

# **Drake**

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## The awakening

The creature stirred, an eye slowly opening. It found only darkness, soon waking from the dream fully and remembering its incarceration, a claw run around the limits of its enclosure, the texture of familiar cold stone examined. Distant tapping registered, vibrations felt through the ground. The creature closed its eye and opened its mind.

It sensed men, four men, keenly digging at the tunnel wall. It could read their thoughts, and the men sought treasure, treasure from the great war of Europe and the American colonies, the war of the strange men who smoked tobacco from the West Indies. But what they sought was not here, that the creature knew. It ... was here.

Another man, a different feeling; surprise, fear, and now anger. The newcomer, he means to fight the others. He possesses something, made ready. Four sharp reports echoing, the men slumped, fear, desperate fear, the life leaving them. The other man, moving away now.

Silence.

Now only darkness and silence again.

Outside of Sophia, Bulgaria. May, 2010.

‘Kobus?’ came an American accent.

‘Yeah?’

‘Hello, Kobus, you there?’

‘Still here, boss, bad line,’ Kobus said with a slight accent evident, a hint of his Afrikaans roots.

‘Where are you?’

‘Outside of Sophia, well outside of it; they still use horses and carts around here, and Donny Osmond is in the charts.’

‘Donny Osmond? Hell, he’s still going. And I went to some of his concerts in high school! Any sign of our boy?’

‘He’s sat stuffing his face with some dodgy looking lady.’

‘And...’

‘I’ll have a word after he’s finished stuffing his face with his dodgy looking lady.’

‘Will that be a quiet word?’

‘No, because I’m fucked off with this stupid country and its dated plumbing.’

‘Let me know.’ The line went dead.

Kobus van der Schule lowered his mobile phone, pressing the red button just to make sure that the call had been cut.

Stepping into a run-down provincial cafe, just as it started to rain, he ordered food by pointing at it on the menu – a few words in German used, a coffee requested. He settled down, adjusting the jacket of his well-worn black suit, a sandwich soon brought out and placed down, the tablecloth having seen better days. The walls had also seen better days, the blood-spattered remains of many swatted flies making their own decorative patterns, interrupted by the faded edges of posters long since pulled down. It did nothing for his appetite.

Easing forwards from where he sat, and around the edge of a small square table that wobbled, he was afforded a good view of the mark. The man now sat across the street and in another cafe, chatting to a pale and skinny girl that looked like a

Russian hooker, and not a local girl; they had a darker complexion. Kobus sipped his coffee.

Needing to use the bathroom, he eased up, edging past a few bored-looking locals tackling soup, and ducked sideways through a narrow opening and into a dark corridor, a hatch on the right displaying the kitchen - and the earnest cooking going on within. A strong smell of boiled cabbage assaulted his nostrils as he peered through the dark for the gent's toilet. The toilet signs were in Bulgarian, but he knew the difference between ladies and gents in Bulgarian from previous visits this charming country.

Pushing the door for "Maze", he squeezed sideways into a cramped and tatty toilet, cursing the pungent aroma. With the door closed he regarded the flimsy lock, not bothering with it. He peed into the bowl, his urine stirring fag-ends floating in a dark brown pool. When finished, he didn't bother to flush. Since it looked like no one else had flushed the toilet since the establishment had opened, why should he bother.

A cracked mirror above a small corner sink presented Kobus with his own image, the slight variance in the angle of the broken glass pieces making his face seem a little thinner. 'You've lost weight, boy,' he told himself.

He ducked his head, and moved to where the larger of the mirror fragments offered him a full, yet slanted view of his own face. He took in his forty-two year old features, the lines around his eyes, his tanned olive skin, the scar below his hairline and his dyed-black hair; his roots would need doing in a week or so. Making a face, he gave his own image a peeved look.

Back at his table he eased down, his coffee cooling, his sandwich unappetising. The mark was still sat eating, but the girl was now gone. Staring at the mark, and focusing on the face of his target, the mark turned his head, and stared straight back into Kobus's eyes.

A click registered.

Kobus managed to get his hand inside his jacket as the shot rang out, the sharp movement forwards saving his life. The cafe's window shattered as a scream went up. Turning, and drawing his pistol, Kobus could see the fair-skinned girl from over the road, standing now behind him, and taking careful aim with both hands. Focused on the end of the barrel, that small black circle, he imagined a bullet being released in slow motion – and how it might feel as it impacted him.

Click.

Kobus's pistol had been lifting up in slow motion, and had lined up with her mid section as she stared at him in surprise, her features turning quickly to abject terror. With his pistol horizontal he fired, his arm still rising. She was knocked back and bent double, a hit just below her heart, the report of the discharge sounding odd in the confined space of the cafe. Kobus had straightened, and was moving towards her before the spent 9mm cartridge had even tinkled off the lino floor.

It had all taken little more than two seconds, Kobus now beginning the move to leap over her before she had even hit the floor and settled. His foot landed just beyond her shoulder, gained purchase, and allowed him to continue onwards, straight into the kitchens. The chef was now staring at the girl's unnatural form as she lay on the cafe's lino floor, a horrified look etched into his face as Kobus picked up speed.

The kitchen aisle wasn't big enough for two.

A shoulder from Kobus, and the chef - along with several boiling hot pans - went flying, a scream issued, a flare of flame caught from the corner of Kobus's eye as he focused on the open back door - and on freedom. He could see that the door was wedged open by a seat, a waiter now sat on it having a cigarette. The young man looked up with wild eyes as Kobus moved closer, the waiter soon throwing himself the out of the gunman's way and towards a line of cardboard boxes.

Cool fresh air signified a safe exit, but was anyone waiting? A split second choice, and Kobus chose the bushes and trees

over an open door in a brick wall, ducking left and right as he ran through the back yard. Moist branches caressed his cheeks and he ran, assuming the worst; assuming that the girl had an accomplice, and that a shot would probably ring out any time now. He tore through the bushes and straddled a crumbling stone wall, halting once over and spinning, bringing his pistol to bear on the rear of the cafe.

Only now did he notice his own rapid breathing and pounding heart as he scanned the garden. No one visible, it was clear. He turned and ran.

He knew the layout of the area in general, and the cafe in particular, and he knew the exits. He had at least done that part of his homework right.

The lane he had reached now led him to the end of the block of shops and cafes, and he turned left, not towards his hire car. He sprinted to the end of the block, an old lady seeing the gun in his hand, but he didn't care; he was now up against the clock. Reaching the main street and halting, a van and car drove noisily past, and between them he glimpsed the mark ducking down the side of the cafe that the man had been sat in.

Through the traffic, Kobus sprinted across the main road and kept going, pistol in hand, now on a parallel course to the mark and six shops away. An alley presented itself. He turned into it at speed, breathing heavily, and made ten fast paces before he saw the mark reach a car, a black BMW saloon. The mark stopped, and stared at the image of Kobus charging towards him, the man soon reaching into his jacket.

Kobus fired twice as he ran, neither shot being well aimed, but one found flesh, the mark doubled up and knocked backwards as Kobus charged forwards. Reaching the mark, the man now on his back and grimacing - holding his stomach where his appendix might be, Kobus quickly put a round into the man's knee, dropping his weight onto the man, a knee onto the man's thigh causing a burst of air.

‘Where’s the exchange?’ Kobus shouted. ‘I know you speak English, fuck face! Where’s the exchange!’ Kobus thrust his pistol into the bloodied appendix area, eliciting an oddly unnatural sound from the man.

‘Paper,’ the man cried out, reaching for a jacket pocket, his features contorted.

Kobus got there first with his left hand, pulling out a folded piece of paper, which he shook by a corner till open. It revealed a map and directions. Stuffing the paper into his jacket pocket, Kobus relived the man of a silver .45 pistol, finally grabbing the car keys, which had been lying on the damp ground.

Back on his feet, Kobus glanced over his shoulder and down the alley, noticing now several people staring towards him from the road as he moved towards the driver’s side of the black BMW. Pressing the OPEN button on the key, the manual door button clicked up, the door opened a second later, the seat claimed. Key in the ignition, engine started and revved, Kobus selected R-Reverse and floored the pedal. A loud bump, and the rising of the car, confirmed the position of the mark, and the fact that he was still lying prone, a second bump signifying the front wheels making contact.

Five yards down the alley, and braking hard, Kobus could now see the body of the mark through a rain-spattered windscreen, one leg across another in an unnatural position. He turned the wipers on, selected D-Drive and sped forwards, two jolts signifying contact.

‘Double tap,’ Kobus said with some satisfaction, soon reaching the end of the alley and joining what passed for a main road around rural Bulgaria. He cut in front of a small white car, almost forcing it off the road, and sped off being tooted.

On the main highway, heading back towards Sofia, and now catching his breath, he called in to his CIA handler, Riggs.

Riggs worked for yet another newly formed taskforce, this particular new task force responsible for gun running through the former Soviet Block countries, he and his team working out of Amsterdam. The Dutch capital was close enough to be close, but far enough across an ocean and a jurisdictional border to allow for some plausible deniability; a rented office, no IDs carried, jobs paid for in Euros. They were a long way from a Congressional Oversight Committee.

Bulgaria had been the responsibility of the CIA's former Russian Section – Europe/East, which had little to occupy its time with these days. The good jobs, and the good staff, all worked in the Mid East section, save that few really wanted to work in the Mid East section these days. And, since this particular job had started in Greece - the assigned territory of Kobus, he had been allowed to follow his lead into Bulgaria. It was not far on the map, as he had reported the fact. Hardly an inch. A thumbnail in distance.

‘Kobus?’ Riggs asked.

‘Yeah, got a problem.’ Only now did Kobus register that he was wet from the rain.

‘What happened?’

‘There’s good news, boss, and there’s bad news. The good news is ... I know where the exchange will be, I have a map.’

‘And the bad news?’

‘They made me; girl nearly took my head off. Her fucking gun jammed.’

‘And if it hadn’t..?’

‘We’d not be having this chat. She was stood two feet away.’

‘Close, Kobus, too close.’

‘I didn’t know you cared.’

‘It’s the paperwork; if you’re killed I have lots of forms to fill in. And the mark?’

‘Won’t be up and about and walking for ... a year or so, if at all.’



‘You shot him in the legs?’

‘I shot him in the appendix, then the knee, then ran him over – twice – with his own damn car.’

‘Jesus.’

‘I didn’t plan it that way, but I knew I’d never get another chance after he made me. I had to move quickly.’

‘And this map?’

‘A place the other side of Sophia, in the hills, I’ll be there before nightfall. And I have his gun, so I’ll use that. And I’ll leave his car at the scene, his prints all over it. All I’d need for a full set ... is his girlfriend, but I shot her.’

‘Let me know if they turn up and buy the weapons. Personally, I think it’s nothing. But we’ll see.’ The line was cut.

‘We’ll see,’ Kobus repeated as he lowered the phone. He eased back into the vehicle’s comfortable seat, and eased off the gas, taking a moment to calm himself. He blew out. ‘Fucking hell, boy, you should be dead. Again.’

Finding a packet of cigarettes in a well under the handbrake, he flicked open the cardboard lid with a thumb, revealing both a plastic lighter and a row of cigarettes. Shaking the pack, he loosened a cigarette, pulling it out with his lips, the lighter shaken out onto his lap. He lit up.

‘Fucking hell, boy,’ he softly let out, barely above a whisper. He shook his head and closed his eyes for a second. ‘What the hell are you doing?’

## Of heaven and hell

Beyond the high rise blocks of Sofia, Kobus followed the map's directions into the hills, negotiating narrow winding roads, finally halting at a village a few miles short of the intended exchange location. Pulling up next to a cafe, the hunger hit him like a kick in the stomach. Was it nerves, or the adrenaline rush? He shook it off, soon sat in a cafe and tackling a beef stew that wasn't half bad.

After two cups of coffee, and six cigarettes, just passing the time and watching the world go by, he went for a stroll, the rain having eased off. Around a corner, he slowly climbed up well-worn stone steps leading to a narrow lane, finding a small enclosed square at the top, the local tourist trap, a dated church with numerous gargoyles staring down at the sinners below. Placing a cigarette on his lip, he peered up at a row of particularly grotesque animal gargoyles.

An American accent caused him to turn his head, a large lady in a hat now focusing on a gargoyle. 'They're to ward off evil,' she told her lady friend in a southern drawl.

'No,' Kobus told her. She turned, and waited. 'They divert water away from the stone, so that the water doesn't erode the stone and mortar. They started as simple spouts, but then became decorative – mostly human faces, then animals. You'll find them in Greece, Rome, everywhere.' He pointed up at

them. ‘Those have been altered, and re-carved to scare people. Thank the Catholic church for that.’

‘I never knew that,’ she admitted.

‘In Paris, the gargoyles are not functional, they’re there to scare people, people with really good eyesight – because they’re mostly over two hundred feet up.’

‘You work here?’

‘No, just ... passing through,’ Kobus said before placing the cigarette back on his lip. He stepped inside the church, dropping a coin in the collection box.

‘No smoking, please,’ a priest said with an accent.

‘Is there anything in the Bible about smoking?’ Kobus toyed.

The priest’s eyes widened. ‘I ... believe not, but it could be considered a selfish act of pleasure.’

‘Not all acts of pleasure are selfish,’ Kobus responded, now staring down the darkened aisle and towards distant flickering candles. ‘Smoking helps me think, and that helps me do my job, and my job keeps people safe. As someone once said, good people sleep safely at night because bad people patrol the streets and borders.’

‘You ... are a policeman?’

‘Of a sort.’ Kobus focused on the statue of Mary. ‘But today I’m a dead man walking.’

The priest blinked, and adopted a curious frowned. ‘Then perhaps, *dead man walking*, you should turn your thoughts to what you might say to God.’

‘I’d say ... that I broke a great many laws, and hurt a great many people to keep the borders safe, and so I’ll be judged.’ He faced the priest. ‘I was raised a Christian, and I know the difference between right and wrong, and I know much of what I’ve done is wrong. So I’ll fight on, sinning all the while, and not be judged on my accumulated sins, but on the tally of those I saved. Hopefully, the scales will tip in my favour.’

The priest edged closer. ‘And do you believe that ... one justifies the other?’

‘I believe that sacrificing my eternal soul to save a child is a reasonable trade-off. Don’t ... you?’

The priest held out his hand, a gesture for the cigarette. Kobus made a face, and handed over the cigarette. The priest glanced around, took a quick drag, and handed it back. ‘We shall both be judged, and hopefully by those we helped, not our own score cards.’

Kobus smiled. ‘I should have been judged today, a few hours ago, but I’m still upright and warm.’

The priest clasped his hands. ‘A near-death experience can ... give us all focus, a time of reflection.’

‘I usually sit and think about the morgue, about being cut up,’ Kobus said with a shrug, staring down the aisle.

‘And will the world suffer a great loss, if you left us?’

Kobus puzzled the priest’s meaning. ‘I’d have one person at the graveside,’ he said with menace, leaning in towards the priest. ‘And he’d be checking that I was actually in it.’ He carefully mouthed, ‘So no.’

A woman walked past, also American, talking about ghosts.

‘This place supposed to be haunted?’ Kobus idly enquired of the priest.

‘A don’t believe that a church can be haunted, since it is the house of God. Ghosts ... are those who have failed to find their way, and exist outside of God’s house.’

Kobus slowly nodded.

‘And what of you, what would you do if you ... saw a ghost?’ the priest asked.

‘That’s easy; I’d embrace it.’

‘Embrace ... it?’ the priest puzzled.

Kobus made firm eye contact. ‘If ghosts exist, truly exist, then it proves that your user manual is not just a pile of crap thought up by the early church to control people and to collect taxes. It would mean ... that this abomination of a species is not

just some cosmic accident, and that there *is* a purpose. It would mean ... that I could retire to a beach with a cold beer, because someone else would have a plan, and ... and it wouldn't be my responsibility anymore.'

'An ... odd view on things. But the lack of tangible proof is what tips the scales between curiosity, faith, and belief. Everyone is curious, some have faith without conviction, and some believe.'

'I'm in the first camp, at the edge, an eye on the border and a beer in my hand.'

Three hours later, darkness claimed this damp night in the Bulgarian hills. And Kobus should have known that no one would show up, not now, not with the principal mark being damp road-kill. He scouted around the area at length, but found no international arms dealers huddled about the campfire chatting in hushed tones.

He stopped and froze. A camper van, parked in the bushes.

For a full ten minutes he stood under a tree and observed the van, no signs of movement, no sounds issued from within. Could it be a courting couple, or just broken down? He slowly circled the area, twenty yards from the van, and returned to the tree, his jacket now damp from the continuous drizzle. It had been a warm day, and he hadn't bother with a coat, but he knew that his suit was getting wetter by the hour.

Approaching the van, each step measured, each footing tested before he placed his weight down, he finally put an ear to the van's wet glass; nothing, no sex going on within. He peered in as best he could, and managed to see right through the glass and out the other side, no one visible.

Back-tracking, he followed the track higher through the dark, the track that had been clearly indicated on the map. That track now wound its way through thick trees, and towards the base of a cliff, heading towards a gorge. As he climbed higher, he considered that no vehicles had been up this track recently;

it was grassed over, he could feel it under his shoes. He also figured it was a dead end, and a bad place for arms smugglers to meet up for a cup of tea and a chat in the dead of night; vehicles would have had to labour up this track.

Reaching the cliff face, he turned and took in the view, now panting a little. 'Out of shape, boy,' he whispered to himself. Turning, a tiny point of light caught his attention. His pistol was out a second later, Kobus frozen to the spot. He stood motionless and silent in the dark for five minutes, checking every shadow and rock, listening intently, an ear to the breeze.

Nothing.

He advanced slowly up the path, secure in the knowledge that anyone laying a trap would probably not put out a light to guide weary strangers closer.

Crunch.

He stopped and backed up, crouching down and tapping the damp grass with his left hand. A pen, a plastic pen; someone had been here. But when had they been here? And had the deal been done hours ago? He advanced again, soon seeing the black mouth of a cave in a dark grey cliff, as well as the outline of a metal fence. He couldn't make out the detail, just dark grey or black outlines afforded him in the available illumination on this dark night.

A moan.

He knelt, his pistol pointed towards the cave entrance. Kneeling there for two minutes, his eyes finally focused on a body, a black outline against dark grey, beyond it the point of light. Something had happened here, and he had missed it. It now looked like the arms dealers had not enjoyed a sing-a-long around the campfire after meeting up; these arseholes had shot each other. But did the buyers shoot the sellers, or the other way around. And, more importantly, would he learn anything useful by staying.

Kobus straightened and turned, certain that an approaching car would not only be heard, but also seen a long way off down

the hill. Unless there was someone hanging around, he'd have plenty of warning. And then there was the cliff face and its gorges; he had an escape route.

Homework done, he stepped cautiously forwards, each shoe delicately placed down, the ground beneath tested. The body moaned again. With his pistol aimed at the mid-section of the body's outline, Kobus felt for a pulse at the neck. Weak, rapid; the man was going into shock. Kobus rudely tapped the man on the head with the end of his pistol, several times, no response given. He patted the man down: no weapons, but a shit load of what felt like climbing gear. Had this poor fellow been in the wrong place at the wrong time, happening across the arms dealers after a pleasant day's climbing?

Kobus lifted his head to the cliff as he straightened. Could there be something up there? Hidden weapons stash? No, that was stupid; arms dealers didn't climb mountains, they met in secluded places with several exits, and then places with easy access. He moved towards the point of light, stepping through a wide gap left by open gates in a high fence, some sort of sign hanging at an angle.

A battery torch revealed itself, lying on the ground, probably belonging to the hapless climber. Had the man fallen from above, or had he been in the cave? Approaching the torch, Kobus scanned the immediate area, finding it all quiet enough. Lifting the torch, he used it to check the ground around the body. Blood, a blood trail leading from the cave to the hapless climber. This climber hadn't fallen from the cliff; he'd been in the cave.

Something glistened in the torch light as Kobus slowly advanced. Kneeling, he found a brass shell casing, 9mm. His pistol was still in his hand, and now he tightened his grip. It brought him right back to the conclusion that hapless climber had stumbled across the arms dealers. Could they have used this cave for some reason, he wondered. Only if they were the

most stupid arms dealers in the world; it was a dead end at the top of a terrible track.

Kobus shook his head dismissively as he inched towards the entrance to the cave, finding another sign, this one fixed to the rocks. He illuminated it with the dull torch light. He didn't understand much of the Bulgarian, but got the gist of the writing – as well as the skull and crossbones; what was inside was dangerous.

A few steps inside the cave, and another body presented itself, illuminated by the dull yellow light from the torch. Kneeling, Kobus could find no pulse, but the body was not cold yet; this guy had died within a few hours. Noticing a jumbo-sized torch alongside the body, Kobus upgraded his equipment. Turning the new torch on, its batteries seemingly fresh, he now had a good view of the inside of the cave, and its dimensions. With a glance over his shoulder, he stepped inside.

The creature opened an eye.

Ten yards in, and the cave split left and right, the remnants of a narrow-gauge train track visible, but buried in dirt for the most part; this had been a working mine at some point. The blood trail led off to the right, and he followed it deeper into the mine, his pistol still prone, the only sound being the odd drip of water echoing from the dark. He slowly passed and inspected rusted buckets, and a line of open-top miniature train carriages that must have been used for carrying ore at some point.

Squelching through mud, he followed the blood trail on, soon finding a brand new backpack, again looking like a climber's pack. Another torch in the dirt signified that he was on the right track, and it also signified what had happened here. The hapless climbers, cum hapless cave explorers, had met a few bad guys. But were they *his* bad guys?

Another body, this one face up, blood on the man's chest, the man's jumper soaked in blood. No pulse, but still warm. He



patted down the body, finding no weapon, but a wallet with the usual family photographs in it, a picture of the kids.

‘You’re no gun runner, my friend. You ... were in the wrong place at the wrong time by the look of it.’

Straightening, and listening intently, he advanced slowly along the tunnel, his powerful torch affording him a great depth of vision ahead, concentric rings of varying brightness created by the torch’s uneven lens. Sixty yards in, having turned a bend to the left, another body presented itself, this one sat against a wall. The man’s eyes were open, but there was nobody home. At the man’s feet lay shovels, a pickaxe, a crowbar, and more rope.

‘What were you after, boys? Kobus puzzled.

Advancing a few steps, he approached a section of tunnel wall, loose chippings at its base - the signs of recent excavation. At first glance the wall appeared to be part of the mine, but at closer inspection he could see that a brick wall had been made to look like it was a natural part of the mine. A fist-sized hole presented itself, revealing that the wall was two or three bricks thick, finally covered in concrete; a solid wall.

Licking a finger, Kobus held it in front of the hole, detecting a slight draft. ‘So, where do *you* go, and what’s on the other side? Something worth dying for, I’d hope.’ He took in the dead man. ‘What were you after, my friend?’

A close inspection of the wall revealed that it had not been recently made, that it was at least fifty years old, and clearly nothing to do with modern-day gun runners. Kobus put away his pistol, and stood staring at the hole for a moment, nothing but the echo of dripping water for company. Placing down the torch, he lifted the pickaxe, and slammed it into the wall near the existing hole.

The creature opened both eyes fully, staring into the dark as loud reverberations reached it.

Ten minutes of earnest labouring resulted in the removal of a jacket, as well as the removal of much of the outer layer of

the wall. As that layer had come away - the ravages of time helping by loosening the mortar's adhesive ability, the hole had enlarged, soon a large section falling inwards. Lifting the torch and thrusting it through, a new tunnel revealed itself, and its dimensions, a heavy damp smell now escaping the hole.

Kobus eased back, and turned his head away to breathe. 'Fuck me that's stale.' He forced several breaths, held the last one, and thrust his face inside the hole again. There, in the dirt, rested a helmet, circa Second World War, a rifle - a Garand M1, US Army issue, and a body, a pair of boots clearly visible.

Extracting his head and arm from the hole, Kobus stepped back to breathe, adopting a puzzled frown. 'American servicemen? In Bulgaria?'

He knew that no American servicemen had reached Bulgaria during the Second World War, so where had they come from? And, more to the point, what were they doing here?

Placing down the torch, the pickaxe retrieved, the edges of the hole were made larger with several powerful swings - the impacts echoing and repeating down the tunnel, many of the bricks falling away unseen into the interior. With a hole now big enough to crawl through, Kobus retrieved the torch, taking a minute to listen down the tunnel.

Nothing. Just a slight breeze and the constant drips of water.

Putting a leg through the hole, he bent double, and eased inside. 'God, that's a bad smell,' he said to himself as he straightened. Turning, he could see writing scratched onto the wall, but couldn't make out the words, or even what language the words were in. His torch illuminated the entire inside of the wall, behind him only blackness, a gentle caress of his ears by a cool draft.

Swivelling around, he knelt next to the soldier, finding a skeleton with hair still visible, thin fingers, silver dog tags shining back in the torch light. 'What were you doing in here, my friend?'

Straightening, he walked past the skeleton, four steps and to another skeleton. But this one had a leather jacket and a flying cap. 'Aircrew, downed after a raid of some sort.' He nodded to himself. 'And the local Gestapo, they walled you up in here.'

Turning his head, he remembered the Garand rifle, something that the local Gestapo would never have left behind. He adopted a puzzled frown and walked on, soon finding several wooden desks – the wood badly rotten, a few faded papers, pencils, a faded map on the wall, its surface black with mould.

'You weren't walled in here, boys, this was a local resistance cell.'

Using the torch beam, he discovered rusted tins - opened and empty, bottles of what could have been local wine, and stand-up wooden lockers that were now black with mould and rotten through. Another three airmen presented themselves, the final one lying at an odd angle, and he seemed to be reaching towards an opening in the tunnel wall, a hole dug out. There, inside a room partially hidden by the remnants of an old stone wall ... rested a large sarcophagus, the sarcophagus looking oddly out of place. Curious, he scrambled over loose rocks and ducked inside.

Standing over the sarcophagus, the object appearing to be some six feet long and two foot wide, he illuminated the engravings on the lid, not understanding any of the words. The words didn't even appear to be Bulgarian. He shrugged and made a face.

Moving on down the tunnel, Kobus convinced himself that the cave had been used by the resistance, a resistance that had oddly walled-in half a dozen American airmen during the war. Splashing through half an inch of water, Kobus plodded along a good sixty yards, finally finding a rusted ladder leading upwards, just before the tunnel ended. Licking the back of his hand, he raised it as high as he could, detecting the breeze. It

was the way in and out, the wall there to fool the local Gestapo, not to keep anyone inside.

A tapping sound caused him to turn, and to freeze. He knocked off the torch, and slowly pulled his pistol out of its holster, soon stood motionless in the pitch blackness. He could feel the gentle breeze on his face, and hear the distant drip of water.

There, again, a faint tapping sound.

There were no visible lights down the tunnel, so no one was moving around and looking for him. Ah! A revelation hit him. One of the cave explorers in here was still alive and moving around. He sighed heavily.

Switching the torch back on, he strode back towards the wall, sloshing through the mud and the water. Drawing level with the sarcophagus he stopped dead. The sound was here, close by, not the other side of the brick wall. But the men in here had been dead a long time, a very long time. He stopped and listened.

A scratching sound. A rat?

Tapping, almost rhythmical. A rat that could tap things? A rat skilled in Morse Code?

He illuminated the sarcophagus fully with the torch, slowly walking around it in the confined space. It appeared as if it had not been disturbed in a hundred years, still covered in dirt and sat in mud, no marks on it suggesting that it had been opened recently. Could the rat be inside?

Tapping, distinct now, and it was definitely coming from within the sarcophagus. And it was no damn rat, that he was certain of.

Stood over the sarcophagus, pistol in hand, he swung the torch about, checking every inch of the walls. Where the sarcophagus lay, the opening it occupied was simply rock, and it appeared as if this small area had been roughly chiselled out, no care for straight walls or an even floor. It was just big enough for the sarcophagus.

Tapping.

‘You’re fucking me off now,’ Kobus quietly cursed. After again diligently checking the tunnel, he returned to the sarcophagus and sat on it, the cold stone felt through his damp trousers.

More tapping, and definitely coming from within, he could feel it through his hand. He tapped the sarcophagus three times with his pistol, getting three taps back. With a heavy frown taking hold, he tapped twice, getting two taps back. Jumping up, he quickly walked to the end of the tunnel, to the body of the first airman, halting and lighting up.

In the dark, he could not be sure of the passing of time, and time passed very slowly, enough time for three cigarettes and a great deal of thought. ‘What are you afraid of, boy?’ he finally asked himself. ‘It’s not dying, so what is it. Afraid of a ghost, of a monster? You said you’d embrace it. Well, here’s your chance.’

He shook his head, rubbed his forehead and took a long drag, exhaling slowly through pursed lips. ‘It’s not the idea of a ghost that worries you, is it. What did the priest say: curiosity, faith, or belief. That’s what you’re afraid of, boy, you’re afraid of being right.’

Shaking his head, he went and fetched his jacket from where he had left it in the main tunnel, placing it on because he was now getting chilled, the sweat from his previous labours in opening the hole now cooling on him. Stood at the entrance to the hole he had made, he almost turned and left, finding himself stood there for a good ten minutes.

He stood thinking, thinking about a great many things, of life and death, and of his death. He finally made a face and shrugged, ducking back into the hole.

Sat back on the sarcophagus, he lit a fresh cigarette, taking a moment in the dull torch light.

‘Maybe that girl didn’t miss me. Maybe ... I’m in a coma in hospital, and dreaming this.’ He heaved a sigh. ‘Fuck it.’

He banged the sarcophagus hard with his pistol, twice. Two taps came back. Easing down onto a knee, the cold damp mud ignored, he examined the edge of the sarcophagus in detail. It had not been opened recently. Three taps came.

Easing up, he sighed, kicking the side of the sarcophagus in anger and frustration. Retrieving the pickaxe, he stomped back to the sarcophagus with determination, placed down the torch, and gave the stone lid an almighty whack at one end. Several cracks appeared, as well as a small hole. Dropping the pickaxe, he put two fingers into the hole and pulled out a piece of stone.

A hand slowly reached out, the pale white fingers feeling the edges of the cracked stone, long nails scraping.

‘You have so ... got to be shitting me.’

The hand slipped inside. ‘Help me,’ came in a whisper, a man’s voice, the words English but accented.

Kobus stared down at the hole, and into the black interior, his mouth hanging open. He cleared his dry throat. ‘Hello?’

‘Hello,’ came back in a whisper.

Kobus took a long drag of his cigarette, pursing his lips as he exhaled. ‘This is so fucking weird.’ Loudly, he asked, ‘Who ... who are you?’

‘I am ... Cornelius De Vargo,’ came a whisper, almost a plea.

Kobus took another long drag of his cigarette, studying the hole. ‘And ... you survived in there ... how?’

No answer came back.

‘You speak English?’

‘I speak the tongue ... of the men from the colonies.’

Kobus puzzled that. ‘Colonies?’ he repeated to himself. ‘The American servicemen? You, eh, you been in there sixty years, my friend?’

‘Longer, much ... longer.’

Kobus took a final drag, flicking away his cigarette. He lifted the pickaxe, and smashed it down with anger and determination, three heavy blows cracking the lid in many

places. Throwing down the pickaxe with anger, he sat on the edge of the sarcophagus and lifted out a large section of lid, straining with it as he threw it down. There, lying inside, was a frightened young man, deathly pale, long white hair, big brown nervous eyes.

Kobus stared down at the young man in the torch light. Lifting the torch, he shone it directly towards the young man, the man squinting away from the bright light. ‘What ... the fuck ... are you?’

‘I ... am like you.’

‘I’d survive in there for ten minutes before the air ran out,’ Kobus pointed out, examining the young man’s clothes. ‘So no, my friend, you’re not like me.’

‘You have little fear,’ the young man noted.

‘*Should* I fear you?’

‘Everyone ... should fear me,’ the young man said, now with some strength in his words.

Kobus moved closer, inching his face towards the young man. He placed a hand inside the sarcophagus, and felt the mouldy old fabric of the clothes that the young man wore. ‘There are many things I fear, but you’re not one of them.’

The young man squinted towards Kobus. ‘You dance with death, you do not fear it. You are a warrior.’ He turned his head and sniffed the air several times. ‘You did not kill the men who sought treasure. You take the king’s schilling and work for the magistrate.’

‘How did you survive in there?’ Kobus repeated. ‘And what, the fuck, are you?’

‘I was a man like you, once, a long time ago. I danced and made merry when news of the West Indies reached our town.’

‘Columbus?’ Kobus puzzled.

‘I have ... been here a long time.’

‘Again, what are you? And why do you speak English?’

‘I speak the tongue of the men from the colonies. They ... taught me.’

‘The American airmen?’

‘Men ... who came in strange craft through the air, a war with Germania.’

‘Coming back to my other question, *what* ... are you?’

‘I ... am a man like you, but...’

‘But ... one that can survive a few hundred years without air, or ... food, or water.’ Kobus waited.

‘I am a man of two halves, and wish not to be judged.’

Kobus puzzled that. ‘I’m not here to judge you, my friend.’

‘You would judge the darker side of me, that which keeps me alive.’

‘Darker side?’ Kobus nudged. He waited.

‘Inside of me lives a demon, not what you see now.’

‘A ... demon? Like ... heaven and hell, demon from hell ... kind of demon?’

‘The men from the colonies called me ... a vampire.’

Kobus’s eyes widened. ‘A vampire?’

‘I ... change when the creature has control.’

‘Really? Show me.’

The young man stared up at Kobus, trying to make some sense of the man who had released him from eternal darkness. ‘You ... have no fear. You ... wish to dance with death, to be close, to smell death. You ... seek answers, I can read it in your thoughts.’

Kobus slowly nodded to himself. ‘We all seek answers, not least what the fuck you are. So, *change for me.*’

‘If I give in to the demon, it will be *he* who you talk with, not me. He may kill you.’

‘I don’t ... care,’ Kobus stated with some attitude. ‘Right now I’m sat on an old stone sarcophagus with someone who should be dead, and yes – I have a few questions. One of those questions, asked of me recently, was ... what would I do if I truly saw a ghost. Well, what I would do ... would be to embrace it.’



The young man puzzled that odd statement, tipping his head as he looked up.

‘Yes, my friend, I’d embrace it, because it would mean that there is a God, and there is a heaven and hell, and that maybe, just maybe, there’s a plan for all this shit – a plan that makes sense to someone. It would mean ... that mankind is not some giant cosmic accident, that we’re not just wasting our time. It would mean ... that our pathetic little lives have some meaning in the grand scheme of things. So you, my friend, and your demon within, don’t worry me. I have a few demons of my own to deal with.’

Kobus drew his pistol, the weapon being carefully observed by the young man. ‘So, let the demon out, or I’ll leave you here ... with a few extra holes in your skull for ventilation.’

The young man smiled, a weak and thin smile formed. ‘If I thought your weapon might kill me, I would – as you say - embrace it. Those from the colonies, they made loud noise and fire, small things passing into me and through me. But I went on.’

He lifted a pale white hand, long and curled fingernails. ‘Put your noise and fire in my hand, and observe.’

Kobus took a moment to study the young man, aimed at his palm, and fired a round through with a loud echoing report. Studying the skin in the dull torchlight, Kobus could see a little blood around the wound but, as he observed, the hole closed itself, the fingers of the hand flexed. ‘Fuck me.’ He grabbed the hand and turned it over, inspecting both sides.

‘Do you still wish to see the demon?’

Kobus nodded. ‘I do,’ he said after a moment.

The young man lowered his head and closed his eyes, grimacing. His chest rose up, a deep breath inhaled, his mouth stretched wide and contorted as Kobus eased back a little. Rising from the sarcophagus, a new face appeared, lifting up into the upright sitting position. The new face offered prominent bones, an older face – that of a middle-aged man,

wild and strong eyes, and a set of pointy teeth right across the mouth.

Kobus took a long drag, and slowly exhaled. Easing forwards, he put his own face to within a few inches of the demon.

‘You hold no fear,’ came a deep and resonating voice. ‘You tempt death, you puzzle it and probe it, even welcome it.’

Kobus slowly nodded to himself. ‘Do you know anything of heaven and hell?’

‘I ... know only of myself, and this prison within a prison.’

‘Prison ... within a prison?’

‘I am imprisoned within this body, this body within these walls.’

Kobus pointed with the fingers holding his cigarette. ‘Door’s open.’

The creature turned its head and upper body towards the main tunnel. And then hesitated.

‘Something wrong?’ Kobus probed when he caught the creature’s look. He waited, taking a drag. ‘Big wide world out there.’

‘Your world.’

‘Yes, my world,’ Kobus said with a sigh. ‘A great many people, a great many police officers and soldiers with guns, and weapons far more dangerous than this pistol.’ He waved the pistol. ‘But the fact is ... no one would want to harm you, they’d want to study you; you could make yourself a lot of money and live well in the world you’d find out there.’ He sighed. ‘If Michael Jackson did it, so can you. Of course, they wouldn’t let you run around and kill people; you’d have to get by on processed food, the occasional fatted calf.’

‘You mock me.’

‘And yet ... you haven’t tried to kill me.’

The creature again looked over its shoulder at the tunnel, and at freedom.

‘Be easier for you to ... live *out there*, if ... well, if you had a little help.’

The creature focused on Kobus. ‘You would have me do your bidding.’

‘You can always stay here, if you like.’

The creature stared back. ‘You take the king’s schilling and kill for the magistrate. You are like those who pursued me.’

‘Not like those, exactly. And right now, you, my friend, are the most important thing in the world to me, because you represent hope.’

‘Hope?’

‘Hope that there’s a meaning to this life, hope that God has a grand plan for us, that there is a goal for us. You see, my annual psychiatric report says that I have a *constructive personality*, that I like to make things, fix things, and see things work. I like to make plans, to work things out, and to see progress. I care ... very much for my fellow man – as a whole – but I don’t mind losing a few along the way, like the cave explorers here. It’s important to me that the ship gets to port in good condition, not that all of the sailors survive. Can you ... understand any of that?’

‘I can read your thoughts, some of your thoughts, yes. You would have me do your bidding for the king’s schilling, to restore order to chaos.’

‘And in return...’ Kobus floated.

‘And in return ... I survive in your world, with your help. And what would a man of the magistrate see me do?’

‘I would see you kill men, and – you know – drink blood or eat them, whatever it is that you do, but just those that displease the magistrate. There would also be pleasures of the flesh - women, drink and food in excess. It’s a big wide world, plenty to do and to enjoy, and in a few places you’d be less than scary.’

‘The other will resist me.’

‘The young man? I’ll talk to him, since I don’t think he wants to stay here either. Does he ... fear the outside?’

‘He greatly fears your world, yes.’

Kobus took a drag. ‘What else does he fear?’

‘He fears that I may gain control, and that he will see my world through his own eyes.’

‘When you kill, does he see and feel everything?’

‘Yes.’

‘Ah. And when he’s in control, do *you* see and feel everything?’

The old man nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘Who placed you in here?’

‘He did,’ the creature snarled. ‘He sought out those who would help, and paid them in gold coin, to place him here and build walls, to be here for all time.’

‘Brave kid,’ Kobus commended. ‘He didn’t want to live with you running around killing people. Which begs the question ... as to why *you* let yourself be sealed in here?’

The creature lowered its head.

‘He can control you, can’t he.’

‘He ... learned to take control, in the tenth year.’

‘Strong young lad. And now, you speaking to me? Would I be right in assuming that he’s allowing it?’

The creature did not answer.

‘Do I have your agreement in principal ... to work with me, not against me, and to work with the young lad, not against him? In return, you get the pleasures of the world through his eyes – and my guidance through my world.’

‘So be it, because you are more like me than him.’ With a curled lip of smile, the creature lay down, its features relaxing, soon the frightened face of the young man peering up. He eased upright.

‘You heard all that?’ Kobus asked.

‘I did so hear the agreement you made.’

‘You’re the half in control, what do you say?’

‘I ... wish to live, to see the sun and smell flowers...’

‘But?’

‘I ... am afraid, and afraid that I will do evil.’

‘I want you to do evil, that’s the whole point, but to the bad people, and then for the king’s schilling. If you kill the bad men, you’re doing good – by protecting the good people from harm.’

The young man peered over his shoulder at the tunnel.

‘Every great journey starts with a single step,’ Kobus stated. Easing up, he grabbed the young man by the armpits and lifted him upright. The young man wobbled, carefully taking a step outside of the sarcophagus, barely able to take his weight. ‘Will your strength come back?’

‘Slowly. But ... there is a faster way.’

‘Faster way?’

‘Take me to the men who are dead, but still warm.’

‘Ah, that faster way,’ Kobus realised. He helped the young man into the tunnel, to the right and slowly along, past the airmen. ‘These airmen...’

‘Yes, we killed them and drank their blood.’

‘Do you refer to the demon in you as yourself?’ Kobus puzzled as he helped the young man along.

‘The men here, they found us after the demon had made a noise to attract them. I could have fought harder to stop the demon, but I was weak.’

‘You didn’t kill them straight away, not if you learnt English,’ Kobus noted as he eased through the hole in the wall. He helped the young man through, a mass of long white hair coming through first.

‘They did not die quickly, and ... one man I kept alive for many cycles of the moon. The men from the Americas, they had food inside of steel, and he lived off it.’

‘And that man taught you English?’ Kobus asked as they approached a dead cave explorer.

‘The demon can learn very quickly, and I know what it knows. I can hear the words or read thoughts to know what is meant.’

‘You’d make for a hell of a card player.’

‘You seek to benefit from me, to make profit,’ the young man said as he knelt.

‘The making of the profit is not as important as how it’s used – to do good.’

A face turned up, that of the creature, the older man. It stared dispassionately up for a moment, then sunk its teeth in the cave explorer’s neck, a slurping sound issued, mixed with a growl like a lion.

A full four minutes later the demon stood, now more steady on his feet, as well as adopting healthier skin colour; pale instead of white. It licked its blood-stained lips.

‘Enough?’ Kobus asked. ‘Need more?’

The creature studied Kobus for a moment. ‘Enough.’ He closed his eyes, the young man soon back.

‘Feeling better?’

‘This does not trouble you,’ the young man said as he glanced down the length of the tunnel.

‘There are a great many things that trouble me, and on certain days – you feeding might trouble me on some level. But that guy was dead, and you didn’t kill him. And if it helps you, and you help me fight the bad guys, then it’s a good act.’

‘You would justify the means by the end.’

‘Wouldn’t most people? Does a father beat his child for discipline, for the child’s benefit in later life, or for pleasure?’ Kobus grabbed the young man’s arm and led him forwards, holding the torch in his left hand.

‘What magic gives you light in this strange lantern?’ the young man asked as they walked.

‘Batteries, and cheap imports from Asia.’

‘I know nothing of your world,’ the young man sighed.

At the mouth of the cave, the young man stopped and breathed deeply, lungs filled with clean and fresh air.

‘Been a while, huh,’ Kobus let out.

They stepped forwards, the young man lifting a hand to feel the falling rain. He stopped. ‘What awaits me, these wonders that the men from the colonies spoke of?’

‘More than they knew of awaits you, and in some cases less – a lot less. They were from the year 1944, it’s now 2010 – sixty years later. And a hell of a lot has changed.’

‘These lights in the distance, these fires burning.’

‘They’re street lamps and house lights. All houses have lights at night; electricity.’

The young man turned his head, and waited.

‘Electricity?’ Kobus faced the distant lights. ‘How the fuck do I explain electricity?’ He blew out. ‘Some things can only be explained at length, and step by step.’

The young man took a step backwards, back from the rain, and from the world that lay beyond the cave. He glanced over his shoulder at the dark cave.

‘Having second thoughts?’ Kobus asked.

‘I fear that the demon will hurt many.’

‘This is a new world, and your demon wouldn’t last long here. There are more magistrates than blades of grass, more guns than birds in the sky. And ... there are many men here who do far more evil than he ever could.’

‘You see me as a child.’

‘You are, and what’s out there will shock you; you’re not so scary to these people. They make TV programmes about vampires; they’re very popular.’

‘T ... V?’

‘A band of travelling actors, a stage drama.’

‘Ah, I see. They tell stories of my terrible deeds.’

‘No, they make light of your terrible deeds, and laugh and smile at them.’

‘What manner of person would smile as such deeds?’

‘It’s a different world. And, after you’ve seen the traffic and eaten at McDonalds, you may just want to be back in the damn cave.’

‘Is your estate far?’

‘My estate ... is in Britain.’

‘Home of the Angles? Across the water to the north?’

‘Yep, across the water to the north. But I doubt we’d get you on a plane without a haircut and a manicure. So, there’s a motel I passed, rooms with discreet access, so you’ve got a date with a hot bath.’

‘A bath would be good. Is there a fire ready to heat the water?’

‘Uh ... yes, the fire is burning ready. And we’ll get you some clothes that are less than five hundred years old,’ Kobus quipped.

The young man regarded the tattered clothes that hung on him. ‘Yes, a new shirt. You have coin?’

‘I have coin, Cornelius.’

The young man took a moment. ‘That name hurts my ears.’

Kobus took a moment to puzzle the lad’s meaning. He shrugged. ‘What name would you like to use?’

‘I ... don’t know.’

‘I’ll call you Drake.’

‘Drake?’

‘They used to refer to vampires as Count Dracula, so Drake for short.’

‘Who is ... this Count Dracula?’

‘He was supposed to be you, but I guess it lost a little in translation over the years.’

‘I was not a Count, but a tailor’s son and apprentice.’

Kobus lit a fresh cigarette as they stood there in the dark mouth of the cave. ‘How did the demon get into you? Did you ... rape, pillage and slaughter, bring down the wrath of God or something?’



Drake shot Kobus a look, frowning heavily. ‘No,’ he insisted. He lowered his head. ‘But I did sin. I drank mead and lay down with girls out of wedlock. Twice.’

Kobus slowly exhaled, nodding his head. ‘Drank mead ... and lay down with girls out of wedlock, eh.’ He shook his head. ‘You have no idea what waits for you out there, do you.’

‘I greatly fear this new world,’ Drake softly admitted.

‘Well, first things first. Can you break those nails off, you look a bit ... you know, like a weird old Chinaman.’

Drake began to snap the long nails as Kobus took out a pocket knife, soon sawing through long white hair and letting it fall.

When done, Kobus stood back and lifted the torch. ‘You still look like shit, so we’ll get you a haircut tomorrow. You ... ready to leave?’

Drake focused on the distant twinkling lights, the lights of houses down the hill. He straightened. ‘I am ready.’ They walked forwards, and into the drizzle.

Nearing the BMW, Drake halted. ‘There is a man, hidden, he waits, he has ... the fire stick that you have.’

Kobus had his pistol out in a second. ‘Where?’ he whispered.

Drake pointed. ‘Fifty paces. And there, a second man, a third further down the hill. They show fear, and anger, and they wait.’

‘I killed their friend.’

Drake turned his head, just a dark outline. ‘Why ... did you kill their friend?’

‘They’re criminals, and they seek to profit from selling weapons against the rules of the magistrate. Those weapons will harm many.’

*‘I will be judged by those I save,’* you told a priest.

‘You can read that in my mind?’ Kobus whispered.

‘I can, since you thought it when you explained why you had killed the man.’ Drake faced forwards. ‘We must stop them from their commerce.’

‘Stay here, I’ll get around behind them.’

‘No,’ Drake called as Kobus started to move off, a hand on Kobus’s arm. ‘They may harm you. They cannot harm me.’

Kobus halted, staring at the dark outline of the young man. ‘You’ve only been out the cave five minutes, are you up for this?’

‘I must admit that ... killing these men is a task that best suits me, in this time or mine, in your world or mine.’

‘You’d let the demon out?’

‘If it helps you, then yes.’

‘And controlling the demon afterwards?’

‘He is happy to wait, and to observe with great curiosity, since he thinks you will lead me towards disaster.’

‘I might just do that,’ Kobus whispered.

‘You say the words, but you hope they are not true; I sense that you would guide me and protect me. So I will do this act, and be judged by those I save, not by the acts I commit.’ He ran forwards, and soon out of sight.

Ten seconds later two shots rang out, followed by a scream. Kobus edged down the track slowly, pistol prone. Another shot, a cry, two more reports echoing. Then just silence. A minute later Kobus could hear footsteps, a dark shadow walking up the path. He held off firing.

‘It is done,’ Drake coldly stated.

Kobus straightened. ‘Did you ... you know, feed on them?’

‘No, I ... we snapped their necks like game before the plucking.’

‘Cool. Let’s go then.’ Kobus holstered his pistol, leading Drake to the car. The BMW’s lights flashed and the door locks clicked open as they neared, Drake halting.

‘What is it?’ he asked, peering at the car.

Kobus took a moment. ‘It’s a ... carriage without horses, fire inside that makes the wheels turn, and we don’t have time for a fucking lesson. Get in.’ Now sat in the driver’s seat, Kobus waited, looking for Drake. He sighed. ‘Like he knows how to use a fucking car door.’ He leant across the seats and opened the door, the light coming on. ‘Come inside, and sit like me.’

Drake nervously edged into the car.

Kobus pointed at his own car door. ‘Grab this part, and pull quickly towards you.’

Drake pulled the handle and closed the door with a click. Running an eye around the vehicle, he said, ‘Such wondrous workmanship, a carriage fit for a king. And glass, like in church, fine glass.’

‘German you see, reliable. And ... all cars are like this, the same workmanship. Well, in Britain they’re not, but you’ll get used to that.’ He started the engine.

‘What growls within?’

‘Magic. Lessons start tomorrow.’ Kobus turned on the headlights, reversed out a little, and started down the track, soon to a road and picking up speed.

Drake was sat smiling widely. ‘This carriage moves at great speed, and glides effortlessly like a swan.’ He pointed at the steering wheel. ‘This wheel chooses where the nose of the beast follows.’

‘Steering wheel, and yes – it chooses the direction.’

They joined a main road, soon reaching eighty MPH, Drake smiling like an idiot. When another car passed he panicked, a hand raised to his face. Looking over his shoulder, he said, ‘I feared we would collide, to pass so closely.’

‘Relax, I’m a safe driver.’

‘What is ... road-kill?’

‘Ah, well ... small animals that the beast accidentally kills as it moves.’

‘Ah, a field mouse under the wheels of the cart.’

They pulled into the roadside motel, halting in a quiet corner of the car park. ‘Stay here,’ Kobus said as he eased out, leaving Drake alone in the car. Paying for a room, Kobus ordered food to be delivered, paying over the odds. Back at the BMW, he opened Drake’s door. ‘Come on, before someone sees you.’

Drake followed Kobus into a ground floor chalet, Kobus checking the car park with a look back. With the light flicked on, the door closed and the curtains drawn, Kobus placed down the car keys and eased off his damp jacket.

‘Wondrous workmanship,’ Drake noted, running a hand over the frame of a cheap watercolour. ‘Such wonders, a suite fit for a king.’

‘Actually, this is poor quality. There are better rooms, and they’re cheap for the common man.’

Drake shook his head in admiration. ‘How you live.’

‘You’ll get used to it. Right, you stink, so follow me.’

Drake followed Kobus into the bathroom, seeing his own image for the first time in many centuries, and stopping to stare at the pale young man staring back. ‘I have not gained any years, but I am pale like the end of winter.’

Kobus looked over his shoulder as he tackled the shower settings. ‘How old are you, I mean ... were you?’

‘I was three years past twenty, to be wed to a fine and sturdy wench that my father favoured.’ Drake turned as the shower came to life, puzzling it. ‘Where does this water come from?’ He lifted his head to the ceiling.

‘From metal pipes in the ground.’ Kobus eased past Drake, opening a wardrobe and finding a white fluffy robe that needed a wash. Still, it was step up from what Drake had on. ‘This robe, you wear it after washing, OK. Your other clothes, put them out through that small window.’ He lifted a motel-issued soap bar in plastic and unwrapped it, handing it over.

‘A marvellous perfume.’

‘You wash with it, rubbing it all over your body when you’re stood upright in the water.’ He grabbed a small shampoo vial and opened it. ‘And this ... you squeeze this out onto your hair to wash it. Take your time, and stay here; I’m going shopping for you.’

Leaving the chalet, and checking again the car park, Kobus wondered what Drake would do with the bidet, and what state the room would be in when he got back. And was this wise, leaving him in there.

At the edge of Sophia, Kobus noticed a supermarket that was still open at this hour, and bought additional soap and shampoo, plus toothbrushes and paste, but not just for Drake. Kobus’s overnight bag was still in his hire car, abandoned earlier. It was no great loss, just inconvenient. He found two gents fleeces that seemed about the right size, and a cheap tracksuit - yellow with a black stripe. He could not guess Drake’s shoe size, so bought a pair of slippers, a stretchable soft fabric. At the quiet checkout he grabbed biscuits and chocolates.

Back at the motel, he slowly circled, checking cars, finally parking the car in a lane and under trees. Back at the chalet, he scanned the car park at length, and turned the key in the lock. Inside, he saw no sign of Drake. ‘Still here, buddy?’

Drake stepped out from the bathroom, now in the white robe, his skin tone matching the robe. ‘I sensed your approach,’ he said with a keen smile.

Kobus dumped the bags onto one of two single beds.

‘Come, see,’ Drake called.

With a curious frown, and wondering about the state of the bathroom, Kobus stepped forwards. Inside the bathroom he found it wet, wet in many places it should not be wet, towels on the floor – and now very wet.

‘I mastered the water, making it faster or slower, warmer or colder.’

‘Well done,’ Kobus sarcastically offered.

‘And look.’ With a wide smile, Drake turned the cold water tap on, then off. ‘Water flows, water stops.’ He straightened. ‘Such wonders of your world.’

Kobus peeked into the toilet bowl. ‘Mastered the toilet?’

Drake studied the toilet. ‘What does it do?’

‘You know, after you drink a lot of mead ... you need to go.’

‘Ah, yes.’ He pointed. ‘You go here?’

‘Yes, then flush’ Kobus reached across and pressed the flush.

‘Wondrous. But I do not ... go.’

‘No?’

‘No.’ Drake stopped smiling. ‘If the demon feeds in the quarter, I need not food or drink.’

‘But ... could you eat?’

‘Yes, I can, but the demon becomes irritable.’

‘C’mon,’ Kobus called, leading Drake to the main room. He opened a plastic bag and pulled out a track suit. ‘Go into the bathroom and place this on.’

Drake studied the yellow tracksuit intently as he turned for the bathroom. A minute later he emerged, the tracksuit a reasonable fit.

‘Great, now you look like fucking Bruce Lee.’

‘These clothes are not suitable?’ Drake puzzled. ‘They seem most finely made.’

‘They’ll do for now. Here.’ Kobus handed over the slippers. ‘They’re called slippers. What were they called in your day?’

‘Slippers.’ Drake sat on the end of a bed and placed on the slippers, which fitted well enough. Standing, he walked around in them. ‘Great softness for slippers, no errant thread or stiffness.’

‘And your old clothes?’

‘Placed through the small window as you desired.’

‘I thought it smelt better in here.’ From a bag, Kobus pulled out scissors. ‘Sit.’ With Drake sitting, Kobus cut his hair, a rough job. ‘Better, but it still needs work.’

Drake ran a hand over his head. ‘Short hair for the summer.’  
‘Fingers, please.’

Drake presented a hand, and Kobus cut what was left of the long nails as best he could.

‘You almost look human. Someday soon we’ll get you a dermatologist; you’ve many oddly-large blackheads in your skin.’

‘As you wish, if I will appear more fitting in this time.’

Kobus sat, opening a bag and retrieving a chocolate bar. He snapped a chunk off for himself and chewed, breaking off a lump for Drake as an afterthought.

Drake sniffed the chocolate, before placing it into his mouth. Smiling as he chewed, he said, ‘Wondrous.’ He pointed towards the door. ‘A man brings beverage and food. He approaches.’

Kobus eased up and stepped to the door, accepting pizza and cans of beer. ‘Danke,’ he offered the man, not wishing to seem British, or Afrikaans for that matter.

Drake sniffed the air. ‘What is it?’

‘Pizza, the ... food of the Venetians. And mead. We call *mead* beer or lager.’ Kobus sat against the headboard, and cracked open a can, soon munching on a pizza slice as Drake worked his way slowly through the chocolate bar. Lifting the TV remote, Kobus turned on the room’s small TV.

Drake jumped back, startled. ‘What is it?’

‘TV.’

‘You used this word before; an ensemble of stage actors.’ He pointed. ‘I see them, but where are they?’

‘The TV shows you things happening in other places, like magic. They’re far off.’

Drake sat on the edge of the bed, now keenly focused on the TV, the news relaying images of the Iraq conflict. ‘Where is this place?’

Kobus took a moment. ‘Iraq, a place in the east where ... I fought in a war.’

Drake focused on Kobus, and waited.

‘It’s near the home of the Persian Empire.’

‘Ah, yes, the Moors; always a war with the Moors. They move towards Dacia. They did, in my time. And again now?’

Kobus took in the images, not happy with the topic. ‘No, now ... now we moved on *their* land, to remove a false king that hurt his people. But in the fighting we hurt many more than just the false king.’

‘You are saddened by this, and angered,’ Drake softly noted.

‘Sometimes, you hurt those you go to help.’

‘When the cavalry charges, their blood up, they know not the farmer or the peasant boy from the enemy soldier in the heat and the dust.’

‘Very true,’ Kobus softly noted.

Without taking his eyes off the TV news, in Bulgarian, Drake said, ‘You were a soldier?’

‘I was. I was born in South Africa, a place you’ve probably never heard of, but went to school in Britain. After studying, I joined the British Queen’s army, an officer, and fought in the land of the Moors near Persia. And after, after ... I worked for the magistrate, for the American colony.’ Lifting the handset, he changed channel. ‘That’s better for you, Friends. And in English.’

‘Friends?’

‘A drama about young friends in the American colonies.’ He turned the sound up a bit. ‘You can practice your English.’

