaporation on the way, but the waterway is already there.’

‘Good idea, babes. Just have to work out how much we’d lose en route.’

First, I picked a valley in western Uganda that received a lot of rain, but could not be argued to feed the Nile. I commissioned a large dam, but not a high dam, a pipe running east towards Lake Victoria. On paper, it appeared that the water would add to the Nile, since Lake Victoria drained into the Nile. My agreement with the parties stated that the amount of water we pumped into the lake could then be taken out by the Kenyans, on the other side, and pro rata.

With the agreement sealed, I then commissioned plastic pipes from three dams that we had created in the north of our region, and down to Goma’s own lake, Lake Kivu. On the Rwandan side, I commissioned a plastic pipe to head towards Lake Victoria, the Rwandan’s being able to take some of the water as it travelled east. That done, I commissioned additional plastic pipes from a point west of Forward Base, where rain fell almost every day.

The new pipeline scheme had many benefits. It created jobs in our region, it would keep our lake topped up with fresh water, it helped Rwanda, Uganda and Kenya, but then – downstream – helped Southern Sudan, Sudan, and ultimately Egypt.

When Jimmy saw the plan he simply nodded, asking me not to forget Chad. I went back to the map, and eventually commissioned another pipe, from the wet north of the Central African Republic and towards Chad.

Calling in the Egyptians, who were now happy enough, I pointed to the Blue Nile in Ethiopia and suggested a dam. They were no longer happy enough. I explained that when the Blue Nile flooded it lost water to the surrounding parched soil, and evaporated, and that such a dam would only stop floodwater. Then, when necessary, it could release that water to increase levels downstream. They were back to being happy enough, and went off as I commissioned a high dam in tight gorges, actually a series of them. Hopefully, war would be averted in years to come.

Jimmy popped in a week later. ‘What you’re doing here - it has parallels to Iraq, and we’re seeing tensions with Turkey and Syria – since Turkey and Syria both have hydroelectric dams upstream on the Euphrates River. And if those countries go at each other, The Brotherhood are a step or two behind.’

I was back to staring at maps.

General Masood, the long running dictator of Iraq, had handed over to a son a few years back, and the new dictator had undergone something of a programme to attract western investment - more of a playboy than his father and educated in England. I sent him a note straight away, asking him if he would like desalination technology. He flew over, and I entertained his party, striking a deal on the desalination plant.

It would be a large plant, and would provide bottled water to Basra and Baghdad. They had oil to make the plastic containers, and the oil to power the desalination plant. It begged the question as to why they had not gone that route up to now, but I didn't press the issue. I offered them a loan at zero percent interest over twenty years.

Jimmy then dropped a hint. 'One of the things that helps to give rise to The Brotherhood in the refugee camps, is a lack of water. Those particular camps will be north and west of Basra.'

Jesus, I thought. We were actually doing it; we were planning for the rise of The Brotherhood.

I asked my guests if we could experiment with reclaiming the waters of the Shatt al Arab waterway as it reached the Gulf. They had no objections, and I immediately commissioned a team to work on reclaiming fresh water before it became too salty, and a plant to clean it up. A very large plant.

Jimmy did, however, request that the plant be upstream, at the end of a long pipe, and closer to the workforce of Basra. They puzzled it, but since we were paying for it all - and creating jobs for locals, they had no particular objections. It made sense to me as well.

Sat drinking around the patio, one of the Iraqis mentioned the poor employment rate of the Basra region, and Jimmy offered to assist. This new move was odd, because he had always told me that he wouldn't assist those countries where The Brotherhood may rise, but now we were trying to assist in the very place that they would rise. I could see the logic, but puzzled Jimmy's change of direction.

With our guests gone in the morning, Jimmy asked me to assist Basra. 'Turn it into the fucking Garden of Eden,' he said.

'And ... won't the money be wasted when The Brotherhood rise?'

'If they rise, yes. But if it delays the rise by a few years, then ... well, it may help.' He took out a map and tapped it. 'The refugees will collect all around the Middle East -'

‘From the disaster that you still haven’t explained to me.’

‘Yes, from that disaster, and some will gather in Iraq; around Basra and south of Baghdad. The camps are filthy, and that helps to give rise to the terror groups.’

‘Young men with hungry bellies and nothing to do,’ I noted.

‘Very much so.’

‘And the attitude of The West?’ I nudged.

‘They won’t want any of them, and that adds to the tension.’

‘Leave them to fester ... and the terror groups rise,’ I noted. ‘And it’s no frigging wonder.’

‘Ten million refugees,’ he carefully mouthed.

‘Ah, well I can’t see The West wanting to take them. Had enough of a problem with Hawaiians in America.’

‘When you build the pipelines, make them deep and strong so that they can’t be blown up too easily, and make the plant strong and durable as well.’

The CAR floatation was fully subscribed, if not over-subscribed, despite Jimmy’s warning that the company would not make extraordinary profits, and that funds would be used for charitable actions.

With the voting shares also floated, but allocated, it instantly became the world’s largest capitalised company, its board truly international. Each previous shareowner was asked to sell a small amount of their holdings, just to meet the rules of the stock exchanges.

A week later our property business was floated, again becoming a huge listed company, its principle shareowners being the Chinese. Two extra tickers appeared on the world’s stock market screens, and both climbed steadily after floatation.

Africa One

After more than a month in office, the First Lady and I boarded our plane, a converted 747SP, and finally toured our domain. Every country in turn was visited, the two of us greeting the politicians and the people, always seen to be visiting an orphanage or opening a new factory somewhere. We reminded ourselves of Prince Charles

and Lady Diana, only we'd been married longer, we didn't cheat, and we made a real difference.

We visited the Chinese enclave with Han, inspecting roads and buildings under construction, the Chinese pleased with its progress. The port facility was already working, trains full of ore arriving from Southern Sudan or even from the DRC. Flying down the coast from Kenya, we landed at the part-finished airport in the Saudi enclave, meeting many senior Saudi figures. The enclave was coming along quickly, my teams assisting – and now experienced at building cities.

Flying on, we crossed the Mozambique Channel to the second Saudi enclave, landing at an airport that was no more complete than the previous. We again met Saudi officials, studied maps and drawings, and asked if there was anything we would do to assist. We spent the night on the plane, entertaining a few of the Saudis, and in the morning flew up to the US airbase in the Hawaiian enclave.

The US airbase was not strictly a base, since they shared a runway with the civilian airport the opposite side. After touching down, the USAF drove us around to their facility, a quick look around buildings being finished off, before driving us around to the small town that the Hawaiians had built. The Hawaiian community in New Kinshasa was only a third ancestral Hawaiian, but here they were in the majority, around seventy percent of the twenty thousand populace.

The marina was now complete and open to passing sailboats, the cafes and bars plying a modest trade. But from the marina I could see many large boats in the nearby harbour, and I enquired whose they were.

'Jimmy bought them,' a man informed me. 'Fishing boats. We have a fishing trade, and sell some in the cities.'

'With your Air Force here, and various ships visiting, you should have a few jobs created.'

They agreed, optimistic about their small and isolated community. They also hoped to create a small tourist industry: beaches to sit on and jungles to visit, scuba diving and Dragon Boat races. Jimmy, it seems, had also promised them a few hotels, one under construction for visiting sailors to use. It would be a large hotel, some six hundred rooms, and would offer a soccer field, tennis courts, pools and bars. I was certain that it would be a repeat of the integration process at the Somali naval base.

Back in Goma, I reclaimed my desk and listened to the petitions of the various governments for things they thought they needed, but my mind was on Iraq and The Brotherhood. How the hell could we deal with ten million refugees? When the First Lady popped in for lunch I discussed it with her.

‘Housing will be at a premium. The longer they’re in tents, the worse it will become,’ she noted. ‘And they’re short of water now.’

‘No country will want to take them - the burden would be huge, not to mention the fear of terrorism.’

‘We produce a lot of food and water, so we can help,’ she suggested.

‘They’d still be living in tents.’

‘So we need to build apartments ahead of time.’

I raised my eyebrows. ‘That’s a lot of money, and when The Brotherhood rise, a lot of wasted money.’

‘It’ll cost just as much to try and ring-fence the region with soldiers.’

The next day the Kuwaiti’s came to see me, accompanied by my Saudi contact. They were, however, all dressed in western suits, not in robes. I had a bad feeling where the conversation would go.

They began, ‘We have been most puzzled by the Saudi desire for enclaves in Africa, and our Saudi friends have been ... less than full in their disclosures, but agreed to try and assist us. Hence our visit to your good self.’

I responded, ‘Jimmy believes ... that in 2025 a ... disaster of sorts will strike the earth, and that widespread financial collapse is certain. As far as you’re concerned, you won’t be selling much oil – if any. That financial collapse will lead to unrest and conflict in the Middle East, hence the Saudi desire to have business interests and friendly locations outside of the region.’

‘We would, naturally, offer a good price for ... accurate information.’

I shook my head. ‘Such information won’t help you, since the situation is fluid, and Jimmy is trying to fix it. That may result in complete success, or total failure.’

‘Or somewhere in the middle,’ they stated. ‘So, we would like to be more prepared than we are now, since we’re a small nation surrounded by large neighbours. You gave our Saudi friends enclaves with oil, and seem to be greatly assisting in construction. As such, we would like you to consider a similar, yet ultimately smaller deal, for ourselves.’

‘I would have to ask Jimmy where the undiscovered oil is, gentlemen, since I don’t know.’

‘But you’re not averse to the idea,’ they nudged.

‘The Saudi deal means that Mozambique and Madagascar get financial aid, and we get a cut of the oil revenue.’ I held my hands wide. ‘Everyone gets something.’

My secretary stepped in. ‘Sorry, sir. Mister Silo. Line two.’

I lifted my phone. ‘Jimmy?’

‘Kuwaitis with you?’

‘They are indeed, plus our Saudi friend.’

‘Grab a map of Namibia,’ he told me.

I called up a map on my computer. ‘OK, got it.’

‘Look at the coast, below the border with Angola, Angra Fria. See it?’

‘Yep.’

‘Offer them an enclave there, if you can work a deal with the Namibian Government, which shouldn’t be so hard. That place has oilfields offshore. Talk later.’

I placed the phone down. ‘He anticipated your visit.’ They were impressed. ‘There is a possible enclave in West Africa, the dry and dusty part, if I can work the deal. Leave it with me.’

‘We could ask for little more.’ They stood. ‘And now we’ll tour your city and enjoy the facilities.’

Two days later, Jimmy popped down from Europe. Sat around the pool, he said, ‘I wasn’t planning on the enclaves but ... but it would be cruel and unreasonable not to try and help them. If I didn’t help, then history would judge me harshly.’

‘If the rich folk pull out, either now or at the time, won’t that make the economy of the region even worse?’ I pondered.

‘No, not really, certainly not for Kuwait. It’s the economies of Iraq, Syria and Jordan that will make a difference when the time comes.’

‘And ... should we be assisting them more?’ I nudged.

‘Boost all the nations around Israel ... and leave the Israelis out?’ he scoffed. ‘We’ll have Israeli diplomats trying to shoot us then.’

‘I can see why you struggle with this one. We could spend the money here, we could develop the Rifles, or we could try and house ten million refugees in the hope that they don’t bite us on the arse.’

‘There’s not enough money on the planet to help the region that will be affected. And, I’ll have to persuade those refugees to move out a month or two before the disaster, warn them a year before. If I don’t, it helps The West by reducing the population of the Middle

East by ten million or so, but then gives rise to anger – a lot of anger, because we didn't warn them.'

'You'd ... leave ten million people in place?' I asked, horrified at the idea.

He looked away. 'Those ... *people*, the displaced, *are* The Brotherhood, and I've seen what they'll do close up. They're capable of great atrocities, whether they're moved out in time or not. But no, I won't leave them there to die, and that may sign a death warrant for the planet. I'm damned if I do, and damned if I don't.'

'And presumably, no country will want too many refugees, especially if the world's economy goes to fuck.'

Jimmy nodded. 'No one will want to take them; even their own capital cities won't want to take them. They'll be the ... *internally displaced*.'

'No enclaves for them anywhere?' I asked, sighing.

'Wherever they went they'd be feared, and they have a culture very different to any outside of the Middle East.'

'Could the Middle East economy be rebuilt?' I asked.

'Sure, over twenty years and with a shit load of money. Problem is, it's a fragile global economy; a two percent hit causes a depression, but this will be ten percent in a day - banks and businesses folding within hours. I do have an idea, I have several – all variations on a theme, but I don't know if the Americans would like it, and the Israelis certainly wouldn't like it. And, when I tell the world what will happen, certain countries will be upset with us.'

'Why?' I puzzled.

'For not warning them sooner, and stopping them spending money on developments.'

'How much warning will you give?'

'As soon as I give the warning, the economy of the region suffers, the people suffer, and The Brotherhood rises from the unemployed and hungry masses.'

I sighed. 'We're going around in circles.'

'Welcome to my life,' he carefully mouthed.

Getting into bed that night, I said, 'I'm not just the President, I'm becoming Jimmy.'

'How do you mean?' Helen queried. 'Wider shoulders?'

I gave her a look. 'No. He revealed more about 2025, and it's a puzzle wrapped around a problem inside a paradox. It's doing my head in.'

'You ... don't think there's a solution?'

‘It’s a like a long balloon that you want to flatten out. Press down on one end and the other goes up. Press down on both ends at the same time and the middle goes up. I need more hands.’

I didn’t sleep well that night, and I had to wonder how Jimmy slept at all. Sitting up in bed in the morning, I said, ‘I need more hands.’ Getting into the office early, I ordered a meeting for the next day, a war council. I requested Ngomo, Abdi and quite a few others.

The next day, fifty people sat in one of the conference rooms in the Pentagon building. On my left I had Abdi, Ngomo and a few Defence Ministers, PACT, the head of the corporation and his deputy, the senior volunteers, the leaders of the brain-trust kids – who were all now adults in their thirties and forties, and a few of my ministers.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for attending this meeting. First of all, this meeting is confidential. The subject matter and the individual topics are to be kept secret from outsiders and from the press. If anyone asks ... we’re simply discussing routine political matters.’

I took a moment. ‘Jimmy has revealed to me a little more about problems we’ll face in 2025, and ... to tell you the truth, they scare the hell out of me.’ I took a big breath. ‘So, we’re going to make some plans, and we’re going to try and figure out solutions to a few problems. It’s a long list!

‘First, a summary. In 2025, a disaster will strike, resulting in a global economic crash. Countries in the Middle East will suffer a sharp economic downturn, their populations suffering, and that will lead to the rise of terror groups, one of which will rally the downtrodden masses into an army, an army with sights on taking over the world. Part of their aim will be to invade Africa.

‘Now, we could – obviously – just sit and wait for that to happen, and defend our borders as best as we can in the hope that we can fend them off, and for decades to come. Unfortunately, when the economics problems hit we wouldn’t be selling ore and oil around the world, and our own economies would suffer.

‘So first I want an economic study group created with our best minds. I want a plan of action ... so that if necessary, in 2025, we could make our markets totally internal and self-sufficient. If that plan calls for changes to be made now, then we need to start making those changes now.

‘Second. We need a plan of action for a combined African army defending our borders, especially the northern border. Abdi, you’ll be in the front line, and as such will receive most of the military

budget. I want to work on the assumption that Sudan, Egypt and Libya will not be allies, but may become enemies. I want a plan for neutralising Ethiopia's military if we need to. Ngomo, I want a plan for neutralising the armies of North Africa if we need to.

'I also want the borders strengthened, and plans made of how we would hold them. I want plans for a call-up of reserves, and of police officers that are not ex-Rifles to be trained as soldiers part-time. I want all former members of the Rifles who have retired to be given two weeks training a year to keep them fresh.

'OK, water sources. We're already seeing problems in many areas because of a shortage of water, and that shortage may lead to unrest and conflict. I want a team set-up to monitor the water availability of North Africa and the Middle East, and to see where the problem areas may be in the future. I want those plastic pipes that we produce to be researched so that we can produce more, and faster, and cheaper – and I want that a priority.

'Ladies and gentlemen, simply piping water to an arid region may prevent a war. If we can spend money on a pipeline and stop a war, it'll be a great indirect cost saving for us. I want to look at additional dams in the Congo, and pipelines running towards the Nile. But first, I want to invent ways of cheaply producing the pipes – pipes that are hundreds of miles long. Since Southern Sudan is central to this problem, let's have a factory there that makes the pipes - and ideas on cheap ways to dig trenches and bury pipes!

'OK, food. We produce more than enough food, so I want to look at increasing the supply of cheap food to the North African states and the Middle East. In particular, I want cheap food sent to Iraq, Syria and Jordan by boat.

'Next, electric buses and cars. I want the small factory that we have here increased in size, and I want to be able to produce our electric cars. Open factories with the Chinese; one for cars, one for buses. To start, we only need to produce a few hundred a year, but – if necessary after 2025 – we want to produce all cars and buses internally. Those buses with the solar panels, I could do with a thousand this year alone.

'OK, munitions. I want a research facility and munitions factory created within the year. After 2025, I want us to produce our own ammunition, and if necessary our own rifles, grenades or even artillery pieces. I want a stockpile of ammunition created in 2024, enough to last us five years or more, and I want to be able to mass-produce our own weapons if necessary.

‘Next, electronics. I want a factory set-up with the Chinese, one to produce radios and TVs, telephones, things like that. I want another set-up with Nokia to produce mobile phones. Basically, if the outside world goes to shit after 2025, we make our own.

‘Next, we have a long coastline, and that coastline will need to be defended. I’ll be buying more maritime patrol aircraft and creating a coastal patrol force. We’ll buy more ships to enhance that force. Whilst on ships, Africa has very little in the way of ship-builders, except South Africa, and they’re a pain to deal with. We’ll be commissioning a few coastal patrol craft from them, as well as fishing vessels.

‘But I want to see a shipbuilding yard near Mombassa. When it’s ready, we’ll keep its order books full. And whilst on the fishing vessels, we see many other nations fishing off African waters, so I want us in there first; if they’re our fish, then we’ll catch them. Again, after 2025 we may need to be self-sufficient.

‘Now, before today the cooperation group was about boosting the economies of sub-Saharan Africa. In the future, this cooperation group will be about the survival of Africa. It will become more important, and will take on greater responsibilities. We will ... need to see more power in the group, and less with regional governments.

‘To that end I’ll be creating a central bank for the group, the lender of first choice. Our other bank will loan that central bank a large part of our reserves, and the central bank will then set interest rates. It will also look at the 2025 problem, and what may happen if the world economy collapses; we may need to issue our own internal currency - and quickly. I want emergency plans in place for just such an eventuality.

‘We have just over five years, people, and we have a lot of work to do between now and then. One of the first tasks is to see what we import that we could make ourselves. To those of you who are overseas volunteers, know this: Jimmy chose to build-up this region in particular, and Africa in general, to assist with 2025. That may mean that we shoulder the burden, and that may mean that our people are unhappy at others *not* shouldering the burden with us.

‘The answer is simple: we can rely on ourselves, we may not be able to rely on others. If everyone sits back and says that it’s not their problem, then we lose the planet. If we step forward and shoulder the burden, then we may end up greatly diminished afterwards, but the planet will be safe.

‘You’re here ... because you stepped forwards to shoulder the burden, and this new task is no different. If the other nations can’t

decide what to do, or to cooperate, then Africa will act – and we'll worry about recriminations afterwards. First, we save the planet, then our own lives, then worry about the rest of the world later.'

'I think we'll all need sleeping pills after this,' Ngomo noted.

'It is a war,' Kimballa put in. 'A fight to the finish. And if Africa leads where others follow, so be it; I will die fighting with my last breath.'

'Somalia will be ready,' Abdi faithfully promised.

'These meetings will take place every month or so,' I said. 'So go and make some plans, and deal with each other without going through me every time.'

We broke for coffee and a chat, the brain-trust kids already in a heated debate about the production levels of various things.

Back at my desk, I glanced at income and reserves, and ordered four hundred electric buses from China to be delivered to Iraq, another hundred for Jordan and two hundred for Syria. When I looked at the cost, and the cost of failure in 2025, I doubled the numbers of buses.

We already had permission from the Iraqis to assist in the Basra region, so I ordered fifty thousand solar panels and fifty thousand of the small wind turbines to sit on rooftops, to be installed free all over Basra. Since the items were made locally it would create jobs in Africa.

I checked with the Chinese, and many Middle Eastern countries were still low on the uptake of the super-drug. I asked the Chinese to send more anyway and to bill it to us, hoping that the region would receive a health dividend.

Practical solutions

I visited a factory a week later, one that made plastic pipes. They showed me the yellow pipes, tall enough to stand up in, and how they were made. They used heat-bonded layers, and wove in a kind of carbon fibre, making the pipes resistant to outward pressure. Huge machines moulded the initial plastic, others weaving the fine threads around the outside in layers.

It seemed like a quick enough process, but we were after hundreds of miles of pipe. A team of sixty scientists had been put on the task, the task of saving costs, and of speeding up the processes

whilst making the pipes strong and durable. The cost of the oil was negligible, the labour was cheap – volunteers now working at the plant, and the research was free. The cost per mile was not much, but was falling further.

Aboard Africa One, I flew over several sites where dams were being constructed. They would be of a simple construction, and not high, each placed where water would accumulate backwards for a few miles. They would also have an effect on the localised flooding that came each year, since they could help to regulate water levels.

Back in Goma, I met with the Chinese, who were falling over themselves to build electronics factories. Ten factories were agreed, the land free and the basic factory costs paid by us. It wasn't a difficult deal to work.

The American Ambassador to the DRC then came to see me with military officers, a list of second hand kit for sale. I bought six old P3 Orions straight away, and four coastguard cutters. They had three oddly shaped maritime Hercules aircraft, so I took those with suitable training staff. As for the rest of the list, I told them to ask Ngomo what he wanted and to get back to me.

In the months that followed I made sure everyone was working with a sense of urgency, and I increased the staff at the Pentagon building. I was soon known as a slave driver, and seen to be always encouraging people to work faster and be cheaper. Behind my back I was known as 'President Faster and Cheaper!'

I would arrive at my office in the mornings when just the security guards were around, and I would leave late, glad to be home. Helen would pop up to my office often since she had her own office a floor below, and her own list of tasks as First Lady. We'd sit and have lunch together, talking about production quotas and new inventions.

Shelly split her time between New Kinshasa and the research vessels, our green stretch of ocean growing, a side effect being rising fish stocks. The Chinese had turned their coastal waters green, as had Australia, and one of our ships was mid Pacific, leaving a green trail behind.

Shelly and Mali remained an item, and an odd period of calm had descended over my family. The work that we were all doing had become the focus, and people were supportive of each other. Despite the stems, we were often tired at the end of the day, mentally tired. Lucy spent a day a week at our finance ministry – a kind of work experience programme, but was too bright to just do chores. She sat in on meetings and offered comments on macro-economic solutions.

Jimmy left me to get on with it, but said that time was drawing near, the time to debate a solution to 2025, or to reveal it to the world. I could see him struggling with it, struggling with both a solution - and the timing.

June saw Jimmy call a special meeting of selected world leaders in Goma; the Americans, Russians, Chinese and British leaders present, our British PM stepping down in just a month. Abdi and Ngomo were in on the meeting, as was the head of the corporation and the CEO of CAR, Ben Ares attending for Israel.

‘Gentlemen,’ Jimmy called. ‘The Chinese have known for some time what will happen in 2025, as does the British PM. Former President Harvey knew, and now you - Mister Blake, and the rest of you, need to know what will happen. It goes without saying ... that a breach of security could cost the world greatly. What you learn here today ... you do not discuss outside the group.’

A map of the Middle East was laid out. Jimmy began, ‘In March, 2025, an earthquake will strike through Northern India, Northern Pakistan, through Afghanistan, and along Southern Iran. That quake will be devastating, damage done to houses as far away as Israel.

‘But in addition to the quake and its damage, the land on the Iranian side will rise by five metres, and the land on the Dubai side will fall by five metres. The resulting tsunami will slam into the south coast of the Gulf, a wall of water a hundred feet high, the wave five miles deep. Qatar, Dubai, Kuwait and a large part of Saudi Arabia will be destroyed. When the wave rebounds it will destroy southern Iran, then flood up the Shatt al Arab waterway to Basra. In a single stroke, most of the world’s oil production will stop.’

‘Jesus,’ Blake let out, the CAR chief staring wide-eyed at the map.

Jimmy continued, ‘If not evacuated, ten million people will die. If evacuated - and when evacuated, they’ll create a refugee crisis, and those refugee camps will see the right conditions for the rise of The Brotherhood, a terror group that will rally the masses, raise an army of a million willing suicide bombers, and start by attacking your attempts to rebuild the oil industry in Southern Iraq. Their second target will be Baghdad, then Damascus, then Israel.

‘Their aim is a simple one - a return to a simpler life, their belief being that God washed away the evil oil industry in a stroke. They’ll behave like communist Wahabists, destroying modern technology, killing educated people, intent on taking over the world.’

The CAR chief asked, 'Is there sufficient oil outside of the Gulf to cope?'

'A good question. If the oilfields that I know about are tapped, and held waiting, and electric cars are widely used – then yes. With some very careful planning we could just throw a switch on the day in question. But to do that would require widespread cooperation, including people like the Cubans and the Venezuelans. Russia, your oil sales would be very profitable, and in much demand, in 2025.'

'Could the Gulf oil be drilled later, years later?' Blake asked.

'Yes, it could,' Jimmy confirmed. 'Providing The Brotherhood are not rampaging around the area. But the one question we have to ask today is ... when do we tell the world about it? And when do we tell the governments that would be affected.'

'How much of Dubai would survive?' Ben Ares asked.

'Not a single building,' Jimmy said. 'But warning them twenty years ago would have achieved little; they would not have listened.'

'A lot of western companies have invested in the region,' Blake noted.

'Your people knew about this twenty years ago,' Jimmy pointed out. 'But yes, they'll be a lot of unhappy campers about, and people will go bust when the news leaks. Problem was, if I had revealed it earlier the world economy could have crashed, a depression caused, and wars would have broken out. And, the Middle East countries would have seen it as a trick, and ignored it, attacking the west – as well as little old me.'

'The Saudis seem to have an idea about what'll happen,' Blake noted.

'Yes, and they could be better prepared if we warn them fully now, so too the others,' Jimmy agreed. 'But the release of the information could spark a financial crash, and we're still in a recession. Besides, if the world plans to live without Saudi oil, how will the Saudis rebuild afterwards?'

'There'll always be a market for oil,' the CAR man put in. 'If it takes five years to get to the Gulf oil then it may be needed at the time.'

Jimmy agreed. 'I will – one year before the quake – give a full warning. The question ... is how much we reveal to people like the Saudis, and when?'

'Well, what do you think?' Blake asked.

'Let's have a show of hands for those that believe a disclosure now to the governments affected is the right thing to do.'

I raised my hand, as did the corporation. I was joined by Ngomo, Blake and CAR. And that was it. Russia, China, Britain and Abdi were not in favour of disclosure now. Or Jimmy.'

'Well, not a clear mandate,' Jimmy noted. 'But, since the Saudis are the largest players, and they're willing to cooperate with us, a show of hands on just the Saudis knowing now.'

Most raised their hands.

'OK,' Jimmy added. 'Let's talk about the refugees. Any nation here willing to take a few million Arabs?'

No one raised a hand, surprisingly enough.

'So, they'll be internally displaced in various nations. Iran will have a great many, so too Iraq. Syria will take Iraqis, Jordan will take some, and Saudi Arabia need only evacuate the coast. People from the smaller Gulf states would wish to flee to Saudi Arabia, many to Europe – those with money.'

'How many in the enclaves?' Blake asked.

'A million in advance of the quake, perhaps four million afterwards,' Jimmy responded.

'Well, it reduces the numbers,' Blake noted.

'The enclaves would not be sustainable,' Jimmy pointed out. 'Not for those numbers.'

'So we help the internally displaced in camps,' Blake suggested. 'Since The Brotherhood rise up from poverty, no doubt, we assist where we can.'

'Assuming that you have the money, and the American people behind you - willing to back the move,' Jimmy firmly pointed out.

I asked, 'If conditions for the refugees were good enough, would The Brotherhood still rise?'

'Rise, yes, get enough support – maybe not. It would delay the rise.'

'How much of a delay?' the Russians asked.

'Years,' Jimmy answered.

'Enough time to re-drill oil and make some money,' Blake suggested. 'And that money could help the people.'

'Since when has oil money helped the people of the Middle East?' Jimmy scoffed. 'The poor stay poor, and the rich leaders stay billionaires! Do you expect the Kuwaitis and others to help the poor of Iraq? Do you expect the Iraqi regime to help the poor of Basra? They never have, so why would they bother afterwards? And what message are you trying to send, Mister President? How many rich folk in America go down to the soup kitchens to help out?'

‘Becoming a socialist, are we?’ I asked Blake. ‘You had a hard enough time with your own refugees!’

‘I think this will be different,’ he said defensively. ‘Especially given what’s at stake.’

‘You’ll persuade Congress that a rag-bag bunch of terrorists will take over the world?’ I asked.

‘They’ll accept it if Jimmy goes public,’ Blake assured me.

‘Which will be a year before the event,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘In American terms ... just enough time to get a bill passed!’

‘What else can we be doing?’ Abdi asked.

I faced him. ‘We can build apartments in certain areas of the Middle East, and try and boost their economies a little. And we can build desalination plants where they won’t be destroyed in 2025.’

‘The Gulf states are rich,’ the PM put in. ‘Surely they should be doing more in preparation, financial or otherwise.’

‘As soon as this news hit, they become less rich,’ Jimmy pointed out.

‘Given the oil situation,’ the PM began, ‘could we not agree to make the most use of Gulf oil before the disaster, and switch to outside sources afterwards?’

‘A good and practical approach,’ Jimmy commended. ‘But it would require fuller disclosure to the world.’

‘But it would mean the Arabs pay for their own preparations,’ the PM insisted. ‘As part of a deal that we all buy more oil from them beforehand.’

‘Hands up those seeing sense in that approach,’ Jimmy called. He raised his own hand, as did most everyone else. ‘Which brings us right back around to disclosure. I suggest, since Saudi Arabia and Kuwait are concerned enough to build enclaves outside the region, that we brief them in a month. In the meantime, I will expand CAR’s exploration and drilling, only to cap off the wells till 2025.’

‘And, this year, I’ll talk with Cuba. Since oil production is a factor of demand, America and China should try and buy more from the Gulf before 2025, switching afterwards.’

‘On condition of cooperation,’ the Chinese insisted.

‘Yes, of course,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘With at least the Saudis.’

I had been tasked with breaking the news to the Saudis, and a month later invited them over, not looking forward to the meeting. Welcoming them to my patio, they could see that something was wrong, not least because I was being very polite.

When they had settled, drinks arranged, I began, 'Jimmy has revealed to me, and others, the exact nature of the 2025 problem. We'll now reveal that to you, since it affects you more than most.' They were all ears. 'There is, as they say, good news and bad news. Well, there's moderate news and dire news. In early 2025, an earthquake will devastate Iran, the resulting tsunami destroying your northern coastline – and inland ten miles.'

'The oil producing regions,' they sombrely noted.

'Your offshore fields will be affected, rigs, and port facilities,' I mentioned.

'How affected?'

'Complete destruction; a tidal wave a hundred feet high and a few miles deep. The water will reach miles inland.'

'And Qatar, Dubai, Kuwait?'

'All gone.'

'The Iranian side?'

'Destroyed by the quake, then a tsunami,' I said.

They took a long moment, glancing at each other. 'You said good news?'

'Before the quake – if we have an agreement – the world will buy up as much of your oil as it can, and there's the chance that years later you can drill for it again on the coast, and repair your ports.'

They sipped their drinks. 'We have many oilfields inland, more than twenty miles,' the Prince thought out loud. 'And the offshore rigs, they could be uncoupled to float free, re-attached after.'

'It's a good approach,' I commended. 'But there's another problem. The mass movement of the populace, and the resulting refugee camps, will give rise to a terrorist group, and they'll do a good job at destroying the planet. It's the reason Jimmy came back through time.'

'A terrorist group ... that can do so much damage?'

'They'll mobilise millions of refugees, hungry and homeless refugees, when the economy of the region is reduced to zero.'

They nodded. 'I can see that,' the Prince stated. 'And this ... agreement?'

'If you help to spend money on planning for the refugees, the other nations will make you the preferred supplier till 2025, then switch to others to make up the shortfall.'

'What ... planning?'

'Build apartments and houses in regions that will be unaffected, move some of the people of Southern Iraq to the central region, help us create desalination plants that will survive the quake. And, a year

before the quake, help us create refugee camps away from the affected areas.'

'These terrorists who rise up, they are our people?'

'No, mostly Iraqis.'

'We can move our people inland,' they stated. 'That will not be so difficult. As for Dubai...'

'The migrant workers and westerns would leave,' I said. 'The rest ... well, we were kind of hoping you'd give them a home till they could move back.'

'And how much of Dubai will be left?' they pressed.

'Not a single brick,' I told them. After a moment, I said, 'If you gave the Kuwaitis, and others, small enclaves inland, they only need to be twenty miles away from the coast. Months later they'd be able to go back to ... well, a possible new start. And gentlemen, we're telling you, but asking you not to tell others yet.'

'We can survive this,' the Prince insisted.

'The tsunami, yes, the terror group ... probably not. Jimmy saw them rise before, and they took down the whole world.'

'How is that possible?'

'They infiltrate refugees fleeing the area, then blow themselves up at checkpoints. Others move on and cross borders to Europe, blowing up everything they can, a never-ending supply of suicide bombers rolling forwards. And, when they attack Israel, they'll start a war, soon to be a nuclear war; Jimmy didn't step back through time for nothing. Millions of refugees mean millions of potential recruits.'

'Where will these refugees congregate?'

'In Basra, Baghdad, Tehran, and in Pakistan. The main terror group rises up from Basra, which will be damaged by the tsunami. Jobs in the Iraqi oil industry will be lost.'

'Refugee camps, like the Palestinian camps in Lebanon,' the Prince noted. 'A perfect breeding ground for the angry young men to come together.'

'And be preached to,' his colleague added.

'We will take this deal to our people and return,' the Prince said as he stood. 'But, if this becomes known, people may switch oil supplier early.'

'We have considerable influence,' I assured them.

That following month I watched with keen interest as Saudi Arabia woke up and got moving – and without discussing it with us first. They closed down many of their inland wells, and concentrated on

pumping at the coast and offshore, soon seen to be practising uncoupling rigs and re-attaching them. Their east-west pipeline took on more importance, a second planned. Building work around Riyadh increased exponentially, and a few facilities on the coast were seen being dismantled. Their African enclaves also developed an added urgency to them.

They came back four weeks after the initial meeting, keen to see the oil purchase agreement implemented. They signed an agreement on behalf of their government, and within a day CAR had cut production. President Blake got together with the US oil importers and encouraged them to adjust their buying patterns, without saying why. Sweeteners were offered.

Jimmy persuaded Cuba to scale back production, but to ramp up exploration, briefing them on the disaster to come. China reduced consumption from Tanzania and bought more from Iran, not just Saudi Arabia. West African states were encouraged to reduce production, but Nigeria took some convincing. Jimmy had to explain to them it was a matter of life and death, and time travel, and that he could not expand upon it yet.

The Saudis increased production after years of successive reductions – thanks to us, and I saw movement in Kuwait. I had not discussed anything with the Kuwaitis, neither had Jimmy, but a town in the desert popped up some thirty miles inside the Saudi border. Meanwhile, bombs started going off in Dubai, probably sent by Rahman. The net effect of the bombs was a reduction in tourism, and in business. Property prices began to fall, the Dubai authorities struggling.

They were already in difficulty because of the American led recession, now almost two years long, and things did not look good for them, either side of the tsunami. When the Dubai airport blew up and caught fire it sealed their fate. Tourism died, investors fled, and as soon the party was over it was time to go home.

Jimmy said, ‘Dubai has been moving forwards at twenty percent a year. All it needed was to dip down to ten to collapse completely. It’s a house of cards.’

The bombs continued through to September and the house of cards was on its knees. You couldn’t give away a holiday here.

The brain-trust kids, working with the volunteers, had improved their plastic pipe technology. It all came from oil, but somehow the layers had different properties. Carbon fibre was woven in at one stage and silica powdered onto the final layer, giving it some element of heat resistance.

Production levels were off the chart, the Rwandan stretch of pipeline growing by ten miles a day, a dozen gangs working on it. On the Kenyan side of Lake Victoria, the pipeline was already buried and mostly invisible from above.

In Ethiopia, we had created jobs with the dam projects, one such dam creating a lake stretching back miles. I mentioned fishing to the people who ran our fish farm, and they got on the case. First, they dug up soil from a place ten miles away, dumping it into the lake and turning it brown. Where the lake touched parched soil in the hills, diggers or explosives were used to move the soil into the new lake, currently sitting on mostly barren rocks.

With a dozen dumper trucks a day dropping in soil upstream, the lake was seeded with fish fry, nutrients added to the water. The dirt would settle at the bottom and form mud, and that would give life to both water plants, and the kind of small creatures that fish might munch on. In the meantime, flour and stale bread was dropped in, plus special pellets that the kids had come up with. The rest would take time.

In Uganda, our dam was coming along, a start made on the pipeline. Our Congo dams were taking shape, pipeline being laid north, plans made for additional dams near the Ugandan border.

The citizens of the Middle East could now be seen travelling on our buses, inter-city routes, the local authorities marvelling at how cheap they were to run. Electric cars were also to be glimpsed on the roads. South of Basra, our pipeline was coming along, the desalination plant just south of the city and a mass of cranes. And in the city itself, solar panels now powered TV sets, wind turbines drove air-conditioning systems, and people disconnected from the local electric grid.

The Saudis allocated their first payment to the refugee problem, and sponsored the building of large apartment blocks in Baghdad. The Iraqis were surprised, to say the least, at the generosity suddenly being shown by its previously arrogant southern neighbour.

‘We can win this,’ I told Helen one evening, having spent a hard day poring over production levels.

She seemed sceptical, yet optimistic at the same time.

The following week I commissioned the building of apartments in Amman, Jordan, and further apartments on the Egyptian border with Gaza. My Egyptian pipeline was coming along, the cleaning plant being built west of the Nile delta.

Ben Ares then came to see me. I took him up to the roof, to a café that was open when it was not raining, and we sat with cold beers. 'We're losing Palestinians,' he noted.

'Is that good, or bad?'

'Good, in that they're less of a burden on the Palestinian state, less of a burden on water resources.'

'But?'

'We could ease settlement pressure if we built in other areas.'

'And by that ... you mean if I pay for the building in other areas.' He shrugged.

'And would settlements in the West Bank be halted in favour of these other areas being built on?'

'It would ease the pressure.'

'But would there be a ... direct link, Ben?'

'Would that be a condition?'

'Since we're all busting a gut down here to save the planet, you're damn right it would. It would be a condition – not a hope. And we'd need to provide water for them, so that delayed pipeline would have to be extended first. Then ... then I could see a few apartment blocks rising in the interests of peace. I could also see a loan for you, and a few ... business deals. I could also see the Jewish quarter here growing.'

'That jewellery business has grown very quickly.'