Drake sat, transfixed, as Kobus munched through a large pizza, downing three cans of lager. Forty minutes later, Kobus checked his pistol, kicked off his shoes, and puffed up the pillows. He lay fully clothed, and now closed his eyes.

‘You need sleep?’ Drake asked without moving his eyes of the TV.

‘I can sleep just fine with the light on, and the TV, so you watch all you want, buddy. You have a few ... *gaps* in your



knowledge to fill. And they say TV is good for kids, or bad for them, I'm not sure which.'

## A new reality

At 7am Kobus opened an eye, the curtains revealing a dull grey light. Turning his head, Drake smiled warmly, sat where he had been, the TV now displaying a children's programme.

'I put the pizza through the small window, and the small metal drums,' Drake informed his roommate. 'May I ask questions?'

Kobus let his legs down, and placed a cigarette on his lip. 'Sure,' he said, rubbing his forehead.

'People go to small rooms with other people, to undertake gainful employment for coin – known as *dollars*, which transact the rent dues from the lord where they live. What dollars are left in hand are used in the pursuit of partners for sex without wedlock, and to make oneself appear better than those around them, a continuous struggle.'

Kobus nodded, and then made a face. 'Yep, pretty much, and definitely a continuous struggle.'

'I feel for Ross, he means well and struggles hard, but fails to succeed at each turn.'

Kobus stared at the side of Drake's head. 'I should have started you with Dallas; you'd have a better fix on the world.'

'I saw images of the men I killed.'

Kobus stood. 'What?'

‘On the TV, images of the men of the magistrate in blue, and the three men I killed.’

‘Did you understand any of what was said?’ Kobus pressed.

‘Some, and the magistrate believes the men to be criminals, members of a group – a group of bad men.’

‘And the cave?’

‘They entered the cave, yes. The men who sought treasure were taken in bags, also the men from the colonies. You are concerned.’

‘I work for the magistrate in America, where Ross and Rachel live, not here. I work in the shadows.’

‘You are a spy.’

‘Where did you get that word?’ Kobus idly asked, yawning.

‘Ross was spying on Rachel, and Chandler spied on a woman, and a man spied on Monika. Spying is common in Friends. And they eat pizza like you, and are very careful with the cleaning of teeth.’ He turned his head, a puzzled frown adopted. ‘Joey lies down with many women out of wedlock, but always seeks more company – and seems at a great loss to understand women. He has much experience, but is always at a loss to understand them.’

Kobus stared down at Drake. ‘All women are different, and knowledge of the moods of one *does not* help with the next.’

‘I think Rachel and Ross will unite again,’ Drake said as he turned back to the TV.

Kobus stared at the back of Drake’s head. ‘I’ve unleashed a monster,’ he said as he headed to the toilet. Back in the room, and stretching, he asked, ‘Sunlight, it doesn’t affect you?’

Drake shook his head.

‘Garlic?’

‘It’s pleasant with some foods.’

‘A crucifix?’

Drake shook his head.

‘What *would* kill you?’

‘I wish I knew that,’ Drake said, a glance upwards, big sad eyes displayed.

After a moment, Kobus said, ‘I’ll take a shower, then we’ll go.’

‘Should I wash again?’ Drake keenly enquired.

‘No, you’re fine.’

Drake seemed deflated, turning back to the TV. ‘In the night you made loud noises with your nose. My father did this, so I placed you on your side many times.’

‘I don’t snore, I just breathe loudly. I’m too young to snore.’

‘You are offended by this idea.’

‘Watch the damn TV.’

Out of the shower, and back in the same clothes, Kobus’s mobile went.

‘You are concerned about the magistrate,’ Drake noted. ‘About me.’

‘Yep. Now be quiet.’ Kobus lifted his phone, and pressed the green button. ‘Yeah?’

‘Kobus, you’re still alive. What the fuck happened, I’ve just seen it on the news?’ Riggs asked.

‘When I got there I found a bunch of dead cave explorers, weekend amateurs, and all shot by a 9mm. I think they stumbled on the gang.’

‘And the cave? They found US servicemen from 1944!’

‘I think the locals were looking for them, maybe they thought there was something of value in there, but they stumbled on the meeting place for the others.’

‘*Did* they meet?’

‘No, that was called off after I *accidentally* ran over that guy.’

‘He died in hospital,’ Riggs reported. ‘What about the gang members?’

‘They turned up looking for me, no deal going down. Bit of a squabble in the woods.’

‘Fuck’s sake, buddy, nine dead bodies in two days; the press and the local police will be all over this. Luckily, they’re calling it a gang incident – for now.’

‘I left no evidence behind, and I’ll ditch the car.’

‘You still have that guy’s car? They’ll be looking for it!’

‘It’s tucked away.’ He focused on Drake. ‘Anyway, some good news, of a kind.’

‘What’s that?’

‘The men, they led me to a safe house in Sophia; they were holding someone prisoner.’ Drake now turned his head, and listened. ‘And this guy is a real find for us, but I don’t want the Company to know yet.’

‘Know what? Who is he?’ Riggs asked.

‘He’s ... Romanian, a young lad who used to work in the circus.’

‘In the circus?’

‘Yep, and he reads minds.’

‘He read minds? You been drinking, Kobus?’

‘He’s the real deal, that’s why they had him. If you hold up twenty playing cards he gets nineteen right – every time.’

‘He does?’

‘I tested him on a few people already, at random. He told me their occupations and names, and then I asked them; right every time – more or less.’

‘Fucking hell, buddy. A mind reader?’

‘After centuries of circus tricks, there was bound to be some truth in it. Anyway, he’s my new partner, so keep that in mind if we’re seen, and I don’t want this to go up the line; they’ll take him off us.’

‘You wanna work with this guy?’

‘He has ... specific skills that I think will come in handy.’

‘How much does he know about you? About us?’

‘He’s a fucking mind reader, dummy, he knew before I told him.’

‘Hey, look, if this guy is on the level, he could be worth a lot the agency; you know what they’re like with their weird programmes, Distance Viewing and all that crap.’

‘Look, if *he* helps me ... and I help *you*, who gets the credit, and a better office?’ Kobus probed.

‘Well, yeah, I would.’

‘If I crack a big case, you get the smarty points, boss; desk in Langley, not too far from the water cooler, bit of a view.’

‘You really think this guy is on the level?’ Riggs pressed.

‘Why do you think they had him holed-up? They were trying to get him to do the lottery.’

‘Can he?’

‘No, that’s the future, he just reads minds.’

‘Pity. What’ll you do next?’

‘Couple of days off, back to Athens, then the next job; the weapons deal will never happen now.’

‘No shit. They’re all dead!’

‘Find me something in a few days. Over and out.’ He cut the call.

‘You gave false testimony about me,’ Drake noted, ‘to protect me, but to also gain me employment with the magistrate.’

‘Yep, otherwise they would ask. If my boss thinks you’re useful he’ll protect you from others who may ... desire your particular skills. And in my game, your skills are excellent.’

Drake lowered his head. ‘We fight the bad men, in the hope that our tally is good at the end.’

‘We fight the bad men, and to hell with anyone who judges us,’ Kobus said as he stood.

With Drake helping, they pushed the car along the lane, and into a field, finding a convenient slope down towards a lake. With a final shove the car started rolling, gaining speed.

‘Such a wondrous carriage, to meet such a fate,’ Drake lamented.

‘C’mon,’ Kobus urged as he turned.

They walked down to the nearest village, a taxi hailed, an odd look given to Drake’s bright yellow tracksuit by the driver. In Sophia, they halted at a row of shops, Drake having spent the time in the taxi staring wide-eyed at everything, marvelling the buildings, and the cars on the roads.

Paying the driver, Kobus led Drake on, walking past many shops till they found a ladies hairdresser. It looked quiet enough. ‘You do men?’ Kobus asked in English.

The woman shrugged, glancing at Drake’s blue slippers.

Kobus thrust a fifty Euro note towards her, and pointed at Drake. The lady held the note, curled a lip at Drake’s hair-job, and finally gestured Bruce Lee towards a chair, a bib thrown around him.

‘What to do?’ she complained.

Kobus shrugged at her, and sat.

In Bulgarian, Drake said, ‘I want look like Joey on Friends.’

The ladies in the establishment laughed – at length, but then got to work. They cut the mangled white mop, and dyed it, a thirty minute process. As they did so, Kobus paid another girl to tackle Drake’s finger nails, much complaining issued, another twenty Euros handed over. When done, Drake stood and faced Kobus with a keen childlike smile. The jet black hair stood out as a drastic contrast to his deathly white skin.

‘You need some sun, you’re pale,’ Kobus said as he stood. ‘Thank you, ladies. Oh, where can I find a dermatologist?’

They understood the word, pointing down the block. Outside, they walked down the block, Drake catching his reflection in the glass of many shops, Kobus rolling his eyes and shaking his head. At the dermatologist, they needed an appointment, so a bribe was paid, and soon found a Russian girl in a side room.

‘Speak English?’ Kobus asked her.

‘Some, yes.’

Kobus grabbed Drake by the shoulders and placed him in the seat, soon pointing the lady towards deep and dark blackheads across Drake's chin, neck and shoulders. A lip was curled, a glance at the blue slippers made, but the girl got on with the task, removing almost a hundred black lumps from under the skin. At the end of it, she rubbed in an acne cream with her gloved hands.

'It was a pleasant experience,' Drake admitted after they left. 'So too the cutting of my hair. I admit I felt ... aroused.'

'That's OK, so do I on occasion when a nice young girl is giving me a cut. Right, we need some clothes for you, and a shirt for me.'

They entered a men's clothes shop. 'You speak English?' Kobus asked a girl stood waiting.

'Yes.'

'My friend, he doesn't know his size. Can you guess?'

She looked Drake over, frowning at the blue slippers as Drake smiled keenly back. 'I think medium, or more smaller.'

'I want underwear, jeans, t-shirt, jumper, jacket, socks. Two of each, please.'

It was a good order for the shop assistant, and she got to work, Drake soon trying on pants and jeans, a fit first time. The t-shirts were OK, plenty of room in the jumpers and jackets. And finally they squeezed black trainers onto his feet.

'Good, we'll take them all, and another of each,' Kobus told the girl, taking out the cash. He handed over two hundred and twenty Euros, and left a happy shop assistant.

'I feel ... strange,' Drake admitted as he emerged onto the street, carrying the spare clothes and yellow tracksuit in a bag.

'Strange?'

'The clothes feel good, and warm, a strange sensation. I feel ... protected.'

'I guess we all feel vulnerable naked.'

'What is next?' Drake keenly enquired.

Kobus pointed up. 'Sun tan.'



‘Sun ... tan?’

‘False sun from the sky, to make your face less ... white; you look like a sheet of paper. In fact, I’d be happy if you just looked as pale as a sheet of paper, I’d feel less conspicuous.’

A few minutes later, Drake stepped into the booth and took the clothes off his top as he was instructed to. He placed on goggles – that were not necessary in his case, and stood still for six minutes, enjoying the warmth. When done, he wished more time.

‘You’re pale, so you’ll burn. Probably. C’mon, enough sun for one day.’

Walking around a corner, Kobus noticed a suitably rundown hotel, and approached. The establishment had a room with two single beds available, for one night, the room paid for in cash, a curious glance shot at Drake from the receptionist. Once in the room, Kobus turned on the TV, explain the changing of channels to Drake.

‘I’m going to pick up a bag I left in another hotel, and get a car. I’ll be an hour at most. Don’t ... go anywhere.’

‘I shall study again the world through the magic box.’

Kobus asked. ‘You heal very quickly?’

‘Yes.’

‘You have marks on you that will put people off, small holes from the girl today. Can you cut them, and see them heal quickly?’

‘I believe so.’

‘Look in the mirror in the bathroom, make many small cuts, see if the holes go,’ Kobus suggested before he headed out.

Kobus returned an hour later, Drake seemingly damp, but back in the same clothes. ‘I had another shower, and mastered the controls,’ he enthusiastically reported. ‘And now my skin is better.’

Kobus closed in, inspecting Drake’s chin. ‘Yeah, better. Be hard to keep the girls off you now.’

‘Girls?’ Drake repeated. ‘Is there ... a local summer dance?’

Kobus hid a smile. ‘Would you ... like to lay down with a girl out of wedlock?’

‘It ... is the accepted custom here, no?’

‘It is,’ Kobus agreed with a coy smile. ‘But I think what might best suit you – for now – would be a girl who takes coin for such ... lying down out of wedlock.’

‘A lady of the night.’

‘Yes, a lady of the night.’ Kobus checked his watch. ‘There is a club here that’s open all day. C’mon then, let’s go meet a lady of the night, now that you’re all keen, clean and raring to go.’

They drove around to the club in question in a hired BMW, this one silver with a wooden finish, Drake now adept at opening and closing the car door, as he pointed out. Inside the club, they found three bored looking ladies in night gowns.

Kobus beckoned one over. ‘Speak English?’

She nodded.

‘My friend here has not been with ... many women.’ He handed over sixty Euros. ‘Blowjob.’

The lady led a keen Drake away. ‘I have had a shower,’ could be heard as Kobus headed to the bar.

‘Coffee,’ he ordered.

‘Ten Euros,’ the barman said with attitude.

‘Ten Euros? Do I get a blowjob for that?’

Ten minutes later, and Drake hurried back, beckoning a now concerned Kobus towards the door.

‘You didn’t let the demon out?’ Kobus asked in a whisper as they stepped out onto the street, glancing back at the club.

‘No.’

‘Then what happened?’

They headed to the car.

‘This lady, she knelt before me and ... took me in her mouth, a most enjoyable sensation. After ... afterwards, she was sick

like a rabid dog for many minutes, and went to sleep on the carpet.'

Kobus stopped dead, his eyes wide. 'You, er ... well ... you gave her some five hundred year old seed. A bit ... *off*, I'd guess.' They walked on. 'Christ, that's more detail than I needed to know.'

'Have I done wrong?' Drake worried.

'No, but ... now that you've cleaned out your ... you know, next time will be better.'

'I feel bad for this lady,' Drake said as they got into the car.

'We won't be welcome back in that club,' Kobus suggested as they drove off. He shook his head, wide-eyed. 'Bloody hell.'

'Is it customary here to send flowers?'

Kobus gave him a look. 'Eh ... no, not to hookers.'

'Hookers: ladies of the night. This word was in Friends, Phoebe was suspected of being a hooker.'

'I've got to start choosing what you watch,' Kobus said with a sigh.

Back in the hotel room, Kobus selected a channel for Drake, a programme about the Second World War.

'The men from the cave,' Drake noted, keenly attentive.

'We'll leave when it gets dark; I prefer to drive at night.'

It's a dirty job, but someone has to do it

An hour later, and Kobus was snoozing after a large pizza had been delivered and eaten.

Drake shook him awake, a hand on Kobus's mouth. 'There are men at the door.'

Kobus eased up, his pistol drawn. 'What do they want?' he whispered.

'They seek us from the first room,' he said softly, pointing at the pizza box. 'They know we are the same men.'

'Do they work for the magistrate?' Kobus whispered.

'One man does, but takes coin from bad men,' Drake softly answered. 'They have pistols, if I say it correct.'

'Unfortunately, you do,' Kobus said as he considered his options.

'There are also men in a carriage, below us.'

Kobus looked to the window, then opened it. They were two storeys up.

Drake's head appeared alongside. 'This car,' he said, pointing.

'Jump onto it, and meet me in that park,' Kobus requested, pointing at a park a block away. 'Go.'

Drake didn't hesitate, on the ledge in an instant and launching himself off. He landed on the roof, the vehicle's windows blown out, a loud report of breaking glass created, the

roof bent in and crumpled. He steadied himself, jumped into the road, and ran towards the park.

Kobus had put an ear to the door when Drake had leapt, now hearing the muffled sounds of men shouting as they moved away. Grabbing the bags, he opened the door with the chain on, checking the corridor quickly before releasing the chain. He ran along the corridor, down the back stairs and out of the rear, one block over before circling around at a fast walk. Pausing, on a corner of the street that the hotel fronted, he could now see several men stood around a car, a man being dragged clear. Crossing over, he skirted around a block, and to the rear of the park. Stood there, scanning the trees and bushes, Drake dropped from above, startling Kobus.

‘Did I do well?’ Drake keenly enquired.

Kobus caught his breath. ‘You did. Are you hurt?’

‘No, I am not hurt,’ Drake said. ‘Thank you for enquiring as to my health.’

‘*Thank you for enquiring as to my health?*’ Kobus repeated as they walked off.

‘It is not correct?’

‘It’s correct, but you can use fewer words.’

They waited in a second park till dark, and reclaimed the BMW from where it had been left, fortunately a block away from the hotel and not in their own hotel’s car park. The damaged car had now been removed, two uniformed police officers positioned either side of the hotel’s entrance.

As they drove south, Kobus’s mobile went. ‘Yeah?’

‘It’s me,’ Riggs began. ‘Listen, your prints just went through the system in Sophia.’

‘They made me, again, and they have the cops in their pockets.’

‘Yeah, well your prints have you down as being dead for six years, and a Russian gangster at that.’

‘They will be confused.’

‘Where are you?’

‘Driving back towards Athens.’

‘Turn around.’

‘Turn around?’

‘We got some intel, and your dead friends are linked to something big, al Qaeda big.’

‘That lot, linked to al Qaeda?’

‘Trying to buy an advanced detonation system.’

‘To detonate what?’

‘Multiple devices, somehow,’ Riggs reported. ‘If you have any leads, no matter how small, follow them up. You have two days before the boys from above send in a team.’

‘Great.’ Kobus took a moment. ‘OK, leave it with me. Over and out.’ He cut the call.

‘You are concerned,’ Drake said as Kobus turned the car around.

‘The men you killed, their friends are trying to buy weapons still, and my people worry about it.’

‘We must find them?’

‘We must find them,’ Kobus agreed.

‘They have a place to sleep and to meet, above a club for ladies of the night.’

Kobus turned his head and stared at Drake as he relayed the information. ‘You read their minds,’ he realised. ‘You know where it is?’

‘The club has the name of wild fowl.’

‘Duck, swan?’

‘Something of that name.’

Kobus pulled up near a taxi rank and got out. Approaching a cab, he handed the driver a twenty Euro note through the open window. ‘I’m looking for a club, for ladies, name like a duck or a bird.’

‘Duck? You mean Ockotan?’ came back, heavily accented.

‘Yes, where is it?’

‘In centre, next to cinema.’

‘Thanks.’

Back in the BMW, Kobus said, ‘I know where it is. So later, you, young man, will have some money, and I’ll need you to lay down out of wedlock with many ladies.’

‘Yes?’ Drake asked with a huge grin.

‘Yes. Ask them questions, read their minds, and sit near men and read their minds. Drink beer.’

‘I shall work hard at this endeavour,’ Drake said with a straight face.

Kobus shot him a look, Drake avoiding eye contact.

As they drove, Drake pointed at a sign for the local district council, a coat of arms. ‘This shield on a pole, it is to say whose land this is?’

‘Shield on a ... pole?’ Kobus repeated. ‘Ah, the sign. No, it’s the local council.’ Drake waited. ‘A group of men who rule this area.’

‘The King’s men.’

‘No, there’s no king anymore.’

‘No king?’

Kobus took a moment as he gathered his thoughts. ‘Every four years, all the people decide who they want to be leader and king.’

Drake frowned heavily. ‘The people ... decide on who will be king? Serfs and peasants have a say in the running of the land?’

Kobus smiled. ‘They do, yes.’

‘And women?’

Kobus lifted his eyebrows and nodded.

‘And after each four years on the throne ... a new king is chosen?’ Drake puzzled.

Kobus nodded. ‘Yep.’

‘And does it not lead to chaos?’

‘That, my friend, is the subject of many newspaper inches and much debate.’

‘It would seem like the ebb and flow of the tide,’ Drake puzzled.

‘Er ... yep, pretty much. The next king undoes what the last king did, and we get nowhere. It’s called democracy.’

At 9pm, Drake entered the club, now dressed in his jeans and jumper, four hundred Euros in his pocket. The large doorman looked him over, getting back a pleasant smile. At the bar, Drake sat and looked a bit lost, a lady soon approaching, a few words exchanged in Bulgarian, a price fixed, money counted out slowly and handed over, being handed on to the barman.

Fifteen minutes later Drake returned, trying to hide a silly smile, the lady taking a seat again. He sat at the bar, close to four large men, his back to them. ‘A tankard of your finest ale, innkeeper.’ As an afterthought, Drake said, ‘Please.’

A small beer was placed down. ‘Seven Euros.’

Drake scanned the numbers on the notes, and then the few coins he carried. ‘Is there a seven Euro coin?’

‘What?’ the barman puzzled. ‘Give me the ten, I give you change.’

‘Ah.’ Drake handed over the ten Euro note, coins returned, and keenly examined. ‘These are nice and shiny,’ he commended. ‘Thank you indeed.’

The barman shot him a quizzical look.

As Drake sat drinking, the men behind him chatted quietly about many things. With his drink finished, a different lady thought she might try her luck, another price agreed. He headed off again, being curiously observed by the first hooker, an indignant look offered.

Fifteen minutes later he returned, alone, another beer ordered with a cheery smile. The hooker returned five minutes later, complaining ‘a long time cumming’ to the other girls.

Drake keenly resumed his task, that of reading the minds of the bored men sat around the bar. With his beer downed, Drake went to stand, but halted, a hand on his stomach. He burped



loud enough for everyone in the club to hear. ‘Sorry,’ he sheepishly offered.

‘Oh, fuck me,’ the barman complained, swiping a dishcloth around at the smell created. A punter moved away, and to another stool.

Tapping his chest with a fist, Drake approached a third girl, a price agreed, the rest of the girls in the room – as well as the men – now wondering about the insatiable stud in their midst, the young man now on his third girl.

Twenty minutes later he returned, again a silly smile fixed to his face, all of the men now watching him. He ordered another beer, the barman keeping his distance as he placed it down. With the beer downed, Drake felt unwell, and stood, holding his stomach. The pain grew, his features contorted, people noticing, everyone now focused on him.

Drake bent double, but forced himself upright, a huge belch issued, like a randy Walrus sounding his intentions. But in that same instant Drake passed wind, a full six seconds worth, a hand on the bar stool to steady himself.

Kobus was sat in the car with the window down, smoking and checking his watch, wondering if this had been a good idea; the kid had been gone almost an hour. He had a view of the club’s entrance, and now saw two men run out, both men dropping to their knees. He sat upright in the car and flicked out the cigarette, starting the engine.

As he observed, another three men staggered out, all appearing unwell, two of them vomiting on the pavement, a girl in a nightdress tumbling out, soon followed by two other hookers rushing out. A chair went through a window.

‘Shit,’ Kobus let out, pulling the car around and getting ready.

Drake walked calmly out, past the people kneeling on the pavement with a glance back at them, and through parked cars

towards Kobus. Sensing, and then seeing Kobus in the BMW, Drake jogged across to the car and got in.

‘I think I should avoid this establishment in future,’ Drake said as they drove off.

‘What the hell did you do?’ Kobus puzzled, staring at the broken windows as they passed the club.

‘I did as you asked, and I gained information as you asked.’

‘Did you start a fight? Let the demon out?’

‘No.’

‘Well?’ Kobus pressed after a moment’s silence.

‘I ... drank the beer, as you suggested, but ... it caused a great pain in my insides.’

‘Can you drink beer?’ Kobus puzzled. ‘Did you before?’

‘Yes, I drank mead and made merry, and ... also gave forth wind from ... below ... an unpleasant odour, but not like this.’

Kobus stopped at the lights, turned his head, and stared wide-eyed at Drake. ‘You just evacuated a nightclub ... because you farted?’

‘It was ... a most disagreeable odour.’ He glanced at Kobus from under his eyebrows. ‘Many people ... they fell to the ground, sick at the mouth, many asleep.’

Kobus stared back, his mouth opening. He pointed a finger at Drake’s face. ‘If you need to do that in this car, or near me, you fucking warn me first!’

‘I will endeavour to do so, yes.’

They drove off.

Kobus shook his head. ‘First you almost kill a hooker from a blowjob, now you destroy a club with a fart. Jesus, boy, you’re dangerous enough without the damn demon.’

‘I did learn of things,’ Drake offered.

‘I should hope so after all that.’

‘There is a man named Ramius, he will meet with a Cossack tomorrow at the coast, and buy something of value – but wanted by the magistrate – and sell to a Moor from the place you fought the war.’

‘Iraq?’

‘Yes.’

‘Shit...’

‘Is that information good?’

‘It’s very good - in that we know, not so good ... in that they probably plan on killing a great many people.’

‘If we stop them, and save many, then we can count that many at the ends of our lives.’

‘I should think so. But do me a favour: when you get to the Pearly Gates and stand before St. Peter, tell him about what just happened in that club – they love stiff like that in heaven. Don’t leave out *any detail*.’

An hour later, and booked into yet another two-star hotel, the phone went.

‘Yeah?’ Kobus answered.

‘You still in Sophia?’ Riggs asked.

‘Yes, boss, hard at it.’

‘Strange story on the wire, some nightclub hit with a chemical weapon.’

Kobus slid his gaze across to Drake. ‘Chemical ... weapon?’

‘Thirty people in hospital, firemen in respirators.’

‘Haven’t seen it on the news yet,’ Kobus said, Drake now looking away and pretending to concentrate on the TV. ‘But we got a lead. Guy name of Ramius, deal going down on the coast tomorrow with a Russian seller, and it sounds like the detonators. And get this, the buyer is Iraqi.’

‘Iraqi? Shit, they’ll be all over this in Langley. But I want some hard evidence before I rattle anyone’s cage.’

‘Run this Ramius fella through the computer, see what hardware he could get hold of, and get back to me.’

‘Are you heading down to the coast?’ Riggs asked.

‘At dawn, deal is for 4pm apparently.’

‘You need some back-up on this?’

‘No, I have my new partner in crime doing a good job.’

‘He’s panning out?’ Riggs asked.

‘Where’d you think we got the intel?’

‘You’re shitting me? And you trust this guy?’

‘Run the name, and see what you get. Over and out.’

Ten minutes later, Riggs was back on. ‘Kobus?’

‘Yeah?’

‘That’s the right name, and it’s flagged; I’ve already had a call from upon high. When I said he was selling to Iraqi’s you could hear the shouts from Langley without a phone.’

‘Does that mean I’ll get some company?’

‘I ... may have mentioned that we don’t know about the buy location.’

‘Meaning ... that you’d like me to get you something solid, solid enough to help your career along.’

‘Hey, you offered, so go make me proud. I’m looking forwards to that office.’

Lowering the phone, Kobus eased off the bed. ‘You did well.’

‘Yes?’ Drake keenly enquired with a boyish smile.

‘Yes, the name was correct. Anyway, did you get to *lay down out of wedlock* at the club.’

‘I did, three times.’

‘Three!’

‘Three, yes.’

Kobus sat opposite. ‘Us mere mortals couldn’t do it three times in an hour.’ He waited.

‘The ... demon assisted.’

‘And did the demon ... enjoy himself, by any chance?’

Drake lowered his head and nodded. ‘He did.’

‘There are many pleasures in this new world that don’t involve killing people and drinking their blood.’

‘It is indeed a wondrous place,’ Drake agreed.

‘You watch TV, and I’ll catch a few hours before we leave.’  
Kobus lay down. ‘And Drake, if you need to release some air,  
do it in the damn corridor.’

‘May I ask a question?’

‘Sure.’

‘The images on the magic box, they are not ... true images  
sometimes.’

‘They’re computer generated.’ Drake waited, Kobus  
explaining, ‘They’re magic, and not real.’

‘A drink cannot make someone fly.’

Kobus shook his head.

‘Great cities in the land of the Chinese are not attacked  
regularly by a giant creature that breathes fire.’

Kobus resisted a smile, and shook his head.

‘Animals have not been trained to speak.’

Smiling, Kobus shook his head.

‘Men still battle over Jerusalem, as they did in my time.’

Kobus stopped smiling. ‘Men still battle over Jerusalem,  
yes, and five hundred years from now they’ll still be battling  
over it.’

## Family trouble

An hour later, Drake turned Kobus onto his side, and returned to the TV. But as he sat there he slowly turned his head, moving it like a bird of prey focusing on a distant mouse. He stood and walked to the door, then shook it off. Sitting back down, he turned his head again, now to the window, the thick curtains drawn tight. Stood in front of the curtains, he closed his eyes and opened his mind.

Kobus woke with a jolt at the sound of breaking glass, the crack of a high-powered round just a fuzzy memory, not sure now of what he had heard. He sat up and let his legs down, seeing Drake on his back, a hole in his white t-shirt, a hint of blood. The demon slowly sat up, an arm raised, an accusing finger pointed at the curtains.

‘Two men, in a room, a long fire stick. They see clear in the dark.’

Kobus slammed his back to the wall. ‘A rifle with a thermal sight. Smart for locals.’

The demon pointed at the bedside table. ‘This ... magic to talk with the magistrate. They ... see it through the dark.’

‘They’re tracking my mobile,’ Kobus realised. ‘Shit...’

‘People gather below, the men leave.’

Kobus leapt over the bed, grabbed his jacket and their bags, and knocked the light off. 'Are you OK?' he whispered. 'Can you move?'

'I can walk, yes.'

'Anyone near?' Kobus asked as he opened the door.

'No,' the demon responded as he drew level.

Kobus opened the door, took a peek both ways, and ran down the corridor, away from the lift and stairs, the demon close behind. At the base of the stairs, Kobus turned to find Drake. 'You OK, buddy?'

'It was painful, a great jolt. But I am OK. These men, they came from the colonies of Rachel and Ross.'

Kobus halted and froze, taking a moment. 'They were Americans? Armed with a rifle fitted with a thermal sight?'

Drake nodded.

'We need to find *them* ... before they find *us*.'

'They move quickly to a carriage, some distance.'

Kobus took out his mobile phone, hesitated, and then pocketed it. 'If they're tracking me, then they can come and damn well find me.' He led Drake out of the rear of the hotel, checking the street carefully, and down the road to the car, the vehicle thoughtfully parked well away from their cheap hotel - and in the car park of a second cheap hotel.

Kobus halted ten yards away from the car, and pointed the key-fob towards the BMW, unlocking it. He waited a further two seconds. Running to it, he placed the bags on the rear seat, but stopped to check the wheel arches and the underside of the car.

Sat in the driver's seat, Kobus hesitated as he put the key in the ignition.

'You are uncertain of the carriage,' Drake noted.

'They may have put a bomb on it.' Kobus heaved a breath. 'Fuck it.' He started the car and revved it.

'A bomb? Gunpowder, like a cannon ball.'

'Yes,' Kobus confirmed as he drove off.

He headed straight out of Sophia and onto a highway, soon reaching a hundred miles an hour, the roads quiet at this hour. At the first service station he pulled in, and parked in a dark corner next to a cafe, just two patrons sat eating within.

‘They will find us ... because of the magic to talk with the magistrate,’ Drake stated.

‘Could you sense their approach, if we wait here?’

‘I can.’

Kobus eased back, folded his arms, and closed his eyes. After a moment, and with his eyes still closed, he said, ‘You did well back there, you saved me; that bullet was meant for me. Question is: why?’

‘The magistrate is not happy with you?’

Kobus opened his eyes. ‘The magistrate ... has many lords, and many men.’ After a moment, he lifted his mobile, and called Riggs.

‘Kobus?’

‘Yeah, got a problem. Two American gentlemen, with a high power rifle fitted with a thermal sight, just took a shot at me.’

‘What?’ Riggs rasped.

‘They’re tracking me via my phone, a number known to very few, old friend. Is there ... something you’re not telling me?’

‘They’re not Company,’ Riggs scoffed. ‘What the hell are you saying?’

‘I’m saying ... that the local cops probably can’t track a mobile, that they don’t have this fucking number, and they’d not use American mercenaries with thermal sights. Would you not agree, asshole?’

‘Well ... yeah, seems like a long shot. Are you hurt?’

‘No, they missed by an inch, the shot taken through windows with the curtains closed. Do me a favour, and see if there’s a team in the area – and if I’ve strayed into something I shouldn’t have.’



‘Meaning what?’

‘Meaning ... I have no idea, but maybe I’ve stepped on someone’s toes.’

‘Kobus, I sent you there - it’s in the system, my name as handler. If there was an issue ... they’d come talk to me, or just order you off. Shooting you would attract a lot of interest, questions asked, so let’s not write an airport novel over this.’

‘I’m going to have a chat with the nice gentlemen, and then ... maybe we’ll have some answers.’

‘Be real careful, and pull out as soon as you can.’

‘Are you ordering me off this case?’ Kobus pressed.

‘No, but ... I’d like to know who the fuck they were as well.’

‘Sleep with a pistol under your pillow, old friend.’

‘Always, buddy, always.’

Riggs dialled Langley.

‘14-10.’

‘It’s Riggs, Amsterdam. There’s been an incident in Sophia, Bulgaria. One of my team was just shot at by two Americans armed with a rifle fitted with a thermal sight, and he’s sure they’re tracking his mobile. I want a check made of the area.’

‘We’ll get right back to you if we find anything,’ 14-10 offered with a pleasant and affirmative tone. ‘Good night.’

The young man answering the phone turned to a second man sat in the same cubicle, a silver-haired man with a waxy stone complexion. The young man’s pleasant expression slipped. ‘They missed Kobus, sir, who somehow guessed about his mobile being tracked. But that’s not the most interesting aspect of the call.’ He paused for effect. ‘Kobus reported the shooters as being *two Americans*.’

The silver-haired man stared dispassionately back for a moment, before slowly adopting a frown. ‘How could he know? They fired from across a road, not seen, no evidence left.’

‘Mister Russell - sir, there’s only one way Kobus could have got himself out of that hotel *and* known the detail, and that’s if the two assets employed are lying, and working with Kobus and Riggs. They reported a clean kill, but the hotel reported no bodies to the police, no blood.’

‘No blood? A chest shot with a sniper rifle?’ Russell eased back, and turned his head to a wall calendar, a pleasant Canadian wilderness displayed. ‘Remove both assets, check their phone logs.’

Kobus lowered his phone, and held it, gently tapping the steering wheel with it.

Drake turned his head. ‘You suspect the magistrate wishes you dead.’

‘Not the magistrate, a ... family member with unwarranted designs on the throne.’

‘They take the king’s schilling, but work false deeds.’ Drake pointed across the car park, at a car approaching. ‘It is the two men from America-land. They seek us.’

They observed as the car in question slowed beyond the petrol pumps and finally halted, its lights turned off. No one got out of the car. A minute later the car drove slowly around to the opposite side of the cafe.

Kobus looked over his shoulder. ‘C’mon.’ Out of the car, he added, ‘I need them alive, but hurt, pistols removed.’ He led Drake on at a jog, around to the rear of the café, and into the dark. Checking the immediate area, he drew his pistol and ducked behind tall metal bins, no illumination coming from the rear of the cafe – just a god awful smell coming from the bins. He pointed to nearby bushes, ‘Hide there, jump on them when ready - if they come this way.’

‘They come this way,’ Drake confirmed as he dashed into the dark bushes.

Kobus checked his pistol and knelt, listening out for footsteps. Those footsteps soon came, barely discernible, the men moving cautiously.

‘Around the corner,’ came a whisper through the dark, an east coast American accent, soon followed by a thud and muffled groans.

‘Come forwards,’ someone whispered.

Kobus burst out, finding two men face down, both dazed, and it was the demon knelt over them. It lifted the hand-held scanner that the men had been using, his face adopting a green tinge. Kobus grabbed the first man, the demon lifting the second man without prompting, the duo soon dragging the would-be assassins through the dark and to the edge of a field, dumping them down on a patch of hard dry soil, the ground studded with the short remnants of a harvested crop.

Patting down the men, Kobus removed their pistols, throwing them away into the dark. Wallets were removed and pocketed. Turning one of the men over, Kobus slapped the man’s face a few times, before presenting the man’s outstretched arm to the demon. ‘Snack on his hand.’

A bite of sharp teeth into the flesh of the hand elicited a loud cry.

‘Who are you?’ Kobus asked. No answer came back. He turned his head to the demon. ‘Bite off a finger.’

As the flesh of the finger was torn away, a growl issued, the man screamed.

‘Who ... are you, and why are you trying to kill me?’ Kobus pressed, a knee on the man’s thigh preventing the man from moving.

Again, the man resisted.

‘Bite the thumb off,’ Kobus coldly ordered, not needing to prompt the demon, a loud cry released as the demon tore the flesh with his teeth, the thumb coming away.

‘Listen up, fella: I’m going to let him eat all of your fingers and toes, finally your cock. And then ... then I’ll let him keep going.’

The demon tore off another finger without prompting, causing a sharp cry.

‘The Company sent us,’ the man forced out in a strained whisper.

Kobus lifted his head, and stared across at a distant house with its lights on, taking a moment. ‘And would they, by any chance, have told you ... *why*?’

‘No,’ the man strained to get out.

‘Any other assets in the area?’

‘No,’ was cried out.

Kobus lowered his gaze to the dark outline of the man. ‘Are you on the books?’

‘No,’ came out as another finger went, a horrible crunching noise created.

‘Your handler?’

‘We get our orders ... from our boss, not The Company,’ the man cried out. ‘You know ... how it works, you bastard.’

Kobus stood. ‘Remove both thumbs of both men, but leave them alive. Quickly.’ He turned and headed back as growls and screams penetrated the dark night.

Drake joined Kobus in the car a minute later. He sat, and waited, facing a pensive Kobus.

Kobus lifted his phone and called Riggs. ‘You awake?’

‘Yeah, and I have a call in to find out what the hell’s going on.’

‘I caught up with the two shooters.’

‘You did?’ Riggs asked, clearly surprised. ‘Already? What happened?’

‘I made them talk. They’re a private firm, hired by the agency to track me and ... to kill me. I have their IDs.’

‘Jesus,’ Riggs let out. Now sounding angered, he said, ‘Give me a name.’

Kobus lifted a wallet, and read out a name and a drivers license number. When done, he hung up, tossing the wallets out of the car. Starting the car, he pulled forwards and halted, a final look at his mobile before he tossed it away. They pulled off, and got back onto the highway, heading east for the coast.

‘You feel for the magistrate ... like a son betrayed by his father,’ Drake noted, no energy in his voice.

‘Not a bad analogy,’ Kobus said with a sigh. ‘And now ... now we need to find the bad men and stop them, whilst looking over our shoulders for other bad men – those trying to stop us from stopping the first group of bad men.’

‘The more bad men we fight, the greater the tally,’ Drake enthused. ‘A difficult task ... is a worthy task.’

Kobus glanced at him as they drove, and forced a weak smile. ‘If you look at it that way, then yes – it probably is.’

They drove through the night, east, always east.

Russell stood at a window, peering through the blinds, his hands clasped behind his back. A man approached, heard but unseen.

‘Sir, the two assets we sent after Kobus, they were intercepted by Kobus himself and unknown others, mutilated, made to talk.’

Russell turned his head. ‘Mutilated?’

‘Fingers torn off.’

Russell turned back to window. ‘Unusual. Are they dead?’

‘No, they’re both alive, sir, and they’ve definitely identified Kobus as being responsible.’

‘He left them alive.’ Russell nodded gently. ‘A ... message to us?’

‘Sir, if Kobus mutilated the men, then they couldn’t have been working together as we believed.’

‘No, there’s someone else whispering in his ear, and not Riggs.’

‘Riggs doesn’t seem to be in the loop, sir.’

‘Have our people look for Kobus at the marina.’

‘Yes, sir.’

## The smell of sun tan lotion

At noon, Kobus and Drake reached the coast, Drake sat staring out of the window as normal, a curious study of anything and everything he noticed along the road.

Kobus idly enquired. 'Does the demon have a name?'

Drake turned, and took a moment. 'His name is Marcus, I heard it in his dreams.'

'His dreams?'

Drake nodded. 'He has few memories, but some. He was, once, a man.'

'I would have figured that. Do you know anything more about him?'

'Many images.'

'Of hell?'

'No, of his time here. He lived in a village near the sea, with a wife and daughters. I see little more than images.'

'After sleeping for a few hundred years, I would have thought that you would have dreamt of more.'

Drake took a moment. 'We ... dreamt of much, but not of places and people we had seen with our own eyes, we dreamt of strange images.'

'I guess dreams are abstract,' Kobus idly noted. 'Does he believe in heaven and hell?'

'No.'

‘No? He’s a fucking demon! How does he explain what he is to himself?’

‘He has no knowledge of heaven and hell, and serves no master. He ... knows only hunger and anger.’

‘Could he be keeping things from you?’ Kobus pressed.

‘He kept many things from me, for a great many years, but all became clear.’

‘Apart from where he came from - and how he became what he is. And you don’t know how he got inside you?’

Drake stared at the dashboard for several seconds. ‘I met a man on the road, an old man, Marcus. He killed me with a sword, and I awoke to know two minds.’

Kobus slowly blew out. ‘Well, it’s a long way from the vampire stories they tell here. Guess that it lost a lot in translation over the years, just like the bible.’ He turned his head. ‘Have you read the bible?’

‘The holy book was only to be read by the men of the cloth. I read the mind of one before ... before we killed him, and the words were laid down in Latin so that only those of the cloth could read them, a great secret.’

‘To stop the common man from drawing his own conclusions,’ Kobus noted, placing a cigarette on his lip. Mumbling a little, he continued, ‘It was deliberately mysterious – and they meant it to be so, and heavily edited to be hard to read, *and* they removed certain things. One Pope removed all favourable references to women.’

‘The men of the cloth, they did not believe in the book, and lay down with women for coin.’

Kobus lit up. ‘Sounds just like the men of the cloth from this time, except *they* like small boys. It is ... a job, not a calling.’ As an afterthought, he offered Drake a cigarette.

‘I have tasted the tobacco, with the men in the cave.’ He made a face. ‘I did not desire it.’

Kobus held up his lit cigarette. ‘Does it bother you if I smoke?’



‘No,’ Drake replied with a smile. ‘You are most considerate.’ Facing forwards, he added, ‘The fragrance is pleasant when first happened upon.’

Half an hour later they stopped for lunch at a service station, choosing to sit outside on wooden benches as the day warmed up, Drake happy with the strong summer sun on his skin. Kobus munched on a burger, a can of Sprite to wash it down, Drake chewing on gum.

‘I don’t feel that different,’ Kobus noted, staring out of focus.

‘Different?’

Kobus ran a hand across the wooden bench they sat at, someone’s initials carved into it. ‘Knowing that demons actually exist; I figured I would change more. I’m not sure what Marcus is, or where he came from, and that leaves a doubt. I had hoped to look God in the face and shout a little.’

Drake glanced across, taking his time to think through his response. ‘I had believed that God was punishing me for sinning, but ... a great many men do more sin, and yet have no demon. And here, in this place, my sins are not sins.’

Kobus swiped away a fly. ‘The demon took you because you happened along that road, not because you sinned,’ he commented before sinking his teeth into the burger.

‘You seek the water to be round when the bucket is removed.’

Kobus adopted a slight frown as he chewed. ‘What?’

‘Water in the bucket takes the shape of the bucket, but without the bucket the water takes a new shape. So they said in my time.’

Kobus considered the analogy, watching kids running around. ‘The water ... is defined by the object that holds it.’ He nodded. ‘We call it round because the bucket is round, and we label human nature as good and evil. Good and evil is only seen - and measured – in the context of people. No people, no evil.’ He focused on Drake. ‘They may have been right in your

time; we observe and measure something that's only there because we make it there – and chose to measure it. And some people make a career out of studying it.'

'They said – evil is as evil does.'

'The act is evil, not the person,' Kobus noted, making a face. 'And that act comes from within, from the primitive monster in us all, and without conscious thought. And if it's there in us all it's not evil - it's just part of nature and evolution. And religion – that's the battle between the inner self and the rules of the game.'

'Rules of the game?' Drake puzzled.

Kobus held his hands wide, a gesture at those people around them. 'This: society, democracy. It has rules, many rules in order to function, and most of those rules came from the Ten Commandments; don't kill, don't lie, don't steal - the basis of a civilised society. But does that society still need religion?' Kobus sipped his sprite.

'In my time, few knelt in church. The nobility and learn-ed men knelt in church, sometimes a gathering in a field for the poor of the village.' Drake stared across the car park. 'When the rich man died, many priests and many people walked behind the carriage. When a poor man died, he was buried quickly, a few short words from the priest.'

'Hypocrisy,' Kobus let out. 'Typical bloody church.'

'You knelt in church?'

Kobus took a moment. 'I grew up in Durban, South Africa, a beautiful place in the coast. We went to church twice a week, and I attended what they called Sunday School on a Sunday afternoon, Saturday sometimes, two evenings of the week. I was seven years old when my father moved to Britain, a difficult time at first. But I liked London, lots to see and do.'

'As a family we went to church till I was maybe twelve or thirteen, then just seemed to stop, only going for special occasions. In Britain, well – in most places, people only go to church to be married, for christenings, and funerals.'

‘I did not kneel in church often, because I did not have coin for the collection.’

Kobus slowly nodded to himself, thinking about many things.

Approaching the car, Drake said, ‘Shall I not study the control of the carriage?’

Kobus halted after unlocking the car. He took a moment, staring across the car’s roof at Drake. Making a face, he said, ‘Come around this side.’

Drake keenly came around, accepting the keys. Kobus jumped into the passenger seat, Drake placing the key in the ignition. ‘Letter N,’ he said, pointing at the automatic gear handle. ‘Turn of key.’ The engine started. ‘Letter D. Look forwards, foot down.’

The car shot forwards, Drake soon braking. Kobus had been forced back into his seat, and now lurched forwards, a steadying hand on the dashboard.

‘Easy,’ Kobus encouraged. ‘Small movements.’

Drake started again, a gentle press of the pedal, soon going around in a circle, around the car park’s limits.

Kobus pointed. ‘There, stop in that small space, between the lines.’

Drake manoeuvred as requested – not crossing his arms as he turned the wheel, easing to a halt before mounting a curb.

‘Not bad,’ Kobus offered. ‘Reverse into the space behind.’

‘Letter R for going backwards,’ Drake stated as he selected the right setting, looking over his shoulder as he manoeuvred back, braking after a gentle nudge of another car. ‘I shall master it,’ he insisted.

‘Not bad for a first time,’ Kobus said as he opened the door and stepped out. At Drake’s side he opened the driver’s door.

‘It was a very short lesson,’ Drake nudged as he emerged.

‘I have a job to do, and you can have lessons when we have the time.’

Back on the road, they made good time to Varna, driving to a point on the coast just north of Varna town. As they drove, Drake keenly studied the map he had been given, now tasked with navigation based on those place names he remembered, names given up in thought by the men in the club. Drake's navigation was not too bad considering that he had never visited the place – or ever seen a roadmap before, and they soon found an area that Drake believed to be the right place. Thirty minutes of driving around led to a hotel, Drake recognising the image of it – as well as its name. They pulled up opposite the hotel, the street sloping gently down towards the sea, many tourists now out and about on this hot day.

Kobus leant across Drake and peered up at the hotel. 'I could get a room, but I think they know what I look like. I have a fake passport, but I don't know if they have the name.'

'I can go inside,' Drake volunteered.

Kobus took a moment, studying the hotel. 'It looks like a tourist hotel, and too big to be a brothel or private club. We'll chance it. But you stay here; they know your face from that club.' Kobus made a face towards Drake. 'Those still conscious.'

He retrieved his bags from the back seat, and stepped across to the hotel. In a busy reception, he enquired in English about rooms. They had a single room, yes, a British passport shown, payment made for three days, full board. Kobus found the room on the fourth floor, and found it to be basic; painted concrete walls and bland water colours, bedding with cigarette burns.

With his bags dumped down, he walked down the back stairs to the ground floor, finding a side door wedged open. Through it he found the edge of the pool, screaming kids running around, adults sunning themselves. Walking around to the front of the hotel, he retrieved Drake, locking the car.

‘You mean to leave the carriage here,’ Drake noted as they walked back towards the hotel. ‘Something about a ... small smelly fish.’

Kobus smiled at the analogy. ‘Bait,’ he carefully mouthed. ‘If they have its license number, it’ll attract them to us.’

‘You desire the confrontation.’

‘I do,’ Kobus noted as they slipped in through the open side-door, and up the back stairs. In the room, he pointed Drake towards a seat. ‘Sit down, close your eyes, and see if you can sense anyone.’

Drake did as asked, Kobus lighting up before sitting on a bed, his back against the headboard. After five minutes, Drake said, ‘There are a great many minds here, and children. Nothing is clear.’

‘Well, keep at it,’ Kobus sighed. ‘Something may turn up.’

Drake stepped to the window, and peered down. When he struggled with the balcony door’s lock, Kobus opened it. They both stood on the balcony, the roar of kids splashing around the pool rising up to them.

‘There are many undressed people here,’ Drake noted.

‘It’s an acceptable custom to wear such small clothes for swimming, and sunning yourself.’

‘Should we ... not purchase such clothing?’ Drake asked, fixed on the ladies in bikinis.

Kobus hid a smile. ‘We’re on the clock, young man. C’mon, we’ll go for a walk, see if anyone takes an interest in us.’

At the base of the back stairs they passed two teenage girls in bikinis coming up, Drake smiling politely at them, and getting a coy smile back. At the edge of the area of mown grass Kobus hesitated, but then turned towards the pool, looking a bit odd in his dark suit. He led Drake around the edge of the noisy pool and to a poolside bar, cold drinks ordered. Grabbing a table, they sat in the shade, Drake focused on the boisterous kids splashing around the water.

‘Like the river at the height of summer,’ Drake noted. ‘When I was a boy, I liked to swim in the river, and to jump off a tall rock.’ A shapely woman in a bikini, walking past, caused him to turn his head and to follow her progress.

‘Drake, in this time, you shouldn’t watch women so obviously; they can be offended by it. Not to mention their husbands.’

Drake nodded. Pointing at a man, he said, ‘I have noticed the glass eyes worn by many.’ He waited.

‘Many people have bad eyesight, and the glass helps. Also, when the sun is bright, the dark glass helps. We’ll buy some today; it’ll help to disguise us. And then you can watch girls in bikinis *without* causing offence.’

‘Indeed yes.’ He sipped his drink, and studied the glass. ‘I like this taste.’

‘Sprite.’

‘Sprite,’ Drake repeated.

‘But if you drink a lot it’ll cause wind, like beer.’

‘I ... shall partake in moderation.’

‘Drink all you like, just stand away from me when you need to make wind.’

They sat studying the pool scene for twenty minutes, Drake not detecting anything before they decided to wander. Around the front of the hotel, Kobus bought cheap plastic sunglasses, placing a pair on Drake.

‘Comfortable?’

‘They do not cause pain.’ Drake lifted the sunglasses and took in the view with normal vision, lowered them, and lifted them again, puzzling the difference.

Kobus placed on his own sunglasses, and led Drake down the street towards the beach, the crowds thick.

On the promenade, Drake took in the scene. ‘So many people, and ... all with good thoughts.’

‘They’re on holiday with their families,’ Kobus explained. ‘Should hope they’re bloody happy.’

‘Two men are observing us, from ... Seattle?’ Drake said without turning.

‘Seattle?’

‘Yes, and one from ... Bos-o-ton.’

‘Boston. They armed?’

‘Pistols. And they know of ... a Beemer. What is a Beemer?’

Kobus led Drake along the promenade, a slow amble of a pace, the crowds thick and the day hot. ‘BMW is called a Beemer; the car.’

‘Beemer,’ Drake repeated. ‘Two other men are at the hotel, these men think of it.’

Noticing a girl in a bikini, a well-endowed young lady, Drake came to a dead stop.

Noticing, Kobus halted. ‘You like big boobs as well, eh.’

‘I must admit to be most aroused by this display.’

Without smiling, his thoughts on the men behind him, Kobus said, ‘That’s OK, you’re supposed to be.’

Noticing a small park, they ducked into it, quickening their pace, soon edging around a large dried bush that looked like it needed a little water, or any water, and out of a side gate at the jog, ducking into a cafe.

Kobus walked quickly through the café and towards the toilets, past the toilets with a glance back, and out into the garden, stepping through an open gate to a lane. He ran to the left, down the lane with Drake close behind, and turned right at the end, as if to double back towards the promenade. He found a narrow street, cars packed with two wheels on the pavement, overhanging trees offering plenty of shade, and no one about.

‘Do you sense them?’ Kobus asked Drake, some urgency in his voice.

Drake lifted an arm, towards the street of the cafe. ‘They come around this way, and will turn to this road.’

‘Find a tree, monkey boy, and jump on them. I’ll be at the end of this street and distracting them.’

They exchanged nods and turned separate ways. ‘Back on the clock,’ Drake said as he stepped away.

Little more than twenty seconds later, the two pursuing men walked around the corner in light coloured suits, noticing Kobus sixty yards down the street, a hand on a car door. As Kobus noticed the men – he had been waiting by the car deliberately, he walked slowly off, and back towards the beach, halting behind a camper van. The junk in the back of the camper camp van offered him a partial view of the two men as they walked down the narrow street, the men’s images alternating between being brightly lit in the sun, or darkened by shade of a tree.

A blur, and Drake fell on the men. Kobus ran to the opposite side of the road, seeing now the two men on the pavement, Drake twisting a head like it wasn’t even attached to a body. When done, Drake ran along the street, alternating between light and dark as he progressed. He handed over a wallet as he drew level.

‘Michael and Tom, they were known as.’ He fell into step with Kobus, both men glancing back before they left the street, stepping into a short and narrow alley joining the rear of the promenade. ‘They felt much anger towards you, for what I did to the other men.’

‘Anger ... makes professionals sloppy,’ Kobus commented as they joined the crowds, opening the wallet and scanning it. He kept the driver’s license and the cash, but casually tossed the wallet into a bin. Pointing Drake towards a bustling beachfront cafe, they stepped casually inside and claimed a vacant table. A girl came over, collecting old glasses and wiping down the table top.

‘Sprite. Two,’ Kobus ordered, the girl withdrawing. After a moment of observing the beach, and its oiled-up sunbathers, he idly enquired. ‘Both dead?’



‘Both dead. And I sensed that they moved with some urgency, something important after dark – that they wished you not know of.’ He pointed. ‘Here.’

Kobus looked over his shoulder, at a rock breakwater jutting out into the sea, the masts of yachts beyond. ‘The marina?’

‘Men will meet on a boat, commerce to be had.’

‘That’s ... disappointing.’

‘You are concerned about something,’ Drake said as the two drinks were brought over and placed down. Drake struggled with the twist top, but got it eventually.

Kobus took off his sunglasses, and attempted to peel a very small sticker off the glasses. ‘The commerce ... is something that should be stopped, but it won’t be stopped, it will be ... observed, and allowed to go ahead.’ He placed his sunglasses back on.

‘I do not understand the magistrate in this matter.’

‘They ... wish to wait for a time when greater commerce is transacted, to ... catch a larger fish, and receive greater reward.’

‘I believe I understand,’ Drake offered before sipping his drink, an eye on the bikini-clad girls at the next table. ‘Is it common for a lady to have the painted skin of a deck hand?’

‘Deck hand?’ Kobus repeated, a glance at the girls. ‘Ah. Tattoos, we call them, and I guess in your time it was just sailors that had them. And yes, it is common these days.’

Leaving the cafe, Kobus approached a payphone, counting out his coins, Drake helpfully handing over Euro coins. Drake keenly observed as Kobus placed the coins into the slot, a finger pointed at the digital tally, a long number entered.

To a background of screaming kids, as well as traffic, Kobus said, ‘That you, Riggs?’

‘Yeah, where are you?’

‘Varna.’ He put a hand over his ear.

‘Listen, I got a blank wall about any other operations in your area. That may be true, or it may be a blank wall. And I just got a report from the Bulgarian police: two Americans

hospitalised after their fingers had been ripped off. Was that you?’

‘I needed answers.’

‘Was a time when you got answers quietly; I’m surprised at you, Kobus.’

‘They came to kill me, so forgive my lack of charity,’ Kobus snarled down the phone. ‘And I just dispatched another two in the street.’

‘Jesus.’

Kobus raised the drivers license, and read the detail.

Riggs reported, ‘The other two, they’re reported as working in the Kurdish north of Iraq, so the computer’s been altered.’

‘As it will have been with this pair, but I got a few sentences out of them. They’re here to stop me from interfering in the deal; they want it to go ahead.’

‘Someone a few pay grades higher than me is taking a risk here.’

‘You have friends above, so go chat.’

‘They might just want to catch the buyers later, but that doesn’t explain their interest in you; one word to me and you’d be pulled back. And no fucking word!’

Kobus took in the small colourful business cards of hookers, wedged into the edge of the plastic display of national dialling codes. ‘It’s your call, boss.’

‘They’re operating outside the rules, and the computer says they’re not even in that country. So fuck ‘em. If I expose this I’ll get some bonus points.’

‘Or you’ll get us both killed.’

Riggs took a moment. ‘You ... they’re already after, but I’d hope that their interest stops at the border. And as for me, what do I do? Pretend this never fucking happened? They tried to kill one of my team on a sanctioned operation. They ... are in the wrong here.’

‘You hold on to that thought, it might be your last one.’

Riggs sighed loudly. ‘What’ll you do next?’

‘I have a lead on the meeting, so I’ll ... observe the meeting, make notes with my neat handwriting, and send you a report – like I’m paid to do.’

‘I’ve seen your handwriting buddy; thank God for email reports!’

Kobus couldn’t resist the smile. ‘I’ll let you know what happens. Over and out.’

Hanging up, and joining Drake at the promenade wall, sirens could now be heard.

Drake turned. ‘They know of the dead men.’

Kobus slowly nodded to himself, staring across at the inviting ocean. ‘C’mon, we have a few men to ... chat to.’