'I could give you a loan towards building a hotel down here, and an apartment block, and stuffing it full of Israelis. And, hopefully, they'd come up with a business idea or two.'

'We would be interested.'

'And a direct flight once a week to Tel Aviv,' I nudged.

'That would be fine. One El Al flight, one of yours.'

'I'll want to see settlements eased, Ben, or there'll be no deal – on anything.'

'And if we compensated Palestinian farmers near the settlements, but moved them?'

'If the compensation was realistic, move as many as you like to the east of Ramallah, or to Jordan, or to Egypt – I don't care; it's the lack of compensation that's the issue. And I'll even refund some of

the compensation afterwards – but only after I see what you're doing, Ben.'

'I think we can reach an agreement. And we'd be interested in property and business down here.'

'It's a free and open city – so long as people do exactly what I say,' I said with a dangerous smile.

I went to see our jewellery factory the next day, and their chart on the wall said it all; production could not keep up with sales. Of most interest to me was the fact that I was turning gold into cash, but without lowering its value. We were also using up the diamonds.

They showed me pictures of shops all around Africa, sixty in total, plans for a hundred more this year alone. They were also now franchising the shops, and we'd soon have shops in every town.

Jimmy was pleased with the project, very pleased, admitting that it was not something he'd ever thought of. But he asked me to franchise it to India, China and South America, and I sent the factory a note to that effect. Hell, if we got into the Chinese market we'd make a killing, and I could shift a lot of gold.

My Saudi contact then cheekily asked if he could buy gold at a good rate, for his cousin who was involved with gold jewellery. We haggled a price, and I gave him a fifteen percent discount on market value, to be paid in US Dollars. Hell, it shifted gold out of our vaults, but not as fast as our jewellery business. That was burning up gold by the tonne, many Africa housewives now adorned with cheap jewellery, bought with their husband's hard-earned dollars.

At the next meeting with the volunteers and the brain-trust kids, they reported that there were now almost twenty thousand of them. A unit was working on economics and the internalisation of the markets - coming up with things that we could produce ourselves, factories popping up all over our region. Those factories created jobs, the research and development departments more or less free of cost.

A massive furniture factory opened, its wood cut in our region, its cloth made from the cotton we seeded many years ago, or from synthetics. Household goods of all sorts were now being produced locally, steel, plastics and glass available cheap. We still imported a great deal from America, but that was intentional.

One of the groups suggested that we create a bottling plant in Southern Chad to service the area, at a point on our water pipeline north, and I gave it the go ahead.

The next group came up with a flat-pack house, complete with solar panels, wind turbine and stove. I had to see it. We all journeyed around to the factory, where a demonstration was laid on. The pack came on a lorry, the pack about six foot wide and twelve foot long, three feet deep but not very heavy; it took only six men to unload it.

As they got to work assembling it, the chief designer said, 'We use local plastic, wood and metal, and the solar panels that we produce. Everything is made here.'

'And the cost?'

'Six thousand dollars per unit.'

I stood observing the small cabin taking shape. The walls were thin, but had two layers to them, and the staff explained that sand, dirt or even cement could be placed in the layers to give extra strength. If not, they were cool during the day and warm at night. Bolts and wires took the tension and stiffened the assembly, the floor and roof adding strength to the shape.

With the roof on they fixed the solar panels to clips, attached wires and fed them below. A small wind turbine was placed on top, powering either a fan or a heating unit. A silver water container was fixed to a corner and wired to the solar panel; the water could be heated up. We stepped closer and peered inside.

A fold down table was clipped in place, a sink, pipes attached to the tank on the roof. A foot pump could be used to pump water up to the tank. Strong plastic chairs were placed down and I sat observing as a bed frame was clipped together, rubber straps run across the top of the base.

I tested the walls, pushing and poking, I pumped water up and watched the wind turbine turn the fan, and even lay on the bed frame. Triangle shelving was fitted to the corners, and it gave the final added strength to the walls.

Stepping out, I asked, 'When can they go into production?'

'In a month or two.'

'Produce a thousand, and use them around Darfur and Chad, see how they work. Send some to Rescue Force at Mawlini for them to experiment with, but then I want a larger version - to fit a family of five. As soon as that's ready I want to see it. Well done, everyone, it's a good design - and cheap. But where's the TV?'

I took away their brochure, and sat up late that night reading it. Turning to Helen, I said, 'For The Brotherhood to rise up and organise they'll need people and ... a density of people, yeah?'

'Yes, I should think so.'

‘So if the camps are all small camps, dotted around, they can’t organise too well, now can they?’

‘Well, no, I suppose not.’

‘In order to get the supplies in, people like the Red Cross will opt for larger camps - it makes life easier. But I’d opt for smaller camps, well spread out.’

The next day the news broke; someone had gone to the press and reported that the 2025 disaster will be a quake in the Gulf. The detail was both accurate, and a worry.

Jimmy waited a day to see what the press speculation would be, but a Kuwaiti official confirmed the story. That was that; we were in the final leg of Jimmy’s struggle. I spoke to him on the phone, and he didn’t sound concerned, he sounded almost relieved.

Global stock markets dipped and oil prices rose; I guess they weren’t looking at the calendar since we had five years to go. Jimmy then planned a TV statement, asking for the speech to be piped to everyone on the planet at the same time. It would be 2pm GMT and held in London. In the house, I sat with Helen and the girls to watch it.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, and those watching this broadcast far and wide, I’m here today to address you about the speculation about a disaster to occur in 2025. The press speculation is correct, there will be an earthquake in the Gulf region, and a bad earthquake.

‘As with other earthquakes and disasters, I have been working with the various world leaders for long time to plan ahead, and to consider what we might do. Many of the world’s leaders knew twenty years ago, but we’ve kept it secret so that we could plan, and so that the peoples of the affected regions could get on with their lives and receive outside investment.

‘It was decided a while ago to inform the Saudi Government and others in the Middle East, and to make joint plans and preparations. The earthquake will strike a region stretching from Northern India, through Northern Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. There will be widespread devastation in those regions, particularly in southeast Iran.

‘As a result of the earthquake, the Iranian side of the Gulf will rise, and the Saudi side will sink. The resulting tsunami will reach inland ten miles, and will sweep away all before it. The water will reach Basra in Iraq, and will wipe away Kuwait, Qatar and The Emirates. The wave will also strike southern Iran, Southern Pakistan

and the west coast of India, Oman and Yemen, even as far south as Somalia and Kenya.

‘Following the earthquake and tsunami, the economy of the region will be severely affected, and there will be a refugee crisis. The various world leaders have been working with me to make plans to deal with that refugee crisis but, unfortunately, if those refugees are not housed effectively, then civil unrest in the Middle East is likely.

‘Everyone should be aware ... that in early 2025 all oil production in the Gulf will end. That should not be a cause for concern, since I know where additional oil can be found. We also have electric cars, and electric bus technology, and I now urge all nations to adopt the electric car technology before it’s too late.

‘Everyone should also be aware that this crisis can, and will, be dealt with, as were the other problems that we previously faced. Mankind will go on as before, the world economies will go on as before, husbands and wives will argue ... as before. The worst thing you have to fear ... is idle gossip by the press. Thank you.’

‘Well, it’s out there,’ I said with a sigh.

‘My God,’ Shelly said. ‘No Middle East oil. Is there enough in other areas?’

‘I doubt it,’ I commented. ‘That’s why we’re pushing electric cars.’

Checking the news online that evening, I could see banks collapsing, property development companies folding, and other businesses making provisions for losing money in the region. Individual tales emerged of people being wiped out after having invested in certain regions of the Gulf. Oil continued to spike upwards, the markets falling further – despite Jimmy’s reassurance.

The next day the TV news was not good, Dubai property prices reducing to zero, the ruling families complaining that they should have been warned twenty years ago. At least they were blaming the US and the Saudis, and not Jimmy directly.

I called an emergency meeting of the African leaders for the following day, and welcomed them into the conference centre as their President. Taking the podium, I hoped that I could be reassuring.

‘Ladies and gentlemen. You’ve all now seen the news about the 2025 earthquake, and let me start by saying that the affect on Africa will be very small. We produce our own oil, and we’re not as dependent on the Middle East as some nations are. But, even though

we'll not be affected, we will do all we can to assist, because as Jimmy said ... problems in the Middle East may lead to civil unrest there, and maybe a war.

'In the short-term, we are asking all African oil producers to cut back on production, and are hoping that the Gulf states sell as much oil as possible in the next five years. Some of that oil revenue will then be used to assist the refugees in 2025. You must calculate that, after 2025, Africa oil will be much sought after, and will make us a much greater profit. So leave it in the ground for now, where you can.

'But there is more to this tale than I'm letting on. Jimmy believes that unrest in the Middle East could lead to war, and that it will spread, probably to us. Because of that we're making plans and contingencies – just in case. I urge all of you to cooperate fully with those contingency plans; if we all pull together in one direction then we're a very strong continent.

'In the years ahead we'll be looking at ways of internalising our markets, and making things that we currently import. We'll be sponsoring factories in many nations, aiming to build what we need. We'll also look closely at the goods that each nation makes, and will try to have them sold around the other nations.

'Ladies and gentlemen, we're in a very good position, good enough to help the Middle East, and strong enough to resist any aggression. Reassure your peoples, and carry on expanding as usual. Hold your heads up high, and never appear concerned. Africa is now strong, very strong.'

After my applause we broke to mingle, drinks in hand. Small groups huddled and discussed the turn of events, and I beat up those countries that produced oil, hinting at consequences if production was not cut back.

An agreement was made, even with the Nigerians, and oil quotas were set, a communiqué released. I made a speech to the TV cameras afterwards, reassuring the peoples of Africa, and suddenly felt like I was the President, really the President.

G20

A week later, Helen, myself, and my team jumped aboard Africa One, bound for the UN building in New York and a meeting of leaders and Finance Ministers. The UN did, however, now screen all

diplomats. They kept the lousy coffee in plastic urns, but they screened potential shooters.

Familiar faces were greeted, a few new ones introduced, thirty minutes taken to chat in small groups before Jimmy called order.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, politicians, hard working aides. This meeting is ... a little more out in the open than I had anticipated - by a few years at least. Perhaps that’s a good thing, not least because there are fewer secrets that I’m burdened with. Some in the Middle East are very concerned, some afraid, some downright angry at the thought of losing their homes, businesses and livelihoods. They will, at the very least, escape with their lives, and if the people around this table work together and assist, then the Middle East may have a chance at recovery.

‘We’ve already seen the Saudis move quickly, and I’m pleased that they’re showing such resilience. That brings us to the first topic, the one of oil production - an important topic to us all. The Saudis, and hopefully other Gulf states, have entered into an agreement whereby the nations represented around this table will buy more oil now, expecting fully for there to be none from that region in 2025. Part of that deal ... is that the Saudis will assist financially towards the cost of preparing and dealing with the refugee crisis in 2025.

‘So, first of all, can I have a show of hands ... of people not happy with this approach towards Saudi oil.’

‘Oil prices will be high for five years?’ the Brazilians asked.

‘Not high, but more than before. If they rise too much then we’ll increase our own production.’

The Saudis piped up with, ‘We believe that we can restore offshore drilling within weeks after the tsunami.’

‘And how will you get it ashore?’ Jimmy asked.

‘We will tanker it straight down to Mozambique.’

‘A good approach,’ Jimmy commended.

‘And after 2025?’ the Japanese asked. ‘Where do you expect oil prices to be?’

‘Ninety-five dollars a barrel,’ Jimmy suggested, a few people exchanging looks.

‘Why so low?’ the Japanese asked.

‘Because the crisis will polarise people’s view of electric cars,’ Jimmy explained. ‘They’ll panic, despite assurances, and I’ll be pushing hard to get electric car costs down even lower.’

‘How do you see the refugee crisis developing?’ the Turks asked.

‘I see Turkey not accepting any refugees, and I advise you not to. I see the refugees remaining in their own countries, or close by, and

being assisted there. I see temporary shelters being built, food and water shipped in.

‘The President of Africa, my good colleague, assures me that they have invented self-assembly homes that are not only suitable, but come with solar panels and wind turbines to generate electricity and warmth. Such homes are only around six thousand dollars to produce, made from materials in our region of Africa.

‘All of the nations here are free to buy those homes in years to come, to assist with refugees, or can simply donate towards them. A little money will go a long way to keep the refugees ... happy.’

‘And would donor nations be expected to contribute to the Iranians?’ President Blake asked.

‘They most definitely will, since an unstable Iran is not desired ... by anyone. And the countries unaffected by the disaster, those that expect to take refugees, will be Jordan and Syria, Iraq itself hosting its own refugees from Basra and the area to the south of it – plus those of the Gulf states. I’ll be asking that donor nations contribute towards the added burden on those countries, but – as you may know – Paul is already assisting those nations, and will continue to do so. Paul? Mister President?’

I gave him a look. ‘We have desalination plants already working, increased agricultural output in Jordan, and we’re funding housing projects. In Iraq itself we’re working on much needed desalination, but around Basra - water piped up to the city and far enough away from any tsunami damage. I’ve also donated hundreds of electric buses and thousands of solar panels to assist with their economies in a small way.

‘In the years ahead I intend to build apartments in Syria, Iraq and Jordan, ready to assist with refugees. But, we’ve no idea of the movement of the peoples of Kuwait, Qatar and The Emirates. Perhaps our Saudi friends could give us their opinion.’

‘The Kuwaitis will be at an enclave thirty miles inland, across our border. The other nations are ... undecided on a course of action, but there is high ground they could go to.’

Jimmy said, ‘If they remain in the area, then food and water will be scarce, no electricity, no roads, no functioning ports. Perhaps you could offer them temporary areas till they see the damage ... and finally pay attention.’

‘And then?’ the Saudis nudged.

‘And then ... you could assist them till they reclaim their own lands, or move to other nations – under agreement with those nations.’

‘Will the Kuwaitis not use their enclave in Africa?’ India asked.

‘Yes, they will,’ the Saudis replied. ‘For a certain number of citizens. And we will relocate almost three million.’

‘Could Dubai not relocate as well?’ the Indians asked, and I tried not to show my disappointment in their question.

‘Dubai’s wealth came from the allure of their golden city,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘That wealth is now gone, and they owe a great deal of money to many people. They have little to bargain with.’

‘The Emirates and Qatar total some four point five million people,’ the Saudis thought they would mention. ‘More than we could absorb, or would wish to.’

‘Could they return later?’ Blake asked.

‘No,’ Jimmy suggested. ‘They’d be starting from scratch, nothing left. Absolutely nothing. Many will drive towards Iraq when the time runs short, some towards Oman – but Oman will have its own problems.’

‘And what of Pakistan?’ the Indians asked.

‘They’ll have an internal refugee problem of one or two million people.’

‘And will that lead to unrest?’ the Indians pressed.

‘No,’ Jimmy answered. ‘The Warizistan Taliban have been diminished, and will continue to be diminished before the time.’

‘And Iran?’ Blake asked.

‘Will concentrate on looking after its people. The *unrest* ... that I expect, would start in Basra, and that’s where my efforts will be focused.’

We spent thirty minutes going back and forth before we broke into smaller groups, individual deals discussed. After a lunch break we met with the Russians, Chinese, Americans and our outgoing British PM.

Jimmy placed a map of the region on the table. ‘OK, let’s get down to it. First of all, the Saudi factor is new to me ... and unexpected. If they help financially, then things may be better in the region after the tsunami. I’ll also be expecting you all to dig deep, because the rise of The Brotherhood is about displaced people with empty bellies, rejected by those around them. The displaced from Qatar, Kuwait and the Emirates - the poor displaced, will end up north and west of Basra, in camps.

‘Even though those camps will have Iraqis in, the local Iraqis will soon want the foreigners gone, because around Basra jobs are scarce enough now anyway. If the Saudis take many, then the Basra camps

could be reduced, and let me be clear about something: the rise of The Brotherhood is not assured, and may be delayed for years.'

'I had an idea,' I put in. 'If we create many small camps, instead of one big camp with a million people in it, then the rise may not find the support it needs to gain momentum.'

'An excellent idea,' Jimmy commended.

'If we pressure the Saudis to take some, then those camps don't need to be so big,' Blake suggested.

'We'd need the oil buying nations to join forces and pressure the Saudis,' Jimmy informed them. 'Oman will suffer, they won't want to take any people – even if we offer financial aid.'

'Four million people is a lot for the Saudis to adopt,' I cautioned.

'Anything is a benefit,' Blake suggested. 'I'll talk to them. Do they know about the Brotherhood?'

Jimmy nodded.

'But not the other nations,' Blake noted. 'Probably best; that would depress people around the world for sure. And you're sure that Iran won't descend into chaos.'

'Pretty much,' Jimmy suggested. 'Besides, we'll assist them.'

'How many refugees will they have?' Blake asked.

'The most, almost five million homeless, but most will stay near their old homes.'

'What if Iraq closed its border?' I asked.

'They did before, but the border guards all accepted large bribes to let the people in. And people just drove around the border posts, across the desert. The Saudis will be quite brutal with unwelcome visitors.'

'OK, moving on. If, and when, The Brotherhood rise up, this is the plan. Our forces in Afghanistan run a line from the Chinese border to the Gulf, stopping anyone crossing into Pakistan, or vice versa. That will be the same force as is there now, but strengthened.'

He tapped the map. 'Next, the Africans will take the Sinai Peninsula, possibly with Egyptian permission. Your combined navies will patrol the Gulf, the Red Sea and the Yemen Straits from the base we now have. NATO takes the Mediterranean, Russia – you take the Black Sea, the Bosphorus Straits down to Europe.'

'An army of Rifles will land in India and assist on their border with Pakistan. Russia, you'll cut off Georgia with an army north of that country, a second line of defence inside your own borders. The European armies will position themselves in Greece, Bulgaria and Romania, Gibraltar and Spain, Southern Italy and Malta.'

‘Russia and China, you need to watch northern Iran. That bottles up the region, but that’s just the start line. At the time I’ll look at where pockets of The Brotherhood are active, and use search and destroy missions with the Rifles, plus those of your soldiers suitably trained. Then, as in Afghanistan, we would make camps and set-up flags, inviting attack ... and killing anyone who does attack us; they’ll run out of people before we run out of ammunition.

‘My aim ... is to be able to call upon a hundred thousand Rifles, and forty thousand of your soldiers suitably trained, but never deploying more than half of that.’

‘What about Turkey?’ the Russians asked.

Jimmy took a moment. ‘Hard to call. I probably will put Rifles on their border, but they do have their own very capable army. But there are two things that The Brotherhood will want to attack. One is oil production in general and the Saudi Arabia oil in particular, and the other is Israel. One strategy could be to deploy Rifles to the Saudi border, another group around Israel; if they killed enough people it could turn the tide. It could be the solution I’ve been searching for.

‘Problem is, that’s a ten year job as the Middle Eastern countries get back on their feet and fight back themselves. Remember, the economies will be hit hard.’

‘And if the displaced are spread around?’ the Russians asked.

‘Then they won’t have the concentrated firepower, and they can’t gain momentum. And remember, it’s not just the displaced that join them, many ordinary Arabs flock to their cause because they’re all unemployed and suffering.’

‘Can your soldiers go in sooner?’ the Chinese asked.

‘They would help to spark the rise,’ Jimmy said as he studied the map. ‘Seen as foreign oppressors.’

‘This whole mess comes down to the wrecked economies,’ Blake noted.

‘Do you fancy throwing some money at the problem?’ Jimmy testily asked.

‘I can just see Congress approving money to rebuild Iran!’ Blake scoffed.

‘And that, boys and girls, is why we’re screwed,’ Jimmy said with a sigh. ‘We’d have to throw a lot of money at corrupt dictators or proclaimed enemies.’

Studying the map, an idea came to me, but I kept it to myself.

Jimmy ended with, ‘I want all of you to consider just how much you would commit to the restoration of the Middle East economies.

We have a while yet, and I would expect the recession to end this year. I'll supply CAR with locations of untapped oil; we'll drill, but cap them off ready. Russia, try use your coal-oil internally where you can.'

Back in Africa, I offered the South Africans coal-oil technology, provided they buy factory goods from us. It was an easy deal for them to accept. I sent them details of the non-chemical process and a bunch of experts, plus a loan towards their first refinery. That done, I asked Abdi to pop in.

'Abdi, how do you feel about giving over some of your empty land for an enclave, for a few years.'

'To who?' he puzzled.

'To rich Arabs from Qatar and The Emirates.'

He took a moment. 'What do you think?'

'They would be fenced off, not interacting with your people, but buying goods from you. And I'd expect them to go home after 2029. They'd pay you towards the land, and they'd build a port.'

'Will they become dangerous after this earthquake?'

'Dangerous? They'd be surrounded by Somali Rifles! Can you think of anyone wanting to trouble you?'

Abdi smiled. 'No.'

'And they'd have no weapons. Maybe their police would have some weapons, but that's it.'

'How many people would come?'

'Maybe a quarter million at most.'

'If you think it would be OK.'

'What could go wrong? You surround them. And, ask them to spend some money on oil exploration offshore.'

'That is expensive,' Abdi agreed.

'It's what they're good at, so let them do it. You'd get a share of the profits.'

I then asked Jimmy where the untapped oil was off Somalia, and he sent a scanned image with a few scribbles on. The Saudi Prince was summoned with his opposite numbers from Qatar and The Emirates. They came to my office, but the new faces did not look pleased to be in my company.

'Thank you for coming,' I offered.

'We have little to lose,' one stated.

'And everything to gain,' I quickly added. 'OK, I'll get down to it. I've worked long and hard to persuade the Somalis to allow you an enclave, as with the Saudis in Mozambique.'

‘That enclave has oil.’

‘This has more oil.’

‘Why were we not offered that?’ the Saudi Prince asked.

‘It’s close to the Middle East and ... if there’s conflict in the Middle East, it’s ... close. We figured you’d want to be far away.’

‘What conflict?’ the Qatar representative asked.

‘We believe that if the economy of the Middle East stays poor for many years after the quake, that war could break out.’

They glanced at each other, shrugging. They obviously didn’t seem to disagree with that.

‘Look,’ I said. ‘The land is cheap enough, there’s oil offshore, and when your existing countries are back up to speed you can move back. You’d have to pay the Somalis a percentage of the oil, but I’d subsidise your food and water.’

‘Subsidise? For ... how many people?’

‘How many do you have?’

‘Two million,’ the man from Qatar said.

‘Then I’d subsidise food for that number.’

They stared back.

‘Who is the offer for?’ the official from Qatar asked.

‘Both of you, enclaves side by side.’

‘And who extracts the oil?’

‘You do it under agreement, overseen by CAR, quadrant by quadrant. Anyway, think about it.’

‘And if they do not wish to pursue this offer?’ the Saudi Prince asked.

‘I’ll try and get you in there,’ I offered. ‘But only if you set-up an enclave in your territory for these good gentlemen; quid pro quo.’

‘And the oilfield size?’ the Prince asked.

‘Don’t get ahead of yourself, these gentlemen haven’t decided yet.’

I took them to lunch in New Kinshasa, showing them the view from the tallest tower. ‘I built this from nothing,’ I told them. ‘And I can build you an enclave very quickly.’

Jimmy rang me a few days later and asked what I was up to. I said that I had an idea, and that I was doing what I was good at, and to trust me. He sounded worried.

A month later the governments of Qatar and The Emirates, which were basically the royal families, agreed to the deal. They each paid Abdi two billion dollars down for the land, and I got to work. I sent a thousand of the basic quick-assembly huts that we made to

Somalia, along with a thousand workers. With a batch of the new flat-pack homes ready, I grabbed five hundred and sent them up as well, along with a couple of hundred miles of barbed wire.

The initial team set-up the two squares, both five miles wide and five deep, and pegged them out. I sent bulldozers by train and lorry, hiring four thousand Somali builders, Abdi providing Rifles to patrol the perimeter wire. The corporation sent up convoys of water tankers from Mogadishu, bottled water and food.

The ground was cut before year's end, Helen and myself filmed with shovels in hands. Back at the mansion, Jimmy was waiting. He nudged me towards the end of the garden and the jetty.

‘How much are the enclaves in Somalia costing us?’

‘How much will the rise of The Brotherhood cost us?’ I countered.

He shot me a look before taking in the calm lake, sailboats in the distance. ‘Good answer. If I thought it would stop them ... I’d use everything we have.’

‘But...?’

He put his hands in his pockets and stared down at small fish in the shallows. ‘Was a time when I considered committing the Rifles to the Middle East, even if it cost them all their lives. And ... there was a time when I thought about using all the financial resources from down here. But ...’

‘But you couldn’t bring yourself to do it,’ I finished off. I put my hands in my pockets and stared out across the lake, heaving a sigh. ‘What I’ve built down here means everything to me; I’d be sorely tempted to tell the world to go to fuck and just isolate Africa.’

‘I’ve had that thought once or twice. But if The Brotherhood get Iranian missiles or fissile material –’

‘Then we’d be at the end of a nuke inside a decade. Yes, I know.’

‘When I gave you more to do down here, it was to develop your political skills, and to widen your experience. I figured that the experience would come in handy when the troubles started. Africa is now five or six years ahead of where it should be, and that’s on an exponential chart, and you’re looking at things with a commercial slant, not a political one. Instead of asking people nicely ... you’re dangling big carrots. As well as kicking a few doors in.

‘That jewellery factory was a good idea, a billion dollar industry already, and the water pipes should make a big difference to tensions now and in the future. Fact is, we’re in new territory, way ahead of schedule and on a different course. The Saudis were never supposed to have enclaves, nor the Kuwaitis or others.’

‘If they’re not there in 2025, then they can’t become refugees,’ I pointed out.

‘If the rich leave and the poor stay, then it’ll still be an issue.’

‘Well, in that case, I may just have a word with certain Arabic gentlemen and modify my agreement. Or else!’

‘Maybe this is the right approach, the commercial approach. I’ve been focused on the fighting too much.’

‘Fighting with your other self. Which are you, soldier or doctor?’

‘If I’m the soldier, you’re the doctor,’ Jimmy softly stated.

‘The enclaves can’t do any harm. They get people out of the quake zone, they create jobs here, they make money for Africa, and they’re ring-fenced; surrounded by Rifles.’

‘There’ll be no Iraqis in the enclaves,’ Jimmy commented. ‘And they’re the spark for the fire.’

‘I’m working on a few ideas, and I’m sure that I can make a difference.’

‘That’s what I always hoped for, that someone else would take on the fight.’

‘It’s what you hired me for, boss.’

He turned and smiled. ‘I hired you for your charm and wit, and because you produce nice daughters.’

‘Shelly has surprised us; not interested in university now.’

‘She’s bright enough as it is, and university is just three years of reading books.’

‘She’s quite settled with Mali, and working eighty hours a week. Poor girl looks tired some days.’

‘She’s found her calling,’ Jimmy commented. ‘And a few years early. Another surprise.’

‘Well, there’s no point knowing the future just to repeat it – someone once said.’

Jimmy smiled. ‘You’re learning. And it’s only taken thirty years. How’ll you power the enclaves in Somalia?’

‘Got a ruddy great nuclear reactor down the coast with spare capacity; I’ll run power lines. The plant will also power the desalination works.’

‘Some day, the Somalis may not be happy you gave away their oil.’

‘They get twenty percent.’

‘They should have got eighty!’

‘Well, they got money upfront, and I’m creating jobs for them. They can whinge if the world is still here after 2025.’

‘Don’t repeat this yet, but that quake will cause a tiny shift in the earth’s orbit, making us a little cooler in the decades ahead.’

‘Noticeably cooler?’

‘No, just a degree or two, but it all helps.’

‘You’ve banned the release of the plankton in the Caribbean,’ I noted.

‘It would do well there, but affect their tourist trade. And right now we need the world economy buoyant. Anyway, how’s money?’

‘Don’t you keep track?’

‘Yes, but I like to ask you what you’re up to, *Mister President*.’

‘Cash is fine, American stocks climbing and we’ve offloaded some. The loan money is coming back, but slowly, CAR is down because we capped the wells, but GDP and taxes here are rocketing. My good citizens are not savers, they’re spenders.’

‘New found wealth,’ Jimmy noted.

‘Got a bunch of companies that want to build hotels down here, but I only grant them a license when the other hotels are over sixty percent occupancy.’

‘You are indeed a wise leader of your people,’ Jimmy mocked. ‘And Ben Ares was after a few quid?’

‘I made it conditional; a peace dividend.’

‘Yeah, well good luck with that. But ... but the Gaza Palestinians are moving to Egypt in numbers, and to Jordan. Your policies there are easing the housing shortages inside the occupied territories.’

‘And the Israelis are now compensating Palestinians before they boot them out of their homes. We’re paying for it ... but it’s the thought that counts.’

He shot me a look. ‘Cats and dogs; the Israelis will never change.’

‘Their economy is suffering,’ I said. ‘More orthodox Israelis on state benefits than people working!’

‘The working Israelis tend to have two kids, the orthodox Israelis have four or more. And the poor old US taxpayer is being nudged towards helping out.’

‘Sanchez seems to have become a footnote in history already.’

‘The US military machine sees Israel as an important outpost in a sea of hostile nations, and the Israelis see the Americans as a pushover. They’re using each other, but it’s the Israelis that will pay the price - the higher price ultimately.’

We headed back to the house. Jimmy said, ‘A lot of human rights activists are after us for the Rifles in South America and elsewhere, accusing us of shooting first and arresting second.’

‘Damn right.’

‘So pull them out, all apart from Mexico.’

In the weeks that followed I dispatched a few thousand volunteers to Somalia, to speed up the enclaves, and hired another three thousand Somali builders, the men coming from all over the country.

Oddly enough, many of the hotel companies that nagged me about building in New Kinshasa now started to ask about the enclaves. I explained that it was sovereign land belonging to Qatar and The Emirates, and to ask them. They received permission straight away, and ground was soon cut on a dozen hotels in each enclave.

We housed plenty of building companies in our region, some of whom had laid off staff as New Kinshasa neared completion, so I dispatched a few of them up to Somalia with grants. They re-hired former staff and shipped their heavy equipment up by train. I figured that the enclave would be ready way ahead of schedule.

I then had an idea, a sneaky idea. I contacted the emirs and princes responsible for the building work, and informed them that I would build worker’s apartments at the rear of the enclaves, and that they would be pulled down in 2025. They had no objection, but thought it expensive compared to the pre-fabricated houses that a lot of workers suffered in.

The order was signed off, and concrete apartments for five thousand workers were sanctioned – in each enclave. But I had made a mistake, deliberately. I assumed one worker per two- bedroom apartment. Silly me. Ten thousand apartments would now be built, built by men who were expert in building these standardised blocks. And when finished, I would forget to demolish them.

End of year

The end of 2019, and the start of 2020, was widely celebrated, a little like 1999 turning to 2000, and cities the world over competed for the best displays – apart from Dubai. The former golden jewel of the Gulf was now a ghost town, apartments empty, cars abandoned and collecting dust and sand.

Dubai’s penthouse suites, bought for tens of millions, sat empty. But they started to attract a strange crowd of holidaymakers, people keen to stay in luxury for a week or two at next to nothing –

especially the Palm Fronds villas belonging to the rich and famous. The rental agencies handled the bookings, no regard for the absent owners, tourism picking up a little.

Most of our belongings from the old house had now been moved down, and we had little interest left in the UK. Some UK newspapers accused me of abandoning the country, but the stories didn't bother me. Much. I gave an interview to the BBC a day later.

'My work here is very important, especially towards 2025. We're building cities for the Arabs to live in, and we're working on new products and new technologies to help the Middle East after the earthquake and tsunami. That work is vital. We're also working on fresh oilfields, and new energy technologies to assist in the future if there's an oil shortage.

'The coal-oil technology that the UK is benefiting from so much was developed down here, and that's created tens of thousands of jobs. The lights will stay on the UK for the next hundred years because of that technology.'

I felt better, and vindicated, and wasn't sure if I cared any more about British newspapers. Much.

Christmas was a family affair, Jimmy plus his new woman - a thirty-five year old American actress. She had gained work through some of the films that we had sponsored, and met Jimmy at a charity function to raise money for the Hawaiian displaced, some of whom were still displaced.

The films we had funded had done well enough for us to recoup most of the money, and the propaganda machine was working flat out. Books about the combined soldiers in Afghanistan had been available for a year or so, a hundred thousand printed in each language and sent to every military base of the countries in question. Ordinary soldiers and young recruits now had their idols, and a goal to aim for.

Two films about the combined units had been released, and international military integration was becoming the norm. The naval base in Somali had been filmed many times, as well as the bases in Madagascar and Sri Lanka. Russian long-range bombers landed in Scotland, and British and American warships docked in Russian ports, Russian dolls and trinkets purchased for wives and girlfriends, Russian prostitutes visited after a spot of shopping.

Jimmy had made a point of visiting many of the bases where the nations mixed, and had taken his latest squeeze along to the base in Somalia before joining us here for Christmas. Mali was now part of the family, but Lucy surprised us by swapping boyfriends every

three months or so. We had always considered Shelly to be the tart of the family.

Liz loved Christmas, and loved to be fussed-over by Jimmy; I rarely got a look in if Jimmy was in the room. She would sit on his lap and watch the TV with us, Jimmy content to carry her to a room where she could watch a kid's programme with him, sometimes for hours.

Our Christmas catering was handled by Cookie and Sandra, down on a kind of working holiday, and we all ate way too much as usual. I even fell asleep by the pool after lunch. With New Year threatening a bit of a squall, we opted for a function in New Kinshasa, a business tower with a restaurant and nightclub on the twentieth floor. It offered the partygoers a view of the city lights, and I stood staring down at my creation.

Jimmy's lady, the stunning actress, drew level. 'It's beautiful. And you built all this from jungle.'

'Well, it wasn't all jungle – some was mosquito infested swamp.'

She smiled. 'Quite an achievement; you must be proud.'

'I am, but we're not finished yet. Just built an Olympic sized pool for competitions, a new fire station, another library and a few extra Internet cafes. It's never ending trying to design the perfect city. So, how're things Stateside?'

'I don't really get to see any of the problems, but you see it on the news.'

'Still many homeless?'

'The people protesting are not homeless, just not ... living where they'd like to live ... or have the jobs they want. Most of the coastal areas have been repaired, the parts you can see, but compensation claims and insurance are still an issue; still people trying to claim. My mother's house was damaged in Malibu, and she's still trying to sort out the insurance almost two years on. You still see homes boarded up.'

'And Brad, how's he doing?'

'He's very popular, doing what he can, always attacking the damn insurance companies. He's formed his own political party and will be running as a late entry this year.'

'Elections are ... November?' She nodded. 'You Americans like to start early. My election was easy enough, I just said – I'll do it.'

The background music ended suddenly. 'Please leave, we have a fire down below!'

I grabbed the man who warned us as people filed out. 'What floor?'

‘Number three, sir.’

I turned. ‘I want all able-bodied men and security staff with me!’ I shouted, Jimmy closing in as I led the security detail down the stairs. We rushed down creating our own echoing roar, a full sixteen floors, our party being the only people in the building. On the fifth floor I stopped, asking the initial guard who warned me where the fire was.

‘Towards the canal, sir.’

I opened the stairwell doors and checked, leading the men into an open plan office. Looking down, I could see the canal through the smoke. ‘Security, shoot out these windows, all of them on this side.’

Standing back and joining Jimmy, the guards shot out the windows, a breeze and a whiff of smoke entering the large open plan office.

‘OK, throw everything out, into the canal. Move it!’

Jimmy took his jacket off and grabbed a desk by himself, soon shoving it through the broken glass. Computer screens splashed into the water, filing cabinets tumbled, and chairs clattered on the concrete below. With everyone working hard and cooperating in carrying desks, we soon had an empty office.

‘Carpet tiles, ceiling tiles!’ I shouted. ‘Rip them all down.’

Sticky carpet tiles were pulled up, guards on chairs knocking down the white ceiling tiles.

Jimmy grabbed a water cooler and stepped out. He descended a floor, the ladies now out of the building, and smashed it onto the stairs. Others copied, water coolers smashed on the floor that I was on.

I led the men a floor lower, all now perspiring, and found a corner office alight. ‘Shoot out the windows, throw everything out.’

Heading towards the fire, I pulled the hose off the wall with an angered determination, straightened it out with a little help and turned on the water. We had pressure. I sprayed the office doors first, yellow flickering flames visible, then ordered the guards to hold them ajar. With twelve inches to play with, and black smoke billowing out, I aimed at the ceiling, soon seeing white tiles blown aside.

Closing in on the gap, I aimed lower, soon no flames visible, just a lot of black smoke. I backed up, handing the hose to a guard. ‘Turn the water off!’ I faced the man I handed it to. ‘Stay here.’

We checked each office in turn, all dressed in our black tuxedos, but found no further evidence of fire on this floor. Opening the stairwell doors, shiny helmets burst in.

‘Are you OK, sir?’

‘Yes, we got the fire out. And the floor above us - we moved everything flammable out.’

‘Please be going now, sir.’

‘Going? I built this city, and I’m not losing a building! Follow me.’

Jimmy tagged along behind, back up a level. We found smoke. ‘Coming from the vents,’ Jimmy noted. ‘That’s how fires travel floor to floor.’

The vent turned out to be hot to the touch. With Jimmy and the fire chief helping, we reeled out a hose and turned it on, spraying the vent. When it was cooler, Jimmy punched a hole into its thin metal, the hose shoved in. The bare concrete floors were now wet, sticky stains from where the carpet tiles had been.

Not wanting to take a chance, I dosed the whole floor, the open plan office now very open, the odd calendar fixed to the walls, loose telephones lying in the water.

Another fireman stepped in. ‘All OK above this floor, sir.’

‘And where the fire started?’ I asked.

‘Out now, sir, but much damage.’

Jimmy led me below, past firemen on the stairs, and to the blackened remains of an office, sloshing through a half-inch of water, drips falling from the exposed concrete ceiling, a few soggy and deformed tiles still hanging.

I picked up a half-burnt calendar. ‘Someone will have a redecorating bill in the new year.’

Jimmy picked up the melted plastic pot of a charred Christmas tree, the wires of Christmas lights still visible. He waited.

‘Fairy lights left on,’ I realised.

‘Good idea to clear out the fifth floor, could have made a real difference,’ Jimmy commended. ‘C’mon, best go get cleaned up - and reassure the women folk we’re alive and well.’

Outside, the police and fire brigade had arrived in force, the party guests all huddled as it started to rain, names taken. I collected my ladies, Jimmy collecting his date, and we headed home, faces blackened with soot, suits wet and ruined, Helen not impressed that I tried to tackle the fire.

‘I built this city, love; I’ll be buggered if I’m going to let a fire damage it.’ I got a disapproving scowl, and looks from Shelly and Lucy.

At the mansion, I threw away my jacket and grabbed a beer with Jimmy. Jimmy commented, ‘You may now feel ... a little as I did

when I came back. That ... feeling of anger towards the inevitable destruction of what's been built.'

I sipped my beer and took a moment. Peering down into my drink, I said, 'I'd have died trying to fight that fire, and not given up.'

'There'll be other buildings, in other places,' Jimmy commented.

I took a moment. 'Not easy to let one go - any one.'

'It never is, but you move on and try again.'

I stared back at him. I carefully stated, 'I could never do this again.'

'You think that now, but you'd change.'

The actress wasn't following our thread.