They ambled slowly through the crowds, crossed the road behind the promenade, and returned to the street of their hotel, walking slowly past the hotel on the opposite side of the road. Drake sensed no one near the car. At the top of the road they crossed over, slowly walking back down, ducking into the side entrance of their hotel, and to the door wedged open by the pool.

Climbing the stairs, Drake halted on the third floor. ‘They have a room here.’ He pointed.

They exited the stairwell on that floor, and stood staring down the darkened corridor, dark compared to the bright sunlight outside. Drake pointed to a room facing the street.

‘Kick the door in, close it, and then ... throw both the fuckers down onto the street from the balcony. Check the corridor before leaving, and before entering the room.’

Drake stepped purposefully forwards, Kobus climbing the stairs again. At the room in question, Drake halted for several seconds. Checking the corridor both ways, he knocked on the door. When it clicked open he shoved it, knocking the first man right across the room, Drake moving inside quickly and closing the door. A second man emerged from the bathroom, lunging towards the beds, where the men’s holsters were laid out. Drake got there first.

Kobus had walked to his room, but then backtracked to the stairwell, a dust-covered sliding window opening to the street below. Thirty seconds later, a naked body flew out and down, impacting the road. It didn't bounce or roll, Kobus noted, it just seemed to crumple and stay flat, a horrible noise created by the impact. Screams rose up, people rushing towards it, a yellow taxi slowing down.

The second body, also naked, didn't fly into the road, but landed on a dilapidated fence, skewered through the abdomen and punctured. Screams now filled the air, people rushing about below. A couple coming down the stairs behind Kobus could hear the screams from the open window. Kobus turned, a hand to his mouth, pretending to be sickened, and pointed towards the window. Curious, the middle-aged couple peered out, soon sickened themselves, but Kobus now had his reliable witnesses.

Entering his room, he left the door ajar, and took his jacket off, throwing it over the back of a chair. Removing his holster, he placed it above a ceiling tile, and checked the room, finally checking his pockets and the bags as Drake stepped in.

'Naked?' Kobus asked, lifting his head to Drake.

'You thought it when you asked me.' Drake waited.

'No big deal, it'll give the Company something to think about. But the police will want to talk to everyone, and you have no identification, my lad.' He glanced at the window. 'Still, be getting dark in an hour or two. If the police arrive before then, hop over to another balcony.'

Drake turned the TV on, and sat, fumbling with the remote.

Bob Russell took a call.

'Is it convenient, sir?'

'Go ahead.'

'All four assets in Varna have been killed, sir. Two suffered broken necks in the street, weapons and ID found on them, and

two ... two were stripped naked and thrown from a hotel balcony down onto the street, weapons and ID left in the room. Local police are all over it.'

'Thrown ... naked, from a hotel balcony,' Russell repeated. 'Jesus. Any sign of Kobus?'

'Not confirmed, sir, no one in the marina saw him, but they found his hire car at the hotel in question.'

'And the current mission reports for Kobus?'

'Working alone, following a lead on gun runners from the Ukraine.'

'He didn't get the better of four men working alone.'

'No, sir, but the agency has no one else in the area.'

'Computer records can be altered.'

'Do we increment, sir?'

'No, we'll wait and see what happens with the meeting. If someone wants it stepped on, let them reveal themselves.'

## Commerce

The local police did the rounds in the hotel, but did not bother to go room to room. As with the first two freelancers, the police were focused on the weapons, awkward questions asked of the US Ambassador in Sophia, who asked a few awkward questions of his own through the State Department.

At 7pm, and with the sun just below the horizon, Kobus led Drake out the back way, the hotel's food not sampled, the bustling restaurant ignored in favour of a lamb kebab on the street. Kobus stood eating as Drake examined postcards of nude girls, a carousel on display outside a tacky tourist shop.

When ready, Kobus led Drake down to the marina, a tissue grabbed from a restaurant's pavement table and used to wipe down sticky lips and cheeks. The marina offered a gate, fixed open, a bored-looking young guard sat nearby. Sat next to the guard was a ginger cat awaiting some scraps, and the cat looked like it might offer more of a diligent screening of people entering the marina than the guard. Still, Kobus and Drake walked past the marina entrance and to the first cafe on the promenade, the first of the resort's tourists now sat eating their evening meal. Kobus took a table overlooking the marina, he and Drake now studying the layout.

'Do these small boats ply their trade across the ocean?'  
Drake puzzled.

‘No, they’re for pleasure.’

‘Pleasure?’

‘People enjoy being on the boats, sailing out in the sun, and the ... skilful application of the sails to master the wind. A challenge.’

‘Ah.’

‘I’ll sit here and go through the motions, you go for a stroll to the beach, up over the rocks, and wander around the boats slowly.’

Drake slipped out of the restaurant as Kobus ordered food and a beer. Drake could be seen below the cafe, his white t-shirt standing out as he ambled along the beach in the dying light, picking up things and examining them, soon scrambling over the breakwater and down the other side, still in sight as he walked along to where locals fished with battery torches and paraffin lanterns.

Having reached the end of the walkway, Drake turned about, still just about visible in the bright illumination coming from the promenade, a promenade now full of people just out walking, or looking for a little inspiration as to where to settle and eat their evening meal. Kobus detected a few Russian words, but noted very little English spoken in the streets here.

Kobus was halfway through his starters, and halfway through his first beer, when Drake appeared and sat.

Drake glanced at those sitting nearby, and eased forwards. Softly, he reported, ‘I have discovered the commerce. Three men await the arrival of others at a time not yet hence, many coin and dollar to be handed over, the object to be handed to another boat after the turn of midnight.’

‘Good work.’ Kobus sipped his beer as he studied the outline of the marina, that which he could see from this angle. He adopted a curious frown. ‘Can you swim?’

‘Yes, I can swim well,’ Drake keenly offered.

‘Can Marcus swim?’

Drake nodded.

Kobus eased back, thinking.

‘You are uncertain as to a course of action.’

‘Because *they* – whoever *they* may be - might be right; it might be best to see where the object goes. But ... but I still don’t know why they tried to kill me, and that alters the plan.’

‘This ... object?’ Drake whispered, glancing around.

‘Would allow many cannon balls to explode at once, much damage done. It’s of interest, but not of very great interest, and that’s what has me worried.’ He made a face, a peeved expression adopted. ‘That and their desire to kill me.’

‘The men in the boat know nothing of you.’

‘No?’ Kobus queried, Drake shaking his head. He stared towards the dark form of The Black Sea for a moment, noticing a few sailboats with their lights on, before sipping his beer. Without facing Drake, he commented, ‘The false magistrate wants this to go ahead, and for me to be killed. But they could make it go ahead *with* my assistance.’

‘They wish you dead for another reason?’

Kobus nodded slowly, thinking.

‘What have you done to be so worthy of such a warrant of death to be issued?’

‘Done? Nothing. Seen or heard ... hard to say. My last few jobs in Athens were ... nothing special.’

‘Then you must have *seen or heard* something at an earlier time.’

Kobus sighed. ‘That’s nine years of work.’

An hour later, Drake turned his head. ‘A boat approaches, the men in it are ... most anxious.’

Kobus eased up, leaving payment on the table, and led Drake out, down to the sand and across to the breakwater, soon hopping from one foot to the next across large boulders. On the far side, they dropped down to the poorly lit concrete walkway, scaring feral cats, and towards a central pontoon.



‘Not sure how to play this,’ Kobus admitted. ‘I might just make it worse.’

‘You seek answers. Maybe the men have answers.’

‘The men are ... simply doing what they’ve planned; a commerce. It’s the reason that they want me dead, *and* the link to the commerce, that puzzles me.’

‘Do they wish you dead because of this commerce, or simply wish you dead?’

Kobus came to a halt, and faced the dim outline of Drake. ‘The two could be unrelated, just bad timing.’ He faced the boats lined up against the pontoons, ropes tapping against masts in the gentle breeze. ‘If that’s true, then it’s my job to stop the commerce; I’ve not been ordered otherwise. And after ... after I need to figure out why they want me dead. Good thinking, Drake, you might be correct.’

Drake was pleased, his silly grin visible even in this dim light. They walked on, the wooden slats beneath their feet creaking as they progressed. At the end of a darkened pontoon, Drake pointed at a yacht across the way, now manoeuvring with its engine into a vacant space. ‘They are Cossacks.’

‘Russians,’ Kobus correct him.

‘A man watches them from another boat, a man from this place.’

‘Does he watch us?’

‘No.’

‘Then first things first. Lead on.’

Drake walked at a fast pace, the wooden pontoon moving a little in the gentle swell, the men’s current movements not very stealthy. Still, they looked like tourists out for a stroll. They again stepped onto the main concrete jetty, following the edge of the pontoons for fifty yards before walking down a parallel pontoon to the previous, passing a few people sat on their boats and enjoying life on the ocean wave on this pleasant evening.

Before Kobus had a chance to say or do anything, Drake had leapt onto a boat and disappeared into its galley. Kobus

glanced over his shoulder, taking in those boats with their lights on, noting the smell of cooking on the breeze and music coming from two directions. No one seemed to have noticed Drake's movement, and none were now reacting to it. He approached the boat in question, all quiet below, and stepped across, a hand on his pistol, drawing it as he ducked into the galley.

In the darkened interior he levelled the pistol, seeing Drake's white t-shirt, Drake now bent over a dark figure.

'He lives,' Drake stated.

Kobus clicked on his lighter, finding a torch on the wooden galley table. He turned it on, and examined the semi-conscious man, a middle-aged man of dark hair and tanned skin, a pot belly, and looking like a local Bulgarian. Reaching around behind the man, he lifted out a wallet, finding a mobile phone in a pocket as the man groaned.

Kobus punched a number into the mobile, his face adopting a blue tinge as he did so. 'Riggs?'

'Yeah?'

'Trace this number back, it belongs to a Bulgarian watching the deal going down.' Kobus spelt out the name.

'It is going ahead then?'

'As we speak, or soon. Russians just arrived by boat.'

'Good work. And you spotted them ... how?'

'Long story, and I'll explain it at some point. Check out our friend here, and his associations.' Kobus paused. 'What are my orders, regarding the deal?'

'Find out what you can, and stop it. Why?'

'I just wanted to hear you say the words, because I suspect that someone wants the deal to go ahead, maybe to catch them later on when the bombs are assembled. That would make for better coverage on CNN than the discovery of a few detonators.'

'You're a cynic, you know that.'

‘People keep shooting at me, otherwise I’d be as well balanced as you,’ Kobus toyed.

‘I’ll run this number, and the name. What about the deal?’

‘Be happening real soon.’

‘I’ll be sat by the phone ready.’

Kobus hung up, and pocketed the phone, closing in on the watcher. ‘Did you sense anything from him?’

‘When he was filled with fear he believed me to be an America man, sent by a Jo-hans-son.’

‘Johansson,’ Kobus corrected. ‘And that name sounds familiar.’ Hunting around the galley, Kobus found the fridge, and pulled out a plastic bag full of ice. Tearing the bag, he emptied the ice cubes over the watcher, dumping most of them down the front of the man’s t-shirt. The man stirred, eyes slowly opening. The man’s hand instinctively came to his head, where he had been hit.

‘You speak English?’ Kobus asked.

‘He does,’ Drake put in.

Kobus waited. ‘Talk, or you go for a swim, a long swim.’

The man looked up at Drake, finding a pleasant-faced young man. Kobus pulled out his pistol, and rudely tapped the man on the forehead with it.

‘What do you want, I have nothing here,’ the man said in a thick accent.

‘We’re not interested in what you have, we’re interested in what you know about the detonators, over on the Russian boat. And no, Johansson didn’t send us.’

‘Who ... who are you?’ the man asked, puzzling his assailants identity, and now fidgeting as he tried to remove ice cubes from inside his shirt.

‘CIA.’

‘I work for Johansson,’ the man protested, pulling out his t-shirt so that the ice cubes fell to the galley’s wooden flooring.

Kobus considered his answer. 'Johansson is under investigation for ... illegal operations. We're here to kill anyone involved.'

'I just take money and instruction,' the man protested, his wet hands spread wide. 'I know nothing else!'

'What *are* your instructions?'

'Watch the boat when it come, say when it come and they go, only this.'

'And men in the town?'

'I don't know of men in the town, I came to the boat early and hide because four American men – they was killed.'

Kobus lifted his head to Drake.

'He tells the truth, he hides nothing.'

Kobus straightened as best he could in the low-ceiling galley. 'Drake, put a hand on his mouth, and show him your other side.'

A growl preceded a muffled scream, the man's eyes wild with terror.

'Let him go.'

Drake pushed the man along the galley.

Kobus grabbed the man by the arm. 'Go home, my friend; say nothing, do nothing.'

The man hurried out, scrambling over the back of the boat and stumbling many times.

Kobus faced Drake. 'Does he intend to report this?'

'No. One more on the tally?'

Kobus smiled in the dim light from the torch. 'One more on the tally,' he agreed.

'And the Cossacks?'

Kobus sat on a bunk. 'Do you sense them?'

'Yes, they sit and wait with fear, for men to bring much gold coin.'

'Then they have the detonators.' Kobus slowly blew out. Shaking his head, he said, 'I have a terrible feeling that I'm not

doing the right thing here, but I can't pin it down.' He rubbed his forehead. 'Can you swim far underwater?'

'To the other boat? Yes?'

'Take off your clothes here, go quietly into the water to the other boat, and punch a hole into the bottom. Could you ... punch a hole through?'

'I believe so.'

'Come straight back. No, no when the boat starts to take on water they'll not want the detonators on them, they'll panic. Go aboard the boat if you get the chance, and take the object of great value.'

'I will do so,' Drake keenly stated as he started to strip off, soon a ghostly stick of white flesh leaving the galley, a gentle plop into the water.

Kobus lit a cigarette. 'Man from Atlantis, eat your fucking heart out.' Exhaling, he frowned to himself in the dark. 'Man from Atlantis was Bobby in Dallas.' He shook his head. 'Should have definitely started Drake off with Dallas.'

Aboard the other yacht, six men sat nervously waiting, the lights out, many eyes now focused on the darkened pontoon, a large holdall sat on the galley table.

A loud crack caused them all to jump, and to exchange looks. A second loud crack, and rushing water could be heard.

'Have we hit something?' a voice asked through the dark.

'We're stationary, idiot!' came back.

Men crouched down and listened, ears against the hull as the roar of water increased.

'We're taking on water,' someone suggested, an instant before a thin metal pole came through the the fibreglass hull, impaling a man through the chest. Shouts and screams went up as the pole was withdrawn, the body slumping, a spout of water shooting across the galley floor. The pole came in again, through a bunk and straight through a man's thigh, a scream issued by the man as others tried to help him.

Four loud taps followed, the yacht now at an angle as men scrambled about in the dark trying to help each other. The pole sliced up through the hull, a cracking sound issued just prior to a man being skewered from beneath, through the jaw, the pole exiting the top of his head. With the pole extracted the body slumped. The final three men fled, the holdall left. As they ran along the pontoon, being observed by Kobus in the distance, the white fish that was Drake slithered aboard the stricken yacht, the holdall retrieved and dragged under the water.

Kobus stood at the wheel, and listened intently for any signs of Drake, the boat gently rocking at its mooring. A wet holdall landing on deck was the first sign, a hand offered to Drake's white form as he clambered over the side, nudged straight into the galley.

Kobus handed him a towel. 'Dry yourself, you'll catch your death.'

'This was a saying from my time, but I do not believe I will perish from the chill of the water – which was most pleasant.'

Kobus opened the holdall, water gushing out onto the galley table, and unwrapped a heavy tangle of wire, finding dozens of stainless steel tubes the size of AA batteries, all connected by thick green wires.

'What is it?' Drake asked as he dressed.

'Detonators by the look of them, but ... very specialised.' Kobus followed the wires back to a hub, on it writing in Russian, a few of the words recognised. He found three hubs, each of which was connected by a thicker wire to a master control, a black plastic box the size of a house brick.

Once dressed, Drake sat and keenly observed Kobus in the dull torch light.

Kobus explained, 'Each of these silver fingers makes fire, and they're all connected together, so they make fire at the exact same time. But ... but these are fixed cables, two or three metres long, not radio controlled. This ... would set-off bombs

that are very close to each other.’ With a heavy frown, he carefully unscrewed a detonator, and examined the workings.

‘You are greatly troubled,’ Drake noted.

‘This ... is a very odd detonator; it’s more like a firework. It would shoot out many sparks, and in here are what looks like magnesium and phosphorous pellets.’

He eased back. ‘Central hub, nine feet, three smaller hubs, six feet and six detonators.’ He unravelled the wires. ‘They’re in a daisy chain, not parallel.’ He stared down at the assembly, his eyes widening. ‘Oh shit.’

‘What troubles you?’ Drake asked, sounding concerned.

‘I’ve seen this before, and now I know why they want me dead.’ He closed his eyes and sighed loudly. Opening his eyes, he faced Drake squarely. ‘We’re in trouble, buddy, big trouble; they’ll stop at nothing to keep me quiet about this.’

Night turned to day, a brilliant flash, the outside world suddenly in daylight. The blast rocked the boat, a mini tsunami created, Drake and Kobus hanging on as their boat bobbed up and down, startled looks exchanged.

‘Did you start a fire over there?’ Kobus shouted.

‘No.’

‘Then that was a bomb, a big bomb. Quick, tear up these wires, smash these plastic boxes.’

Drake got to work with fervour, all wires torn, boxes smashed.

‘Drop it over the side. Quick, we need to go.’

Drake dropped the bundle of wires into the sea as Kobus clambered up onto the pontoon, Kobus soon staring across at a huge cloud of grey smoke, illuminated from within by an unseen fire. They joined others running along the pontoon, acrid smoke filling their lungs, soon out of the marina and onto the promenade as sirens registered.

Back in the hotel room, Kobus stopped and lit up, sitting on the bed with his back against the headboard, his legs stretched out.

‘We did well, no?’ Drake asked from across the room, turning on the TV.

‘We did well,’ Kobus confirmed without looking up, no energy in his voice. ‘Too well.’

‘You are greatly troubled by what you learnt.’

Kobus nodded before rubbing the bridge of his nose. Drake focused on his sponsor, but Kobus made no comment, Kobus slowly working down the cigarette as he thought about many things, not least the implications of the detonator, a detonator with only one purpose.

After a second cigarette, Kobus grabbed the watcher’s mobile, and dialled Riggs.

‘Kobus?’

‘Yes.’

‘Well?’ Riggs asked after a moment.

‘I ... intercepted the sellers, and got hold of the detonators.’

‘You know, buddy, you’ve done better in the past few days than I’ve ever seen you do. I thought you were good before, but this is fucking incredible buddy.’

‘Not as incredible as what comes next.’

‘Meaning?’

‘The detonator only has one purpose, and I know what that purpose is; I worked on it with the British Army.’

‘With the British Army? What, in Iraq?’

‘I need you to do something, no arguments; this is serious now.’

‘And when was it not; they’ve been trying to kill you!’

‘There’s more at stake now, a great deal more. I need you to contact Deputy Director Mason, and give him the following message as coming from me, and this number.’

‘Deputy Director? What the fuck’s going on, Kobus?’

‘There was a project I worked on that you’re not supposed to know about.’

There was a pause at Riggs end. ‘Oh.’

‘If you push it, you’ll be censured for sure.’



There came another pause. ‘What’s the message?’

‘Tell Mason from me that the Pop-Dragon is out the box.’

‘Pop-Dragon. And I’m not supposed to know what it is.’

‘There are twelve people who know what it is, I’m one of them. Just send him the message, and give him this number, or I’ll have no choice but to go around you.’

Riggs took a moment. ‘I’ll send the message.’

‘Be difficult and insistent, just in case your message is ... blocked.’

‘Sounds like this *is* getting out of control,’ Riggs solemnly noted.

‘We’re way beyond that, boss. Make the call.’ Kobus hung up, and grabbed a fresh cigarette.

‘You are not confident of our fight,’ Drake noted, now sat watching a cartoon.

‘It soon won’t be our fight.’

‘We will fight shoulder to shoulder with others?’

‘We’ll ... pass the fight on to others, yes.’

Drake seemed deflated. ‘And who will we fight?’

‘We’ll fight small fights, and you ... you can learn to drive.’

Drake turned his head, smiling. ‘Yes?’

Kobus forced a weak smile. ‘Yes.’

When the phone went, it was Riggs. ‘Kobus, there’s something on the wire, a blast at that marina in Varna, a big fucking blast.’

‘*Someone* ... was covering their tracks. And no, it wasn’t me.’ He hung up.

## The hand of God

Ten minutes after speaking with Riggs, the mobile trilled, Kobus raising it. 'Number unknown,' it displayed. Kobus hit the green button. 'Yes?'

'Kobus?'

'Yes, that Mason?'

'I got your message, which came as a shock, because I've just finished reading a report on the subject matter.'

'Sir, I need to verify that *you* are actually *you*. Who was the principal who designed the bomb?'

'Kamil, Dr Kamil, a Kurd of all people.'

'OK, you know the detail.'

'And what detail do you know?' Mason pressed.

'I was working on a job in Athens, which led to Bulgaria, to Sophia –'

'The body count has opened an investigation, a second investigation as to why the computer says that the dead men are in Iraq as we speak. Have you ... lost perspective, Kobus?'

'They came for me, I reacted. They kept coming, I fought back; it was no more complicated than that.'

'You'll sit before a review board soon enough to explain that.'

'Fine.'

'So why the message?'

‘I followed a few leads to a marina in Varna, Bulgaria, and relieved a few Russian gentlemen of a holdall with what I was led to believe were detonators of some description. Inside, I found a master synchroniser, nine feet of thick cable to three hubs, breaking to six feet of cable and to specialised detonators full of phosphorous. The rig was designed to detonate at high temperature, and at eighteen points simultaneously.’

‘My God...’

‘You can see why I sent the message. That rig was familiar.’

‘And it only has one use,’ Mason agreed. ‘Kamil is missing, so are his chemicals.’

‘With all due respect, sir, might I ask why someone with a desk close to yours is trying to kill me?’

There came a long pause. ‘That matter is subject to a high level investigation.’

‘Will it draw a conclusion *after* I’m in the ground?’

‘So far, Kobus, it looks like you can handle yourself, a few people around here mentioning your name.’

‘I’ll be happy to take less notoriety and a dull assignment, sir.’

‘Seems like that train has left the station.’

‘Do you have any instructions for me?’

‘Keep investigating, any and all leads, and send it all through regular channels.’

‘Will do, sir.’

‘We’ll talk again soon.’ Mason hung up.

‘Good news?’ Drake enquired, looking hopeful.

‘No, he wants me dead,’ Kobus said as he stood, walking to the window. He closed a crack in the curtains.

‘This man ... is the magistrate?’ Drake puzzled.

Kobus slowly nodded, appearing drained. ‘He’s the second in command to the magistrate.’ He heaved a breath. ‘Given what’s happened, and what I told him, he should have ordered me back to debrief, others to take over. I’m ... someone they

use for small jobs, not important jobs. When he asked me to stay with this *most important* of jobs, I knew he was lying.'

'Why does he wish you to continue, if you are not the tradesman for the job?'

'So that *he knows* what *I know* and, more importantly, that he knows where I am.' Kobus closed his eyes, and rubbed the bridge of his nose. 'We'll leave in ten minutes.'

Opening his eyes, Kobus stared down at Drake, as Drake offered a curious expression back. Kobus finally said, 'If the bomb goes off, a million people will die.'

'How many is that?'

'More people than there are blades of grass in a meadow.'

Drake lowered his head as he considered the idea. 'That is a great many people, a great tally if we save them.'

Kobus took a moment, staring down. 'Drake, there's only one thing that stands between those people ... and their deaths, and that's you.'

Drake puzzled that. 'Me?'

'You, and Marcus, are the only ones that can stop this. And I found you ... found you in a cave after you'd been there for hundreds of years. After all those years ... you were found *now*, this week, when this happens. And me, I'm one of a few people who knew about the bomb and what it does, one of a grand total of ... just the one CIA freelancer on this planet who could recognise that device.'

'It seems as if many things are in alignment,' Drake stated with a heavy frown.

'The reason they tried to kill me a few days ago, was because I could recognise the detonator. The Russians, they probably have no idea what it does, they just made it to spec.'

Kobus sat on the end of the bed, thinking. Staring at the carpet, he began, 'When I was in the cave, and I heard you tapping, I almost left. Not because I was afraid of you or a ... ghost or something, but because I was afraid to being right, right about something beyond this life.'

He rubbed his forehead. ‘The day I found you, I spoke to a priest, and he suggested that many people are curious, that some accept religious teachings without conviction, and some actually believe. Well, buddy, there’s a fourth group: those that know.’ He stood, and looked down at Drake, the pale young man with dyed black hair. ‘You weren’t cursed by God, my unfortunate young friend, you were sent by God for this very purpose.’

Kobus made ready to leave, Drake staring at the carpet for a whole two minutes before moving.

Standing, Drake said, ‘I have a purpose?’

Kobus stopped packing, taking a moment. ‘You have a purpose, you always did.’ He turned his head. ‘You learnt to master the demon, a remarkable feat, and something you should be proud of. I’m ... proud of you for doing that. And now, now your ... *unique skills* might just stop the bomb.’ Kobus took a moment. ‘Part of me would like you to take charge, to be the strong one, to ... take the responsibility.’

‘I know little of this world.’

Kobus slowly nodded his head. ‘We were partnered up for a reason, I’m afraid, and neither of us will survive it.’

Drake stepped forwards. ‘But if we possess a very great tally at the end of our lives, we shall be saved, no.’

Kobus forced a weak smile. ‘Part of me believes that, and part of me ... just wants to walk away.’

‘You are a strong man, pure of thought and swift of sword. We shall prevail, no.’

‘My friend, we fight with a small pistol ... and a large amount of hope.’

They said nothing to each other as they headed out, the car abandoned. A taxi whisked them down to central Varna, a cheap hotel found after walking around for twenty minutes. Cash secured a tatty room, no questions asked. And the

watcher's mobile, that was now in the taxi, stuffed under the seat and being driven around Varna.

'How will we find this bomb?' Drake asked once inside the small and poorly decorated room.

'The watcher on the boat gave up the name of Johansson; I think he's a CIA section manager in Berlin, Germany. I met him once.'

'We will journey there? To Germania?'

'We will. And we'll look for another detonator, because they can't set off the bomb without one.'

'And the men with gold coin for the object?' Drake asked. 'They were close by.'

'They'll be long gone,' Kobus suggested.

'The men with coin have a house called "villa", not far.'

Kobus took a moment, placing a cigarette on his lip. 'They'd be just middlemen, but...'

'The coin would assist us in this fight,' Drake finished off.

Kobus nodded, and then checked his watch. 'We'll leave at midnight. Do you have a name for the area?'

'I do,' Drake offered. He sat, turning on a black and white TV as Kobus lay on the bed.

At midnight, Kobus was snoring, nudged awake by Drake. 'It is time.'

Kobus eased up, and yawned, rubbing his face. 'Can you actually tell time?'

'I have learnt from the TV, Big Bird taught me; the small hand and the big hand.'

Kobus shook his cigarette packet, pulling out his last cigarette. Lighting up, he said, 'Big Bird, eh.'

'Cat is spelt C – A – T, dog is spelt D – O – G.'

Kobus slowly cranked his head around to Drake. 'I might just live long enough to see you spell *disillusionment*.'

'That sounds like a long word,' Drake noted. 'What does it mean?'

Kobus stood. 'It means ... that the magistrate should do no evil. When he does, we – his servants - are disillusioned.'

'A good word, yes. But today on the TV, the word of the day is *house*.'

After a quick wash, and the use of the toilet, Kobus was ready. 'I need a new shirt,' he commented as he placed on his jacket.

'Do you not wash your shirts?' Drake puzzled.

'When I have the time. C'mon.'

Outside of the hotel, Drake described the villa's area and name as best as he could, and Kobus relayed the detail to a taxi driver, who thought he knew the place. Twenty minutes later, and after a few dead ends, Drake pointed at a cafe that was still open. Paying the taxi driver, Kobus straightened, taking in the quiet cafe.

'The men meet here often, I know this image.' Drake turned. 'When they leave ... they go this way.' He pointed off to the right. 'Not far.'

'Lead on.'

They followed a dark pavement, few street lamps working, and past houses with high walls and high wooden gates, cats dashing under parked cars. Dogs barked unseen, the other sides of those high walls. At the next corner, Drake took a moment, turning right, halting after ten yards.

'Lost?' Kobus asked.

Car headlights caused them to duck behind a parked car.

'It is them,' Drake whispered.

The car passed, heard but not seen, and slowed twenty yards down the road that they were on. Lifting their heads up, they could see the car enter a villa through large gates held open by a guard. That guard checked the street carefully for a moment before closing the gates.

'Bingo.'

'Bingo?' Drake queried.

‘It means ... we have won, or we are correct, or good, or we found something of interest,’ Kobus whispered.

‘Bingo,’ Drake repeated in a whisper as they stood. They checked both ways down the road, seeing no one, no vehicles approaching, and ran across, ducking behind a row of three tall metal bins.

Facing Drake, Kobus interlaced his fingers – palms upwards, and instructed, ‘Do this with your hands, so that I can step up and over the wall.’ Drake nodded, led to the wall bent double, his hands soon interlocked. Kobus placed a foot in, and was launched upwards, landing on the top of the wall and wobbling. ‘Fuck me.’ He crouched, placed a hand down, and jumped inside, hitting the dirt at the base of a tree.

Drake landed next to the tree, almost silently, just as a dog barked in the house next door. After a moment crouched in dark shadows, Kobus ran forwards bent double. He crunched across dried grass, and slipped around to the rear of the property, lights now on in the upstairs windows, a few cracks of light escaping wooden shutters on the downstairs windows. He turned, Drake nowhere to be seen.

‘Drake,’ he whispered, just as a body hit the ground beside him, air bursting from the man’s lungs, followed by a moan.

Drake landed, straddling the man. ‘He was watching us from above.’

‘Good move.’ Kobus relieved the man of a pistol, then moved around a large bush to view the rear of the property. Turning his head, he whispered, ‘Can you make a loud noise in the street, and come back.’

Drake was gone in a blur. Six seconds later, it sounded like one car had landed on top of another, a car alarm sounding, a ghostly image turning solid as Drake drew level.

‘I said a loud noise, not to wake up the whole damn city!’ Kobus whispered, a fist shaken. Bent double, he moved stealthily forwards, up onto a stone wall bracketing steps, along it whilst trying to balance - his arms stretched out, and up onto



a balcony with ease. The balcony doors were not locked, sounds now coming from the front of the house, echoing off the neighbouring houses. As he moved inside, he could feel rather than see that Drake was close behind.

A crack of light, from a door open just a fraction, gave away the room's outline and dimensions, the light coming from the hallway. Pistol in hand, Kobus moved quietly around a central sofa and glass coffee table to the door, now hearing raised voices on a lower level, yet distant and distorted. He turned to Drake. 'How many men, and where?'

'One above, at the front of the house,' Drake whispered. 'Six below, at the front of the house, a woman below.'

'And the money?'

'Above, at the front, with a man who stands guard.'

Kobus had just started to open the door, an eye on the hallway, when Drake grabbed his arm. He turned his head.

'There is ... a man, near, he ... puzzles the noise I made at the front, and ... makes ready to kill all here.'

'How does he plan on doing that?'

'A ... bomb.'

'Shit,' Kobus let out as he sprinted towards the balcony door. 'C'mon!'

He scrambled back down to the wall, balancing as best he could along the wall, and jumped, rolling as he hit the ground and impacting a small stone statue, the statue falling into a pond with a splash. Cursing, he jumped up and ran to the rear of the garden, pistol still in hand, but found a high stone wall blocking high path.

Turning in the dark, he called for Drake, who was nowhere to be seen. Backtracking a few paces, Kobus placed a foot on a wobbly statue, reached up to a tree branch with one hand, and gained purchase on a ledge in the wall. With his hand on the branch, one shoe on the ledge and one shoe on the statue's head, he reached for the top of the wall and got the pistol hand over, then a leg, cursing at the pain caused by scraping over the

wall's rough edges. He dropped eight feet, right onto his back, landing on hard dry soil, the wind knocked out of him.

A dog growled.

In agony, and stunned, Kobus lifted his head a few inches, seeing the black outline of a dog stood with its legs wide, growling down at him. Drake landed next to the dog, scaring it and causing it to jump sideways in shock. The dog composed itself quickly, and growled towards Drake through the dark. Drake growled back, the dog retreating just as Kobus brought his pistol to bear on the mutt.

Drake leapt six feet, and landed straddle over Kobus as night turned to day for the second time, the wall collapsing onto them.

Kobus could see images, blurred images: light and dark, a bag, a bin, a curb stone. Water, water splashed onto his face. He opened his eyes, finding Drake's image, Drake looking worried.

'Can you hear me?' Drake asked.

'Wha ... what happened?'

'The house of the men with coin was damaged by a bomb.'

'We ... should go.' Kobus tried to move, grimacing in pain.

'We are some distance from the house named "villa", in a garden of many trees and paths, things for children.'

Kobus slowly eased up with Drake's help, finding a dull yellow street lamp, the lamp covered in spiders webs and surrounded by fluttering moths. Peering around, he could see swings and roundabouts, now registering the echo of distant sirens, a low bush immediately in front of him, and distant houses beyond. 'Fuck...'

'You are hurt?'

'I'm not hurt badly, just winded. I'll ... be OK.'

Drake lifted Kobus to his feet. 'You will need more clothing, I fear.'

Kobus took in his clothes in the dull yellow light, starting to brush down the dust and dirt.

‘We shall buy fine thread now that we have coin.’

‘Huh?’

Drake pointed towards a large holdall. ‘I believe the number of the paper is fifty.’

Kobus tested his legs and took a few steps, kneeling painfully to open the bag. ‘Fuck me.’

‘It is much gold coin?’

‘It is ... and more than would have been needed to buy that detonator.’

Drake puzzled that as he knelt. ‘They ... would buy more than one?’

‘They would. Or ... something else.’ He stuffed a wad into his inside pocket, handing one to Drake – who placed it into a pocket in his casual jacket.

‘We must return to the hotel, for you to rest.’ Drake lifted the hefty bag of cash after zipping it up, and grabbed Kobus under the armpit.

It took ten minutes of slow hobbling to reach a main road, a taxi flagged down. Once in, Kobus asked for the centre of Varna, and halted the taxi several blocks away from the hotel. He hobbled the short distance, putting on a brave face when let in by the night porter.

‘What happen you?’ the man asked, heavily accented.

‘Men fight me for money,’ Kobus replied, and pushed past, soon in the room and under a hot shower.

Out of the shower, and with just his trousers back on, he found Drake sat watching TV. ‘Counted the money yet?’

Drake looked over his shoulder and focused on the holdall. ‘I am uncertain of how to count this paper.’

Kobus sat next to the holdall. Retrieving a wad of fifty Euro notes, he counted fifty notes in each bundle, and estimated fifty bundles. ‘A hundred thousand or so, which may have been a fair price for the detonator if it was precision made and tested. Less than I thought though.’

Lifting out another wad, Kobus frowned down at the wad below. It was different. He peeled back the top fifty, and found notes valued at five hundred Euros. 'OK, that's ... odd.'

'What is odd?' Drake asked without taking his eyes off the TV.

'The top note is a fifty, the rest five hundreds. It's a trick. But ... it should be the other way around; five hundred on top and fifty underneath. And ... there's more than a million Euros here.'

'A million was what you said was very big, yes?'

'Yes. We could ... retire somewhere nice and turn our backs on the world. But they'd still want me dead, and this money isn't really enough to disappear with.' He sighed.

'You do not wish to give up the fight,' Drake noted.

Kobus took a moment, throwing down a wad. 'No, I don't, so I need my fucking head examined.'

'At the house named "villa", there was a woman below, very sad. She was a prisoner.'

'A prisoner?' Kobus queried as he rifled through the bag.

'Yes, from the land you fought in.'

Kobus pulled his nose out of the bag, staring at the back of Drake's head. 'From Iraq?'

'Yes. And I smelt death in the house, a body hidden below where the woman was held, the body of a child.'

Kobus reached for his cigarettes, finding the box empty and cursing.

'Shall I go to the shop for cigarettes?' Drake keenly offered, now standing.

Kobus considered if that particular task was wise, but handed over a twenty Euro note. 'Don't be long.'

Drake handed back the note. 'I have coin.' He turned, opened the window, and launched himself through before Kobus could stop him. Rushing to the window, Kobus found a flat roof one floor down, a row of brightly lit shops visible a

hundred yards away. Shaking his head, he moved to the bed and lay down, aching all over, and now bruised in many places.

Ten minutes later, Drake came back through the window with effortless grace, two bags in hand. He placed the bags down, and lifted out several packs of cigarettes - the correct brand, and a new plastic lighter.

‘Good kid,’ Kobus commended.

‘And we have chocolate biscuits, other biscuits, Sprite, and this.’ He hand Kobus a small medical kit for tourists, the wording English. ‘To make you better.’

Kobus eased up onto an elbow, letting his legs down. ‘Excellent.’ Sirens registered through the open window. He slid his gaze across to Drake, and waited.

Drake lowered his head. ‘A man wished to part me from my money.’

‘And...?’

‘I kicked him.’

‘And...?’ Kobus pressed, louder this time.

‘I ... kicked him, and he went to the inside of a shop.’

‘Did the shop have one of those new fangled glass windows at the front?’

‘I ... believe so.’

‘You just kicked someone through a plate glass window?’ Drake did not answer. ‘At the villa, what did you do to make that noise in the street?’

‘A large metal bin. I ... threw it onto a car.’

Kobus twisted the top of a Sprite bottle. ‘I didn’t thank you. You saved my life.’ He toasted a smiling Drake with his Sprite. ‘Cheers.’

Drake smiled widely. ‘Good health, long life, and many fine sons.’

‘Yeah, well don’t know about the last part.’

A mobile phone began ringing, causing Kobus to puzzle it; he had left the previous phone in a taxi.

Drake took out the phone, from his pocket. ‘The man who wanted to part me from my money dropped this.’ He handed it to Kobus. ‘I thought you may have use of it.’

‘Good thinking.’ Kobus answered the call. ‘Malek? No, he’s shopping, try later.’ Kobus cut the call, and punched in the number for Riggs. ‘That you, boss?’

‘Yeah, and there’s more on the wire, a villa blown apart in Varna, ten or more dead they’re saying.’

‘The Company took care of the boat, and the villa.’

‘Jesus, this is all way over my pay grade.’

‘Do me a favour, and run the names of the people at the villa, you should find Ramius in there. And see if there’s an ID on a woman and child.’

‘How’d you know who was in the villa, Kobus?’ Riggs demanded.

‘I was watching it when it blew, a bit busted up; fucking wall fell on me.’

‘You’re hurt?’

‘Cuts and scrapes.’

‘Fucking Bulgarian authorities are jumping up and down.’

‘I can imagine.’

‘What’ll you do next? Do you ... have any leads?’

‘One, and it’s a long shot, so I’ll be heading to Paris.’

Drake turned his head, and listened in.

‘Paris?’ Riggs queried. ‘You’re leaving the area?’

‘It’s a bit hot around here right now, and no one will be making any deals for a while.’

‘No, fucking police are all over it. They’re saying its drug related, Russian gangs. That name you gave me, it was for a low grade watcher, but he was linked to Berlin station.’

‘Probably nothing. Anyway, I’ll call you in a day or so when I get to Paris.’ He cut the call, noticing Drake’s look. ‘When I use the phone, the magistrate can listen in.’

‘Ah, you gave a falsehood. We shall journey by another road.’

‘We shall, starting right now.’

## Gold

Drake turned off the TV. ‘What is a tamp-oon?’

Kobus halted, considered his answer, and lifted the holdall. ‘You figure it out.’

‘They would appear to cause great pleasure to women, much smiling and dancing along the street after purchase.’

Kobus halted, and cocked an eyebrow. ‘TV advertising has a great deal to answer for.’

A bored taxi driver was offered as much money as he made in a month for the short trip to Bucharest in Romania, Kobus explaining that they had a problem with an aeroplane, a delay. They set off north after the taxi had taken on fuel, and the driver had picked up his passport from home.

Kobus sat with his head against the door’s cool glass, staring up at yellow highway lights as they flittered past. The only sound was the high-pitched whine of tyres on concrete, Kobus sat mesmerised by the rhythmical passing of the yellow lamps against the black night sky. The lamps became white for certain stretches of road, an occasional lamp out, and time moved slowly.

The driver had puzzled the route, since it was not the most direct route, but Kobus wanted a particular border crossing-point used. They had stopped for a bite to eat in the hills near



the border, and now approached a quiet border-crossing in the dead of night.

Halting at a cafe just short of the border, Kobus handed the taxi driver another month's pay. He thumbed towards Drake in the back seat. 'The boy, no passport, but I know a man here, he goes around. No ... questions.'

The taxi driver took the money, making a face and shrugging.

Kobus stepped out, followed by Drake, Kobus handing Drake the holdall – which also contained Kobus's holster and pistol. He pointed. 'You see the bend in the road, past the border controls?'

'Yes.'

'Meet us there. Go around, quietly, don't be seen.'

Drake headed off down a slope without a second thought, the curious taxi driver watching him go. With Kobus back in the car, they drove up to the border, passports shown, no checks made of the vehicle; this was Europe, one big happy family.

Across the border, they halted around the first bend, Drake opening the door little more than two minutes later, and surprising the taxi driver. The man glanced at Kobus – who didn't respond, made a face and drove on, heading north for twenty miles before crossing the Danube, soon heading west along its northern banks, now on the Romanian side.

In the early hours they reached Bucharest, passing bland white high-rise blocks for a few minutes before approaching the historic centre, picture postcard buildings glimpsed by Drake in the grey half-light. Kobus tipped the driver even more money, thanks given. And stuffed under the back seat of the taxi was the mobile that Kobus had used to call Riggs, now on its way back to Varna.

They found a cafe that was open at this early hour, and sat with cups of coffee near two uniformed police officers. Drake

copied his mentor by adding milk and sugar, and then tasted coffee for the first time. Kobus waited.

‘I do not greatly favour its taste.’ Drake shrugged.

‘It helps us mere mortals to have more energy, to be awake more.’

‘Ah.’ Drake nodded. ‘Like Red Bullshit.’

Kobus cocked an eyebrow. ‘*Red Bull*,’ he carefully mouthed. ‘Although, I think you were right the first time.’

‘What is it, *bullshit*? Men say this often in the colonies of America.’

‘It’s what a cow does in a field after feeding.’

‘Ah. As I child we collected these when dry, for the fire in winter.’

‘When people say it ... they mean to suggest disbelief in something.’

‘They seem to disbelieve a great many things,’ Drake puzzled.

Kobus sipped his coffee. ‘You must have picked up some sun yesterday; your skin is less ... white.’

‘I appear more fitting?’ Drake keenly asked.

Kobus nodded. ‘Be hard to keep the young girls off you.’ As Kobus observed, he watched a demon blush, sat now in a cafe in Romania before dawn, a holdall full of cash less than four feet away from armed police officers. It was a surreal moment.

Two hours later, at 7am, they flagged down a taxi, soon to a second hand car lot that was just opening up. Kobus found a ten year old BMW covered in morning dew, the offer price being just over ten thousand Euros. He grabbed the salesman. ‘You speak English?’

‘Yes, some.’

‘I’ll take this car, now, fifteen thousand Euros, no name or paper. Understand?’

The man hesitated. ‘I must give name.’

‘You ... can give any name, my friend.’

The man glanced around the quiet lot before coming to a decision. He fetched the keys.

In a showroom, Kobus counted out the money, handing it over. When done, he made firm eye contact with the salesman. ‘If there is problem, my friend, I come back – and I talk with you.’

The man handed over the keys, and the vehicle’s documents, whilst avoiding eye contact.

Sat in the car, and running a hand over the leather, Drake said, ‘Beemer, yes, like before.’

‘Beemer,’ Kobus confirmed as he drove out of the lot, stopping to adjust the seat.

‘A pleasant smell,’ Drake noted. He faced Kobus. ‘I can ... study in this carriage?’

‘You can, because I don’t care if you damage it.’

They headed northwest, and towards Germany, a long drive, and a few border crossings to negotiate along the way.

‘Should I not have papers?’ Drake asked. ‘For safe conduct across the border?’

‘You should, but the best forger I know is in Switzerland, in Zurich. We’re heading that way, so we’ll make a stop. There’s a guy in Prague I know, he’s OK. In fact, he’s less known to the magistrate. OK, Prague it is.’

Route A1 took them towards the hills, soon spectacular views glimpsed as the morning warmed up, ornate and dated houses on the roadside reminiscent of Switzerland or Austria, proud castles glimpsed atop distant ridges.

They stopped off in a small town and bought fresh clothes, Kobus now dressed in jeans and t-shirt, a brown leather jacket bought, one of those new and very expensive leather jackets that looked like it had been worn out already. Drake picked up a pair of shoes he liked, Kobus a pair of ankle boots and two holdalls.

After three hours, and rounding a bend, Drake pointed. 'I know this place.'

Kobus eased to a halt in a lay-by, peering across a deep wooded valley at a castle of three spires surrounded by trees. 'Are we near your home village?'

'No, but I was here in the eighth year, I believe. I travelled with a group of minstrels, and hid my identity from those who pursued me.' Drake stared across at the castle, appearing saddened. Softly, he said, 'I did great evil here.'

Kobus took a moment, and sighed. 'Nothing we can do about that, it was a very long time ago. Place is probably a hotel for tourists.'

'Tourists?'

'People who travel for pleasure.'

Drake nodded. 'The lord of these lands, I killed him as he tried to hide his treasure.'

Kobus turned his head. 'Treasure?'

'Gold coins. Many. After I killed him, I closed the wall he had opened with a heavy stone, so that his family would not benefit from the money; he did not trust them to know of his treasure. I made good the render on the wall.'

'Sadistic.'

'What is this word?'

'It means, that you didn't just kill him, but that you wanted to enjoy the family's discomfort afterwards as well. It means ... that it served no practical purpose ... other than to cause suffering.'

Drake nodded. 'I was ... sadistic, yes.'

'Marcus was, you ... were not. Don't forget that.' Kobus took a moment. 'Do you want to look around the place for an hour?'

'The release of such memories would only hurt me. But should we not collect the gold coin?'

'After all this time they would have been found.'

'It was well hidden,' Drake suggested.

Kobus eased the car out. ‘Well, if you’re sure that it won’t upset you too much we’ll have a look.’

‘If we have more coin, we have means to wage war, no?’

‘We’d have means to wage war,’ Kobus agreed. He noticed a sign for a hotel, a picture of the castle, and turned off the main road, circling underneath the main road before negotiating a dated stone bridge that was single lane for traffic, finally climbing through dense woods up to the castle grounds.

Getting out of the car, Drake said, ‘It has not changed.’

‘People like these old castles, and they look after them. A ... curiosity.’

They wandered inside, and to reception, three attractive ladies in black and white uniforms stood ready to assist.

‘Speak English or Deutsche?’ Kobus asked the first receptionist. The lady receptionist spoke both languages. ‘Do you have a room for tonight?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘May we see one, please?’

The receptionist called a porter, Kobus pointing Drake towards a diagram on the wall without the lady noticing. Drake closed in on the diagram, and held a finger on a room, a third of the way up a south-facing tower, the tower that they were stood under.

Kobus eased closer to the receptionist. ‘Do you have a room above us, a view south - of the river?’

‘We have two, sir,’ she confirmed after attending a computer screen. She handed the porter the keys, the man leading them off, and into a lift that simply took them up one floor.

When the lift door opened, Drake hesitated, before taking a single large stride out and turning fully around, puzzling just how the hell he was now on a different floor without walking up the stairs. Kobus grabbed him by the arm as the porter opened a room.

Inside the spacious room, Kobus noted a giant four-poster bed, a sofa, an ornate and dated dresser, and a great view through tall and narrow windows, one whole side of the room curved. He turned to Drake, and waited.

Drake faced the porter. ‘May we enter another room?’

The man led them out, and to the second room on the same floor. As they entered, Drake made brief eye contact with Kobus, a nod given.

‘We’ll take both rooms,’ Kobus loudly stated.

The porter led them back down, Drake puzzling the magical box that transported them between floors, inspecting the floor numbers at length before being dragged out by Kobus.

Five hundred Euros were handed over for the two rooms, one night with breakfast. This was a five star establishment. The porter carried their bags from the car, a tight squeeze in the lift for the three of them with luggage. Kobus took the first room, Drake the second.

Kobus had dumped down his bags, quickly following the porter into Drake’s room, tipping him and thanking him. With the door closed, Kobus turned to find Drake running a hand across a wall, a section of wall to the left of a huge stone fireplace. Kobus closed in on the wall, examining it.

The walls of the rooms were bare stone, adorned with a few shields and tapestries. That stone had been worked down to a finish that was smooth, but one that did not completely destroy the stone effect. The mortar between the stones was a pale grey, and finished to a very high standard.

‘It is here,’ Drake stated.

‘You can sense it?’

‘I can.’

‘We have till the morning, when the maids will come in and clean the room – *after* calling the police.’ Kobus put a hand in a pocket. ‘Opening that up will cause a great deal of fucking noise. They’ll tolerate young couples having loud sex, but demolishing old stone walls is generally against hotel policy.’

Drake grabbed a poker from the fireplace, inspecting it. 'The stone is balanced.'

'Balanced?'

'Balanced at the centre, here,' he explained as he touched the wall, the lower mid-point of the stone in question. The mortar was obviously modern era, but the outline of the large stone was clear, some six feet across and four feet high. 'The stone need only be turned, not levered.'

Kobus lit up, and checked out the view as Drake quietly chipped at the mortar, making a mess on the carpet. There was a "No Smoking" sign on the wall but, given what they were doing to the room, Kobus figured it was the least that the hotel owners would be pissed about.

'I have purchase,' Drake said after little more three six minutes of effort. He shoved the poker in, to a depth of around two feet, turned it so that its barb caught the stone, and pulled. Increasing his effort, he pulled again, mortar popping out of the far join and peppering the previously clean room. A loud crack revealed the sinking of the far end of the massive stone. Another tug, and a scraping sound was issued, Kobus concerned that it may be loud enough to attract attention.

Drake was unperturbed by the noise and yanked again, an opening revealed. Drake let go of the poker, and managed to get an arm inside, a knee against the wall, as Kobus stood keenly observing, a cigarette balanced on his lip.

Dust rose up and mortar fell as the stone moved twelve inches, now revealing the curved side of the adjoining stone, and a hollow space behind. Wedging his upper body sideways into the hole, Drake moved the huge stone around till it was almost at a right angle to the wall. He jumped up, a foot on the base of the hole, a hand on the top of the stone, and slid in sideways. And disappeared.

As Kobus closed in, a hand appeared, holding out gold coins. He picked one out. 'They're big, and heavy, worth some money. If you hold on, I'll pass you a bag.' He dumped the

clothes from a strong holdall onto the bed, and squeezed the air out from it, shoving it through. Clicking his lighter, he peered into the gap.

Beyond the stone, a small space revealed itself, just big enough for Drake to stand up in, just wide enough for him to avoid scraping his shoulders. Several rotten wooden boxes lay stacked up, now a loud tinkling from the coins as they filled the bag. Drake passed the bag through, Kobus taking hold of it. But when Drake let go, the bag dropped to the floor, almost pulling Kobus's arm out of the socket.

'Fuck me,' Kobus let out as he straightened, rubbing a shoulder. '*You* can carry that. But I think the fucking handle will come off.'

'There is more,' echoed out, the words oddly distorted.

Kobus blew out, thinking. He glanced over his shoulder. 'We need more bags.' He took a drag before dumping clothes out of a second bag, passing it through to Drake. Stepping to the bedside cabinet, he dialled reception. 'Hello? Would it be possible to purchase a new suitcase, a strong plastic one with wheels? If you could have it brought up, room Six. Thanks.'

Placing down the receiver, the phone clearly indicating that this was room seven, he returned to the hole, Drake now filling the second bag. 'We'll need some help,' Kobus thought out loud.

Kobus went back to the phone, taking out his wallet. He found a number on a folder sheet of paper, and dialled it after transposing two digits. Many code-words and numbers were listed on the paper, but each number had certain digits swapped. 'Georgiou? It's Kobus, I've got a job for you. Are you free for a few days?'

'Sure. You want someone followed?' came an accented voice.

'No. But this job, it pays you twenty thousand Euros, and a percentage. The ... Company got hold of some gold coins, from a Russian gangster that won't be needing them.'



Laughing could be heard.

‘Anyway, I need you to find a second driver, someone you can trust, and two strong cars, Audi or BMW. Drive to northwest Hungary, head for the town of Deva. What’s your mobile number these days?’

Kobus wrote it down on a pad next to the phone. ‘OK, got that. How soon do you think you could get here from Athens?’

‘In the morning. What money for the second man?’

‘Ten thousand.’

‘This *is* a good job. You want to use Maros to fence them?’

‘Some of them, yes, but I don’t want them all fenced in the same place.

‘I know a few people,’ the man offered.

‘That’s why we’re talking,’ Kobus quipped. ‘And not a word to anyone.’

‘Of course. I’ll leave in an hour. Shall I call Maros?’

‘Yes, have him send someone to Zurich, ready to hand me cash, maybe ... two million Euros. And ask him where he wants the gold dropped, and don’t use the phone; go see him if you can.’

‘I will do. Call me in the morning.’

Kobus returned to the dusty hole in the wall, Drake now shoving a heavy bag through. Kobus got under it, but getting it on the bed nearly killed him. ‘Fuck,’ he blew out, the bag bouncing before settling, the antique bed creaking - and none too pleased at its treatment.

Drake scraped through the hole and dropped down. ‘It is much coin.’

‘It is, and it may come in handy.’ Kobus took a breath. ‘But first, first we need to get it to the car, then we need to see if the car will take the damn weight, then we need to hand it to a man who’ll turn it into paper money. And we need to do all that without any fucker noticing.’

‘You are not confident.’

Kobus lit a fresh cigarette. Exhaling, and pointing at the bag with the cigarette, he said, 'We can do it, but can we do it without anyone noticing.'

Ten minutes later, a knock could be heard at Kobus's room. He stepped into the corridor, and paid the porter for the suitcase. 'Keep the change.'

Back in Drake's room, the air now thick with dust, he examined the strong grey plastic case. 'This'll hold a bag's worth of coins for sure,' he suggested. He grabbed a pillow and placed it into the case, Drake lifting over the smaller bag and placing it down, the case just about zipped up. Kobus wheeled the case around the bedroom. 'It'll do. Stay here.'

Kobus wheeled the case to the door and out, to the lift and down, and out to the car. He had to wait a few seconds to make sure that no one was about, struggling to get it in the boot - and cursing. Back at Drake's room he knocked, the door soon opened by a grubby looking Drake. 'Job done.'

'There is more coin,' Drake informed Kobus.

Kobus peered into the hole, and gave it some thought. Turning, he said, 'I'll be back.'

Twenty minutes later he returned, the case now empty save the pillow. 'No one saw me, so they won't think I'm stealing pillows - or removing dead bodies in suitcases! And at two-fifty a night, we *should* be stealing the fucking pillows.'

Drake lifted the second bag of coins into the suitcase, plus many small plastic bags filled with the coins. 'You have hidden the coins nearby, in a wooded area, for collection later?'

Kobus absently nodded. 'Hey, buddy, where'd you get the little white plastic bags?' he enquired, pointing at them.

'They were in the small room for washing.'

'Oh,' Kobus said, nodding. Somehow, stuffing plastic bags designed for sanitary towels full of priceless gold coins seemed wrong.

With the third holdall utilised, and the majority of the coins now removed, Drake moved the stone back into place. Apart from the obvious missing mortar, a thick layer of grey dust everywhere and mortar on the carpet, their handiwork would not have been noticed. And the hotel owners were unlikely to remove the stone to see what lay behind it. It would simply have appeared that the guests had ... dug out the stone's mortar for something to do.

Kobus placed the cigarette on his lip, and studied the large stone, wondering if the mortar could be touched up, and not caring either way. Grabbing a pad next to the phone, he wrote a note: "Sorry about the mess". He placed it on a pillow, along with ten thousand Euros. It might just keep Interpol out of this.

'Shall I shower?' Drake nudged, the lad keen to get wet and soapy again.

'Sure, I was just about to do the same. We'll leave in an hour or so.'

Back in his own room, Kobus ordered a sandwich, and sat eating it in the bay of the window with his feet up, taking in the view through the trees, the picture-postcard view of the river and its ancient stone bridge. And he tried to imagine Drake, dressed like a wandering minstrel, moving around the castle and killing its occupants. A green and yellow striped hat, with points with bells on, came to mind, Kobus shaking off the image.

But being here rammed home the realism of what Drake was, a realism that was easy to forget when looking at the fresh-faced young lad. Drake had been here, hundreds of years ago. And his sadistic deed, that of hiding the coins, would now benefit Kobus in particular, and the world in general, an odd symmetry.

As dusk came on in the valley, Kobus packed up as best he could, utilising the plastic bags that the clothes had been bought in. In Drake's room he took charge of the suitcase,

wheeling it slowly, and struggling to get it onto the back seat, nearly breaking his back.

Returning to the hotel, he stepped to reception, and asked for a map, enquiring about local bars and restaurants. Later, when the reception staff saw him drive off, it would seem that he would be returning, nothing amiss.

In Drake's room, the lad now clean and fresh - and heavily scented from the complimentary aftershave, they lifted the remaining bag of coins, the plastic bags with clothes in, and headed out via the stairs. Drake checked ahead, as well as checking around the corners. They made it to the car without incident, their bags placed onto the back seat, and drove off across the narrow stone bridge without checking out. Kobus did, however, fill in the little survey form that asked how well the rooms had been cleaned.

Reaching the main road, they turned west and towards the town of Deva, the car heavy and sluggish. As they joined the highway, Drake pulled from his pocket a complimentary toothbrush with a short handle, and examined it.

'Haven't been stealing stuff from the hotel, have you?' Kobus mock scolded.

'This is for the cleaning of teeth.'

'Your teeth won't rot ... because of what you are.'

'But I should still have good breath, no.'

Kobus shot him a playful look. 'Sure. But that's what gum is for.'

Drake retrieved the gum from his pocket, unwrapped it, and started to chew. Speaking whilst eating, he said, 'The small paper says: do not swallow.'

Kobus made a face. 'I've swallowed many. It won't do you any harm, but I guess they don't figure it'll do you any good either. Labels like that are for kids.'

'The men in the cave, they had gum, but not like this.' Drake stared ahead for a moment. 'Kobus, now that we have

much coin, I would request some for the families of the men in the cave.'

Kobus glanced at Drake, and considered for a moment what he was suggesting. 'We'd have to find their names, and living relatives.'

'It ... can be done?'

'It can be done,' Kobus agreed. 'The bodies would be flown home in a few days.'

'Then I can ... make amends.'

Kobus glanced across at Drake, but said nothing as they drove through the dark.

Bob Russell lifted his phone. 'Yes?'

'Sir, some odd intel, very ... odd.'

'Go ahead.'

'We've been monitoring calls into Kobus's handler, Riggs, for the past forty-eight hours. Kobus knew there was a woman and kid in the villa, he was there when it blew, minor injuries picked up.'

'Did he know who they were?'

'No, sir, he asked if the bodies had been identified.'

'Could he have seen them, through a window?'

'It's possible, sir. I guess Ramius was sloppy.'

'There's something we're overlooking, and that's the British.'

'They've made no enquiries since the project was mothballed, and we're not aware of any British assets in the area, sir.'

'Any sign of Kobus?'

'We tracked a mobile he used to call Riggs. He drove over to Bucharest and back.'

'Send assets to Varna. Find him.'

'Sir, he informed Riggs that he's heading to Paris.'

'Paris? There's no element of this in Paris. What's in Paris?'

'We don't know, sir.'

‘Keep me informed.’

They reached the town of Deva quickly, noticing a roadside motel beyond the town that seemed quiet enough - just the one car in the car park. Kobus paid cash, no ID shown, the night porter heavily tipped. He parked their car right next to their room, Drake effortlessly carrying the heavy suitcase and bag inside - just in case someone stole the damn car in the night. All told, they had around three million Euros on them, in either notes or coins.

With the door closed, the lights turned on, Drake settled in front of the TV. Not having got much in the way of good sleep in the past twenty-four hours, Kobus lay down and closed his eyes, soon snoring, and soon turned on his side by Drake.

## A pleasant drive

10

The dawn light woke Kobus at 6am.

‘Coffee?’ Drake asked with a cheery smile.

‘Coffee?’ Kobus puzzled as he eased up, rubbing his face.

Drake pointed at a plastic kettle on a tray, cups, and coffee sachets. ‘It is for coffee, I have read and understood. Watch.’ Drake switched on the kettle as if it was a prize-winning effort, and stood back. ‘The water will become hot.’

‘Good lad,’ Kobus commended as he used the bathroom. Returning after flushing, Drake was stirring powdered milk into the coffee.

‘Two small paper bags of sugar,’ Drake stated, proudly handing over the cup on a saucer.

‘Thanks,’ Kobus said as he took the cup. He took a sip. ‘Not bad. But the powdered milk is never the same.’

Drake handed over a mobile, Kobus immediately worried. Drake explained, ‘In the night I sensed men fighting nearby, and I climbed through the window without waking you. One of the men dropped this as he fought.’

‘What were they fighting over?’

‘One of the men was married to a woman in a room here, the other man lying down with her.’

‘It’s a motel,’ Kobus said dismissively. ‘Did they see you?’ he asked as sipped his coffee.

‘No.’

With his coffee downed, a second cup threatened and on the boil, Kobus used the mobile to call Georgiou.

‘Yes?’ Georgiou cautiously answered.

‘You awake?’

‘Kobus! Yes, awake, and we are here.’

‘From the town, follow the road northwest a mile, you’ll see a motel on the right. Room 10.’

‘We’ll be fifteen minutes.’

Drake diligently watched the road as Kobus made a second coffee, the coffee downed before two black Audis pulled in.

‘What do you sense?’ Kobus asked Drake as he readied the bags of coins.

‘They approach, they are ... cautious ... not worried.’

‘Are they alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you sense a falsehood?’ Kobus asked as he approached the door.

‘They ... think they may gain more commerce than you agreed.’

‘Can’t blame them for that,’ Kobus said as he opened the door. Georgiou reversed his car close, halted and jumped out, the boot popped-open ready. Between them they lugged the heavy suitcase into the boot, slamming it, the holdall handed to the second man.

With the cars locked, the two drivers came into the room after a cursory check of the car park, a nod at Drake as they entered. They all sat on the edges of beds.

Georgiou, a dark haired and tanned Greek, began, ‘I have two buyers, maybe three. Maros has two million Euros ready, in Zurich. We’ll drive these coins to a rendezvous here, a truck to take it across to Switzerland.’

‘Fine, but we’ll need to tally it squarely; my boss knows how many coins there are.’ Kobus handed Georgiou a coin.



‘I know these coins, and they’re rare; worth a great deal. I think it is more than two million, much more.’

‘Tell Maros we’ll settle after he’s sold some. Right, there’s another load, and the sale of those will be down to you alone. I’ll want the money paid into the usual account, bit by bit, but try and shift some of them quickly. Oh, ask Maros for a great many traveller’s cheques, a few bank drafts made to *cash*.’

He handed Georgiou a hand-drawn map with directions. ‘The place isn’t far, it’s south east of here, an hour or less. Fetch it when you can.’

‘First I get some sleep!’ Georgiou joked, he and the other man laughing. ‘We drove all night.’

Kobus swivelled, and pulled out wads of Euros from his jacket, handing over thirty thousand Euros in large notes. ‘Here, a cure for insomnia.’

‘The best kind of cure,’ Georgiou agreed. ‘With this I can drink myself to sleep!’

‘Off you go, my friend,’ Kobus encouraged. They stood, handshakes given, Drake practising his handshaking.

With the door closed, Kobus turned to Drake, and waited.

‘I sensed no deception.’

‘Good, then ... next stop Zurich. Do we have any coins left on us?’

Drake volunteered six coins.

‘Keep them on you,’ Kobus requested as he grabbed the plastic bags holding their clothes. ‘We have a border or two to cross, and I don’t want to be found with those on me.’

Kobus hesitated, noticed by Drake, placed down the bags and lifted the stolen mobile. After a moment, he punched in Riggs number. ‘Did I wake you?’

‘Just about, I’m still in the apartment. Had a late night meeting with my boss, he flew over, everyone talking about Varna.’

‘Did you identify the woman?’

‘They say she was an Arab, but no ID on her.’

‘Did they find the body of a kid?’

‘They did, buried in the basement. Tell me, do you have fucking X-Ray vision now?’

‘Remember that thing I told you I found in a safe house.’

Riggs paused. ‘You’ve got to be shitting me.’

‘It’s why I’m still alive, and why you’re now probably in danger. So keep it under wraps as long as you can.’

‘Too many people know about Varna, no way anyone could bury the detail. Already talk of a Congressional Hearing, the White House asking questions.’

‘This will be buried, made to look like Russians shooting a Russians,’ Kobus scoffed. ‘Still, it doesn’t matter now.’

‘Doesn’t ... matter now?’

‘Nothing. I’ll call you from Paris.’ He hung up.

In Langley, an operator lowered his headset and made notes on a pad. ‘Safe house. Kobus found something. What?’

An email was sent to Bob Russell. ‘Our boy is in Romania, near town of Deva. Paris could be the destination after all.’

Kobus was moody as they drove off. After a while, Drake said, ‘You are uncertain about involving someone, someone who may help us.’

Kobus considered his answer as they wound their way around tight bends in a forest. ‘I was a soldier in the British Army, an officer, a Captain in the Iraq War. When I was there I was involved in analysing – *studying* – a type of bomb we found. That bomb was kept secret, and few who knew about it, very few. The British Government knows about it, a few senior people.’

‘Will they help us?’

Kobus took a moment. ‘Yes, and no. Yes, they’d try and stop a bomb going off, but they’re good friends with America, and they can be easily bullied.’

‘Why do you not take coin from them, if they are your people?’

‘They’re not my people, they’re my ... adopted people. And I offered them my services.’

Drake turned his head. ‘They did not wish you in their service?’

‘No.’ Kobus changed lane. ‘I was angry with them for a while, but not now.’

‘I see.’ A moment later, Drake asked, ‘Who will the bomb kill?’

‘That, my friend, has been troubling me; the target. If the magistrate knows about it, then ... well, they know and don’t care. My fear, my very old young friend, is that they’ll allow the bomb to go off.’

Drake puzzled that. ‘Why would they wish such a thing upon themselves?’

Kobus glanced across at Drake. ‘If the bomb kills many, the king will grant the magistrate more coin for more men.’

Drake faced forwards. ‘I see. In my time, Moors were paid to sail near the coast, and the magistrate and the guard captain received more coin from the king in fear.’

‘Some things never change.’

Drake crossed the border with Hungary by jumping the fence, and met Kobus on the other side, with the holdall full of money. En route, he left the mobile on the mountain, something for the CIA to puzzle over. They continued their journey all that day, a few stops made for petrol and food, and faced the Austrian border in the dark. Drake had to take the mountain route at this border, almost an hour to rejoin Kobus, an anxious hour for both of them.

Twenty miles beyond the border they spotted a motel and pulled in. Kobus did not wish to risk his fake ID again, he had used it too often of late. They observed for ten minutes those chalet rooms furthest from reception, as well as being on a second floor, a door quietly forced by Drake. They claimed the

room without turning on the lights, the TV turned to face away from the window, the sound kept down. Kobus lay down fully clothed after a wash and the use of the toilet, and closed his eyes.

At 5.30am, Drake woke Kobus as planned, the aim being to leave the motel before anyone spotted them. After using the bathroom, Kobus led Drake back to the car before it got fully light, and pulled away quietly under a dark blue sky, the day promising to be warm and clear in Austria.

By noon they were at the Swiss border, Drake finding Austria in the summer a very beautiful place. He again lugged the holdall up and over a mountain before meeting the car, but did so this time in daylight and taking a risk. Driving on, they headed towards Zurich through steep gorges, through long tunnels, and around the edges of steeply sided mountains.

Halting at the edge of Zurich, at a service station, Kobus eased out and used the payphone, a call in to Georgiou first. 'Georgiou? It's Kobus.'

'Ah, my friend, how goes it?'

'I was just about to ask you that.'

'We got the other coins – from the woods, and Maros had the first batch on a truck. I'm back in Athens, and those coins – they're worth a lot more than two million, my friend.'

'You get ten percent, that's all, and I had to work hard to get you that.'

'I won't let you down, I'll offload them slowly.'

'And discreetly.'

'Yes, yes.'

'And the money for me in Switzerland?'

'Hotel Nova, Maros will be there tonight for 6pm.'

'Thanks.'

Kobus drove into the centre of the city as Drake sat taking in the detail, crossing over the rivers and into the run-down part of town, selecting the worst hotel he could find after circling for ten minutes. The hotel had a room, cash offered.

‘Passport? No, I lost it,’ Kobus said in near perfect German.

The receptionist, who was also the owner - and looked like the only employee, shrugged, accepting the hundred Euros handed over. When he saw Drake he just grinned.

In the room, Drake said, ‘This man believes me to be a young boy who takes coin for pleasuring old men.’

‘In a hotel like this, such things are common. Don’t worry about it. And *don’t* ... kill him.’

The room was stuffy and warm, no air conditioning working, but it was a base. And it was anonymous. Drake tackled the black and white TV as Kobus took the first shower.

At 5.45pm they set out again, driving to the Hotel Nova, their target not far from the lake. They parked on the street outside the hotel and paid the fixed meter.

‘What does it do?’ Drake enquired.

‘You put in a coin, and that allows your car to be here for two hours. If not, the car is removed and you have to pay a hundred Euros or more for its return. It’s to stop too many cars from blocking easy access down the streets.’ He nudged Drake away, but they walked right past the Nova Hotel, Kobus checking faces and cars, but - more importantly - he allowed Drake time to get a feel for anyone who was anxious.

After a meandering stroll right around the hotel, Drake didn’t sense anything amiss. They entered the hotel, moving through reception and to the bar. Kobus spotted Maros sat in a corner, the buyer a silver-haired Greek of sixty years of age - and of a morally casual attitude. A younger man sat with him, a fit looking man.

Both men looked up as Kobus approached, then lifted up. They shook, smiles exchanged.

‘Come, sit, have a drink,’ Maros urged. ‘It has been six months, my friend. I don’t see you at the casino.’

‘Always working, you know me.’ They sat. ‘This is Drake, he’s a ... computer wizard. A hacker, you know.’

Maros nodded towards Drake with a forced smile. Turning back to Kobus, he began, waving a finger, ‘Some of those coins are very rare, not all the same; worth a fortune without regard to the base gold.’

‘Good. You get forty percent.’

‘Forty?’ Maros pursed his lips and blew out. ‘They must be very hot for you to be so generous.’

‘Yes, so be careful.’

Maros beckoned a waitress, Kobus ordering a beer and a Sprite. ‘I have travellers cheques and bank drafts, so be careful; don’t leave them lying around.’ He handed over drafts for half a million Euros in total, and Dollar travellers cheques for the same amount again, a thick bundle. ‘Dollar travellers cheques were easier.’

‘No problem,’ Kobus offered.

‘Cash is in the car. No hurry. So, what have you been up to?’

Drake stood. ‘Please excuse myself for moving away for a small time.’ He stepped away, curiously observed by Kobus.

‘What nationality is he?’ Maros puzzled.

‘He’s Romanian, just learning English.’

‘He sounds like a damn computer,’ Maros quipped.

Two minutes later, Drake returned and sat. ‘Excuse me, Mister Maros, do you know a man called Vargas?’

Maros lost his smile. ‘Yes. Why?’

Drake glanced at Kobus. ‘I ... saw a face I considered of interest, and listened at their table. Mister Vargas wants to take the cash, and to ... *slice you up*.’

Maros and his minder stiffened.

Drake continued, ‘He employs three men who sit across the room, men from Veniceland.’

‘Veniceland?’ Maros repeated with a frown.

‘Italy,’ Kobus quickly stated. ‘Drake, stay here and ... *follow* the men.’ Kobus turned to Maros. ‘Let’s get to the car. Act

natural, don't look back.' He tapped his jacket, signifying a weapon.

A stony-faced Maros left money on the table for the drinks, the three of them soon moving off as a group. As they entered the stairwell, the three would-be assailants followed at a discreet distance, Drake trailing close behind them.

In the underground car park, Kobus checked over his shoulder as they reached Maros's car, no signs of trouble yet. Maros opened the car whilst scanning the darkened structure, handing over a hefty holdall.

The echoing report of a shot reached them.

'Go!' Kobus told Maros, rushing to the stairwell whilst lugging the holdall, two additional reports echoing. As he reached the base of the concrete steps, Drake ran down to him. Glancing up, Kobus could see a hand hanging into the stairwell.

'They are dead,' Drake flatly stated.

Kobus spun, and led Drake out, running. He passed the bag over like a rugby ball. 'Here.'

Drake carried the hefty bag without difficulty, both men running through the parked cars and across to a second set of steps. Running up the steps – their footsteps echoing – they happened into an area that appeared to lead to the swimming pool. An emergency exit presented itself, the street beyond glimpsed through glass panes containing a wire mesh. Breathing heavily, Kobus pushed down on the silver rail with a clatter and opened the door, soon in bright sunlight, turning a corner and slowing right down, the car in sight.

As they reclaimed the car, sirens wailed, Kobus holding off pulling out yet. The police car passed, halting at the main entrance, its officers inside the hotel when Kobus pulled slowly away.

Drake lifted two wallets and three phones, and smiled across as they slowed in traffic.

Kobus couldn't resist a smile. 'You're quite the thief. I've corrupted you.'

One of the phones trilled, Drake offering it to Kobus.

'It can't be for me, so why don't you answer it.'

Drake peered at the phone. 'The small green button, yes?'

'Yes,' Kobus confirmed as they pulled away from the lights.

Drake pressed the button, and held it to his ear, as he had seen Kobus do. 'Hello, and greetings ... I am called Drake, by what name are you called ... he is deceased and no more ... yes, I killed him ... you sound most displeased, perhaps a tampon would put a skip in your step and a smile of your face.'

Kobus turned and stared for a moment.

Drake finished, 'Thank you for your call.' He peered at the phone. 'Red, yes?'

'Red button.'

Drake pressed the red button several times.

'What did he say?' Kobus idly enquired as he drove.

'He was looking for his friend, and most displeased at his friend's death.'

'I'm surprised the tampon advice didn't cheer him up.'

'Indeed. He said he would kill me, and very slowly.' Drake examined his hoard. 'We now have three phones.'

'Well done. But that hotel probably had cameras, so we'll need to leave straight away.'

'Cameras? This word seems familiar.'

'A camera takes your image so that people can see it later.'

'Ah, yes. In the cave, the man I kept alive, he did this.'

'Aerial photography, from the bomber,' Kobus noted.

Back at their small and run down hotel, Drake remained with the car, the bags of clothes reclaimed, the holdall of cash having been in the boot all the while. They pointed the Beemer north, towards the German border.

'We now have much coin?' Drake asked.



‘We have a very great amount,’ Kobus confirmed. Drake waited. Kobus said, ‘You ... want to send some to the servicemen’s families?’

Drake nodded.

When Kobus spotted an internet cafe he pulled up and led Drake inside. Paying two Euros, they sat behind a screen.

‘A TV?’ Drake queried.

‘No, it’s called the Internet, a computer, a ... magic oracle of information.’ He typed in “US SERVICEMEN FOUND IN BULGARIA”, and several stories appeared, Drake watching the mouse like a bird of prey after the mouse’s namesake. Kobus opened one story, scrolled down, and found a list of names, units and years served, home towns.

Pausing, he said, ‘There may be an easier way.’ He Googled for veteran associations, found the right one, and clicked on the donations page, noting down an address. The girl sat at the counter had paper and a few airmail envelopes, a Euro coin handed over for them. Kobus wrote out the name of the veterans association onto several high-value travellers cheques, totalling more than two hundred thousand dollars.

He popped them into envelopes with a note about who the money was for, sealed the envelopes, and wrote the address on the the front. Around the corner he bought several Airmail stamps, and finally put the letters in the post box.

Kobus explained, ‘The letters will be collected, here from this box, and taken by aeroplane to America, and to the people who look after old soldiers. They’ll know what to do with it and ... good lad.’ He gave Drake an approving nod.

Drake smiled back as they headed to the car. ‘We sent much coin?’

‘A large amount, yes,’ Kobus confirmed as they drove off.

At the German border, Drake repeated the previous border hopping exercise, but now with two holdalls, Kobus having pointed out a distant church across the border. There he met Drake forty minutes later, just as it started to get dark.

‘This is Germania?’ Drake asked as he clambered in, the holdalls now in the boot.

‘It is, but we’ll head north for a bit, then across to the Czech Republic.’

Bob Russell answered his phone. ‘Yes?’

‘Sir, the computer has thrown up a likely match to Kobus, an old fake passport – one of ours listed as destroyed. It shows use in Varna in Bulgaria, Romania, Hungary, Austria, Switzerland, and now the Swiss border with Germany.’

‘I don’t have a map,’ Russell curtly stated.

‘That does put him on a course for Paris, sir.’

‘Move assets that way, we have enough people in Germany.’

‘Shall I put him on Interpol’s list?’

‘No, others will see it.’

## Germania

As they drove north through the dark, Drake said, 'You are keeping something from me.' He waited. 'Something about this car, and ... your papers at the crossing point.'

Kobus took a moment. 'Part of me ... wants to face them head on, to be found, and ... I could have been more careful than I have been.'

'If they come, we would fight them,' Drake enthused.

'The men that the magistrate would send are ... men like me, men who take coin to do a job. If you kill them, you're breaking the sword, not killing the swordsman.'

Drake took a moment. 'I understand. And this troubles you.'

'Half of me believes that the magistrate is lying to the king, but part of me wonders if they have another plan, a valid plan. But the one thing that convinces me that this *is* important, as well as very wrong, is *you*.'

'It is an odd alignment of the heavens, to be for nothing,' Drake solemnly stated.

'Too damn odd.'

'In order to fight the magistrate, you have to fight his soldiers, and this troubles you. But is this not a test?'

'A test?' Kobus repeated as they drove.

'If the fight was ... as play for a child with a sword of wood, would there be an alignment of the forces of heaven, and

would such a fight be a worthy one? You will have to see the end, not the means.’

‘You’re wiser than you look,’ Kobus complained.

‘I have lived a long time ... and thought much. I was awakened by you, and you say for a purpose.’ Drake took a moment, staring out of focus at the dashboard. ‘In the tenth year I mastered the demon, and tried many times to end my life. I was not successful, and worked with men of the cloth to create the cave within a cave, and to have my thoughts alone so that I would not kill.

‘And now, awake, I am being tested again by God, tested to do a great good, or many great goods. I believe that I was wrong to place myself in the cave.’

‘Wrong?’

‘Yes, wrong. I should have been stronger, and I should have fought the demon and ... used its strength and ... done good deeds. You, Kobus, have taught me how to do good deeds through evil acts. In my time, they said: evil is as evil does. I was not evil, the acts of the demon were evil. And now I do evil when I kill, but I am not evil, and my means will produce the ends; you will guide me – that I trust.’

He turned his head to face Kobus. ‘But you also have your own demons within, and you also have to fight, and you also are being tested.’

Kobus glanced at Drake as he drove along a quiet highway north. Facing ahead, he said, ‘How do you turn half a belief ... into a full belief, and sleep soundly?’

‘Only you can answer that, since you fight your own heart, Kobus van der Schule. Maybe, you must give in to what your heart is telling you to do.’

Kobus pulled off at the next service station. After a moment sat thinking, he attended a payphone, many coins placed in, and dialled a number. As he waited, he took in the fire-fighting equipment laid out against the wall; sand, a fire blanket, an extinguisher.

‘Duty officer?’ came a British voice, a dull roar of traffic surrounding Kobus.

‘I know you’re recording this.’ He took a breath. ‘This is Kobus van der Schule, South African national with a British passport, currently in the employment of the CIA. Message for your director: Pop-Dragon is out of the box, Uncle Sam happy to see it go pop somewhere - it’ll justify a few years worth of budget increase. I’ll be on this number for the next thirty minutes.’

He hung up and stepped to the car, Drake easing out. After a moment, the traffic roaring past, Kobus glanced up at the yellow lights illuminating the forecourt. He finally said, ‘As far as the magistrate is concerned, I just slit my own throat.’

‘Do you feel lighter?’

Kobus made a face and nodded.

Five minutes later the phone rang, Kobus stepping across to it. ‘Kobus.’

‘Deputy Director, at home. But when our people ran the name, well – I figured we’d best chat.’

‘You’re familiar with Pop-Dragon?’

‘I am, and the system says that you used to be a Captain in our Army, a question mark now as to your ... loyalties.’

‘I offered you my services, but you declined, so I work for the CIA - all part of NATO and on the same side. A bit like an RAF pilot on secondment to the States.’

‘Not ... quite the same.’

‘Have you been following the action in Bulgaria?’

‘The report is on my desk.’

‘Everything that happened there was either about me, done by me, or to do with me.’

‘That’s ... most disturbing.’

‘Yeah, well you’ll not like this next part then. A few CIA freelancers, listed as being in Iraq, came for me in Bulgaria - and missed. I was on an innocuous job, following a lead, something to do with the sale of arms. Four determined

individuals tried to kill me, and I had a chat afterwards; I identified them.

‘In Varna, I followed a lead to a marina, and got a detonator off a boat before it blew. That detonator was made to order by the Russians: a master synchroniser wired to three hubs, six wires down to specialised thermal detonators, fixed length, good workmanship. And I’d seen it before, in Iraq with Dr Kamil.’

‘You’re certain of that?’

‘I’ve killed quite a few people lately, that’s how certain I am. It only has the one use, and that’s Pop-Dragon.’

‘Every study we’ve conducted says that Pop-Dragon is ... extremely difficult to make go pop, extremely difficult.’

‘Dr Kamil is missing, and I think his wife and kid were in the villa that blew.’

‘Ah.’

‘If he puts his mind to it, he might make it go pop. His chemicals are missing as well.’

‘They’re supposed to be guarded by US forces in Iraq. Which begs the questions as to ... how they were released.’

‘My own people have been taking shots at me, and Pop-Dragon is out. Put two and two together ... and justify your fucking salary.’

‘What *exactly* are you looking for from us?’

‘Question is, what are *you* looking for, now that you know that it’s out the box? They won’t sneak it into the States.’

‘You think the target may be closer to home?’

‘Close enough to justify a budget increase, not so close as to destroy the US economy. Is there anyone else’s economy that they don’t give a shit about? Would a nice target be ... Paris, or Rome maybe?’

‘This will need to be handled with the utmost discretion -’

‘Why do you think they’re trying to kill me? And if you keep this quiet, and Rome goes, I’d not like to be the one that explains it to the Italians. Would you?’

‘As I said, it’s a delicate matter. Do you need a little ... close protection?’

‘No, I can look after myself,’ Kobus said, a glance at Drake sat in the car. ‘I was in this fight at the start, and I’ll see it through. Just keep a channel open to me, and if I find the weapon be ready to act quickly, even if you have to step on a few toes.’

Back in the car, Kobus sat and stared at the traffic whizzing past for a minute.

‘Do you have a course of action?’ Drake finally asked.

‘In hindsight, we should have tried to extract more information from the people in Varna, but I suspect that they wouldn’t have known much more.’

‘And what lies in Germania?’

‘A man who may have some answers.’

They exchanged looks, and drove on.

North of Munich, on Route 93, Drake turned fully around in his seat and peered behind. ‘Men follow.’

‘Face forwards, don’t let them see that we know,’ Kobus urged. ‘How many cars?’

‘Two cars, but another comes closer from afar. Eight men. These men are ... sadistic, if I say it correctly.’

‘Sadistic?’ Kobus repeated as he checked his mirrors.

‘They wish not only to complete their assigned task, but to *enjoy it*.’

‘Kinda wish I hadn’t explained that word to you,’ Kobus said as he indicated, changing lanes for the next exit. ‘And their *assigned task*?’

‘To kill you,’ Drake flatly stated. ‘But they wish to question you first.’

‘Yeah, no doubt,’ Kobus said as he took the next exit. An off-ramp led them lower, and to a roundabout under the highway, traffic lights controlling the traffic. ‘Hang on,’ Kobus said with some menace.

He swerved around the line of cars, and sped straight through the lights, making side contact with another BMW, Drake staring wide-eyed at the other driver as that man swerved. Horns sounded as Kobus threw the car the wrong way around the roundabout - coming off left as cars screeched to a halt, and bounced over a median into the right lane, flooring it as the road ahead seemed clear.

‘They follow,’ Drake stated, looking back. ‘But their carriage is in need of repair.’

Kobus took the next exit, seeing ahead of him the dark outline of a forested area. Braking hard, Drake placing a hand on the dashboard, Kobus slowed down enough to turn safely. He left the main road, crashing straight through a metal cattle gate and onto a rough concrete road, a private road through ploughed fields, a hundred yards and to the start of the trees.

‘They come,’ Drake stated as the Beemer’s tyres growled over the hard concrete surface, the car’s headlights soon only penetrating a few yards ahead of them as they followed a winding path. Another gate presented itself, no time to react, smashed through, a headlight now out, the windscreen cracked on one side.

The path straightened out for fifty yards, Kobus flooring it when he could see ahead clearly, and they passed a large metal shed. To Kobus, it reminded him of a cattle shed. Beyond it, he turned off the headlights.

‘Get ready to jump out!’ he told Drake, the car now issuing an unhealthy scraping sound. ‘When I say, jump out and wait for them, but wait for the second or third car before attacking them. I’ll distract them.’

Kobus swung the car tightly around a bend, and sped past a line of trees, the concrete track a dark grey against the black of the trees. As the end of the straight stretch of track neared, Kobus hit the brakes and skidded in the mud, despite the ABS brakes. He and Drake jumped out, Kobus grabbing a holdall with money, but not for the cash; his pistol was in it. Lugging



the heavy bag, he disappeared into the thick trees, approaching headlights glimpsed out of the corner of his eye.

The first tail car slowed, noticing the Beemer at a standstill, the Beemer's doors now hanging wide open.

The passenger lifted his radio. 'They are on foot.'

The driver switched his vehicle's lights off, and eased slowly forwards, coming to a stop twenty yards from the BMW. They opened doors and drew pistols, but waited for a second vehicle to pull up, a jeep with four men in. Those four men jumped down with MP5's, the clicks of weapons cocking being the only sound to penetrate the blackness as eyes scanned the dark tree line.

The passenger of the lead car gave a hand signal. Three men moved left, two to the right, a third vehicle approaching at speed. It skidded to a halt, the passenger of the lead car directing its two men out and forwards.

Kobus tried to slow his breathing, his knees now on moist soil, his nostrils full of the smell of cow dung. He unzipped the holdall and pulled out his pistol, checking it as quietly as he could whilst staring through the trees and bushes at the light given off by his BMW. He knew that three vehicles had halted, and that he could be facing ten or twelve men – all armed. Not to mention sadistic.

A branch broke, in his two o'clock position. He froze. Lowering his head towards the dark outline of the bag, he pulled out a thick wad and launched it back towards the car, the wad landing just two yards from the BMW. The Beemer's doors were open, the internal light on, and the wad should have been visible where it lay.

Craning his neck, he lifted up, now noticing two men edging slowly towards the car, pistols levelled. The men could see no one in the car, and moved to the open doors, both men turning in opposite directions and outwards from the car, each step slowly measured, pistols moving back and forth ready.

Crunch. Someone was in Kobus's three o'clock position, maybe ten yards away. Time was running short.

'Hans! Come!'

Kobus grinned; the first man had found the wad. Easing up, he could see the man back-tracking to the car, a second and third man soon there. They opened the boot with pistols drawn, as if someone might be hiding in the boot, and discovered one of the holdall stuffed full of Euros. The other men were called in, soon something of a debate going on in hushed tones, the debate becoming something of a heated argument. Kobus moved.

He made it to the edge of the trees, unheard and unseen, finding a very nice target; six men closely bunched up. Taking a deep breath, he raised his pistol, took aim, and fired off eight rounds in quick succession before throwing himself to one side and crawling desperately.

Several shots came back, rounds pinging off trees as he crawled frantically through the undergrowth. Automatic fire sounded out, the trees above him registering dozens of hits.

As he crawled away on his elbows, now covered in dirt and leaves, groans and moans registered through the dark, coming from the men he had shot. And he figured that each of the eight rounds fired had found a target, possibly some men hit twice. He found the holdall by accidentally clambering over it, noting its texture, and eased up. The wild shooting towards him had halted, and now he could see men being dragged. Lifting the holdall, he edged closer; two rounds left in the pistol, one spare magazine.

Peering through the "V" made by two branches, he suddenly remembered Drake as a body landed on the BMW, penetrating the rear windscreen head first with a loud smash. Those men that had been wounded, and had been leant against the car, were surprised to say the least.

A distant scream registered, the reports of two rounds echoing about the trees. But as Kobus focused on the men near

the car, a long metal pole flew in from the side, skewering two men and pinning them to the BMW. Kobus had to look twice, as the men hung there like limp rag dolls threaded by a giant knitting needle.

The sound of distant glass breaking, and two cracks of pistol shot, encouraged Kobus to inch closer to the car. Noticing a wounded man, sat against a wheel but now raising a hand and pistol towards the other vehicles, Kobus fired at the man, a chest shot. The man slumped.

A crack past Kobus's head caused him to duck. Crawling on his elbows again, he could see the darkened outline of a wounded man pulling back the slide of a pistol. As he made ready, a body fell out of the sky and landed on the man, knocking down both that man, and a second wounded man.

Kobus edged closer again, seeing a darkened figure crawling on his knees on the far side of the track. A single shot, a head shot, and the man slumped. Kobus dropped the magazine into his hand and pocketed it, a fresh magazine slapped in, the slide pulled back and released.

Drake appeared on the track, a long metal pole in his hand. He stood over the last man that Kobus had shot, stretched up and stabbed down, pulling the pole back up afterwards. In turned, he skewered each man on the ground, two only wounded and still moving before being skewered.

Kobus moved cautiously out to Drake, his pistol aimed back down the track.

'They are all now dead,' Drake flatly stated. He left the pole in the last victim, and studied the BMW. 'We shall require a further carriage.'

'No shit,' Kobus said as he straightened. 'Grab the money. Quickly.'

Drake struggled to lift the boot and edge it upright - the two skewered men left vertical, and lifted out the bags, catching up to Kobus at the first vehicle. That vehicle now had a gunman through its windscreen, so was passed around. The second car

was on its roof, legs sticking out from beneath, but the third vehicle, a Range Rover, was fine, keys in the ignition.

Kobus dumped the holdall on the back seat, Drake hurriedly throwing in the other bags. 'Quick. Go back and check the car for anything that's ours,' Kobus said as he jumped in. He started the car, closed his door and pulled along the track, past the car on its roof, edging past the second vehicle and approaching their Beemer with the Range Rover's lights on.

Drake ran to the passenger door, holding their clothes bags, but also holding up the disposable toothbrush. He waited.

'You wouldn't want to leave that, now would you,' Kobus sarcastically told Drake. Drake jumped in, the Range Rover bumping over legs as it edged around the BMW, low tree branches scraping over it. Sirens could now be heard.

Kobus followed the track to a junction, seeing street lamps across a ploughed field. 'Hold on.' He floored the pedal in a low gear, and sped across the hard brown soil, creating an unnatural sound for any driver or passenger, dirt pinging off the mudguards and wheel arches, quite a roar. They bumped across the field, smashed through a wooden gate, and lurched onto the road, straightening up. Turning right, they could now see flashing blue lights in the trees.

Kobus blew out, steadying himself. 'Fuck.'

'You are well?' Drake enquired.

'I'll be OK after a bite to eat, a hot bath, a few beers and a good cry.'

Drake reached into his jacket, and produced two mobile phones, holding them up. One started to pulse and flash. 'What is it doing?'

'It's ringing, but silently; the volume was turned off.' He shot Drake a look. 'Why don't you answer it?'

They turned a corner, and followed a road with a sign for the highway.

Drake pressed the green button. 'Hello, how are you?' Drake flatly stated, getting a look from Kobus. 'I am being

called Drake. Hans? He is dead. Yes, dead, I killed him. Also his seven friends. If we are *messing* with the wrong people, then who should we be *messing* with? Where might we find them? Hello?’

Drake lowered the phone and pressed the red button. ‘What is ... *messing*?’

‘It means ... to involve yourself with someone else’s commerce.’

‘This phone is very pretty.’

‘It can also be used to track us,’ Kobus pointed out. ‘Turn them off for now.’

‘Off?’

‘Press the red button and hold, or a button on the top. The lights will go out.’

It took Drake a few minutes, each phone being passed over to make sure that it was off.

## Rules of the game

As they drove northeast, Drake complained that he had not learnt to drive the Beemer before the car had been abandoned, Kobus promising faithfully to start lessons soon – whilst pointing out who wrecked the Beemer. The debate raged as to who was responsible for the damage.

Approaching the Czech border, Kobus figured that their new vehicle would, most likely, be stopped, and that his fake ID was probably now flagged. He couldn't risk using it again, not unless he wanted to attract some attention. They abandoned the car on a dark hillside, a gentle push starting it off, the Range Rover bouncing down a steep grassy slope towards trees, a crash heard through the dark. And Drake, he complained at length about the waste of the fine carriage, one that he could have learnt to drive in.

Through dark woods, Drake lugged the bags of cash, Kobus the bags of clothes. Fortunately, it was warm night, no sign of rain to spoil things. At the border fence they ignored the warning signs, Kobus directing Drake towards a section of wire that was often cut, and a section that the authorities didn't care too much about. Halting every once and a while, Drake felt for the presence of anyone nearby.

They slipped through a part of the modest border fence that was already cut, across a neatly trimmed section of grass and a

paved road, and to a second parallel fence, that barrier also already cut.

‘This important wall between kingdoms has a hole,’ Drake noted as he pushed through with the money bags, now just a dark outline ahead of Kobus.

‘People use it for child trafficking into Germany,’ Kobus whispered through the dark. ‘Criminal gangs bring teenage girls across to Germany so that fat old men can lay down with them for coin.’

‘It is against the law of the magistrate?’ came from up ahead.

‘It is. A girl must be sixteen years of age first.’

They started up a grass bank.

‘In my time, a girl would be married by this age, or sold into the service of a house or castle.’

Kobus panted as he climbed the slope. ‘I think we can safely say ... that young girls ... are treated better these days. They go to school ... to college ... and get good jobs.’

‘I often thought of the girl I was promised to, when I was in the cave, of what may have become of us and our children. I had wished for fine sons.’

Kobus reached a ridge and halted, standing in a cooling breeze for a moment whilst staring down at the lights of a village. ‘She may have found a nice man after you left, and may have been happy.’

‘And what of you?’ Drake asked.

‘I was engaged once, *betrothed*, but ... it didn’t work out. I had my job in the Army, she had a job with a charity called UNICEF, and we hardly ever saw each other.’

‘Charity?’

They started down the slope. ‘A group of people who ... petition others for money to ... do good for the poor and needy.’

‘She sounds like a good person, to fight for good in a charity.’

‘Unfortunately, most of the money given to charities is used on the good lives of the people *in* the charity, not on the poor and needy. The people in the charity drive fine carriages.’

‘That would seem a falsehood; to petition for the needy, yet enjoy the trappings.’

‘You noticed that as well, did you,’ Kobus quipped.

In the village, they found a lonely yellow taxi in the main square, and made the driver’s day with a fare to Prague, two hundred Euros agreed. They could have haggled that fare down to sixty, but Kobus didn’t care; he had a few Euros to hand.

In central Prague, they stood and waited for the taxi to drive off, and approached a second, soon taken to a small and tacky hotel near the red light district. Cash secured a room with two single beds, no questions asked, a tip left for the fat old night porter. With Drake watching TV, and also watching the money, Kobus headed out; money in his jacket, pistol in its holster.

Through familiar and busy streets, he eventually found the bar he was looking for, and the tattoo parlour next door. Stepping into the tattoo parlour, and into a sickly fragrance, he asked for Blok. Being shown through, he walked past a girl having a tattoo of an apple put on her arse cheek, a second girl sat with her legs spread wide, a cobweb being tattooed around her pussy. She smiled up as he passed, smoking a joint.

In the back room, Kobus again asked for Blok, being pointed up narrow winding steps, and to a room that was not just painted red, but illuminated by red bulbs. A girl sat waiting, reading a magazine, a second having her clit pierced. Kobus winced as he passed, soon through to a very small bar with as many patrons as bar staff; one of each.

‘Blok around?’

The girl behind the bar, adorned with continuous tattoos behind her flimsy white t-shirt, pointed to a door. Kobus knocked and entered, a face turning up from a computer.



‘Kobus,’ a young man acknowledged; bald, ears pierced many times, a stud in his nose. ‘Been a few years, man.’

Kobus plonked down onto a bright red leather sofa. ‘Need some fast work, and it pays very well.’

‘Yeah, hey, like ... cool,’ Blok let out. ‘For you?’

‘For me and one other.’ Kobus counted out five thousand Euros. ‘Has to be good work, and it has to pass under scrutiny.’

‘Five thousand?’ The man lifted his eyebrows. ‘You’re employers are getting generous.’

‘Another three thousand when I see them. I want two or three for me, same for a friend. German and British for me, German and Bulgarian for him.’

‘Bulgarian passport will be checked at the airport, man. No fucker likes Bulgarians – ain’t properly in Europe an all.’

Kobus considered that. ‘Make it British; they’re all foreigners anyway these days.’

‘When, man?’

‘Tomorrow.’

‘I’ll have to drop the smack tonight, man, and work. Bummer.’

Kobus checked his watch. ‘It’s 3am, so not much of the night left.’

‘I work nine to five man, like ... 9pm to 5am. After work we go out, me and the gang.’

‘Make an exception tonight. Next, is that crazy girl Roxy still around?’

‘Yeah, man, she’s out of the hole and loose on the street; on bail or something.’

‘Contact her for me, I have a job. Oh, and there’re a few people looking for me.’ He eased forwards and counted out another five thousand. ‘If someone comes looking, point them to a hotel, any hotel, say I was in today and ... coming back in a day or two, then make sure that they don’t wake up for a week, and then with a tattoo on their faces.’

‘What’d you want the tat’ to be, man?’

‘Use your imagination, but something that would make them ... unemployable for spy work.’

‘Yeah, will do, man.’

Kobus stood. ‘Got a camera for me and the second face?’

Blok passed up a small silver digital camera.

‘I’ll be fifteen minutes,’ Kobus said before he stepped out.

He reversed course, trying not to look at the bodily alterations and adornments going on in each room. Out in the busy street – busy despite the hour, he walked two streets over, and around to the hotel after doubling back. Drake opened the door before it was knocked. Inside, Drake combed his hair as he wanted it, hesitated, combed a different way, then finally settled on a style, several snaps taken after being told not to smile so much.

Back with Blok, Kobus handed over the camera. ‘Kid’s image is on there with mine.’

‘OK, man.’

A knock at the door, and Kobus reached into his jacket. Blok eased up and stepped to the door, opening a slide. Happy with what he found, he opened the door, a shapely and attractive woman stepping in. She was five eleven, tanned, bleach-dyed hair combed straight back, a diamond stud in her nose, and now wore a one-piece long red dress that suggested she made a living on her back. On each arm she wore black opera gloves up to her elbows.

‘You look familiar,’ Roxy said, heavily accented.

‘You did a job for me a few years back,’ Kobus told her. ‘A fat old German businessman; you liberated his briefcase, then cut his dick off just for fun.’

She made a face and shrugged. ‘He was a pig.’ She glided across the room and eased down into a comfortable chair. ‘What is this job?’

‘Back stop.’ Kobus counted out ten thousand Euros in large notes. ‘You know that shit hotel, Camileri?’

She nodded.

‘I’m there for a few days, coming back here tomorrow. Bring in some help if you need to, the people after me are ... *professionals*. And you get a bonus for each action.’ He handed her a mobile, one from the men killed at the farm. ‘Turn it on and use it, and leave it somewhere; they’ll track it. See who comes out to play. Oh, there’s a young lad with me. He is ... naive, inexperienced, but deadly when angered. He makes you look like a girl scout.’

Roxy handed Blok two thousand Euros. ‘Invest it for me.’

Kobus didn’t bother to ask what that meant, and slipped out past the naked girls, a scream signifying a new piercing. Back in the hotel room, he found Drake watching porn.

‘You’ll go blind,’ he told the lad, Drake puzzling that.

‘There is much nakedness and sex on this TV. I could not find the news programme.’

Kobus gave Drake a look. Finally, he commented, ‘It’s that kind of hotel.’

Drake sniffed towards Kobus. ‘A great many strange new scents.’

‘You would have liked the place I just visited,’ Kobus said as he lay down. ‘And tomorrow, you’ll have papers for the borders.’

‘You seem happier,’ Drake noted, still focused on a gyrating threesome on the TV.

‘Really?’ Kobus considered his own mood. ‘I just decided to play a few games with some people ... and to hurt them. Maybe that makes me happy on some level.’

‘You feel comfortable in this city,’ Drake suggested.

‘I worked here for two years, I know the place, and it offers us the chance to fight on better terms.’

Drake pointed to his left without taking his gaze off the TV. ‘The people here are having sex, also above, and in this other direction. This is a place for sex with coin?’

‘No, this is a flea-bag hotel, but right next door is where you find the girls. Men come from far away to this city, because the

magistrate here doesn't care about girls who sell sex; in most cities they do. Right, turn the sound down, I need some sleep. Better still, turn it off, lie on the bed, and focus on the minds of those having sex.'

Drake knocked the TV off and lay down, closing his eyes. 'This man above, he has two girls with him.'

'Lucky bugger,' Kobus said, his own eyes closed.

'We have much coin, but you do not lay down with a girl.'

Kobus took a moment, opening his eyes and staring at the ceiling. 'I like nice girls, quiet meals and walks in the park, but this job ... well, it doesn't suit that lifestyle.'

## The last day of innocence

With the sun beating through the window, Kobus eased up, finding a damp young man. 'You showered?' he puzzled, not having heard Drake during the night.

'I closed the door, and I was quiet. Did I disturb you?'

'No,' Kobus coughed out, reaching for a cigarette.

'There are not many people in the hotel now, only ladies cleaning.'

'Sounds about right,' Kobus muttered as he lit up. He stood and peered out of the window, finding an ugly view - the rear of another hotel and its rusted fire exits. Turning inwards, he took a long drag, and slowly blew out. 'Best go buy a car. You can have some lessons. Stay and guard the money, and keep an eye on the cleaners when they come in.'

'I have found a place to hide our coin. Come.'

Kobus followed Drake into the bathroom. Drake knelt, sliding a wooden bath panel along. It revealed a grubby area of old toilet rolls, an inch of dust peppered with dried-out old condoms, but under it all was a twelve inch metal grate.

Drake lifted it up with his fingers and slid it to one side. 'It is heavy to lift, difficult to move. Here, this space, it has no scent of people, only rats; I have looked inside.'

‘Fine. Put the money in plastic bags, then shove it in, but ... you know, keep it within arm’s reach - or we won’t get it back. Oh, and wash your hands afterwards. Thoroughly.’

Drake got to work, Kobus stuffing twenty thousand Euros in his jacket pocket, just forty 500 euro notes.

An hour later, and after a late breakfast in a cafe, they jumped into a taxi and headed across town, and to a row of used-car lots next to an industrial area. Drake picked out a BMW he liked, a 520 in silver, wood finish, nine years old. With Drake stood admiring it, the salesman came over.

‘Tourist?’

‘We work in Germany,’ Kobus suggested. He pointed at the car in question with his cigarette fingers. ‘How much?’

‘Eleven thousand.’

‘I forgot my passport and drivers license, they’re at the hotel.’ Kobus faced the man squarely. ‘Could I still buy it, for cash?’

The salesman took a moment. ‘Thirteen thousand, with no papers.’

Kobus glanced at the car again, Drake keenly waiting, and finally nodded. Ten minutes later they drove out of the lot, and the short distance to the industrial area. There, they swapped seats.

For an hour and a half, Drake drove around the empty industrial units. He tried a quiet roundabout, signalled and reversed, and just about mastered parallel parking after a few minor scrapes. It was a good start, apart from the numerous changes of seating position, Drake adjusting his seat up and down, back and forth.

‘You’re a quick learner,’ Kobus commended as they swapped seats again. ‘It took me weeks and weeks to get it right.’

‘Marcus learns quickly, and we share the knowledge,’ Drake explained as they joined the traffic back towards the

hotel. ‘But I have noticed that when you drive you do not think about what you do, you just seem ... to do it.’

‘If you drive for many years, then it becomes as natural as breathing.’

Kobus had a bite to eat around the corner from the hotel, genuine tourists out and about and enjoying the historic buildings – not sex tourists, before reclaiming the room. The beds had been made, causing Drake to check the metal grill, finding it as he had left it; covered in the kind of crap that no sane person would touch without rubber gloves, a wooden stick, and a gas mask.

‘I’ll get some rest,’ Kobus sighed. ‘We may be out and about tonight, *all* night.’

Bob Russell was sat at a large table, just the one file open, when his assistant knocked and entered with a file. The man approached, but waited.

Russell lifted his head.

‘Last night, eight German assets picked up Kobus’s car at a car station north of Munich. They followed, but Kobus made them, turning off the highway. The car chase led to an isolated farm, shots fired. Kobus and one other escaped in a vehicle used by the assets.’ The man paused.

‘And the assets?’

The assistant opened a file, placing down a dozen A4 black and white photographs. ‘From the German police.’

Russell slowly moved the photographs aside in sequence, till they were spread across the table, lingering on an image of two men skewered into the top of the BMW.

‘Sir, a wad of money was found by the police, serial numbers matching the payment made to Ramius.’

Russell glanced up as he eased back into his chair. ‘Kobus *was* in the villa.’

‘There’s something else, sir. A Greek man named Maros, with links to Kobus and our Athens office, paid Kobus two million Euros in Zurich, for a large stash of gold coins.’

‘Gold ... coins?’ Russell puzzled.

‘Yes, sir. This man Maros is selling them on the assumption that they were ours, money to be paid into Company accounts in Athens, less the two million he handed Kobus. The coins, sir, are estimated to be worth five million dollars or more.’

‘What the fuck was Kobus doing with five million dollars worth of gold coins?’ Russell banged the table with his faced. ‘Who is this man!’

‘He’s obviously not who we thought, sir, he’s been playing us for years.’

‘Working for ... who,’ Russell said as he stood, stepping to the window and peering through the blinds.

‘The ... Russians, sir?’

‘The Russians couldn’t organise a tea party. No, this smacks of a private body.’

‘Not the British, sir?’

‘No, they’d not go up against us. Besides, they only have half a dozen field agents worth a damn, and they don’t carry weapons.’ He turned. ‘Have the money, the deaths, and Kobus linked, put him on our wanted list – no one could argue with that now. Send our best teams to hunt him down.’

‘Paris, sir?’

‘Paris,’ Russell confirmed, turning back to the window.

An hour later, Drake shook Kobus awake, a hand over Kobus’s mouth. ‘A woman approaches.’

A knock came at the door.

‘What’s her name?’ Kobus whispered.

‘Rock. She means no harm.’

Kobus nodded, eased up and answered the door to Roxy, letting her in. Stood now in jeans and a white t-shirt, a blue



denim jacket, she looked Drake over as he smiled politely back, and finally claimed a chair. 'Drake, this is Roxy. Roxy, this is Drake.' Kobus and Drake eased down onto the beds, facing their guest.

'I put on the phone and called some numbers of girls,' Roxy began. 'After I saw you. Now, two stiff fuckers sit in the cafe where I use it, and drink coffee like they want a laxative.'

'How far?'

'Two streets over, on the main road.'

Kobus pulled out a 500 euro note. 'Take my young friend to the cafe, sit and talk for ten minutes close to them. He may know their faces ... from ... before.'

She eased up, pocketed the money, and led Drake towards the door after looking him over again.

'Roxy,' Kobus called. 'He is more than he seems.'

She stared back for a moment, shrugging a shoulder before leading a keen Drake down the corridor. Outside the hotel, and now in bright sunlight, Drake walked alongside her as they navigated around the middle-aged tourist couples, the afternoon hot.

'I have been learning to drive a car,' Drake volunteered.

She glanced his way. 'I don't drive,' she curtly got out,

'I enjoy it greatly,' Drake informed her as they crossed a road.

'You are young to be working with Kobus,' she queried.

'I am ... older than I appear.'

She shot him a disbelieving look. 'You like danger, eh?'

Drake took a moment, adopting his serious head. 'Death has no meaning for me. But I hope to live long enough to do great goods, for which I shall be judged.'

She puzzled that as they walked.

In the cafe, they approached the counter and ordered drinks, a cappuccino for her and a Sprite for him, and sat behind the men in question, one of the men idly looking them over as they sat. Drake sat facing the watchers, both men appearing to be in

their late thirties, thickset and strong, now sat with padded jackets and baseball caps - and nursing coffee cups.

Roxy whispered, 'You know...?' she ended by gesturing with her eyes and tipping her head slightly.

Drake nodded, a phone trilling a second later, one of the men taking a call. Drake listened in, much "yeah, yeah" and "right", little else. After the call, Drake decided to make small talk. 'Do you ... have a family?'

She stared back for a moment. 'No.' She looked away.

He thought up another question 'Do you ... like TV?'

She stared back for several seconds. 'Sometimes.'

Their drinks were placed down by a girl in an apron.

'I like Friends.'

She shrugged, disinterested. 'I saw it once.'

Drake had been reading her mind, and now changed track. 'Do you like small dogs?'

She nodded. 'Yes.'

'I raised a Spaniel in Bulgaria,' he lied.

She brightened. 'I have a Spaniel.'

'Mine was orange-brown, a white nose.'

She tried to hide a smile. 'Mine too, always eating my fucking shoes.'

'I put my slippers and shoes up high,' Drake said, having read it in her.

She coughed out a laugh. 'That just makes mine scratch the chair.'

'Is there ... a good park here?'

She thumbed over her shoulder. 'Across the river, a nice walk next to the river.'

'It's good to be alone with just the dog, I can ... leave the world behind for a few hours.'

She nodded, taking several seconds. 'How did you get into this work?'

'I ... began when I was young.'

'Have you ... killed anyone?'

Drake inched his head closer. ‘A great many.’

‘You are young enough to study, to do something ... better.’

‘There is no better calling ... than what I now do.’

‘You trust him? He might get you killed.’

‘We are both equal partners in the game of chance, as are you.’

She glanced out of the window. ‘I stabbed a man when I was thirteen, was a prostitute at fourteen, in prison at sixteen.’ She made a dismissive face, and tackled her coffee.

‘And yet ... you care for a dog. You walk it, feed it, and love it. You are not lost, you only think you are lost.’

She frowned back. ‘Now you do sound older, much older.’

A man stepped in, to the counter, but noticed Roxy. ‘You fucking bitch!’ he loudly called.

Drake was up quickly, and presented himself in the man’s path, the two watchers now keenly attentive to what might be a situation. The man, middle-aged and fat, swung an arm to move Drake aside, startled by the immovable object. He stepped around, only to be blocked by Drake, who now had his chin on his chest, his eyes half closed.

Frustrated, the man threw a punch, hitting Drake in the chin. Drake hardly moved, the man shaking his fist.

‘Withdraw,’ Drake firmly suggested.

The man shook off his hand, and shook off his surprise, intent on getting to Roxy. Drake read the man’s mind, and made up his own mind. He grabbed the man by the arm, swung him around at waist height, and launched him straight at the heads of the two watchers. Screams rose up as the man smashed through the plate glass window, the two watchers stunned from the impact, following the man through the window and into the street.

Drake jumped up onto seats and out into the street, landing in broken glass next to the watchers and relieving one of them of a mobile without anyone seeing. A glance back at Roxy, and Drake walked off at a pace, ducking through the tourists. At the

hotel, he knocked on the room door, Kobus opening it with a hand inside his jacket.

‘How’d it go?’ Kobus asked, a glance down the corridor before closing the door.

‘Well.’ Drake handed over a mobile. ‘The man who possessed this phone spoke to Johansson, who is here in the city.’

‘Here?’ Kobus loudly queried.

‘Yes, here, at a Hotel Grand.’

Kobus waved the mobile. ‘And Roxy?’

‘Unharmd.’

‘The two men?’ Kobus pressed, his eyebrows raised.

‘Alive, but sleeping.’

A knock came at the door.

‘It is Roxy,’ Drake stated, Kobus answering the door. She walked in, and stopped at Drake, her hands on her hips. After a second, she turned to Kobus. ‘He is stronger than he looks.’

Kobus smiled and nodded.

‘He threw a man through a window,’ she reported.

‘It wouldn’t be the first time,’ Kobus responded.

She lifted a mobile. ‘From the other man.’

Kobus turned them both off. ‘OK, Roxy, go to the Hotel Grand, and see who looks out of place. Take a girlfriend; I want twenty-four hour cover.’ He handed her another 500 Euro note.

She studied Drake for a few seconds, and stepped out.

‘I like her,’ Drake said as the door was closed. ‘She has a good heart.’

‘A good heart? She’s a killer. And she enjoys it!’

‘She enjoys hurting men who like to hurt women, because when she was ten years old she was hurt many times by her father and uncle.’

Kobus took a moment, looking away. ‘Ah.’

‘But she has a dog she loves. She fights the bad men her way, and we fight them our way, no.’

‘I guess there are parallels.’

‘We will attack the men at this hotel?’

‘We will,’ Kobus firmly stated. ‘And we’ll get some answers.’

Johansson ran a hand over his shortly cropped grey hair, and turned away from the window of his room at the Grand Hotel. ‘You lost your phones?’ He waited.

The two watchers from the cafe stood with plasters on the faces and hands, a third man sat near. They glanced at each other. ‘Someone picked them up –’

‘While you were taking a nap; a stunt made to look like a simple brawl, intended to liberate your phones. If your wallets had gone I could have put it down to locals – but they took only your phones.’

The man in the chair put in, ‘Kobus has no phone tracking kit, and the phones were switched off within minutes, meaning that someone simply sold them on.’

Johansson took a moment. ‘Maybe.’ He closed in on the two watchers. ‘Last call made.’ He pointed at the first man.

‘Him,’ he said, motioning towards his buddy.

Johansson slid his finger across to the second man.

‘Sports betting results,’ the man admitted.

‘Did either of you call this hotel?’

‘Ain’t got the number; we’d call your mobile, and that re-directs.’

Johansson glanced at the man sat down, and turned back to the window. ‘Describe the kid.’

‘Twenty, thin, jet black hair. It looked dyed.’

‘Pale complexion?’ Johansson nudged as he turned back towards them.

The two men nodded, Johansson making eye contact with the man in the chair.

‘Go and get cleaned up.’ With the men gone, Johansson joined the man sat down. ‘Same kid. They’re here.’

‘*Why ... are they here?*’ the second man asked.

‘If they have the money, then to offload it maybe, launder it maybe. First, they’ll need a new ID.’