Jimmy added, 'And, if disaster comes, all you need is that first step. Then, once you're there ... it's a case of one step at a time, one day at a time.'

Helen and the girls were not happy, and I received an ear bashing. Jimmy assured them that there was little real danger, till he received an ear bashing as well, opting to take his lady to the casino. Liz was still up, and at least she was not whinging at me. We settled down to a Japanese 3-D cartoon about a monster eating Tokyo, my daughter fascinated.

Returning to the fire the next morning, I ordered a review of all tall buildings and their respective fire codes. Later in the day, my deputy from the corporation came around with a large Christmas tree. He placed it on the road and set fire to a low branch. The damn thing went up in three seconds.

'Chinese imported Christmas trees, sir. Two others reported alight.'

'Issue a warning, ban them from Africa for next year.'

Desert bloom

Things returned to normal, and I returned to my desk, but I now set out one-year and four-year plans, some elements of which I kept to myself. First, I asked the brain-trust kids from the farm college in Kenya to form a team, and to see if they can boost crops in Jordan and Northern Iraq.

The pipeline across Rwanda was ready and tested, water leaving our lake and travelling across to Lake Victoria, thereafter to either

join the start of the Nile or be pumped out and onwards to Kenya. The pipes to our own lake were then connected and tested, huge areas of white water created, bubbles surfacing, which was good for the fish I was informed.

The next morning, as I stood with a coffee at the end of my garden, I could see that the water level was higher. I called the corporation and they called the water company, who said everything was fine, but that what they hadn't figured on was a rainy Christmas and New Year. What they had planned on – without telling me - was raising our lake twelve inches to improve water storage, and water quality.

Another phone call and a little research showed the Rwandan pumps not at the required capacity, and if ours kept pumping I'd have crocs in my swimming pool in a day or two. Our pumps were throttled back to fifty percent of normal pressure whilst the pumping stations across the lake were fixed.

Three days later, the water level fell back, Lake Victoria receiving its full quota. The second pipeline, the one from the west of Uganda, now burst into life, and the Egyptians monitoring the lake level were happy at the increase. That increase was measured in millimetres, but would have an effect downstream. The Kenyans were also happy, because water was bursting forth in arid regions, including some of our safari lodges.

The only hiccup to the whole start-up ceremony was a Rwandan worker who managed to fall into a pumping station and drown, being fished out of Lake Victoria the next day after a journey of some twenty miles. My engineers were delighted that the man had made it all the way, marvelling at the interior smoothness of the pipe and its joins. They tried to explain the quality of workmanship to me, but I just stared at them till they left my office.

A branch of the third pipeline turned north and into Southern Sudan, its first use being to irrigate safari savannah and bring a little greenness back to the area. Literally. Dormant seeds burst to life, and the livestock and prey animals that had been brought in now had streams in which to quench their thirst. Lions could stop and have a drink before returning to chasing the antelope across the savannah for the tourists.

One of my first visitors in the New Year was a Palestinian spokesman, accompanied by a Jordanian official, the pair something of a surprise. With tea and coffee made, I sat and faced my unexpected visitors.

The Palestinian gentleman began, 'We are familiar with your work in Jordan and Egypt, your work which ... goes around the Israelis. And, although we do not wish to see our citizens leave, we are grateful for what you have done.'

'But...?' I nudged.

'We were wondering if there was more that you could be directly involved with.'

'Such as...?'

'Financial assistance.'

'What could you spend it on? And what could you get through the Israeli lines without them sanctioning it?'

'The Israelis have no problem with us receiving overseas aid, and then spending it on Israeli goods.'

'Ah...' I let out, easing back.

They waited.

'Gentlemen, if I'm going to be get involved, then I want tangible results for my money.'

'Results?'

'A peace dividend,' I said. 'Some ... progress.'

'And what ... *progress* did you have in mind?'

'I'll build apartments in Ramallah, and east of occupied West Bank, if you'll move people that are snuggled up to the Israeli settlements.'

'We'd be giving up our land.'

'They're going to take it anyway, by slow creep,' I countered. 'This way you can compensate your people, and get extra housing.'

'The fact they may do it anyway ... should not be a reason for tolerating it.'

'Oh. OK. Try someone else.'

They sat exchanging looks.

The Jordanian official said, 'I'm sure that we can work something out. You have been a great friend, and most generous.'

I eased forwards and interlaced my fingers. 'Here's the deal. I build more apartments away from Israeli settlements, you move your people out of stone-throwing distance, and I'll send some money. That's not because I agree with Israeli settlement policy, it's because I agree with moving out of the way of the steamroller. You've seen the Gulf states moving thousands of miles, so you can move a few short miles. That, is being pragmatic.'

'And if we agree?' the Palestinian asked.

'Then you'll find me very generous. You can spend the next twenty years shouting at the slowly advancing steamroller, or move

ten miles and have twenty years of peace. And, if you consider the quality of life of your people - rather than your cause, you'll take my money ahead of your pride.'

I faced the Jordanian. 'You have a great many Palestinians in your country. Perhaps you could take more, possibly even an enclave of them. Then, my assistance to you will be much higher than it has been.'

'Do you aim to empty the West Bank?' the Jordanian asked, not looking happy.

'I aim to ease tensions by reducing both the proximity of the warring parties, and the numbers. Fewer people means more of those left in work, and less of a welfare burden. That's how I see things. But, if you wish the next twenty years to be like the last, then stay as you are.'

'You think we are better off outside our lands,' the Palestinian noted.

'The Gulf states chose enclaves in Africa ... over the death of their people. They, obviously care more about lives than parched soil. What do you care about? If that parched soil and nationhood is so important to you, then use up the lives of your people to fight back - I have nothing against that. But don't do it slowly, causing suffering to your people. Do it all in one go, sacrifice all of your people in one go, and when they're all dead you can be sure that you fought honourably for that patch of parched soil. And the rest of us, we can all get some bloody peace.'

'Alternatively, you could look at the Saudis in Mozambique, the Kuwaitis in Namibia, the Hawaiians in Madagascar, and realise that being alive, and being part of the human race, is more important than a piece of land. If you wish to die on your own soil, fine, just hurry up and get on with it.'

They were a little shocked.

'We'll need to discuss your proposal with our leaders.'

'Of course, take your time. Go forth and cogitate, sit about the camp fire and smoke the pipe, it's not like your people are suffering every day.'

They left me with odd expression on their faces.

Ben Ares was on the phone an hour later. 'Paul, how are you?'

'Cut the crap and get to the point, please, or it'll be embarrassing.'

'You've had visitors.'

'Unannounced visitors, who claim ancestry back to the Philistines.'

‘And what did they want?’

‘The usual; nukes, EMPs, rotten apples to throw at you lot.’

‘They want money.’

‘Yes, but I made it conditional.’

‘On what?’ Ben nudged.

‘That they relocate and compensate their unhappy farmers in the shadow of those pesky Israeli settlements, and that Jordan takes more of them.’

‘What did they say?’

‘They said they’d get back to me, but they did compliment me on my diplomatic style, asking if I picked it up in Tel Aviv.’

‘You’re rude even by Israeli standards!’

‘A compliment if ever I heard one. I’ll let you know if they come back.’

‘We’d like to open a small consulate in New Kinshasa.’

‘Sure, pick a spot. But does that mean we have to recognise the State of Israel?’

‘You already do.’

‘Bummer. My Palestinian visitors won’t be happy.’

‘When *were* they happy?’

My visitors returned two weeks later, happy to make a deal. Well, happy was not the right word, but they were ready to deal. They agreed to move farmers, and I’d foot the bill, provided that the buildings on the land would be demolished and no one else would try and move in.

I sanctioned the building of five apartment blocks and sent twenty million dollars cash via the Jordanians. Further assistance would be dependent on them keeping to their side of the deal. The Jordanians, meanwhile, were also prepared to deal, accepting a few more Palestinians for increased uranium ore purchases and development grants.

The Israelis, meanwhile, ignored my previous agreement to build apartments in Israel and grabbed some of the vacated Palestinian land, as I had expected. It was an odd world, but a reliably unreliable and predictable one.

The Israelis opened their mission in New Kinshasa a few weeks later, and further Israelis involved in the diamond and jewellery industry became involved with the existing company, now some six hundred shops in size. The business expanded into India and South America, and my surplus gold was reducing at a pleasing rate. The

Israelis opened a kosher food store and restaurant near their offices, and we added another nationality to the city.

But a month later we had our first serious incident, four armed robbers intent on relieving the jewellery manufacturers of some of their produce. The thieves, South Africans, made the mistake of trying to target the offices instead of the factory, but either one would have proved equally as fatal.

They burst past the first guard, and held a second at gunpoint, both guards being Rifles. When the first nodded a signal, he knocked two gunmen down whilst his colleague pulled his pistol faster than a wild west cowboy and shot dead all four men in an instant.

I arranged for the incident to be covered up, since it would have been bad for business. The getaway driver was found and became crocodile meat, the South African jewellery fence that they would have used meeting Unit 402 head on.

It was a disappointment, but it was a big city and this was the Congo. I had the street that housed the jewellery office and factory gated off, armed guards placed at the entrance. Signs were removed, no bright advertising boards trying to sell the produce made within. Still, you're not a proper city till you attract armed gangs.

Post apocalyptic Canada

'Commissioner Silo, I know what your complaints are, and your desire to feed the people is commendable.'

'There's always food if you have a gold coin, or some fuel,' Jimmy pointed out to the army general, General Gibbs. The general stared back for a second, then walked off. Jimmy turned right and entered the old hotel that was his office, the place always reminding him of a Wild West saloon. He took his outer layers off, the coats damp and dirty.

His secretary had been watching the altercation and now accepted the coats, hanging them up. 'Keep at him and you'll wake up dead, Jimmy,' she cautioned.

'Run the Jacuzzi, I need a bath.'

'Hah!' she laughed. 'Anyway, you have a visitor.' She nodded towards a seat, a dark-skinned man sat in a padded coat, holding his hat.

Jimmy ran a hand down his grey beard and stepped over. 'You're Doctor Singh.'

Singh stood. 'Yes. I work on ... the project.'

'I know, hard to keep secrets around here.' They sat next to a low table, well read magazines from 1994 scattered about. 'What can I do for you?'

Singh took a moment, seeming hesitant. 'I've been doing my own research for many years, in parallel to ... theirs. They've lied to the people, they've hit a dead end, the same calculations over and over and they get nowhere. They've made no progress for nine months. In effect, the project is shut down.'

'That doesn't surprise me. And all the power they take from the dam.' Jimmy shook his mop of unkempt grey hair. 'What a waste.'

Singh glanced over his shoulder. 'I think I can get it to work.'

Jimmy eased back. 'You ... can get it to work ... where they failed?'

'They're trying to use brute force energy to wind back time. Brutish, simple, but flawed. They would need a dozen nuclear reactors wired end to end just to open a tiny portal.'

'And you think you have a way to do it?'

'I know I do, I've already opened a micro-portal,' Singh admitted.

Jimmy eased forwards and rested his elbows on his knees. 'You opened a portal?'

'A micro portal. But I got a radio programme, and it sure as hell wasn't from around here. And it was reporting the Falklands War.'

'1982?'

Singh nodded.

'Then why are you telling me this, and not your military paymasters?'

'Sending someone back through time would be very dangerous, it could do more harm than good. Besides...'

'Besides?'

'There are a few things you don't know. We'd like you to ... join the resistance.'

'I thought we were the resistance,' Jimmy said with a smile.

'The resistance to tampering with time. There's a group of us, all scientists, people who worked on the drug.'

'And your main objection ... to all things military?'

Singh checked that the foyer was empty. 'Jarheads with attitude going back through time.'

Jimmy checked his filthy nails. 'Could get us both shot for just having this conversation.'

'We'll take the risk, instead of helping them finish it.'

'And what is it that you want from me, Doctor Singh?'

'We want you to go.'

'Go?'

'Back.'

Jimmy's eyes widen. 'Go ... back?'

'Yes. There's more to it, more than I can explain, but not here. First, I want you to think about it.'

'What's to think about? If I could go back and warn people, then of course I would.'

'And who would believe you?' Singh posed. 'They might just lock you up as a nut case, or worse – they'd grab you and make you tell them all that you know so that they can use it.'

'They being ... people like the good general.'

Singh nodded. 'He is what he is ... because of the situation. Back in 1982 ... people were different, still in the Cold War. Would they use our knowledge to better the world, or to defeat the Russians and Chinese and then nuke the Middle East before The Brotherhood rise up.'

Jimmy heaved a sigh and slowly nodded. 'Yes, I can see the issues. Who you tell, and how you tell it, could just make it worse.'

'We think we have a plan, a strategy that will work, but it ... it's not what you think, and it will take time. If we could get you the drug, would you go – go back?'

'Why wouldn't you go yourself?'

'Someone needs to operate the machine, and ... as I said, there's more to it.' He handed over a book, and extra food coupons. 'These are for you.'

Jimmy examined the food coupons, then ran a finger down the book's spine. 'History of mankind from 1945 to 1995.' He looked up. 'A little light bedtime reading?'

'We'd like you to eat the extra food, put on some weight, and meet us in ten days. We'll inject you with the drug to give you a boost. But then, then we need you to make a few of the woman in the resistance pregnant.'

Jimmy lifted his eyebrows. 'Is this resistance more of a cult?'

'You'll see when we explain it.'

Ten days later, Jimmy was picked up in the dead of night at the rear of the hotel, whisked away with his head full of the history of

mankind, and what he may say if he stepped back through time. He was not worried about being followed, since he was sure no one cared, certainly not enough to get out of their warm beds on a cold wet night.

After a fifteen-minute drive, they pulled into a farm and bumped along a track towards a barn, the driver not having said a word. They drove straight in to the barn's dimly lit interior, the barn doors closed behind the jeep. Stepping down onto crushed and muddled hay, his nose full of the smell of pigs, Jimmy could make out Singh, but also recognised some of the technicians and scientists that he knew worked on the time machine.

He stood and took in their faces. 'I was thinking ... that the best way to warn the world might be through anonymous letters about disasters, things like earthquakes, and to use those letters to build up trust and credibility. And not just with the American authorities.'

They glanced at each other. 'A good idea,' Singh acknowledged as he stepped forwards. 'Take off your coat and roll up your sleeve.'

Jimmy eased off his coat, glancing at the faces as they stared dispassionately back, most just dark shadows wrapped up warm. 'And this drug will do what ... exactly?'

'This is the low potency version. It will make you immune to most diseases, a little fitter, but mostly it will keep you alive if disease breaks out here.'

Once he had completed the injection, Singh told Jimmy, 'It will have an effect in a few days, but they won't see a difference in you. We'll get you extra food coupons each week.' Doctor Singh then took a blood sample, handing it to a lady. 'This is Mira, and we'd like you to couple with her.'

'Couple with her?'

'Make her pregnant.'

'And ... without seeming ungrateful at the opportunity to *couple*, would you like to explain why?'

'We've developed a drug that stimulates the body's natural production of stem cells. Once injected, you basically stop aging and feel much better, fitter and stronger. But if we take the stem cells of the umbilical, of a child of your own, then we can create a genetically modified variant, and that will make you look twenty years old again.'

'And don't you think the army will notice that?' Jimmy scoffed.

'Yes. When we're ready, you'd have to fake your own death, be injected, and two or three weeks later go back through time.'

‘And just why the hell do I need to look twenty to do that?’ Jimmy loudly asked.

‘To replace your younger self, and to be able to prove that you’re ... you, basically.’

‘Replace my younger self? Why?’

‘We’ve given it a lot of thought, and to change things you’ll need at least ten years or more – perhaps twenty, and they will be looking for you. If they find you ... then you are your younger self, and that will throw them off the trail. You’ll have a perfect DNA match to your parents -’

‘You think my parents would accept me?’ Jimmy scoffed.

‘If we do this right, then yes. We’ve already completed the procedure on a solidier ... by accident. He looked just like he did at twenty.’

‘I was about thirteen stone at the time!’

‘We know, we have everything planned out. Trust us.’

‘Jesus.’ Jimmy took in the faces through the dim light of the barn. ‘So what’s next?’

‘We’ll send you each of ten ladies in turn, once the drug has kicked in, and then – in nine months – if all goes well, we’ll inject you in secret and send you back.’

‘In nine months, there may be none of us left,’ Jimmy pointed out. ‘The Brotherhood landed in Mexico last week.’

‘If things look bad, we’ll open the portal early. Besides, Texas nuked Mexico yesterday.’

Jimmy took a moment. ‘That figures. But just what the hell do you expect me to do for the next nine months?’ Jimmy asked.

‘Study a great deal, I’m afraid.’

A woman asked, ‘When you were young, you were a stock market trader?’

‘Yes. Ah, I see where you’re going with this; trade the markets and make a lot of money!’

‘And use that money to alter things,’ Singh added.

‘So, I guess I better study the markets for those years.’

She handed over a data stick. ‘All on there, and more.’

Jimmy held the stick. ‘You lot still haven’t explained ... why me?’

‘You’re the most trusted person in the area,’ Singh began. ‘But, more than that, we all know about the long voyage you took, and what you’ve done seen arriving in America. And, for what we want done, we require someone with a strength of personality, and

someone who can keep at a project once started; a very long project, and a very difficult project. The chances of success are slim.'

'And you'll explain it all ... when?'

'Step by step, Jimmy. And we have more research to do, a lot more. Be aware, you may just be killed when you step through.'

'I'd still try it,' Jimmy quickly answered. 'If there's a chance, a chance to undo this...'

They exchanged looks.

Back at the hotel, Jimmy accessed the data stick in his laptop, calling up a chart of the Dow Jones, 1985. 'Haven't seen you for a while old friend. So, how do I commit you to memory?'

He clicked on a particular day, and then cross-referenced his book, annotating the events of the day to the chart. Every major earthquake or eruption was noted, cold winter or hot summer, wars, terror attacks, World Cup soccer matches and Eurovision Song Contest winners.

'Lady Diana's death, 1997.' He marked the chart, then stopped and eased back. 'I could alter that, and save her. But if I save her, does that alter the time line?'

He stood, stepping to the window of his small and cold bedroom and peered out through the rain. 'This'll take some thought.'

Goma, spring 2020

With the US economy recovering, the Chinese naturally wanted a reversal of favours, but Jimmy insisted it was too soon and asked to review it in six months. Meanwhile, he promised the Chinese the enhanced coal-oil technique - to be handed over at that time.

I went to see how that particular project was advancing, finding the plant heavily guarded.

Inside, the manager explained, 'We have refined the technique, but we need to drill more holes. If we drill down and hit a coal seam, we can pump down the first chemical and pump up the stage one liquid. That then gets cleaned up and put through the second stage, a little distillation, and a third chemical reaction, a little more involved than the first method.

'But as we dissolve the coal, the hole gets wider and more liquid is needed, diluting the liquid solution, and so we need to distil more

at the second stage. The best way is to make many holes, find the seam and plot it on a computer, then use angular drills to make a hole down the centre of the seam and work from there. Second stage distillation is still an issue, but it's quick enough, and cheap.

'Cost per barrel?'

'If the fuel is used for clean power stations, twelve dollars a barrel. If you want to refine it to be good enough for a vehicle, twenty dollars a barrel.'

'That's still cheap,' I commented.

'Volumes?'

'Volumes are excellent. We can produce enough to power Africa each year, and for the next hundred years.'

'Good work. And in September, this technology will be released to much of the world.'

'The benefits to the global economy should be huge, sir.'

'Let's hope so,' I told him with a smile.

Back at my desk, the mine manager responsible for our richest gold seam turned up unexpected.

'Problem?' I asked.

'No, sir, quite the opposite. I have been searching for ten years for a source of platinum, which -'

'Is more expensive than gold, and in demand. Yes. Did you find any?'

'We did, sir, this week. Right on the border with Zambia.'

'Since we have the mining rights to Zambia I want it. How much?'

'Initial estimates are very good, sir.'

'And in dollars?' I pressed.

'In the trillions, sir,' the man proudly stated.

I stood and punched the air. 'Yes!' I hit my phone. 'Get me the head of the corporation, send him in right now!'

I stepped around my desk and shook hands with the man. 'Do you feel like changing the world, my friend?'

'That is your privilege, sir. My honour is to serve.'

The head of the corporation stepped in. I said, pointing at the manager, 'He's opened a mine near the Zambian border. I want four hundred Rifles there today, and I want you to give this man anything he needs; staff, equipment, money. That mine is your top priority, drop everything else for today!'

I thanked the manager again and showed him out. Downstairs, I entered Helen's office, finding the First Lady sat behind her computer.

'Not lunchtime, is it?' she puzzled.

'I have some news.' I stepped around her desk and sat on her windowsill, nudging aside a potted plant. 'We found platinum ore.'

'How much of it?'

'Enough to worry a lot of countries; more than the hidden gold seam.'

'My God. How much is it worth?'

'In the trillions.'

'But ... if we sell it, would it fall in value?'

'It's increasing in demand, they use it in everything; including our electric cars and buses. But we won't sell it. We'll put the ingots in the bank, and loan against it. And, when people buy from us later, it's adjusted. What's more, we're a dollar denominated country and central bank. With that load sat in there we'll prop up our own central bank, which props up the dollar.'

'Seems like a good find then.'

I drove around to a hotel where Jimmy was holding a meeting with potential trading partners. I rudely dragged him out. 'We found platinum?'

'Where?'

'On our territory, up against the Zambian border.'

'How much?'

'Trillions of dollars worth.'

'South Africans and Russians will be pissed. Play it down.'

'I'll stick it in the central bank, that'll prop up our dollars and the US Dollar.'

Jimmy nodded. 'Excellent. We'll be able to shift some platinum jewellery as well.'

Back in my office, I scanned the list of requests for either funding, or for items to import. I sanctioned two hundred thousand copies of Microsoft Office 2020 Clear Sight, and ordered a hundred thousand iPads for schools and colleges.

Running a finger down the list, I ordered four small destroyers for the Somali Navy, three for the Kenyan Navy. They were dated American destroyers, but they suited our needs. I added twelve dated Hercules aircraft, ex-USAF stock, and four new C5 Galaxies.

Figuring I may need to wait to see the ingots arrive before spending them, I walked down the corridor and into the offices of

the Finance Minister. No matter how many financial reports he gave me, I always preferred to see a summary, or just hear a summary.

‘How much could I spend this year without worrying, given what I just ordered from America.’ I showed him the sheet and he totted it all up.

‘After commitments of the next four years are taken out, assuming a safety margin and drop of GDP, you could spend two point six trillion dollars and still be inside the guidelines Mister silo set.’

‘Money is no good if it’s just sat in the vault.’

‘True, sir, very true.’

Back at my desk, I commissioned a road improvement scheme, north from Mogadishu to the Qatar enclave, a new rail link to run alongside it. Whilst thinking of Mogadishu, I commissioned new apartments and a new shopping centre.

An improved road and rail link, from our port in Angola down into Namibia and the Kuwaiti enclave, seemed like a good idea. Next, I moved north, way north, and considered something that Jimmy had once said. The Russian countryside was capable of feeding the world, but little was being farmed properly. I sent the farm a billion dollar loan and asked them to expand as rapidly as possible.

My final purchase was fibre optic cable and mobile phone masts, ordering a massive increase in the penetration of the Internet. We had a satellite above New Kinshasa that was supposed to be very fast, but we were clogging it up already. I wanted the fibre optic cable to follow the road to old Kinshasa and beyond to the coast, there to join the Atlantic cables. Other cables would spread out to each town in our region.

I had spent a fraction of what I could spend, and decided to be frugal, for a few weeks at least.

A month later, the first platinum ingot was placed on my desk, and thereafter I used it as a very valuable paperweight. When the IMF audited our central bank they noticed the new section and enquired as to how much more we had. We didn’t say, but all of the world leaders were on the phone the next day, all making gentle enquiries, the dollar strengthening.

Some of the new platinum was then handed to the commodities traders and sold at our exchange. That generated further enquiries, but we assured people that the amounts sold on the open market

would be small. Platinum jewellery took off, advertised as “rare African platinum”, and we sold it by the tonne to the housewives.

Seeing the gold coming in, Jimmy said, ‘I might go back now.’

I was stunned, the two of us sat on my patio. ‘Go? Before 2025?’

‘There are ... other things I need to be doing. Besides, time has a meaning here, but not ... *there*.’

‘There?’

‘Canada.’

‘You’d go back ... to Canada? And won’t what we’re doing here have altered that?’

‘No. It’s there ... and this is here.’

‘I’m no expert in temporal mechanics, but won’t success here stop Canada from ever happening?’

‘No, it’s ... not that simple. Forget it, I’m staying. Forget what I said.’

I took a moment. ‘You think I could pull it off without you?’

‘Yes, I do,’ he confidently stated. ‘I can see now that money was the key, not weapons or politics, but good old fashion money and bribery. I was always battling between soldier and doctor, but I overlooked banker.’

‘Ninety-nine percent of everything I’ve done has been your idea, so don’t sell yourself short,’ I pointed out.

‘You ignored me and pushed the enclaves, and the help for the Middle East, and it took time for me to see sense. I can see that we need to forget the other nations and do it ourselves; just Africa. We can rely on ourselves when the time comes.’

‘You know, the thing I always hated the most, was that there was no one there to help me, and I mean psychologically; no one more experienced. I was constantly the one people relied on, yet had no one else to rely on.’

‘And am I ... becoming that man?’

‘No.’

‘Oh,’ I said, deflated.

‘But someday, well ... maybe there’ll be someone. But it would be nice just to be told what to do for a change.’

‘Should have raised daughters,’ I quipped.

He smiled. ‘Don’t take this the wrong way, but I get better directions from Shelly than from you.’

‘She’s her father’s daughter,’ I proudly stated. ‘Bright and headstrong.’

2035, aboard the Eco-Warrior submarine.

I tapped my computer screen. 'Begin recording, append to previous, topic: Jimmy leaving.'

'Recording,' came from the computer as I stood and stretched.

'Would Jimmy have left us then? Hard to say, but the thought had certainly crossed his mind. He was drawn back to Canada, but for reasons I wouldn't fully understand for another year or so. And if he had gone back, could I have handled it?

'Well, at the time I didn't think so, but I had done more to defeat The Brotherhood than I had realised; the development of Africa ahead of schedule, the platinum find, coal-oil. It all had an impact on my spending power, and I was certainly not afraid to spend our money. And that willingness to spend the money had an effect, both in Africa and the Middle East.

'The creation of Mining City was a turning point; Jimmy acknowledged that a year later. It set in motion a chain of events that would grow our GDP by so much that we would be unstoppable. And that GDP would make a difference, both before 2025 – and in the critical time afterwards.

'Some argued later ... that we wasted African money, and that the money should have been spent internally, but who could argue with our rate of growth? No, I had no problem spending the money, and to tell the truth ... I was never happier than when I was signing off on a new project, President Faster and Cheaper.' I smiled as I thought back. 'I even signed a few forms that way.

'I could understand Jimmy's desire to return, but I didn't know at the time what waited for him there, or the grand plan, and years later – when I knew – I struggled with when to tell the world, and if to tell the world.

'I was glad when Jimmy stayed. I could handle Africa, and I could handle most of the world's politicians, but he had a blow by blow knowledge of 2025 that would have been invaluable to me.'

My cabin door opened and my granddaughter burst in, Lucy not far behind.

'We'll be there tomorrow night,' Lucy mentioned. 'How's it going?'

'Up to 2021,' I informed her, touching the computer screen before grabbing my granddaughter.

‘You’ll be rejoining the world then, and being less unsociable,’ Lucy complained.

‘This is important, I have to get it down.’

‘You could do it bit by bit.’

‘No, I want to get it all down, and then let the editors and historians have a look at it.’ I looked down at the top of my granddaughter’s head. ‘You don’t remember Jimmy, did you?’

She didn’t know how to respond.

‘Are you going to let the world know where he went?’ Lucy risked.

I shot her a disapproving look. ‘Some things ... are secret. But yes, soon enough.’

Post apocalyptic Canada

A knock at the door, and Jimmy let in one of the ladies he had met in the barn. She was no looker, but then neither was he.

‘I’ve had a long hot bath, a shave, cleaned my teeth and found some deodorant. I’ve even had a haircut so that I’m a bit more appealing and less ... old and knackered.’

‘You scrub up well,’ she noted.

‘Was it the thirty second special you were after, or the full minute?’

She laughed. ‘Let’s see how it goes.’

‘It’s been a while, but I think I remember what goes where. We have black market wine, music and candles.’

‘Very considerate,’ she said as she took off her clothes.

‘And afterwards, the child?’

‘You’ll understand when Doctor Singh explains.’

‘It won’t be harmed?’

‘No.’

The following week another lady arrived, by the back door and at night. And eight more followed in quick succession. With the pleasurable part done, Doctor Singh dropped in another data stick, injecting Jimmy a second time.

Singh explained, ‘This injection will make you look better, so hide your appearance; maybe a beard or long hair. You’ll want to eat more, you’ll sleep less, and for the first few days your pee will smell terrible. Exercise by running, no weights, and try and slim down. If

not, you'll put on muscle and we want you thin. You'll only need four hours sleep, so study the rest of the time.'

'And when the babies are born?'

'We'll gather your own compatible stem cells, modify them and inject you. That will be ten days strapped to a bed, and it will not be pleasant. If it works, you'll look as you did at twenty.'

'And then...?'

'Then we'll give you the full picture.'

'I guess I better get my reading glasses.'

'You won't need them after a week, not with this drug. But keep them anyway so that you look as you did before.'

'I've been thinking about how to stop the war, and I'm reasonably sure that I can do it.'

'We have a team working on a plan, you need only memorise it.'

'Oh, well, you're the experts.'

'If you learn everything on the data stick, the plan will slot into place.'

'Let me show you something.' Jimmy called up the DOW Jones. 'I've memorised the chart by date association and major event, disasters, Presidents and leaders, and the release of certain songs and films.'

Doctor Singh nodded. 'Good. Very good.'

'That's not all.' Jimmy called up a map. 'Discoveries of gold and oil in Africa. If I made money on the stock markets, I could open a mine and make money, drill for oil and strike it lucky straight away.'

Doctor Singh slowly nodded. 'We hadn't thought of that. Excellent. Geography is geography, and rocks don't move.'

'Rocks don't move?' Jimmy puzzled.

'We'll explain later.'

Goma, 2020

The mining manager who had found the platinum arrived unexpected, a map under his arm.

'Problems?' I asked.

'No, no, sir. But I wanted to show you this.' He rolled out the map on a bare tabletop. 'These are all the places that we drilled, sir, taking core samples. Some have gold, some other metals. They are not concentrations, but they are valuable.'

‘How do the ore concentrations compare to our other mines?’ I asked as I studied the map.

‘About the same, sir.’

I called in the head of the corporation. Tapping the map, I said, ‘I want CAR given concessions to their choice of these mining prospects, the rest given to anyone who wants them by auction.’

‘That’s a great many mines, sir,’ the man cautioned.

‘I want the money, and CAR has capacity since they capped off wells – and a few idle hands.’

That next week, CAR bought the concessions for twelve new mines, its share price spiking upwards. Twenty other concessions were sold by auction after the various company geologists had inspected core samples. In a stroke, I had created thirty thousand new jobs. We’d also receive a cut of the production profit, and the usual taxes. With this new future income in mind, I ordered a new city to be started, in the south central region and at the heart of a group of towns in the mining belt.

Having learnt from New Kinshasa, I designed the city first, then auctioned land, the developers footing much of the cost of the construction. I named it Mining City, and that attracted investors like a pack of wolves; I was inundated. A second auction was arranged, and I could see bidders from all around the world, in particular the Middle East. The Chinese Government were present, Po and Yuri, the value of land rising.

There was plenty of land for sale, and cheap, but everyone wanted to be on the main boulevard through town. Twelve hotel chains bought land, a token hundred thousand dollars each. I commissioned an expansion of the closest airport, but then had an odd request from Yuri. Could he hire the C5 Galaxies to move equipment?

I purchased four dated C5s, painting them white, but kept them as part of our new Military Transport Command; the military pilots could practise by flying delicate cargo around the region to keep their skills sharp. Army Huey pilots already did that.

Studying the proposed layout of Mining City, I was like a giddy teenager, salivating at the prospect of creating another new city. Hearing about it, Steffan Silo came up to see me from his office on the second floor.

He got straight to the point. ‘I think we could create a mono-rail all the way down, up to sixty miles per hour.’

‘Cool. But its three hundred miles,’ I mentioned.

He nodded. 'We've struck a deal with a Japanese manufacturer; they'll make the track here, at a local factory, so that'll save cost. They'll supply the carriages and – well – power is electric.'

'Which we have plenty of,' I said with a smile.

'I think two tracks should be laid, alternate directions, and we should build halts at six locations on the way down.'

'Only six?'

'It would be a slow total journey otherwise. Besides, the existing trains stop at many places.' He handed over a very detailed plan, and its very detailed costs. It even had a building schedule.

'Total costs ... thirty million dollars?' I queried. 'Why so cheap?'

'We have surplus steel we bought that was never used in the city, so I had it put to one side. The girders are already cut, so we've designed a base structure around them, they won't need to be cut again.'

'Cool. You have a green light.'

He hesitated. 'Are you going to tell me to do it *faster and cheaper?*'

'Steffan, do it faster and cheaper!'

He smiled and left, the first I remember ever seeing him smile.

That following month I settled down to some good brain sex, taking my work home with me. Helen had become a widow to my designing of the new city, but I often involved her and the girls in it, loud debates about where to put what.

Shelly grabbed the computer modelling software that the volunteers used and entered much of the detail. I could now 'walk' down a three-dimensional street on my computer and see what it might look like someday. The brain-trust kids got involved and created a website where anyone could walk through the theoretical city. The hotel owners added in graphics for their new buildings, as did many others, and we soon had a detailed virtual city.

One day I noticed a new bar with a neon sign. Since it was called the Faster and Cheaper Bar I had a closer look. Ladies looking like hookers stood outside, well-endowed ladies, and inside I found a realistic caricature of myself sat a table. As I approached myself, the character said, 'Faster and cheaper!' Cheeky buggers.

With the number of platinum ingots growing by a stack a day, I turned my thoughts to the Middle East again, viewing rioting in Gaza on the TV news. Jimmy was in America, working on film scripts, so I decided to be bold and invited the Palestinians down again. They arrived three days later.

‘Gentlemen, I have a question, and a proposition. You’ve seen the Arab enclaves in Africa. If it didn’t cost you anything, would you like one of your own?’

‘One of our own?’ they queried.

‘A fenced off enclave, your own sovereign land, peace and quiet a long way from Israel. And, maybe a little oil offshore. I’d build a city for you, a sea port, an airport, and you could sustain yourself from the oil.’

‘And have the Israelis asked you to make this offer?’

‘No, they don’t know yet.’

‘We’d be giving up our rightful land, and the Israelis would have won!’

‘Is that what it’s all about; who wins, who’s right, who has the last word? Are the lives of your people not more important? You could have schools, hospitals, playgrounds for children – a thousand miles away from an Israeli helicopter. Or you can stay where you are and suffer for a thousand years. And in 2025, the economy of the region will be devastated, millions of refugees and unemployed people wandering around. Things will be bad for you then.

‘How much worse could your own enclave be ... than Gaza is now? You’d be free, you’d live in peace, you may even prosper. Some day you might be a nation like Qatar or Dubai, and your children would grow up learning mathematics and English, not how to make bombs and hide from Israeli helicopters. It’s good enough for the Saudis and others, so it’s good enough for you lot, and I’m offering to spend billions on a new city for you.’

‘And Israeli would claim all of the disputed territory!’

‘What use it is to them,’ I scoffed. ‘What’s your GDP? How many mines do you have, oil wells, or even adequate water? You’re living in a shit-hole!’

‘The people would never give up their lands. We’ll have no part in this.’ They stormed out.

I went down to Helen. ‘They stormed out.’

‘They’ve been fighting for that land for so long they’ve grown used to it,’ she commented.

‘I’m wondering if I could work around the leadership,’ I thought out loud.

‘Most Palestinians live outside the occupied territories.’

I raised a finger. ‘They do, and they struggle. So, if someone offered them a job someplace else, they may come.’

‘Once enough of them were there, and doing well, others would follow by word-of-mouth.’

‘If I built it ... they will come!’

‘Wasn’t that a Kevin Costner film?’

‘I learnt a lot by watching TV,’ I told her as I left her office.

I rudely requested that Abdi fly down the next day, save me flying up to him. I took him up to the roof, the weather fine, and we strolled around, enjoying the view and the cooling breeze.

‘How do you feel about another enclave?’ I asked.

‘They are good for jobs and trade.’

‘Do your people worry about foreigners on your land?’ I asked.

‘Its just desert, no one lives there. I think they like the job and the money more than the sand.’

‘No complaints?’

‘Some small voices, but everyone sees the work and money.’

‘How would you feel about a Palestinian enclave?’

He glanced at me. ‘Many of my people, they understand the Palestinian struggle and take the side against the Israeli, but the soldiers see the Israeli as fellow brothers. It is mixed.’

‘You have land in the north, barren land - no one lives there, hundreds of miles without a house. They’d want only an area five miles wide and five miles deep.’

Abdi shrugged. ‘It is a grain of sand on the map. But how will they pay - they have nothing? Less than nothing.’

‘I would pay.’

Abdi glanced at me as we progressed. ‘You wish to make the peace?’

‘If the two sides have an ocean between them, then they can’t fight; it may end a long period of suffering. And, in 2025, that area may see a lot of fighting, the innocent caught in the way.’

‘You and Jimmy, you have never been wrong, and you have never steered us wrong. Somalia is a rich, strong, and proud nation now, and I think what it would have been without you. If you say that it is necessary I will order it accepted - it is five miles of sand and camel shit.’

‘There’s something else. Jimmy told me where a small oilfield is located offshore; not enough to make anyone rich, but enough to feed a few hungry Palestinians. I would position the enclave next to it, and let them drill for oil. Your oil.’

Abdi plodded onwards. ‘And this oilfield, how does it compare to the money you gave my country?’

‘Well, it’s less. A lot less.’

‘Then it shall go some small way towards paying our debts.’

‘C’mon. Lunch on me,’ I said.

‘We’ll split it. I insist.’

Ben Ares rang later. ‘How are you, Paul?’

‘Cut the crap and ask your question, Ben.’

‘What did the Palestinians want?’

‘I offered them an enclave in Africa.’

‘You did?’

‘Yes, but they refused; stormed out the meeting.’

‘That doesn’t surprise me,’ Ben scoffed.

‘So I’m going to build one for them anyway.’

‘You are?’

‘Yep, and I’ll work around the leaders and see if I can tempt a few people along.’

‘Where would it be?’

‘Somalia, a coastal enclave.’

‘How long would it take to build?’

‘Ben, can you do something for me?’

‘What’s that?’

‘Fuck ... right ... off.’ I hung up.

Using the designs for the Kuwaiti enclave in Namibia, I modified the basic layout and scaled it down. Fixing the location where Jimmy had indicated a modest oilfield, I marked out a square, getting the coordinates off Google Earth. I checked the satellite images and saw no settlements - the area backed by hills, and no roads. It truly would be an enclave.

I commissioned a Somali company to build a port and marina, and asked them to make a start straight away.

Jimmy popped in a week later. ‘You’ve been busy? You pissed of the Palestinians - and Ben Ares.’