‘I’ll start checking the forgers. You know Kobus worked this patch for two years.’

Johansson nodded. ‘He knows the turf, we don’t. He’ll have connections here, he won’t be in a hotel room; he’ll be shackled up with some old girlfriend, or a hooker.’

‘We still don’t know what he’s into,’ the second man cautioned. ‘Or *with whom?* They chopped up four guys in Sophia, four in Varna – in broad daylight, and eight in Germany – Kobus leading our people straight into a carefully prepared trap.’ The man eased forwards. ‘They were sliced and diced, so this has to be a Russian gang thing.’

Johansson took a moment. ‘We’re thin on the evidence - either way; fucking Kobus has been playing both sides for years. Riggs has been suspended; he’s back Stateside having a torch shone up his ass.’

The second man stood. ‘I’ll make you this bet: when you find him, there’ll be twenty Russian gunmen over your shoulder, all wanting a small piece of you.’

He left Johansson with that thought.

At 7pm, as it started to get dark, Kobus led Drake out, and Johansson’s associate was correct - there would be a few Russian gangsters about. With their jackets stuffed full of cash, they walked a few streets through early revellers, and to a club that was just opening, a nod at the doorman. Inside the quiet club, just the one lone punter starting early, Kobus asked for a Demitri, being shown to a table to wait.

Demitri was a short and grey-haired man, dressed now in a casual blue blazer that appeared too big for him. He came flanked by two heavies, both men around two feet taller than their boss. ‘Kobus, long time,’ he offered as they shook, his words accented.

‘Got a private room?’

‘Come, this way, we’ll talk.’ Demitri led them to an office, and to a cluttered desk of invoices and receipts. ‘Drink?’

‘Not yet, it’s going to be a long night.’

‘You have something on tonight, no?’ Demitri asked, pouring himself a drink.

‘I need a few boys,’ Kobus began, taking out the wads of cash. Drake followed suit with a cheery smile, soon quite a bundle handed over. ‘That should be a hundred thousand Euros, more or less.’

‘How many fucking boys do you want?’ Demitri asked, motioning towards the money. ‘And for what?’

‘I’ve ... fallen out with my former paymasters, they’ve ... sent a team for me.’

‘Ah, they wish to close the chapter in the book, clean up the mess, sweep it under the rug,’ Demitri said, waving an arm.

‘Thanks for the analogy,’ Kobus quipped.

‘What thanks for your hard work, eh? It’s poor that they do not look after their people.’

‘Yeah, so, down to business. There’ll be another hundred thousand tomorrow – if I’m still alive. Starting ten minutes ago, I want your people out looking for Americans who can handle themselves. When they find them, I want them injected with morphine, even if it’s done in the street.’

‘You want them asleep, not dead,’ Demitri noted, easing back and cradling his drink.

‘They’re just doing their jobs,’ Kobus responded. ‘It’s their boss I’m interested in. At ten o’clock exactly I want a car set on fire, a hundred yards from the Grand Hotel. At ten thirty exactly I want smoke canisters let loose inside the hotel, and around the outsides.’

Demitri made notes.

‘That’s all for now.’

‘I hope there’s not an American football team visiting,’ Demitri quipped. ‘We will use a lot of morphine for nothing!’

Kobus smiled as he stood. 'They'll get over it. Oh, do you have some 9mm ammo?'

Demitri opened a desk draw and produced two boxes. 'Enough?'

'Enough,' Kobus confirmed.

Demitri tipped his head towards Drake as he stood. 'You play a dangerous game, for such young company.'

'He's ... much stronger than he looks, a top agent.'

'Yes?' Demitri made a face, a big shrug issued. 'We'll be ready, don't worry, my friend.'

Outside, Kobus asked, 'Did you sense deceit?'

'No, he will do as asked.'

They navigated their way down busy streets, tourists out for their evening meals, the first hard-core sex tourists on the prowl. Around the first corner, Drake suddenly shoved Kobus into a noisy bar, flashing neon everywhere, the two of them immersed into the droning beat of techno.

Drake placed his mouth close to Kobus's ear. 'Someone approaches; they think they know your face.'

They slowly eased past the drinkers, most people in this bar drinking whilst standing, and towards the toilets.

'American?' Kobus asked, Drake nodding. He halted behind a pillar. 'Punch to the stomach.' He tapped his abdomen. 'Here. Don't hurt them too much.'

Drake spun around the pillar as Kobus stood with his back to it, and weaved through a party of Brits on a stag weekend. Sensing the two men enter, Drake edged through the Brits, the two large men now looking every which way apart from at him. Drake stepped left, smiling at a group of people - as if part of their group, and edged side-on to the two men. At the last moment, one of the men stared straight at him, a glance at the dyed black hair.

Drake moved quickly, ducking low and coming up, a punch to the stomach that bent the big man in half. A strong hand slapped down onto Drake's shoulder from behind. Drake took



a half step back and bent forwards a little, soon elbowing the man in the solar plexus, the man crumbling to the floor.

People had now moved back, a gap formed, two bouncers rushing over.

Drake tapped his back pocket. Loudly, he said, 'They try to take my money.'

Given the reputation of bars in this city, no one was surprised, and no one had any sympathy for the men on the floor. Drake headed quickly to the door, Kobus outside a minute later. They said nothing as they weaved through the crowds, now being extra careful, and managed to get safely back to the hotel after doubling back.

In the room, Kobus said, 'Time for a change of hair colour I think.' He stepped out of the room, and to a store cupboard at the end of the corridor, pinching a bottle of bleach. Back in the room, he directed a curious Drake towards the bathroom, soon running the warm water into the sink, the plug in the hole. With the sink almost full, Kobus squeezed out a little bleach, slowly swirling it with a hand.

Put your head in, close your eyes, and wash your hair in it for five minutes.

Kobus left the lad to it. Back in the room, he took off his jacket and lit up, opening the window. As an afterthought he closed the curtains tightly and sat on the bed.

By time he finished his cigarette, Drake was out, towelling his hair, which was now black in places, grey in others, blonde spots visible. 'You ... you look fine.'

Drake paused, and returned to the bathroom to study his new hairstyle the mirror. 'This is fitting?' he loudly asked.

'Yes, you have ... *highlights*,' Kobus shouted.

Drake appeared. 'You find this new style amusing.' He waited.

Kobus eased up. 'The important thing ... is not to look as we did before,' he said as he brushed past and into the bathroom.

He took off his t-shirt, squirted more bleach into the sink, and washed his own hair in it at length. When done, he wrapped his head in a towel and took another cigarette, Drake combing his hair in a dresser mirror.

‘You look fine,’ Kobus insisted. ‘And you must have seen people here with hair like this.’

‘How do *you* appear?’ Drake asked, looking up, and looking none too pleased.

‘I’ll wash out the bleach in the shower in a minute, save smelling of it all night. You can hop in first if you like.’ Drake stood. ‘Use a lot of soap on your hair, to get rid of the smell.’

‘You still find my hair amusing,’ Drake complained as he headed to the shower, Kobus resisting a smile.

After Kobus had showered, his hair was closer to a natural dark brown, but lighter in a few places, not too many streaks. But Drake was not a happy bunny.

‘Look,’ Kobus said. ‘Tomorrow we’ll go to a hairdresser, and you can have any colour you like, just ... not black.’

Drake bent over and studied himself in the dresser mirror again.

## Into the fire

At 9.15pm, Kobus checked his pistol, placed a bundle of cash in his jacket, but then hesitated. He leant against the dresser and lit up.

‘You are again uncertain of a course of action,’ Drake noted, sat in front of the TV, the sound turned down.

Kobus pursed his lips, and slowly blew out a pall of grey smoke. Softly, he began, ‘Part of me ... part of me still thinks like a normal person, not one who’ll be dead in a few days. Part of me ... still foolishly believes that ... that once this is all over he’ll go back to work, or maybe change jobs, or take a holiday.’ He coughed out a small laugh, and shook his head.

‘You are following your head, but not your heart.’

Kobus nodded, and took a drag. ‘Part of me ... wants to go on, to ... take part in that constant struggle of Rachel and Ross, that struggle of work, and family, and relationships. I want to have ... *options*, and I have no options.’ He took in their run-down hotel room. ‘They may not have a perfect life, Rachel and Ross, but they have options, and they don’t have anyone shooting at them.’

‘We must consider the mission, the end, and not the means - or the steps in between.’

‘Yes,’ Kobus finally agreed. ‘I know that, I just wish I could ... rid myself of that ... urge to survive.’

‘If you did that, you would not be a person,’ Drake noted. ‘The test, your test, is the battle you now have, that of a person who wishes the life of Rachel and Ross, yet must step into fire for the good of others. Your reward, Kobus van der Schule, will be in your own heart.’

Kobus stepped across to the window, and peered through a crack in the curtains, a slight breeze caressing his face. ‘Self sacrifice. And, even with all the evidence laid out in front of me, I still have a doubt.’

Drake turned off the TV, checked his watch, and stood. ‘If you did not have a doubt, you would not be a man.’ He waited. ‘It is time.’

Kobus flicked his cigarette out of the window. ‘Into the fire we go.’ Putting on his jacket, he said, ‘I wonder how the young soldiers felt on D-Day, during the war.’

‘They too would have this struggle, between the urge to live, and the need for sacrifice,’ Drake stated.

Kobus drew alongside Drake. After a moment, he said, ‘If I’m killed, use this money, try and do some good. And you, young man, should also follow your heart.’

Drake appeared saddened. ‘I fear not death, but I find that I greatly fear your death. I have this struggle within, as you do.’

Kobus nodded to himself. ‘Well, then. Let’s go do something real dumb – but for the right reasons.’ He glanced at Drake’s hair. ‘And if anyone says that you look like a badger, just ignore them.’

‘What is a *badger*?’ Drake asked as they left the room.

‘An animal of the forest.’

‘I appear like an animal of the forest?’ Drake loudly complained.

‘A ... strong and noble animal of the forest,’ Kobus insisted.

‘You still think my hair to be funny!’

‘At least you look ... different.’

Drake walked with his head down, grinding his teeth.

Johansson peered through the spy-hole in his door, and unlocked it, letting in his assistant.

‘We have three men down,’ the man stated as he pushed past his boss. Johansson closed the door, but held it. He waited. His assistant added, ‘Injected in the ass with morphine, by girls for the most part, who disappeared into the crowds. Our guys are safe, they’re just ... fast asleep and dreaming pleasant dreams.’

‘Russian gangsters would have shot them, or stabbed them,’ Johansson puzzled as he stepped across his room and to the window.

‘It’s a puzzler,’ the other man admitted.

‘Warn everyone about crowds, to avoid them.’

‘Ya taken a look out the fucking window lately, boss?’

Johansson peered down at the crowds in the street. ‘This is his turf, and he’s making use of that fact. Fine, we’ll swallow the hook.’ Louder, he said, ‘Have our ladies follow our guys, and tell the guys to be a bit obvious. When they get stabbed in the arse, grab the girls doing the stabbing.’ He faced his assistant. ‘Move, and counter move,’ he loudly commended. ‘And I’m smarter than he is.’

One street away from their hotel, Kobus moved into a dark doorway, switching on one of the watchers mobiles. He punched in the number for Riggs, but his finger hovered over the green button. Finally he pressed it.

‘Hello?’ came after six rings.

‘You’re not Riggs,’ Kobus said, an eye on the crowds.

‘No, Kobus, I’m his boss, Brad Martins. We have met.’

‘Where’s Riggs?’

‘Stateside, under investigation.’

‘For what?’

‘For his associations to you.’

‘Meaning?’

‘Oh, a few dead agents, a few million in gold coins. Is there ... something you’d like to get off your chest?’

‘Riggs is clean, he had nothing to do with anything that happened here. And for the record, I’m clean as well, and someday ... someday that fact might see the light of day.’

‘There’s a large pile of gold coins that *speaks volumes* about how clean you are.’

Kobus took a moment. ‘That *would* take some explaining. But you need to ask yourself one thing, when you consider that I have three million dollars in cash in a bag, and that’s why I’m looking for answers, when I could be sitting on a beach. Keep that thought in mind in the next few days, and then ... then when a very large bomb goes off – one that’ll make 9/11 look like a sideshow – you might consider why I’m not sitting on a beach.’ He hung up.

Seeing a teenager walking past, he stopped the youth. ‘Here, this is for you. Keep it. Go on.’ The teenager walked off examining the phone.

‘You are saddened,’ Drake noted.

‘My ... previous boss, who was a boss *and* a friend, he’s ... in the dungeon of the magistrate.’

‘It is sad, yes. But many an innocent man went to the dungeon.’

Kobus took in the crowds, and the flashing neon signs of the many bars. ‘In your time and mine,’ he said, sighing. He turned, and led Drake off at a brisk pace.

They approached the Imperial Hotel from the rear, a glimpse of the neon sign for the Grand Hotel, their target hotel being third large hotel in a row on this block. With Drake a step or two ahead, moving slowly through the dark and sensing for danger, they weaved through stationary cars in a dimly lit parking area at street level, and to the base of a fire exit.

Kobus whispered. ‘Jump up, and turn the wheel so that the ladder comes down.’

Drake crouched and jumped, climbing hand over hand onto a landing, and soon hand-cranking the ladder down, a few loud squeaks issued. When the ladder was low enough, Kobus jumped up, getting a knee in the bottom rung as Drake reversed his actions, the ladder rising quickly. Safely onto the first landing, Kobus stepped slowly and quietly higher, up six flights of metal steps and to the roof, a padlocked gate preventing access onto the roof.

Drake considered the lock, and the gate, finally the metal grill that housed the fire exit. He yanked at a corner, breaking the thin metal strands, and pulled it back, enough room for him to climb through. Kobus followed, struggling after snagging his jacket.

They found themselves on a sloping roof of grey lead flashing, the slope around three metres and leading up to a flat top. Along the edge of the roof ran a stone balustrade some three feet high, and they now edged along it in the dark bent double, enjoying a good view of the city's neon lights.

Kobus had taken little more than five steps when Drake pushed him down. They waited. 'What?' Kobus finally whispered.

'A man with a rifle, and a ... thing for looking at night, as before in Sophia.'

'A night sight,' Kobus noted. 'Stay low, and out of line of sight.'

They started to crawl, dead pigeons pushed aside.

At the end of the balustrade, Drake peeked up and over the top. 'There is a ... thing for the smoke of the fire. The man does not see us.'

Kobus eased, up, scrambling up and over a wall and down onto the next roof, this one flat, but with a similar stone balustrade, two lift housings sat perched at either end. And, oddly enough, a clothes line with a few clothes pegged out. Kobus looked up and made a face as he crawled past it.

A firm hand on Kobus's leg, yanking him back a few inches, and Drake was up and running to the lift housing, and around it. Kobus drew his pistol, and lay flat. Ahead of him he could see the darkened outline of the lift housing, the tops of hotel signs across the road, the glow from the street below highlight the gaps in the balustrade opposite.

A man stepped out, stubbing out a cigarette with his shoe. Kobus froze, wondering just how dark this damn roof was. He took aim. The man turned towards him, just as a dark figure appeared behind the man. Kobus tapped the roof with his pistol, the man inching his head forwards to see what the tapping might be. A blow from Drake, the sound of cracking bone, and the man went down.

Kobus got up to his knees, to his feet, but ran across bent double, dropping to the lying position next to the man, Drake now knelt beside his victim.

'He lives, but has damage,' Drake whispered as the man groaned.

Kobus checked his watch. 'Fifteen minutes.' He relived the man of his pistol, tossing it up onto the top of the lift housing as Drake pulled out a radio and mobile phone. The phone was tossed up onto the lift housing, the radio kept.

'Is the man with the rifle looking this way?' Kobus whispered.

'No, he ... eats something, and faces away.'

Kobus eased up and ran to the balustrade at the front of this hotel, peering down at the bustling street below, a pedestrian walkway without traffic. There, in the middle of the street, sat a small garden, a few tall bushes. Kobus studied the radio, finally retrieving a twenty Euro note from his pocket. He turned the radio on, jammed the folded note into the side of the TRANSMIT button, pressed the key down – it held, and tossed it into the bushes below.

Drake turned his head towards the Grand Hotel. 'Men puzzle the lack of words, and ... curse the lack of words. They



... believe someone to be in error, someone ... in the many people below.'

'As they should,' Kobus whispered, running bent double to wall that separated this hotel from the Grand.

Johansson opened his bedroom door to his assistant.

'We grabbed two *ladies*, and I use the words sparingly,' the man said as he entered. Johansson shut the door. 'They were paid by a local Russian hood. And get this: tonight at ten thirty they were due to set off the fire alarm in this hotel, tossing around a few smoke canisters.'

Johansson was momentarily shocked, but tried to hide it. Stepping past his assistant, he noted, 'He knows I'm here, and he wants me.'

'What's his gripe with *you*?'

'Wish I knew that. He put in a call Riggs's boss, Brad Martins, a little while ago, and asked Martins to consider why he – Kobus – was not sat on a beach. He has three million in cash, apparently.'

'So why *ain't* he sat on a beach with the loot?'

'He has an axe to grind, or maybe those he works for do.'

'Who ya pissed off?'

Johansson took a moment. 'Good ... question. Another good question ... would be how he knew about this place.' He checked his watch.

'We moving?'

'That's what he wants, for me to be out on the street.'

'Sniper?'

'I'll pack quickly. Have the cars brought around the back and into the underground car park. Check it all carefully.'

'From fox to hen ... in one minute,' the man noted, getting a pointed finger from Johansson.

On the roof, Drake focused on the real sniper, not the imagined one. Lowering his head, he whispered, ‘They make ready to leave.’

‘Leave ... for a drink, for some food ... or leave for another hotel?’

‘They do not wish to return to this place.’

‘Can you get that sniper quietly?’

Drake eased his head up. ‘He makes ready to leave, he does not care for anything else. He talks with another man, much ... *bullshit* spoken of. What is a *bullshit detail*?’

‘That would mean that they don’t believe in the merits of their task.’

‘It should be easy to defeat such people.’

‘Go!’ Kobus urged in a strong whisper.

Drake leapt over the wall, a thud heard a few seconds later, the clatter of something hitting the roof. He returned quickly. ‘The man thought of many cars under the hotel.’

‘Shit,’ Kobus let out. Bent double, he crawled like a crab sideways, and peered over the balustrade at the rear of the hotel. After a moment, peering down into the dark car park of the Grand Hotel, he could see that two cars were being attended by at least two men each. Turning to Drake, he said, ‘You see those men and those two cars?’

Drake peered down. ‘Yes, they are anxious.’

‘Wait till I reach the metal steps and start down, then throw the man you just hit down onto those cars, *and* the man from this roof. Can you ... throw that far?’

‘Yes.’ Drake leapt over the wall, and back onto the roof of the Grand.

Kobus turned, running bent double next to the balustrade, and over to the Imperial Hotel, a hand on the lead flashing as he made his way along the balustrade. At the fire exit he clambered through, again snagging his jacket and cursing, soon stepping quietly down the metal steps.

He had made it down to the second landing when a loud smash caused him to stop and look. He could not see the far car park clearly from where he was, but he could guess what had caused the sound. He descended another two landings, another loud crash signifying an impact. Clambering down the ladder, he dropped the last four feet, suddenly scared rigid by the car next to him exploding, showering him with glass.

Drake lifted Kobus upright. ‘Sorry, I ... was not sure of the merits of jumping.’

‘No shit!’ Kobus whispered, a quick look at a saloon that had unwittingly become a soft-top. He led Drake out of the rear of the car park, took position in a dark corner, and waited.

Johansson had opened his door, had half stepped into the corridor, but was pushed back inside by his assistant. ‘What is it?’ he asked as he closed the door.

‘We just lost the two guys on the roof, and two cars in the lot,’ the man reported, now a little out of breath. ‘The guys on the roof took a run and jump, and demolished the cars. Three guys badly hurt out back. *We ... ain’t going nowhere.*’

Johansson dropped his bag and stepped back into the room, kicking over a chair. He checked his pistol, and checked his watch. ‘The smoke will be just a decoy to get us out; they won’t set the hotel on fire.’ He kicked the upturned chair. ‘Call everyone back here. Now!’

The assistant lifted his phone, as Johansson moved to the window, peering through a crack in the thick curtains, the street below full of revellers oblivious to the drama unfolding above their heads. ‘What do they want?’ he whispered to himself.

Bob Russell answered his phone. ‘Yes.’

‘Sorry to disturb you, sir, but there’s a situation developing in Prague.’

‘Go on.’

‘Johansson has nine men down, and he’s now holed-up in his hotel, surrounded.’

‘Surrounded? By who?’

‘We don’t know, sir, but local Russians gangsters were used to disable some of our men.’

‘Disable?’

‘Injected in the ass with morphine, right in the street in public.’

‘Where’s that Alpha Team?’

‘Sat awaiting a suitable target, sir. And sir, the front of that hotel has a thousand people in the street.’

‘*They* can move through the crowds, and we don’t dare shoot. Move the Alpha Team to the rear of the hotel, not to make contact with Johansson and his people, but to see who’s watching the place.’

‘Yes, sir.’

Russell lowered his phone, and peered across at the Deputy Director.

‘Problem?’

‘Very much so, and we’re getting sidetracked with this man Kobus. Whoever he’s working for is expending a great deal of time, energy, and money, not only on keeping him alive, but hitting back at anyone getting close. Our people in Prague are nine men down and stuck in a hotel.’

‘Just who the hell has that kind of nerve, and the resources to pull it off?’ the Deputy angrily considered.

‘We can fight this war, or we can concentrate on other things.’

‘If there’s someone out there with those kinds of resources, willing to interfere with us, then I want to know,’ the Deputy Director insisted.

As Kobus and Drake hid in the shadows, two ambulances and two police cars pulled into the rear of the Grand Hotel.

‘Time to move,’ Kobus said. He led Drake back into the car park of the first hotel, and ducked between parked cars. Flashing blue lights then penetrated this car park, the police moving towards the car that Drake had landed on.

Kobus moved off, keeping low, an eye on the police. Finding a bin next to a wall, and a convenient ledge on the wall, Kobus made a choice and lunged upwards. A foot on the bin, and second foot on the ledge, a hand on the wall, and he rolled over the top, landing between two cars. Drake landed next to him, on all fours like a cat.

‘Can you sense anyone?’ Kobus urgently whispered.

‘A man makes ready to leave, two people walk to the hotel.’

Car headlights preceded the car pulling out, the vehicle soon in the lane.

‘There is no one near,’ Drake finally whispered.

Kobus lifted up, running bent double to the wall of the Grand Hotel’s car park. Flickering blue lights could be seen, reflecting off the back of the hotel, people peering out of windows at the action below.

‘Men go to hospital,’ Drake began. ‘Two men go inside. They believe that Johansson will remain in the hotel.’

Kobus checked his watch. ‘Two minutes.’ He forced a breath, releasing a heavy sigh. ‘C’mon.’

Bent double, they ran behind parked cars, and to the rear entrance of this hotel. Once there, they straightened, and tried to look like guests. Inside, they ducked left and into the stairwell, rushing straight up to the top floor.

Kobus halted at the emergency door. ‘If we open this an alarm will sound.’ He took a moment, before rushing down the corridor to the front of the hotel. Halting at a door, he asked Drake, ‘Anyone inside?’

Drake neared the door, shaking his head after a moment. Kobus ran a hand over the door, finding it solid. He gestured Drake towards it, a shoulder taking the lock off. They quickly

moved inside, the room dark, and closed the door - as best they could with its frame splintered.

The balcony door was unlocked, and they now slid it open, the two of them engulfed in a roar from the street below. They had no view of the front on the Grand, but were visible from across the street.

‘Anyone across the street? Watching the hotel?’

Drake peered across. ‘Two men, they watch the street.’

‘Where?’

Drake pointed.

‘Far enough away.’ Kobus hopped up onto the balcony wall, a quick and nervous look down five floors as he wobbled, grabbed a drainpipe, and placed a foot on a sill over the balcony door. Reaching up to a gap in the balustrade, he soon had a hand on the top of the stone balustrade, a knee on the base of the balustrade, and over, landing in a heap. Drake was already there, crouched ready.

‘A woman on a balcony, with a small dog, saw us. She calls the hotel people.’

‘Fucking great,’ Kobus whispered as he eased up. They ran to the wall of the Grand, scrambled over, and kept low as they headed to the stairwell.

Reaching the stairwell, and opening the door, a shaft of light illuminated them, Drake shot a second later. He spun, landing flat, and seemingly lifeless. The crack registered with Kobus as a high velocity round, but probably with a silencer fitted, and it came from behind them. He let go of the door, the light cut away, and crawled over in darkness.

‘Drake!’

‘I am alive, but playing like an animal that has been killed; a blossom,’ Drake flatly stated.

‘That’s a Possum; playing Possum.’

‘Since I appear like a creature of the forest, is it not fitting?’

‘When you’re quite ready,’ Kobus curtly nudged.

The lifeless form lifted up onto all fours, both men staying low as they headed to the stairwell and down. As they moved lower, Drake pulled out a wad of cash, the wad now with a hole in it. He showed it to Kobus, who tossed it away after a quick look.

‘Will this money not be good?’ Drake enquired, a look over his shoulder at the discarded cash.

‘Well, we could take it to the bank and ask if they’ll change it for us. Just need to explain that it was in your jacket when you were hit with a high velocity round!’ He turned away, and down the stairwell, just as the fire alarm sounded.

‘It has begun,’ Drake noted. ‘There is much concern from many people.’

‘*They’ll* evacuate, our boys won’t.’ He forced a breath. ‘We wait.’ He sat on the stairs, soon hearing people on the stairs below, clattering lower.

After ten minutes the stairs fell silent, but the smell of smoke hit them.

‘Few people remain,’ Drake suggested. ‘I sense men with guns, anxious men.’ Drake stood, and stepped down to the landing below, a puzzled frown taking hold. ‘I sense Roxy, here, afraid and held.’

‘They must have made her,’ Kobus noted as he stepped down. ‘Can you find the room?’

‘I can.’ He led on. One floor down, he stopped at the access door to this floor. ‘Men watch this door.’

Kobus coughed in the smoke, the fire alarm now ending.

Drake peered down the stairwell. ‘Men make ready to come up, men ... who wish good for people, and to help.’

‘Firemen.’ Kobus led Drake back up to the roof. They bent double and rushed across to the middle of the hotel, and peered down at the rear through the balustrade; rooms at the rear did not offer their guests balconies. There was also the small matter of a hundred firemen running around, and a sniper.

‘She is two floors below. Here, this room.’

‘Can you climb down there?’

‘Yes, but men now look up.’

‘Then we go in the front.’

They ran across the flat roof, and hardly paused before scrambling over the side and dropping down onto a balcony. Tourists peered up and screamed at them – as if they might fall, the two men now appearing as if escaping the blaze. Once on the balcony, they scrambled lower another floor, Drake kicking in the glass. Kobus hesitated, turned back to the balcony and shouted ‘Help us,’ before entering the bedroom.

‘You wish help from others?’ Drake puzzled.

‘No, that’s so they’ll think we’re guests.’

Drake was not following, but rushed to the room door, placing an ear against it. ‘They are close.’ He pointed to the right. ‘They do not look this way.’

Kobus slowly turned the handle, opening the door a few inches and letting in a shaft of light, noting now a thin layer of smoke creeping along the corridor’s ceiling. With the door fully open, magnolia walls and bland watercolours exposed, Drake inched closer to the door frame, peeked out, then burst out in a blur. Kobus followed closely, looking every which way, his pistol levelled.

Drake hit the first man with a punch, kicking the door that the second man stood partially behind - a room directly opposite the first. He barged into the room that held Roxy, Kobus shouldering his way into the room opposite. Kobus found a man out cold, lying in the dark, blood covering his face, a pistol on the carpet. The room was clear. He opened the door again, pistol prone, and moved into the light, checking the corridor both ways.

A face, off to the right.

He lifted his pistol and fired twice as he moved, leaping across to the room opposite. Inside, he stepped over an unconscious man, finding a second man out cold and lying in



an unnatural position, Drake untying Roxy as she lay trussed-up on the bed, the lights on in this room.

And the curtains were open, he noticed as an afterthought. A new thought entered Kobus's head, a good instinct.

'Down!' he shouted. He was too late.

The window cracked, not a loud noise, and Roxy's head exploded, blood spattered across the wall.

Drake spun, staring at the window, dragged down by Kobus a second later, who started to crawl on his hands and knees to the door. Drake moved just two feet, and stopped, staring at Roxy's lifeless eyes as she hung over the side of the bed, blood spurting down to the carpet. The image held his attention for many seconds.

Reaching the door and peeking out, Kobus could see a dozen firemen in dark uniforms and shiny metal helmets now coming down the corridor towards him. He lifted his pistol, aimed at the ceiling, and fired three times, the firemen withdrawing in a mad scramble. Turning back into the room, Kobus caught his breath, sat now with his back against the door frame - his legs keeping the sprung door open, and sat staring at Drake's expression. Several seconds passed.

'Her death was my fault,' Kobus finally said. 'Because I followed my heart, and not my head.'

Drake turned his head to make eye contact. 'The end, not the means,' he said, no energy in his voice, his eyelids seemingly heavy.

'We need to find Johansson,' Kobus finally said, the broken window letting in the sound of sirens.

'One floor below, a ... room over the street. He waits, and he is afraid.'

'Then perhaps, my young friend, we should help him realise his fears.'

Drake moved painfully slowly, Kobus holding the door whilst staying low. With the door shut they eased up, Kobus

now starting to cough in the smoke. ‘Another man is close, but hurt from you.’

‘I must have winged him.’

Drake stepped to a door, kicked it through with a roar, and entered, three rounds fired before a scream was issued. A loud smashing sound signalled the man exiting the hotel via the window without opening it first, falling three floors to down to the car park below.

Kobus moved past the room, pistol still prone, now watchful of the doors, and ran to the stairwell. He found it clear, Drake behind him a second later. They walked down one floor. Kobus made ready, grabbed the door, and ducked to the hinge side, yanking it open. The smoke was thicker here, and he put his face in his elbow as Drake walked brazenly into the corridor.

After Drake had taken ten steps two shots rang out, closely followed by a second two, soon the sound of a door being kicked off its hinges registering with Kobus. Another two reports, a scream. Kobus ran forwards as best he could, bent double and trying to breathe through part of his t-shirt that he know held over his mouth. He reached an open door on the left, open because it was laying flat on the floor, off its hinges, Drake heard moving around inside.

The door opposite opened.

In slow motion, Kobus dropped to a knee, his back against the magnolia corridor wall, two shots fired into a figure. He could see the slide moving in slow motion, the expelled cartridges flying out. The figure gasped and fell backwards, the door slamming shut after being released.

Kobus composed himself, catching his breath, making a check of the corridor both ways. Turning, he scrambled over the slippery door as it lay flat, and straightened up in the darkened interior of the room, flashing neon light entering the room from the hotel opposite, a lime green hue applied to the grey images within. Someone had turned the room lights off, but had opened the curtains fully.

Drake stood over a man on a bed, and as Kobus closed in he could see that the man's thumbs were now missing, the blood an odd brown colour in the green light, alternating to shades of grey. The man turned his head towards Kobus, trying desperately to control his breathing, breathing through his nose, his nostrils flaring wildly.

'You Johansson?' Kobus demanded.

'He is,' Drake put in.

'What do you know about Pop-Dragon?'

'What ... is ... he?' came back in a strained whisper.

'Talk and you get an ambulance. If not, I'll let him eat you alive, finger by finger. What do you know about Pop-Dragon?'

'Project ... is headed by ... Bob Russell.'

'And the Deputy Director knows?'

Johansson nodded.

'Here's the question that will decide if he bites your fucking pecker off: what's the target?'

'Baghdad.'

'Baghdad? You're not about to blow up your own troops, or diplomats. So what's the target?'

'East ... the suburbs,' Johansson strained out, controlling the pain.

'Ah, roast the Shia, cause another civil war, keep you there for another decade, and convince the folks back home that WMDs do exist - and that budgets need to be increased of course. And who would get the blame? Iranian backed militias maybe?'

'Yes.'

Kobus lifted his head to Drake.

'He speaks the truth.'

Kobus stepped to the window, peering down at the police now moving people back, the road taped-off both ends, flashing blue lights everywhere, his face being bathed in the green flashing light from across the road.

‘Drake, getting to Iraq, and finding them and stopping them would ... be almost impossible, even with the money and the best will in the world. Even with *you* at my side.’ He turned. ‘I don’t think we’re meant to go to Iraq, I think ... we’re missing something.’

He returned to Johansson, whose eyes were now moist with the pain. ‘Who were the woman and child in the villa? Kamil’s family?’

‘Yes,’ was squeezed out from fitful lungs.

‘Why would you kill your only bargaining chip with Kamil? *And* after the delivery of the detonator was screwed up? Maybe ... because you didn’t need the detonator, because you could make one easily enough yourselves. Maybe, you needed the world - and the agency - to think that someone was buying the detonator. Help you to ... apportion blame later, piss off the Russians; two birds with one stone.’

Kobus heaved a sigh, and turned away. ‘Drake, we have fought the dragon, and we’re in the castle talking with the pretender to the throne, but ... there is no answer here, no maiden to rescue. Something ... is not right.’

He turned back, and lowered his head to Johansson. ‘Is there anything that you’re not telling me that might save your life, because right now I’m not tempted to let you live. What ... was the last thing you heard about Pop-Dragon?’

Johansson took a moment, but Drake cut in with, ‘Contact was lost with ... Special Unit 14.’

‘And what does Special Unit 14 do?’ Kobus asked Johansson.

‘They ... transport the device,’ came back in a strained whisper.

Kobus stared down. ‘You ... stupid son of a bitch,’ he slowly let out. ‘You lost the fucking device.’ Kobus tipped his head back, and sighed heavily. Lowering his head, he asked, ‘How long ago?’

‘They’re ... overdue ... reporting in. Twelve ... hours,’ Johansson strained to get out. ‘Might just be ... faulty kit.’

‘Final question: was Dr Kamil with Special Unit 14; along for the ride, under duress?’

Johansson took a moment. ‘Yes.’

Kobus took a step back, a last look at Johansson. ‘Drake, I’ll be on the roof. You have one minute to vent some anger.’

Kobus reached the corridor as the screaming began, and the scream echoed all the way down the corridor as he ran through the smoke. On the roof he dropped to his knees and gasped for breath, the smoke now starting to have an effect. The air was full of the sound of sirens, now the sound of a helicopter.

A flash of red in his eyes.

Kobus dropped flat, a crack of air, and he knew that a laser designator had been used. Snipers, those that had killed Roxy; they now had a better angle on the hotel roof. He had forgotten about them, and had nearly gotten himself killed. Cursing himself, he shuffled backwards into the stairwell, and down a few steps as he studied the rising smoke. Had Demitri’s people set fire to the hotel for real, or just used half a tonne of smoke canisters?

Drake leapt up the steps, halting on the landing below as Kobus kept his head down.

Kobus stared, wide-eyed; not an inch of Drake’s clothing or skin was free of blood. He looked like he had been swimming in it, and now stood rigid, his chin on his chest, his eyes wild. After a moment, Kobus said, ‘I guess you did vent some anger after all.’

‘I do not feel better,’ Drake stated.

‘Yeah, welcome to the club; I just missed a sniper by an inch.’

Drake lifted his head, and peered up to the roof door. ‘The man who shot Roxy, he is ... many paces, maybe ... one hundred. There are ... six of them with long guns.’

‘We may be able to get across a balcony at the front, but I’d not make it; there’s a sniper out front as well. Basement is a possibility.’

‘Wait for my signal, wait here.’

‘What ... will the signal be?’ Kobus puzzled.

‘As I jumped onto the car, so this noise it made.’ He leapt over Kobus in a single bound and out of the roof door, several cracks registering almost immediately, high velocity rounds. Kobus turned, and inched higher - as far as he dare go, additional cracks registering through the night sky.

Kobus waited a full three minutes, wondering if the police would be coming up the stairs, or any of Johansson’s men, or if the damn hotel would burn down around him. Maybe he would just choke to death, he considered as he waited on the stairs.

A distant burst of machinegun fire.

Another burst.

A smash, just like the men hitting the cars before, and now a car alarm.

A second smash, a third, a fourth, more car alarms. At six, Kobus eased up and crawled to the balustrade, peering down. The police, the firemen, and now the ambulance crews were attending men’s bodies on damaged cars, the men looking like they had dropped from a plane.

Taking a breath, and making a choice, a choice of faith and belief, he lifted up and ran as fast as he could, his heart pounding. He reaching the wall, still alive he noted to himself, and lunged over it. Across the flat roof he sprinted, pistol in hand, ducking under the oddly placed clothes line. On the roof of the Imperial Hotel, he crouched down and crawled frantically along the lead flashing, and to the fire escape. Seeing the flashing blue lights below, he kept going.

The hotel roof ended abruptly, an eight foot gap across to a lower roof. A leap of faith was now required. Literally. He put his pistol away, stood on the edge, bent his knees and leapt forwards, landing and rolling. He slammed into a skylight and

stopped, testing his ankles while still on his back. They hurt, but did not seem broken. Easing up, he ran to a door, finding it locked. Two rounds fired, and the lock gave.

The inside of the stairwell was dark, the stairs unlit for the first two flights, but then normal hotel stairs appeared, carpeted in a light brown. He ran down, three flights before he heard a door slam above him, but kept going, right down to the ground level. There he stopped dead in front of a huge mirror, and checked himself over. Composing himself, a hand through his hair, he stepped into the main reception area. Seeing a leaflet carousel, he grabbed two tourist leaflets, studying them as he walked straight out of the front of the hotel, the police cordon ending just before the entrance of this hotel. He disappeared into the thick crowds.

Back at the hotel, he placed a thousand Euros on the desk, under the nose of the fat old porter. ‘Men look for me. If they find me, I’ll kill you.’ From the look he gave the man, the man was left in no doubt.

Kobus carefully checked the corridor outside his room, an ear to his own door for a few seconds. With pistol in hand, he turned the key without being in the firing line. Nothing. He reached an arm inside and flicked the light on, inching in slowly, every angle checked, even under the beds, finally the bathroom.

Taking off his jacket, and issuing a huge sigh, a knock came at the window, startling him. Since they were five floors up, he figured it was Drake. He knocked the lights off, opened the curtains, and let Drake in. Closing the curtains, he flicked the lights on, Drake stood soaked in blood.

Kobus took a moment as Drake stood staring back. ‘Did anyone see you?’

Drake took a while before answering. ‘I used high places.’

‘Step into the bathroom, take off everything, and have a hot shower.’

After a moment, Drake turned and entered the bathroom. Kobus rifled through Drake's bags, finding the spare set of clothes. He placed them on the end of the bed.

Lifting a large plastic bag, he handed it through to Drake. 'Put all of your clothes in this, and shoes and socks. I'm going downstairs, I won't be long.'

Kobus put his denim jacket back on, and took the stairs down, checking every turn. Reaching the night porter, he said, 'Coca Cola?'

'In kitchen.'

'Now!'

The man brought back a large plastic bottle of Cola, sheepishly handing it over. Back in the room, Kobus now found the plastic bag containing Drake's clothes left outside the bathroom door. Into it he poured the Cola, mixing it around. Pulling a pillow case off a pillow, he soaked it in Cola and wiped down the window ledge, the floors, and spots on the wall and bed covers. With that done, he sat on his own bed, his back to the headboard, and lit up.

Drake emerged naked ten minutes later, taking the clothes and dressing in silence, the new shoes placed on, not yet worn. When done, and still not having said anything, he sat on the edge of the second bed, facing away. Kobus eased up, and took the plastic bag of Drake's clothes into the bathroom. He poured Cola into the bath, down the sink, and wiped down surfaces where he could see blood. Placing the bag of clothes in the bathtub, he poured most of the Cola into it, and left it to soak.

Back in the room, he sat down next to Drake, almost shoulder to shoulder. 'You ... feel bad for letting the demon out?' Kobus softly enquired.

'I did great evil, and enjoyed it.'

'You ... enjoyed hurting those who hurt Roxy, you didn't kill for fun. You helped me, you saved me for sure – I should be dead now.'

'And the bomb he spoke of?'



‘Would have killed a million people yes, and may still do. But the betrayer has been betrayed, and the bomb is now in the hands of mad men.’

‘We shall fight more.’

‘We shall fight ... till the bomb is no more, and we will count those we saved.’

‘We shall count those we saved,’ Drake repeated.

## Turning point

Bob Russell answered his phone. ‘Yes?’

‘Sir, news from ... from Prague.’

‘Go on.’

‘The hotel that Johansson was at, it was hit, none of our people walked out of it that weren’t already on their way to hospital earlier.’

Russell paused. ‘And Johansson?’

‘They’ll ... try and identify him by DNA records, sir.’

‘DNA records? What the hell are you talking about?’

‘They ... didn’t find a piece of him big enough to identify, sir, his entrails hanging from the light fittings.’

A long pause preceded, ‘And the Alpha team?’

‘All dead, sir. Initial reports are odd, but not as odd as the rest of these reports, considering. They’re ... trying to match heads to torsos.’

‘And dead or wounded enemy agents?’

‘The sniper teams reported at least three clean kills, but no blood or bodies were recovered, no sign of Kobus. Shell casings were found around the hotel, bullet holes, but no bodies - except our people, sir.’

Russell hung up.

At the other end, the junior member of staff placed down the phone, closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

Taking off his headset, he slowly swivelled his chair and looked up at the cold stares of Brad Martins, Riggs, and two other men. As a group, they moved off without saying anything.

Sat in the hotel room, Kobus eased up and said, 'We'd best make use of the confusion out there, and get our new papers.'

Drake eased up, and placed his jacket on without having lifted his eyes off the floor.

Kobus took a moment. 'I never had any children, but if I had a son, then I hope he would have turned out as well as you have.'

Drake lifted his face, lightening a little.

'You have a good heart, and you're doing the right thing. And never forget that if we fail ... a great many people will die. Keep those people in your thoughts.'

Drake found some fortitude before Kobus led him out. They walked through the crowds, and around to Blok's tattoo parlour, their nasal passages assaulted on entry with a mix of spice and pot. They were immersed in deep red light as they walked through, past girls having tattoos added to odd areas, or being pierced, Drake shocked by the activities. Kobus had to drag him by the arm, twice.

Knocking on Blok's door, the slide opened, their faces examined. With the door open, Blok said, 'Dude, have you heard about all the shooting and stuff?'

'We've been keeping a low profile,' Kobus said as they entered. 'Why, what's been happening?'

'Some big shoot-out and a fire at some hotel, like the Grand, man. Bodies everywhere.'

Kobus made a face. 'Russian gangs. Got the papers?'

Blok opened a drawer and produced six passports, a few drivers licenses, Kobus checking the work, and the likenesses, Drake very curious about his own image.

'Paul Smith?' Drake queried.

‘That’s the name you would use at the border,’ Kobus explained. ‘You’d say that you were British.’ He faced Blok. ‘How solid are these?’

‘My friend got the names and numbers from Interpol, so like – they’re real people, and current passports, man.’

Kobus nodded. ‘Good.’ He handed over another three thousand Euros. ‘Destroy anything linking them to me.’

Blok smiled. ‘We got a dude next door; he came looking for you, man.’

‘Show me,’ Kobus said with a puzzled frown.

Blok led them through to a second room, a man being working on, a new tattoo being applied. Only this man was drugged-up and out of it. ‘Gave him a beer with a little extra in, man.’

Kobus closed in, peering at the tattoos. The man’s face now held a Nazi Swastika on his forehead, a dick with balls on a cheek, and “Fuck you” on the other cheek. ‘Should slow him up a bit,’ he quipped.

Putting away the fake IDs, Kobus said, ‘Have you seen or heard from Roxy today?’

Blok shook his head. ‘No, man.’

‘She was watching a few people for me. Hope they didn’t make her.’ He thanked Blok, and led Drake out, past the naked bodies.

Outside, Drake said, ‘You created a falsehood about Roxy.’

Kobus halted in the street, the never ending sea of drunken revellers moving past, and lit up. ‘Nothing we can do to bring her back, but we can divert blame away from us.’

‘We *are* to blame,’ Drake sullenly stated.

‘And a few more may die before this is over.’

Back in the hotel room, they packed up, Drake retrieving the money, the holdalls filled, his hands washed. Thoroughly. Reclaiming the car, from a spot a few streets away, Kobus threw off the parking tickets and eased in.

‘Where shall we go?’ Drake enquired.

‘Away from here, and then ... then we’ll decide, because right now I haven’t any leads to follow.’

Sat in the car, the engine started, Drake pointed. ‘This girl is greatly distressed.’

Kobus took a moment. ‘So?’

‘We should help.’

‘There are probably a great many people around *these streets* we could help,’ Kobus said dismissively.

Drake turned his head to Kobus, and waited. After a moment, Kobus switched off the engine. ‘OK, fine.’ They stepped out, and approached the sobbing girl. She seemed to be aged around twenty, cute, blonde hair, a skimpy short dress, and now stood looking very lost.

‘Do you ... speak English?’ Kobus asked.

‘Yes.’

‘Are you OK, love?’ Kobus asked.

‘I had all my stuff stolen, my bags, my phone, my money, everything. I only have my passport left. Now the hotel won’t help,’ she sobbed. ‘I don’t even have a coin to call the British Embassy.’

Drake took out twenty thousand Euros, being stared at by Kobus, and handed it over. ‘Now you have coin. Please, don’t be sad.’

She stared at the wad in her hand. ‘My god.’

Kobus sighed, rolled his eyes, and turned, grabbing Drake by the arm and leading him away.

‘Wait,’ she called. She stepped after them. ‘This is too much.’ She took a 500 Euro note off the top, and handed Drake the remainder. ‘Give me your address, I’ll send it back to you.’

‘There’s no need,’ Kobus assured her, stepping towards the car.

‘Please, I want to,’ she insisted, rushing after them, Drake giving Kobus a nudge with his look.

‘Get in the car,’ Kobus finally told her. ‘I know where the embassy is. They have twenty-four hour staff for lost Brits.’

They all got into the car, Drake making room for her in the back, moving the holdalls.

As they pulled off, she dabbed her runny mascara with the back of a hand, and asked, 'Are you here on a stag weekend?'

'Not ... really,' Kobus said as they drove towards the embassy.

Drake turned his head. 'We work for Interpol, and thus travel much through Europe.'

Kobus shot him a look without the girl noticing.

'Sounds interesting,' she offered.

'Where is your home?' Drake enquired.

'I live in Gibraltar with my father, my mother lives in England, in Essex.'

'Where were you hoping to fly back to?' Kobus asked.

'Back to Gibraltar. I work for my dad, in shipping.' She took a moment. 'I don't even know your names.'

'I am called Drake.'

'Drake, like the duck?'

Drake stared at the side of Kobus's head. 'A duck?'

'Drake, a male duck,' she added.

'A male duck,' Drake repeated, still staring at the side of Kobus's head.

'His name is Paul Smith, but I call him Drake because he looks like a vampire after a late night out.'

'I'm Cathy, but my friends call me Cat. I was named after a saint that was burned, or something.'

'A saint?' Drake repeated with a frown. 'Your father, he is a religious man?'

'He is, I suppose. He met my mum when she was on holiday in Spain; he's from Gibraltar.'

'What work is it ... that you do?' Drake enquired, trying to make conversation as they drove.

'I'm a clerk, a shipping clerk, I do the paperwork for my dad; stevedoring and warehousing, freight forwarding. Mostly

we ship around the Mediterranean, some Middle East and Africa.’

Kobus glanced at Drake. ‘What ... Middle East countries do you ship from?’

‘We handle Syria and Lebanon, but just landed a good contract for UN goods in and out of Iraq.’

Kobus slowed and pulled over, a look exchanged with Drake. ‘Cat, my young friend here has been nagging me for some time for a driving holiday across Europe. We were going to head for southern Spain and ... it wouldn’t be out of our way to drop you off in Gibraltar. Are you ... in a hurry?’

‘Oh, well, I have to be back in work in four days.’

‘How come you’re here alone?’ Kobus asked, looking the girl over in the mirror.

‘I had a row with the two girls I came with, and stupid me – I moved to another hotel. I was only there a few hours when they raided my room.’

‘You could find the girls,’ Kobus suggested. ‘Go to their hotel?’

‘I’d rather go home, they’re bitches; one had been seeing my ex for six months and never told me.’

‘Well,’ Kobus said with a sigh. ‘We can take you, and buy some clothes for you along the way.’

‘It’s odd, but I don’t know you – yet I trust you.’

Kobus and Drake exchanged a look. ‘We’re police officers,’ Kobus said. ‘Guess we look trustworthy.’ He pulled away. ‘OK, next stop, Spain.’

Drake smiled widely as they turned onto the highway, the three of them soon powering down the quiet road and towards the German border.

### A friend for Drake to play with

They drove to the border in the dark, making good time, passports shown - fake and real, and found a hotel on the German side – a five star hotel. Two rooms were booked, Cat with her own room, and she headed off for a few hours sleep in a huge and luxurious bed. Kobus caught four hours sleep, Drake sat watching the TV as normal.

Cat knocked on their door at 2pm – the sun high and the day warm, having showered, and having bought a bag of toiletries from the hotel shop with small notes that Drake had given her. They ate a quick meal together in the hotel bar, bar snacks, and re-started their journey, halting at the first town to buy clothes. And en-route Kobus explained away Drake's lack of appetite by suggested he had pigged out with room service. Since both Kobus and Drake required clothes, the town was a worthwhile and practical stop.

Drake insisted that Cat could have anything she wanted. She wondered what he earned as a police officer stationed in Bulgaria, and did not wish to be too indebted, but Drake was insistent. She relented, and bought a great many items, the car soon stuffed full of bags.

Taking a cigarette break away from the car and standing on a grass verge, the sun beating down, Kobus lifted one of the



stolen mobiles, not even sure who it had belonged to. He turned it on, waited to find a signal, and dialled London.

‘Duty officer?’ came a woman’s voice.

‘It’s Kobus van der Shule. Your deputy director has thirty minutes to call me back on this number.’

‘Hold on, don’t go yet,’ she urged. ‘I’ll put you through.’

After little more than ten seconds, the same man came on. ‘Kobus,’ he flatly answered, waiting.

‘Pop-Dragon was supposed to be set-off in the Shia east of Baghdad, reasons and politics aside, but they lost it.’

‘Lost ... it?’

‘They lost contact with the convoy transporting it.’

‘Then where is it?’

‘Somewhere in the east of Baghdad, in the hands of those least suitable to possess it, possibly on its way to Iran.’

‘Dear God.’

‘If you make a few discreet enquiries, you might get some answers. And don’t worry about me, they have no idea how I might know that fact.’

‘I also ... have no idea how you knew that fact. And Prague?’

‘What about it?’

‘You haven’t caught the news lately? It’s all over every news outlet in Europe, and the States. Czech’s are trying to claim that a fire at a hotel killed a group of Americans, but the individual witnesses – many a drunken Brit on holiday - testify to a lengthy gun battle, and two dozen bodies being taken away. Even we are being stone-walled by the Czech authorities.’

‘Guess they don’t want to harm the sex trade, valuable tourist dollars.’

‘Any ... clues?’

‘I’m in Germany, so no.’

‘Will we be getting anything further on Pop-Dragon?’

‘If I know, and it’s relevant, you’ll know.’

‘Good of you, and ... I’m well aware of the difficult situation this leaves you in with regard to your employers...’

‘Will there be a light left on in the window for me?’ Kobus asked, watching kids playing in a nearby park.

‘I have a long list of questions, not so many answers. So we’d play nicely for a while at least.’

‘It’s a nice thought, but I don’t think I’ll make my next birthday. In fact, I’d bet good money against myself.’

‘We could send a plane. You’d be in Northolt in a few hours for a de-brief.’

‘Shooting’s not finished, not yet.’

‘Should we be concerned?’

‘Yes, you should.’ He hung up.

After a cigarette, most of the time spent staring down at the innocuous phone, Kobus called Riggs old number.

‘Kobus?’

‘Yeah, who’s that?’

‘Brad Martins.’

Kobus sighed. ‘Listen, nothing I say is going to alter anyone’s opinion about me, but there’s something you need to know.’

‘Go on.’

‘There’s a very nasty bomb called Pop-Dragon, invented by an Iraqi scientist working for Saddam Hussein, a genuine WMD. Bob Russell and a few others, like Johansson, were planning on letting it go bang in the east of Baghdad, for ... reasons best known to themselves. Yesterday, Special Unit 14 was transporting the bomb ... towards the target I guess, and they were jumped. They, and the bomb, are missing, the bomb now in the hands of the militias, possibly on its way to Iran.’

‘You’ve just put the last piece in the puzzle, and sat next to me is a senior figure from the FBI, this call recorded.’

‘FBI?’

‘After the deaths in Europe a lot of questions were asked, not so much answered. After yesterday, some of Bob Russell’s

trusted aides switched sides and owned up. Some even figured they might be killed by ... persons or groups unknown. Bob Russell has been suspended, pending a full enquiry.'

'And Riggs?'

'Still a few unanswered questions, not least his competency in running you.'

'His competency was fine, and he's clean.'

'I'd like to believe that. Unfortunately, we have a high body count. On the plus side, the operations were not sanctioned, and so in some way you could say that the dead men were operating outside of the law. Still, we've lost more people in a week than the last twenty years, the President getting daily reports.'

'It's not over yet,' Kobus said, kicking grass stalks with his shoes.

'Meaning?'

'Meaning just that; don't take your eye off the ball.'

'Don't suppose you'd like to come in.'

'Not yet.'

'Riggs mentioned something to me, about a young lad. Is there ... any truth in it?'

'Who knows about him?'

'Just the two of us, and Riggs, for now.'

Kobus took a moment, and looked across the road, Drake and Cat sat on a bench and enjoying ice cream. 'There is some truth to it, yes.'

'And would the skills demonstrated have ... gained you a large sum of money?'

'They would.'

'And the money was used for...?'

'Hired help in various places. I was trying to find out about Pop-Dragon, they were trying to kill me; it was no more complicated than that. And I'd strongly suggest that you not send anyone after me for a chat.'

‘They can’t decide if you’re our most wanted, or our most helpful. Fortunately, Bob Russell’s minions are backing up your story and admitting to sending a hit squad after you. They admit to a bomb on the boat, and blowing the villa.’ Martins took a moment. ‘Some of the reports from that hotel in Prague are ... X-Files stuff. Is there ... anything you can tell me?’

‘I spent a million dollars on some good Russian lads to help protect me; guess they got carried away. And for the record, I greatly regret the loss of life on our side.’

‘And the young lad?’

Kobus took a moment, kicking dandelion heads. ‘Talk to those above, discreetly, and see what deal you can get us; the asset is more valuable than you could ever imagine. I’ll call again in a day or two.’ He hung up, Drake now walking over.

‘You are troubled, and you have given a falsehood again, about me.’

Kobus took a moment, tossing the phone into a bin. ‘If the magistrate believes that you can read minds ... then he’ll be interested in working with you, but ... they’d want you to do bad things for them, and ... they’d never let you go. I said what I did so that we’d have some time, time to figure this out and stop the bomb.’

‘It is our destiny.’

Kobus slowly nodded, ‘It would seem that way. So I think they may back off, or cooperate for a while, long enough for us to stop the bomb.’

‘And after?’

‘And after ... I’ll be dead and you’ll be in the dungeon.’

‘This is not a good forecast,’ Drake noted.

‘Most brave knights, those with a destiny, did not rescue the fair maiden. The dragon roasted them in their own armour, peeled them like a banana, and ate them warm, the knight’s lance used as a toothpick. In the real world, the heroes don’t come back.’

They set off again, and through the beautiful hills of Bavaria, heading west. And in no particular hurry.

‘You’ll get your money back,’ Cat insisted, now sat in sunglasses, a new white t-shirt – no bra, and new blue jeans.

‘Cat, I have a confession to make,’ Kobus began, also now wearing sunglasses as he drove. ‘The last job we did, we infiltrated a Russian gang, a gang of arms smugglers and drug dealers. We were there when the warehouse was raided, but we snuck out unseen. Take a look in the holdall.’

She unzipped the holdall. ‘My God! How much money is here?’

‘Close to a million Euros.’

‘A million? My God, what’ll you do with it all?’

‘Well, no one has reported it missing; it’s drug money. Drake here, he wanted to ... hand it out people in need, like you were back there. Kid’s been giving away money since we got it,’ Kobus lied.

‘If you got caught you’d be sacked, and sent to prison,’ she said, holding a thick wad and thumbing through it.

‘It’s drug money, so no one will miss it. And no one knows about it,’ Kobus suggested.

‘We shall use it to help those in need,’ Drake explained.

Kobus took a moment. ‘Know anyone in need?’ he asked Cat, glancing at her in the mirror.

‘Well, there’s a charity my dad works with. They help barmaids –’

‘Barmaids?’ Kobus loudly queried.

‘Girls from eastern Europe or Russia who went to Spain or Europe to work, who had their passports taken off them by the boss, many forced into prostitution.’

‘Sounds like a worthy cause,’ Kobus noted. ‘We’ll give you some money to give them.’

‘A lot of money,’ Drake added, a glance at Kobus.

‘Yes, a lot of money.’

They stopped at a hotel just short of the French border, another expensive hotel, and booked in. This hotel sat in the well of a curved hillside, a stream running along the edge of its grounds - beautiful and extensive gardens of mown grass. Kobus paid cash for one night's stay, fake IDs shown, the hotel's best suites booked. Bags were carried by porters in black waistcoats, Cat overwhelmed by her room. She placed on some of the new clothes and shoes, and made herself look pretty for the evening meal.

Drake changed clothes several times after his shower, Kobus starting to get fed up with offering advice. 'You look fine,' he kept saying.

He and Drake opted for casual shirts for the evening meal, only to find that they would not be allowed into the posh restaurant without jackets. Kobus decided to eat out, Cat not fussed with the posh restaurant. They grabbed their casual jackets from their rooms and drove off, and into the town of Baden Baden. Leaving the car at the edge of town, they took a gentle stroll as the sun dipped below the horizon, the evening warm. Many people were out and walking, bands playing, a few stalls on the side of the pedestrian precinct areas. It was all very pleasant, and a complete contrast to Prague.

Seeing a church, Cat suggested that they donate something. Drake was keen, Kobus following them inside. A priest stood pointing out interesting features of the stained glass windows, two ushers in dark morning suits greeting them in German.

'We'd like to donate some money,' Kobus said in German.

'Of course,' the men said, pointing towards a collections box.

'I don't think the slit in the box is big enough,' Kobus told the men, Drake handing over a wad. One of the men started to examine the wad, adopting a heavy frown. Kobus handed over a wad, Drake a third. 'That's about thirty thousand Euros,' Kobus informed the two men, who now looked like they'd been caught snoring in church.

Cat led the gang out, the ushers stood rigid. Outside, she said, 'It's good that the drug money will go towards something useful.'

'A good feeling, to help others,' Drake agreed.

They strolled through the crowds, past a line of stalls selling paintings, others selling brass pots or crystal glass, the air heavy with the smell of onions, music now coming from several different directions. Seeing a colourful tent and a sign, Kobus nudged the gang towards it, and inside. He handed the lady in costume ten Euros, Drake sat puzzling the function of the tent.

'She'll read your mind and tell you your future,' Kobus said.

'Ah, a travelling fortune teller,' Drake realised.

'What is your name?' she asked.

'Drake, but I'm called Paul Smith for my papers.'

She puzzled that. 'You are English?'

'Yes, but I'm from Bulgaria.'

She was now even more confused, Kobus stood staring down with a coy smile.

'You have made a journey, for ... work, I believe.'

'It is not work, it is a calling,' Drake responded.

'I see. You like fashion and clothes, and someday may work in fashion.'

'I do not believe so, and neither do you,' Drake said. 'Now, let me tell you something about yourself.' She wanted to cut in, but Drake continued, 'You cheat on your husband with a man named Rolf, but you are not satisfied by his small penis.'

Cat sniggered, a hand to her mouth.

Drake continued, 'You don't like to have sex with the lights on because of your arse, and you hide money from the government in a flowerpot.'

'Who are you?' she demanded. 'Get out!'

Drake eased up. 'Thank you for the reading,' he politely offered, the woman glaring.

Outside, Cat burst out laughing. ‘That was so cheeky. Still, it’s all nonsense isn’t it.’

They walked on, Kobus and Drake exchanging coy smiles. At the coconut shy, Drake won a pink stuffed elephant for Cat. Noticing a machine to hit with a hammer, and to raise a metal striker to hit a bell, Kobus stopped. Drake turned, adopted a puzzled frown, and then focused on the machine. He stepped forwards, and paid two Euros, examining the large wooden mallet.

‘Drake, as hard as you can,’ Kobus instructed.

With a shrug, and a puzzled frown, Drake hit the base. The striker shot up and broke off the bell, the base collapsing and splitting, the mallet’s handle splintered. Drake handed it back to the man, in two parts.

‘Poor workmanship,’ Kobus loudly announced, in German. Others, nearby, agreed, the man left with a lump of mangled wood.

Beyond the tourist trap, and leaving the crowded streets behind, they followed picturesque cobbled streets higher at a slow stroll, and found a Chinese restaurant in a back street. Shown to a table by a German girl in a Chinese dress, they sat, menus handed out and now studied, the only guests so far.

‘Duck?’ Kobus asked Drake with a straight face.

Drake stared back. ‘Duck would be acceptable, unless they serve badger.’

‘Badger?’ the waitress and Cat queried at the same time.

‘It’s a ... delicacy in Bulgaria,’ Kobus explained.

‘Errr,’ came from Cat, grimacing.

Kobus lifted his gaze to the girl as she waited, pad in hand. ‘Enough duck and pancakes for three, please. Oh, and a beer, a Sprite, and ... Cat?’

Cat lifted her head to the waitress. ‘Beer.’

‘Same, please,’ Drake cut in with.

The girl headed off, a lip curled.

Cat faced Drake. ‘They eat badgers in Bulgaria?’



‘In mountain villages,’ Kobus quickly put in, a glance at Drake’s hair.

‘So how long have you two worked together?’ Cat idly enquired.

‘Not long,’ Drake answered. ‘Tell me of Gibraltar, I have not visited.’

Cat described the best and worst features of Gibraltar, the very unusual runway that had a working road across its middle, the mountain and its famous mischievous monkeys – the draw for the tourists.

A small collapsible stand was soon placed next to their table, the duck cut up, rice pancakes handed over with sauce. When the duck was ready, the waitress withdrawing, Kobus took charge. He placed pieces of duck on three plates, Drake then observing the ritual of placing the duck across the centre of a pancake, adding sauce, rolling up, and eating like a fat cigar.

‘A most agreeable taste,’ Drake enthused.

‘You talk funny,’ Cat noted. ‘Were you raised in Bulgaria?’

‘I was, yes, and learnt English ... after. Please, correct me if you wish.’

‘It’s OK,’ Cat insisted. ‘But a bit like people used to talk in old black and white movies.’

‘He’s bright, and a quick learner,’ Kobus put in before sipping his beer. ‘He learnt English quicker than we’d learn Bulgarian.’

‘I grew up with the Spanish language,’ Cat idly mentioned as she rolled another duck pancake. ‘So it was easier. Tried to learn French in school, but I never got far. At sixteen I started to work for my dad’s company; I used to work there in the holidays when I wanted some pocket money.’

They made small talk for half an hour, soon onto the main course, a few tables now occupied. And Drake, he was on his third beer, Kobus keeping a careful eye on the lad, not because

he thought Drake might get drunk, but because of noxious gas emissions.

By time they had finished, Kobus felt mellow, more relaxed than he had been for a while. It was not to last. Drake turned his head and focused on a couple that entered, and who seated themselves near the toilets. When Cat was distracted, Drake tipped his head.

Kobus clocked the couple, both in their mid thirties, conversing in German and appearing for all intents and purposes like a married couple. He placed more than enough money on the table to cover the meal, and suggested that Drake pay the bill. Cat eased up and started for the door.

Kobus bent towards Drake. 'Wait thirty seconds, sit next to them, and ... let out some wind.' Outside, he led Cat away, explaining that Drake would pay and use the toilet.

A minute later, Drake walked out, Kobus leading cat down an alley, Drake catching up.

'All OK?' Kobus asked as Drake fell into step.

'Yes, I gave the money, and more. They will be happy.'

Kobus lifted his eyebrows as he walked.

Stopping for Cat, when she peered into an antique shop, sirens could be heard.

Kobus faced Drake, whispering, 'What happened?'

'I did as asked,' Drake responded. 'They were most unhappy.'

'They know about the hotel?'

Drake nodded. 'Something about numbers on the paper money. They follow from Prague.'

Cat led them on, and back into the crowds, the music, and the smell of onions, men in lederhosen dancing in the street. They negotiated the crowds at a leisurely pace, stalls glimpsed at, curiosities peaked at. With the crowds thinning out, they beat a path back towards the car. Kobus used the key fob to open the car from ten yards, no explosion spoiling their night. At the car, Kobus mentioned the tyre pressure. Cat jumped in,

Drake and Kobus peeking under the car, nothing found. They started back to the hotel.

Halfway back, Drake looked over his shoulder at a car some distance behind, Kobus getting the message. But Kobus had few options with Cat in the car. He drove at a steady pace back to the hotel, along lonely dark roads banked with thick trees. They made it to the hotel without incident, Cat tired after the meal and the drinks and heading up to bed, waved goodnight by the men folk.

As soon as Cat had turned the corner, Kobus moved at a jog, down the back stairs, Drake close behind. In the car park, Drake took the lead, Kobus checking his pistol.

Drake pointed down the access road. 'They wait, they ... try and talk with others, and puzzle why they cannot.'

'How far?'

'Two hundred paces or more.'

Kobus pointed to the dark tree line, and ran across the mown lawn, past bright lights sunk into the grass to illuminate the picturesque hotel, the lights now attracting moths and insects. Just inside the tree line, they turned left and ran towards the unseen vehicle, Drake leading the way. They leapt across the stream in the dark, Drake's effort more graceful, and approached the car from the side, its headlights now out.

Crouching, Drake reported, 'A man and a woman, but not from before with the food of China. They hesitate.'

'We don't need attention drawn to the hotel,' Kobus suggested in a whisper. He stopped behind a tree. The road the car now sat on branched after a few yards, leading into the hotel. 'Could you pull a wheel off?'

'I can try. But why not push the car over? There, look, where the car sits - a brook is beyond it.'

'Might look like a simple accident,' Kobus agreed, but did not seem convinced as he took in the straight road. 'OK, go.'

Drake leapt forwards through the dark, Kobus following as fast as he could through the trees, his pistol drawn. Drake

reached the car unseen and unheard, and rushed to its side, grabbing the underside. In that instant the woman passenger turned her head and look straight at him, startled, even more startled when the car flipped over. It rolled on its roof, the windscreen shattering, and landed on its side in the stream. Water started to enter.

Kobus ran across the road, checking for anyone about. Drake leapt up onto the car as it lay on its side, and onto the car's rear passenger door. The front passenger door was forced open and upwards, the lady's hand pushed through, groping in the dark. Drake opened the door, and lifted her straight up by the arm, holding her with her legs dangling inside the car.

'Who sent you?' he calmly enquired.

She punched him.

In an instant, he lowered her into the cold water, shocking her, and back up. 'Who sent you?' he calmly repeated, the lady now trying to scratch his face. Drake grabbed her by the hair and let go of her arm, her hair now taking her weight. 'Might I enquire ... as to who sent you?' He shook her back and forth like a rag doll, the lady now holding his arm with both hands to try and relieve the stress on her hair.

'Johansson,' Drake finally stated, having read her mind.

'Johansson? When?' Kobus queried from the road.

'Four days before now,' Drake stated as she struggled, dunking her in the rising water, very chilly water.

'So it was before we killed him,' Kobus realised. 'How many others?'

'She is aware of two others, in the town, no more.'

'Is the man dead?'

'He is,' Drake confirmed.

'Break her neck.'

Drake lowered the woman, but yanked he hair to the side as he crouched, slamming the door down onto her neck, a horrible sound produced. Kobus winced. Lifting the door, Drake released her, letting her fall into the cold water, the car door

slamming shut. Jumping down to Kobus, he added, 'The life leaves her.'

'C'mon,' Kobus urged, leading Drake back across the road and into the woods, a check made of the dark road both ways. As they reached the well-tended lawn and the lights, they slowed and walked casually back to the hotel. 'The other two will be around in the morning, but suspicious of the lack of contact with this team. My guess is they'll try and follow us.'

They climbed the stairs to their room, Drake taking a moment with his head close to the door before they entered.

Inside, Kobus threw off his jacket. 'Johansson hired them before he was killed, and there may be more out there. The boss of Johansson has been removed, but ... they may not know who else is out there.' He paused, taking a deep breath. 'We should think about putting Cat on a plane.'

Drake was concerned by the suggestion. 'We shall part company?'

'If she's in the car with us...' Kobus said, his hands wide.

'I can protect her,' Drake insisted as Kobus kicked off his shoes.

'She only needs protection because she's with us! If she wasn't with us, she wouldn't need protection.'

'You believe her to be part of the alignment; I read it in your mind many times.'

Kobus sat on the bed, taking a moment. 'I do. But –'

'But we shall save many, and we *also* have a destiny.'

'Do you like her, like ... Roxy?'

Drake sat, suddenly saddened. 'I like her more,' he admitted.

'And if they kill her?' Kobus posed.

Drake lowered his head. 'It ... would be a great madness in my head.' He lifted his eyes. 'We were meant to find her, and to be travelling companions. You believe her father is a piece of something.'

‘A piece of the puzzle, yes. But that’s a guess, and ... a leap of faith, not based on fact.’

‘I shall trust your faith and judgement, since I have nothing else. And if she is meant to help –’

‘Then what? You’d accept her death, you’d sacrifice her? Roxy was *meant to help*, and look what happened there.’

Drake lowered his head again. ‘You don’t believe the bomb will come to us for many days, you think seven days or more.’

Kobus took a moment. Quietly, he said, ‘It takes less time than that to fall in love.’

Drake lifted his head. ‘You think that when the bomb comes we will both die, that I am destined to die.’ Kobus didn’t respond. ‘I have seven days, Kobus van der Schule, seven days in this wondrous place.’

‘And when the time comes, will you step into the fire?’

Drake stared back, and for the first time appeared tired. ‘If you give me these seven days, I will step into the fire.’

‘That’s not my choice to make. If it was, then I’d give you your seven days.’

‘Then we shall pretend that it is your wish to grant.’ He waited.

Kobus smiled. ‘Then I wish you well for seven days, as far as it’s within my power. I don’t think the universe could begrudge you that.’ He paused, and stopped smiling. ‘But I’ll make you this promise: when the time comes, leaving this wondrous world – and Cat, will hurt like nothing has hurt you before.’

Drake gazed at the windows. ‘It already hurts.’

‘Besides, she may not even like you.’

Drake could not hide a coy smile. ‘She likes me.’

Kobus stretched out. ‘Even with that stupid hairstyle?’

‘You said it was fitting! Tomorrow, we shall go to the girls who will make it better!’

‘What’s wrong with looking like a badger?’ Kobus asked, his arms folded, his eyes now closed.

‘You are a circle in the rear for the passing of shit.’

‘Ass-hole. It’s called an asshole. And keep the damn sound down.’

## Road kill

Kobus woke with a start at 2am, not sure why he was suddenly afraid. The window was open, the curtains moving slightly in the breeze. 'Drake!' he whispered. No one answered.

He let his legs down and pulled out his pistol, dropping to a knee between the beds, a moment taken to check dark corners of the room, the lights now out. A quick dash into the bathroom revealed no one, so he ran bent-double to the window and dropped down, peeking out. He could see the lights sunken into the lawn, the black line that was the distant wood, a blue-grey night sky above, no stars visible.

Easing his head forwards, the cool evening breeze now caressing his face, he peeked out and studied the gravel forecourt immediately below the window. Drake was gone, but where had he gone, and why?

Cursing Drake, Kobus considered that the lad may be in trouble, but then dismissed that idea; Drake could take care of himself. So where had he gone? Had the other two people - from the Chinese restaurant, come to the hotel, and had the lad gone out to deal with them by himself?

Kobus was now resigned to the fact that there was little point in running around the woods looking for Drake, so he settled down next to the window. And waited. Fifteen minutes later, a light caught his attention. Easing up, he could see a car approaching, soon seeing that it was a police car. It did not



bode well. The car halted near reception, two officers easing out, but chatting casually and making a joke. They didn't seem to be concerned, or in a hurry.

Ten minutes passed, the two officers finally leaving, Kobus observing them driving away. As the lights from the car diminished, Kobus stuck his head out of the window, suddenly scared rigid and knocked back by Drake bursting through the window.

'Do I disturb you?' Drake calmly enquired after landing quietly, now just a dark outline in the room.

'On several levels,' Kobus said as he eased up, closing the window and the curtains. 'Where've you been?'

'I sensed the approach of the police, and went to see. I stood hidden, and observed.'

'And?' Kobus asked, knocking on a side light.

'They believe that the car was not subject to *duck play*.'

Kobus tipped his head. 'Foul play?'

'Yes, foul play. They believe that the man drank much wine. But another car visited the scene, the two people from the place of food from China. They believe us to be here.'

'Where are they now?'

'They have moved to the town, but wish to return at the sixth hour.'

Kobus checked his watch. 'At the fifth hour, go out and wait for them. Damage their car, maybe ... throw something at it. They can't follow without a car.'

'They know the number of our car.'

'We'll buy another tomorrow, or change the plates across the border. But, if they don't have CIA backing, they won't get to access the plates at the border. And if they do call in they'll realise that something is wrong, or be told to stand down.'

'The magistrate now favours us?' Drake puzzled as Kobus returned to the bed.

'The magistrate ... can see that Johansson was a betrayer, but the magistrate is still not convinced about me.'

‘You told the magistrate that I could read the minds of others, and you believe that they will value me greatly.’ He waited.

‘A bird in cage may be greatly valued by its owner.’ He folded his arms and closed his eyes, leaving Drake with that image.

## The White House

The President stepped into the situation room, the room already occupied by the security advisory staff. Everyone had stood as the President entered.

‘Thank you. Please, sit. And thank you for meeting at this late hour.’

Everyone settled, now some twenty-six men in attendance, almost a full turnout. Notes were presented in front of the President as he sat.

Turning to his National Security Advisor first, the President nodded. ‘Rick.’

‘Mister President, there’s ... no sign of the bomb. We fear ... it may be in Iran.’

‘Is there any hard evidence of that?’ the President asked.

Looks were exchanged.

‘No *hard* evidence,’ the National Security Advisor admitted.

The President turned to the Director of The CIA. He took a moment. ‘And the investigation into the incidents in Prague and Bulgaria?’

‘We’re trying to contain it as much as we can, but ... the unauthorised movement of assets has harmed us greatly, Mister President.’

‘I think ... that what happened to those men ... has harmed us greatly.’ The President left his gaze on the CIA director.

‘Yes, Mister President.’

‘And what further evidence have you uncovered?’

‘Little beyond what we originally knew, Mister President.’

‘And still no arrests,’ the President nudged.

‘No, Mister President.’

‘Someone kills twenty or more of our people, mutilating and decapitating them, and no arrests are made, not even arrest warrants for suspects on the run.’ He waited.

‘Whoever was involved ... left little evidence behind, Mister President,’ the CIA director reported. ‘Fortunately, the Czech authorities are cooperating, since they don’t wish to harm tourism. It’s being contained, to a degree.’

The President nodded to himself. ‘As good as that containment is - to save your agency from looking incompetent and tarnishing us all - I’d like some answers. I’d like ... to know where the bomb is, and I’d like to know what happened in Bulgaria and in Prague and, if I don’t get some answers, then it will be *difficult* to keep some of you in your posts.’

The men exchanged looks.

The President continued, ‘There *will* be a Congressional Hearing, and we can only delay that for a certain time. So I suggest, gentlemen, firmly suggest, that you find some answers.’ He turned to the FBI director. ‘Ted?’

The FBI director collected his thoughts, both looking and feeling out of place in this group. ‘Mister President. As far as we can determine, the freelance agent known as Kobus was assigned to try and intercept detonators in Bulgaria. He was performing that task when four Americans - listed as being private security staff in Iraq - tried to kill him.

‘Despite that fact, he continued with his assigned task, reporting in. But I must say at this point that the man admitted to mutilating his attackers, torturing them for information. He proceeded to Varna, where - somehow - he gained information about the hand-over of a detonator on a boat in a marina. He secured the detonator, recognised its sole function - that of

detonating the Pop-Dragon device, and withdrew before a bomb blast rocked the marina.

‘He later turned up at a villa before it blew, and admitted that to his handler. Prior to the boat exploding, four freelance CIA agents were killed, two of them ... stripped naked and thrown out of a hotel window. He admits to having killed them. Kobus did, in his favour, report the discovery of the Pop-Dragon detonator, and he did so securely; he followed procedure. At this juncture, Mister President, all evidence suggests that Kobus killed just those trying to kill *him* – without seeming to agree with what he did.

‘The villa that exploded contained many people, including a woman and child. Subsequent DNA evidence confirms that they were the family of Dr Kamil - the inventor of Pop-Dragon, being held by a Russian gangster. That Russian gangster had ordered the manufacture of the detonator – but it’s unclear who gave him the design. There’s no evidence to suggest that he knew what it was for.’

The President cut in with, ‘A detonator *outside of* Iraq?’

‘It’s my firm belief that it was a red herring, Mister President,’ the FBI director stated. ‘Pop-Dragon never left Iraq.’

‘Go on,’ the President nudged.

‘Subsequent to the deaths and explosions in Varna, Bulgaria, we come to the gold coins. A hotel in Romania was damaged, and an inspection of a stone wall by the hotel staff revealed gold coins in boxes that had been mostly emptied. The descriptions given were of Kobus and a travelling companion. The coins match those being sold – in the name of the CIA, and the boxes match the quantities. It’s not clear how Kobus knew about the hidden coins.

‘Kobus collected two million dollars in Zurich, down payment for the coins, at a hotel where there was a subsequent gun battle, three Italian hit-men killed. A day later, Kobus and unknown others tangled with eight German men known to hire

out themselves to the CIA. All eight men were killed, some most bizarrely. Money was found at the scene, the serial numbers matching money paid by the CIA to Ramius, the Russian gangster blown up in a villa in Varna. Somehow, Kobus obtained money from Ramius, which we could consider a black mark, and a large question mark as to his loyalties.

‘Kobus then travelled to Prague, where he hired locals to watch out for any CIA agents, and is known to have directly paid to have Americans injected with morphine in the street. He also paid to have smoke canisters released at a hotel being used by a CIA unit in the city. I must state at this point, that the particular CIA unit seems to have been there to specifically find Kobus.

‘What happened at the hotel isn’t clear, and statements from those that survived are still being examined. Snipers confirm shooting people, yet no bodies or blood were ever found. Inside the hotel, shots were fired after the smoke canisters were released, yet no bodies were found - from anyone other than the CIA unit present. No civilians were hurt in the hotel.

‘Twelve men were killed, another six injured, not including those drugged. Some of those men, having been drugged, had tattoos added to their faces. I must state at this juncture that some of the deceased at the hotel had been tortured or mutilated. I must also state that there is no evidence that Kobus entered the hotel at any time, or took part in the deaths or mutilations.’

He took a deep breath. ‘Some of the detail from that hotel is contradictory, and ... quite fantastic. Six snipers fired off almost a hundred rounds on a rooftop, the firing of their weapons witnessed. Those six *heavily armed* men were then decapitated, carried to the Grand Hotel, and thrown off the roof, down onto cars below. Their heads were left on another roof.’

‘Dear God,’ the President let out.

The FBI director continued, ‘Subsequent to Prague, two CIA freelancers were killed in Germany, an apparent accident, their two colleagues injured – details unknown. The whereabouts of Kobus – and the money - are unknown at this time, but Kobus has called in and provided useful evidence. There is no evidence of his involvement with other countries or agencies, although I’m informed that the British started asking questions about Pop-Dragon after Prague.’

The President faced the CIA director. ‘And the senior staff you suspended?’

‘Presently refusing to talk, Mister President. The senior staff, that is.’

The President took a moment. ‘At this juncture, I’m ordering that Homeland Security and the FBI to jointly run an investigation into all current CIA operations, the FBI to head the investigation into Pop-Dragon with the cooperation of all agencies. And let me be clear ... when I say that people *will* end up in prison.’

He turned his head to the CIA director. ‘Given that your deputy seems to be involved at some level, perhaps your resignation would be ... appropriate.’ The President opened a file and slid a sheet across to the man.

After studying the paper, the man stared back at the President for a few seconds. He signed before he stood. ‘Mister President,’ he said, a quick bow of his head before he left the room.

The President made eye contact with an Admiral. ‘Admiral?’

‘We’re checking all ships leaving the Gulf area, Mister President.’

The President interlaced his fingers. ‘Gentlemen, this nation and its security services could be seriously tarnished and harmed by this episode.’ He faced the FBI director. ‘Send a team to Prague, and Bulgaria. Go over everything, leave no stone unturned.’

At 7am, Cat was awake, but was not hungry. They decided to move on, the hotel a little posh for her taste; she felt out of place, Drake eager to please her.

Kobus checked the car, and the underside, at length before they loaded up, the money having been taken into the room during the night – at least one holdall had, one left in the boot for any lucky car thief. Leaving the hotel grounds, they found two police cars on the main road, a crane attending the car in the stream. Kobus eased to halt next to a bored looking police office. In German, he asked, ‘What happened?’

‘They drove into the stream, two killed.’

‘That’s shocking,’ Kobus offered.

‘Maybe drinking, it was late.’

Kobus could see another car on the side of the road, further along. ‘Did they collide with another car?’

‘No, that car hit a deer.’

‘A deer?’ Kobus repeated.

The officer nodded. ‘Yes, smashed through the windscreen and injured two people. Busy night here last night.’

Kobus eased off, a glance at Drake. ‘Hit a deer, eh.’

‘Poor thing,’ Cat said from the rear seat. ‘Car’s shouldn’t be going so fast along this road if there’re deer about.’

‘It happens, sometimes,’ Kobus said with a sigh, another glance at Drake.

Finding a bright red sign for a roadside diner, they stopped for breakfast, Drake now making an effort to eat normal food when in front of Cat. After a pleasant breakfast, the sun beating through the window, Cat headed back to the car first.

Drake seemed apprehensive. ‘I must sit on the ... thing for going after food.’

Kobus looked over his shoulder, and pointed towards the toilets, then took a moment. ‘Here’s some advice. Wipe the seat first with the soft paper you’ll see, put the seat down, sit

on it, do what you need to do and flush – flush more than once if you can see anything ... left behind, and open a window first if there is one. Afterwards, you use the soft paper to clean and wipe your ... you know. Then wash your hands.’

Drake was deep in thought as he headed off, Kobus shaking his head. ‘This should be good.’ He paid for their food, but waited near the door, a wave through the window at Cat.

A full four minutes passed, Kobus stepping out for a cigarette. Back inside, raised voices caught his attention, diners now complaining of the smell coming from the toilets. Kobus turned, to see a man walk into the gents. But the man come straight back out. A male member of staff listened to the complaints, at length, before bravely stepping inside himself. He could not have been inside for more than a few seconds when he emerged, a hand to his mouth and nose.

Drake’s image appeared, coming around the outside of the diner, Kobus moving out to meet him. Kobus stood and waited.

‘You are greatly amused by this,’ Drake unhappily noted.

‘In our society, such things *are* funny. But ... but Cat would not be amused by such things, and not in the car.’

Drake seemed concerned.

‘Have you ... emptied what needed emptying, and expelled air?’

‘I have, and washed with scented soap, both my hands and ... other parts.’

‘How did you get out?’

‘I ... broke a window, save facing those I distressed.’

Kobus rolled his eyes. ‘If you need to let out air in the car, tell me to pull over.’

They stepped towards the car, breakfast diners now evacuating the establishment.

‘Do you suffer this problem?’ Drake asked.

‘Sometimes, after Indian food. I’d guess, I’d hope, that your insides would get used to it. But, since you don’t produce



stomach acid to digest food, it'll always be a problem. Just eat small amounts in front of Cat.'

They got back into the car, Cat puzzling the mass exodus of the diner as they pulled off.

No.10 Downing Street, London.

The Prime Minister stepped purposefully into Cabinet Office Briefing Room 'A', known as COBRA. With him now was the Home Secretary, the Defence Secretary, the Directors of SIS and MI5, the deputy head of the Metropolitan Police – responsible for terrorism, an SAS representative, and a Colonel from the Royal Army Ordnance Corps. Everyone settled. The Prime Minister gestured towards the head of SIS.

'Prime Minister, might I start by reminding all here that the subject matter is most grave, and top secret; notes, should be sparingly used. We've completed our preliminary investigation into Pop-Dragon, and we've spoken to our American counterparts, some of whom were ... distressed and concerned as to how we obtained some of the information.' He straightened, running a hand down his tie. 'But, we can now confirm much of the detail. First, Colonel Blake here will brief us all on the technical aspects of the threat. Colonel.'

The Colonel eased forwards. 'Before the allied forces liberated Iraq, an Iraqi scientist – a Dr. Kamil, a Kurd, accidentally made a discovery whilst experimenting with liquid binary explosives. That discovery blew up his lab and killed eight people, wounding more. What was noteworthy was the small amount of chemical that was used. That chemical leaked, its smell detected, and had been ignited by a naked flame.

'Dr Kamil went on to experiment with the chemical, simple trial and error over several years, and found a formula that made a nice big bang when detonated as a vapour. He lost thirty two members of staff, but Saddam Hussein wasn't

bothered. Rather, he was encouraged, and funded further research, out in the desert.

‘After the invasion, Dr Kamil identified himself to advancing American units, and explained his discovery. A team of British and American ordnance officers were assigned the task, at a time when we were looking for weapons of mass destruction. I was one of those officers, Captain Kobus van der Schule was another; my assistant.

‘We spent four weeks trying to re-create the conditions that Dr Kamil described, for a test blast. That test blast failed thirty-eight times, but succeeded on the last attempt. That blast, Prime Minister, killed eight people standing some six hundred yards away, for six litres of chemical used.’

They exchanged looks.

The Colonel continued, ‘Close to the blast site was a stone bunker, as well as several old cars spaced out, a line of street lamps. The cars melted, and street lamps up to three hundred yards away melting like ice cream in the sun. Without knowing the exact science, Prime Minister, the binary liquid burns very hot and melts steel - anything in its path catches fire. Our good friends in the American Army then produced a computer simulation, of what might happen to a city if the bomb was detonated in a sky scraper.

‘That sky scraper would fall, the metal girders melted – as with 9/11. All of the combustible material in the building would catch alight, the windows would blow out, and the windows of nearby buildings would blow out. The super-heated gas would spread out, finding additional fuel in the paper and wood found in offices, cars bursting into flames as if a nuclear bomb had gone off next to them. As a ... self-fuelling system, the spread of flames could be total - across an area a few miles wide.’

‘Dear God,’ the Prime Minister let out.

Colonel Blake added, 'If set off in Manhattan, they'd lose New York, the effect less in London or Paris; you need tall buildings, tightly packed.'

The director of SIS put in, 'Might I state, at this juncture, that setting off the device is extremely hard – the conditions need to be just right, including no wind outside; they'd have less than a one in twenty chance of making it work. If they did detonate it, it would cause a fire for certain – a building lost, but the main effect seems to be damned hard to reproduce.'

'And if it did go off in London?' the Home Secretary asked.

'You could lose a mile radius, to buildings on fire,' Colonel Blake answered.

'That covers most of central London,' the Prime Minister pointed out. 'And we don't know where this device is?'

The director of SIS replied, 'Most likely in the hands of Iranian backed militias. But the Americans assure us that it will never get out of Iraq.'

'If weapons can be smuggled into Iraq, they can be smuggled back out,' the Prime Minister noted. 'There's also the Iranian border.'

'The Iranians may see Dubai or Bahrain as targets,' the director of SIS suggested. 'For the device to work, you need a cluster of sky scrapers. Otherwise, you just set fire to a small area.'

The Prime Minister stood, everyone following him up. 'Iraq is a long way off. Increase checks at ports if you like, warn the Dubai authorities, but let's not make a drama out of this; the bomb will probably go off inside Iraq, or be found. Thank you all.'

## France

They crossed the French border without incident after a pleasant drive through the hills, and headed southwest towards Dijon, the beautiful countryside enjoyed. Kobus pretended to be lost a few times, and circled around, Drake scanning for trouble. So far, no one was following them. Halting for lunch, they found an old watermill that had been converted into a restaurant, numerous patient ducks and swans sat awaiting a little bread from kind patrons of the establishment.

The trio sat on rustic wooden benches, cheese and bread soon placed down, three cold lemonades arriving. Cat broke off bits of bread and threw them to the ducks, Drake copying. When he started to throw bits of cheese, a look from Kobus halted him.

The day was hot, the sky clear, little sound other than the ducks squabbling over the scraps. Cat wandered to the water with Drake, pointing and naming things in English for him. They inspected the old water wheel – it still turned, and peered down at small fish in the shallows.

After a very pleasant hour spent at the watermill, they paid up and drove off, following a picturesque canal lined with tall trees, ploughed fields beyond. The locals were out in boats, a few people fishing, a few cyclists passed after slowing down, horses passed after slowing right down, waves given by their riders.

Back on the highway, now heading south towards Lyon, they made good time, either chatting away or simply looking out of the window at the wonderful scenery. North of Lyon they turned west, and found a castle set in rolling hills that had been converted into an up-market country retreat, the castle surrounded by magnificent tended grounds. Rooms were available, paid for in cash, Cat and Drake soon exploring the grounds as Kobus sat with a beer on an elevated patio, enjoying the view as the sun rested just above the far horizon.

Glimpsing Cat and Drake in the grounds, he saw her hold Drake's hand as they walked, and she had initiated the move. With his beer in his hand, he stared across at the young couple, suddenly both happy and sad, concerned, angered at the world in general, and at nothing in particular.

Seven days, he considered; Drake deserved more, he deserved a chance at a life, demon or not. Alone with his thoughts, beer in hand, cigarette on his lip, he watched the sun setting alight the distant hills with a fantastic orange glow.

Half an hour later, a woman in her late thirties came and sat down without being invited. 'May I join you?' she asked with a French accent.

It was an odd question, since she was already sat and making herself comfortable, her drink placed down.

'Sure,' Kobus offered, eyeing the lady as she made herself comfortable. She was not unattractive, and she did have a large pair of breasts, a great cleavage exposed from a figured-hugging light grey dress.

'British?' she asked.

'From South Africa originally. I'm Kobus.'

'Kobus? An unusual name. I'm Marlene.'

'On holiday?'

'Of a sort. Since my husband passed away I spend a lot of time in places like this, trying to find something, some peace and serenity.'

'This is a nice spot,' Kobus agreed.

‘What work do you do?’ she asked.

‘Mining,’ Kobus made up on the spot. ‘Mines in Africa.’

‘It must pay well, if you’re staying *here* with your family.’

‘Family? Ah, no, the young man works for me, and the young lady ... we found in Prague; she’d had her things stolen. We were heading to Spain, so we’re giving her a lift there.’

‘Very kind of you.’ She sipped her wine. ‘Do you ... rescue young ladies often?’

‘As often as we can,’ Kobus quipped. ‘Sometimes, we rescue cats from trees, and have been known to donate to churches.’

She studied him carefully, not sure if he was taking the piss.

‘And is there a woman waiting for you at home?’

‘No, no one is waiting for me. My life is ... just work.’

‘And nice hotels in the country.’

‘And nice hotels in the country, from time to time. What ... do you do?’

‘I live off what my husband left me.’ She shrugged. ‘A woman of leisure.’

‘There must be a great many women who envy you.’

‘I find myself busy doing nothing.’

‘And there must be a great many men who would like to meet a rich and single woman.’

She cocked an eyebrow. ‘I could not be with such a man.’

Kobus took in the view, and sipped his beer. ‘Have you never been tempted to find a nice young man from Turkey who ... needs a few Euros?’

She took in the view, and sipped her wine. ‘I tried that once, but it did little for me.’

From where she now leant forwards, her elbows on the table, her ample breasts hung down. Kobus lifted his hand, and caressed a breast for a few seconds.

She slowly turned her head. ‘I don’t remember giving you permission to do that.’

‘Ease forwards on your chair a little.’

She stared back for moment, but then did as asked.

‘Open your legs a little wider.’

She eased her knees wider, Kobus running a hand up her thigh unseen by the other patrons of the bar.

‘I have a room...’ she began.

‘That would be ... dull and unimaginative.’ He stood. ‘Let’s go for a walk.’

She downed her wine quickly as she stood, eyeing Kobus, a mixture of curiosity, interest, and caution. Hand in hand, they walked down the steps from the patio, and onto sloping grass that had been well tended; it looked good enough to play golf on. A carp pond was inspected, the white and red fish moving slowly about their limited enclosure.

At the edge of the grounds, they claimed a bench facing distant farmland, the horizon an orange glow beyond. Sat on the bench, Kobus eased his hand across to her thigh, and up to her knickers, starting to gently rub her.

‘We may be seen,’ she toyed, making it sound like she didn’t care.

‘The risk ... is part of the fun.’

After a minute of attention, Marlene was starting to breathe louder.

‘Enough for now, we wouldn’t want you to peak *too soon*.’ Easing up, he took her hand, and they strolled slowly towards trim hedges. Inside of the parallel rows of a maze-like hedge, the shrub high enough to just about cover her shoulders, Kobus halted her, and eased out an ample breast, taking his time to examine it, to measure its dimensions in his hand, to weigh it. He finally tucked it away without saying anything, and led her on.

The small maze led to a fake water-wheel, no water anywhere nearby – now or in the past by the look of it, the object examined. A path led them around the castle walls, parts of the walls appearing modern day reproductions, other parts authentic – but with in-fills in places. Finding a bench beneath

high walls, a well-trimmed waist high bush running past, he pushed her down onto it, and unzipped. Holding his firm dick, she opened her mouth, but he simply slapped her cheeks with it for a minute, finally allowing her to suck it, a hand now inside her bra.

Pulling out rudely, he lifted her up and turned her over as the light faded, soon thrusting in with little regard for any preparation. Thinking of many things, such as damp slate roofs, books on taxation, the mortar used on the castle walls, Kobus held off finishing for long enough to know that she had achieved an orgasm.

‘Money shot,’ he said. ‘Pulling out sharply, and eliciting a groan, he spun her around and sat her down. Masturbating quickly, he came over her face – whether she was ready and willing or not, grabbed her hair and thrust into her mouth. She moaned, but from surprise and being choked as much as anything else.’

Pulling out, he zipped up, a glance around as she opened her bag, in need of a wet-wipe or two.

‘We’d best get back, before they think we’re up to something,’ he told her with a grin.

Walking back around, she continued to wipe herself down. ‘You’re a bad man, you know that,’ she mock scolded.

‘It takes two.’

‘How ... how long are you here?’

‘Just tonight.’

‘I’m in room six,’ she volunteered.

‘I’ll pop by later, if I feel like it.’

She glanced at the side of his head as they walked, but said nothing, soon glimpsing Drake and Cat walking hand in hand towards them. Both couples met up below the patio.

‘Good evening,’ Drake formally offered Marlene, shaking her hand. ‘Did you have a pleasant walk?’



‘We did,’ she confirmed. ‘If you’ll ... excuse me.’ She glanced at Kobus before heading towards her room for a clean-up, Drake watching her go.

‘Find anything interesting?’ Kobus asked Drake as he lit up.

‘The gardens are most splendid,’ Drake responded.

They turned as a group and climbed up to the patio, drinks ordered. When Cat trotted off to the toilet, Kobus asked about Marlene; did Drake sense anything.

‘You had sex with her, in the castle gardens.’

‘Besides that,’ he urged.

‘She seeks a man with money, she has very little of her own.’

‘Ah,’ Kobus let out.

‘Cat now likes to hold my hand,’ Drake said, but did so as a discovery, not a boast of her growing affections for him.

‘You’re a nice looking young lad, you behave well around her – what’s not to like?’

‘I make many a falsehood about my past,’ Drake reported.

‘Better than the truth, much better,’ Kobus urged. He carefully mouthed, ‘Don’t be tempted to tell her.’

‘Should you not tell me what to say?’

‘That would take a long time. Just ... try not to think of yourself, but her, discover things with her – don’t tell her about them, and let her take the lead. Tell her you have little experience of women, and definitely don’t tell her about brothels, about Roxy, or about women who take coin. Be as innocent as we both know you are ... and you’ll be fine.’

‘I am troubled. Should I not ... think as you think, and not desire a friendship with her because of what lies ahead.’

Kobus placed the cigarette back onto his lips, and slowly inhaled, lifting his head towards the dull purple glow on the horizon. He blew out. ‘Drake, enjoy yourself, and to hell with what lies ahead. Enjoy yourself while you can, you deserve it.’ He made eye contact. ‘You didn’t choose to have the demon inside you. You battled it for ten years, and then you locked

yourself away for a few hundred years - a brave and selfless act. And now, now the universe conspires to make you suffer more. So fuck the universe, and enjoy it while you can.'

'When we stand before St. Peter, you shall have to account for such curses.'

'Buddy, when I stand before St. Peter he'll hear a lot more than that. I have a few things to get off my chest.'

'You like this woman of the Gaul lands?'

'It was ... giving in to temptation, but not really what I want. What I want ... is what you have, but that's not available to people like me.'

'Why did you take this woman?' Drake puzzled.

'Because ... it was there, and ... I have needs like any man. But, like most men the ... short-term gratification is just that; short-term, fleeting, of the moment. And afterwards, afterwards we wonder why we did it, and why such things don't make us happy - truly happy. It's part of the human condition.'

Drake nodded. 'I laid down with a woman for coin, when I considered betrothal. My father suggested I might ... be less of a fool on the wedding night.'

Kobus made a face. 'Practice makes perfect. And I'm still practising, trying to figure out what makes me happy. Unfortunately, the job makes me happier than the thought of family life.' He heaved a heavy sigh. 'I'm a lost cause.'

With Cat back at the table, talk returned to castles, and interesting facts, Cat nosey about Kobus's new lady friend. For the evening meal they drove to another castle, this one even less authentic, and sat on a long table watching dancing horses on the stage, followed by a troop of black disco stars from the 1970s.

Drake found the knights in armour and mock fighting to be a little off-putting; he'd been on the receiving end of a few of the weapons displayed. They sat at the bar till closing time, and chatted to a British couple down on holiday, finally driving back when the hall closed, their rooms reclaimed.

But Kobus found himself alone for the first forty minutes, tempted to go to room six for a visit, and to play with the large breasts again. Drake finally appeared, and now with a silly grin.

‘Well?’ Kobus knowingly asked.

‘We lay down, and I made her very happy,’ he proudly stated.

‘After all those hours watching porn in hotel rooms, I should damn well hope you know what you’re doing.’

‘I admit to cheating.’

‘Cheating?’ Kobus puzzled, wondering how anyone could cheat at sex, and did Drake have a vibrator hidden away.

‘I read her mind, and did what she desired at each stage,’ Drake reported.

‘Lucky bastard,’ Kobus quipped, looking peeved.

A smug Drake readied his clean clothes, and took a long hot shower. Fortunately, he didn’t sing in the shower, or put on a little soul music.

Kobus checked his pistol, lay down fully clothed, folded his arms whilst muttering and cursing, and closed his eyes.

They skipped a formal hotel breakfast in the morning, and left early - no sign of Marlene. They were soon on the road, the day promising to be clear and warm. Kobus pointed the car due south, and towards Marseilles, soon cruising down the highway at a steady 80mph, the BMW a smooth ride. North of Marseilles they turned west, avoiding the city, and glimpsed the coast after an hour. Mindful of the few days remaining, days till Cat had to be back in work, they kept going, finding a hotel near Perpignan as the sun set.

With two rooms again booked, Kobus found himself sat on a balcony after a lengthy meal at a local cafe, a private smoke now enjoyed whilst taking in the view, a distant pearl-string of lights delineating the end of the darkened land and the start of the darkened Mediterranean.

Drake appeared an hour later, still carrying about him his silly smug grin. He joined Kobus on the balcony, sitting without saying anything.

‘All well in the marital bedroom?’ Kobus finally asked.

‘All is ... very well, yes. We undertook a bath together.’

‘What it is to be young,’ Kobus quipped, staring out into the night sky. ‘Except that you’re not. You’re a ... living falsehood.’ He turned his head, and waited.

‘You are concerned ... for Cat.’

‘I’m concerned for you both. Cat, she’ll get over you quickly and find another man to interest her; never underestimate a young girl’s ability to move on quickly. And you, well, you and I will be dead soon enough. Or worse.’

‘Worse?’

‘Worse, meaning they take you alive, and study you.’

‘I do not believe the magistrate to be strong enough to do this,’ Drake confidently stated.

‘Don’t be foolish, they’ll find a way.’

‘But you have already sold my merits to them, and suggested a deal of some description.’

Kobus took the cigarette from his mouth. ‘I was playing for time, buddy. I’d hate for you to end up working for them, or to be in their custody.’

‘You think dark thoughts.’

Kobus took a moment. ‘I wish there was more I could do to help you.’

‘Help me? And what of yourself?’

‘Of myself?’ He sighed. ‘I don’t think I have any choices left. I’ve been shown a light at the end of the tunnel, but that light is you; I just carry the torch. You ... have a destiny, a destiny to stop that bomb, and then ... then the universe will have little further use for the torch bearer.’

‘You believe the alignment to signal your death.’

Kobus nodded, staring across at the distant twinkling lights. ‘Funny thing is, it doesn’t bother me that much, and ... and part

of me is delighted to see that the alignment is there to stop the bomb. And ... part of me would have been delighted to know that there is a God, just ... not under these circumstances.’

‘These ... circumstances?’ Drake nudged.

Kobus turned to face Drake. ‘Under no circumstances can you allow yourself to be captured, and to be put on TV. If they get close, bury yourself somewhere deep, or swim down to the ocean depths, anything, just don’t let the world see that you really exist.’

‘If I exist - if the demon exists, then it is for a purpose.’

‘That purpose is, I hope, simply to stop the bomb, and nothing more, because if you’re discovered and known, then ... then all that you see around you will be in jeopardy.’

Kobus took a moment. ‘Most people in the western world follow the basic Christian tenets - in practice if not in name, and their belief is just that – a belief. Faith ... needs a doubt, and that doubt keeps people going to work in the mornings, and relying on technology instead of prayer.

‘But if they knew that you truly existed - and if they were convinced that God truly existed, who would go to the doctor instead of praying, who would start to believe that cancer is divine will? What police officer will shoot a bank robber and risk eternal damnation in hell, what soldier would raise a gun and shoot an enemy soldier for fear of going to hell? And what soldiers will start to kill willingly because they believe *it is* God’s wish.

‘The problem ... will be a hell of a lot of people wanting to fulfil God’s wish, but what – exactly – is God’s wish? Do we follow the Bible, the Koran, or something like the Buddhist faith? Which guidelines are correct?

‘People working in offices might stop working for insurance companies and banks if they thought the work might be slightly immoral, and husbands and wives would stay together even though they don’t like each other; because it would be a

sin otherwise. And what of abortion? No, we'd go back to the dark ages if they knew about you.'

'Would not adopting God's teachings be a good thing?'

'In theory - yes. Problem is ... which of the teachings are God's teachings, and which have been concocted and altered over time? Would the church start to exert political power? Would the Catholic Church take power in Europe and America, and would they then see the Muslims as unbelievers to be put to death? Would the US President consult a cardinal before starting a war?'

'The problem with God's teachings is that they're open to interpretation from men, and men are fallible, if not downright stupid much of the time.' Kobus took in the view. 'No, the status quo needs to be maintained, not upset, or the world will stop turning and be a different place, a very different place. People will kill each other in God's name, and we'll be back to the Crusades, three groups squabbling over Jerusalem again - but now nuclear armed.'

'You would have me dead,' Drake unhappily noted.

Kobus glanced into Drake's eyes. 'Once the bomb is dealt with, I would have us both dead, so that what you see out there goes on, so that Cat gets on with her life and lives a normal life - not living under the rules of the church. This *test* ... is not just about fighting evil, and it's not just about stopping the bomb and having a good tally for St. Peter. Drake, if you stop yourself from existing, you'll save a hundred years of war, and a hundred million lives, not just a million. How's that for a tally?'

Drake took in the distant lights. 'It is a very great number ... to be on the shoulders of just one person.'

'Two ... persons,' Kobus softly insisted. 'You're not alone.'

'You say that ... should I be known to the world, that great chaos and disaster will follow.'

'I do. Men will use you as an excuse to hurt others, and to make war.'

‘Then this alignment is the start ... and the end.’

‘It always was, we just forget that fact some days. Enjoy a few days, see the world at its best, but don’t get used to it. Take a few good memories with you.’

‘And what of you, Kobus van der Schule, what memories will you take?’

‘I’ll take a long list of tasks started but not finished, and a long list of regrets about things that I never did. St. Peter will need to sit down, take the weight off, and make notes. And that’s after I’ve kicked him in the balls and shouted for a while.’

‘You are the hand and heart, I am the sword,’ Drake stated. He glanced at Kobus. ‘I find myself angry, as I was when I walked the lands before, angry that I was chosen.’

Kobus inhaled. ‘Drake, you were chosen ... because you were the one strong enough to fight the demon inside of you, and strong enough to see this through. Out of all of the millions and millions of people on this world, you were chosen, Cornelius; you, and no one else. You were chosen ... because you’re special, and the best man for the job. You weren’t cursed, you were blessed.’

Drake eased up, and stared up into the stars. ‘You turn my pain into a great joy.’ He nodded. ‘You are the heart, I am the sword.’ He smiled down, but then frowned. ‘I ... sense great distress, here, this hotel.’

Kobus jumped up. ‘Have they found us?’

‘I do not believe so. The men who cook food, they see great fire.’

‘We’re on fire?’

An alarm sounded.

‘Get Cat out!’ Kobus shouted as he spun into the room. He grabbed their clothes and stuffed them into bags, launching them off the third floor balcony and down to a grassy area leading to the pool. Grabbing the holdall with cash, he lugged it out and down.

Slamming the car door shut, and now smelling smoke, he returned to the hotel, to see Drake leading Cat down the stairs, bags in hand, other people leading their families out, hotel staff trying to direct things.

As Drake and Cat drew near, Kobus gave Cat the car keys. 'Stay with the car.' She trotted out.

'You mean to assist,' Drake noted.

Kobus nodded. 'Where are people most distressed?' he whispered.

Drake turned, leading Kobus up one floor against the tide of people coming down. At a door, Drake shouldered it open, finding smoke, an elderly woman sat on the edge of her bed and coughing; she had gone to bed with the balcony door open on this warm night.

'Take her down!' Kobus shouted, now coughing himself. He ran around to the second of two single beds, finding a man semi-conscious. Placing the man's arm over his shoulders, Kobus dragged the man out, following Drake down the corridor. There he found a male member of staff directing people. 'Here, grab him.'

The staff member took the semi-conscious man, Kobus rushing back, a thin film of black smoke now hugging the ceiling, the available light fading. He glanced over his shoulder to find a teenage lad with wild eyes wishing to assist. At a second room, beyond where they found the couple, Kobus could hear coughing. The door was locked, and too strong to kick in.

'Police,' Kobus told the kid, pistol out and two shots fired at the lock. A kick, and the door gave, the pistol holstered as Kobus bent double and rushed in. He slammed straight into an elderly man, bumping heads. Grabbing the man, both now bent double, he led the man into the light, and to the teenager. 'Take him out!'

Back in the room, Kobus found an elderly woman struggling to breathe, and rudely dragged her out to the



corridor, finding a young woman stood shouting in French for anyone left behind. Kobus handed her the elderly lady. ‘Take her. Go!’

Drake burst into view. He stopped, tipped his head, and pointed at two rooms.

‘Kick both doors in!’ Kobus urged.

Drake kicked the first door off its hinges, the second door splintering as he kicked it. Retrieving his leg, he used a flat palm to shove the door open, far more smoke now wafting along the corridor. He met Kobus back in the corridor, each carrying elderly people, a woman shrieking uncontrollably. With little time, they simply dragged people along the corridor as fast as they could go, Kobus trying to keep his head below the smoke. At the stairs, two staff members knelt with handkerchiefs over the faces, the victims unceremoniously dumped down.

Drake sprinted back down the corridor, Kobus losing sight of him through the swirls of smoke. As Kobus reached the room he had just attended, now bent double and coughing, Drake had a couple under each arm, dragging more than carrying them. Kobus ducked into the room, finding an elderly man on his hands and knees, talking in German. Fortunately, the pensioner was slightly built and easy to lift, soon being dragged along an increasingly smoke-filled corridor.

At the stairs, Kobus dropped to his knees, starting to struggle, a woman – a guest, now helping with the old man.

Drake came back up the stairs. ‘You are not well.’

‘I ... don’t think I can go back any more,’ Kobus coughed out, feeling weak.

‘Go down, I will help here,’ Drake firmly nudged.

Kobus followed the steps down, coughing as he went, and was helped outside. Straightening, he found Cat with a water bottle.

‘Here, drink some,’ she urged, the car park now full of dazed people as sirens grew louder. ‘Where’s Drake?’

‘He’s still inside.’

She went to move, but Kobus grabbed her arm. ‘He’ll be fine.’

‘What do you mean, he’ll be fine!’

‘He’s at the side, facing the pool,’ Kobus lied. ‘Not too much smoke, and he can climb down to the first floor. Don’t worry, he’s not near the fire or anything.’

She ran off towards the pool. Kobus took in the hotel, and the billowing smoke, and followed Cat around to the grass, and to the pool – the water illuminated bright blue from lights below the surface. Now he could see flames coming from the ground floor, and lapping the first floor.

A gas canister exploded, blowing out the windows in the kitchens, screams rising up. And Kobus felt stupid; he had labelled Drake as being on this side, and this side was the Towering Inferno in 3D!

‘Drake!’ Cat called. Together, they walked around the pool with others, flashing blue lights now signifying the arrival of the fire brigade.

A large dressing table flew through a balcony window, smashing on the sun loungers below. Kobus suddenly had a really, really bad feeling. His fears were realised when an elderly man flew headfirst out of a dark window, his arms flailing around as if he was trying to fly. It was a well aimed shot, the man hitting the centre of the pool.

‘C’mon,’ Kobus urged a stunned Cat. He jumped into the cool water, the pool almost two metres at this part, and dragged the stunned man to the side as his nostrils registered chlorine, other guests rushing around to help. Cat helped lift the man out, the man conscious but spluttering.

As she did, a second splash was preceded by a yelp, a woman in a night gown hitting the water on her back. Those guests near the pool now puzzled just how the elderly woman dived across the eight metres of poolside, a two metre strip of grass, and the width of the balcony. Kobus was still in the

water, and now dragged the woman to the surface and to the side, a man jumping into the pool to assist.

A small dog yelped before it too landed in the water, rescued by the same man – who happened to be closer, another dresser loudly smashing windows as two firemen ran past. They stopped, and stared, as a teenage girl flew headfirst, twenty yards laterally, and into the pool. She was closely followed by a middle-aged woman, who slammed into the water unconscious, the stunned fireman soon giving her mouth to mouth.

Kobus grabbed the poolside with an elbow, water gurgling loudly into a drain, and waited. Another dresser went through a balcony window and clattered down to the sun loungers, a TV attached to it and trailing behind. It smashed loudly on the concrete. As it did, a large lady, a good eighteen stone, flew out without a sound, her landing displacing a huge volume of water, Kobus negotiating a wave as he swam towards her. He had just started dragging her when a rotund man defied gravity and flew out, an equally large splash made, the drains on the side of the pool swamped and gurgling all the more.

A full minute passed, and no one else jumped, Kobus easing out of the pool, whilst holding his jacket so that his pistol would not be seen. He stood next to Cat, who shouted for Drake.

Drake appeared at a third floor window. ‘Cat, I am unharmed,’ he shouted. ‘Do not worry.’

Kobus shook a fist at Drake without Cat seeing, his teeth clenched. Unknown to him, Drake was now carrying two people at a time out, most of them elderly, one wheelchair-bound lady surprised to find herself - and her wheelchair, being carried swiftly down the stairs, the lifts now shut off. As the firemen climbed higher, they encountered Drake handing them semi-conscious people, or simply people a little too old and too afraid to get out in time.

Drake finally appeared on the fifth floor, the first floor well alight, flames licking the second floor, the smoke thick. 'I am unharmed,' he shouted down towards Cat. She screamed back for him to leave the hotel, the firemen now trying to move everyone further back.

'He'll be fine,' Kobus assured her, getting a disbelieving look back. 'Kid has nine lives. And he's ... fitter and stronger than he appears.' He led her off, his shoes squelching, as the firemen herded the crowd away.

Ten minutes later, a very anxious ten minutes for Cat, Drake walked casually around behind them. Kobus had retrieved a bag of clothes, and had managed to change in the car without anyone seeing his holster.

'I am unharmed,' he flatly told her, black with soot.

'That was a stupid thing to do she screamed!' but hugged him anyway.

'It is a noble deed to help others,' he said as she sobbed into his shoulder.

'We should go,' Kobus suggested to Cat, still a little damp. 'Or we'll not get you home in time, young lady. If we stay here there'll be paperwork to fill in for a day or two, silly questions to answer. Besides, I think the ambience around the pool bar will be off for a while.'

They found and retrieved Drake's clothes from the edge of the pool, walked to the car, and drove off past the line of fire engines and ambulances. Cat bent Drake's ear at length, then just snuggled up – after he had changed his t-shirt, the car now smelling of smoke.

Looking in the mirror, Kobus could see Cat asleep, her head on a jacket on Drake's lap, Drake gently stroking her hair. And the look on Drake's face, that was one of surprise and wonderment; surprise that she liked him and wanted him, and wonderment that she liked him and wanted him. Kobus smiled to himself, soon joining the main highway west.

## Spain

Along quiet highways, they drove through the night and to the border, Cat woken up briefly to show her passport – and to use the toilet when she noticed a sign. On the other side of the border, now in Spain, Kobus drove till the dawn rose behind them, finding a hotel on the coast near Valencia.

Booked in, Cat got some sleep, Kobus and Drake walking down quiet streets to a cafe that had just opened, a view of the calm ocean in the distance. Sunglasses were placed down on a white plastic table, a full English breakfast ordered from a British ex-pat, a lady in a blue and white apron.

‘You were greatly troubled by my assistance for the people at the hotel,’ Drake noted, taking in the nearby shops. ‘Did I not add to my tally?’

Kobus took a moment, lighting up. ‘You did add to your tally, yes, but ... but every time you help someone you risk the population finding out about you, and that would kill many more in the long term.’

‘You wished me to assist,’ Drake struggled with.

‘Yes,’ Kobus loudly sighed. ‘Yes, I did, and I would have done more if I could, but ... but I have an eye on the bomb, and it’s a numbers game; ten here, a million there.’

‘I shall try not to do this again,’ Drake offered as mugs of tea were placed down.

‘Drake ...’ Kobus pause, and made a face. ‘Drake, follow your heart, and to hell with the alignment. If you see people in need, help them. And St. Peter, he can fuck right off. We’ll do this our way, and to hell with the consequences.’