‘Fuck ‘em all, they’re all a bunch of wankers,’ I responded. ‘You never get anything done trying to be nice. So I’ve commissioned the enclave anyway.’

‘You have?’

I nodded. ‘When the basic facility is ready, I’ll offer jobs to Palestinians from outside the occupied territories, from Egypt; they can come down by boat. If nothing else, they can work there for a while, but some are bound to stay on.’

‘Not a bad idea. Where are you building it?’

I showed him on the map.

‘Oh dear,’ he said. ‘Israelis *will* be pleased about the oil.’

‘Fuck ‘em.’

‘Let’s avoid mentioning the oil till the place is full, and then play it down.’

‘Why?’ I pressed.

‘Because if the Israelis believe that a free and independent Palestinian colony might grow rich, they’ll want to destroy it.’

‘Why, for fuck’s sake?’

‘Because the Palestinians will have long memories, and some will want payback. The Israelis know that, and they won’t want to see the Palestinians with their own navy or air force.’

‘They won’t have an air force; it’s a small enclave with limited oil,’ I insisted. ‘Besides, the fucking Israelis will be happy as fuck if all the Palestinians move to it – they’d have the land they want and no terror threat.’

‘Old habits die hard. Be careful.’

‘If the Israelis go near that enclave I’ll have the African armies stop them! Besides, the Israelis would have to fly over Egyptian or Saudi territory to reach it, and that would be a war with those countries! And it would be a war with me as well.’

‘Build a Somali base down the road; the Israelis will think twice about nuking the area. And plenty of international hotels, especially Arabic chains. Problem is, as we get closer to 2025, the Israelis will get twitchy.’

‘Twitchy ... pre-emptive strike twitchy?’ I asked.

Jimmy nodded. ‘It won’t do them any good, and it’ll make things worse. I’ll have advanced EMPs in the region, and at the first sign of an Israeli attack and I’ll bring down their planes and missiles.’

‘Do they know that?’

‘No, not yet.’

‘Then I guess we’ll both be popular.’

President Blake was on the phone a week later. ‘Paul, you’re building a Palestinian enclave?’

‘Good news travels fast.’

‘They don’t have two beans to rub together, so I’m guessing that you’re funding it.’

‘I am. But the Palestinians have refused to occupy it.’

‘Have you halted construction?’ Blake asked.

‘Nope, I intend to offer jobs to Palestinians from Egypt.’

‘What will that achieve?’

‘A trickle may become a flood, and the Red Sea may part, a guy with a beard - and looking not unlike Charlton Heston - leading his people to the promised land. Either that or they’ll come by ferry.’

‘And your aim, Paul?’

‘To tempt Palestinians away from Palestine.’

‘If they left of their own accord, there’d be peace in the region,’ Blake noted.

‘They don’t pay you the big bucks for nothing, do they.’

‘May I ask about your platinum reserves?’

‘What would you like to know?’ I nudged.

‘How do they compare to your gold reserves?’ Blake asked.

‘About the same, in weight.’

‘It’s a lot of money.’

‘And will be used well, not least to prop up the dollar.’

‘Our guys have your GDP growing at around fifty percent.’

‘Yeah, sounds about right.’

‘And the new city, they say it’ll be bigger than New Kinshasa.’

‘Could well be, lots going on in the region. Your Caterpillar company has a stiff dick at the prospect.’

‘You’re their biggest customer, by far.’

‘So, how’s the west coast?’ I asked.

‘Progress is slow, still a few insurance companies wrangling about claims. But jobs are up, the welfare bill falling, more people being relocated around the various states. This quarter’s figures are good, markets are up.’

‘We’re buying what we can from you.’

‘And we appreciate it,’ Blake emphasised. ‘Paul, can I ask a question you may not like?’

‘Of course you can, you’re American.’

‘Will Brad run for President next year?’

‘We hope so, and he’ll get a billion dollar backing – thanks to your lawmakers changing the law and allowing such things.’

‘I’m not running, as you probably now, and we’re not popular.’

‘Sitting governments always get the blame, even if they do everything right.’

‘Tell me about it. Oh, Hardon Chase is back in the Senate.’

‘Good. It helps to have friends in high places,’ I quipped.

‘You don’t need friends, Paul, they need you. My guys say that by 2025 your cooperation group will be a super-power in its own right, an economic superpower at least. You’re making India, China and Brazil look bad.’

After the call, I went up to the roof and for a stroll, glancing down at our creation, noting tall cranes in the distance and not even knowing what building was going up. Stood looking down at the canal, I realised that we were becoming an economic superpower, and I was determined to use the money to fix 2025.

I had previously sent the Iranians an invite to visit, and they finally turned up in June. After a welcome chat and a tea I took them outside, and to a demonstration of a flat-pack home being erected. Once up, they poked and prodded the house, and marvelled at the electricity coming from the roof.

I told them, ‘When the quake strikes you’ll lose a quarter of all your houses. I intend to send you five million of these so that your people have something better than tents. I’ll also send you grain ships every week, and food from here.’

They took a moment to consider my offer.

I added, ‘I also have another suggestion. After the quake your oil industry will be devastated, but CAR could move in to sink fresh wells, and you’ll get the lion’s share of the proceeds till you’re back on your feet.’

‘Given what you say will happen, we will be glad of the assistance, not least ... because we have very little choice. But what of payment for the grain and food.’

‘It’ll be done on the honour system. If you can pay, and when you can pay, you can send us what you think is appropriate, but we won’t be chasing you for it.’

That puzzled them greatly. I showed them around Gotham City in a civilian S61 helicopter, followed by an aerial tour of New Kinshasa, finally lunch in the marina. We had an agreement; I’d send whatever the hell I wanted to send, and they’d use it. It was simple enough.

The corporation dispatched a hundred flat-pack houses to Iran, another batch to Iraq, even some to Pakistan.

The UN Secretary General then paid me an official visit, and reviewed the flat-pack houses himself, wishing to make use of them in the UN coordinated effort. What he meant to say was “Could I have some powers back – you took them all!”

I graciously offered to work within his written plan, but then scribbled all over it. Handing it back, I gave him my plan, which he then adopted as his own. Rescue Force would have a major role, a full deployment, but would also channel the food and control flat-pack house erections. They would run the camps, and as such would be the front line. They’d also be my eyes and ears for when The Brotherhood put in an appearance.

On the TV news I caught Jimmy campaigning for Brad in the States, the opposition trying their best to have him stopped. Problem was, US laws on support for candidates were loose at best, and the laws governing the sponsorship of candidates had been relaxed a

decade earlier. Corporations could send money to candidates – even foreign corporations, so CAR had sent Brad sixty million dollars, Pineapple Music another ten million.

Wherever Brad and Jimmy turned up the crowds would be huge, Jimmy giving speeches about troubled times ahead and a need for the right man in the White House. It was as if he was saying Brad was destined to fix America, and that no other candidate would do. It made me smile, the poor old Republicans low in the ratings as Brad fielded his volunteers as new candidates for Congress, making good use of twenty-two Democrats and four Republicans who had switched sides.

The opposition claimed that if Brad's newcomers gained a majority in the house - that the house would suffer from a lack of experience. Jimmy countered by stating that he knew of all the problems and issues to come and would advise accordingly, a hint that he would only do so to Brad's team. It was outrageous interference on a grand scale, and we didn't care.

Moses parts the Red Sea

With the fence up around the proposed Palestinian enclave, and the main harbour wall complete, I had a thousand flat-pack houses raised on the barren sandy soil. A canteen was constructed, a shower block, a food store, and little else.

We then advertised in Egypt for Palestinian labourers, and Palestinians only, the first batch of fifty men turning up by boat, an overnight voyage down the Red Sea. The existing Somali builders hired the men and set them to work. The men's wages were modest, but food and accommodation were provided. They began work on the harbourmaster's office, followed by a customs building, a few sheds erected.

Two hundred turned up the second week and were put straight to work, materials arriving by ship every day.

By the end of the first month I had five hundred Palestinian men, including a handful from Gaza. They began building apartment blocks with the guidance of Kenyan builders, apartments with no water or electricity yet. Having constructed the apartment blocks they moved into them, water brought in by bucket for the moment. Two small oil-powered generators turned up by ship, and the blocks

gained power, water soon pumped up to the roof tanks, hot showers created by solar panels and wind turbines.

That following month the first family moved in, and the wife began to make a living washing clothes. I continued to advertise, and attracted a second batch of five hundred men the following month, ten families tagging along. A small oil-fired power station was then landed by boat, in pieces, and was soon knocking out more than enough wattage to power the apartment blocks.

In the hills behind the enclave the Somalis sunk wells, enough water found to save bringing it in by ship. We increased the advertising and attracted five hundred additional men, many escaping Gaza through the smuggler's tunnels and with just a suitcase.

Now that things were moving along I sent two thousand Somali builders to the enclave, a thousand from the corporation, and commissioned twenty apartment blocks in a row. Satisfied that the harbour was now big enough, and operational, I commissioned the same French company to build an airfield, positioning it up against the edge of the enclave.

A desalination plant, big enough to provide water to half a million people, came by ship, many of its components only needing assembly. Plastic pipes turned up, enough for a comprehensive sewer system, fibre optic cables being laid from nowhere to nowhere through the sandy soil, the builders wondering what the hell was going on.

Increasing wages, and paying in dollars, our advertising went into overdrive around the Middle East, families turning up that had left Palestine in 1948. I then considered that it was time to piss off the Palestinian leadership, erecting a large billboard picture of what the enclave would look like when finished. It was labelled as New Palestine, and two huge flags blew in the breeze next to it.

Only now did it dawn on a few of the builders just what they were building. The sign next to the picture stated that anyone of Palestine origins would be granted citizenship and allowed to live and work there.

The UN came to see me a week later, a very polite "what the fuck are you doing?" type of question, but asked very nicely in a round about sort of way.

'I'm building a Palestinian enclave. Anyone Palestinian who wants to live there will be welcome.'

'You ... are encouraging them to give up the occupied territories.'

‘Not at all. If they want to stay where they are they can, or they can go to the enclave. Besides, most of the people in the enclave are from outside the occupied territories.’

‘You expect the enclave to be recognised as a country?’

‘It will be recognised by all African and Middle East nations. Or else!’

‘Oh.’

They went off thinking about my approach, and just how little they could do about it.

Following the UN visit, I altered the building schedules at the enclave and had the marina given priority, a horseshoe promenade backed by cafes, bars and apartments. Pontoons were brought in, and the first sailboat docked, the first cup of tea served. Mooring fees were nil, no customs officers to be seen.

The Saudis then decided that they should have a hand in the enclave, if not an influence, and commissioned several hotels, a few schools, and a tower block that one day may house business offices. I was delighted, but tried to make out that I didn’t want too much Saudi influence in the place.

The harbour was suddenly alive with boats, all wishing to offload their men or materials. I sent another five thousand flat-pack houses, and two thousand Kenyan builders, the second harbour wall being hurriedly finished off. Offering resettlement grants to the citizens of Gaza, I seriously pissed off Hamas, a flood of people escaping by the tunnels to Egypt and down to the enclave. Two hundred families took up residence in the apartment blocks, agreements stating that they were rent-free for five years.

The first shops appeared, built by merchants bringing their goods in by boat. Since there were no taxes, margins were good. After a few fights and one stabbing, I put fifty Somali police officers inside the enclave, backed by fifty Rifles. But we had no prison or police station yet, they all had to be built, and so troublemakers were simply deported.

When a fat old police chief turned up with his family we gave him a uniform, a jeep, and a detail of Somali police to work with. He called former colleagues in Gaza or the West Bank, and they journeyed down; all of a sudden, Israeli issued travel permits were right easy to obtain. Getting back in afterwards would be the problem.

Palestinians arrived from Lebanon, their sea fare paid by us, apartments allocated. The enclave was a dusty hot place, alive with building work going on from dawn till dusk, the place a hive of

activity. The Egyptian President flew in on a military transport, landing on a half-finished runway, and had a look around. He was losing the burden of the Palestinians on his state, but made out that he had concerns about the welfare of the people.

Not to be outdone by the Egyptians, the Saudis flew in and made a grand tour, praising the enclave. A Palestinian politician then approached me, and asked if he and ten of his colleagues could take charge of the enclave. That delighted me, and I gave them a good budget, finding them temporary offices. The sign went up: "Interim Palestinian Authority". They recruited additional police officers, customs officers, and tried to bring order to the dust bowl building site, immediately condemned by both Hamas and the West Bank Government.

Another three thousand people journeyed down, and we were accepting them faster than we could build, the flat pack houses made use of. I nudged the builders to finish roads, and to create a shopping centre. I had already dispatched twenty Rescue Force medics, but now made that a hundred, jeeps and all, a temporary clinic erected.

As the end of 2020 approached, Brad now President Elect, twelve thousand Africa builders and eight thousand Palestinian men toiled on the enclave, the port in use day and night. With the runway finished, the terminal just about usable, I dispatched C5 galaxies full of goodies, keen to make sure that no one suffered for the lack of basic amenities.

All day long, aircraft landed and took off, the stores mounting up and being distributed. Fridges, TV sets, basic furniture, medical supplies, food and drink; everything had to be brought in. Ships bringing concrete berthed every three hours, others offloading steel girders, bricks or breezeblocks.

At my request, warships docked one at a time, and the ratings sat around the marina bars, buying food and drink, and stimulating a small local economy. A scuba centre opened up, and visiting naval ratings could dive in the Red Sea, extra dollars earned by the locals – untaxed dollars. The ruling council had not yet got to grips with taxation or currency, so they used dollars at my request. They charged sailboats a modest fee for docking, and controlled the customs officers and police, and little else so far. It was time to upset the Israelis.

I had a bank built, a large bank. It offered a retail service, changed money, but more than that it held a gold reserve that I had sent around, a small number of bars. But that gold secured a new currency, the Palestinian Dinar. We printed them in New Kinshasa,

both coins and notes, and fixed a rate against the US Dollar. One dollar fetched three Dinars.

A million Dinars were printed and sent to the bank, the first few puzzled citizens holding a purely Palestinian currency. Hamas were furious, the West Bank Government making threats. Well, they would if they could actually get out of the West Bank. Workers were paid in Dinars, using them at the local shops or exchanging them for dollars.

The Saudis recognised the currency straight away, asking to buy them from us. We sold the Saudis five million Dinars, more than was in use at the enclave. The Saudis then paid the people working on their tower in Dinars, Egypt recognising the new currency. Lebanon and Syria followed, if anything just to piss-off the Israelis.

By January, 2021, and Brad's inauguration a week away, a steady trickle of five hundred people a week were leaving Gaza, the Israelis allowing us to land boats in little used harbours. From the West Bank, Palestinian families made use of re-opened border crossings with Jordan, boarding ships in Aqaba, all paid for by us.

Inside the enclave, full employment was guaranteed, wages good, and a few additional political leaders arrived. They couldn't agree on what colours to paint the walls, let alone on a government, so we ignored them and worked around them till I imposed a structure, Somalis and Saudis acting as honest brokers and stewards.

With the airport almost ready, certainly enough to handle a few flights, we installed security equipment - manned by Somali Rifles, and landed two 737s painted in the Palestinian colours and labelled as Palestinian National Airways – just to catch the attention of the Israelis. Daily flights began to Cairo and Amman, filmed landing by the world's media.

The West Bank Government were about to burst a blood vessel, since they weren't involved, and Hamas could only sit and scratch their heads as their supporters slipped away at night. The Palestinian Government then suggested that they would send a delegation down and govern from afar. I said that the men would be welcome, but then emailed the Israelis, asking that the men never be allowed back in to the West Bank.

The delegation took up offices in the enclave and joined the other political leaders, still arguing over the colour of the walls. Not to be outdone, Hamas sent its own representatives down. Their boat was intercepted, their weapons dropped over the side, and as they came ashore they were again checked for weapons. Now, if they wanted to

argue and fight, they would have to do it with words, heavily armed Somali Rifles wandering around.

Hamas set-up its own office, but no one was paying them, the men told to work or starve. They picked up tools and melted into the workforce just as I created the first basic ruling council. That council had taxation rights, and Palestinian workers were now paid through the council, taxed at a modest rate, the money used towards the police and customs officials. We stopped paying those officials ourselves.

An extra five million Dinars were flown up from New Kinshasa, handed to the council to pay workers. And, after I asked, Kimballa flew in for a visit, the council welcoming him and showing him around. He informed the council that he would grab an office suite to use as an embassy, and that the DRC would officially recognise the enclave as a country in its own right.

The Saudis were hopping mad, and commissioned the very quick building of their own Embassy. Abdi followed suit, followed by Egypt, soon a row of embassies taking shape, imported trees lining the avenue and watered regularly, Somali Rifles policing the street.

With just enough roadway to make it worthwhile, I dispatched ten electric buses and fifty electric cars. The first few taxis appeared, taking workers from the harbour to various sites, to embassies or the airport, the airport hotel now finished.

Itching to see the building work, I flew up unannounced with Helen and toured the dusty enclave in an electric bus, meeting the provisional council and a few of the ambassadors. We stopped at the marina and took a walk, the Palestinians more than happy to see me, a few British naval ratings enjoying local cuisine. I stopped to chat to them.

‘Never thought we’d be eating at a Palestinian café,’ they commented.

‘Or in a Palestinian port,’ I pointed out. ‘You tried the scuba diving.’

‘Only here today; next trip maybe. Had a nose, and it looks good, the water is good around here.’

‘Locals friendly?’ I nudged.

‘Very. Nice spot as well, this.’

I made sure that we were snapped looking around, since we had – after all – brought a dozen hacks and a TV crew with us. They filmed the marina, getting footage of me chatting to the ratings and the locals. What they didn’t film were the hot-tempered men of the delegation that couldn’t get back into the West Bank.

When I met with them, I said, ‘Why don’t you bring your families down here; free apartments, jobs, and it’s peaceful.’ I was being less than sympathetic to the men, and they were not that keen to stay.

Arriving back in Goma, Ben Ares sent me an email, asking if Palestinian prisoners wishing to move to the enclave could be sent down. ‘Sure,’ I said, but then worried about something.

My worries were confirmed when a ship turned up with a thousand former inmates, all of whom had been expelled from Israel. They were given apartments, but the men’s families were still in the occupied territories. I uttered a few rude words for being played, then encouraged the men to bring their families down, offering good money as incentive. Some of the men caught the next ferry to Egypt – heading for Gaza via the tunnels, others stayed, their families sent for.

The Israelis modified their approach, and sent just prisoners from the West Bank on the next ship, the UN and Middle East leaders condemning the move, worried that the Israelis might now try to forcibly expel Palestinians. I voiced my opposition to any forceful expulsion, but we still received a steady five hundred a week from all around the Middle East.

The local council received blank passports from me and began to register people, the first few passports issued, Egypt and Saudi Arabia recognising the new passports. Africa recognised them, but would not issue visas, not yet.

As spring approached, the Saudi enclaves in Mozambique and Madagascar were coming along, as were the Chinese, and those of Qatar and The Emirates. My pile of platinum was growing rapidly, and the IMF had to count it afresh each month. With money coming back to us from America, and the addition of the new platinum, a very large sum was soon sitting in the central bank.

But unlike many countries we didn’t sell bonds; we had no need to. Instead, we loaned money to many countries by buying their bonds.

South Africa was now doing well thanks to coal-oil and electric buses, their economy booming and adding to Africa GDP. Nigeria continued to increase its own GDP, and Southern Sudan was becoming a rich nation, starting to eclipse Sudan. Around Africa, things were looking good.

President Brad Sullivan made an official visit to Goma, a grand show put on for him. Thousands of soldiers lined the streets, aircraft

flew by overhead, and half a million people lined the streets as we toured the city in an open-top bus that was oddly glassed over with bullet-proof glass. I had to question the ‘open-top’ aspect of it.

Brad was seen and filmed opening several new buildings and projects, and described to the press numerous large contracts that we had awarded US companies, making it appear as if he had secured them himself. He spent the night with us at the mansion, but discreetly steered things away from mention of the Hawaiians here, still a sensitive topic to the Americans.

Mali popped in, thanking Brad for all he had done on the west coast, but I could see that Brad was uneasy; he wanted the emigrants home, Jimmy wanted them here – and more of them.

Post apocalyptic Canada

Jimmy lifted a baby and smiled down at it, the realisation that this small bundle was his child finally dawning on him. ‘If only you could have been born into a better world.’

Dr Singh stepped up. ‘We believe we have what we need to begin. Next week, could you fake your death and hide.’

Jimmy took in the expectant faces. ‘You going to tell me the big secret now?’

Dr Singh gestured Jimmy towards a chair, the child’s mother taking the bundle. ‘The drugs will greatly extend your life, and that’s necessary. We have a plan, but it may take from two to three hundred years to get it right.’

Jimmy stared back, his mouth slowly opening.

**The next Magestic chapter is the last

*K2 book 7 is available from www.geoffwolak-writing.com

Magestic

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Part 18

Jewellery. Goma, 2021.

Helen asked me the question, 'Did our safari lodges sell our jewellery?' I had no idea and made a call, finding out that they didn't, and that neither did our hotels.

In the morning I issued a decree and just about made it the law in Africa for every hotel and safari lodge to sell our jewellery. Our Dutch and Israeli friends recruited an extra two hundred people for President *Faster and Cheaper*.

Meanwhile, Jimmy had won CAR a massive contract in North Korea, a contract to mine numerous areas, CAR's share price climbing. Well, when you had a chief salesman like Jimmy Silo you'd always do well. His cold calling technique had a hundred percent success rate.

As the summer approached, I gave my deputies more responsibility and concentrated on the enclaves, and Mining City. Our clever 3-D modelling software was fantastic, and a great time-saver. I could click on a building and see who was building it, what its schedule was. The brain-trust kids then modified the software, and half-finished buildings could be displayed on screen as half-finished buildings. I could alter parameters and either view the finished article, or where we were at the moment.

Impressed by that, I put a team on the Palestinian enclave - to digitise it. Using the same technology that Google Earth had employed over the years, a helicopter flew low over the enclave and digitised images for me. In my office, three A3 iPads then gave me a three-dimensional view of the enclave, other screens displaying work schedules.

With Jimmy in the UK, I settled down to what I was good at, and built things.

Stateside, Brad was using Jimmy's rhetoric to pass bills. Mentioning future terror threats, he passed a bill that tightened the border controls of the States, additional resources being placed with the coastguard and with federal agencies. The DEA lost staff and the border agencies gained staff and budget increases, in some cases quite sizeable increases.

I was then surprised to see Brad militarise the Mexican border. He had gained the vote of the Hispanic community and much of the black Democrat vote in order to win the election, but now risked

alienating those Hispanic voters. His next speech then shocked me, not in what it was, but that it came from him.

‘If an American were to travel to another country illegally, they would face imprisonment, beatings, and deportation after heavy fines were paid. But if an illegal immigrant comes to America we turn a blind eye to it, and may deport only a small number of them.

‘If an America citizen, living illegally in another country, stayed there for a few years, held down a job and started a family, they would not be entitled to remain because of it. If the immigrants of the world wish to be treated fairly here, then they should petition their own governments to treat American citizens the same way in their countries of origins.

‘There are troubles ahead - I’ve been made aware of them, and I’ll now takes steps to return America’s right to govern its own people, and control its own borders. We ... will decide who settles here, and with due process and law; the immigrants will not decide for us. There must be law and order, and our borders must be respected.

‘As such, strengthened laws will see businesses or individuals fined ten thousand dollars for each illegal immigrant that they employ. If the company is caught twice, that’ll be twenty thousand dollars for each illegal. A private citizen, employing an illegal as a nanny or housekeeper, will be fined just the same – and no excuses will be acceptable.

‘Starting this week, additional resources will be channelled towards repatriating illegals from this country. Some compensation will be paid to those who have resided here and worked for many years, since we don’t wish them to suffer unduly when they return to their countries of origins.’

I was shocked, and called Jimmy. Jimmy explained, ‘The number of Hispanics will grow, and become a serious issue after 2025. If and when the economy goes to shit, the Hispanics will organise into self-help groups along the lines of The Ark, but eventually turn militant. So we’ll ship them out, millions of them.’

‘Will they be taken back?’

‘The various governments will be offered inducements,’ Jimmy reported. ‘And we’ll help.’

‘We’ll help?’ I questioned.

‘Yes, helping to deter those deported from turning to crime too early on after their return home. We’ll build apartments in various countries, offer loans, send solar panels.’

‘Brad will never get a second term,’ I noted.

‘He’ll lose most of the Hispanic vote, but a large number of them don’t vote anyway, and those that are entitled to don’t usually bother. As for the rest of the States, their minds have been polarised by the Hawaiian displaced; they’re all for kicking out the illegals. And while we’re on the topic, keep encouraging recent Africans emigrants to America to return – and those here with itchy feet to stay.’

After that conversation, I checked to see how many Africans were returning, finding that it was around six hundred a month. I increased the budget, saying that I wanted Africans educated in The West back here and helping to start new businesses. We soon had six hundred a week returning from North America, a hundred from the UK, many from Spain.

2022, Canada

‘Two or three hundred years?’ Jimmy repeated. He stared at Doctor Singh, then took in the faces of the other members of the resistance.

‘When we opened the micro-portal, we received and isolated various radio signals, and one was a news programme that described the Falklands War,’ Doctor Singh explained. ‘In the broadcast, the British lost the Falklands War.’

‘Lost it? They won it.’

‘Not where the signal was coming from.’

‘And ... just where was the signal coming from?’ Jimmy puzzled.

‘An alternate earth, an alternate history, an alternate time line,’ Singh carefully stated.

‘An ... alternate earth?’

Singh nodded. ‘We don’t believe that the portal would ever allow us to travel back in time through this particular timeline, this planet’s history.’

‘Then what the hell are we all here for?’ Jimmy loudly asked. ‘If this can’t be fixed?’

‘It can’t be fixed, but there are other things to consider.’

‘Like what, for fuck’s sake?’

‘We can’t go back through this time line, but we can go back to certain points in other dimensions, maybe even thousands of them, and they all share the same basic fate as this world. Jimmy, if you

could save the people of a ... a carbon copy of this world, would you do it?’

‘Carbon copy?’

‘An almost identical copy of this world - with some slight variations, but physically the same planet. There’d be a version of you there, your family, people you know. The man who you sailed here with, he’d be there ... but in 1982 or 1992 – alive and well.’

‘But facing the same war as we suffered,’ Jimmy said, turning away.

‘And many planets like that, all facing the same problem,’ Singh said with urgency in his voice. ‘We’ve isolated thirty so far, most very similar, some quite different.’

‘After millions of years of evolution, how could they be similar? How could I be born on any alternate planets?’

‘I’ll start at the beginning.’ They got comfortable.

Goma, 2021

Sat on the patio, Helen and the girls at a function, Jimmy said to me, ‘I should probably tell you something about the time machine. To start at the beginning, Doctor Singh was a clever young Indian astrophysicist. He did his PhD on the background noise of space, but then decided it was all wrong and dropped out for a while. You see, he had a radical idea; it made sense to him, but no one else. He started everything off with the idea that background noise in space was caused by nearby parallel dimensions.’

I eased up and stared across at Jimmy, my mouth opening. ‘You *are* from a parallel dimension, you big lump. I’ve been discussing that with Shelly for years, but it never made sense – the detail you know of this place.’

He nodded. ‘This is the first time I’ve been here, this planet. This ... is not my world, and nothing I do here will affect my own world, my own version of earth.’

‘And if you went back?’ I asked.

‘That timeline would continue, and we’d eventually be overrun by The Brotherhood.’

‘You can’t stop that?’ I puzzled.

‘No, not directly. There is ... a plan, which is also a hope, and that I can’t discuss with you yet. It’s ... not completely hopeless, but

it is tricky, and it's linked to success here.' He lifted his head to the stars and gathered his thoughts. 'Let me start simple.

'If you stand next to a high-speed train as it goes past, you see a blur. But inside the train – if you weren't looking out the window – you wouldn't know that you were moving at all. People live in that space, and then later on others live in that same space.

'Now, imagine a train travelling close to the speed of light. Ten thousand of them would pass you in a second, just a blur, but to each person on each train they had their own little world, unaware of how fast they were travelling. If you took a single second in time, then all of the people occupied it - ten thousand trains and a million people, all crammed into an area a few metres high and wide. Take a look over you left shoulder.' I did. 'See the lion stalking the antelope?'

'Er ... nope?'

'Because they're on a different train. They're here, but moving too quickly to be seen. And since we're moving just as fast, we couldn't see them anyway. Open a portal, and you'd see the lion; you'd see the people on the other trains, and stepping across is far easier than you think, so is stepping across at varying places in their timeline. Trying to go back in time on this train is fucking hard, and we never mastered it. Now, consider the Big Bang; there wasn't one.'

'No Big Bang?'

'No, the universe is a circle, but ... shaped like an apple. Think of it like this: big old magnet at the centre, a solid object. From the top of the magnet, lines of magnetism radiate outwards, curve around and eventually hit the arse end. But the lines are not lines of magnetism, they're lines of pure energy. Everything ... is energy in one form or another, there's no such thing as solid matter. Solid matter is just energy that has cooled down a bit, it's vibrating less on an atomic level, and temporarily forms atoms and electrons, and then molecules and matter.

'From the top of the big magnet at the centre of the universe, lines of concentrated energy flow out and around, eventually hitting the arse end billions of years later. All this, this planet, will eventually go back to energy.

'Now, as the lines of energy travel out from the top of the magnet, they split apart and cool down – for want of a better phrase, and become strands. Each strand is an expanding universe as we perceive it. In those universes are planets, like this old rock, and after a few years, or decades, the strand that we're now in will split

in two as it cools down and gets further away from the centre, the centre being the apple core.

‘When the line splits, a complete carbon copy is created, since there’s more than enough energy around us to split hundreds of times and not notice it. This planet, and the molten core and its gravity and its moon, that’s a template. And when the strand splits, when the timeline splits, it doesn’t go anywhere in effect. It’s over your left shoulder, but occupying the same space, like those fast moving trains, but they’re parallel, not one behind the other – or something like that.

‘This particular timeline split from another in 1976, which was after I had been born to my parents, and you to yours; we targeted it specifically because it was a recent split. If I had gone to another timeline, then the Germans may have won the last war, or mankind may have died from a plague. And finding the closest timeline was real easy; we just used the minimum power settings. Since they were so close, we only had to take a small step.

‘After Doctor Singh had thrown away his PhD, he figured that background noise in space was coming from events in nearby parallel dimensions. Problem was, they all thought him a bit crazy, so he did his research in private. But when he arrived in Canada he was a prime candidate to assist on the time machine, fronted by NASA, and ran some of his own tests. He opened a micro-portal when NASA had just about given up – and without them knowing about it.

‘After that initial success he recruited other scientists, those he knew were disenchanted with the Army’s approach to things, not least because the Army wanted to go back and nuke the Middle East in 1991, when the Russians were at their weakest.

‘So Singh formed a resistance movement, and eventually asked me if I would go back through time, only not back through our own time. It took a while to understand it all, and to see what they were after. But, at the end of day, this planet is just as worthy of being saved as the one next to it.’

‘I figured you’d been here many times, you know so much.’

‘No, I’ve been to many worlds many times, all almost identical, a few subtle changes. Like you with a moustache.’

‘I had a moustache?’ I asked.

He laughed. ‘No.’

Canada

Jimmy waited till dark before approaching the field. Stood in the open field, he took his bearings from nearby mountains, spending almost an hour checking and re-checking his position. Knowing that a micro portal was permanently open, he took out a small device and switched it on, a radio signal sent, the same code over and over. Wrapping it in a plastic bag to keep it dry, he placed it onto the damp grass and stepped back.

At 4am he could hear a distant helicopter, and see lights towards the nearby hamlet. Stood shivering in the cold rain, he stared at shadows in the trees, wondering if he would make it.

Half an hour later he could hear dogs on the breeze, certain that he would be captured. Stood there, hopping from one foot to the other to stay warm, considered taking his own life to keep the authorities from finding out what he knew.

By 5am the sound of the dogs had faded, but he could now see the headlights of vehicles in the distance, still the intermittent sounds of a helicopter. Thankfully, the weather was terrible.

A flash of blue light startled him. He turned to the left and began running, sloshing through the mud. Reaching the illumination of the portal, its edges shimmering brightly, he could see the laboratory the other side, well lit and with people in white lab coats peering towards him. He reached down and grabbed the transmitter, soon realising that the base of the portal was a good two feet off the ground. He ran as fast as he could manage on the wet grass, car headlights close by now.

Reaching the portal, he jumped headfirst, a burst of light and warmth preceding an impact with a concrete floor.

‘Close it, they’re right behind me!’

Singh cut the power, Jimmy laying on his back and panting. Easing up with the help of the others, he sat looking at his wet trousers and muddy shoes. Up on his feet, he took in the laboratory and its equipment, and a few faces that he had almost forgotten. ‘How long was I gone?’

‘Hour and fifty minutes,’ Singh reported.

‘Eleven years that side,’ Jimmy reported, blowing out hard. He took his coat off as a technician wiped down his muddy shoes.

Singh brought forwards a backpack, placing it down with an odd look on his face, almost apologetic. Jimmy stared at it. Singh said, ‘We’ve isolated another timeline, closer than the last.’

Jimmy slowly nodded, staring at the backpack. 'I made millions on the stock markets,' he idly commented.

'We couldn't hear any radio programmes mention you, and you're back before the use of wireless Internet locally,' Singh noted.

'I bought hotels in Africa, and a mine or two. It was going well, but I slipped up somewhere because the CIA was all over me. I was interviewed twice, they took DNA samples – good thinking of yours to replace my younger self – and I gave them the slip in Seattle. They caught up locally; another day and they would have had me.'

'We'd like you to go through in an hour,' Singh said after a glance at his colleagues, seeming apologetic.

'What's the time here?' Jimmy asked.

'One o'clock, Saturday morning.'

'Do you think we'll do it?' Jimmy asked after a moment.

'Yes, we're on schedule. We knew the first time would be the worst, and you've learnt from it no doubt. But Jimmy, Monday morning they'll be coming through that door.'

All of the technicians brought over chairs, forming a circle, notepads in hand. 'Tell us what happened,' Singh requested, some urgency in his voice. 'We'll make a modified plan.'

Jimmy accepted a coffee and sat. 'The fake passports were fine, and the money. I almost got caught fencing the diamonds you gave me, I'll have to be careful in future. When I arrived back I got a bus to Toronto and made like a tourist, bought a case and packed it out; that survived inspection in London airport.

'I stayed in London for two years, placing bets on horses and making good money, studying hard, but keeping the weight down. In 1984 I got a place in Cardiff and studied my younger self, eventually just knocking on his door. I ... killed him and hid his body, taking his place just before I – he – was due to move to London for a new stockbroker job, not seeing my parents for almost five months, and when I did they accepted me.

'I traded the markets and made a fortune, bought a nice apartment, a nice car, and all the while sent letters about disasters to ambassadors in London. Those letters never leaked out, and I could see disasters being avoided – so it was working well enough. I used the name Magestic as we discussed, but the CIA *was* looking for me.

'I made contact with a future British Prime Minister, and gave him a detailed briefing. He's due to take office in the years ahead, so he may well make a big difference. I also gave him the chart for gold prices for a few decades, and a few hints at technology to come, so I'd like to think that he would make a difference.

‘The British security services paid me a visit on more than one occasion, but never figured it out. I lived the high-life when I knew they were watching, and they lost interest.’

‘And if you did it again?’ a lady technician asked.

‘Oh, I could do a much better job of it. And I know who I could recruit and trust to help me.’

‘Recruit?’ Singh asked.

‘It’ll be difficult by myself,’ Jimmy insisted. ‘I need people I can trust, and I know of one now.’

‘You told him who you were?’ they asked.

‘Yes, and he offered to help. After seven years – no problems, but ... well, I think they have him in custody.’

‘And the Russians and Chinese?’ Singh asked.

‘I speak a reasonable amount of each language now, and I warned them both of the future to come by letter.’

‘Did *they* try and find you?’ Singh asked.

‘I don’t think so.’

‘Did China research coal-oil technology?’ they asked.

‘I read an article about it just before I came back to Canada,’ Jimmy informed them.

‘I have a signal from that world,’ someone said from behind Jimmy. ‘It’s ... 2017 ... it’s ... military ... it’s ... post apocalyptic.’

Everyone collectively sank.

‘Next time,’ Singh insisted. ‘Next time.’

With the briefing over, and a few ideas bounced around, Jimmy put the backpack on, checking his fake passport and money. Stood next to the portal he turned and looked back at the expectant faces. ‘Wish me luck.’

Goma, 2021

A week after Jimmy had revealed more about who he really was, my head was still full of all things temporal. I was dying to discuss it with the girls, but dared not.

But now things were different for me, and different between Jimmy and myself. He was the outsider now, and this was my world, that’s how I felt. I was being trained to assist him – but here, and some day soon he’d be gone. I felt more attached to the world all of a sudden, that realisation that this was my world, and that there were

others out there. The care and belonging I had felt for Africa I now started to feel for the planet as a whole.

Brad had, apparently, been given his own briefing, a private one-to-one that lasted six hours. Two people on the planet now knew, three if you included our version of Doctor Singh, who was in a secret location in India and busy working on his theories behind closed doors.

In the States, Brad had passed a bill that basically paid us back almost half of what was still owing to us from various American states and our coffers were full, if not bursting. With this new reality about Jimmy, and the new reality of full coffers, I continued to work hard on the enclaves, certain that they would make a difference.

In New Palestine, Shelly had become involved after studying satellite photographs of the enclave. She had noticed a nice beach just outside the enclave, and a nice stretch of coastline. Without my knowledge she had approached Abdi, and nagged that he extend the enclave by four miles. Abdi agreed, since it was just parched soil, and Shelly dropped a project on my desk.

‘There’s a great beach east of the Palestinian enclave, the potential of a great coastal region. So, if we developed that region, added another marina, it would help to generate future income and to develop a small tourist trade.’

‘Tourism? To a Palestinian enclave? People will think of Gaza!’

‘Till they see the pictures. Abdi has agreed the land, I asked him nicely, then sat on him and refused to move till he agreed.’

‘He agreed more land?’

‘I asked for a mile, and took four. Who’s counting? Anyway, if you move the fence and landscape the beaches will be lovely. Put a road at the back, then parkland, then nice apartments.’

I had been given a firm nudge, and sent additional builders up – not wishing to be sat on till I gave in. Their work was simple enough, the road completed quickly, the parkland down in a few days, sand moved around on the beaches. Hundreds of labours moved rocks and filtered the sand, trying to create a perfect beach. They even swam out and removed rocks from the shallows, save important paying tourists stubbing a toe.

When the hotel chains of the world saw the sketches, and accompanying photographs of the beaches, many wished to plant a beach hotel nearby. I sanctioned the building of twelve immediately.

Meanwhile, the dustbowl was taking shape, some three hundred apartment blocks either complete, or soon would be, the first row of nice villas built. A police training college had been knocked together

next to an army barracks, the Rifles in charge of both for now. Former security staff from the occupied territories signed on, the Israelis on the phone straight away.

‘Paul, Ben. Will these Palestinian soldiers be trained like Rifles?’

‘No, I’ve specifically forbidden it, so relax. They’ll have just basic training, no super-drug, and a nap at 3pm each day. We’re not creating Palestinian super-soldiers, because they might bite us on the arse as much as you.’

‘And the Somali base nearby?’

‘Is there in case trouble breaks out. Relax, worry about your economy instead, huh. That’s heading towards the toilet.’

Fearing a growing Israeli interest in the enclave, I ordered that the basic dirt airstrip that the nearby Somali base offered become a half-decent airfield that would hold a squadron of Kenyan F15 fighters. Or two. I also had the breakwater harbour at the Somali base increased in size, asking that Somali and Kenyan coastguard cutters be based there all the time.

When Ben Ares popped down for a visit, we touched upon the subject of the enclave.

‘Ben, their army will be tiny, and not trained like the Rifles. But, should they be a problem, I’ll invade them myself and sort the problem. But if *you* were to launch a raid I’d consider it an act of war, and I’ve already signed a defence treaty with the enclave’s provisional council. If you fire a shot, you’re at war with Rifles.’

He was not a happy bunny, but I assured him that I would take responsibility for the conduct of the enclave, including the searching of ships. I also pointed out that the colony offered the death penalty for the private possession of a firearm or explosives.

We toured the massive jewellery factory, and its equally large offices, some four hundred Israelis now working in the city. A temple had been built near the offices, and the city now boasted three restaurants that could be described as offering Jewish cuisine.

A week later, Rahman and al-Qa’eda reared up, and attacked Dubai again. I had to wonder about their logic, since the city was dying anyway. A bomb had gone off in Dubai’s tallest tower, another building set-alight. The economic damage may have been great, in another time, but now it hardly made the news.

Stateside, Brad was earning friends on the right and losing them on the left, and I’m sure that Sanchez was turning in his grave. The TV news showed Hispanic illegals being deported, businesses being raided or shut down for employing illegals. Unemployment rates

amongst Hispanics soared, even if they were legal, but Brad held firm.

Brad told a TV interviewer, ‘When a person lands at JFK they show their passport, because that’s international law. If someone wishes to come and live and work here ... then they apply to do so – within the laws of this land!’

Studying a political analysis website, I could see Brad gaining on the right and losing on the left, but overall he was doing OK. Jimmy then waded in with a TV interview.

‘During 2025 and after, there will be the danger of high unemployment and civil unrest here in America. In the years following 2025, some groups of Hispanics will turn militant and fight the authorities, making some areas no-go areas, hundreds of police offices and soldiers being killed.’

That frightened right-wing America, who now called for even tougher action. Landing in Goma a week later, Jimmy gave an interview to our TV station.

‘New Kinshasa is a beautiful city, and the Democratic Republic of Congo has done well. But unchecked immigration by those without jobs could spoil all that. Control of the people, and application of the law is important in any country. If we allowed it, we’d have millions of unemployed people in our region and beggars on the streets. That would harm business, and investment.

‘That’s not saying that we don’t like the people from other countries, that’s saying that we’ll help people in their own countries, and allow movement with legal paperwork. We help the Ugandans in Uganda, and we help the Kenyans in Kenya, but we don’t allow anyone to just move where they please and put up a tin shack.

‘President Kimballa is in office to govern the people of the Congo, not to govern the people of any other nation. His first loyalty is to his own citizens, and to consider overseas workers afterwards.

‘Personally, I don’t like to see Africans with an education going to work in The West. I think they should be here, making things better for their homeland. If they work in The West to get experience and come back, then fine.

‘As for the foreigners in New Kinshasa, they are all legal; we know who they are and they have papers, invited here to do jobs that locals can’t do yet. And working alongside these Westerners, our people learn to do the jobs themselves.

‘I am all in favour of people mixing, but done so with control and the rule of law, not done without planning, and not like the Mexicans climbing over the fences on the American border.’

When he arrived at the house, I asked about the situation in America. Jimmy began, 'There was a time when American politicians realised that their health service and welfare bill was a giant Ponsi scheme; the new arrivals paying for those already in it. The thinking was that new migrant workers would increase the size of the population and help to prop-up the welfare bill and pensions years later.

'The health dividend eased that greatly, but it also means that Americans will live longer, and their obesity problem hasn't gone away. Senator Pedersen's own health insurance company now screens out obese people, or charges a great deal more. People are living longer, and that'll stretch the pension payments greatly.

'Brad will soon tackle that, and people who've been injected with the drug will be told to retire ten years later - and to contribute more to their own pensions. It's a ticking time bomb, unfortunately, but he will hit it head on - or die trying!'

'Will he get re-elected?' I asked.

'He doesn't care. He'll tackle every problem I give him and do what he can, and to hell with it.'

'Hispanics are not happy.'

'They're illegal, they have no rights - certainly not to be complaining about it. Besides, I know what'll happen, and they need to go.'

'Mexican border sewn up tight?'

'Getting that way, as well as Mexico's border with Guatemala. And I've given the Mexicans money to ship South Americans out. America used to gain people every year, now they're starting to lose them, but it's a decade or two too late.'

A week later I had a visit in the Pentagon building from some of the brain-trust kids.

'We've been working on the drug to slim down the pigs,' they said.

I had to stop and stare. 'Slim down ... pigs? Are our pigs overweight?'

They smiled. 'It's a drug for humans, sir.'

'Ah,' I realised, and I remembered the visit to the pig sheds. 'Yes, yes. So, how's it going?'

'We think we have it, the trial on the first hundred humans is being conducted now, and so far there are no side effects.'

'And their waistlines?'

‘Much better, sir. But they need another injection if they put the weight on, which is what Mister Silo wanted.’

‘He did?’

‘Yes, sir. They have to keep buying more.’

‘Ah, good idea. And it could be worth a fortune to us. What do you need?’

‘We’d like to create our own pharmaceutical company here, sir, and then sell the drug locally first.’

‘You’ll have everything you need,’ I promised. I sent for my deputies and instructed them, asking the group, ‘When do you think it will hit the shops?’

‘I may be six months, sir, if all goes well.’

‘Try and accelerate it, conduct a bigger trial; I want to make a lot of money from this ready for 2025.’

I informed Helen that lunchtime.

‘Could be worth more than our gold,’ she suggested. ‘Just think of the women who’ll want it; they can eat chocolate all day and then just pop a pill.’

Security for the group was duly tightened, armed bodyguards for the key researchers; I had PACT take on board the project’s secrecy until the drug was ready, my target audience being the chocolate munching women of the world.

Horseback

Jimmy washed his bloodied hands in cold river water. Standing, he took in the view, a wooded river valley leading to gentle hills devoid of trees. ‘It’s beautiful. I guess it’s what the original settlers saw; virgin territory.’

Corporal Diaz straightened, taking in the view, stood in his drab green uniform with his hands on his hips. ‘It’s also deadly if you have no food, tools or weapons, or if you don’t know what the fuck you’re doing.’ He pointed at Jimmy’s cut hand. ‘That OK?’

‘Be gone by the morning.’

Diaz took a moment. ‘You going to explain that at some point, buddy? And back there; you killed those three men like they were made out of straw. You going to explain that?’

‘At some point,’ Jimmy acknowledged with a smile.

They grabbed their heavy backpacks, trudging slowly onwards, always north and towards the Canadian border. Diaz had carried an M16 rifle, Jimmy wore an AK47 slung and a pistol on his hip. They had already glimpsed a bear, but it had been more afraid of them and scampered off.

‘So, this place ... Manson, that’s where the British Army is?’ Diaz asked.

‘That’s what I heard.’

The next day they found a road, but decided to avoid people; those that they had met so far had tended to shoot first and say hello afterwards. They crossed the road, pressing on along a little used track. Finding a wooden cabin, partly burnt, they dropped their packs and investigated, weapons ready. Inside the cabin they discovered three bodies; two charred, the third partly eaten by animals.

Diaz said, ‘That one - she killed the other two, burnt them and the cabin, then killed herself.’ He pointed at a photograph above the fireplace. ‘Parents and daughter by the look of it.’

Tinned food was liberated, powdered milk, but little else.

‘Diaz?’ Jimmy called from an outhouse.

Diaz came running, weapon ready. Jimmy pointed. ‘Saddles. So where are the horses?’

‘They probably let them go.’

‘If they were broken-in, raised tame, then they wouldn’t have gone far.’

Leaving the outhouse, Diaz pointed towards a large field. Reaching the open gate, they could see four horses grazing happily on the far side.

‘You know horses?’ Diaz asked.

‘I was having lessons a few years back.’ Jimmy turned. ‘We’ll need food for them, and the householders probably grew their own. C’mon.’

They discovered an overgrown vegetable patch towards the track, beyond it a line of apple trees, a dozen apples collected by each of them.

Back at the field, Jimmy tried to whistle. ‘Never learnt to fucking whistle,’ he cursed. ‘You?’

Diaz dropped his apples, put two fingers in his mouth and created a loud whistle, repeated many times. The horses were now staring across, the first starting to amble towards the humans, the previous providers of sustenance.

A full twenty minutes later the first horse nervously approached, sniffing the air. Jimmy tossed it an apple, soon gobbled up and munched, a second following. The horse edged closer. Holding several apples, Jimmy stepped to it and halted, standing perfectly still. Five minutes later the horse was close enough to sniff the apples, Jimmy holding one out on his upturned palm. The horse took the apple and munched it loudly, the remaining three horses closing in, Jimmy tossing them apples.

The first horse, the most confident, allowed Jimmy to rub its nose. 'Hello there,' Jimmy quietly offered.

Diaz eased forwards, offering an apple to a second curious horse. 'What now?' he whispered.

'Now we take a few days to get to know them, them us, and for them to get used to saddles again. In the meantime, we close the gate, move the bodies and set-up a happy home.'

With the three bodies buried, Jimmy marked the graves with a shovel, and a photograph in a glass frame from above the fireplace, an image of the once-happy family. He joined Diaz on the porch.

'We fucked it all up, man,' Diaz stated, focused on the graves. 'Fucked it all up *big time*.'

Jimmy took a moment to stare at the graves. 'Attacking China was a mistake; your President fucked the whole world in one go and started the war.'

'I never voted for the asshole.'

'Can you keep a secret, Diaz?'

'Who'd I tell?' Diaz scoffed.

'You've seen me heal, you've seen how fit and strong I am, how little sleep I need, but you seem to accept it.'

Diaz shrugged. 'I'd be dead without you, man. You got me out that camp – fucking Texans would have sent me back to Mexico. I was born here man, a serving corporal, and those fucking rednecks wanted to deport me, or lynch me.'

Jimmy gently nodded, then turned his head and made eye contact. 'In Manson there's a secret facility. Inside it is a time machine. I'm ... from another time.'

'Shit...' Diaz slowly let out.

'And I need a favour.'

'Anything, man.'

'It's important that I get to Manson, because I may be able to go back in time and alter all ... all this. If we run into trouble, I need you to do everything you can to get me there, even if it costs you your life.'

Diaz stared back. 'You can alter this?'

Jimmy nodded. 'I think can, at least I hope I can.' Wistfully, he added, 'I just need to figure a way to stop your fucking President from nuking China because of your economy, and your economy not failing because of OPEC, and of OPEC not dropping the dollar.'

'Jesus,' Diaz let out.

Jimmy stood. 'I found a syringe in the bathroom. Take off your jacket and roll up your sleeve, I'm going to inject you with my blood.'

'Inject me ... with your blood?'

'Afterwards you'll be just like me: fucking indestructible.'

'Shit...'

The horses accepted apples twice a day every day, Jimmy and Diaz getting to know them, Diaz improving his strength and fitness. On the third day, Jimmy showed the horses a basic rope harness and bit, getting them bridled eventually, the bridles removed at dusk. That following day, Jimmy led the horses around on a rope, each in turn, running and jogging.

'They seem OK,' Jimmy told Diaz. 'But I'm no expert. And I've no idea how to check their shoes.'

In the morning, Jimmy tied his favourite horse to the fence, stroking and patting it for five minutes. They seemed to have an affinity. It took a while for Jimmy to figure out the saddle assembly, instructing Diaz where he could. Finally ready, Jimmy saddled his favourite horse, leading it around the field before tying it to the fence again.

An hour later, with Diaz stood ready, Jimmy checked the saddle position, tested that it wouldn't slip, and mounted up. Diaz smiled widely as the horse simply stood there.

'Untie me,' Jimmy called.

Diaz released the knot, tossing Jimmy the rope, watching now from the fence as Jimmy walked the horse around the field for half an hour. Back at Diaz, he said, 'Your turn, Corporal.'

Jimmy held the horse, rubbing its nose as Diaz mounted up. 'Slow gentle kicks with your heels. Talk to her, reassure her, pat her neck.'

Diaz dug his heels in and walked the horse around the field. 'How do you turn?' he shouted back.

'Pull the rope with your left or right hand, turn the horse's head.'

Diaz survived the experience, back with a huge smile. 'We're like proper cowboys, man.'

‘Release your left foot, hold the big bit in front of your groin, move your weight forwards, then right and down, keeping hold on the rope.’

Diaz landed on his back, laughing hard. Unbridled, Jimmy rewarded the horse with apples.

Four days later, Jimmy and Diaz, travelling companions, sat atop their horses, the final two horses roped behind and carrying their back packs. From a gentle rise they looked back at the cabin.

‘Could have stayed there, man,’ Diaz said. ‘Vegetables and all, and fucking apples.’

‘You have to keep moving, because it would be too easy for me to just stop, just stop and try and have a life.’

They turned their horses north.

Mexico

On a visit to Nairobi, I met Jimmy in a new hotel that our property business had built. He was booked in, I’d be flying back later, and we met in the bar.

‘Hello stranger,’ I offered as I sat.

‘Well, someone has to try and fix the world whilst you’re busy fixing Africa.’

I wasn’t sure if I liked the dig at me. ‘Is there something else I should be doing?’

‘Probably, but I’m not sure these days. Africa and The Middle East is the problem to fix for 2025, my efforts in the wider world are for ... after that, assuming that 2025 is dealt with to some degree. Anyway, need you to gear up on helping Mexico.’

‘Mexico?’

‘Need to ease the pressure on Brad. Best way to do that is to make Mexico less of a shit-hole, and more attractive to those being kicked out.’

‘They don’t have much industry or mining, except silver and iron ore,’ I pointed out. ‘And their coal production is limited; they import some.’

‘First, they have old coalmines that are not worth drilling, but may be worth coal-oil liquid technology. Second, they have more coal than they realise, but its deep under tough rocks.’

‘Less of a problem for liquid extraction,’ I realised.

‘I’ve already asked the Mexican Government for permission to re-work old mines and to sink new wells. CAR will handle it, but use the latest liquid technology, and we’ll see if we can’t keep the lights on in Mexico City a while longer. They have a coachbuilders, so send them more electric batteries suitable for buses, and the new solar panelled buses.

‘Then, get the property company to buy land where I’ve arranged, and build condos and hotels and sell them. We’ll cover our costs, but it will employ local labourers and encourage tourism. Then we’ll get CAR to attack their copper deposits, and I know a few that the Mexicans don’t know about. We’ll break even on it, but that’s not the point – we need to create jobs where we can.

‘I’m also encouraging the Mexicans to increase the size of their immigration service, and they’re starting to chuck out South Americans. Send them some money.’

‘I could subsidise a few weekly flights from Europe to Mexico,’ I offered.

Jimmy nodded. ‘It all helps. But CAR will create the most jobs in the short term. Still, you have a knack for thinking of things that I miss, so see what you can do.’

‘Brad getting a lot of heat?’ I asked.

Jimmy reluctantly nodded. ‘It was always going to be this way, and his majority isn’t great. It’s been good to see that America has shifted left a little, become a little more caring towards its own citizens, but the media is still controlled by corporations with a political agenda, and there are plenty of powerful Americans who think that America should stay on top at any cost – even if that means forcing the rest of the world to conform by force.’

‘We knocked the rich back a bit,’ I offered.

‘Not enough, and it’s a constant process. The greatest danger they face ... is if the super-rich and the powerful get into a situation where they’re so rich – and control the media so much – that the gap between rich and poor will be widened to the point where there’s no fixing it. It’ll be something you’ll need to look at if I’m not around.’

I nodded my agreement, and sipped my beer. ‘People listen to you more than ever, so a few good speeches on the matter may help.’

‘I’ll be making them as we get closer to crunch time, when people’s minds are focussed. I met with the American oil industry last week and showed them all the untapped wells, and capacity, and we’re reasonably sure that the 2025 shutdown won’t cause a jump in oil prices. CAR has capped off twenty wells around Cuba and Haiti, some in the gulf, and I pointed towards additional Gulf reserves, some in Asia.’

‘American coal-oil having an effect?’ I asked.

‘Some, but not enough; I have Brad looking at it. And the take-up of electric vehicles is still slow. Some states have introduced the electric buses, especially California and Florida, but others are being slow. And to most affluent Americans, electric cars are what poor people drive.’

‘I’m still bringing back Africans from Europe and the States,’ I mentioned.

‘Good, keep at it, especially the States. More we can bring back, the less trouble later. When 2025 hits and the economy slumps, people will turn their anger towards the social deadwood - and foreigners.’

‘How’s the propaganda going?’ I asked with a grin, having seen some of the films.

‘Very well – Americans can easily grasp a concept if its on the big screen, a hero and babe to save, but they’re not so big on reading the papers and figuring it out. They all now see Russians and Chinese are brothers in arms against Muslim terrorists, which makes it hard for the media to portray the Russians and Chinese in a poor light.

‘Besides, companies like CAR and others are truly international, and they have an effect; a nudge from the board of CAR can influence politicians. Other US companies are becoming truly multinational, some with my help, and that makes it hard for a US politician to criticise China when the largest employer in his home state is part owned by the Chinese, a company that funds his election campaigns.’

‘We didn’t give Brad that much after all, and got some back.’

‘My campaigning helped there, and Brad was frugal in his spending. He did most of his work on the social media sites like Facebook and others, a viral campaign. That’s the way of the future for US politics, not kissing babies on doorsteps.’

‘You’ve been to North Korea a few times,’ I noted. ‘Seems to be going well.’

‘I flooded them with food and fuel, and asked nicely afterwards for modest changes to the regime. Coal-oil is making a massive difference there, and private ownership is now being tolerated. But, now that they’ve started that process, it’ll be impossible to stop. And you ... you’ve been making friends with the Iranians.’

‘I flooded them with food and fuel, then asked them nicely afterwards to lower the rhetoric,’ I said, making Jimmy smile. ‘Most of the international sanctions have been lifted, and they’re selling more oil to the Chinese. They know they’ll be hit bad in 2025, and they’re terrified.’

‘We should have tried that approach before; cut the sanctions and played nice – then asked for favours.’

‘Israeli economy is struggling,’ I noted.

Jimmy made a face and nodded. ‘It’s unsustainable with their defence spending, but the US military hide the donations well enough. US taxpayers now contribute twenty billion a year to Israel, and since I described the threat from The Brotherhood that’s hard to argue against.’

‘Has New Palestine had an effect?’ I asked.

‘On the psyche of the Middle East it has, because so much emphasis was put on the Palestinian struggle before, and on two small areas of land. Now people can see the Palestinians leaving, so how can they try and back the Palestinian’s cause – when it looks like the Palestinians themselves have abandoned the land.’

‘Any signs of a peace dividend in Israel?’

‘No, because they still get the odd rocket lobbed over. The reduction in tension has not come from your enclave, its come from a changed Iranian attitude, and a diminished Hezbollah. I also had a word with the Syrians a while back, and pointed towards what the Somalis did to Tehran. They got the message.’

‘By 2025, I could have a quarter million Palestinians in the enclave. I’m building taller towers to make better use of the land, but I don’t think Abdi cares if we expand it further.’

‘As I said, the greatest benefit has been the perception that the Palestinians are leaving, even if most of your people are from outside the occupied territories. The Palestinians are getting less support now from The West. Oh, while I remember, the UN is now producing those household wind turbines for a few countries – I had them sent the designs.’

‘I heard. I’ll ship more to Mexico and Central America; they’re only thirty dollars a go locally. Costs as much to transport them.’

‘Brad now has private agencies deporting the illegals, and that’s working quite well. Just a few small problems when people with papers were shipped out by mistake, over-zealous private operators on a commission. In California, hundreds of small agencies are popping up, working like bounty hunters under license. They bus people south to the border and collect their reward money, many of them Hispanic themselves.

‘They even have private agencies on the border now, nabbing people and handing them over for their bounty. But one innovative group crossed the border after bypassing US soldiers, grabbed a bunch of local villagers, brought them back and collected their bounty.’

I laughed.

‘US soldiers now get a small bounty for each person caught as well, just fifty dollars, but it buys the beers. And the new Governor of Texas, he thinks it’s his God given mission to repatriate as many as he can. In another time - and another place, he would have made Texas independent, and fought The Brotherhood in Mexico.’

‘You think we’ll beat them this time?’ I delicately enquired.

‘With everything that the world’s armies now know about them? Hell, if they lose ground now then they deserve to die. I’ve given them blow by blow accounts of how it will happen, where and when.’

‘You ... optimistic?’

‘Of the military campaign, yes, but not of the economic and political. Basic human instinct is to be downright miserable and nasty to your fellow man when your belly is empty; it’s easy to make rash decisions then.

‘When 2025 hits, I think we may be able to condition people enough to expect it – and accept it and move on. But if The Brotherhood set off bombs in Europe, then attitudes will change quickly, and European stock markets will crash. That’s the danger early on, more so than being invaded. And don’t forget, Britain has two and half million Muslims; a time bomb waiting to go off.’

‘And if The West hits Pakistan with a pre-emptive strike?’ I nudged.

‘Civil war in the UK, and complete economic collapse; and that’s something I experienced first hand, before I set off on the Long Voyage.’

‘And if the rise of The Brotherhood is delayed - what can I expect?’

‘Well, I’ve already done what future Republican Presidents would have done, not least with the illegals in the States. The movies have brought the nations close together, and the multi-national corporations are making it hard to start wars. I’ve knocked back the big banks before they took down the world economy, but they are back to their old tricks already.

‘I’d have to say ... that American politics will still be the biggest issue, the rich poor divide and the idea by some of the rich and elite in America that they can turn the world into one large company with themselves on the board of directors.

‘That’s not actually an idea that I completely disagree with, but to them its about control and power, with me it would be about unity and peace – plus a fair deal for the little guy. Their vision of the future has all the power in the hands of the banks and corporations, and debt is used instead of warfare; if a nation can be fooled into borrowing too much from you, then you own them - and don’t need to fight them.

‘It’s the same principle that was used in Africa before we arrived on the scene: keep them poor and subservient, don’t give them a chance to grow, and keep taking the ore. If the US banks can get Syria and Iran in debt to them in the future, then great.’

‘And China?’

‘China will suffer from its own success; their middle classes will start to grow in influence and have a political effect. They’ll go the same way as Russia, watered down socialism where capitalism is good. Just as China gets to the point where it feels that it can throw its weight around, its own people will stop it.’

‘What are you doing with trees that I read about?’

‘Replanting trees in the American mid-west, the old dust bowl. We’re drilling wells and pumping water with wind turbines, hundreds of them - that will become thousands of them, and the irrigated areas are being planted with trees that are already a few feet high, some seeded.

‘In the wetter areas, we’re employing local labour to dig trenches to form small canals, and planting trees along the banks; they create small eco-systems. I’m aiming to plant a couple of million trees, and that helps with soil erosion in years to come. California has a chronic water shortage already, and it’ll get worse, so we’re looking at pipes from the north or desalination using solar energy.’

Back at my desk the next morning, my head was full of post-2025 ideas, and I found myself stood in front of a map of the world. With

my hands in my pockets, I spent ages just staring at various countries, mountain ranges and rivers.

Getting to work on Mexico, I put a team of brain-trust kids and volunteers together, outlining the need to boost the Mexican economy. They went off to do a study and report back. My CAR representative - and they had their own offices here - popped up for a cup of tea, and we went through my plans for Mexico. First, I ordered additional surveys and bore samples to be taken right across Mexico. After all, there may be something under the ground that we didn't know about, and that Jimmy didn't know about either.

I ordered more electric buses from within Mexico, certain to keep their coachbuilders busy for many years, and sent five thousand Chinese electric cars to be used as taxis.

My next meeting was with the property business, which was now a listed company and technically not ours to boss around. But, as with CAR, we held the largest minority of shares. They promised to send a team out to Mexico straight away and to start buying land – or leasing it, since the Mexicans still did not allow foreign corporations to own land.

But Jimmy had set me thinking about trees, and over lunch I discussed it with Helen. She mentioned that she was already involved with tree planting in a few small areas, so I asked if those few small areas could become numerous large areas. She told me – firmly but politely - to do it myself. After lunch I put a team together, and asked that they start on Kenya first.

I wanted canals dug from Lake Victoria, not purposefully to take more water - but to improve the trees and wildlife in that area. Volumes would be hidden, little mention made of the fact that some of the canals would be a hundred miles long. Following Jimmy's example, I ordered wells drilled and water pumped using wind turbines, the water being pumped into areas where trees were now scarce.

The tree-hugging team set off, and threw up fences around saplings, the green shoots otherwise to be eaten by passing grazers and elephants. Acacia trees did well on the savannah, but few other species of tree thrived. They identified a tree species in the Congo that was also indigenous to Kenya, and so young trees – under six foot tall – were dug up and transported, being transplanted into the Kenyan savannah in clusters and fenced off. Those fences contained holes for certain animals, but would keep the larger grazers out.

When CAR reported the find of a significant silver deposit in Mexico, I negotiated directly with the Mexican Government. Temporary homes were constructed around the mine, CAR hiring some six thousand people, the planned mine covering an area some six miles across. I made sure that the wages were above average, and laid on electric buses for workers to commute to local villages and towns free of charge.

I had created my first jobs in Mexico and felt good about it. The next part was easy enough, I just needed to join the dots. I contacted CAR and asked if they could give employment priority to Mexicans kicked out of the States, those that had the skills. I sent Brad a note, and he agreed to cooperate, those able-bodied Mexican men returning home given a grant to apprentice at a mine; Uncle Sam would pay the apprenticeship costs for a year.

CAR had taken over thirty old coalmines, the former owners stunned at the request to mine the worn out old seams. Our people plugged up holes, drilled other holes, then poured in the first stage chemical. A good amount of second stage distillation was necessary, but coal-oil soon appeared from small on-site refineries. In the local town, the petrol stations took delivery of the refined gasoline, reprocessed at existing petrochemical refineries, and consumers could fill up with slightly cheaper petrol.

But the main benefit of the coal-oil came when a coal-fuelled power station was converted to run on coal-oil instead. Imports of coal from the States eased, and the costs to the state electricity company were lessened, the first of many such planned moves.

Biblical proportions

The Palestinians had been using a large marquee tent as a temporary mosque, but now asked to begin construction of a mosque. I looked at my plans, soon realising that I had not included one, so suggested that they design their own.

That led to a note from the Saudis, who said that they would not only design it, but build it as well. They sent me the designs and I had to laugh; it was a replica of the Golden Dome in Jerusalem.

With more Palestinian builders now in the enclave, and skilled at putting up the standardised apartments, I pulled out some of the Kenyan builders, making sure that all the Palestinian men were fully

employed. Apartment blocks were rising at the rate of one a week on average, the steady trickle of people being – well - steady. But I was pleased to see more families arriving, including those without a paternal head of the family. I instructed that the mothers and daughters be given welfare if they couldn't find work.

The UN then sent a very polite note about the enclave, which translated to: you left us out of it and are making us look bad, asshole! After I had stopped laughing, I sent them a note, giving them permission to do whatever they liked in the enclave, subject to approval by the provisional council. They got straight to work.

Tented cities popped up, UN aid workers and medics taking up residence and showing how caring they were. UN grain, which had no use around Africa these days, was duly delivered, and schools received more equipment, even foreign Arabic teachers.

Three months later, we ran out of families to put in apartments, the apartments now rising faster than we had warm bodies arriving by ship. As had happened in other areas, builders used their spare time to buy land from us and build their own houses, and we soon saw the first sanctioned private sale of a property. The beach hotels were nearing completion, one already operating and attracting an oddly motivated crowd. They were nearly all Arabs, and were flying down from Cairo or Amman so that they could use Dinars - and give something back to the Palestinians.

It was political protesting holidaying, and made me smile. Still, it put money into the local economy. An Israeli documentary about the enclave, filmed by Jordanian cameramen, showed the beaches and hotels, parks and apartments, and missed most of the dustbowl. The tall Saudi tower was filmed, the airport and the scuba centre. The floodgates opened.

I had to wonder if the Israelis were trying to make the enclave look good, or if it had been unintentional. Either way, Palestinians from the occupied territories applied to Israeli to emigrate, knowing that they would receive a small grant from us. That first week after the documentary, shown in the occupied territories and Israel, two thousand families made the journey down the Red Sea. They occupied apartments, and we were soon watching their kids playing on the beaches, no Israeli helicopters overhead.

My time was typically split between doing the mundane Presidential stuff - functions and the opening of hospitals, to running the macro elements of the economy, to my pet projects. I had lost interest in the

Arab enclaves to a degree, and concentrated on either Mining City or the Palestinian enclave, an eye on Mexico.

Lucy then gave me a few ideas for the Palestinian enclave. 'A university,' she suggested.

'University? There's hardly enough teenagers to warrant a school!'

'But there will be in time, and the university would be like here – for people from all over to study, and to pay fees. It would help the local economy.'

'It might,' I realised. 'At least – it may cover the teachers salaries.'

'And then a teaching hospital,' Lucy added. 'Again, people would study there, and if it was a good hospital you could charge for operations.'

I went back to the drawing board, sketching out the position for an Arabian regional university and a teaching hospital, commissioning the building work straight away. That led, inevitably, to a request from the Saudis that they have a hand in both projects, and I agreed that they fund a third of them respectively, and a third only; I had images of the university being a little on the radical side.

But no sooner had the ceremony taken place, the cutting of the ground on the university, than the enclave suffered its first terror attack. A small boat from Yemen had evaded the local patrols somehow, and landed at dawn near the main Palestinian port. They stormed ashore and began firing indiscriminately for half an hour, the Rifles eventually killing the Yemen al-Qa'eda operatives.

It was a shock, and I uttered a few words, smashing furniture in my office. Calling the commander of the combined naval base in Somalia I offered to go up there and kick him in the balls, before ordering Kenyan F15s up that evening. They blew several large holes in the main runway of Sana'a City airport. That resulted in much condemnation of my actions from the Arab world and The West, but I didn't care. I went on TV and threatened to invade Yemen if necessary.

Jimmy called. 'You're behaving like an Israeli,' he calmly stated.

'How so?' I challenged.

'When Palestinians set-off bombs in Israel, the Israelis send over warplanes - or invade. Now you know how they feel.'

The parallels were there, and I apologised to the Yemen Government - who now feared for their lives, Abdi sabre rattling towards them. Naval patrols were increased, extra Rifles placed onshore, but paradise had been lost. Or so I thought. The following

day, the tourists all mobilised into a march and protest, stating firmly that they would not be scared off. Bookings continued. We recruited additional would-be sailors, and the tiny Palestinian navy grew, twenty-four hour patrols organised.

The following week, three thousand families appeared, up from the weeks before, and I was now back to increasing the building rate. I even sent more African builders to the enclave.

Meanwhile, the less controversial area of Mining City was growing rapidly, fifty buildings being worked on at once, more than a hundred thousand builders of one description or another, many from outside the region.

When someone suggested that we may grow to the point where we have so many mines we run out of ore, I commissioned a study. That study suggested that African ore would last three hundred years, so I was reassured. Still, I adopted a different policy. The corporation encouraged mines to be opened, assessed, but to then adopt the policy of “just ticking over”. In other words, we would soon have many more mines, we would know what was there, but we would not exhaust them.

Extra mining surveys were conducted in Angola, Namibia, Central Congo, Southern Sudan and even Chad. Ore was found in many new places, assessed and left. Working along those lines, I made a move that would have ramifications, but without realising it. A group of CAR teams were tasked with sinking wells offshore, right around the African coastline, to judge future potential.

When Jimmy saw the detail of the scheme, he commented, ‘I know where some of it is, but to tell the truth, ninety-five percent of the coast has never been tested.’

Months later, when CAR had found good pockets in many places unknown to Jimmy, he ordered the findings kept secret.

I called him. ‘Why is the CAR oil survey being kept secret, oh great one?’

‘Why do you think, lord and master of all you survey.’

‘You tell me.’

‘If there’s more oil than we know about, then what affect will it have on the Middle East, before and after 2025?’

‘Ah, yes; could knock them lower, oh great one,’ I conceded.

‘Find it, cap it off, but leave it for a rainy day – Mister President.’

CAR spent money on exploration, reported to its board its findings, but kept the detail hidden from the wider world. They had become secret agent oil explorers. And as such secret agents, I asked

them to survey both the land around the Palestinian enclave, and the waters.

A month later, CAR confirmed the oil, and that it wasn't deep. They capped it off as requested and moved on, but found another small oilfield just at the western edge of the enclave, a third where Shelly had claimed the land for beaches. On land they found iron ore and copper as expected, just ten miles from the back of the enclave, but in quantities worth extracting.

As with much of Somalia, especially the northern area that was Somaliland before integration, ore was taken where found, and little additional exploration took place. The rear of the enclave was a long way from anything, and the mountain ranges might have suggested that moving the ore to the sea was the best bet. I got Abdi on a video link.

'How're things in rainy Goma?' Abdi asked.

'Fine. How're things in dry Mogadishu?'

'They are ... dry and warm.'

'Listen, there's iron ore and copper under the ground at the rear of the Palestinian enclave. It's in an isolated area, difficult roads, and would best be extracted and moved by ship. Could the Palestinians remove it under license from you, working with CAR?'

'Certainly, if it is difficult to get at any other way.'

'How're things with Yemen?' I broached.

'The runway was repaired, and we have agreed to stop small boats crossing in a joint venture. They captured the brother of one of the men who attacked, and he said that they attack because Israel builds the enclave to push the Palestinians out.'

'The Israelis don't tell me what to do,' I stated.

'I know this, but they do not, my friend.'

'The patrols are tight enough now, more ships in the area. Anyway, enjoy your sunny day. It's raining here!'

As year end approached, the newly formed Palestinian Mining Corporation was sub-contracted by CAR to mine ore from the hills behind the enclave, the raw ore moved by truck to the port on roads improved by us, and then sold on the open markets. The corporation did not make much, but it employed a growing number of men in skilled positions.

Our own corporation bought some of the ore, not all of it because we wanted an export trade and foreign currency reserves for the enclave. I commissioned a smelting plant at the very rear of the enclave – at a time when the Central Bank of New Palestine housed

a few thousands dollars worth of each of three currencies, their biggest reserve being in Egyptian pounds. It wasn't much, but it had been earned, and this year's national income could top a hundred thousand dollars if exports continued at this blisteringly slow pace.

The rate of immigration was actually the rate of hiring, since not that many families considered their move here to be a permanent one. Most saw it as a job opportunity. But after a few weeks, and after they had strolled along the marina promenade, bathed on the beaches or enjoyed the parks, attitudes slowly changed amongst many. We even had a few babies born.

At Ben Ares request I had built an open prison – of sorts, and the Israelis made prisoners the offer of moving to the enclave, or spending the next twenty years in an Israeli jail. Thousands moved down, many intent on sneaking back into the West Bank or Gaza. But the enclave was a long way away from the occupied territories, and the new arrivals could not board a plane or a ship.

Outside the enclave, Somali Rifles turned escaping prisoners back at gunpoint, some of the die-hards sneaking aboard ships in order to try and return to the territories. We eased the situation by making the prison more of a hotel, and brought down families to either visit or to stay. Since apartments were free, food cheap and work guaranteed, many families stayed.

The UN, and just about everyone else, condemned the prisoner move as a breach of human rights and international conventions, but I defended it, saying that the prisoners were better off here. And the Israelis ignored the UN as usual.

But New Palestine was becoming a little gem in a sea of sand. People serious about their scuba diving flew into the enclave, never before dived, and the Arab world still frequented the hotels. The enclave's reputation was growing, and Shelly had been right about the beaches and hotels; they added a quality to the place.

I commissioned two additional marinas and arranged for small harbours to be built, suitable to moor small boats. With a gentle nudge from me, more warships docked, foreign currency being earned in the cafes and shops.

For New Year we decided to head for River View by the sea, Mombassa, and block-booked rooms. Rescue Force were invited down, Rudd and family, Anna and Cosy.

It had been years since I had been here last, and I noticed a few subtle changes, starting with an Internet room with video conferencing equipment. I took a wander down to the scuba centre

and said hello, the instructors all strangers, the place not offering the welcome it once did.

Sitting at the beach bar, Han appeared, joining me. ‘Didn’t know you were down?’ I said.

‘I have work in my country’s enclave here, and so decided to grace you with my presence.’

‘You’re always welcome.’ Studying Han, who still seemed to wear glasses – despite being injected – I said, ‘You’re looking old, Han.’

‘I am seventy one this year.’

‘Had the full drug?’

‘I received the lower dosage many years ago. Otherwise, I would have retired by now.’

‘Jimmy could inject you...’

‘My government will soon have mastered the drugs, and the stems, to a much higher potency. I may be, as you say, the guinea pig.’

I sipped my cold beer and took in the ocean. ‘It’s been a lot of years, Han.’

‘For us ... just a small step when compared to Jimmy. May I enquire, for myself, your aspirations and expectations of 2025.’

‘There’s no way ... that I believe the oil changeover will go smoothly. I think the markets will crash and oil prices will jump up. They know it’s coming, but its not the same till it gets here. As for the refugee crisis, I think we’ll handle it – the rise of The Brotherhood delayed by years. The Iranians have agreed to allow CAR to drill for oil whilst they’re incapacitated, and that’ll help. I have enough food in Africa to feed the refugees, and enough temporary homes.’

‘And will that approach ... lessen the growth of African GDP?’ Han posed.

‘Can’t have it all ways.’

‘Indeed no. And your recent activities in Mexico?’

I swiped away a fly. ‘Simply to try and help their economy, for when large numbers of illegal Mexicans are kicked out of America – to help Brad.’

‘And your thoughts as to the stability of America, post 2025?’

‘Jimmy can’t accurately predict that, and I’m no expert.’

‘You are better than you think, Mister Holton. That I *have* learnt over the years. These enclaves were your idea, and the Palestinian enclave may just solve an old and intractable problem.’

‘It’ll take a few years, and may help, but it’s not big enough for all of the Palestinians – even if they did want to stay there. Many will stay where they are.’

‘And oil offshore, we understand?’

‘Some, yes.’

‘But not tapped yet?’ Han puzzled.

‘We’re keeping it quiet for now, or the Israelis will be jumping up and down.’

‘But if the oil was extracted, then the area may see a rush of people?’

‘It may do,’ I agreed. ‘But the Israelis may do something to undermine it. They don’t want to see a rich and independent Palestinian state.’

‘Perhaps the time for caution has passed, and the time for firm actions has arrived,’ Han suggested. ‘There are only three short years remaining, and the time will pass quickly.’

I sipped my drink. ‘I have been getting more radical of late, more of a sense of urgency.’

‘My government grows focused by the day. Our coal-oil extraction is far higher than we agreed with Jimmy, and will grow more, our use of electric buses soon to be law.’

‘Sounds good to me.’