‘You will indeed have many curses to answer for when your time comes.’

‘A great many,’ Kobus carefully mouthed.

After the large breakfast, Kobus caught a few hours sleep. Drake went shopping, and bought loud Hawaiian shirts and swimming trunks, towels with “I love Spain” printed on them.

Kobus woke to find the room’s balcony door open, the scream of kids coming from around the pool, the sun beating in. He eased up, stretched, and stepped across, soon sitting on a white plastic chair and peering down at the poolside as he lit up. And there, on the edge of the pool, sat the thin stick of white that was Drake, swimming trunks on, Cat in a bikini.

Drake lifted his gaze towards Kobus, and waved, Kobus smiling, and now shaking his head at the surreal scene.

An hour later, Kobus paid a Euro, and utilised the hotel’s internet screens. Searching for stories on the hotel fire in France, he found quite a few. Too many.

*‘Hotel fire sees miraculous rescue, French fire fighters baffled,’* he read.

It got worse, one story displaying a grainy image of Drake carrying a woman. Reading on, many of those who had been rescued recounted stories of the thin young man rescuing them, one particular woman going so far as to claim that he had picked her up and thrown her from a second floor window. Fire fighters confirmed the very strange incident of people flying through the air into the pool, a distance that could never have been reached by a person diving, or even taking a run and jump with a rocket behind them.

Fresh from surfing the web, Kobus met Cat and Drake at the busy poolside bar, grabbing a seat in the sun. With Cat fetching drinks, Drake enquired as to Kobus's curious look.

'People are talking about the fire in the hotel, and your *heroic deeds*.'

'You are concerned.'

Kobus took in fat and pale British holidaymakers around the pool, the people oblivious as to who Drake and Kobus really were. 'We should be keeping a low profile. People know your face from Prague, and if they find us here...' He glanced towards Cat as she stood at the bar. 'The innocent are in the firing line.'

'I sense no danger here,' Drake pointed out.

Kobus sighed. 'So long as we keep moving we should be OK. But, we are moving in a predictable direction; they need only join the dots.'

'Part of you wishes to be found,' Drake noted.

Kobus nodded. 'Part of me does, and part ... wants to go back to Athens and pretend that none of this happened. Funny, but my old apartment and my old job don't seem half so bad now. In fact, my old life seems downright good.'

'You still have a doubt.'

'More than just the one, my friend.'

When Cat returned, she mentioned again the charity that her father supported; there was a local office nearby. Drake was keen, so he and Cat put on clothes, grabbed money from the holdall, and they tracked down the charity's local offices. Cat walked in first, conversing in Spanish with the middle-aged local woman they found. With their purpose explained, the woman raised her arms and smiled, thanking them. She stopped smiling when eighty thousand Euros was handed over in large notes.

Kobus explained that he was a rich man, and that he cared greatly about the cause. Still, the woman was shocked. She

insisted on counting the money and giving a receipt, cold drinks offered as the gang waited.

As they waited, a Russian girl stepped in, slightly built but attractive, Kobus noticing the girl's silver crucifix. To be helped by this charity, she had to be either a barmaid, or a prostitute – and she looked more like the later. As he sat there, he wondered which she was. In English, the girl asked about a loan to get home to Russia, the lady explaining her accented English that her colleague might be able to arrange money tomorrow. Given the cash being counted, it seemed odd.

Kobus pulled out a 500 euro note, and handed it to the girl. 'Get your flight home.'

The girl took the note, but held it, studying it. 'Give to me please name and home so that I send money back,' she said, heavily accented.

Kobus offered her a flat palm. 'It is a gift.'

'Why do you help me?'

'Do I help you, or do I help myself?' Kobus posed.

'You are a Christian?' she asked.

'Not really.'

The girl took a moment. 'I know of a place with many girls, they cannot go home, the police do nothing.'

Kobus exchanged a look with Drake, Drake urging him on with his look. Facing the girl again, he said, 'Do you have the time to show us?'

'Da!'

Kobus gave Cat enough money for a taxi, Drake handing over even more, the Russian girl led out to the car. Setting off, the girl said, 'These men are criminal gang, you are ... strong?'

'We are strong,' Kobus confirmed. 'And what of you, are you strong?'

'I am Russian, we are strong. I was here one year to make money to leave with another girl, work like prostitute.'

'And if we are bad to these men, are you strong?'

'If I can kill them, I do it.'



She directed them along the coast and inland a mile, to a large building that simply said Club. ‘Inside, girl live above, twenty girl.’

Parking around the corner, they walked around together. At the door, Drake didn’t wait for instruction, he simply kicked the heavy wooden door off its hinges, loudly announcing their arrival. They moved inside, finding an empty lap dance bar, seats and poles awaiting customers – as well as awaiting a few dancers. A man moved around from behind the bar, a large African, and not looking happy at the alterations made to his door.

Drake stepped forwards, a swift kick to the balls bending the tall man double. He reached and grabbed the man’s arm, throwing him through the open doorway, the Russian girl surprised to say the least. She pointed to a back room. Drake kicked the door off its hinges, and the walk through and to a set of stairs. At the top of the stairs the owner was waiting, baseball bat in hand.

Drake stepped casually up to the man. A swing of the bat, and Drake caught it, pulling it off the man in an instant, smashing it into the man’s knees. So much force was used that both knees were smashed, the man screaming as he fell backwards, bent like a broken matchstick. As the Russian girl reached the top step, and reached the screams from of her former boss, she kicked at the man repeatedly, swearing in Russian. Drake handed her the bat. With it, she set about the boss’s arms.

Kobus stepped past, and opened the first door. There, he found around ten girls sat chatting, some eating. He withdrew a wad, and started handing a thousand Euros to each girl. ‘Make a bag, go home. Make a bag, go home.’

One girl, who spoke near-perfect English, informed Kobus of their passports in a safe. Drake stepped past, and into an office. A loud crack, and the safe door broke off. Passports were soon being handed out, as well as the cash from the safe.

More girls appeared, from rooms above, more cash handed out. When Kobus got to the point where each girl now had a thousand Euros in hand, he still had plenty of cash, and started back at the beginning - handing out even more.

With half the girls gone, passports retrieved and bags hurriedly packed, a girl stepped forwards. 'A girl is in small room, door with lock.' She led the way.

At the door, Kobus asked the girl to go quickly. And waited. Now, with just him and Drake at the door, Drake kicked it in, a shriek issued from a girl within. She sat in a corner in a flimsy night dress, her blonde hair matted and unkempt, a plate on the bare floor at her feet, part of a sandwich left. Fearfully, she peered up with a bruised eye.

'You can go home,' Kobus told her, handing over five thousand Euros. Offering her his hand, and waiting, she cautiously took it, Kobus lifting her up. 'Come, get your things.'

With Kobus watching, the painfully-thin girl discarded the nightdress and stood naked, trembling for a moment as if she expected something to happen, a sideways glance at Kobus. Finally, she slipped on a pair of jeans, seemingly with difficulty, and a t-shirt. She stopped and turned, her arms folded tight as if cold, pushing up small breasts, the t-shirt hiding little.

'This is all,' she said.

'No shoes, jacket? Suitcase?'

She shook her head, stood like a deer in a car's headlights.

Kobus extended a hand. 'Come.'

She stared at the outstretched hand for several seconds, peered into the eyes of her helper - great sadness conveyed, and reached out. Kobus led her out, a few of the girls now stealing things from the club, others having fun smashing glass panels in the bar below. They passed the former boss, the man now lying unconscious and bloody, the barefoot girl staring down at him as she passed. Seeing that walking was painful,

Kobus lifted her up, surprised at just how light she was. They burst into bright sunlight, the girl wincing, and just made it around the corner as sirens registered.

Drake opened the car door, and helped the girl onto the back seat, easing in with her and handling her as gently as he might a baby. Sensing her feelings, he placed his own sunglasses on her face, the glasses a little big. Kobus reversed around the corner to avoid the main road, and the police, and took a back route. Seeing a row of tacky tourist shops, he pulled up.

‘What size foot?’ he asked the girl.

Drake cut in with, ‘Four zero.’

‘Yes,’ the girl softly agreed.

Kobus eased out, finding plimsolls in a shop, just four Euros a pair. He bought a pair, two t-shirts that seemed about the right size, and a child-size fleece. As an afterthought, he bought a bottle of Sprite and a chocolate bar. Back in the car, he handed them to Drake. The shoes fitted the girl, the fleece a little big. Twisting his upper body to watch her for a moment, Kobus eased out again. Ten minutes later he had a small case, towels, t-shirts and socks, even a straw hat, and sunglasses for girls aged 9 to 11.

With the case in the boot, he drove back to the hotel, slipping past reception and leading the girl up to Cat’s room. After a quick explanation of the girl’s circumstances, Cat pointed her towards one of the two single beds, and showed her the bathroom – a shower much needed, and much appreciated.

Drake knocked on the door ten minutes later, entering with a plate of chips, beans and sausages, placing the plate down on a dresser, a knife and fork wrapped in a napkin.

‘What’s her name?’ Cat whispered.

‘Oksana.’

Oksana appeared with damp hair, back in the same clothes, Cat directing her towards the food. Drake bowed his head and withdrew.

On the balcony of their own room, he sat next to Kobus. Kobus took the cigarette from his mouth. ‘She OK?’

‘She has suffered much, but has not been in this place more than six days. She sought work in the bar, but her money and papers ... they were placed into the metal box, and not returned. She was asked to lay down for coin, but refused.’

‘Good for her. But, she’s hardly strong enough to fight back; she weighs about the same as a ten year old girl.’

‘She came to *run away* ... from her father, and now regrets it. He is criminal.’

‘Criminal?’ Kobus idly enquired, sat with his shoes on the balcony, peering down at people around the pool.

‘A group of men who work together in crime, in Odessa. I sensed that she wished to be away from the other men more than her own father.’

‘Out of the frying pan...’ Kobus began.

‘She is uncertain of contacting her father, and has no papers.’

‘Without a passport she’ll need to fill-in a lot of forms at the Ukrainian Consulate – three or four weeks of pissing about. I doubt there’s one down here, maybe in Madrid.’ He took a drag. ‘It’ll take her a while.’

Cat knocked on the door twenty minutes later. ‘She’s sleeping,’ she informed them as she entered.

Kobus said, ‘You can tell your father about just how *practically* you’re supporting his charity. But ask the girl not to mention where she came from, or what we did there.’

‘She said they were holding her prisoner,’ Cat noted.

‘Most are simply virtual prisoners, their money, credit cards and passport taken off them, the girls intimidated,’ Kobus explained.

‘It’s shocking,’ Cat let out.

‘It happens right across Spain and Greece, Cyprus. The Greeks don’t care; it’s cheap labour.’

‘We shall remain here?’ Drake asked.

‘Cat, when do you need to be back?’ Kobus asked.

‘I spoke to my dad on the phone, and he’s not worried. It’s Thursday today, so if I’m back for Tuesday he can cope without me.’

Kobus took a moment. ‘There might be a Ukrainian consulate in Malaga; I’ll Google it later. We could drop her on the way.’

‘She needs a doctor,’ Cat suggested.

Drake put in, ‘She hurts from where she sat in a small place, only this.’

‘She needs a little stretching and swimming,’ Kobus commented.

At 7pm, Kobus suggested that they go out for the evening meal, Oksana not booked into the hotel. Oksana was not overly keen to venture out, but agreed to come along. She walked along with Cat, down the road from the hotel and towards the beach, a quiet British restaurant entered. Sitting, Oksana lifted her knees to her chest and wrapped them in the fleece, placing her hands in the sleeves of the fleece.

Now, with her hair combed, she appeared quite attractive. With a mug of tea placed down, she cradled it with both hands and sipped. She still appeared afraid, but was a little more sure of herself.

‘There may be a Ukrainian consulate in Malaga,’ Kobus informed her. ‘We can take you there, we’re going that way.’

Oksana took a moment. ‘I don’t wish a return to Ukraine.’

‘If you don’t have papers, they could put you in prison,’ Kobus pointed out. ‘Or send you back. You need a passport to work or to get a hotel room.’

Oksana considered that, and knew that she was in a bind. ‘When I have papers, I can stay.’

‘Sure,’ Kobus agreed. ‘You have the money we gave you to make a fresh start.’

She took a moment. ‘Why do you do this?’

Cat put in, 'My father, he runs a charity for girls like you, here in Spain.'

Oksana turned to Kobus. 'It is your work?'

'No,' Kobus said with a smile. 'Cat is not my daughter, and Drake is not my son. Drake works with me; *Interpol*.' Oksana was momentarily shocked. 'And Cat, she was in Prague when her things were taken, stolen, so we helped.'

'You are police?'

'We ... were, but now we are ... retired,' Kobus explained. 'After this holiday we won't be going back to work.' He exchanged a quick look with Cat.

Drake handed Oksana a few coins. 'Perhaps you will telephone your father.' He pointed at a nearby payphone. 'He may think of you.'

Oksana studied the coins in her hand for a moment, and let her legs down, stepping to the payphone.

'Nice thought,' Kobus commended.

They watched as Oksana spoke for five minutes, but she returned tearful, Cat offering up a tissue.

'All OK?' Kobus finally asked.

'I spoke with my mother. My father ... he is here for three weeks, he looks for me.'

'Perhaps you should meet him,' Kobus suggested.

Halfway through the meal, Drake again handed over coins. 'Call your mother, let your father know where you are.'

Oksana returned to the payphone, giving details of their hotel, town and area. Returning, she informed the group that her father was just sixty miles away.

They returned to the hotel an hour and a half later, and sat in the bar. Fifteen minutes later, a thick-set man in a suit stepped in, seeming out of place amongst the British tourists. Silver-haired with a silver beard, he stepped in with two younger men, the men appearing to be bodyguards. Stood in a casual brown suit, he noticed Oksana, and walked over, but seemed to be in

no particular hurry. He sat without saying anything, inspecting the faces of the others, the two bodyguards hanging back.

Kobus offered a hand. 'Kobus.' They shook.

'Yuri.'

And Yuri, he asked questions of who these people were in the native Ukrainian tongue, many sentences exchanged with Oksana, who avoided eye contact with her father for the most part.

Yuri finally faced Kobus, but managed to seem proud, offended, and begrudgingly grateful at the same time. 'I thank you for your help, for my daughter.'

'What work do you do?' Drake asked Yuri with a pleasant smile, as if asking an innocuous question.

'I have many businesses, some shipping.'

'Do you ship from Syria?' Drake asked, an odd question.

Yuri hesitated. 'Sometimes.'

'And you use a ship ... Malaysia Star?'

It was now a very odd question. Kobus reached into his jacket, the move noticed by all, and offered Yuri a look that suggested the man was in trouble.

As Yuri focused on the jacket, Drake asked, 'Do you ship from the Syrian port of Tartus?'

'Who are you?' Yuri finally asked.

'We used to work for Interpol,' Kobus stated, maintaining firm eye contact with Yuri.

Drake put in, 'And I recognised your face, from ... pictures.'

'So,' Kobus began. 'What do you ship, Yuri?'

'And what are you nervous about?' Drake asked. 'Is it ... the eight Iraqi men you transport, or the weapons they carry?'

Yuri half turned his head to his men.

Oksana focused on her father. 'Father, what do they say? What do you ship? Do you ship guns and terrorists?'

Yuri didn't answer.

Kobus whispered, 'You'll be dead before you hit the floor.'

Yuri again stared at the jacket. ‘Did you rescue my daughter, or did you look for her – to get to me?’

Drake faced Oksana. ‘Do you like your father to ship terrorists?’ He faced Yuri. ‘I think, Mister Yuri, that Oksana left because of your work, not her love for you. And she still loves you and wishes to be with you, yet does not wish to be part of a crime family. Mister Yuri, your daughter is here if you wish to be again a family; you need only consider what weight in gold coin she is worth.’

Cat was looking worried, and stared at Drake as Yuri turned to his daughter.

Drake asked him, ‘Is what is on that ship worth your daughter? Can you sit in your home and count the gold coins, when your only daughter was forced into prostitution, beaten, made a slave to eat on the floor, crying in the night and asking for her father.’

Oksana was close to tears, and so was Cat. Yuri heaved an involuntary breath.

Drake continued, ‘She sat alone in a dark cell, naked, no food and drink, crying your name. Where were you, Mister Yuri, where were you?’

After a moment, Kobus said, ‘Turn away from what was on that boat, and turn to your daughter. And help us. What was on the boat, and where was it going?’

Yuri welled up, facing his daughter. ‘The boat ... had eight men, some large boxes, weapons. They ... left Tartus three days ago, for West Africa.’

‘Oksana,’ Drake called. ‘Go with your father. Leave your things here, and go, or you will forever regret it.’

Yuri stood, a hand extended down to her. She studied the hand for a moment, grasped it and stood, a big hug for her father.

Kobus stood. ‘Things can go one of two ways; life, or death, good, or bad. Go home.’

With a final look back, Yuri led Oksana out of the hotel.



Kobus faced Drake. 'Do you think he *knows* what was on board?'

'No.' Drake glanced at Cat, and stood, leading Kobus away a few steps. 'He had a feeling - and images - about a man on the boat, as did Johansson. It was Dr. Kamil, the same images.'

'I need to make a call.' Kobus rushed back to the room, and switched on one of the stolen mobiles, not sure whose it was. He waited a painful few seconds to gain a signal, pacing up and down, and finally entered a number.

'Duty officer,' came the authoritative voice a British man.

'This is Kobus van der Schule - situation critical. Pop-Dragon sailed from the Syrian port of Tartus three days ago, ship named Malaysia Star. Eight Arab gunmen were on board, along with Dr. Kamil and numerous boxes. Destination is unknown. You got that?'

'Yes, got all that.'

Kobus hung up, and dialled Riggs old number.

'Brad Martins. That you Kobus?'

'Listen up, Dr Kamil and eight Arab gunmen are aboard a ship called the Malaysia Star, somewhere in the Med; it sailed from the Syrian port of Tartus three days ago. Pop-Dragon is on board, I repeat, Pop-Dragon is on board.'

'And you found this out ... how?'

'I'm good at what I do. I've alerted the British, just in case someone your end is still thinking of allowing it to go off.'

There came a long pause. 'I ... wish I could refute that last remark, which I greatly resent. Unfortunately ... well, they'll let it go off over my dead body.'

'Your boss has a call to make to a few European partners, like the Italians and Greeks.'

'And you got this information...?'

'I used a million dollars to bribe a few Ukrainian shippers. Still, money well spent.'

'And the *special asset*?'

‘I sat him in front of a few people, and he confirmed if they were lying or not.’

‘He can do that?’

‘Most of the time, it’s not an exact science.’

‘Those above me are greatly interested in the asset.’

‘We’ll negotiate, after Pop-Dragon has been dealt with.’ He hung up. Turning off the phone, he leant out of the window, and tossed it into the dark hotel pool below. ‘Be running out of stolen phones soon, boy.’

## A right pair of bachelors

Heading back down to the hotel bar, Kobus found that Drake and Cat were now gone – no sign of them around reception. He returned to his room, sitting on the balcony in the dark, and lit up. An hour later, Drake knocked, let in – and stared - at by Kobus.

‘Cat was ... suddenly most interested in lying down,’ he said with a puzzled frown. ‘Her thoughts were most odd, in that she found me more ... dangerous and mysterious.’

Kobus slammed the door. ‘Lucky bastard,’ he said as he returned to the balcony.

Drake sat next to him. ‘Our lying down is now much better, but I must try hard not to say “*Bingo!*” at a point of pleasure.’

Kobus lifted his eyebrows. ‘I ... can see how she may interpret that the wrong way, yes.’

‘It was an odd alignment of the heavens, to meet this Mister Yuri.’

‘No more odd than finding a fucking demon in a cave, a flatulent demon at that.’

‘When I am ... lying down with Cat, sometimes I feel like I must make wind, and I go to the balcony. Cat is understanding, and laughs, but the people in the room next door have moved away.’

Kobus focused on Drake, trying to keep a straight face. He shook his head – wide eyed, and lit up again.

‘Will we fight the men on the boat?’

‘First, we’d have to find damn thing, and that’s down to the magistrate. It sailed three days ago, so it could be out of the Mediterranean by now. It hasn’t been long enough sail to Britain, but it could have reached Italy, Greece or Southern France by now. So, my young friend, it could nearby.’

‘You are ... concerned that time runs short.’

‘My life has a few days left to run, so yes, an odd feeling – odd in that I accept it. But, when I see things like ... happening across Yuri, I do find a ... sort of calmness taking over.’

‘It is good to be in an alignment of the heavens, and I now feel that I was chosen, not cursed.’

Kobus put his feet on the balcony, and took in a young couple getting amorous beyond the pool. Holding his cigarette, a hand over his raised knees, he peered down at the couple. ‘I never married or settled, and ... it’s kind of hard to walk into your own death knowing ... knowing that you never really found the right relationship. It feels like ... unfinished business.’

‘I have this feeling also,’ Drake admitted. ‘I was to be betrothed, and I thought often of the girl.’

Kobus nodded, taking a drag. ‘When we imagine something - something like a relationship or a marriage, we make it better than it seems. If I was married I may have been unhappy, I may have felt trapped, she may have been ... difficult.’

‘It is indeed a wise argument. I read the minds of many men who were married, and only those married yet a few short years were happy.’

‘Your *betrothed*, she may have ... smelled bad and bathed little.’

‘Indeed a problem in winter in my time, no summer stream to bath in.’

‘She may have ... grown large and round.’

‘Such a wife would have kept me warm in the winter, but I confess to liking Cat with ... little meat on the bone.’

‘She may have ... developed warts on her face, even on the end of her nose.’

‘In my time this was common,’ Drake said with a sigh.

‘And she may have refused your advances unless you spent your last coin on her.’

‘Indeed, to have had my heart ransomed in such a manner.’

‘But that’s the thing about the human mind – we paper over the cracks, and we can image a love that’s greater than it really would be. We long for things that we imagine to be wonderful, and don’t appreciate them when we have them.’

‘I appreciate Cat, but ... she thinks of shopping and meeting her friends, or what her friends will make of me, and what clothes I should wear.’

Kobus tipped his head back and laughed quietly. ‘A hen-pecked demon.’ Smiling widely, he shook his head.

‘If only to live life with a maiden, each day as on the first day,’ Drake lamented.

‘Let’s make a pact: to remain unmarried for the rest of our lives.’

‘I so agree to this pact, but I fear it will not be tested by the years, rather by the passing of days.’

‘Better to live the life of a king for a day, than a serf for a lifetime.’

‘Go out with a blast,’ Drake stated. ‘So it was said by Stones Rolling. Yet they are old men, and still alive.’

‘Everyone says *live life to the full* ... but they never do. But some die young, through drinks and drugs.’

‘And this man who lives in the Mansion of Playboy...’

‘Is Hugh Heffner, my hero.’

‘Indeed. To be surrounded by naked girls all of your life, and to earn coin for doing so.’ Drake shook his head. ‘How some men live.’

‘Yep, and here we are, a sorry pair of bachelors.’

In the morning they checked out, Oksana's things left in the room, and headed south along the main highway, halting near Almeria at 4pm, a hotel chosen at random. The first hotel they tried only accepted bookings over the internet, the second offering up two rooms with a sea view, a four star resort with a large pool surrounded by palm trees, a horseshoe hotel that surrounded the pool on three sides.

Kobus ordered room service, and sat on the balcony eating, the room affording him a wonderful view of the pool area, the beach beyond, and the calm sea. With beer in hand, he sat on a comfortable lounge and stared down at the beach and the sea. He glimpsed Cat and Drake once, on the beach below the hotel, and didn't worry for their safety.

With the sun down, he moved inside and closed the balcony door, hopping on the bed and picking up the TV remote. Turning the TV on, he found the BBC World News.

“- in the single largest mobilisation of counter-terrorist police officers Europe has ever seen -”

‘Woken up, have we?’ he scoffed.

They showed images of police officers at Italian ports, searching ships, and then focused on the Malaysia Star itself. Kobus eased up; the ship had been searched by French Commandos, nothing found. He scrambled around through the bags, and found a mobile, switching it on. He called Brad Martins, checking his watch as he paced back and forth across the room.

‘Brad?’

‘Yes, Kobus?’

‘What was on the Malaysia Star?’ Kobus asked with some urgency.

‘They found a secret compartment, bed rolls for eight men, tins and bottles.’

‘And the device?’

‘One of the crew is talking. It was ... moved to another ship in the dead of night, along with the eight men. One fits the description of Dr. Kamil.’

‘Then it could be anywhere!’

‘Europe is locked down tight,’ Brad confidently stated.

‘And your eastern seaboard?’

‘It’s a ten day sail, so we’re ramping things up bit by bit. Do you ... have any more leads?’

‘Some,’ Kobus lied.

‘And don’t you think we should be the ones investigating, with our considerable resources?’ Martins nudged.

‘I’ll explain it at some point, but no. Where was the device off-loaded?’

‘Off the coast of Sicily, two days ago now.’

Kobus took a moment. ‘What’s my status, as far as you and the wider world is concerned?’

‘There are, obviously, a great many unanswered questions, and a high body count. Self defence is one thing, mutilation another.’

‘Tell the President I want a pardon, done officially, and tell the director I want it all made to go away – all my actions. And pressure on the Europeans to bury it.’

‘That’s a tall order.’

‘Mister Martins, the next time I call you it may be the most important call anyone on the planet has made ... ever. Do you want to take the risk of pissing me off?’

After a long pause, Martins said, ‘I’ll see what I can do.’

‘I’ll do everything I can to stop a western city from burning, a million dead, and I’ll I die trying. What’ll you lot do, Brad?’

‘We’ll ... do everything we can to assist.’

‘Make my *request* ... known.’

‘The President has read your file himself, and get’s daily updates about you.’

Now it was Kobus’s turn to pause. ‘Oh. Are you ... looking for me?’

‘We’ve been ordered not to, not that I think we could find anyone daft enough to come for you; it would be a task short on volunteers.’

‘Am I on the Interpol list?’

‘You were, but you came off.’

‘Nice of you,’ Kobus quipped.

‘If you don’t mind me asking ... what have you been up to lately?’

‘Hard at it day after day, following leads, bribing dirt-bags; won’t have much money left soon.’

‘If you need more, ask.’

Kobus took a moment. ‘Kind of you, but ... I kind of see this as my fight. You arseholes tried to kill me to stop me from finding out about Pop-Dragon, and ... I took it personally. I’ll see this through, I’m going to find that damn bomb, and God help anyone who gets in my way.’

‘I can’t fault you, Kobus, despite the deaths.’

‘What happened in Iraq, to Special Unit 14?’

‘Killed to a man, an ambush.’

‘Dr. Kamil,’ Kobus realised.

‘Yes, we think he switched sides.’

‘Maybe he found out that Johansson killed his wife and kid; that can, sometimes, turn a man against you.’

Martins paused. ‘Yes, it could. Listen, I know you have no reason to trust us, but we’ll help you out if you call – men or resources. We’re just as keen to find Pop-Dragon as you are.’

‘What, keen to avoid explaining to Europe why they lost a city and a million people?’ Kobus cynically asked.

‘That ... would be a factor, yes.’

Kobus sighed. ‘I’ll call when I know something.’ He hung up, switched off the phone, and launched it from the balcony, down into the pool.



Drake and Cat joined Kobus for the evening meal at the hotel, but talk turned to what would happen after they dropped her off.

Kobus was ready. 'We'll need to return to Bulgaria to resign properly, and to clear out our apartments,' he informed her. 'That could take a week or two. Then ... then Drake's free and he could visit.'

When Cat stepped to the toilet, Kobus told Drake, 'A good lie is always better than the pain of the truth. Tell her that ... you're old fashioned, that you think you and her should get married in Bulgaria, and live on a small farm raising pigs and chickens, and have six children.'

'It is a very pleasant image, yes,' Drake said, nodding and staring out of focus. 'She will be pleased.'

Kobus blinked. 'Yeah, right, and ... you know, sell her on the idea, see what happens.'

Kobus made his excuses after he had finished his meal, and left the happy couple alone, soon in the hotel bar and nursing a pint of beer. Drake came and found him an hour later. 'Well?' Kobus asked as Drake sat.

'She ... is not happy to consider marriage yet, she says that she is too young, and might be married when thirty - a great age to consider betrothal. And she is not happy with a farm, pigs, or children.'

'You've gently pushed her away, by making yourself less appealing. That will save hurting her feelings.'

'She said ... *it's not you, it's me* -'

Kobus laughed. 'Welcome to the modern world.'

'I have heard these words spoken on Friends, and it makes many people unseen laugh at Rachel and Ross.'

'It's a kind way to say ... *no*.'

'A small farm with pigs and children ... it was a very nice image.'

Kobus shot him a look. 'Tomorrow we'll reach Marbella or Gibraltar. I had planned on seeing her father, but we were

meant to give Cat a lift to meet Yuri. I don't believe Cat's father can help us.'

'Not part of the alignment of the heavens?'

'I don't think so, no.'

'We do not know where the bomb is,' Drake pointed out.

'True, and I feel we should be looking, but ... but I'm also second-guessing myself as to what path we should follow. We met Cat because we were supposed to. Hopefully, after we drop Cat off, something will guide us.'

'Is that not tempting fate?'

'It is, but I don't know where the damn bomb's going.'

'You are a good agent of the meadow –'

'Field agent,' Kobus corrected.

'Yes, you are a good agent of the field. Maybe you can think about where the bomb is going.'

Kobus eased back, thinking. 'Dr. Kamil and the others, they want to hurt America. So ... they'd most likely sail to America.'

'I sense that you do not believe they will succeed.'

Kobus nodded. 'The American magistrate is sat waiting, checking all boats. So are the British, and the Europeans.'

'Who is not checking boats?' Drake posed.

'Non-Europeans, but Dr Kamil doesn't want to hurt them.' Kobus shrugged. 'He probably wants revenge for his family.'

'In my time, the captain of the guard would attack a village at night and leave no one alive, dropping the curved swords of the Moor behind. The king would give him coin for more men out of fear.'

Kobus considered that, and nodded gently. 'Here, the king of America lied to the world, and said that the Moors had great weapons, and were a great threat. It was a lie that started a war.'

'You said before that the magistrate sought more coin from the king.'

‘That was before the betrayers were discovered. Now, hopefully the US President – the king – will be very suspicious of everything that the magistrate does, *curved swords* especially.’

In the morning, Cat was not as touchy-feely as she had been, and Kobus’s suggestion to head down to Gibraltar was welcomed. They set off after breakfast, soon speeding down the toll-highway, quiet roads allowing for many miles to be burnt up quickly, Kobus cruising at 90mph. They stopped for a quick lunch at a service station, and made Gibraltar in good time. Passports shown, they queued in the traffic, queued some more, then drove across the middle of the runway to the island, which was not really an island.

Cat directed them through narrow streets and terrible traffic, one-way systems negotiated at a crawl. They parked below her apartment block, what little she had with her carried up. Drake handed over a hundred thousand Euros, and asked that she make good use of it. As Kobus stood there, shoes came to mind, lots and lots of shoes.

She led them back down, and around to her father’s offices, welcomes exchanged. Cat explained about the donations, her father surprised, if not suspicious. Still, he made the lads a cup of tea.

Kobus noticed Drake’s look, and puzzled it.

Making idle chat, Drake asked, ‘Do ships in Asia still suffer pirates?’

‘Some, yes, it’s still common, and Somalia of course,’ her father explained as they sat about a coffee table. ‘And recently we had a ship disappear here, in the Mediterranean.’

‘Disappear?’ Kobus repeated. ‘You mean it sank?’

‘No, we think it was taken, a crew member found in the sea – he’d been shot.’

‘Shot?’ Kobus queried. ‘Never knew such things happened in the Med.’

‘It’s the first time for us.’

‘Where was last contact made?’ Kobus now asked.

Cat’s father squinted towards Kobus for a moment. ‘Off Malta.’

‘Do ... the Sicilian Mafia involve themselves in such things?’ Kobus pressed.

‘They have done once or twice, but not for decades. And the last contact was near Sicily, but the ship’s transponder stopped.’

‘Valuable item to lose, a ship,’ Kobus noted.

‘Not ours, it was registered in Malta, owned by a Turk and operated by Egyptians. Lloyds of London will be looking for it – expensive claims. I think the cargo was stolen, maybe off-loading in Lebanon.’

‘What was the cargo?’ Kobus asked.

Cat’s father shrugged, and made a face. ‘Steel, maybe ... three million Euros worth.’

‘I’m sure they’ll find it, less the cargo,’ Kobus finished with.

With Drake saying goodbye to Cat, her father thanking them for rescuing her – and the large donations to the charity, they wound up the visit.

Outside, Kobus asked Drake, ‘Did you get the ship’s name?’

‘Valetta Two.’

Kobus rustled around in the bags in the boot of the car and found a mobile, surprised that they had any left. He switched it on, found a signal – eventually, and punched in a number.

‘Duty officer,’ came a British voice.

‘This is Kobus van der Schule. I need a favour, and urgent. Try and find a ship called Valetta Two, any sightings, it went missing off Sicily. I’ll call back from time to time.’ He hung up and switched the phone off.

Facing Drake, he said, ‘We’re on British territory, and can be picked up, so we’ll head back to Spain; they have more of a morally casual attitude to life.’

They again negotiated the terrible traffic and one-way systems, queued, moved, and queued some more. Across the runway, no planes landing at the time thankfully, they joined the highway east, and headed towards Malaga. With the sun low, they came off the highway near the airport, and found an isolated hotel, the Bali. It had a room with two single beds, cash paid, fake IDs shown.

On the balcony, Kobus sat on yet another white plastic chair, put his feet on the balcony, and lit up facing the ocean across four hundred yards of flat scrubland. Dunes gave way to a very long beach, the afternoon warm, the scene a pleasant one.

‘We have found an alignment,’ Drake noted. ‘Yet, you seem unsure.’

‘It seems like it could be the second ship, but they’d have to be stupid to try and think they could sail it anywhere other than through the night. The oceans are busy places these days, and other ships will see its profile and report it, especially if it goes near a port. Around the Mediterranean it would be seen very quickly, and they’d never get to America.’

‘They would sail when dark?’

‘Sure, but how far can you sail in twelve hours of darkness without being seen. They could reach ... Italy, Libya, or Greece.’ He sighed. ‘High-jacking a ship is likely to attract more attention to them than the ship they were already on. It was dumb move, if ... and it is a big if ... if they took the boat.’

‘It could be a coloured fish of the Vikings,’ Drake suggested.

‘A red herring, yes. Did you ever see Vikings, men with red hair?’

‘Yes, they fought for coin for the rulers of Constantinople.’

‘They invaded Malta as mercenaries,’ Kobus idly noted. ‘And these days, Constantinople is Istanbul, a Muslim capital.’

‘Many wars were fought over the city, many wars started from the city,’ Drake noted.

‘It has been the centre of things for a while. In fact, it’s been the centre of things for two thousand years; where East meets The West.’

‘Who is now the king of the city?’

‘The country now has a secular president, the country known as Turkey.’

‘Turks? Men in the boats that had the wire bird’s nest had a thought of Turks.’

‘In the marina in Varna, they had a link to Turkey?’

Drake nodded.

Kobus inhaled, and blew out slowly, taking in the view. ‘The original deal was to buy the detonator from the Russians, then pass it on to someone else – who must have turned away after the blast. But who were they?’

‘They would have been known to Johansson.’

Kobus nodded as he thought. ‘Yes, part of the decoy, but why Varna, and why a boat – a boat that could reach Turkey in a day or so?’ He adopted a puzzled frown. ‘Just what the fuck ... would Varna have to do with a bomb in east Baghdad?’

‘A red herring?’ Drake correctly got this time.

‘The detonator being found ... would point towards someone other than the US Army possessing the knowledge. Then a few days later the bomb goes off in Baghdad, what – five days later or so, maybe longer. Who’d be fooled by that? They’d have to get the detonator through Turkey or Syria into Iraq. And ... people like the British knew that the US Army were custodians of the bomb.’

Kobus lifted a finger. ‘They must have been planning on Dr Kamil being found somehow, and made responsible for the blast. But since he was in the custody of the Americans, the Americans would get the blame anyway.’

‘I do not see a clear path through,’ Drake complained.

‘Me neither,’ Kobus quipped. ‘The red herring is no good where it was, it would have to be closer to ... Iraq or Iran.’

‘You said before that they wished you dead because of your knowledge of the bomb.’

‘Yes, but my chances of finding the marina without you were slim at best. I can understand them wanting to remove someone who knew about Pop-Dragon, but that was probably not related to the red herring. That must have been on its way somewhere, into the hands of terrorists in Iraq or Syria, who’d be caught with it after the east of Baghdad was roasted.’

‘Curved swords on the ground,’ Drake noted.

‘Yep, curved swords on the ground – blame apportioned.’

Kobus switched the mobile on. When it found a signal, it bleeped, a text message waiting. He opened it.

“ONLY CREDIBLE SIGHTING OF VALETTA II NEAR GREEK ISLAND OF MILOS.”

He lifted his head.

‘You have new information.’

Kobus made eye contact. ‘That damn boat is on its way to Constantinople.’

‘Where wars start,’ Drake pointed out.

‘It would never get through the Straits, so ... it’ll have to be offloaded somewhere else. But what’s the target?’

‘They seek to make war on Constantinople?’

Kobus made a face. ‘That won’t affect the Americans, it’ll hurt *fellow Moors*.’

‘Curved swords, Kobus?’

Kobus took a moment. ‘Attack Istanbul ... and make it look like America?’ He made a face and frowned. ‘They’d never believe it. But ... but Dr. Kamil is a Kurd - and they hate the Turks, so he won’t lose any sleep over it.’ He shook his head. ‘No one is going to believe that the Americans had anything to do with it, but they could argue that the Americans were negligent in releasing it, especially with a million dead Turks.’

Kobus dialled Brad Martins.

‘Hello?’ Martins answered.

‘It’s Kobus. Tell me, did Special Unit 14 lose any kit when they were jumped?’

After a pause, Martins said, ‘Are you fucking psychic now?’

‘Did they?’ Kobus nudged.

‘They lost most of the kit, and three men were never recovered. Is it worth asking how you knew?’

‘I’m psychic.’ He hung up and turned the phone off. Facing Drake, he explained, ‘The American men who had the bomb, their specialist equipment was taken, and three bodies.’

‘Kill everyone in the village, leave curved swords on the ground,’ Drake said.

Kobus sighed. ‘Some things never change, do they.’

‘We shall drive to Constantinople?’

‘No, we’ll fly.’

Drake was excited. ‘I have not been in the sky.’

‘It’s over-rated, cramped seats ... unless, unless you hire your own executive jet. Do we ... have any money?’

‘We have much money,’ Drake said with a smile.

Kobus stopped smiling. ‘Problem is, our bags would be searched at both ends; we’d have no money in Istanbul.’ Kobus eased back, and took a long drag. Finally, he faced Drake. ‘Are you ready to step into the fire, my friend?’

Drake took in the view, and took a moment. ‘I have known a girl and loved, yet known the passing of time in love. *Each day as the first* is ... of a story. I have seen the wonders of your world, and I have learned of my true purpose from a good teacher. I am not the demon, I am the angel; I know this now.’ He faced Kobus. ‘I am ready, *my friend*.’

‘Time to roll the dice.’ Kobus dialled Brad Martins.

‘Kobus?’

‘Yes. You said you wanted to help, so it’s time to make good on that. Got a paper and pen?’

‘Go ahead?’

‘I want a private jet at Malaga Airport, Southern Spain, as fast as humanly possible, and I want transport for me and one



other – with our bags unsearched, to Istanbul, and I need that ride to be quick. Then, I want the Delta Force team you keep in Germany flown to Istanbul, full tactical kit. Then I want the President to have a difficult chat to the Turks.’

‘Istanbul is the target?’

‘The kit from Special Detail 14 is there, and the bodies of your men. You’re about to get the blame for the loss of the city.’

‘Jesus...’

‘Get me that flight, and make a few calls. I’ll leave this mobile on. And Brad, screw with me and the bomb might just go off. I can find it, that you’ll have to take on faith. Over and out.’

He stood, Drake following him up. ‘Right: shower, shit and shave, check the bags, then we step into the fire.’

## Curved swords

At Malaga airport, Kobus parked where he was not supposed to, in the area clearly marked for taxis only, and abandoned the car – keys in the ignition, the heavy bags of cash lugged. They grabbed a trolley, placed the bags on it, and moved inside the terminal building, adopting a position near a line of car rental cubicles, and waited.

Drake eventually pointed at a man. As the man turned, they noticed a sign that said “Kobus”.

‘Now we see,’ Kobus began. ‘They might just shoot me. Or arrest me. Or arrest me *then* shoot me.’ He pushed the trolley towards the man with the sign, and simply stood in front of the man.

‘This way,’ the man said with a local accent after looking Kobus over. He led them to a side room and through, airport guards nodded at, soon onto the tarmac, a bus waiting. They dumped the trolley and lugged the bags onto the bus, the man accompanying them onboard. With the doors closed, they moved off.

Drake faced the man with an excited grin. ‘I’ve never been on an aircraft before. I am looking forward to it.’

The man stared back at Drake for a moment, then turned his head to face Kobus, a question in his look.

Kobus said, ‘He’s taking the piss.’

Kobus looked over his shoulder, and had to look twice, a grey US Air Force KC135 tanker sat waiting. ‘What, no in-flight movie?’ Kobus curtly asked their guide.

‘What will the movie be?’ Drake asked, ducking to get a better look at the aircraft. The man stared back as they trundled across the apron. ‘I like Sesame Street,’ Drake told the man, being ignored.

The bus halted next to a crewman in a green flight suit. With the door open, they were hit with a smell of aviation fuel and the whine of jet engines turning over. Drake lugged two bags, Kobus one. The crewman offered to take one, then struggled with it.

‘What the fuck you got in here?’ he shouted over the noise of the engines, approaching the steps.

‘Cash.’

‘Yeah, right.’

‘Cash,’ Kobus repeated. ‘Have a look.’

The crewman stopped at the base of the steps, and had a quick peek inside, zipping up the holdall afterwards. He shot Kobus a curious look before lugging the holdall up the steps. Once Kobus and Drake had ducked their heads into the aircraft, the crewman pointed at the other holdalls.

‘Cash,’ Kobus repeated, the man having a look inside the bags.

‘Weapons?’ the crewman asked, closing the door.

Kobus took out his pistol, released the magazine and made safe, showing the crewman the empty pistol, and getting back a nod. They were shown to a row of just three seats, and buckled up.

‘Can you do me a favour?’ Kobus asked the crewman. ‘Kid’s not been on a plane before. Can you hold out your arms and say ... *the emergency exits are here, here ... and here.*’

The crewman gave Kobus the finger, and turned to the flight deck.

Within five minutes they were taxiing around, soon on the runway and lined up, taking off due south and out over the ocean, Drake trying to take in as much as he could.

‘Will they bring food on small plastic trays? I don’t sense any ladies in uniform.’

Kobus focused on Drake with tired eyes. ‘This is not an aircraft for passengers, it’s a military aircraft, and just for us. No meal, no in-flight movie, no duty-free perfume on sale, and definitely no attractive air hostesses.’

Fifteen minutes later, with the aircraft levelling off, the pilot came back. He took a moment to study his passengers, and the bags. ‘My boss had a call from the fucking President, to get you two to Istanbul, and to hell with permissions.’ He waited.

‘It’s a long story,’ Kobus suggested. ‘But can you do something for me?’

‘What’s that?’

‘You familiar with the veterans association for US soldiers hurt in Iraq?’

‘Yeah.’

Kobus unzipped a holdall, and pulled out a dozen large wads. ‘It belonged to a Russian gun-runner. He won’t be needing it, and no one knows about it.’ He handed it over.

The pilot studied the wads, placed them in a plastic bag and stowed them in a locker. Returning, he said, ‘You CIA, yeah?’

‘Something like that,’ Kobus responded.

‘And the kid?’

‘Just a witness on a case,’ Kobus lied. ‘Can he see the cockpit?’

The captain reluctantly waved Drake forwards. Drake knelt between the crewmen, and listened for five minutes as various things were explained.

When Drake returned and sat, Kobus asked, ‘Will the pilots take us to Istanbul, or throw us out at a very great height?’

‘They will take us,’ Drake responded. ‘They mean us no ill.’

Kobus eased back, stretched out his legs, folded his arms, and closed his eyes.

‘We are the only passengers,’ Drake noted, being ignored. ‘Will we have to pay much for our passage to Constantinople? Perhaps our own cabin? Is this a Learjet? This is not like on TV.’

‘Are we nearly there yet?’ Kobus muttered to himself.

Three hours later, the co-pilot informed Kobus that they would soon be descending, and that they had made good time. It was now dark outside, Drake knelt near a window and peering down at the distant lights below.

The pilot then came back. ‘Just had a radio message.’ He paused, looking Kobus over. ‘There’s a Delta Force unit at the airport, waiting for you. And helicopters.’

‘Can’t be for me, I’m not important enough,’ Kobus quipped.

‘Something up in Istanbul?’

With cold eyes, Kobus said, ‘Refuel quickly, and leave as fast as you can.’

The pilot straightened, glanced at Drake, and returned to the cockpit.

‘We are in Constantinople?’ Drake keenly enquired.

‘We are,’ Kobus confirmed.

‘We have travelled very far in such a short time, the length of Europe!’

‘That we have, and this is journey’s end. But, given all the conflicts that have been started here, it’s a suitable place for the final battle. And it’s the cradle of Christianity, so I guess that’s poignant as well.’ He stretched. ‘It’s where Emperor Constantine saw something in this idea of Christianity, an idea to control the people and raise taxes – just in a different way. The Roman Empire became the Holy Roman Empire, then the Holy Roman Church; same idiots, different uniform.’

‘You are in much confusion as to the merits of the good book,’ Drake noted.

‘The water is shaped by the bucket, and the bucket was built by man – not by God.’

‘Indeed, yes,’ Drake agreed, nodding. Peering over his shoulder at the equipment panels, he asked, ‘Will they be handing to us what is known as *frequent flier miles*?’

‘Are we nearly there yet,’ Kobus mumbled.

‘And we must fill in a form about recent travels, for a chance to win a holiday.’

‘If you fill in the form, you’ll be forever on their junk mailing list.’

‘Oh.’ Drake gave it some thought. In a conspiratorial tone, he said, ‘Perhaps we should give a false address on the form.’

Kobus opened his eyes, shook his head, and closed his eyes again.

With the aircraft door open, the whine of jet engines bursting in, the steps were brought close. Drake and Kobus thanked the crew, Kobus again telling the crew to leave the city. They lugged the bags down, and were met by a Major stood in combats, a Turkish police jeep behind him.

The Major shook Kobus’s hand. ‘You Kobus, yeah?’ he shouted.

Kobus nodded. ‘And this is Drake.’

‘Drake? Like the duck?’

Drake shot Kobus a look.

‘Yeah, just like the duck,’ Kobus confirmed. The bags were bundled into the back of the jeep, seats taken behind the driver, the men finally able to talk with the doors shut. The driver was also Delta Force, and again dressed in combats, and now pulled off.

‘We have a command post set-up in a police station in the centre of town,’ the Major explained from the front passenger seat as they pulled off.

‘And your orders?’ Kobus asked.

‘To wait and see if this theory of yours pans out, then to move on the bomb.’

‘And what do the Turks know?’

‘They think there’s an al-Qa’eda cell here, and that they’ll try and kidnap Americans or go for a plane - which was the story we were fed. So what’s *really* going on here?’

‘It’s classified. What I can tell you ... is that the bomb has a three mile blast radius.’

The Major and his driver exchanged startled looks, and peered over their shoulders at Kobus.

‘There’s a fucking nuke here?’ the Major loudly asked.

‘Not a nuke, but it’s just as deadly. If you’re in the city when it goes - you’ll roast alive. And if it goes, it’ll kill a few million people.’ Kobus took a moment as they drove out of the airport. ‘You a man willing to take risks, Major?’

‘Risks? What the fuck do you think I do for living, bud?’

‘I mean ... personal risks. If you happened across the bomb, would you say to yourself – I can stay and try and disarm it, or I can drive off. Would you stay and try and disarm it, knowing that three or four million people might die: men, women and children?’

The Major glanced over his shoulder. ‘This wasn’t what I expected when I woke up this morning.’

‘Then you best start thinking, because within a day or so you may have that choice. Myself, and my assistant here, have no issues with dying; we’ll try and diffuse the bomb, because three million is a number much bigger than two.’

The Major and his driver again exchanged looks. ‘If the Turks found out ... Jesus, they’ll lynch us.’

‘We’re here to help them,’ Kobus pointed out. ‘But ... but I don’t intend telling them either; a mass exodus would achieve nothing. The bomb may not even be here, or it may arrive a day after people return to their homes. So no, no evacuation.’

‘What’s your specialist area?’ the Major asked.

‘I’m one of a few people who’ve worked on the bomb, and seen it detonated.’

‘You know how to disarm it?’

‘Yes. And in our favour, it’s a bitch of a bomb to set-up and to set-off. It may take two days or more just to create the right conditions, and another two to set it up. It’s fiddly. Most likely, when they detonate it, it’ll just burn up an area two hundred yards in diameter.’

‘And the kid?’

‘He’s a specialist, with security clearance higher than you.’

The Major glanced at Drake over his shoulder, getting a silly smile back.

At the police station, a handful of Delta Force soldiers stood smoking outside, the Major now helping to lug the bags. Inside, he said, ‘Where do you want your kit?’

‘Kit? The bags are full of cash,’ Kobus explained.

‘Cash? What the heck for?’

‘In case we need it.’

The Major led them through the police station, and to a large room fitted with a blackboard and numerous desks, two dozen people sat around or checking weapons, a large Turkish flag hanging in the corner. The holdalls were placed down, just as a dozen men in suits stepped in.

The senior man approached Kobus with a neutral expression. ‘I’m Schneider, Istanbul Section Chief.’ They shook. The rest of the men were introduced, Drake nodded towards, his age and appearance puzzled.

‘This everyone involved?’ Kobus asked. A few additional soldiers were invited in before the door was closed.

Kobus stepped to the front of the room, people settling down and sitting as he waited. ‘Gentlemen, until recently this subject matter was so sensitive that fewer than a dozen people really understood it. Rest assured, guys, that a leak by someone here will not just shorten a career, it’ll lengthen a prison term.’ He let them think about it, taking in the faces.



‘This is classified top secret, keep that in mind at all times. And, should the Turks find out, we’d all be thrown in a Turkish cell and never released. Disclosure ... would cause panic – to say the least. Gentlemen, if the device is here, and it goes off, it’ll do so with a three mile blast radius.’

A chorus of whispers broke out, sweeping around the room.

Kobus waited for them to settle. ‘In our favour, the device is a bitch to set-up. First, what’s the wind today?’

‘About ten miles per hour,’ a CIA agent said. ‘Cool and pleasant.’

‘They won’t try and set it off in a breeze like that, they’ll wait. So, weather forecast ... anyone?’

A man lifted an iPhone. ‘I can get that.’ They waited. He finally said, ‘Day after tomorrow, hot and sunny, no wind.’

‘Then that’s the day they’ll go for,’ Kobus said. ‘The bomb likes still hot air. OK, I’m breaching a number of laws by briefing you on this, so I hope you all have permission to be here.’ He pointed at the CIA Section Chief. ‘Any views on this lot?’

The man took in the faces. ‘Orders are to brief them and deal with the damn bomb; can’t do that without knowing what makes it tick.’

‘OK,’ Kobus began. ‘The bomb was discovered by accident, by an Iraqi – a Dr Kamil, and is a *vaporised binary liquid*. This bomb *cannot* go off outdoors, it must be enclosed. The space that it’s enclosed in is dependent on the volume of liquid used. If they have a good supply, as we know they have, then that space would be something like ... a gym hall, but three times taller.

‘That space ... would need to be reasonably air-tight. It would be positioned near tall buildings, not on a hilltop or in a breeze, not near any open spaces – like a football pitch or a river. What we’re looking for, is a tall empty space inside a building, surrounded by other tall buildings, in a densely populated area, ideally in the well of a slope.

‘OK, how it works.’ Kobus paced as he spoke. ‘Up on the ceiling would be a set of specialised nozzles. They start to release the liquid after mixing, and under a certain pressure. That kit is specialised, and was probably brought with the device. To buy it and make it locally would give us an excellent footprint.’

The CIA took notes.

Kobus continued, ‘That liquid mixes as it drifts down, slowly turning into a vapour, a process that takes three to four minutes. If you happened across it before then, just destroy the kit - and kill the arseholes operating it. Once the vapour is at the right density, it needs to be at the right temperature. That would be controlled by warm water pipes, or air heaters, no naked flames. The temperature has to be consistent through the void; if you walked into it, it would feel like a sauna.

‘You’d also notice a sickly sweet smell, and a red mist. So that’s warm, sickly smell, red mist. And it would make you cough. At the base of the void, you’d find oxygen canisters. Again, they may have been buying locally. Those canisters switch on as the liquid falls, and it creates an odd molecule. Timing ... is everything.

‘If you’re lucky, you’ll notice an odd series of detonators, about thirty-six of them, all strung out like Christmas lights. If you could break a few off or cut the wire, it would still go bang, but not reach its full potential.

‘If they get all that right, then upon detonation the strange molecule burns at a temperature hot enough to melt steel. If it’s inside a building built with steel girders – like the Twin Towers were – the building will collapse, so will those around it. The hot gas spreads out and burns everything in its path.’ He pointed. ‘Your rifle barrels would melt, even half a mile away.’

‘Jesus,’ someone let out.

‘Counter-measures,’ Kobus began, taking in the faces. ‘If you upset any of the above, it won’t work properly. Throw a grenade, good. Start a fire early, good. Break windows and let

the gas out, good. Take with you a smoke canister and set it off, good. Take with you a CO2 bottle and set that off, even better. Anything ... that upsets the concentration of the vapour and its temperature will turn a big bang ... into a burning building.’

‘CS gas canisters?’ the Major asked.

‘Yes, good,’ Kobus agreed. ‘Throw them in, or launch from a rifle. If you can, simply shoot out all the windows. So, CIA, look for oxygen purchases, pressure hoses, brass tubes, air blowing heaters – unusual at this time of year, and a large empty space in a tall building in a built-up area.’

‘You have leads?’ they asked.

‘Some, yes,’ Kobus lied. ‘They brought us here. Myself, and my keen assistant, will follow them up.’ The CIA focused on Drake.

‘Can we talk privately,’ the Section Chief asked as he stood, a firm nudge in his tone.

Others stood, and started chatting in small groups as Kobus and Drake were led to a side room. The Section Chief closed the door, and said, ‘I’ve been asked ... to *request*, that I assess the special asset.’

Kobus pointed the man to a seat behind a desk. ‘Drake, read this gentleman’s mind. Schneider, think of an image.’

After a few seconds, Drake frowned, saying, ‘He thinks of us having an unnatural sex act.’

‘Cheeky bugger,’ Kobus told Schneider. ‘Try another image.’

After a few seconds, Drake said, ‘A yellow curved fruit, then an elephant.’

‘Shit...’ Schneider let out. ‘What number am I thinking of?’

‘Twelve, the age of your daughter, Cassie, whose birthday you were not able to attend.’

‘Jesus...’

‘And you suspect your wife of cheating –’

‘OK, enough for fuck’s sake.’ He stood. ‘Fuck me.’ He pointed at Drake. ‘What are his limitations?’

Kobus said, ‘He needs to be close, and making eye contact, no distractions or loud noises nearby. And then it’s not a hundred percent. He reads weak minds easier.’ Kobus finished with a smile.

‘Yeah, and fuck you too.’ Schneider focused on Drake. ‘I would never have believed it. I’ve seen a few weird things in my time, even spoke to someone about Distant Viewing, but this is real fucking weird.’

Kobus said, ‘If we can get him close to the bad guys, he can read their minds and get us some answers. Any suspects - bring them here for questioning. Oh, and get us a hotel room in the centre of the city, would you.’

With Schneider gone, Kobus asked, ‘Sense anything else in him?’

‘He fears you and wonders as to your abilities, and resents your authority here.’

‘That’s fair enough; can’t blame him for that.’

‘Why did you lie about my abilities?’

‘Simple. Because I don’t trust him.’

‘There is something else. He worries about what I may have seen in his mind, beyond his wife’s cheating.’

‘How much ... does he worry?’

‘He is hiding something.’

‘Might not be related to the bomb. They probably want me in custody afterwards, it could simply be that. They’ll also want to capture *you*.’

Back in the main room, Kobus answered questions for ten minutes, and then grabbed a computer. Using Google Maps, he studied the centre of Istanbul’s business district, printing off a map of the city and a separate map of the business district. Schneider arranged for a photograph of Dr. Kamil to be emailed over, the image printed off fifty times and handed out, copies given to the Turkish police in the building.

Kobus then handed a surprised Turkish police chief a holdall full of money. ‘Offer this as a reward for Dr. Kamil, one million Euros – more or less; we may have taken some lunch money out.’

With Schneider having arranged a driver and jeep for Kobus, they set off for a hotel, and took the two remaining holdalls - despite delicate questions from Schneider and his team about security for the money. As well as about its intended use.

Driving east from the police building, they followed a long highway through the city, finally glimpsing the high-rise towers of Maslak business district. Off the highway, they circled north, and eventually arrived at the huge obelisk that was the Sheraton Hotel – the CIA had an account. A porter helped with the heavy bags.

‘We’ve arranged for two local police officers,’ the driver informed Kobus, a man of olive skin and shortly-cropped black hair, and a pleasantly disarming face. ‘And I’m your assigned driver, Ramirez, so they’re spoiling me – I get a room near your rooms! If I order room service and cable porn, I’m sticking it on your room number.’

Kobus smiled. ‘Why the hell not.’