‘Perhaps you should pump the oil for the Palestinians, and fund the enclave that way,’ Han suggested. ‘And, if you sell the oil to Israel – at a good price – then they cannot complain.’

‘Han, you’re a sneaky shit, you know that.’

‘I learnt from the best.’

I made a call and ordered CAR to start pumping from one well, straight to tanker, and to sell it to the Israelis at a discount – if they would take it.

Jimmy stayed in London for New Year, at the club, and I enjoyed a family beach holiday, teaching Liz to scuba dive. She was a natural, like her sisters, and showed no fear of the water. Many an afternoon I would be sat in shade with a cold beer, chatting to old friends, reminiscing about past projects and adventures.

Mac looked odd, and very old to be having a young wife and toddler, another baby on the way. The young girl was adorable, and obviously didn’t take after her father. But she was having an effect on Mac, who was less sarcastic, smoked less, and swore less. Parenthood had tamed Mac in his seventies.

Rudd was a grandfather of six, Cosy a grandfather of one, and us old men enjoyed babysitting at the beach bar.

On the 2nd of January, 2022, I took Lucy the short distance up to Ebeye, finding that few of the original old buildings still stood.

‘When I first came here it was falling down, a wall of flies to get through to reach the courtyard,’ I told her. I pointed at a new wall. ‘That wall used to be six feet high, and locals would drop their kids over the side, just dumping them here for old Mary.’

‘My God.’

‘And over there was a hospital ward of sorts, all the kids dying from AIDS. Should have seen the look on the old lady’s face when Jimmy told her to inject the kids with his blood.’

Staff rushed out and lined up. I told them not to bother, but we soon had a thousand smartly dressed kids chanting and singing, Lucy recording them with a small video camera.

A man stepped up to me, a teacher. ‘Mister Paul, I was here the day you first arrived,’ he said in an accent. ‘I was five years old, and I remember the big man swinging me around.’

I shook his hand. ‘That was a long time ago, my friend.’

‘Thirty-four years, sir.’

‘It’s changed a bit.’

‘Ah, very much so, sir. And now, when the children from before have the job, they send back the five percent. We have the five percent from the thirty-six thousand people, sir. We have the six Cabinet Ministers, the eight Junior Ministers, and the twelve CEO of the big company, sir. And one hundred officer in the army more than the Major rank.’

‘Excellent. I guess we did some good then.’ I waved, and more than a thousand kids waved back.

Leaving, Lucy commented, ‘It’s amazing what you achieved, despite the knowledge of the future.’

‘Small acorns,’ I said. ‘Jimmy knew back then that he had time, and that the dying kids here had nothing to lose. It was an army of the dead; ghosts walking.’

‘I read the other day that this place has produced twenty thousand teachers. Around Africa, your orphanages have produced over a hundred thousand teachers.’

‘It was what Africa needed, an education system to rival The West. But first it needed security, then to be extracting ore for itself; without the Rifles it would still be just hostile jungle. You know, back then we took a lot of risks, we could have been killed many

times. When I asked Jimmy about it recently, he said he was tempting God.'

'Tempting God? He's not a believer.'

'No, and after everything he's been through I think he welcomes the idea of death.'

'He seems OK.'

'There are things you don't know, babes. Maybe someday he'll explain them to you.'

Back at the hotel, Ben Ares called. I was in two minds to answer the phone.

'Yes?'

'Paul, Ben.'

'Happy New Year to you too,' I quipped.

'Yes, happy New Year.'

'Have CAR offered you some oil, Ben?'

'They have, Palestinian oil.'

'And...?'

'We'll not recognise them or pay them directly. We'll accept the oil, but pay you.'

'Any which way you like, Ben. What else?'

'Is there much oil there?'

'Enough to make the enclave pay for itself, and to encourage a great many other Palestinians that way at the prospect of a good job and nice home.'

'And how many will you take?'

'As many as we can. We have almost two hundred thousand, but most were from outside the territories to start with. Still, there're more families arriving now. Perhaps you should show that documentary again. Update it first though, and show the ore mining and the oil.'

'We may do that, certainly. But this enclave, its too small for ... larger numbers.'

'It's twice as big as Manhattan Island in New York, and the towers are growing higher. As it stands it'll take a million, but we may extend it since the Somalis don't care. We're seeing six thousand people a month arrive, so by 2025 you'll have fewer potential recruits to The Brotherhood, maybe a lot fewer.'

I needed a beer, and worried if I was doing the right thing. I was interfering with an entire nation, but we had done that before.

Ben didn't need to show his documentary again, the news of the ore and oil spread like wildfire, Palestinians telling relatives that the enclave would be the next Kuwait or Dubai. Our intake doubled, and

this time more came from the occupied territories, the Israelis only too happy to assist with travel plans. But I still worried about what I was doing.

Fourth attempt

Jimmy said goodbye to his assistant Paul Holton, a glance at Paul's ex-wife, Helen, then dived through the portal. As he lifted his head, his pack came through and landed on him, followed by two additional packs. The portal was powered down.

Doctor Singh helped Jimmy up. 'What the hell happened?' he asked with a desperation and sadness in his voice. 'You did it, you fixed it all!'

Jimmy straightened himself, taking in the confused faces. He took a breath. 'I got further in that timeline than here, and by a few years. In 2025, a massive earthquake will devastate the Middle East. Over there, it reduced the world economy to zero, civil unrest broke out, wars, and The Brotherhood rose up as they did here, destroying what was left of the Middle East and attacking into Europe.' He shook his head. 'We could never have factored it in.'

'Why such a crash in the economies?' Singh puzzled.

'The quake wiped out all Middle East oil in a day,' Jimmy reported as he took his coat off.

'How the hell can we fix that?' a technician barked.

'OK, OK,' Singh shouted, seeming tired and looking drained. 'Get the computer simulation up.'

'What's the time?' Jimmy asked.

'Sunday, twelve noon,' Singh informed him.

'Time for two more,' Jimmy said with a sigh.

'You were gone forty-five years, Jimmy,' a lady technician reminded him as she closed in. 'You're on borrowed time as it is.'

'Inject me again,' Jimmy insisted. 'I can get the weight off myself, I know how. Trust me, I can do it.'

Ten minutes later, sat with a coffee, his arm sore from the injections, Jimmy said. 'I know where the oil will be found outside of the Middle East. If that could be found early, it might counterbalance the loss of Middle East oil.'

A technician put in, 'I have the web pages we saved; they have all the world's oil, ore and gold, and potential oilfields.'

‘I’ll take it back with me on a data stick, study it, and tap the fields,’ Jimmy suggested.

‘What about The Brotherhood?’ Singh asked.

Jimmy blew out, taking a moment. ‘I developed the Rifles in Africa to clear away the rebels and warlords. If they’re increased in size, then maybe they could be used to fight The Brotherhood. I’ve got the technical data on advanced weapons, invented by the autistic kids; it’s on a disk. And we discovered that the kids injected with my blood - who then go on have their own kids, produce an antibody to Lagos Fever. I’ll experiment with it when I go back. Copy my data-stick and have a look.’

‘You’re way ahead of us now, Jimmy,’ Singh admitted with a tired smile.

‘By a few years,’ Jimmy agreed.

‘No, not just the advance in years, the advance in you,’ Singh pointed out. ‘Your technical knowledge, your political skills. We caught some of the speeches, we saw the things you developed. None of that was in our original brief.’

‘I’m sure that if *you* lived another two hundred years, you’d improve as well.’

‘Incredible,’ Singh noted. ‘You left Friday night, and you’ve picked up two hundred years of experience.’

‘Did they re-invent the stems treatment?’ a technician enquired.

‘No,’ Jimmy answered. ‘But they cracked the blood properties eventually, even improved upon some of it; I’ve been injected with a drug that would baffle you lot.’

Stood ready to leave, Jimmy faced the group, a line of expectant yet saddened expressions. ‘It comes down to an alternate to Middle East oil, then a military solution to the terror groups. If I can nail that ... then we’re there.’ He offered an encouraging smile. ‘Wish me luck. Oh, and enjoy the goodies in the backpacks.’

Ten to midnight

Jimmy landed back in a heap, the clock on the wall indicating that it was ten to twelve. He eased up and dusted himself off, a tired expression offered to the expectant faces. ‘Time?’

‘Ten to midnight, Sunday.’

Jimmy grabbed a chair and sat, the laboratories tabletops littered with coffee mugs. Nothing was said for many seconds, worried looks exchanged. Without looking up, Jimmy began, 'We got the military ready for the rise of The Brotherhood after 2025, but the terrorists did well in Europe, destroying the economy. NATO pulled back from Turkey – as they did here, which caused problems with the Turks - again, many of whom switched sides.

'Europe couldn't be held, but American had the Atlantic and Pacific, so did well enough. China's western provinces rose up, Indonesia attacked its neighbours...' He eased forwards and put his face in his hands.

Lifting up, he said, 'When I sent you the signal I'd already been in Canada almost two years. Texas had broken away – again, it ... it was a carbon copy of what happened here, just later.' He stood and stretched. 'Inject me.'

'There's only time for one more trip,' Singh reminded Jimmy, urgency in his voice.

'I have a few ideas,' Jimmy offered, but did so sounding less than confident. 'When I get there, I'll have plenty of time to think about solutions.'

After being injected with the genetically modified stems, Jimmy retrieved a small bottle of blue pills. 'Super weight loss pills. They were invented in 2025.' Heaving a big breath, he declared, 'This time.'

Singh handed him a data stick. 'The details of the portal controls and frequencies are on there. Even if ... you don't fix things, maybe they could send help here.'

'The last couple of hundred years has taught me to trust no government,' Jimmy stated. 'It would have to be under exceptional circumstances that I'd give this to anyone. The Chinese were very helpful, and the Russians, but at the end of the day they all buckle under pressure – and look after their own. Paul Holton can be trusted, his wife, a few others I recruited. But no government.'

Stood at the portal, backpack on, Jimmy turned and faced the group. With no energy in his voice, he said, 'Wish me luck.'

Goma, 2022, the long hot summer

Despite a wet winter, our lake's water level was down; I noticed it in the mornings. Our rainfall millimetres were down across our region, as they were across the Nile tributaries. Our dams in Ethiopia were low, many still being worked on, and Egypt was asking for Nile levels to rise.

By time spring came around, Egypt was no longer asking - but demanding that Nile levels rise. The West Nile Reclamation Project was going well, clean water production increasing, but production was insufficient for Cairo's growing population. Egyptian politicians had already condemned the Ugandan and Ethiopian dams, but then the sky fell in. Sudan announced a hydroelectric project of its own, and war was on the cards.

Sudan was not part of our group, but we did enjoy cordial relations with them these days. Egypt was not part of our group either, but was an important trading partner. Ethiopia was part of the family, as was Uganda, and any threats against them had to be taken seriously. I sent a note to that effect, but since an Egyptian army would have to cross the vast Sudanese territories first, we were not too worried.

A meeting was organised at the Pentagon building for the interested parties, myself as chairman. Everyone said their piece, politely to start with, but the Egyptian delegation seemed to be from another planet, let alone another country. They spouted rhetoric about the Nile having been part of the ancient Egyptian empire for thousands of years. The Sudanese delegation labelled them as imperialists as bad as America, which caused the Egyptians to walk out.

The meeting continued without the Egyptian delegation. Both Uganda and Ethiopia offered to release a little more water, but the problem was Sudan – and its proposed hydroelectric dam. That dam would take a year or two to build, and would then greatly lower the Nile's level whilst it filled up, thereafter returning to previous levels. Hopefully.

Sudan would not budge, and the situation deteriorated in the weeks that followed, this year turning out to be particularly hot, our own river levels low. Then a bomb went off at a builder's camp near an Ethiopian dam under construction, ten workers killed and thirty wounded. PACT investigated, another bomb going off a week later, initial evidence pointing towards an Egyptian group who called themselves The Brotherhood. Shock waves went around the world's intelligence agencies.

Ethiopian Islamic fundamentalists, also calling themselves The Brotherhood, then set off bombs near Ethiopian oil and gas fields, and we all felt a chill, despite the hot weather. Security was increased, PACT given a firm kick, rewards offered for information. Fingers were pointed at the Egyptians, and the situation deteriorated.

A month later, in June, our new reclamation pipeline from the Nile was blown-up, TV images of kids playing in the escaping water holding my attention for most of the day. Fixing the pipe would be easy enough, but they could always blow it up again. Meanwhile, bottled water supplies fell, prices rising. Disquiet spread.

The Egyptians blamed the Ethiopians for the pipeline attack, despite the fact the Egyptian Brotherhood now claimed responsibility. The Egyptian military was put on alert, its Air Force flying 'training exercises' close to the Sudanese border. The Sudanese responded in kind, their own Mig 29s flying close to the Egyptian border, up against Egyptian F16s. The Egyptians out-gunned the Sudanese ten to one in the air, six to one on the ground, their armed forces more modern, the Sudanese making good use of cheap Chinese fighters – plus Egyptian tanks from the '67 war.

Doubting very much that Sudan would attack Egypt, we concentrated on Egypt. I offered a second pipeline and processing plant, practically giving it away, but that didn't seem to do the trick.

Jimmy had been oddly quiet on the matter, so I called him.

'Do you know what the outcome will be, Sudan and Egypt?'

'Most likely there'll a negotiated settlement, with Egypt offering investment in Sudan if it drops its hydroelectric ambitions. But, a preferred solution would be Egypt pounding the hell out of Sudan, reducing their military and removing the current Sudanese regime. Then ... then you can go in and help - influencing the future leaders, and put a coal-oil power station or two in the country.'

'And how, exactly, would that come about?'

'Use your negotiating skills.'

I gave it some thought. The next day I had a one-to-one with the Egyptian Ambassador to the DRC. 'I've spoken with the Sudanese, and they won't budge unless ... unless *you* pay towards oil-fired power stations in Sudan.'

'We pay?'

'Look, we both know you'll not go to war, and if you did then that war would cost you more than the twelve billion they're asking for.'

'Twelve billion? Dollars?'

I nodded.

‘Tell them to go to hell.’

After lunch I called in the Sudanese Ambassador. ‘I’ve spoken to the Egyptians this morning, and I think you could ask for inward investment towards oil-fired power stations instead of a dam. I think, if you start negotiating around twelve billion dollars, you may get what you need. It’s in their interests, and a war would cost them a lot more.’

The next day, the Sudanese publicly aired the idea of inward investment from Egypt. I had spoken with Abdi the day before, and later that day bombs went off outside the Egyptian embassies in Ethiopia and Sudan. The Egyptian press condemned the request for money, the people up in arms, the Egyptian government – who had actually considered some money – under pressure from the media. A war of words began.

A day later, Egyptian border guards were fired upon and wounded. Egypt moved several companies to the border in response, the press calling for revenge. Abdi’s agents fired on a Sudanese patrol and wounded a dozen men, the Sudanese now moving their tanks towards the border.

Jimmy called for calm, and publicly offered extra desalination for Egypt. We all knew that a new desalination plant would not have much of an effect, and would take a year to get into place. I echoed similar offers, all the time giving mixed messages to the two parties whilst relaying rude messages that were never uttered. I was about to start a war, yet publicly stated that we took no sides in the dispute, a dispute over water.

A week later, Abdi’s agents fired on Egyptian soldiers, well within the Egyptian border. The pursuing Egyptian unit crossed the border, being fired on by startled Sudanese, but also tripping mines placed by Abdi’s agents. The war had begun. I moved thousands of Rifles to the borders of Chad, Uganda and Ethiopia, as much to stop refugees moving south as anything else; the soldiers were certainly not about to take Sudan’s side.

In a massive dawn attack, the Egyptian Air Force bombed Sudan’s airfields, plus the civilian airport in Khartoum. Those Sudanese Mig 29s and Chinese fighters that managed to take off were all shot down, few losses on the Egyptian side, the Sudanese airfields hit with Somali baby EMPs just prior to the Egyptian air attack. With radar’s not working, aircraft engines not starting, the Sudanese aircraft were destroyed on the ground in numbers, control towers demolished.

On the border, Egyptian tanks rolled forwards, engaging Sudanese tanks. Those Sudanese tanks lacked supplies, their re-supply routes mined in advanced, their tanks tripping anti-tank mines as they manoeuvred. Leaving his Presidential Palace, the current Sudanese President's car blew. It was all over by noon.

The Egyptians paused, never having aimed at causing so much damage, and pulled back, the UN urging for a ceasefire. Jimmy nudged Brad, and Brad told Egypt to negotiate – or else!

In a few short hours, Sudan had lost most of its air force, a large number of tanks, its President, but its total casualty figure was less than three hundred. I breathed a sigh of relief, now wishing to get on with the task of rebuilding.

The Sudanese Parliament Speaker assumed control and ordered elections in a month. Working from a list Jimmy had supplied me with, four candidates met with accidents, two appearing to have shot each other. The frontrunner was Jimmy's favourite, and I arranged a discrete payment for the man's campaign.

When our candidate was duly elected I invited him up and laid it on thick - a massive aid package offered, provided he play ball and join our group as an affiliate, not a full member. He was in no position to argue, or to negotiate, his economy in tatters, his people traumatised.

I insisted on greater tolerance for non-Muslims, a less-harsh religious regime, free and fair elections every four years, a maximum of three five-year stints for presidents and independent courts. I gave the man a new constitution.

He agreed - he had little choice, and I adopted Sudan as my next project; to rebuild the nation. CAR went in, a complete survey of ore and oil prospects, Jimmy hinting at a few areas. We paid for the repair to the main airport, but not for the military bases, then dispatched thousand of builders north, our standard apartment blocks soon to be seen in Khartoum.

A hydroelectric dam was off the negotiating table, two oil-fired power stations commissioned, cheap food shipped north by train. And, after things had settled, I was seen as the peacemaker, praise from many areas – even the Arab world.

Life returned to normal, but the terror groups persisted, the odd bomb going off. Jimmy informed me that the groups would never gain enough support, and I lost no sleep over them. CAR found ore deposits worth extracting, even a modest gold deposit. Mines were started, locals employed, fenced-off camps erected.

Within a month we had isolated eleven new areas worth mining, large camps pegged-out, some twenty thousand much need jobs created, revenue soon to be earned for the state coffers. Jimmy hit a spot on the map and said that it would be good for tourism, an area on the Red Sea, a second area in the hills near the Eritrea border. Hotels and safari lodges were commissioned immediately.

By October, twenty-eight new mines had been started, the potential revenue prospects very good for the new Sudanese regime, unemployment falling rapidly. But, being a bit cheeky, I asked if we could put an international air base and port at an isolated location on their Red Sea coastline. They saw no problem, since the base would be both isolated and fenced off.

I commissioned a small port, an airfield inland of it, and sent barbed wire up, miles of it, the American Joint Chiefs paying me a visit as soon as they found out. I showed them the agreement I had signed with the Sudanese, and my design, the men delighted; within a year they'd have access to a port and airfield halfway up the Red Sea, besides Djibouti. Another step towards 2025 had been taken, the ring around the Middle East strengthened, a new place for naval ratings to run ashore and enjoy the Red Sea.

Winter, 2022. The big freeze.

Sat in Goma, it was not easy to appreciate a cold winter in the northern hemisphere. Jimmy went public in October and warned of a hell of a cold spell, one of the worst winters on record. He warned Canada and Russia to make provisions, and for people to stockpile food ready for January.

Our farms in Russia were now huge, the largest independent producer of food in the world. We even produced cereal crops in abundance. I called down the farm directors for a crisis meeting, and we sat about the about the table discussing what we could do. Wherever possible, regional stockpiles were increased, dried foods and canned foods shipped to the towns and cities to be stockpiled, but also to help supply the need for those panicky citizens now hording food.

From Zimbabwe, I dispatched several large grain ships to Europe, the various governments cooperating on storage. We did a hell of a

trade in tinned food that month, trains loaded with our produce trundling ceaselessly to the coast and up to Europe.

In the UK, Jimmy asked that a register of pensioners be collated and made ready, especially for the infirmed or those living alone. Rescue Force UK, and the Supplementals, were kitted out in winter wear, additional helicopters shipped up from Africa. Jeeps were made ready, snow chains for their tires tested. Millions of extra blankets were handed out as the temperature dropped, the Red Cross and Salvation Army handling the distribution.

Huge cargo ships, packed with tinned soup from our region, journeyed north, each vulnerable British pensioner allocated plenty of tins and asked to hold them back for emergencies. The continental Europeans we didn't need to worry about, they could handle a bit of snow. But in the UK, more than a few days of blocked roads led to paralysis and chaos. Two weeks of blocked roads would end all commerce in the UK, and three weeks would have finished off the country. Jimmy now predicted block roads for six weeks, and the British Army was mobilised, Marines brought back from Norway.

An emergency fund was allocated, reservists of all descriptions called up, the police issued cold-weather gear and given some basic training; police stations now stocked tins, powered milk, and fuel.

A week before Christmas the snow fell, and settled, unusual for Britain. But, since Jimmy had predicted it, the bookies stopped taking the traditional bets on a white Christmas. When Jimmy warned that UK airports would be closed through January, ticket sales plummeted, extra snowploughs brought in, the Prime Minister estimating the damage to the economy to be huge.

Christmas day saw British kids playing in two feet of snow, many of those kids never having seen snow, especially in the south of Britain. I was enjoying a warm rain in Goma, a family Christmas, but the girls were grown ladies now, Liz as independent and as stubborn as her sisters, so it just wasn't the same.

On New Year's Eve we celebrated inside the casino, the roof sodden, the fireworks cancelled, but the Brits were under four feet of snow and suffering. Mobile phone masts froze and stopped working, people's dependency on their mobiles highlighted since landlines still worked. Few people in the UK had cold winter clothing, certainly not suitable boots, and getting to the shops and back was a nightmare for them.

Rescue Force helicopters could be seen on the TV news, flying supplies to remote villages and farms, tinned food dropped from

above, the odd windscreen smashed by a tin of tomato soup. But not even Rescue Force could get through the snowdrifts.

At one point I stuck my hands in my pockets and stared at the screen, as one innovate group came up with a petrol tanker flamethrower of sorts. They were seen advancing along the M4 motorway, burning away the snow quite efficiently. Having cleared six miles, they'd used thirty thousand pounds worth of fuel. I shook my head.

By mid January the mood had altered, deaths being reported across northern Europe as the freeze started to bite. By the end of January, the death toll in the UK was around thirty thousand, nearly all pensioners, but most living in urban areas, not in isolated farms. In Russian, whole communities had been decimated in the north due to the coldest snap since records began. The Russian Army mobilised, but there was little they could do.

Scandinavia started to suffer shortages, the UK struggling to get grain from the stores to the bakeries to the shops. Less than half the UK workforce was making it in to work, planes were not flying, the economy suffering. Fortunately, many people worked from home these days, and everyone had a computer pad. Videoconferences were being held, images of people sat in their living rooms, work carried out at home like never before.

By the end of February, people were fighting at the shops for food, civil unrest a growing problem, stores running low. And the death toll was over sixty thousand in the UK, many more due to be found when the weather cleared. Our ships made it to the docks, but getting the supplies inland was an issue.

Rescue Force and military Chinooks took to ferrying tinned soup and bags of grain, and our Rescue Force teams broke open a warehouse stuffed full of the parachute emergency packs. Hueys were soon dropping supplies by parachute, although the bottled water was not appreciated; people had plenty of water to hand.

March saw an end to the worst of the weather, and some two hundred thousand people were now part of the emergency service that set about clearing drifts and moving supplies.

Jimmy gave a broadcast. 'It would be wise for the Governments of Britain and Europe to increase their civil defence budgets, to increase training for a whole range of disasters, and to create extra stockpiles of food and fuel – for a future disaster.'

He had let them suffer more than they should have, just so that the message would be heard loud and clear. As the weather improved, Jimmy publicly made suggestions about future civil

defence readiness, and suitable structures. Each point he raised was now public knowledge, and the UK Government could not fail to implement them, lest they be strung up by the populace.

Fuel stores were commissioned at the coal-oil mines, tinned food and dried food stores, massive warehouses created. They would not be filled yet, but they would be ready. Civil defence training took on new meaning, and included civil unrest training, even weapons training. A reserve force of some fifty thousand part-timers was planned, all to be trained in first aid, fire fighting, crowd control, even basic survival skills. 2025 was in our sights.

Horseback

Cresting a gentle hill devoid of trees, Jimmy slowed his horse with a tug of the reins and a soft call, the three trailing packhorses halting in line. Below him, down the valley, Jimmy could now see a ranch, a few people moving around on horseback, others working near a large house, three large barns behind it. Lifting his gaze, Jimmy figured that he had an hour of daylight left.

Making a choice, Jimmy kicked his heels in and moved down the slope to a point where he must have been in clear view, and halted. Five minutes later, three riders galloped up the gentle rise towards him, slowing to a walk fifty yards away and approaching cautiously. The leader of the men appeared to be in his late fifties, the other two men in their thirties. And they were all armed.

‘Howdy,’ the elder man said from five yards out, but made it sound like a threat. He halted, eyeing Jimmy’s AK47.

‘I’m British,’ Jimmy announced. ‘I was a soldier, and figured I’d join the army again in Canada; there are NATO soldiers up there.’

‘You come a long way?’

‘I was in Africa when the war started. Britain was all gone – I knew that. So I travelled across Africa for a few months, getting the first boat I could, and that boat dropped US citizens in the Caribbean. Since then it’s been a struggle to get here.’

‘Been more than a year,’ the elder man noted.

‘Yes, it’s been a ... long road,’ Jimmy agreed.

‘You can join us for evening meal,’ the man offered, making it sound an order.

‘I have nothing to pay you with, or barter with, but you’re welcome to one of the horses,’ Jimmy offered.

‘I didn’t ask for payment.’

‘I’m not comfortable to sit at your table unless I can give something back. Do you have a few days work for me?’ Jimmy asked.

The elder man took a moment to study Jimmy. ‘There’s no shortage of work around here.’

‘Then I’ll accept the meal if I can pay my way.’

‘Follow us down,’ they said.

With the horses tied off, one of the younger men noticed blood. ‘Your horse hurt?’

‘No, I had a travelling companion, but he was shot a day back.’

‘Sorry to hear that.’

‘He died trying to save me,’ Jimmy said, focused now on the blood. ‘His things are still on that horse, I haven’t been through them yet.’ Jimmy retrieved Diaz’s M16 and ammo pouches. Approaching the elder man, he said, ‘I won’t be needing this.’

‘Thanks, weapons are always useful.’ He pointed. ‘You mind not carrying that AK into the house.’

‘Of course,’ Jimmy offered. ‘He handed it over, a pistol still hidden under his arm. ‘And it’s Jimmy.’

At dinner, everyone wanted to know about Jimmy’s travels, and how the outside world was coping, some twenty people sat around a large table. Jimmy did not paint a good picture, one of nuclear wastelands and roaming gangs.

‘Stay away from towns and cities,’ Jimmy told them. ‘Well away. And ... stay out of Texas, they’ve declared independence – for what that’s worth, raised a militia, and they like to exact swift punishment for anyone they don’t like the look of.’

‘And Europe?’

‘All gone,’ Jimmy said. ‘Hit by the Russian counter-strike. Africa wasn’t hit, but the economies obviously failed, shortages everywhere, lawlessness.’

‘How did you get across Africa?’

‘By fighting one long-running gun battle,’ Jimmy replied. ‘I killed at least a hundred people, lost my travelling companions. I had some gold, and that got me passage on a ship.’

‘Why Canada?’

‘I had a farmhouse in Canada, well – it might still be there, and was thinking about that when I heard on the short-wave radio that a fair number of British Army units had made their way to Canada;

Navy and Air Force. There's a large concentration of your armed forces near Vancouver, and in the Canadian Rockies.'

'You could reach it in six weeks by horse.'

Jimmy nodded. 'That's the hope.'

One of the young men at the table had seemed disturbed by the topic of conversation, and now stared intently at the elder man.

The elder man said, 'The US Army, it's east of Vancouver you say?'

'Yes,' Jimmy agreed. 'A large concentration.'

'Karl here was a soldier, but ... decided he'd rather help out here,' the elder man told Jimmy. 'But I think his conscience has caught up with him, and he wants to rejoin the Army.'

'It's a dangerous trip,' Jimmy cautioned. 'But some company would be appreciated.'

'I know this country,' the young man offered.

'Good, because all I have is an old map,' Jimmy responded.

After dinner, the elder man produced a large map of Montana, giving Jimmy a recommended route, marking it on the map. He also marked a friend's ranch, and signed and dated the edge of the map to show the ranch owner.

That night, Jimmy slept in a bed for the first time in weeks, and even had a hot shower. The next morning, one of the ladies cut his hair and provided a shaving kit. With a few shirts and jeans being washed, Jimmy assisted with a new barn-raising.

Taking off his shirt, the other men stared toward Jimmy for a moment, before everyone got to work. 'Afraid I know nothing about raising barns or carpentry, so you'll have to instruct me.'

'You can help fetch the lumber.'

Jimmy accepted a pair of gloves, walked to the pile of lumber and lifted a long beam, bringing it over.

The men stopped and stared. 'Fella, what did your mama feed you on?'

'I used to work out,' Jimmy said with a smile. 'Where does this go?'

'It normally goes between three of us.'

Two days later, Jimmy was part of the family, the barn almost complete, everyone referring to him now as Mister Silo. Jimmy would be up first, worked all day long, and was last to bed, often to be found reading old magazines late at night, next to the fire with the household dogs at his feet.

Two weeks later, Jimmy felt comfortable, very comfortable. It kept him awake, and at 5am one morning he packed his things and crept out, waking the young lad. Outside, in the cold grey half-light, the dawn yet to put in an appearance, they saddled up.

Mounted now, Jimmy led his horses, and the young lad, from the paddock.

‘You not saying goodbye, Jimmy?’ the elder man called.

Jimmy halted, taking a moment. ‘If I stay any longer ... I won’t be leaving at all.’

‘That’s not such a bad alternative. People here kinda taken to ya.’

‘There are people waiting for me in Canada, if I can find them. If I don’t go ... I’ll spend forever wondering about them – and hating myself for staying here.’

‘I wouldn’t wish that on ya. Take care of the lad.’

‘I’m hoping he’ll take care of me.’ Jimmy kicked his heels and moved off.

At the Canadian border Jimmy was alone, two horses trailing behind. Finding an abandoned car with a little gas, he turned the engine over. From his saddlebags he retrieved several bottles of petrol, pouring them into the vehicle’s tank, soon loading the rear seat with his stuff. The horses were unbridled and let loose, but stood staring at Jimmy. He issued them the last of the feed he had, rubbed their noses and said his goodbyes.

Two hours later he pulled into a farm, tooting the vehicle’s horn. A porch light came on, a man appearing with a rifle.

Jimmy clambered out of the car and straightened. ‘You won’t need that, Robby.’

‘Jimmy? My god...’ He rushed over, a woman appearing at the window. They hugged.

‘Thought you were dead,’ Robby whispered, a tear in his eye. The lady rushed out, a second woman appearing at the window. ‘We’ve got all your stuff here, it’s been ready for ... well, since the war. When will you set-off for the time machine?’

‘There’s no hurry,’ Jimmy told them, hugging the woman. ‘No hurry at all.’

The second woman approached, the others taking a step back.

‘You made it,’ Jimmy flatly stated.

Helen stepped closer. ‘We went to the west coast of Wales as you said, to where the boat was waiting. It was an easy enough trip across to Nova Scotia, the weather good, and then ... then we used the gold coins to get rides across Canada.’

‘And Paul Holton?’ Jimmy enquired.

‘He ... went to try and get his parents first.’

Jimmy slowly nodded. ‘And Big Paul?’

‘Shot dead near Quebec,’ Helen reported. ‘Ricky made it here with me, but was killed fighting off raiders.’ She closed the gap and gave Jimmy a long and passionate kiss. ‘I missed you,’ she whispered into his ear.

‘Then I best have a bath, and you can show me how much you missed me.’

‘How did you get here?’ Robby keenly enquired.

‘Across central Africa, onto a boat to the Caribbean, sailed up to Texas, and walked or rode up here. Fifteen months, so get the damn kettle on.’

2023, An American Tale

I had often heard the term ‘The American Dream’, and wondered what it meant, especially now that the US media circus was reporting that it was under threat - and in imminent danger of disappearing. After chatting to Lucy, who knew everything, we decided that the American dream was a term used by the original settlers from Europe, downtrodden and landless people with no chance of advancement in their countries of origins. In the new territories, land was available cheaply – or free for a while, and farms could be started. People could open a small business and flourish, away from the monarchies and noblemen of Europe that owned most of the land.

The American dream was about self-reliant people wanting to get ahead, about throwing off the shackles of an old feudal class system, about freedom of travel, freedom of speech, and religious freedom.

America hosted the Red Indians long before the first Spanish landed, was owned partly by the English and partly by the French, parts owned by the Spanish through Mexico. But the first group of people that could be called a ‘ruling-class’ were wealthy white folk from Europe, English speaking for the most part, and somehow that same group of people still seemed to think that being a middle class white person made you an American - a proper American. Other ethnic groups were not quite so American.

Watching a debate on a US show one evening, I caught a whiff of the definition of what a true American was. I said to the screen: 'First it's a Red Indian, then a Hispanic, then a black salve, and finally a white person - you tosser!'

The panel didn't hear me, and didn't seem to agree, since they were debating a lack of patriotism amongst ethnic groups, and whether or not it should be tolerated. Yes, the panel seemed to be in favour of something being done about people 'bad mouthing' the United States. After watching for another twenty minutes, it seemed that people who voted Democrat were not patriots; a socialist could not be a patriot, their right to citizenship lessened somehow.

I watched the entire show, feeling a little saddened at it all, the main thrust being that President Brad Sullivan was leading the country towards socialism, and that it would destroy the great American dream. But Brad's plan would not stop anyone starting a business, or buying land, and it would not take anyone's land or livelihood away. What it would do ... would help to provide a safety-net for when problems like Hawaiian quake reared their ugly heads.

After the show, I cracked open a beer, and watched the news on the same US channel. Well, their version of the news. Seemed that Brad was trying to make America a little more like our region of Africa, and coming in for some criticism. I had not heard Brad use such a comparison. Ever.

They threw up a chart of Brad's spending since coming to office, much of which was the emergency aid for the displaced agreed by his predecessor. They cut to a senator.

'The people of my state work damn hard for their money, and they don't see why they should be sharing that in higher taxes, a tax on the rich to give to the poor. This is America, not Russia.'

Well, most of the rich Russians I knew never paid any tax, or if they did it was below five percent.

The argument was a simple one: Americans don't like sharing. Sat there, I wondered how many of those early settlers helped to raise a barn of their neighbours, and did that constitute socialism? After all, they weren't being paid - they had volunteered to help their neighbours.

And the people back then - they paid tax, and businesses paid tax in order to raise and pay an Army. That army then went and shot the Indians, making space for more farmland. The settlers paid their taxes into a communal fund, the government, and reaped the communal benefit of an army. They also benefited from a postal

service, a legal system, prisons and police officers – all paid for from a communal pool raised by taxes, and for the benefit of all.

Nowhere during the TV debate did they suggest that the police should be disbanded, or the army, or schools inspectors, or even the oceanographic service. But where money was to be spent on trying to assist poor people – for the common good of the nation – then the government was moving towards socialism. Raising taxes towards other things was fine, even if the money was misspent. But job creation schemes, homes for the poor, welfare and public hospitals – well, they were just downright communist.

A commentator then came on, labelling Brad as “fucking communist dickhead”, and I had to wonder whatever happened to censoring such language on TV. Since most TV reached people across the web these days, it was very hard control the content.

That following week I watched the same channel on many consecutive evenings, asking Helen and the girls to sit in and to comment. They were horrified as well, simply by the tone, and what US political commentary had become. I decided to act.

I chose the worst three offenders and banned them from Africa, and banned their staff and reporters from Africa, or from attending any news conferences I might give. We knocked their feeds off our satellite, and African housewives could no longer be perturbed by such crap reporting. CNN came calling straight away and I gave an interview in my office.

‘The news channels in question are not reporting the news, they’re making up stories, inventing crap, and trying to present themselves as serious newscasters. They’ve lowered the tone greatly of your news casting, and they’re trying to create a culture of mistrust towards the White House.

‘In reality, they’re owned by Republican sympathisers, and nothing that the White House does will ever be good enough for them. If the Republicans were in power, these newscasters wouldn’t be attacking the various polices, and they seem to think that anyone who doesn’t vote Republican is not a patriot, which is rubbish.

‘They’re also trying to attack President Sullivan as being a socialist. Well, what is socialism? Every country in the world is socialist, because every nation raises taxes then dishes out the money to see that the citizens are taken care off. All American citizens pay tax, and that tax goes to the police and the army. Who in American wants to do away with the police or the army? And who in America wants to vote on how their taxes are divided out?

‘If you fail to address the needs of the poor ... they turn to crime, and then you’ll need more police officers and more prisons. And keeping people in prison for years on end costs more than a few job creation schemes. If you educate the poor, and try to create jobs, you have less crime and need fewer police officers and prisons.

‘Every old Wild West town had a sheriff, and that sheriff was paid by the townsfolk to keep order. They all paid taxes towards the sheriff, a common pooling of money. But no one labelled the sheriff as a socialist.

‘There are some twenty million people in America living in trailer parks, another twenty million in social housing. Their education standards are low, teenage pregnancy very high, and crime very high. The rich people can’t build a fence to live behind, they have to deal with the issue, and ignoring it is not dealing with it.

‘And those poor people are no less American, and they have rights. Your constitution starts by mentioning “the people”, all of the people on not just the rich people or Republican voters. But what these news channels come down to is simple fascism; modern American fascism, and the idea that the Republicans would like to create a one-party state, their party, because they know best and no one else does. That’s how Hitler got started, and that’s how many of the world’s dictators got into power - and hang onto power.

‘I’d like to see the good people of America become more involved in stopping the rise of fascism in the media. Everyone should stop watching these news channels, and start seeing them for what they are, which is simple propaganda. And if the Republican Party has an ounce of decency left they’ll distance themselves from such programmes. I know who owns these particular TV channels, and I’m going to take a personal dislike to the company.’

The next day I did just that, and banned the company’s websites from the African continent, as well as their TV shows. Since they had spent a lot of money in the region, it hurt them. Their offices in New Kinshasa were attacked, the staff having to flee. I found out that we had stock in their company and sold it as a block, knocking the price lower. I then encouraged everyone I knew to sell the company’s stock.

With a nudge of Po and the Chinese, a deal about to be signed allowing the media group into China was put on hold, and that was worth billions. That led to an emissary wanting an urgent meeting, and I accepted a meeting with the man in my office a few days later.

‘Thanks for seeing me,’ he offered as he sat, a young man in his thirties, a west coast accent.

‘Aren’t you a bit young for such a high level approach?’ I curtly asked.

‘No one else wanted to risk coming here.’

I smiled, but forced it away. ‘So what can I do for you?’

‘We’d like to come to an understanding, and to fix ... what’s wrong.’

‘Stop putting shit on the air; that’s simple enough.’

‘We’re willing to look at ... content and direction. Do you have anything ... specific?’

‘Bring back Walter Cronkite.’

‘I ... think he’s dead, sir.’

‘As a metaphor; someone that the viewers can trust, and someone free of political bias. I don’t mind you attacking politicians, so long as it’s fair and unbiased. Oh, and not made up, distorted, or ... you know – complete shit.’

‘It’s a Republican group – strong ties. They do ... own the station.’

‘Then put a line at the bottom of the screen: this is a Republican Party Political Broadcast, not the news.’

‘That ... might take money out of our pockets.’

‘I’ll take billions out of your pocket,’ I mocked.

He took a moment. ‘Well, how do we proceed, if we were to fix that?’

‘Run your normal service for a month, and I’ll watch. I’m not looking for praise for Brad, or bias, just a new concept for American news – the truth. I want nothing more. And I don’t want to hear swear words on the news. Simple enough?’

‘Easier said than done. But, I will try and convey that.’

‘And I’ll resist the temptation to come for you more than I have done already – which is a possibility.’

‘Oh. Can I ... come back, and leave in one piece?’

‘What purpose would that serve? You know what I want, either do it ... or not.’

At 6pm I found Jimmy at the mansion, sat enjoying a cold beer. I sat next to him. ‘Any views on my attack on the US media?’

‘No, you keep at them. But I would have gone for their balls first, then made them an offer instead of going public. You made enemies in the media, and they’re like a bunch of ten year olds.’

‘Fuck ‘em. If they want a war they’ll get one.’

‘You hurt them in the pocket, and that’ll cause them to sit up and take note.’

‘So, Mister Oracle, what is the great American dream?’

‘That’s a bit of a dated phrase, from a time when parts of the world suppressed opportunity and others encouraged entrepreneurs. Now, most of the opportunities are outside of America, with a cheap and well-educated workforce. America missed a trick by not coming here, and not taking over companies in the Far East and India. Those countries are now doing well and beating their American rivals.

‘The Americans will always do well at technology, media and the social arts, books and films, but whatever they invent will be copied and produced cheaper elsewhere. They missed a trick by not grabbing the cheap workforce.

‘And they ignored China for so long that it was too late. If they had been nicer to China early on, entered into joint ventures, they would be reaping the benefits now. They could have bought factories for fifty dollars back then. Now, that factory is a billion dollars – and not for sale.

‘Education standards in America are not falling, but the rest of the world has caught up, so the gap has narrowed. There are more PhD graduates from outside the States now, have been for a decade. And Russia ... their sixteen to eighteen year olds average a few points better than their American counterparts – who all aspire to skateboard, or be in a band.

‘It was America’s race to lose. They haven’t lost it yet, they just haven’t noticed that the finish line is close, and that when they look over their shoulders that once clear road is now crammed with people catching up. In the hare and the tortoise race, the hare got cocky and took it easy – trying to win the military, political and ideological race, when it should have been trying to win the commercial race all along.

‘And you, young man, you’d make a great US President, because you try and make a buck before spending a buck, and you watch the bottom line. You fought a war, a commercial war, and you beat the crap out of everyone else; they weren’t even looking at Africa. What America needs is a President that thinks like a factory manager and a salesman, not a world leader who likes the sound of his own voice. American needs to stop trying to change the world, and start selling to the world.’

‘And what about the future?’ I asked.

‘There’s only one way that America can go, and that’s backwards. That’s not because they’re doing a bad job, but because the others – Indian, China and Africa - have a cheaper and better workforce, more resources and more entrepreneurs.

‘A lot of people criticised American imperialism in the past, but I’d say they were never imperial enough. They should have opened hundreds of factories in India, Africa and Asia. Now those nations sell to America when America should be selling to them.

‘It’s a pity, but American kids want to be famous or in a porn movie, not entrepreneurs. You see, American culture and language gives rise to all the best music, film and literature – but those same creative qualities make the kids want to skateboard instead of study. And they don’t mind large-scale disasters – so long as they look good doing it. They’re so used to watching movies that they live their lives as if there’s a camera on them.’

I nodded. ‘That kid – the other month – killed twelve people and admitted he did it because he wanted the exposure,’ I put in.

‘Yep. Life on TV is not real, but they haven’t figured yet where the off button is. Last week a trader took eight billion from a pension fund, and it looks like his bank may fold.’ He sighed. ‘There are a lot of people whose motto is: live for now, and think only of yourself.’

‘They need to be a little more socialist,’ I quipped. ‘Raising barns on the weekends.’

‘I did that once, in Montana. And to tell you the truth, I didn’t want to leave. Living on a ranch appealed to me; it’s simplicity. You grew crops, raised cattle, tried to survive, and did a little bartering with your neighbours. You know, for the most part my travels through America – after the troubles – were one long gun battle, struggling to reach Canada.

‘But when I passed through Wyoming and Montana I dealt with farmers, and they had a better appreciation of the world, and what it needs. A farmer and rancher knows that you’re as rich as what you can see in front of you, not what the bank can lend you; you count your herd and you know where you stand.

‘I stopped at a few farms, and for the most part they couldn’t do enough to help me – once you said howdy and got past the end of a rifle. I avoided the towns and cities; they were like a bad zombie movie. But the farmers, they saw life and death every day in their animals, and they had a better appreciation for life, and hanging onto it. I’ve always liked farmers, and the simplicity of attitude, and simplicity of purpose.’

‘I’ve been watching the America news more, since I got involved,’ I began. ‘And I caught a programme about teenage suicide, which accounts for some twenty-thirty thousand teenager

deaths a year. What is it that makes a youngster so despondent about their own futures that they'd take their own lives?'

'My theory, is that they watch too many films. You see, we all watch films and empathise with the characters. If you watch a lot of movies where the characters are dealing with life and death issues, then your head is full of those feelings – even though you haven't experienced them yourself. Sixteen year olds have young bodies, they live at home with their parents, but their heads are fifty years old. They say ... been there, done that, got the t-shirt. Thing is, they haven't - they saw it in a movie.

'Back before TV and cinema, kids were wide-eyed and curious about discovering the world. But years of negative imagery kills that in our youth. They know what having a job and family is like before they have the damn job and family; they feel like they've already done it. And that causes the despondency. Been there, done that, got the t-shirt – so what's next? Nothing? May as well end it. The kids today are not better off, they're emotionally damaged by the media.'

That following week I continued to spend hours each day watching the US news. Two kids walked into their school and shot dead a dozen people, a banker walked into work and killed thirty. A second banker stole six billion dollars, and a bunch of teenagers managed to get a crude EMP working, knocking out the electronics across an area a mile in diameter, including a hospital.

I stopped watching the US news, I couldn't handle it any more, and went to visit one of our orphanages; suicide rate – zero. The kids started with nothing, grateful to have a warm meal. They received an education, and they were grateful, and when they left they got jobs and started families, the divorce rate very low.

What had the western world become, where killing yourself, your classmates or your work colleagues was a fun thing to do? Survival was no longer an issue for people in The West, the issue was one of gaining pleasure, more and better than the last experience, something new, a new t-shirt with a catchy slogan. From the roof of the Pentagon building I took in my creation, wondering how long it would be before people here had so much, so much that the only thing left to do was to kill their work colleagues and then themselves.

The Joint Chiefs, and various US military advisors, had become regular visitors in 2024, the idea on everyone's lips being that the Rifles would front the war. The Russians and Chinese also held that view. The Americans were ready and willing to deploy and fight, the Russians less so, the Chinese hoping to stay in barracks.

The various allies conventional armies would not have helped, we all knew that. Using a conventional army in a counter-terrorist campaign was always going to be a problem, as well as a mismatch in problem to resources. The Rifles, plus the non-African soldiers trained and seasoned in Afghanistan, were the most suited, and would take the fight to The Brotherhood.

May, 2024, saw a meeting in the Pentagon building, a secret planning session, the world leaders and their military advisors all present. We all sat around a large table covered by a map of the Middle East, other maps on the wall. Major Big Paul was in attendance, now chief expert on all things counter-terrorist, and a seasoned veteran of Afghanistan and Pakistan.

The meeting started with the US Joint Chiefs detailing resources and availabilities of shiny hardware, soldiers in boots. The Russians detailed their forces in the Caucasus, the Chinese simply giving numbers that could be employed.

Jimmy then took the floor, standing. 'Gentlemen, there is only one thing to consider when planning for a fluid situation – and that is to remain fluid. The toys stay in the box till they're needed. Any movement of military hardware towards the Middle East ahead of time will cause tensions, and those tensions will help to give The Brotherhood support.

'We're already seeing commentators on the Middle East suggesting that we'll move in when the countries are at their weakest - and try and take over, stealing the oil. If our naval vessels turn up in force after the tsunami, then the Arab populations might just believe that we're there to invade, and to hold onto the territory after invading.

'What Paul has done in recent years ... has altered the playing field, and I'm happy to admit that his strategy has changed the playing field significantly; he saw something that I missed. The number of refugees in certain areas will be so low ... that the chances of The Brotherhood rising is low. We could go a decade before they take shape.

'And, if we supply enough housing, food and water, then maybe they won't rise at all. I'll admit, I had been looking at ways to deal

with the uprising, and to deal with them militarily, but missed the simple option of putting food in their bellies and dispersing them. It'll cost a lot of money to repair and rebuild the Middle East, and that will drag the richer nations down a little. But if that money is spent, then we might just get away with it.

'I came back through time to change things, and to fix things, to prevent history repeating itself. If we look at a military solution to the Middle East, then we're all half way to repeating the previous mistake.' He sat.

'There'll be no deployment ahead of time?' the Israelis asked, clearly not happy.

'Are you paying attention?' I curtly asked them. 'A deployment will start the war for certain.'

Jimmy said, 'From the point that The Brotherhood blow up their first oil well, to reaching your borders, is almost a year. With the refugee camps dispersed, that first oil well may not blow up for two or three years. Do you expect us to put soldiers in the desert for three years, when it takes a week to deploy them?'

'We'd like additional military resources,' the Israelis requested.

'Good luck with that,' I told them.

'We'll not deploy ahead of time,' Brad stated, the Chinese and Russians echoing that, and I had to wonder if the Chinese and Russians would deploy at all till their own borders were threatened.

'We have a plan,' Jimmy stated. 'We'll be as nice as we can to the refugees, we'll try and rebuild the Middle East, and we'll meet to discuss The Brotherhood when that first oil well blows.'

I said, 'I have an idea how you can all assist the Middle East, without getting problems from the voters back home. If you invest in our region, we'll divert funds to assist in the Middle East. You can all tell your media that you're not helping. And, just for the record, I'll take a very dim view of those not wishing to help, a commercially dim view in years to come. If you don't help ... you'll lose money anyway afterwards.'

We broke for coffee and to chat in small groups, the Israelis still asking for more resources. I led their delegation to a side room, Ngomo and Abdi in on the meeting.

'Guys, if the Middle East falls apart, you'll be sat at home in the deckchair watching the fireworks, whilst the other nations have an ocean between them and you. If you do anything to spark a conflict, then you're the ones that will be killed first. And we're not talking about a conflict like the '67 war, we're talking about a conflict that will kill every last one of you.'

‘Take a look at the fucking map, guys; you’re an aircraft carrier in a sea of hostile neighbours! If you fire off a few shots first you’ll fucking sink. Now, if – and when – your borders are threatened, I’ll put forty thousand Rifles around you. But those soldiers are not going to sit in the sand scratching their arses till they have something worth shooting at.

‘And extra aircraft and helicopters for you are not going to make any difference, because aircraft and helicopters would be useless against The Brotherhood. As useless as your nuclear weapons will be.

‘I’m going to fix the Middle East, gentlemen. Have faith. But make an aggressive move outside our plans, and you might find no support when you need it. This is a team game, and you’re not the quarterback or the captain.’

Back in the meeting, we kicked ideas around, promises of financial assistance. CAR would lead the way to re-drill Middle East oil, working hand-in-hand with the other nations. Off the coast of Somalia, enough oilrigs lay at anchor to drill a hole right through the planet and out the other side.

The brain-trust kids and the volunteers had been handed the task of re-drilling the oil, and had come up with a variety of ideas, rigs being modified, strange new bits of equipment appearing. They had worked out a plan of action, a mad rush to re-drill the most lucrative wells. Those wells were not as lucrative as others found outside of the Middle East, peak-oil having been passed a decade ago, but they were still important.

One particular invention was a large oil tanker fitted with a huge net-like trailing boom, and a huge ugly distillation plant perched on its deck. Everyone figured that the quake would rupture wells, and that the Arabian Gulf would turn black with oil. They also considered that the quake may rupture rock formations, and that oil may escape through cracks. So this new ship would sail up and down reclaiming the oil just floating on the surface of the Gulf.

With the military meeting over, it’s next session postponed indefinitely, we met to discuss economic matters, trade agreements, even student exchanges, a group dinner in the evening.

The next day, Brad hung around to meet with the volunteer groups, who had now evolved into a global political movement under Jimmy’s careful guidance. The American branch had reached public office, their man in the White House, the other national branches less overtly political, but having an influence in areas that Jimmy nudged them towards.

Worldwide, they counted a hundred million members, and made great use of social networking websites to bring down politicians or to expose dodgy practises by big business, especially the banks. People power had arrived, and on-line voting websites were the norm these days. If your local representative saw that eighty percent of his constituents were not in favour of a bill, the politician would have a hard time voting for it.

The Internet gave instant feedback on many things, and comments on news shows by politicians could mean an end to their careers in an hour. No politician could get away with anything any more, and a new age of morality and decency had arrived in politics in some countries. It had only taken two thousand years, but we finally had a system that prevented elected representatives behaving like politicians. The ancient Greeks would have been pleased with how our democratic systems had turned out. They would have doubted the benefit of involving the hoi poli, and marvelled at the technology, but overall would have agreed that elected representatives do – after all – work for the people.

2025

The New Year celebrations for 2025 were mixed, mixed in that all countries outside of the Middle East celebrated, and those in the Middle East tried to put on a brave face – those that had a few faces left to party. Dubai was a sand-blown ghost town, Qatar returning to the desert already, Kuwait evacuated. Watching the images on the news, I could see homes boarded up, their owners being somewhat optimistic about their potential for return.

In Dubai, the Palm Fronds were the object of attention for a crazy bunch of holidaymakers who wanted to stay in luxury villas right up till the last week. Rescue Force chasers were also out in force, and tens of thousand of people wished to witness the tsunami close up, hilltops in The Emirates now hosting tented cities, plots sold by those local Arabs daft enough to remain.

The area south of Basra had been evacuated, very orderly refugee camps created north of the city. But as I had planned years earlier, we had relocated many of the citizens of this area to apartments to the north, or to Baghdad. Not many sat in self-assembly huts, cooled by ceiling fans powered by small wind turbines. And the camps that

had been created had a limit of ten thousand people imposed by me, the UN and other aid agencies ignored.

Many of the citizens of Qatar now enjoyed their enclave in Somalia, the small area now a gleaming city of high-rise buildings, oil flowing and jobs appreciated. In Angola, Kuwaitis sat in their gleaming enclave, and more than two million Saudis lived and worked in their African outposts. But, against our wishes – yet somehow inevitable, the Gulf State's enclaves hosted large numbers of migrant workers. And, as I expected, the low-grade apartment blocks used by workers were still there, being utilised to house foreign workers.

At the mansion, we welcomed eleven African Presidents, all of them our protégés, and I invited along Major Lobster, now an instructor at the officer's college and a potential future leader himself. Shelly and Lucy worked the crowd and impressed everyone with their knowledge of African politics and local issues. Jimmy turned up with another New Year squeeze, a Rescue Force doctor, and a babe in a cocktail dress. Shelly and Lucy mobbed the new squeeze, as usual, and asked questions.

At midnight, we stood in the garden and enjoyed the fireworks, Po and Yuri joining us after their own parties. At 1am I was stood on the jetty with Jimmy, bowties loosened, buttons undone, drinks in hand.

'It's 2025,' I commented. 'It's ... finally here.'

Jimmy heaved a big breath of warm evening air. 'There was a time when I worried about it. Now ... now I'm beyond that; I've done what I could.'

'We're ready,' I assured him. 'Refugees are spread far and wide. There are more aid workers and Rescue Force staff in the camps near Basra than there are refugees!'

He nodded. 'You've done very well.'

'We ... did very well.'

'No, I kicked the ball into the penalty area and you headed it in. Be proud of yourself.'

I took in the lights of the other mansions, numerous parties going on simultaneously. 'You're only human, Jimmy. You saw a lot, were captured and tortured, and built up a prejudice to The Brotherhood. That's only human. I never went through that, so I can deal with Arabs without hating them.'

'I don't hate them, and I've always wanted to help them, but it's not easy when you've seen what they're capable of.'

'Things OK Stateside?'

‘They’re trying to change the law so that I can’t bribe their politicians so much.’

I laughed. ‘They made the rules.’

‘My lobbyists are the most aggressive, my campaign donations the largest. I also have a lot of the good representatives investing in a fund I created. That – they want banned as well. But for now, the good old dollar is king, and I’m using their own flaws against them. And Brad is still there, so it’s sewn up ... more or less.’

‘And the Hispanics?’

‘It’s settled down, but since Brad took office he’s repatriated five million illegals, which all helps. There are also recent citizens being expelled - if they commit a serious crime within ten years of citizenship. Brad also kicked the Hispanic prisoners out, paying the countries of origin a small fee to take them back. And as for Africans – hell, it’s still a negative immigration number.’

‘A hundred and fifty thousand Americans working here now,’ I proudly stated. ‘Most in mining or oil.’

‘States have finally given up oil and gone nuclear, and coal-oil production is massive now,’ Jimmy stated. ‘Took long enough.’

‘Any thoughts of leaving?’ I risked.

He made a face. ‘No, I’ll hang around and see how it pans out.’

‘Chinese suffering?’

‘A little; their Middle Classes are gaining more power. The leaders warn about the dangers of this year, but still lose ground. We’ll see the first independent party being tolerated next year.’

‘Took long enough,’ I echoed. ‘And North Korea?’

‘Once they reach a certain level of affluence, which is not far away, they’ll join a union with China, no border controls. Taiwan is a step away from that as well, and Japan’s looking towards China instead of America; new treaties being signed every day. I could see six other countries joining a union with China. Without Brad in the White House that would lead to tensions or war, but he can see China breaking apart from the inside.’

‘Been thinking of expanding my empire as well,’ I put in.

Jimmy waited.

‘I spoke to the Saudis about an economic union, also the Iraqis and Iranians.’

‘You’d have the world’s oil sewn up.’

‘It’s the influence I’m more interested in - future influence. We enter into talks with Yemen next week.’

‘They’ll take any deal you offer,’ Jimmy noted.

‘Exactly. But I need to secure them, or they’ll disrupt that region and the shipping lanes.’

‘You’re thinking like a global leader, Mister Holton. And I can remember giving you advice on how to handle a girl in your room.’

‘Ah, those days were good. Looking at the world afresh, looking at the world from the bottom of the pile. Life was simple. Well, you scared the crap out of me and we were dodging the intelligence services – but life was simpler. Back then I used to have baby elephants peeing on my feet in the shower, and sex with babes.’

‘And now...?’

‘Now, Helen is a friend, and bedtime pillow.’ I shrugged. ‘I wouldn’t want to be without her...’

‘But?’

‘Well, it’s been a long time, and we both work ourselves to death. You know.’

‘No, I never settled ... because I knew I would have to say goodbye, sooner or later. And having kids, well ... I’d leave them here and ... go elsewhere.’

‘You consoled yourself with a long list of babes,’ I pointed out.

‘And I needed consoling.’

‘Much consoling.’

‘But I deserved it.’

I nodded, mockingly.

Jimmy raised his glass. ‘To the year that changes everything, and the man who made it all stay the same by changing so much.’

‘Thanks. I ... think.’

Rescue Force. February, 2025.

Descending into Mawlini at dawn, I could see more white helicopters than desert. Stood at the top of the aircraft steps, I put a hand over my eyes and took in the cluttered apron, and the line of white Hueys; some were dated, many a new variant, but none were newer than six years old. And some of these old ladies had been flying a long time.

At the base of the steps I accepted the salute from the honour guard of Rifles and stopped to chat to the senior officers, jumping into a black limo for the short trip around to Rescue Force Africa’s headquarter building. Clambering out with my deputy, I shook hands

with Coup and his team, finally with Mac after he gave a typically mocking salute. They led me inside the new building; air conditioned, clean, and a far cry from the original huts that we found here.

The new command and control centre offered a wall of screens, each four foot square. Some displayed the news, others maps, a few displayed lists of current dispositions. I greeted each member of staff in turn, finding Bob Ratchet.

‘Jesus, Bob, its been a while.’

‘I’m still at it.’

‘What happened to Spanner?’

‘Married a New Zealand lady and settled down in civvy street.’

‘And you?’ I nudged.

‘The missus is here, up the road, and two kids. Our eldest is eighteen now.’

‘You were the first recruits; Ratchet and Spanner,’ I said with a smile. ‘Immortalised in numerous books.’

‘It’s been a long road,’ Ratchet said. ‘1989 to now; thirty-six years this spring.’

‘Seems like forever,’ I commented.

‘You won’t know this one,’ Ratchet said, gesturing towards a lady. ‘She was in the womb when you fetched her mum out of Somalia that day.’

‘Well I’ll be damned. Was it ... Nash?’

She nodded. ‘Yes, you rescued my mother. I took my own daughters to Baardheere a few years back.’

‘Time does move on relentlessly,’ I noted.

‘Have you heard about Tubby?’ she asked, a glance at Bob Ratchet.

‘No?’

‘He retired, then came back, then switched to the Flying Doctors, but crashed a Cessna yesterday and killed himself. He was drunk, as usual, so we covered it up.’

I shook my head. ‘I liked Tubby; he taught me a thing or two about flying.’

I joined Mac in his office, Coup and his deputy sat waiting. ‘So, we all ready?’

‘Seventy-eight helicopters sat getting a tan,’ Mac informed me. ‘Three hundred jeeps set off yesterday, driving up to the naval base in Northern Somalia, from there they by cargo transport to various spots around the Gulf.’

Coup put in, 'C5 Galaxies ready to move the warm bodies, plus a bunch of your 747s.'

'747s?' I queried. 'Stick 'em in a Hercules, make 'em rough it!'

'They're all tough as fuck,' Mac pointed out. 'They could give the soldiers around here a run for their money.'

'I miss the dust and the Hueys,' I put in.

'Aye, well you're a fucking pen-pusher now,' Mac commented. 'And a bloody politician!'

'And you're a father of two,' I countered with.

'No need to swear,' Mac mock complained.

'When I arrived here you had a falling down hut, ten dollars and bottle cap to your name,' I pointed out.

Coup's deputy fetched an A3 photograph.

I held it, and peered at a familiar image, that of the old huts taken from the control tower roof. 'We used to have a fridge on the roof, and deckchairs.' I lifted my gaze. 'What happened to Doc Adam?'

'Killed by robbers years ago,' Mac informed me. 'Somewhere in Chad I think.'

'Family?' I asked, causing a loud a raucous laugh from the men.

'He fathered twenty-six kids – that we know about!' Coup informed me. 'Six of his work for us.'

'Ah,' I let out. 'He was a bit of a ladies man.'

'Rabbit?'

'Stepped on an old mine,' Mac said with a smile. He shrugged.

'You want to tell us the truth about what'll happen after this quake?' Coup nudged.

'If the economies of the Middle East go to fuck, and the people suffer, there'll be wars – and they could spread into a global war.'

The men exchanged looks.

'You got a ... you know, plan?' Mac asked.

'Got it all sewn up, Mac. Don't worry. Besides, if war breaks out you can change back to green, stick your tin hat on and die with your boots on, not in a soft bed.'

'He has a waterbed now,' Coup mentioned.

'Was a time when you slept on a camp bed in your hut,' I pointed out to Mac.

'Aye, well that was before you gracious fuckers appeared and changed my life for me.'

'Jimmy could take you back to as you were at the time if you like,' I teased.

Mac took a moment, becoming serious. ‘When you have fuck all, you worry fuck all. Now ... now I worry all the fucking time, especially about what’ll happen after this bloody quake.’

‘Leave the worrying to Jimmy and me, that’s what we’re here for.’

I flew up to New Palestinian, welcomed on the tarmac by their President. Whisked a short distance along the apron in a bus, I stepped down to four white Hueys, an entire turnout of Rescue Force Palestine, all twenty-six of them. I greeted them all in turn, finding just three women in the group, before sitting in a dated Huey, memories flooding back.

Late for our lunch appointment, I boarded the bus, outriders ahead of us, blue lights flashing. Beyond the airport gates the crowds began, ten deep, cheering and waving Palestinian flags. I waved back. At the Parliament building I walked down to a funnel of Kenyan Rifles, Palestinian police beyond them, and was ushered inside.

The legislators stood and applauded as I entered the chamber, the building and its interior just a year old. Stood at the podium, I noted the sixty faces, mostly men, the various politicians representing small areas of the enclave, broken by uniform square districts. Titles were often: ‘The member for district 12.’ There was a posh quarter to the enclave, nice villas, a middle portion, and the dock area, so you could say that they had a social divide based on income.

‘Thank you,’ I offered, the legislators settling. ‘And thank you for the kind invitation to visit here today.’ I took in their faces. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, there have been many times over the years ... when I worried greatly about creating this enclave. At first ... I thought I would create a few jobs – more for Palestinians outside of the occupied territories – and that the enclave might grow, easing pressure on the occupied territories. But more than that, I wanted somewhere where you could come together and live in peace.

‘But in time my ambition grew, grew into a dream that you may have a separate land, and finally find some peace, and some sense of national identity. Was part of my idea to move you away from the Israelis? Yes, of course. That was not because I wanted you to give up your claim to the land, it was simply because I wanted the two sides to stop fighting.

‘I also knew about the troubles ahead, the troubles we’ll face in a few short days. I knew ... that if you remained in the occupied territories, and there was a Middle East war, that you would be in the middle of it, in no-mans land.

‘In the past four years this colony has grown, and has grown peacefully into the modern and vibrant city that it is today. You no longer worry about water shortages, jobs and Israeli helicopters – you worry about traffic, school league tables, and the daily routine of families. Well, they’re down to you, not me.

‘You’ll be pleased to know that the new rail link will be completed soon, and a widening of the road to Mogadishu. Export of ore should be simpler. And don’t forget, that my original agreement with the Somalis was that you have an enclave five miles by five miles.’ They laughed. ‘Not the twenty-five miles you now have.

‘Ladies and gentlemen. If you want to reward me for my efforts here, then bring as many of your people as you can down here. That ... is my greatest wish. Thank you all.’

The representatives of the districts stood and applauded as I left, the President accompanying me to my hotel. We chatted at length over lunch, new deals and ideas discussed, before I claimed my room and checked my emails.

At 8pm I stepped up to the roof, meeting again the President, many TV cameras and journalists present. ‘You may proceed,’ I told the President. He made a call, the Rescue Force unit mounting up. From the rooftop we could both see, and hear, the Hueys, soon watching them fly overhead and out to sea, heading for Oman via Yemen as the sun tucked itself behind distant hills.

Everyone turned to face the southeast as drinks were handed out to the assembled guests, and I could now see many people on nearby roofs, crowds in the streets, kids faces in windows and on balconies. A distant dull roar signalled that we had dispatched the local RF unit just in time.

From the low hills that backed the enclave came a distant rumble, soon a few black specs on the horizon, growing distinct and into the shape of Chinook helicopters. A ‘V’ formation became recognisable as the rumble grew, five Chinooks in formation coming straight for us.

The first flight passed low enough for us to see their faces, passengers hanging out the back and waving, the hotel roof seemingly shaking as the formation thundered overhead and out to sea, heading towards Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Three flights of Chinooks roared past, normal conversation drowned out, a flight of Pumas behind, soon followed by more white Hueys than anyone had ever seen in one place at a time.

I stood staring up, a silly grin on my face, the sky full of the Hueys in formation, doors open and rescuers sat on the sides. Group

after group passed overhead, some twelve minutes for them all to pass over the hotel. As the last flight showed me their tails, their images diminishing as they headed out to sea, I felt saddened to be not going with them.

The President stepped closer. 'I spent most of my life fearing helicopters, or shouting abuse at them.'

I smiled. 'And now?'

'Now I rejoice that these brave people go to help the countries that will suffer.'

'Progress,' I said.

The beginning of the end. March, 2025.

Stepping into my command and control centre at the Pentagon building, I glanced at the array of screens, news channels from around the world displayed. Thirty people buzzed around the room, some sat behind computer screens, many peering up at large screens displaying a map of the gulf with countries, capitals and certain roads highlighted.

My deputy stepped up to me. 'The last oil well was just capped off, sir.'

'Bloody typical; day to go and they're just finishing off!'

'All CAR wells now online and at capacity, sir.'

'Shortfall?'

'Holding at six percent, the Cubans still not agreeing prices and quotas.'

'It'll have to do. And the Cubans can sell on the open market; we'll work around them. What is the market price?'

'Two hundred and sixty dollars, sir.'

'Not too bad, considering. Electric bus usage?'

'It stands are sixty-two percent worldwide.'

'Europe?' I asked.

'Eighty-nine percent.'

'China?'

'Seventy-five percent.'

'Africa?' I asked with a smile.

'Ninety-two percent, sir,' came back, also with a smile. 'But ... Sweden has just banned all petrol cars, buses and trains – tractors still permitted.'

‘They’re slow, New Palestine achieved that a year ago, so did the Qatar and Emirates enclaves. Stock markets?’

‘DOW Jones is still sliding, sir, down four percent today, but year-on-year is up more than twelve percent.’

‘Could be worse,’ I sighed. ‘OK, how many Saudis in their enclaves?’

‘Two point two million, sir, and just under eight hundred thousand for Qatar, one point four million for The Emirates. Kuwait has tallied at just under a million in Angola, the remainder in Saudi Arabia, as are the peoples of Qatar and The Emirates.’

‘And New Palestine?’ I asked.

‘One point six million, sir,’ my deputy proudly stated. ‘Unemployment at only twenty-six percent.’

‘Not bad, not bad at all,’ I told myself. I heaved a big breath. ‘Basra region?’

‘Evacuated to the north of the city, Southern Iran evacuated.’

‘Iraqi refugee camps?’ I knowingly asked.

‘None are bigger than ten thousand people, the total number displaced standing at half a million. Pakistan reports that they are ready. UN waiting for you, sir.’

I nodded and smiled. ‘Good work.’

In the next room I settled in front of a screen, immediately seeing the UN Security Council at the other end. ‘Can you hear me?’

‘Yes, we can see and hear you,’ came back from the British member, currently the rotating President.

‘Would you like me to go first?’ I asked.

‘Please do.’ They adjusted earpieces.

I glanced at my computer pad, a confirmation of the figures I had just been briefed on. ‘We have less than half a million refugees in Iraq, no camp bigger than ten thousand refugees. There are forty thousand Rescue Force staff in Iraq, so plenty to go around. We also have four thousand Cuban doctors, the Red Cross and the Red Crescent in there, so the people should be feeling pretty bloody well looked after by now!

‘Every refugee family has a hut to live in, we’ve got the medics in tents, and we have spare huts ready. Food is stockpiled, water, and a pack of cards for when they’re bored! Short of that, I can’t think of anything else to do other than to wish them luck. Over to you.’

‘We’re concerned about Pakistan, because few have evacuated from Karachi and the coastal regions. They aim to sit on their roofs,’ the British chair of the UN Security Council stated.

‘Some areas will be hit with a fifty foot wave, so I hope they have high roofs and solid houses,’ I said toward the screen. ‘As well as a pack lunch to keep them going till the water level drops.’

‘In the north, they’re sleeping outside, but it’s cold for them. I’d guess that some will stay indoors tonight.’

‘It’s due at 9am sharp, Gulf time, so they should be up and about and stretching their legs,’ I commented.

‘And CAR?’ they asked.

‘We have thirty oil rigs and a hundred and sixty ships waiting to go back in, which will take three days to get there towing the rigs. That’s fine, because Jimmy says that the tsunami will slosh backwards and forwards for two days at least.’

‘There are still people in Dubai, also on their roofs, some up the tall towers.’

‘That’s down to the Dubai authorities. We can’t shoot people or chase them around an empty city,’ I angrily stated. ‘I’m not risking the lives of good people to chase after idiots!’ Calmer, I said, ‘There are Rescue Force helicopters in the area. Maybe ... maybe if a few buildings survive the people could be picked up.’

‘Anything left to do?’ they asked.

‘Sit and wait, then start Operation Bucket and Spade.’

Some of the council members smiled. ‘It’s Operation Clean-up – officially.’

‘Not down here it isn’t,’ I said with a smile.

‘And the African armies?’ the Chinese member enquired.

‘Trained, equipped, ready. We have a hundred and eighty thousand Rifles to call upon, sixty thousand former members under fifty-five years old, sixty thousand police reserves trained to soldier, and two hundred thousand regular African soldiers – for what they’re worth.

‘But I don’t think they’ll be needed for a few years; if at all. We’ve moved out most of the refugees, we’ve built apartments in the north of Iraq and Baghdad, and they have electric buses and cars, solar panels and wind turbines on every blood roof. Most of the citizens of Iraq can’t remember what an electricity bill looks like! And Iraqi unemployment is lower than in the States.’

‘Thanks for that,’ the American council member offered.

‘How are you ... financially?’ the British member asked.

‘Coping, so don’t worry about it. And the special reserve – we haven’t touched that yet.’

The British council member said, ‘The Israelis will move into the occupied territories tomorrow.’

I took a moment, and heaved a sigh. ‘It may sound wrong, but I agree with what they’re doing. The Palestinian population has reduced by half. If the Israelis sweep through and disarm everyone left, there’ll be less trouble. Hell, there’s been less trouble in the past two years. And if they expel those with Jordanian passports I’ll help support the displaced in Jordan, and if they expel others for weapons offences or any excuse they like, we’ll welcome into New Palestine.

‘Peace means more to me than that piece of land, and if the Israelis administer it – as they used to – then maybe it will be better, maybe they’ll harass those remaining and nudge them out. Either way, Palestinians are living in peace in my enclave, which is now twenty-five miles long and eight deep as of last week.’

‘We’re not going to condemn the Israeli move, but the wider council will,’ they stated.

I offered the screen a big shrug, my hands wide. ‘Like I said, I don’t care. And I have a party to go to.’

‘We heard. Why the celebration?’

‘We’re celebrating all the hard work of a lot of people, me included.’

‘Good luck.’

‘To us all.’

I cut the transmission and called Bob Davies in Mapley. ‘You awake, Bob?’ I asked as the screen came to life.

‘Not much to do now, not till tomorrow. We been using the software to run simulations over and over, we’ve triple checked supplies and dispositions. I’m going to have an early night.’

‘You are getting on now.’

‘Aren’t we all!’ Bob quipped.

‘I’m a young sixty-one!’

‘You look thirty something, so you’re doing something right.’

‘Swimming, sunshine, and a clear conscience, Bob. Besides, I was injected young, and that helps.’

‘Jimmy seems to have taken a bit of a back seat to you,’ Bob noted.

‘I’ve finally grown up and matured into the son he never had, or would want!’

Bob laughed. ‘Where is he?’

‘On his way down here. Bit of a party tonight, to relieve some of the stress.’

‘Well, I’m sure that we’ll speak tomorrow.’

‘Have a good rest tonight, old man.’ I touched the screen and it blanked out.

At the mansion I welcomed Presidents Kimballa, Ngomo and Abdi, Jimmy arriving with a new young lady, a Croatian model that was all legs. I felt a small pang of jealousy.

‘Are we ready, Paul?’ Abdi asked.

‘We’ve done more than anyone could have asked of us,’ I said, and I meant it; I felt drained.

When the doorbell rang again it was Solomon, the new President of Zimbabwe and the former Army Chief. ‘Mister President,’ I offered.

‘Mister President,’ he said with a tip of his head and a huge toothy grin.

On the patio, I approached Jimmy, leading him to the end of the garden and onto the jetty. ‘How we looking?’ I asked.

‘You tell me, you’ve been the force pushing this all along.’

I took in the lake. ‘We’ve tackled the refugee crisis, and beaten up the Saudis and Iranians over the post-quake oil targets. CAR goes in and takes it, and they get a cut. Beyond that, I’m fresh out if ideas.’

‘You know about the Israelis?’

‘Yes,’ I said, letting out a breath. ‘I don’t care really, I hope they kick out all the Palestinians.’

‘They should have done that in ’67, saving sixty years of conflict. How many more can your enclave take?’

‘At least another million; it’s getting to be like New York down there – all tall towers. And Abdi doesn’t care how much land we use, he’s taken the Palestinians under his wing. There’s a Palestinian embassy in Mogadishu.’

‘You altered global politics with the enclaves, Paul, and they were something I never considered. And they’re working well; we’ve not had any problems. You’ve also reduced the refugee numbers, something I failed to do. Part of me even wanted to leave them there.’ I faced him. He added, ‘I saw what they did and ... and that’s hard to let go. You want to - you know it’s right, but it’s hard to let go. Old prejudices die hard.’

‘You recruited me and trained me, so if I’ve done a good job you get some credit. Not much, but some.’

He smiled widely. ‘You’ll do well when I’m gone.’

‘Any ... thoughts on that?’ I nudged.

‘I’ll wait a year or so to see what happens, then decide. Oh, American lab came up with a drug that’s even better than the stuff

kicking around my system. One injection at aged twenty and you could live to be two hundred or more.'

'The Americans are struggling to pay their pension bill now, let alone with people living to be two hundred!'

'The bill that was passed means that by law, anyone injected voids their pension till they show signs of slowing up, and that will cause problems anyway. Even when people do slow up they'll live another forty years.'

'French reckon they have SARS licked,' I put in.

'I have my doubts,' Jimmy said.

'Yemen is worrying me. Again. They're across the water from New Palestine and on life support from the Saudis. I might conduct an ore survey and see if I can mine over there, just to help.'

'Oman will stay peaceful after the quake. Help them where you can.'

I nodded, noticing a fish jumping clear of the water. 'Shelly gets married in a year, and she's talking about moving back to the UK.'

'She's supposed to go into politics.'

'Politics? Shelly? Lucy is going into politics.'

Jimmy made eye contact and shook his head.

'No?'

Liz ran up, my youngest now up to my shoulder. 'Uncle Jimmy, they're asking for you,' she politely stated.

'First things first.' He pointed. 'You see that boat approaching.'

We both looked, no boat approaching, Liz shoved into the lake a second later with a yelp.

Jimmy said, 'Educate your young daughter, not to ask visiting Africa Presidents if they're *well hung*.'

'She didn't?'

'She did,' he said as we walked down the jetty, Liz shouting abuse after him, a colourful choice of phrase for a ten year old.

The party went well, soggy daughter aside, and it was good to relax and pat each other on the back after many years of hard work. We had largely ignored the rest of the world and proceeded as we had wanted to. Various governments came up with plans and proposals, but I did it all my way.

When the dawn arrived I was already awake, soon in the situation room and glued to screens - along with everyone else on the planet. At 8.45am the world held its breath. It was Saturday, and images arrived on the screens of empty streets in Asia, in Africa, and in particular in Baghdad and Syria.

Ten minutes later an alarm sounded, a particular screen displaying the quake pattern. Jimmy arrived a minute later and sat next to me, having seen the show before. Live-feed cameras showed dust clouds rising from Northern Pakistan, followed by images from Southern Iran.

‘That’s just the warm-up,’ Jimmy said.

We focused on the screen displaying the quakes vibrations, the line now settling. It spiked, settled, then spiked again, now much larger than the previous output.

‘Right now, everyone in southeast Iran is on their backside on the floor. That jolt would have lifted them a few feet off the ground.’

An image appeared of the abandoned Palm Frond houses in Dubai. The sand surrounding the houses had gone, and the houses themselves – luxury villas worth millions – started to sink.’

‘Liquefaction,’ Jimmy said. ‘They were built on compacted sand. How stupid was that!’

‘Look!’ someone shouted, the main screen switch to the Palm Fronds. ‘The water is going out!’

It didn’t stay out long, rushing back in and rearing up. The image switched to one from the tallest tower, a live satellite link, and one of many being beamed out today. The giant wave boiled itself up into an angry monster, and as with Los Angeles turned the colour of sand. It enveloped the Palm Fronds, making the villas look tiny.

‘There!’ someone shouted, rushing forwards and pointing.

A car could be seen driving down the main access road, away from the wave. The wave rushed forwards, the camera still showing the car speeding away.

‘They have nowhere to go,’ Jimmy stated.

Another image seemed to be on the roof of a two-storey house. From that angle the wave appeared to be six or more storeys high. The image died quickly. From the tallest tower, the boiling wave front moved forwards. A tower block took a hit, the water swirling around it, the building slowly collapsing backwards.

‘That was a twenty storey building,’ Jimmy noted.

The camera fixed to the tallest tower shook, the image blurred, then lost. Another view, from an aircraft, showed Dubai like a street map, the water moving across like a beige coloured blanket being pulled across the city.

Images from Kuwait City appeared next, the city’s landmark towers in view from a point a mile inland. The water came at the city side on, moving buildings off their foundations as it progressed.

‘Call up the Shatt al Arab waterway,’ I requested.

An image appeared of a point near the Kuwaiti border.

‘The water level has dropped,’ I noted.

‘Not for long,’ Jimmy suggested.

We could see a grey line on the horizon, getting larger, soon filling the image. Even though we weren’t there, the fear in the room was palpable, the camera image soon lost. Another appeared, that of the top of our desalination plant. We waited.

The image came with sound, and we could hear a roar of wind picking up. Defences had been dug, numerous high sand barriers, concrete barriers near the plant itself.

A rolling wave of sand hit the first sand barrier and bounced high into the air, hit from behind a few seconds later. A second wave hit the second sand barrier and again burst upwards. But as we observed, it seemed to lose momentum, trickling through the final barrier.

‘Our beach hotel will be hit in four hours or so,’ Jimmy remarked. ‘It’s full of tourists, but they’ll be on the roof. Afterwards, or tomorrow, they’ll help clear the sand out the restaurant.’ He tipped his head, leading me towards the door. We climbed to the roof garden and ordered coffee and doughnuts.

‘So what now?’ I asked.

‘Now, we wait. We rebuild the Middle East where we can, and ... and we wait, and we hope. And, in a few short years, my knowledge of this place will end. After that ... well, its down to you, and others.’

‘You said there’d be a final battle.’

Jimmy took a moment, taking in the view. ‘Sealed documents will be given to you after I leave. Worry about it at the time.’

‘Should I be preparing for it now?’

‘No. Now ... you have at least a year, so try and enjoy it; don’t burn yourself out.’

2035. A long voyage

Jimmy had been gone four years, but I received a coded email and prepared for his arrival. A plane was sent out to Fiji, Jimmy’s sailboat docking after an extended voyage.

He hadn't endured much in the way of hardship, since he had built a luxurious pad in a cave many years earlier, and the lady visitors had been most pleasing on the eye – I received images. The cave offered all modern conveniences and allowed a passive link to the web; Jimmy could see what was going on, but could not be traced.

As with my memoirs, his were now finished - including details of trips to other worlds, and I was sure that he would beat mine up the eBook charts.

Leaving my cabin, my dissertation on its way to the editors, I entered the large galley and sat next to Lucy, her daughters stuffing their faces, a Holton family trait. And no sons produced by either Lucy or Shelly so far.

'Mum was on,' Lucy commented as she cleaned up the girl's messy lips.

'Where is she?' I asked.

'New York, at the UN.'

'Perfect. Jimmy's flying in to San Francisco tonight.'

Lucy snapped her head around. 'He was here all along then,' she said, giving me a disapproving look. 'Not back through time.'

'He wrote his memoirs, sat in the sun, did a little sailing.'

'And now?'

I took a moment. 'And now he'll be going back.'

Lucy appeared saddened, and she would not be alone when the news broke. 'He might not survive,' she mentioned.

'It's his choice.'

'Do you think he'll ... go on to other worlds?'

'No, definitely not. He'll ... end it if necessary.'

'He could stay here,' Lucy suggested as she tended her kids, the girls now four and five.

'He knows what he's doing, and it's his choice.'

'When do you go back to work?' Lucy asked me.

'Two weeks or so, but I've kept up on the issues.'

'And mum?'

'She's happy to stay as deputy to the UN Secretary General for now.'

'The man's a fool; mum does a better job of it.'

'You may think that, but I could not possibly comment,' I said with a smile.

'Shelly's in New York already,' Lucy mentioned.

'And...?' I nudged.

Lucy made a face. 'She'll go back to the UK and run again for Prime Minister.'

'And...?' I pressed.

'They're animals; the MPs and the press. She's flogging a dead horse.'

'She has a calling, as you do. Well, it's a bit of a mixed up calling for you both; she was the scientist, and went into politics, and you studied economics and politics, and became a scientist. Go figure.'

'You and mum don't spend a lot of time together these days,' Lucy thought she'd mention.

'We're not seeing other people...' I let float.

'If you asked her, maybe she'd quit the job and live in Goma.'

'What I'll do ... is respect your mother's wishes. Besides, she's doing a good job of keeping an eye on the fool she works for.'

In the hours before we docked in Bermuda I watched the news, images of Jimmy in Fiji, waving as he boarded the plane. Seemed that all of the police in Fiji had turned out, as well as all of the citizens.

Picked up at the harbour, I was whisked towards the airport with Lucy and the kids, a large police escort, tourists stopping to snap the convoy. At the airport I boarded Africa II, an old converted 747XP from 2026, and we headed north towards New York as Jimmy headed northeast towards San Francisco.

Arriving at our hotel in New York, I found Helen already in the room, a meal thoughtfully ordered in advance of my pending arrival.

'For me?' I mouthed, Helen on the phone.

She nodded, and I sat at table to tuck in, Helen finishing her call and sitting opposite. 'Jimmy's due to land in San Francisco soon.'

'He's probably got a tan, and an old salty-dog beard.'

'He emailed the book, but some parts are coded to just you.'

I considered that for a moment, then tucked in. 'Lucy was hoping you'd go back to being more of a housewife in Goma.'

'Had that from Liz the other day,' Helen put in, grabbing some toast.

'And how is the little darling?'

'Pregnant.'

'Liz? Is pregnant?'

Helen rolled her eyes. 'Drunken party at college, a work-up to graduation.'

'Do we know who the father is?'

'She says yes, but I have my doubts.'

‘Bloody marvellous. I always figured Shelly would be pregnant before fifteen, and she had kids at thirty!’

‘Well, Mister President of Africa, we’re going to have a single mum in the family; a bit of gossip for the press.’ She took a moment. ‘Do you know what Jimmy will do?’

‘He’ll go back. I’ll meet him in Canada day after tomorrow. Are you ... free?’

‘I’ll move things around. Be nice to see him before he goes.’

‘He felt a little useless after 2029, not knowing the future,’ I mentioned. ‘Too used to being able to call it.’

‘They love him none the less. And if people know that he’s going there’ll be a crowd in Canada.’

‘The Canadian authorities and US military will seal the area; they’ve promised not to try and interfere when the portal opens.’

‘They wouldn’t dare. But I heard that NASA received something from Jimmy.’

‘Yeah?’ I puzzled.

An hour later we met Shelly, now the Member of Parliament for Monmouth for five years and leader of the Labour Party in opposition, the British elections a year away. She was good at attacking the incumbent Prime Minister, her wit and sarcasm coming from me. She was also the best-looking Member of Parliament by a long way and used her smile to open political doors. A little flirting went a long way with crusty old back-benchers in the commons.

In the old New York nightclub, still going strong, we booked a side room and ordered Indian food.

‘Jimmy going back?’ Shelly asked.

I nodded.

‘You could just kidnap him and hold him here. Or we could ask the Canadians to bar him access,’ Shelly suggested.

‘We’ll all ... respect other people’s wishes, as we did with yours.’

‘I went into politics, father, not a dangerous alternate dimension!’

‘I don’t know, I think the House of Commons qualifies as being full of people from another planet,’ I quipped.

‘Mother?’ Shelly called, wanting some backup.

‘Yes ... child?’

‘Don’t *child* me, old lady,’ Shelly retorted.

‘Old lady?’ I repeated with a grin. ‘Your mum doesn’t look a day over thirty-five.’

Helen gave a look, now sixty-nine years old, but not looking more than forty. ‘We should buy something for Jimmy to take back.’

‘Warm coat?’ I sarcastically asked. ‘Some food?’

‘I think he’ll travel again,’ Shelly suggested. ‘He’ll spend a few days or weeks back, and travel.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘There’s ... something you don’t know, and I’ll explain it later. But ... no, he won’t be taking a few days or weeks to think about it.’

Helen and Shelly stared at me. ‘Will he be in danger?’ Helen asked.

I nodded. ‘Some, yes. But he has an idea of how to ... be in less danger.’

‘He should take an army back with him,’ Shelly suggested.

‘Limited energy on the portal, so limited time,’ I explained. ‘Just two minutes. Well, minute and a half actually.’

‘He could still take someone back,’ Shelly suggested.

‘They’d be in danger, and probably stuck there,’ I pointed out.

‘Plenty of people would volunteer, even knowing the risks,’ Helen insisted.

‘Yeah, well you take it up with him.’ I told her. ‘And ... good luck on persuading him.’

I gave a quick interview about Jimmy’s return, where he had been, but I made no mention of where he was going. In San Francisco, Jimmy organised an impromptu press conference at the airport.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, I’d like to remind you that it’s my birthday next week, and that I’ll be two hundred and seventy six years old. It may not be easy for people to understand how I’ve lived so long, or where I’ve been, but I have written it all down. That story, the story of my life, will be released in the years ahead.

‘Paul Holton has also written his life story, and both books with probably be released around the same time. His book looks from the perspective of being recruited by me, mine looks from my own recruitment to go back through time. They are very different stories.’

‘Where have you been?’ they asked.

‘I needed a break, a holiday to recharge my batteries, and to think about what I do next. I’ll be meeting Paul and his family in Canada for a reunion, and after that I’ll decide on my future. As for where I’ve been, I was sailing around the Pacific. Thank you, I’ll make another speech in Canada, but I request that people do not try and follow us there, we need some time alone.’

I arrived at the hotel in Canada the next day, Helen, the girls and their husbands, and all of the grandchildren in tow. Shelly spotted a

tanned Jimmy coming across the foyer and ran across, a big hug given, her husband holding back.

Easing back but holding onto Jimmy, she asked Jimmy, 'Are you going back?' He didn't answer, hugging Lucy and Helen in turn, finally picking up Liz and swinging her around, a yelp issued.

Jimmy gestured us towards a table, drinks and food ordered, the grandchildren puzzling the big stranger. 'In answer to your question, yes – I will be going back. I have ... unfinished business.'

'You could be killed,' Shelly pointed out.

'I could have been killed many times over the years,' Jimmy reminded her. Only now could I see flecks of grey hair above his ears, a few extra lines around his eyes.

'This is different,' Shelly pointed out. 'It has a certain ... finality to it.'

'Not necessarily,' Jimmy said with an enigmatic smile. 'There are ... possibilities.' He faced me. 'After I'm gone, documents will be released to you. NASA has already had a few.'

'They'll build a time machine?' Lucy asked. 'It's been outlawed!'

'And rightly so,' Jimmy agreed. 'But research is OK, because some day soon you may wish to ... look into that area.'

I knew what he was talking about, but the others didn't. They believed that he had travelled back many times, despite the lack of logic to that premise, and the resultant paradoxes that would have been created. As far as most of the world was concerned, it was still a mystery.

We got off the topic of Jimmy's imminent departure as Jimmy asked all about the family gossip, jobs, and Liz's contraceptive habits. We sat there for two hours, drinks and a meal served. When the grandchildren needed tending, just Jimmy, Helen and myself were left.

'It's been a long journey,' Jimmy said with a sigh. 'And you'll understand more when you read my book.'

'Two hundred and seventy six,' I said. 'That took some doing.'

Jimmy shrugged. 'You face each day, and you try not to think too far ahead, or to fix too much in one go – or you'd stress yourself into an early grave. Every time you go to sleep, the wonderful human brain washes away a lot of the stress, and you wake up and start again.'

'I've been injected many times, and my brain cells are not the same ones I had at the start; there are real gaps about my childhood - things I can't remember. When I came back I studied old photographs and added new memories, listening to my parents

describe old holidays and trips. Each time I came back I had to study a great deal.

‘My bones and teeth are still the same, at least some of it is, but every other part of me is new. I am, technically, a new person – biologically speaking.’

‘Back at the apartment in London, 1985, you were always reading,’ I commented.

Jimmy nodded. ‘I was re-reading human history, just to be sure. But the good thing about the stems was that my brain was like that of an inquisitive teenager; my capacity for gaining new knowledge was good. Old brain cells, with images of my youth, were being replaced by earth history, technical facts, and geography.’

‘But in the last four years I’ve forgotten quite a bit. Writing the book, I had to stop and research my own youth. I couldn’t picture the school I attended, so I found it online – then a few memories came back. I even found stories on the net of people who knew me as a kid, and that helped. But, for the most part, they could have been anyone, I couldn’t have proved them wrong.’

‘I have a hard time remembering my youth,’ Helen admitted. ‘I’ve stuffed my head full of UN facts and pushed the other memories out.’

‘What are your plans?’ Jimmy asked her.

‘I might stay where I am another year, or accept the role of head of the UN for Africa,’ she replied.

‘Why not go for UN Secretary General?’ Jimmy nudged.

‘They’re a squabbling bunch of kids,’ she said. ‘If I want something done, I call Paul and work around them.’

‘If you’re the Secretary General – you can still call Paul,’ Jimmy pointed out. He slid his gaze across to me. ‘How’s GDP?’

‘Steady,’ I replied. ‘It’s found a straight line on the graph. Population growth is down a bit; it’s as you said, educated Africans in good jobs have fewer kids. And since they know they could live a long time they hold off starting families. Gotham City is known as couples city.’

‘Population?’

‘Hundred and ten million for the DRC now,’ I proudly stated. ‘Ten million foreigners.’

‘And South Africa?’

‘Boom and bust,’ I lamented. ‘Boom and bust. But they are closer to Brazil now, a few new trade agreements.’

‘My tree planting projects in Africa and India are going well,’ Helen put in. ‘Good forestation in most places. They say it’ll alter the world’s climate a fraction.’

‘Found coal in Tibet,’ I mentioned. ‘Gearing up mines now.’

‘All sounds good, and it sounds like the planet is in good hands,’ Jimmy commented.

Helen shot me a look. To Jimmy, she said, ‘You don’t have to go.’

‘Yes, I do, there are people waiting for me.’

‘I still don’t understand how you can go somewhere,’ Helen complained.

‘Your dear husband will explain it after I’ve gone. Anyway, tonight I’m going to eat plenty, and drink plenty, because there’s very little of each where I’m going.’

I stood with Jimmy in the field, the weather cooperating with a crisp spring morning, dew on the grass. At the edge of the field the security detail stood waiting, curiously watching us, and wondering what we were up to; I had not briefed them. They had already erected a small table and chair set for us, food and drink on it, plus a tent in case it rained.

Jimmy took out a small device, switched it on and checked the setting. ‘They’ll detect the signal through a micro-portal that is always open, just a few molecules wide, then take a guess as to where it’s coming from, narrow it down, eventually to within a few weeks or so. Then they’ll open larger micro-portals a few times a day, every day. Well, it’s every day here - but every minute over there. If they get a lock on they’ll open the portal and ... off I go.’

‘So it could take twenty-four hours?’

‘Yep, hence the table and picnic hamper.’ He set the device and placed it onto the damp grass.

Stepping back five yards, we sat and poured drinks from the thermos, staring at a piece of air in the middle of a field.

‘This is easier at night, because the portal’s fucking hard to see in the daylight,’ he said. ‘Once, well - twice before, you were here with me, seeing me off. It was a cold and wet night, and we’d given the security detail the slip. We pinched a helicopter and flew over the border, bought a car for cash and made our way here.’

‘And if it doesn’t open?’ I asked, stretching out my legs.

‘That’s a possibility actually. They may have run out of time on the other side.’

‘Run out of time?’

‘It’s all in my book. Just remember ... for the future, that between here and there ... time has no meaning. It’s all relative.’

I stared back, a puzzled frown forming.

‘You’ll understand after reading the book.’

An hour later, the morning warming up nicely, I took a layer off. ‘Pleasant enough spot.’

‘It is,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘And an image I’ll take back.’

‘There are a few nice models you could have spent your last few hours with,’ I mentioned.

‘They don’t have your charm and wit,’ he quipped, focussed on the field. ‘Besides, we’ve been at this a long, long time. And this field ... mark the spot and don’t mix it up.’

‘Mix it up?’

‘You’ll understand –’

‘When I read the book, yes.’

We enjoyed a leisurely lunch, the security staff sat watching us from the edge of the field, then opened a bottle of wine.

‘When I go, I’ll have to go quickly, so ... you know,’ Jimmy said.

‘Yes, no hugs or long goodbyes; it would be embarrassing.’

‘You did it, Paul, you fixed it,’ he said, suddenly serious. ‘Africa, the enclaves, the refugees, and New Palestine. On top of it all, you brought some semblance of peace to the Middle East ... and adopted the region it as you adopted Africa.’

I stared across the field. ‘I like building things. And I like spending money.’

‘And that was the answer all along,’ Jimmy noted. ‘And I missed it.’

‘Not really; you just missed the last five percent, the rest you got right, perfectly right. And to do it over and over? I couldn’t have done that, and I doubt few could. And Doctor Singh was right - the military would have never pulled it off. They’d just have started the war earlier.’

‘Definitely,’ Jimmy agreed. ‘The last peice of the puzzle was a little tender loving care. You had it, but I held onto my hatred of The Brotherhood. You managed to see the people before they became terrorists, and to see some good in them.’

I nodded. ‘I wanted to thank you, for ... Helen and the girls. I could have easily just been a playboy.’

Jimmy now nodded himself. ‘It gave you a stability.’ He faced the field. ‘Over there ... I have ten children, all just a few months old.’

‘The ladies you made pregnant to get the stems,’ I stated. ‘And the chocolate in the backpack?’

‘Gifts, for people who’ve not seen chocolate for a long time. Well, I took some back the last time.’ He stood and stretched his back. ‘I still remember the look on your face when I told you who I was.’

‘You scared the crap out of me, then played to my weaknesses by telling me I’d be rich. God, I was useless in those days.’

‘You were twenty something, I was two hundred and something, so it wasn’t a fair comparison.’

‘You were so cool, like the big brother I never had,’ I said with a smile. ‘But I hated you for that visit to the orphanage. God it was a rough place back then. And when you told Mary you were in the Second World War – I believed that!’

‘I fooled a lot of people,’ Jimmy said, staring at the distant hills. ‘Including my own parents. And I killed my other self five times. This time around I was tempted to inject my parents and keep them alive but ... but I would have found it hard to explain things to them, including murdering their son. I just ... just wanted to have the option not to worry about them while I was worrying about everything else. It’s something that has plagued me for a long time.’

‘My mother didn’t want the stronger drug, she wanted to go,’ I said.

‘Living a long time is not such a blessing, not when you carry the emotional baggage around with you. If I thought I’d live forever I’d probably blow my brains out.’

‘Spoken to Brad?’ I asked.

‘Sent him a note, he’s still running The Ark. And he and Hardon Chase made all the difference. That conversation I had with Chase in the Oval Office - that was a turning point; I focused him more on how he would be remembered than on his term in office itself.’

‘He stepped down from the Senate three years ago, still active with The Ark,’ I put in. ‘Brad’s second term was touch and go. We had the right wing on board, but the Democrats were at his throat.’

‘You spent a fortune in Mexico, and that helped,’ Jimmy noted as he stood staring across the field. ‘You found ore that even I didn’t know about.’

‘It was a tried and tested routine,’ I said. ‘And CAR, they could sink a borehole in a day. These days they use lasers and water cutters; they go through rocks like a hot knife through butter.’

‘How’re your bio-fuels?’ Jimmy asked.

‘We have good production levels, but they’ll never match coal-oil or nuclear. It’s not much cheaper than solar power or wind power. Besides, the need for liquid fuels is waning.’

‘There’s something you should know. The third time around, when Helen first came to work for me, me and her ... well, we were lovers for years, and she made it to Canada with Big Paul and Ricky. I hate to say it, but I shagged your wife.’

‘I always wondered if you two had been close. I mean, she was sent to spy on you – and you knew about it.’

Jimmy heaved a sigh. ‘In Canada ... I lied to them; Helen and the others. I told them if I stepped back into the machine and altered things ... that they would never have known about it. I left them there.’

‘Best spot to be at the time,’ I noted.

‘They had a house stocked with goodies I set up. I did that each time, but kept it secret. I have a place in Montana, Canada, and Texas, set-up ... you know, just in case, but didn’t need to use them this time around. And, the day before yesterday, I went horse riding.’

He took in the field. ‘Wasn’t easy, I almost burst out crying. You know, I was never happier than when it was just me and the horses camped by a river. The lifestyle was so simple, so little to worry about, no confounded emails; it was just me and nature. And that’s what I craved, a simple existence. But I got this.’

The air around us cracked, and my heart raced. Jimmy smiled widely, grabbing the backpack, a shimmering circle now visible just a few yards in front of me. I wanted to reach out and grab him.

Without a word he turned and accelerated, and I stepped after him, getting an image of the laboratory he mentioned, people moving about – and looking back at me. Jimmy jumped headfirst into the image, and I saw him land, the image gone a second later.

With the security staff approaching, I kicked over the table, picking up a chair and smashing it down on to the upturned table.

‘He’s gone?’ an out of breath guard said a few seconds later.

I kicked the table, turned and walked across the field, enquiries about Jimmy ignored.

Helen and the girls stared at me in silence as I found them in the restaurant. I sat without a word, offering a reassuring smile to the grandchildren. Helen and Shelly exchanged looks, the rest of their lunch eaten in an awkward silence, the children wondering what was wrong.

Walking down to the lake with Shelly, I pointed. 'Do you remember rescuing a boy here?' I softly asked.

'Yes,' she said. 'Jimmy lifted me up and carried me in, fetching me ice cream as a reward.'

'For a while back then, I used to check you didn't have gills and webbed feet.'

We approached the shore, the water a light blue, the sheer cliffs shading part of the lake and forming a dark blue corner, a few tourists in canoes enjoying the warm day. I remembered us canoeing around the lake with Big Paul and his son, and suddenly felt that I had lost something, something precious that would never come back. I wanted to reach back in time and live the moment again, to make the clock stop at drag out the day. It was a horrible feeling in my stomach.

'Did Jimmy tell you about all the trouble I got into when I was young?' Shelly asked, a hand over her eye as she took in the lake. 'He covered it up of course.'

'No. Thankfully.'

'I lost my virginity at fourteen, to a twenty-year old farmers son. Police were involved.'

'They arrested him?'

'No, they arrested me.'

'What for?' I puzzled.

'The sex was OK, but afterwards he refused to give me a lift home, so I broke his nose, then battered him with a shovel.'

I laughed, putting my hands in my pockets. 'You were headstrong. Get that from your mother, not me.'

'And I made a pass at Jimmy dozens of times.'

'I figured that.'

'He slapped me a few times, had me handcuffed once and kept in the basement. Locked me in a room at the club in London.'

'Well I'm hoping that's not in his book.'

'And I damaged Michelle's car; I was jealous of her.'

'You turned out all right in the end, but you surprised Jimmy by not going to university in California and studying oceanography.'

'I applied, and I had the acceptance ... but wanted to do something sooner rather than later, something to help. And I loved Goma, I wanted to stay.'

'Do you remember "M" Group meetings, kicking people in the shins?' I asked.

Shelly nodded. 'I embarrassed the Chinese Premier a few times, deliberately.'

‘Never would have thought that the Americans would have tolerated the Greater Chinese Union; Taiwan, Korea, and Myanmar. But it’s turned out well.’

‘They’re more worried about Africa these days, you pinching their export market,’ Shelly put in.

‘Will you go back into British politics?’

‘It’s possible, but they’re such children. I might try and find a small and struggling nation somewhere and just try and build it up from scratch.’

‘You got that from me,’ I noted. ‘Why not try Papua New Guinea; they have ore, and lots of problems.’

‘Something like that. I’ll live a long time, so I’ll probably move around a little. What about you?’

‘Africa for now. More to build; always more to build.’

An hour later I faced a bank of cameras outside of the hotel, requesting that the images be transmitted to all news outlets around the world, and on the web, at the same time.

‘Ladies and gentlemen, Jimmy Silo has left us. He is not dead, but he is no longer on this planet. He has gone ... to where he came from.

‘He asked me to consider carefully before revealing the nature of his time travel, and his presence here. Well, to hell with that. Jimmy came to us from a parallel dimension, another version of Earth that’s almost identical to this one. His own world had suffered a global war and had been destroyed, but his journey here was not to escape that world. His journey here was to help us, to prevent us suffering the same fate.

‘Jimmy left behind those he cared about, and journeyed to this world in order to try and help us, the citizens of this planet, knowing all the time that it would not help those he left behind. There was no greater act of kindness, there will be no one more determined, or as strong, ever again. This world has lost Jimmy Silo, its guardian angel, but he only left after he knew this world was safe.

‘We should have destroyed ourselves before now, but we were spared – with a little help. We owe it to Jimmy not to destroy ourselves in the decades ahead. He ... he gave us our world back, and I hope you can all live up to that.’

A day later I landed back in Goma, Africa having declared three days of mourning, state mourning, schools closed. I journeyed around to the main square in New Kinshasa at 6am, to the unveiling

of a statue I had commissioned six months ago. Despite the hour, chosen to avoid the crowds, thousands of people lined the square in silence.

I had noticed a statue of Atlas previously, the muscle bound god kneeling whilst carrying the world on his shoulder. It seemed fitting.

Kimballa pulled the chord, the sheet falling away. The facial likeness was good on the huge bronze statue, the pose apt, not a dry eye in the square. I hugged Kimballa, then turned away, one last glance over my shoulder as I boarded the coach. At the mansion, I cancelled all appointments and called up Jimmy's book on my computer. It asked for a password, with a hint: Who would the mystery man have killed at River View? I entered 'Rudd'.

Next question: During the Long Voyage, what island did we find the most supplies on? I entered 'Seychelles.'

The software allowed me in, and I started to read.

Manson, Canada

Jimmy landed partly on his shoulder, partly the backpack, trying hard not to smash the contents. With Singh attempting to lift Jimmy's heavy frame, the assembled technicians applauded loudly, all now offering beaming smiles as they closed in and formed a half-circle.

Jimmy dusted himself down. 'Thank you; it's always nice to be appreciated. He took in their haggard appearance and tired faces. What's the time?'

'Almost seven AM Monday morning,' Singh said with a smile.

'I guess you've been watching my progress.'

'Local farmer had unsecured wi-fi Internet access. We found more stories about you than anything else,' Singh reported through a huge smile. 'When you were reported as missing we worried a little, but seeing what you did to that world – well, we were all jubilant.'

'Just a little worried about me missing,' Jimmy teased. He lifted his backpack and placed it on a desk, unzipping the pocket. 'Latest high-power computer, and the history of the world – that world – all songs and all books.' He handed it over to Singh.

Reaching into the bag, Jimmy pulled out a dozen large bars of chocolate. 'Ladies, more chocolate.'

The female technicians tore open the foil and bit down on the milk chocolate.

Jimmy pulled out a photograph in a glass frame, fortunately unbroken. He handed it to Singh without a word.

‘Meena?’ Singh gasped, putting down the computer pad.

‘Your other self married her, as you asked me to arrange, and you – your other half – had six kids.’

‘Six?’ Singh was shocked. ‘Six!’

Jimmy took off his coat, dressed smartly in a suit underneath. ‘I gave your other half a lot of money, so feeding the brood won’t be a problem for him.’

Singh slowly nodded as he studied the picture intensely. Lifting his gaze, he said, ‘What you did in Africa – amazing, truly amazing. And the spread of the technologies – incredible.’

‘I had a little help, and some practise. How long was I gone?’

‘Three hours.’

‘Fifty-two years the other side,’ Jimmy noted. He sighed, ‘Fifty-two years.’

Pulling another photograph from the bag, he handed it in silence to a lady technician. After a second studying the image she burst into tears, consoled by her colleagues.

‘Your brother did well, very well, and I made sure that he was cured of cancer in time. He’s now married with three kids and working in Seattle. You ended up in Hawaii, at an observatory, but you left in time. After that you went to Europe, but never married.’

‘Do you think it will work, Jimmy?’ Singh asked, everyone focusing on Jimmy.

Jimmy smiled. ‘Send the signal.’

A lady technician rushed forwards and operated a computer, ‘Power is limited,’ she said as another technician threw a switch. When done, both technicians stood back from the coils that powered the portal, waiting expectantly.

‘Well,’ Jimmy said with a sigh. ‘I guess we’d better face the music. Someone open that door and send for General Gibbs.’

With the door unlocked, two guards stepped in, drab green uniforms that had seen better days. ‘What the fuck was the door locked for? It’s been locked for hours, we tried it!’

They focused on Jimmy. ‘Who are you?’

‘Silo, James,’ Jimmy calmly responded.

‘Silo’s dead.’ The man stepped forwards, to within inches of Jimmy. ‘You ... you look different, and why are you alive?’

‘Chocolate?’ Jimmy asked, handing the guard a bar.

‘Chocolate? Can’t even get that on the black market.’

Jimmy lifted an A4 computer pad from the backpack, turning it on. ‘Computer. Display New Year celebrations, 2034.’

The screen came to life, images of celebrations in Time Square, New York, the guards focused on the scene.

From his backpack, Jimmy pulled out a silver ball. ‘Watch this.’ He held it out, tapped it twice on the top, and let go. It stayed where he had left it. Giving it a gentle tap, the ball moved slowly towards Singh, who tapped it back, Jimmy letting it bounce off a wall and return.

‘That’s not my favourite toy. Watch this.’ He pulled out what appeared to be a dead Sparrow, tossing it up and catching it. ‘It’s a toy. Sparrow, fly!’

The bird came to life and flew around the room, settling on a chair back.

‘Where’d you get this stuff?’ the guard asked, breaking the chocolate bar and stuffing down squares.

‘From the future,’ Jimmy carefully mouthed.

‘The ... future?’ they puzzled.

‘It’s a time machine, isn’t it?’

‘You ... you mean it works?’

‘More or less,’ Jimmy responded. He pulled out a four-pack of Bud, handing a can to each amazed guard, and cracked one open himself.

‘Haven’t seen these for years,’ a guard noted.

Half an hour later, General Gibbs arrived with his adjutant and a dozen guards, walking in to something of a party atmosphere. ‘What the hell is going on?’ he barked, being ignored. ‘It’s just been reported to me that the door was locked all night!’

The silver ball slowly floated past, curiously observed by Gibbs, the sparrow flying around, but whistling as it flew – whistling Dixie. Jimmy stepped down towards Gibbs. The general squinted, taking a step forwards. ‘Silo?’

‘It’s been a very long time, general,’ Jimmy stated.

General Gibbs looked Jimmy up and down. ‘You’ve ... changed. And where the hell have you been? We found your jeep in the river!’

‘That was a very long time ago,’ Jimmy said with a sigh, thinking back. ‘Three hundred years.’

‘Three hundred years? What the hell are you talking about?’ Gibbs barked.

‘Doctor Singh got your machine to work.’

‘Work? The ... the time machine?’

Jimmy lifted his eyebrows and nodded. ‘Where your people failed, Singh succeeded. But the good doctor didn’t want to see a stupid jarhead like you in control of it. So I stepped through.’

General Gibbs shot Singh a look. ‘You’re a dead man.’ He turned to the guards. ‘Arrest them all!’

The guards drew weapons.

‘Bad idea, General, because you’ll never make it work without these people,’ Jimmy told Gibbs.

‘We’ll see,’ Gibbs threatened.

A soldier ran in. ‘Sir, come quick!’

Jimmy turned to Singh and winked.

‘What is it?’ Gibbs asked.

‘Soldiers outside, thousand of them.’

‘What soldiers?’ Gibbs asked. ‘Texans?’

‘No, sir, but they are American – but their uniforms and weapons, they’re nothing like I’ve ever seen before. They say ... they say they’re from the future.’

Gibbs turned and focused on Jimmy.

‘General Gibbs,’ Jimmy loudly stated. ‘You are hereby relieved of command.’ He turned to the guards. ‘Put your weapons down, before I forget what a nice man I am. Those soldiers outside are mine, kitted out with advanced weapons from the future. Put your weapons down, gentlemen, or face the consequences.’

Confused, the guards lowered their weapons, the sounds of boots echoing along a corridor. The doors burst open, two soldiers holding the double-doors open, a four-star general striding in. He walked right up to Jimmy, pushing guards aside, and saluted.

‘Mister Silo. Sir! General Mathews, and ten thousand US Marines, reporting as requested.’

Jimmy smiled, shaking the general’s hand. ‘What kept you?’

‘You’re ... from the future?’ General Gibbs asked.

‘No point in building a damn time machine if it doesn’t work!’ General Mathews told Gibbs. ‘We have food, medical supplies, and advanced weaponry to fight The Brotherhood.’

General Gibbs pointed towards the portal coils. ‘But ... but if it works, then why not go back and stop the war?’

‘That would create a paradox, and would stop Mister Silo from having reached us,’ General Mathews stated. ‘And, since we’re very happy that he did reach us ... it would not be allowed.’ Mathews pointed at the guards. ‘Outside. Now!’ The men filed out, past the Marines.

Jimmy took a step forwards, smiled at Gibbs, then knocked him down. 'I've been wanting to do that for a while.' He stepped closer and stamped down on Gibbs' groin.

Boots snapped to attention in the corridor, the report echoing. Jimmy turned towards the door, and I stepped in. I walked forwards, taking in the room, the technicians, the dirty floor and the sticky-tape keeping things together. General Mathews stamped to attention and saluted me.

'You're ... Paul Holton,' Singh realised as he stepped closer. We shook.

'I met your other self and your – his - family many times, Doctor Singh.' I turned to Jimmy. 'I don't remember you wearing a suit when you came through.'

'How much time has passed that side?' Jimmy asked me as the technicians closed in.

'Twelve years! Took bloody forever to get a consensus on the time portal,' I told Jimmy. 'Anyway, this is the famous lab, eh?'

Jimmy took in the faces of the tired staff. 'You're safe now, you're all safe.' He turned to me as the ladies burst into tears again. 'Can they be evacuated?'

'Of course they can; the portal outside is open and stable,' I told Jimmy. I faced the group, taking in their expectant faces. 'We'll be taking you to our world, and to the future; good food, warm beds, and a few billion people who'd like to say hello ... and to say thank you.'

The ladies dried their eyes, the men patting each other on the back.

'What position do you hold now?' Jimmy asked me as I directed everyone outside.

'After you went I stayed on as President of Africa, then eight years later as World President, the UN upgraded to a more democratically elected body with real powers. I suffered that for a few years and went back to Africa.'

We walked along the corridor.

'And Helen?'

'UN Secretary General, Shelly being the British Prime Minister for five years before she'd had enough, and Lucy is a low paid scientist.'

We approached the entrance.

'Liz?'

I gave him an embarrassed look. 'Single mum of three, and not bright at all.'

‘Ah well,’ Jimmy let out.

We stepped out of the tunnel entrance and into a chill morning, the dawn fighting to take hold, a blue-grey herringbone sky promising a clear day. The Marines closest snapped to attention, but for Jimmy as much as myself, a civilian cameraman recording the event. Across the field, thousands of soldiers filed out of the portal, most carrying boxes, dishevelled local soldiers accepting tinned food and chocolate off the Marines.

‘Looks like it might be a nice day,’ I commented, taking in the sky.

Jimmy stopped and looked up. ‘Do you think you can do it?’ He only looked at me after he had said it. Our eyes met.

‘I’m planning on a twelve year campaign, and I’ll stay here till its finished. Hopefully, you’ll see me in a day or two at that end.’

‘I’m not going,’ he quietly stated. ‘This is where it started, and I’ll stay and beat The Brotherhood.’

‘You beat them when you fixed my world. We can do the job.’

‘I know this place, I can save you time. Besides, we both know that I was more soldier than doctor. Or banker.’

‘We have a ranch waiting for you in Montana. It has ... horses.’

‘Horses?’

‘Say goodnight, Jimmy.’

‘Huh?’

Two soldiers caught him as he collapsed, a device put away by a third soldier.

‘Stubborn, cantankerous, obsessive compulsive.’ I stood shaking my head. ‘Take him back. Carefully!’

I turned and took in the sky, the breeze cold on my cheek. ‘Twelve years.’

I thanked Doctor Singh again, and approached a Marines Major. He fell into step as I inspected the camp. ‘First, coal-oil, then we have fuel for the vehicles, then we get the crops growing to feed the army, then we go on the offensive – starting with South Africa and working our way up. I have a city or two to build from scratch. Thinking of calling one ... New Kinshasa.’

A soldier ran up. ‘Sir, there’s ... another you here.’

‘Another ... me?’

‘Another President Holton, sir.’

The soldier stood to the side as a group walked across to me, someone looking like myself flanked by US Marines. Our two parties met, the soldiers and onlookers staring wide-eyed at myself and my carbon copy.

I offered myself a hand and we shook. ‘Where did you come from?’

‘Here.’

‘Here?’

‘Four years from now this timeline will split.’

‘Ah, you’re from a separate branch,’ I realised.

‘Who do you think sent the messages, dumb fuck?’

‘That was you?’ I puzzled. ‘VAT14:JDI? And the diamond ring in the swimming pool in Somalia?’

He nodded. ‘You – us – thought it was from us later on, but no, it was me later on, after we realised that the timeline split.’

‘What year is it your end?’ I asked.

‘2046.’

‘We only got the consensus to come back in 2047,’ I told him. ‘So why the messages, because right now I’m not thinking of altering things.’

‘After fighting here for ten years you’ll decide to make a few small changes. But, you know, don’t bother now.’

‘Yeah, sure.’ I put my hands in my pockets. ‘So, you and Helen?’

‘Divorced, finally.’

I made a face and shrugged, my opposite number mirroring the move.

‘Anyway,’ he said, ‘We’ll sort diplomatic relations, and think about –’

‘Distant worlds, yes, we’ve been discussing them.’

He handed me a disk. ‘That’s our location and frequencies, we have yours – they were our old ones.’

‘Of course. So, if I’m not here when the line splits...’

*If you have enjoyed the series, donate a dollar via Paypal to help keep me writing. Paypal to: gwresearch@aol.com. Thanks.