They booked in, fake IDs shown – Ramirez curious about the documents, and took the lift up to the fourteenth floor. A receptionist had accompanied them, rooms opened, pleasant smiles exchanged. Drake stepped immediately to the window, staring down at the spectacular view of the city and its twinkling lights.

‘It is indeed a very large city, much greater than I remember.’

Kobus looked up. He had been checking the holdalls to see if all of the cash was still in the bags. ‘You’ve been here before?’

‘I came after mastering Marcus, when trying to escape those who knew my image, and I stayed a month or two. But I did

not like the city and returned to Europe, some time in Macedonia alone in the hills. Here, the food made me ill.'

'You ate regularly?' Kobus puzzled.

'For a time I did, just red meat, and not cooked. Little else kept Marcus quiet.'

Kobus returned to checking the bags, especially for bugs. 'Did you sense anything about the driver?'

'He has been asked to stay close to us and to report, but does not wish us ill.'

Kobus approached Drake, a finger across his lips. Whispering, he said, 'Do you sense anything odd in the room, like a small device to listen to us?'

Drake took in the room, stepping to a picture frame. There he found a bug and handed it to Kobus after examining it, the bug held close to his eye. He stood on a chair and unclipped the smoke detector, removing another bug, finally a bug from a cash holdall. After walking around for five minutes, turning his head like a demented bird of prey, he gave a big shrug, his hands wide.

'We need to be careful what we say, they'll be listening in everywhere,' Kobus suggested. 'Turn the TV on for background noise.'

Drake attended the TV, adept at remote controls these days. He found the news, Kobus focusing on a local news programme when a picture of Dr. Kamil appeared, a reward figure displayed. Since Kamil was a Kurd, the local Turks would be keen to find him, and to give him a good kicking.

After ordering room service, Kobus sat and ate quietly, thinking about many things. Drake tried some of the bread, the city's twinkling lights a backdrop to their meal, most of those lights being distant yellow street lamps.

'You are considering a plan,' Drake noted, tasting marmalade from a plastic sachet and wincing.

'We'll walk around the business district later. If they're in place - or nearby, you might sense them. The good thing for us

... is that they need a few days preparation.' His mobile trilled. 'Kobus.'

'It's Schneider. We got a lead on oxygen cylinders, bought yesterday for cash, no questions asked. Buyer spoke broken Turkish, no match to Dr Kamil. We also have a match to the same guy buying long copper pipes, and a precision drill the day before, a warm air blower from the same outlet: said it was to dry the concrete on a house construction. Any clues as to what he needed a bunch of ten nine-volt batteries for?'

'Probably the detonator; it needs the juice.'

'So it is here,' Schneider realised. He waited.

'If there's anyone around here you care about, move them,' Kobus coldly stated.

'I'll have to report this up the line. It's not definite proof, just ... circumstantial, but ... if the Turks found out.'

'Yes, a problem. Still, you have them looking for Dr. Kamil, they can't argue with that, and you're not sure if it's here or not.'

'You are.' He waited.

'My lead was ... extracted from someone.'

'Is what they said ... about what you did, is any of that true?'

'Bob Russell sent a hit team after me because I know what I know about Pop-Dragon. They wanted me silenced, I wanted to live; it was no more complicated than that.'

'They say you killed thirty two men.'

'They say all sorts of things, but you shouldn't believe what you hear.'

'And the cash?'

'That's between me ... and those a few pay grades higher than you. If you have any questions relevant to the bomb, feel free to call and ask.' He hung up.

'You do not like this man,' Drake noted, now on the ketchup sachet. Fiddling to open it, he squeezed, the sauce bursting out and onto the carpet.

Kobus glanced at the ketchup on the magnolia carpet - a look exchanged with Drake, then took in the city view. 'We broke a great many rules, and killed a great many people, and to him I'm more of a problem than a solution. But I don't blame the guy, and most of what we did would be *very hard* to explain. Once this is over, well ... there's no point thinking about that.'

Kobus's phone trilled ten minutes later, Drake now sampling brown sauce. 'Kobus.'

'It's Brad Martins.'

Kobus checked his watch. 'Working late?'

'I am today, as well as a few others. There're a few five o'clock shadows around here, and we're running low on damn coffee, a few people in the shirts they had on yesterday.'

A squirt of brown sauce, and Kobus wiped his jacket with a napkin, Drake apologising with his look.

'Schneider has made some progress,' Kobus noted.

'Yes, *after* you told him what to look for. There were a few raised voices around the desk this end, the boss wanting to know why we weren't looking for those things; our Army experts were a bit slow.'

'I'm glad to be of service,' Kobus quipped. 'But people like Schneider - well, he's a good man, and what I did would take a review board a year to unravel.'

'I can take a risk here, and say that if you locate the bomb - all past sins will be wiped and I'll kiss your lily white ass.'

'That's not an image I needed to picture,' Kobus quipped. 'And would the *special asset* have something to do with my coming in from the cold?'

Drake looked up.

'There're a few excited people over here, and a few people now think they know how you survived. Would the asset ... *like* to work with us?'

'Not really. He only wants to work with me.'



‘After this ... you and he ... would make an attractive proposition to the decision makers.’

‘Let’s get the bomb before we discuss a desk with a view, huh.’

‘Could we ... persuade you to accept close protection for the asset?’

‘And ... for me?’ Kobus toyed.

‘Well, yes, of course –’

‘But he’s more valuable,’ Kobus finished off.

‘I didn’t mean it like that.’ Martins paused. ‘Is he – you know – kinda autistic?’

‘He is,’ Kobus said whilst making firm eye contact with Drake. ‘A bit slow. He sits and watches TV, likes rides on the bus, drools, suffers extreme flatulence.’

Drake curled a lip.

Kobus continued, ‘I need to look after him, and he’s gotten used to me. I’m like the father he never knew, and he’s like the son I never wanted.’

‘A deal could be reached, I’m sure.’

‘We’ll talk after I find the bomb. Over and out.’ Kobus lowered the phone.

‘Drools?’ Drake repeated, looking none too happy.

‘I did it for you,’ Kobus lightly suggested.

‘For me?’ Drake queried, not buying it.

‘Yeah, for you, to ... protect you,’ Kobus said with a grin.

‘Cowpats!’

‘You say *bullshit*, not cowpats.’

Drake ground his teeth. ‘Named after a bird, given hair like an animal of the forest ... if you were truly my father I would change my family name and disown you.’

Kobus took in the view. ‘If I was your father ... you’d be in university, studying to be something useful – and not here.’ He stood. ‘C’mon, we may as well make a start, unless you want to sample the fucking salt sachets as well.’

Drake stood, and paused. ‘You think it a waste for us to give our lives here,’ he noted.

‘Only when I stop to think about it,’ Kobus said with a sigh. ‘So let’s not stop to think about it.’ He checked his pistol, grabbed the room key, and led Drake out. Next door, he knocked and waited. Ramirez appeared, his tie loosened, his shoulder holster visible. ‘You fit?’

‘You want to go out?’ Ramirez puzzled.

‘We sure do,’ Kobus mocked. ‘But we can get a taxi if you want a night off, mate.’

‘Be my arse if anything happens.’

Kobus stared at the man. ‘If anything happens, you’ll be in a body bag, on a slab in the morgue for dawn.’

Ramirez slowly placed on his jacket whilst maintaining eye contact. ‘Should we have a close protection unit?’

‘Won’t get much done with them tagging along, now would we.’

Ramirez closed his door, key in hand. ‘And if we find the bad guys?’

‘There could be raised voices,’ Kobus quipped as he stepped to the lift, Drake studying the buttons. Drake pressed the button for down, pleased with himself.

They stepped out through the plush foyer, past pink marble walls, and down a few steps to the forecourt, yellow taxis queued up waiting. Kobus took a deep breath of the warm night air, and took in the nearby buildings. ‘We’ll walk.’

They set off. As they did so, Ramirez called in and reported their movements.

Drake pressed the button at the first pedestrian crossing, diligently waiting for the green man before stepping out, amusing Kobus. Drake faced Ramirez. ‘I learnt how to do that on Sesame Street.’

Ramirez stared at the back of Drake’s head as they walked, a look exchanged with Kobus.

The hotels and bars along this street were brightly lit, a few up-market boutique shops still open at this hour, a great deal of traffic whizzing by as the three men ambled along wide pavements.

A fifteen minute stroll bought them to the business district, and to tall towers. Kobus stopped and peered up at many of the office blocks, and stood staring down wide streets.

‘The streets are wide here, the buildings not very close together,’ he noted. ‘It ... doesn’t seem like an ideal spot for the bomb.’

Ramirez drew level. ‘Would they want to hit the business centre, or a population centre?’

‘Either,’ Kobus admitted. He hailed a yellow taxi. Inside, Kobus said to the taxi driver, ‘Market? Centre? Old Centre?’

The taxi driver seemed to understand, and took them to the Old Bazaar as the CIA driver Ramirez – now a CIA passenger – called in their movements.

The Old Bazaar was a collection of many tight streets, and a huge market place dating back centuries. Tourists flocked to it, the locals using it for bargain hunting; they invariably paid a different price to the pale white tourists off the cruise ships.

Stepping out of the taxi, their senses were assaulted by bustling traffic, by crowds of locals and tourists, by music coming from several directions, and a wide range of smells – smells of cooking, and of spices and perfumes.

‘This place is a security nightmare,’ Ramirez cautioned.

‘Stick close and you’ll be fine,’ Kobus offered him, getting back an odd look.

They penetrated one of the bazaar’s many “gates”, and fell into the flow of people being herded along, many tourists out and about.

‘It has changed little,’ Drake noted.

‘Been here before?’ Ramirez asked.

‘When I was younger,’ Drake said, a look exchanged with Kobus.

‘School trip, eh,’ Ramirez commented as they rubbed shoulders with tourists.

Sellers shouted out, proclaiming the wonders of what they sold, people haggled, and tourists gawked at the brass plates, carpets, and spices. Some stalls simply offered modern fruit or vegetables, many selling modern tourist crap; towels looking like the Turkish flag, towels with a map of the country, t-shirts and flip-flops for the beach, sunglasses.

‘Men follow,’ Drake casually told Kobus five minutes later.

Kobus took the next turn, aiming at a quieter street. ‘And their intentions?’ he asked without Ramirez hearing.

‘To kill you.’

‘Just me?’

‘Just you.’

‘It’s nice to be popular. American?’

‘Local men, who take coin from another local man, who they saw meeting a western man an hour ago. It was Schneider.’

‘That’s disappointing,’ Kobus said with a sigh.

‘This man was working with Johansson?’ Drake asked.

‘I don’t know, but I guess they figure they’ll find the bomb now without me, and they want *you* alive.’

Kobus turned his head to Ramirez. ‘Walk in front of us, buddy, there’s a few boys behind that want to shoot holes in us.’ They exchanged cold looks as the driver reluctantly moved past and to the front, glancing back. ‘And I’m assuming that you don’t know who they are.’

Ramirez glanced over his shoulder at Kobus. ‘No, I don’t know who they are. Should we call for backup?’

‘Would that make things better, or worse?’ Kobus testily asked above the din coming from the market.

‘You think that *our side* sent them?’

‘You tell me, buddy.’

Drake suddenly bent double and ducked into a vacant shop, Kobus nudging Ramirez onwards. At the next corner Kobus halted, keeping his back to the men following.

‘Ready for a shoot-out?’ he asked Ramirez, staring dispassionately at the man.

The driver reached into his jacket, scanned the people closest, and made ready.

Drake drew alongside. ‘We should go,’ he urged. He stepped off quickly, around a corner, Kobus following, Ramirez glancing back at a crowd now peering down at something on the ground.

‘What did you do?’ Ramirez asked as he caught up.

‘I put their heads together, and they fell asleep,’ Drake reported.

‘Good move,’ Ramirez commended, checking over his shoulder. ‘Didn’t learn that on Sesame Street. And you’re good at spotting tails; I missed them.’

Drake handed Kobus a mobile phone. As they walked through the crowds, Kobus dialled the last number used. A greeting came in Turkish.

‘This is Kobus, the man you were paid to kill. You’ll need a few new men, yours are asleep in the bazaar. Have a nice day.’ He hung up, and tossed the phone away.

Schneider took a call, listened, and finally hung up. He faced his deputy. ‘The two men Farkas sent after Kobus were intercepted, and Kobus himself called Farkas on the mobile of one of the men.’

They exchanged looks, puzzled looks.

‘That phone was evidence,’ Ramirez firmly suggested as they negotiated the crowds.

‘Sometimes ... when your mum is shagging the guy next door, you don’t say anything because it would hurt the family.’

‘You’re saying that someone in the community sent those guys?’

‘I’m saying, that next time they won’t be so stealthy, and that a cold slab in the morgue has your name on it, because someone in the CIA wants me dead.’ He halted, and faced Ramirez as tourists weaved past. ‘You ... they assigned to me, and you ... they don’t care about being in the firing line. To the person who sent those men, and who’ll send more men, *you* ... are expendable.’ They exchanged cold looks. ‘Perhaps you should decide whose side you’re on, before the mortician cuts open your chest.’ Kobus led Drake on.

Ramirez caught up. ‘Do you know something about those men?’ he demanded.

‘Yes.’

They walked on.

‘And?’ Ramirez nudged, dodging around tourists.

‘And what? You’re Company, Istanbul Section, and a dumb expendable minion. Not like you care what goes on above your pay grade.’

‘I have a wife and two kids, asshole, and I’d like to see them again.’

Kobus halted. ‘There’s a bomb in this city, and if it goes bang a million fathers will lose their wives and kids. Do you ... care any?’ He waited.

‘Yeah, I care.’

‘And if, tonight, we found the bomb and started to disarm it, would you stay behind and give your life for those Turks that may lose their families?’

Ramirez took a moment. ‘I’d like to think so, but the fact is ... I don’t know.’

‘Schneider is working with a different agenda,’ Kobus said as he walked off.

Ramirez caught up. ‘Schneider is dirty?’

‘No, he’s a patriot, and he wants what’s best for the agency. Problem is ... we’re in Turkey, and the dead people will be Turks, not Americans. Schneider is probably a good agent and a good Section Chief, and he probably has his orders, orders that don’t include me surviving this night.’

‘We’d have more chance of defusing the damn bomb *with you* than without you,’ Ramirez firmly stated.

‘Most sensible people would agree with that, but whoever is pushing Schneider’s buttons might not.’

Noticing a small cafe, Kobus entered and sat, teas ordered, the bustling street observed as they took the weight off.

‘A war on two fronts,’ Drake noted. ‘We must find the bomb, and do so without being shot.’

A minute later, Ramirez sipped a sweet tea in a small glass. ‘What’s your plan?’

‘We’ll take a walk, and see who comes out to play,’ Kobus responded. ‘Not least ... because your mobile will tell them *exactly* where we are.’

‘You think they’re tracking my mobile?’

‘Definitely,’ Kobus answered before sipping his own tea. He turned his head to Drake. ‘Do you think you could find the paymaster of those men?’

Drake nodded.

Ramirez studied Drake. ‘How would you know the paymaster? Did *Big Bird* tell you?’

Drake took a moment. ‘You have had doubts about your work for the CIA, since ... your posting to Panama.’

Ramirez stared back, but didn’t comment.

Drake continued, ‘You did not like what a certain George Kaplin ordered you to do. But I sense that you are a good man, that you don’t always agree with what the CIA does, or what you are told to do.’ He waited.

‘What are you, fucking psychic or something? And this dumb kid act, that’s just a show. You seem much older when you’re not playing the fool.’

‘As a young man, you attended church ... and considered other things,’ Drake told Ramirez. ‘You went with Wendy Sanchez, so that you could sit near her.’

Ramirez’s eyes widen and he straightened in his chair. ‘How the fuck...’

‘He’s not human,’ Kobus told Ramirez. ‘He’s an angel.’

Ramirez lifted his eyebrows. ‘An ... angel?’

Kobus asked the waiter for a sharp knife to cut a thread on his jacket. The waiter came back quickly with a sharp pocket knife. With the waiter withdrawing, Kobus handed the knife to Drake. Drake laid his upturned hand flatly on the table, and stabbed down into it.

A slit of flesh was visible, a drop of blood, but - as Ramirez observed - the slit closed up. Drake flexed his hand, and offered Ramirez the knife. ‘My leg.’

Ramirez took the knife, looking back and forth between Kobus and Drake. He pointed it down, and stabbed gently into Drake’s leg. Drake did not react, no blood visible in his trouser.

Ramirez reached across and took Drake’s hand, stabbing into it below the table. He pushed the knife in deep, and withdrew it, lifting Drake’s hand above the table when done, a close inspection made. The hole closed up, Ramirez staring wide-eyed at it.

‘Think of an image from your childhood,’ Drake suggested. After a moment, he said, ‘A cabin on a lake, your sister before she drowned, for which you still feel guilty.’

Ramirez’s mouth slowly opened.

‘Time to choose sides, Ramirez,’ Kobus suggested. ‘You may have to face your maker sooner than you think, and we could do with a little help.’

‘All those rumours about Bulgaria and Prague...’ Ramirez began in a strained whisper.

Kobus eased forwards. ‘I survived, because I had a little help along the way. And now, now the lives of a few million



people hang in the balance. Question is, will you step up to the plate?’

‘What ...’ He licked his lips. ‘What did you want me to do?’

‘Take a walk around the bazaar with your mobile, meet us later. If anyone calls - we’re with you – just out of shouting distance or in the toilet.’

Kobus eased up, and led Drake off.

‘You referred to me as an angel,’ Drake noted with a silly grin.

‘You could be; there’s a fine line between angels and demons. And, according to old scriptures, angels were known for passing wind.’

‘Yes?’ Drake asked. His features suddenly darkened. ‘You made that up!’

Shaking his head, Kobus headed to the main road. They hailed a taxi, Drake describing the area where Farkas worked. Driving around the area, the taxi driver well paid, Drake finally recognised a road, then a building. They thanked the driver and eased out into a busy street.

Studying the building, Kobus said, ‘You’ll need to avoid getting any blood on you.’

Schneider took a call, his face dropping, his mouth opening. Hanging up, he turned to his deputy. ‘Farkas and a few of his men were just killed. And Farkas, his entrails are hanging off the ceiling fans!’

They exchanged looks, Schneider quickly calling Ramirez.

‘Yes, boss?’ Ramirez answered over the din of the bazaar.

‘Where’re Kobus and the kid?’

‘In the old bazaar, playing like tourists.’

‘Have they been out of line of sight for any length of time?’

‘Only in the can.’

‘You’ve been with them since you left the hotel?’

‘Yeah, why?’

‘Nothing,’ Schneider hung up. Facing his deputy, he said, ‘Kobus isn’t here alone, the son of a bitch has a team here.’

‘What ... what’s their agenda?’

‘I have no fucking idea – at all.’

‘That team, they hit Johansson and his boys,’ the deputy cautioned. ‘And if Farkas talked...’

‘Farkas had his guts opened up, so yeah - I think he may have fucking talked!’ He dialled Kobus after forcing a deep breath. ‘Kobus, how’s it going, any leads?’ he asked in a pleasant tone.

‘Just waiting for a call-back or two, so we’re out enjoying the market while we have the time. You need me for anything, boss?’

‘No, just checking in. Bye.’

‘Well?’ Schneider’s deputy finally asked.

‘As if he didn’t know, or he’s a hell of an actor.’

‘So who the fuck is running around out there: Russian gangsters?’

‘If there’re Russians out there, then what the fuck’s their agenda, and who the fuck’s paying them?’

Ramirez suddenly noticed Kobus fall into step in the market. A glance over his shoulder confirmed the presence of Drake, a pleasant smile offered by Drake. ‘Schneider called, wanted to check where you were,’ Ramirez reported.

‘We just killed a man named Farkas, who admitted to knowing Schneider - *and* having been paid to kill little old me.’

Ramirez wasn’t sure how to react, or what he felt. ‘Do you ... have any leads on the bomb?’

‘Not really.’

‘No?’

‘No, but if we get close enough then Drake would sense the people responsible.’

‘Jesus. What else can he do?’

Kobus made form eye contact. ‘You don’t want to know.’ Facing forwards, he added, ‘He’s capable of bad things, which is why he locked himself away in a cave for a few hundred years.’ Ramirez glanced over his shoulder at Drake, Kobus adding. ‘He is ... older than he looks.’

Turning a corner, Kobus noticed a display of art, and a model of the city, tourists photographing it. He strode over to it, and rudely nudged tourists aside. With Ramirez and Drake finally alongside, they peered down at the replica of the city, and at its streets and buildings.

‘We need a low area, in a depression ideally, and with densely packed buildings,’ Kobus explained. All eyes scanned the large model.

Ramirez pointed. ‘There.’

Kobus knelt, and closed one eye for a moment. ‘It’s in a depression, yes,’ he said as he straightened. ‘Tall buildings, old - part old the city, and densely packed. A blast would spread out, covering a wide area, maybe a mile to the Straits.’ He beckoned a man who seemed to be responsible for the model. Pointing, he said, ‘What name ... this area?’

‘Sultanahmet.’ The man held his arms wide with a smile. ‘Here.’

Kobus nudged Ramirez towards the bazaar “gate”, leading on at a quick pace. Outside, they stopped and considered the immediate streets, what layout they could see. Kobus approached a man. ‘Speak English?’

‘Some, yes.’

‘Cafe, bar, up on roof.’ He pointed up with a finger. ‘Up.’

The man gestured a direction. Thanking the man, Kobus turned, leading off and heading down the busy street, weaving between locals and tourists. Emerging into something of a small square, they found enough space to walk without rubbing shoulders, and halted in the middle of the square. Seeing two police officers, Kobus approached.

‘Speak English?’

‘A little,’ came back.

‘Bar, cafe on roof, up.’

The officer pointed to a corner of the square.

‘I speak a little Turkish,’ Ramirez pointed out. ‘I *am* stationed here.’ He seemed a little offended.

At the corner of the square, Kobus followed a dark side street, soon glimpsing revellers at rooftop height. He located the entrance and stepped inside, old stone steps clattering as they climbed up four floors. They found a busy cafe at the top, mostly locals, just a few western tourists. At the bar, Kobus and Ramirez caught their breath, beers ordered. With drinks in hand, they stepped onto the terrace, and took in the local topography on this warm night.

‘Ground zero,’ Kobus suggested, peering down at the bustling streets below. Seeing an even higher level to the building, they climbed a set of steps, and took in the view around the immediate area, the tall minarets of Istanbul’s famous mosque clearly visible and dominating the dark skyline.

‘This is the tourist centre,’ Ramirez pointed out. ‘Damage this area, and the economy of Turkey is affected.’

‘Dr. Kamil might just have that in mind,’ Kobus noted, taking in nearby buildings. ‘We need a building with a ... hollow centre of some sort.’

Drake raised an arm and pointed a finger. ‘Men are very anxious and nervous here, they ... make ready weapons, and a bomb.’

‘What kind of bomb?’ Kobus urged.

‘A small bomb in a hand.’

Kobus slammed down his drink, spilling it, and nudged Drake to the steps. ‘Go!’

In a mad scramble, they descended lower whilst attracting attention – and not caring, shouting at people to step aside on the stone steps. In the street, Drake took the lead, soon weaving between people and down a narrow lane. At the end he turned

right, then immediately left, halting at a building overlooking the square they had walked through earlier. A large double door presented itself, looking solid – but also appearing very old.

Drake glanced left and right, before punching a hole through a panel. Reaching in, he unbolted the door, a shoulder opening it. Kobus and Ramirez followed Drake inside, and to a dark interior, drawing their pistols.

Drake halted them with an outstretched arm. ‘There are four men above; machineguns, grenades, a bomb.’ He turned his head, to make eye contact with Kobus through the dark, just a sliver of grey light coming from the open door. ‘I will go.’

‘We go into the fire together,’ Kobus insisted, pushing past. ‘You can try and get the bomb out.’

‘This way,’ Drake whispered, leading them up a dark set of stairs, the hall smelling as if no one had lived here for years.

‘We should call for back-up!’ Ramirez whispered after them.

‘The way out ... is the way you came in, if you want to go,’ Kobus told him without turning, taking each step quietly. ‘You’ll see your kids again.’

‘Fucking son of a bitch,’ came back.

At the top of the stairs, Drake pointed. ‘Two men,’ he whispered. ‘Two above.’

‘The bomb?’

‘Above.’

‘Go for it, I’ll take these,’ Kobus whispered. ‘When I shoot, you move.’

Drake moved off in a blur. Hearing muffled voices, Kobus eased slowly along the corridor’s stone floor – his pistol outstretched, and towards a door, now hearing voices in Arabic. As he drew level with the door it opened, a bright shaft of light suddenly illuminating him. As he brought his pistol to bear, the gunmen he found holding the door looked even more startled than Kobus.

In slow motion, Kobus saw the slide fly back, the gunman hit in the chest, a second shot fired as the man fell backwards, blood spurting from the man's face, arms flailing.

After a second's hesitation, the gunman now hitting the floor, Kobus ducked down, landing on a shoulder, his pistol inside the door as he sought the second man.

A tremendous roar signalled the magazine of an AK47 emptying into the doorway, the reports echoing loudly about the stone walls. The wood of the door and its dated frame splintered, the stone of the walls erupting, Kobus soon covered in masonry and closing his eyes, the gunman not seen. The tinkle of spent cartridges hitting a stone floor registered, just as a 'click' came; the gunman had fired the weapon till empty.

Kobus started to lift up, soon seeing Ramirez jump over him and into the room, arm outstretched, his pistol starting to fire, three rounds echoing. 'Clear!' came after a tense moment of silence.

Kobus eased up as a tremendous crash came from up above, dust falling from the ceiling, the sound of weapons fire. He could now see the man he had shot, and as he stepped around a dusty old sofa he could see the second gunman beyond a stone pillar, the old paint flaking off it. The house looked like it had been vacated a long time ago, he noted as he caught his breath. On a low wooden coffee table sat a US Army issue M4 - an M16A2, a pistol and a handful of grenades, again US Army issue.

'Call it in,' Kobus shouted at Ramirez, and turned to the door. He burst through the open doorway and tore towards the stairs, concerned for Drake. As he climbed the steps, a blast registered; a grenade had gone off.

A moment later, something metallic hit the steps behind him, an awful foreboding taking hold. He slammed himself into the hard stone steps as the grenade detonated, a bright flash followed by hot metal pinging off the stone walls. Something caught him on the side of the head, now a burning

sensation in his leg. Lifting up, his ears ringing, he continued up the steps, a hundred years of dust falling down the stairwell and making him choke.

Reaching the landing, he dropped to a knee and peeked around the corner, a shaft of dull light visible, a body on the floor with its head at an unnatural angle. A scream echoed down the landing, the kind of scream that only Drake could cause in someone, someone on the receiving end of Marcus. Kobus eased up and ran.

Reaching the door, he slammed a shoulder into it, his pistol shoved into the light. Moving inside, he dropped to a knee, checking every which way.

‘They are dead,’ Drake flatly stated. He lifted the bomb. ‘I believe this is counting like a clock.’ He focused on it as if it was an innocuous toy. ‘Forty five, forty four...’

Kobus straightened, ‘Get it outside, take it to street! Find a drain and smash down with your foot, and throw it inside!’

Drake moved quickly, moving past in a blur. Kobus grabbed an AK47, released and checked the magazine, and ran towards the window, dated patio doors hanging open. A small balcony presented itself, a rusted metal guard, people walking around in the dimly lit alleyway below, a few peering up and wondering about the noise. Kobus pointed the AK47 towards the wall opposite, aiming down at an angle. Hesitating for a second, his mouth dry, he aimed at dated stonework, and emptied the magazine.

Screams went up, people running in both directions. As he finished the magazine, he could see Drake stamping on a drain cover. Drake stopped to peer down the hole, glanced at the bomb’s timer, and casually dropped the bomb inside, turning to return to the house.

Pulling back from the balcony, now breathing heavily, Kobus focused on the US Army equipment, and stood wondering about it.

Drake appeared at the door. ‘The bomb is in the water in the drain.’

The house lurched, the blast felt through their feet, dust falling by the bucket full, walls cracking, masonry clattering to the ground, Kobus raising his hands over his head and grimacing.

When the world stopped shaking, Kobus said, ‘Quick, put these grenades in your pockets, grab that weapon.’

They stuffed Drake’s jacket pockets with grenades. ‘Go downstairs, grab other weapons like this, and grenades, go out the top of the building and hide them on a roof somewhere, not too close. Quickly!’

Drake spun and ran out, Ramirez entering a second later.

‘What’s he doing?’ Ramirez asked, his pistol still in his hand.

‘Hiding evidence.’

Ramirez closed in. ‘What evidence?’

‘The Arabs wanted to somehow link the US Army to this incident, weapons and kit they picked up in Iraq. Drake will hide it.’ Kobus looked around. ‘Question is, is there a body around here.’

‘A body?’

‘Three bodies of three US servicemen in Iraq were taken; Dr Kamil wants to link them to the bomb when it goes off. Start searching.’

‘Delta Force are on their way, local police should hold off till we OK the bombs,’ Ramirez reported as he started to move things with his foot, the room now covered in a thick layer dust.

Sirens penetrated the open window, soon the dull resonating drone of a helicopter. The helo put down in the square, soon the sounds of boots on cobbled stones.

Kobus risked putting his head out of the balcony window. ‘Building clear! Building clear! Come inside and search for bombs.’ As an afterthought, he added, ‘This is Kobus.’



Boots soon echoed on the stone steps, 'clear' shouted a few times. A clatter above the room, and Drake burst through the ceiling, bringing half of it down with him.

'Problem with the fucking door?' Kobus dryly asked as he straightened, his hands no longer over his head. Ramirez eased up, dusting himself down and coughing

'Items were hidden in a small space, so I made a hole.' He handed over a grenade as the first Delta Force soldier appeared, checking the faces down his rifle sights.

'Clear,' the man said after checking the room, others soldiers pouring in, their faces covered in diagonal green and black stripes.

'Check each room,' Kobus told them, handing over a grenade.

'That's one of ours,' the soldier noted.

'Yep, a curved sword left behind.'

'Huh?'

The Major stepped in, stopping to take in the room. 'You, er, wanna explain this, Kobus?'

Kobus pulled masonry out of his hair. 'I had a tip-off, we came, they shot at us, we found a bomb counting down and dropped it into a drain outside. End of report. I'd offer you a written report, but my handwriting is terrible.'

'And ... you figured we were sat with our thumbs up our ass?'

'There was no time. The tip-off suggested that they were making ready the bomb. I needed to act.'

The Major pointed at the side of Kobus's head. 'You're hit.'

'Picked up a little shrapnel in the leg as well.'

'Medic!' the Major shouted over his shoulder.

Ten minutes later, and with Kobus's head and leg being tended, Schneider and his deputy stepped in, crunching masonry under foot, and taking a long look at the gunmen. Schneider finally faced Kobus, a white bandage now around

Kobus's leg. 'You certainly live up to the rumours,' he flatly stated.

'Always in the wrong place ... but at the right time,' Kobus quipped, placing a cigarette on his lip.

'And this lot?'

'Four out of eight, of Dr. Kamils team. He's now ... shorthanded, I guess.' He stood, 'Could I trouble you to clean-up around here?' He stepped out with Ramirez – and a very dusty Drake, Schneider watching them go.

Outside, Kobus inspected the broken cobblestones in the available light, a large section appearing as if had been dug up and loosely replaced. They turned the only way that they could now turn, and towards the square, finding a sea of flashing blue lights and a line of dark blue uniforms. Ramirez recognised an officer, and exchanged a few words. That man escorted them through the police line, and to a police car, soon on their way back to the Sheraton.

Outside the hotel, Kobus asked Drake to take off his jacket and wipe down his trousers as best he could. After all, this was a four star hotel. He shook his own jacket. In the bar, they grabbed a table and sunk into the comfortable seats, three beers ordered.

Kobus let out a sigh, and sipped his beer. Studying Ramirez for a moment, he said, 'You didn't choose the door, Ramirez.'

Ramirez took a moment. 'That bomb, it ... would have been placed somewhere public, wouldn't it – like the square.'

'A bomb's no good in a sewer,' Kobus pointed out. 'Dead rats don't make for good newspaper inches.'

Drake said, 'I have added to my tally.'

'Tally?' Ramirez queried.

'A tally of those I have saved, over those I have killed. If the bomb had exploded in a street, a great many would have been killed and hurt. I count this tally.'

Ramirez made a face. ‘I suppose you could see like that. But why – if you don’t mind me asking – is an angel killing people?’

‘I was not always good,’ Drake explained. ‘Once, a long time ago, I was evil.’

‘He overcame his evil side,’ Kobus explained. ‘And now ... now he works on his tally, trying to redress the balance.’

Ramirez faced Drake. ‘How ... old are you?’

‘I was a young man when Columbus discovered the Americas.’

‘Jesus. You look like ... twenty.’ Ramirez reached across and put a finger on Drake’s t-shirt. ‘Were you hit?’

‘I was, twice,’ Drake stated with a pleasant smile. ‘They passed through.’

Ramirez shook his head. ‘What a fucking day.’

‘Day’s not over yet,’ Kobus said. ‘After these drinks we’ll clean up and head out again. Still have a big bomb to find.’ He faced Drake. ‘Did you sense anything from the men?’

‘They have a house in the far south, across a long bridge, and driving in the carriage for one hour.’

‘You think you could find it?’

Drake nodded.

‘We have helicopters!’ Ramirez firmly pointed out.

‘And how will we explain the ... *angelic sat-nav*?’ Kobus posed.

‘Well, yeah, that could be a problem.’

‘We’ll drive, and call in the cavalry when we find something. OK?’

Ramirez nodded his acceptance, and sipped his beer.



## A long night

Ramirez reclaimed his jeep from the rear of the Sheraton – a hefty price paid to the meter, and after checking the underside at length. As he turned the key, he closed his eyes and thought of his kids, blowing out loudly when the engine started normally. Pulling around to the front of the hotel, he picked up Kobus and Drake.

‘Head over the bridge,’ Kobus suggested as he got in.

Ramirez pulled out and headed northeast. ‘I have two vests in the back, and M4s in a locked box.’

‘You might need it,’ Kobus agreed.

‘And you?’ Ramirez asked.

‘When my time is up, it’s up,’ Kobus said with a shrug. He lit up.

‘This is a company car; no smoking,’ Ramirez toyed.

Kobus turned his head, and waited.

‘Got one for me?’ Ramirez asked.

Kobus lit a second cigarette, and passed it over.

‘I had given up,’ Ramirez admitted. ‘Don’t tell my wife.’

They reached the bridge fifteen minutes later, Drake keenly peering out at the huge structure that spanned the Bosphorus Straits, one of the world’s longest bridges.

‘I should call this in,’ Ramirez suggested, taking out his mobile.

‘Call that Major, and hand me the phone,’ Kobus insisted. ‘You got his number?’

Ramirez nodded, selected a number, and pressed the green button, handing the phone to Kobus.

‘Major, that you?’ Kobus asked.

‘Yeah, back at the police station.’

‘Standby for a full tactical assault on a house inside of the hour; it’s thirty clicks south east – across the water. Use the helicopters.’

‘And the exact location, layout, numbers?’ the Major complained.

‘We’ll get there, do the eyes-on then call, so keep this mobile with you in the bird. Beyond that, I don’t know, and I won’t know till I check it out. They may have left and moved on.’

‘We’ll be ready.’

‘Let Schneider know, it’ll piss him off that I called you first. See you soon.’ He hung up, and handed back the phone as they sped across the long bridge, ships glimpsed far below, the large craft heading into the Black Sea.

As they neared the far side of the bridge, Kobus turned his head to Drake in the rear. ‘Anyone following?’

Drake turned fully around. After a few seconds, he said, ‘I do not believe so.’

‘They have your mobile,’ Kobus told Ramirez. ‘So they know exactly where we are.’

Schneider lowered his desk phone, and turned to his deputy. ‘Kobus is heading over the bridge, to check-out a safe-house of some sort, Delta Force making ready to assault the house.’

‘That house near the bazaar,’ the deputy began. ‘It has to be the kid; Kobus didn’t get any calls - I’ve checked.’

Schneider took a moment, easing back into his chair. ‘The kid is dreaming up the fucking locations. And Kobus, he probably lied about the kid’s abilities.’

‘We got to get the kid away from Kobus, drugged up and flown out. Kobus will be fucking useless without the kid.’

Schneider nodded. ‘That still leaves the teams out there, and their agenda. And let’s not make a mistake here; those teams are fucking good at what they do.’

‘We can worry about that after we get the kid away, and after the bomb’s gone off.’

‘Doesn’t matter if it goes off or not, it’s out there now, so any other bombs going off will seem like the same group.’

Across the bridge, they remained on the main highway heading south east, a further forty minutes of dull road before Drake suggested the next exit. He directed Ramirez to a turn-off. They began along a main road - yet suburban, two miles further and off at a roundabout to a quieter and darker road, the water of the Straits now running parallel to them and no more than a few hundred yards to the right as they progressed south.

‘Are we nearly there yet?’ Kobus asked Drake with a straight face, making Ramirez smile.

‘Stop here,’ Drake eventually called. Ramirez pulled up outside a row of brightly lit shops, Drake adding, ‘They have used these shops, and have bought from here the Kebab.’

‘We’re close,’ Kobus noted. He faced Ramirez. ‘Read those fascia signs, and report this to Delta Force as the right general area, and you know ... boots shined, faces green, standby to lift off.’

Once Ramirez had given his report, Drake directed them on, down a busy street of shops, and off to the right, soon on a dark road running closer to the water and parallel. Half a mile down that road, the houses and villas thinning out, they slowed before pulling around a corner, their lights now turned off.

Peering across an area of scrubland some fifty yards wide, Drake pointed out the villa in question, the house partly hidden by trees and bushes. They eased out of the car quietly, checking the immediate area.

‘Could you report this exact location?’ Kobus quietly asked of Ramirez.

‘I have the road name, and look.’ Ramirez pointed. Kobus could see a tall metal structure with lights on top, sat on the coast, and just fifty yards away. ‘It’s for shipping.’

‘Make your report,’ Kobus quietly urged.

As Ramirez called in, he opened the boot of the jeep with his free hand and retrieved his bullet-proof vest, soon opening a locked metal box and pulling out an M4. With his phone off he checked the weapon, handing a second to Kobus. Magazines in, weapons cocked, they stepped towards the scrubland, moving off to the right and around the plot, edging through bushes. The nearest houses were far enough away not to be a worry, a gentle rise behind those houses.

Stepping around behind the villa in question, Drake halted. ‘I sense ... perhaps thirty men inside.’

‘Thirty!’ Ramirez forced out in a strained whisper.

‘All armed with rifles and grenades,’ Drake flatly added.

Kobus stopped and froze. ‘Shit...’ He took a moment, a look exchanged with Ramirez through the dark.

‘Delta Force are on their way,’ Ramirez reminded Kobus.

‘Send a text message, and ask for confirmation that they got it.’

‘What message?’ Ramirez asked as he took out his phone.

‘Hot LZ, 30 armed men. Look for house on fire.’

‘On fire?’ Ramirez asked with a glance over his shoulder.

‘It ain’t on fire, is it?’

‘Not yet it isn’t,’ Kobus said, a glance at Drake. He led them off bent double, stepping quietly around bushes and kicking up dust. Ten yards from the rear of the large villa - a



villa with an inconvenient high stone wall, they crouched down and waited.

‘Drake,’ Kobus whispered. ‘When you sense the helicopters, let me know.’

After two minutes of silently observing the villa, little movement seen, Drake said, ‘Helicopters approach, four helicopters.’

‘How far?’ Kobus nudged.

‘The ... length of the bridge we crossed.’

‘They’ll be heard in seconds,’ Kobus realised. He faced Drake, and pointed at a dusty and lonely Fiat Punto sat down the road, beyond the villa. ‘Can you throw that small car?’

‘Not a great distance.’

‘Throw it, or shove it, into the main gates.’ He handed over his lighter. ‘Damage the fuel tank and light the liquid.’

Drake ran off, Kobus signalling Ramirez to stay close. Kobus reached a broken wall, fronting what looked like a house that had been started, but never completed. He scrambled up a jagged stairway of brick ends, and to the top of the wall, now hearing the approaching helicopters through the dark night sky. Steadying himself against a telephone pole, he got a view over the target villa’s wall, a glimpse of windows with lights on within, men moving around. Ramirez drew level, a hand on the telephone pole, and took aim.

A loud smash signified the Fiat Punto ramming the gates and smashing them, soon a yellow flash, a glimpse of flame through the dark.

‘On my mark,’ Kobus said. ‘Aim at the windows.’

As they made ready, a large metal bin flew through the air, crashing onto the roof of the villa and dislodging dozens of red roof tiles, the tiles clattering down to the ground.

The drone of helicopters grew.

‘Now,’ Kobus shouted, opening fire on the windows he could see. Ramirez opened up, well-aimed single shots at the windows.

Tall flames burst skyward from the villa gates, illuminating the front of the villa, as well as blocking escape through the main gates.

The first helicopter roared in, a burst of machinegun fire preceding the launching of three CS canisters into the villa grounds. As that helicopter banked hard around, the second helicopter passed, two points of light firing down at the villa, two CS canisters fired down.

The lights were now off in the villa, Kobus and Ramirez holding their fire, not least because they could see nothing worth firing at. The third helicopter came in a few seconds later, but now took incoming rounds as it fired four CS canisters down at the villa, the gas now to be smelt on the breeze by Kobus and Ramirez.

A bag of cement flew high into the air, illuminated by the burning car. It slammed down into the roof, an explosion of grey cement shrouding a large area as a second and third bag rained down, the fourth helicopter approaching.

The first helicopter suddenly appeared, coming in from the sea at little more than six feet off the ground. It flared, and touched down in the scrub quicker than Kobus would have credited the pilots, men jumping out.

‘The wall,’ Ramirez shouted, opening fire.

Kobus looked, soon seeing a dozen points of light; gunmen firing out from the villa. He opened up on them. He had fired little more than two short bursts when a bag of cement slammed into the roof above those of the gunmen firing out, the men shrouded in it a second later, a second and third bag exploding nearby.

The first helicopter lifted off and banked hard away from the villa as a second came in, almost colliding with the first it was so close. Men were out and firing before the helicopter settled.

Drake jumped up onto the wall and steadied himself. ‘Men in the villa make ready a large bomb,’ he flatly stated. ‘They mean not to be arrested by the magistrate.’

‘C’mon,’ Kobus urged, jumping down. He ran straight across the road, into the scrub, and straight towards a helicopter coming in to land. Dropping his M4, he ran forwards ten yards, firing going on all around him, and waved his arms frantically at the helicopter.

As it nosed right towards him, he made grand gestures to wave it off. They got the message at the last moment and banked hard, pulling up. Kobus turned towards the villa, a dozen men now firing into the house, fighters firing back. He ran five yards and halted, his hands cupped to his mouth. ‘Withdraw! Withdraw! The villa is rigged to blow! Withdraw, withdraw!’ he shouted as loudly as he could.

A soldier ran across. ‘There’s a booby-trap?’ the dark figure asked.

‘It’s wired to blow!’ Kobus shouted. ‘Withdraw your men!’

The radio order was given, dark figures running back as they fired. Drake appeared, dragging a wounded soldier. In a mad scramble, they all ran to the edge of the scrub, rounds cracking overhead, the soldiers returning fire as they went – moving in covering pairs, soon through a dilapidated fence and across a road, into a ditch.

Drake suddenly grabbed Kobus and knocked him down. The blast washed over the men in the ditch, ears and sinuses shocked, debris raining down - bricks and concrete, roof tiles slamming into the ground for more than ten seconds, many of the men hurt, including Ramirez and Kobus.

When silence reclaimed the night, everyone eased up and peered at the villa, the only illumination now available coming from the burning car. The villa was gone, and so was its high wall.

Drake lifted Kobus upright. ‘You have hurt a part of your leg.’

‘My ankle,’ Kobus said, wincing.

Ramirez eased up, a gash on his head. ‘Fuck...’ he let out, coughing in the falling dust and cement.

Drake turned his head. ‘A man makes ready to leave.’

‘Where?’ Kobus urgently asked.

Drake pointed. ‘He goes to a car.’

‘Ramirez, can you walk?’

‘Yeah.’

‘C’mon,’ Kobus urged, hobbling along the road as Drake assisted, soldiers now moving back towards the villa, coughing as they progressed, the air now resonating with the sound of helicopters.

Reaching the car, Ramirez wobbled, a hand to his head.

‘He will fall asleep,’ Drake cautioned.

‘You drive,’ Kobus told Drake, opening the door and easing into the passenger side. Drake snatched the keys off Ramirez, and helped him into the rear, before easing into the driver’s seat. He adjusted the seat.

‘Quickly!’ Kobus urged.

‘N for neutral, key in, turn, D for Drive.’ Drake pulled away sharply, rounding the corner and clipping the curb.

‘Can he even fucking drive?’ Ramirez asked from the rear, his face now covered in blood.

‘He had the one lesson.’

‘One!’

‘He’ll be fine,’ Kobus said, wincing at the agony that his right ankle was causing him. ‘Drake?’

‘Yes, Kobus.’

‘Find the headlights and switch them on, there’s a good lad.’

Drake got the wipers, the radio, and finally the headlights - with a little help from Ramirez shouting instructions. He turned onto the main road, passed the shops, and accelerated. ‘The man is ahead.’

‘Slow down, but stay close enough to sense him,’ Kobus urged. ‘Is it Dr. Kamil?’

‘No, his name is Ahmed.’

‘Well ... the fucker might just lead us to the bomb,’ Kobus said with a sigh.

Drake indicated left, pulled right – cutting up another car, then swerved back. He now indicated right, moved right and cut-up the same car, getting some loud horn anger from behind. ‘I believe I have mastered the rules of this road.’

‘Good lad,’ Kobus enthused. He swivelled over his seat to Ramirez. ‘You still with us, buddy?’

‘Just a cut and a concussion – be fine in a few weeks.’

‘Good attitude,’ Kobus mock commended. He faced Drake. ‘Did any of the soldiers back there die?’

‘No, but three were shot. They will live, I believe.’

Kobus slowly nodded his head, and lit up. He passed the cigarette back to Ramirez for a puff.

Ramirez took a drag. ‘How the fuck do I write this up in a report, huh? Be my arse either way.’

‘The agency knows – or thinks – Drake is psychic. Just say that Drake led us and informed us, but be vague.’

Ramirez’s mobile trilled. He awkwardly retrieved it around his vest, and hit the button. ‘Ramirez.’ After a moment, he said, ‘Hang on, sir.’ He passed it forwards.

Kobus took the phone. ‘Kobus.’

‘It’s Brad Martins. What happened?’

‘I got a lead on the villa, had a look, turned out to be stuffed full of Arab gunmen armed to the teeth enjoying a kebab. As the Delta Force arrived we spotted them making ready a bomb, so we opened fired – did what we could – and warned off the soldiers when we could. Villa blew, but one got away; we’re following to see where he goes.’

‘Jesus.’

‘Always in the wrong place ... but at the right time,’ Kobus quipped.

‘President is following the action blow by blow, so are the Joint Chiefs. Your photo is pinned to the wall of the situation room.’

‘Yeah? Shit ... hope they got my good side when they took that snap, I look rough in the mornings.’

‘Was the device destroyed in the villa?’

‘No,’ Kobus replied.

‘No?’ Martins loudly queried.

‘No, I think that’s in an area near the old bazaar; Sultanahmet.’

Drake drifted into another vehicle’s lane, a horn sounding.

‘What’s that?’ Martins asked.

‘The lad is driving; Ramirez and me, we’re busted up pretty bad. Still, he’s not doing too badly after just the one lesson.’

‘One lesson? You’re tailing the most important suspect the world right now, and you have a fucking kid with one lesson driving?’

‘Love to see you report that to the President. I’ll call if we learn anything.’ He hung up, and handed back the phone.

‘I believe that I must make way for other drivers at certain times,’ Drake stated, concentrating on driving.

‘Fuck ‘em, they have brakes and airbags,’ Kobus suggested. He eased back into the seat, and took a long drag.

Crossing again the mile-long bridge over the Bosphorus Straits, Drake stayed five cars back from the target vehicle, Kobus staring down at the black water, a brightly lit ship passing under the bridge. The bridge lights flashed by, a rhythmical dance of light that soothed him. He peered up at the lights, noting one or two out.

Once across the bridge, Drake got the radio, the wipers again, but then finally indicated left. He pulled into the right hand lane and nudged another vehicle, which did use its brakes. ‘I will master it,’ he assured Kobus.

‘Don’t worry about it,’ Kobus told him. ‘Car is registered to Ramirez.’

‘Thanks, asshole,’ came from the back.

Drake came off at that exit, followed the road around, negotiated a roundabout by ignoring the other cars and doing his own thing - a loud cacophony of horns created, and remained behind the car of interest. Halting at traffic lights, a car pulled alongside, a window down, the driver shaking a fist and shouting in Turkish.

Drake pressed the button to lower his window. He lifted his left hand, carefully bent his fingers, and gave the man the middle finger with a cheery smile. The man jumped out of his car. In an instant, Drake changed to Marcus, a loud growl issued through long sharp teeth, the man jumping backwards before running off.

Drake followed the traffic as it pulled off.

‘Jesus, I thought my wife got angry when she drove,’ came from the back seat.

‘Drake, I think you just cured that man of his road rage,’ Kobus noted, placing a fresh cigarette on his lip.

Twenty minutes later, and twenty minutes of loud horn anger later – one irate motorist warned off at gunpoint, they arrived back in the old quarter, not far from the bazaar.

‘Ground zero,’ Kobus noted, taking in the bustling streets. ‘Drake, follow him on foot, learn what you can. We’ll be here, bleeding quietly.’ Drake jumped out and walked off. Kobus looked over his shoulder. ‘See if we can get you to a hospital when we get a break.’

‘I’m OK,’ Ramirez insisted, the blood on his face dried. ‘Fight the good fight, eh?’

‘Fight the good fight,’ Kobus agreed, peering out at the crowds.

Drake returned twenty minutes later, climbing into the car. ‘This man, Ahmed, went to a house and met a second man, and made a call on the telephone. He now sits and waits, very much afraid.’

‘Was the other man Dr Kamil?’ Kobus asked.

‘No. Dr Kamil was spoken to on the telephone, and now travels to a place from another place.’

‘Do these men think about the bomb being put together in a large space?’ Kobus pressed.

‘No, these men are ... for looking one way in a falsehood.’

‘A distraction,’ Kobus realised, peering out at the crowds. ‘Kamil is using them as bait, to see who comes out to play, while he does what he needs to do. They may not even know where it is. C’mon, let’s get cleaned-up, and regroup. Might be a few leads at that villa – under the rubble. Drake, drive ... carefully.’

Drake started the car, carefully, indicated and pulled straight out, a car screeching to a halt.

‘Mirror, signal, manoeuvre,’ Kobus calmly informed Drake. ‘Always look first.’

Drake eased off, and around a corner. At the next junction he eased to a halt, a line of people with placards blocking the street.

‘What’s up with the late-night protest?’ Kobus asked Ramirez, taking in the small group of unhappy citizens.

‘It could be the Orthodox church over there. It was abandoned a long time ago, damaged in a few earthquakes, and no money to repair it. Town planners want to pull it down and put up apartments, Christians are up in arms about it.’

‘Yeah, all twelve of them,’ Kobus quipped.

‘I know this church,’ Drake stated, focused on the building. ‘Here I spoke with a priest many times, and I confessed as to what I was.’ With the protestors moving off, Drake drove across the junction, despite the lights being red, and eased up alongside the church.

Kobus peered out at it, at what he could see in the dark. It was bordered up, scaffold around it, a main dome around a hundred feet tall, three structures branching off it, the main



nave around forty metres long, the vestibule just rubble and part collapsed.

‘I sense something here,’ Drake noted. ‘Something inside.’

Kobus lifted his phone, and dialled Brad Martins. ‘Brad, you sat behind a computer? Good, get me an accurate weather forecast for Istanbul, kinda quickly.’ They waited.

‘Kobus?’

‘Yeah, go ahead.’

‘Tomorrow will be hot, little or no wind after noon.’

‘Thanks.’ He hung up. ‘Ramirez, take over please, and drive us back to the hotel.’

Drake eased out, the engine running, and Ramirez took over. After a fifteen minute drive they pulled into the Sheraton.

Kobus faced Ramirez. ‘Go and get yourself checked out, talk with your family, and tomorrow ... tomorrow take the day off, someplace away from the bazaar. If you come back here tomorrow to drive us around ... you’ll be dead before sundown.’

Ramirez stared back, the black blood caked onto his face. ‘And you?’

‘We’ll both be dead by sun down,’ Kobus stated, appearing tired.

‘There are soldiers here, police...’ Ramirez protested.

‘Some things ... are just meant to be. Drake here, he’s come full circle, and he’s now at the end of that journey. My journey ends here as well. You, on the other hand, don’t need to end at all. You ... can go home, and maybe do some good.’ Kobus opened the door. ‘And don’t report the position of that church.’

Kobus and Drake walked up to the main entrance, and past a porter that stood shaking his head at the state they were in. In the room, Kobus eased off his jacket and lay on the bed, grimacing at the pain that lying down caused.

‘Are you well ... for this fight?’ Drake asked.

‘Question is ... are *you* well for this fight.’

‘I am not injured,’ Drake pointed out.

Kobus eased up and let his legs drop. ‘That’s not what I meant.’ He lifted his head to Drake. ‘You could be dead tomorrow, so ... do you accept your fate?’

Drake lowered his head and turned away. ‘I ... I will greatly miss what we do, and I think that I will greatly miss you.’

‘If we end up in the same place, you’d still see me.’ He took a moment. ‘I wish there was more that I could do for you, you deserve better. You mastered the demon, and you’re helping now to save a great many people – people you don’t even know, and you’ve suffered more than anyone else ever could. You’re more angel than demon.’

‘But you think I must end.’

Kobus eased up slowly, limping across to the window. Peering down at the twinkling lights of the city, he said, ‘If the world knows that you exist, it will alter things. You saw the protest out there; religion divides peoples, especially around here where east meets west. Proof of your existence could start a new crusade, and a great many people will use you as an excuse to hurt others; it’ll be like a second coming. My heart wants you to survive, but my head wants you to go.

‘And that bomb, that bomb will burn hot enough to make sure that even Marcus is just dust. That’s why I haven’t sent the police around. Stopping the bomb is part of this, taking you from this world is another part of it, perhaps the most important part. Your tally, Drake, will be very great tomorrow, but far greater than you could ever know. By leaving this world, you’ll be helping to save it from itself – from its own madness.’

‘You still have many doubts.’

‘About a great many things.’ He faced Drake squarely. ‘Will Marcus resist, if we find the bomb?’

‘I ... I can control him.’

‘Even when he knows that it will be his death?’

Drake did not answer.

‘Let him out, please, and don’t resist him.’ Kobus waited.

Drake glanced at Kobus side on, then tipped his head back, jerking involuntarily. The old man appeared, protruding bones, sharp teeth.

‘Been a while,’ Kobus said as he closed in. He examined the face of the demon close up. ‘What do you say, Marcus, about what we have planned?’

Marcus looked away, lowered his head, and appeared saddened. ‘The boy never told you, but I longed for my own death,’ he rasped. ‘I did not ask to be what I am.’ He paused. ‘In these few days I have seen great things, felt and tasted great things in your world, and known again the love of a woman. When the boy lay down with his girl I saw again the faces of my wife and my daughters, and I wept inside.’

‘Will you resist us tomorrow?’

Marcus made eye contact. ‘I will see the face of God, and I will know why I was cursed.’

‘You might just go to hell,’ Kobus pointed out.

‘I have fought this fight with you, willingly, and on the morrow I will fight willingly. A great man once said: I shall be judged by those I save, not by those I killed.’

Kobus smiled weakly.

Marcus continued, ‘I shall have my tally, and I shall share it with the boy, and this I do willingly. And if the alignment of the heavens is true, I will see again my wife and daughters.’

‘I hope that you do, Marcus, I truly do.’

Marcus extended a hand. Kobus looked down to it, then shook. ‘You found me, and you have delivered me. Rest before the morrow, you are weak.’

Kobus nodded and turned to the window, and to the view of the city, finding Drake stood there when he turned back. ‘There’s a shop in the foyer, why don’t you get yourself some clothes, and a shirt for me.’

Drake stepped out as Kobus lay down, Kobus’s eyes soon closed. Drake pushed the button for the lift, waited as the light indicated the floors of the lift, and made ready as the number

hit thirteen. When the doors opened, Schneider as his deputy were stood there with a third man.

Drake waited.

‘Drake, we ... were looking for Kobus. Is he in his room?’

Drake took a moment, staring back with tired eyes. ‘He is sleeping. Can *I* help you?’

‘Yes, can we talk somewhere ... private?’

‘Do you have a room here?’ Drake asked.

‘Yes, third floor,’ Schneider told Drake. The three men stepped back to make room.

Drake stepped inside, turned around so that his back was to them, and pressed the button for “Roof”.

‘Roof?’ Schneider queried.

‘On the roof, no one will hear you scream,’ Drake calmly stated as the doors closed.

Schneider’s deputy moved quickly, jabbing Drake in the back of the neck with a vial. Drake remained standing, watching the lights indicate floors as they climbed higher. The man stabbed again, a second vial, straight into the side of Drake’s neck.

Drake slowly turned around. The third man lifted a pistol and levelled it. ‘Take it easy, son, and we won’t hurt you.’

Drake grabbed the pistol off the man, Schneider and his deputy pressed flat against the lift walls. Drake turned the pistol around, aimed at his own chest, and fired three times whilst making eye contact with Schneider. ‘You have wondered how the men in Prague were killed. They were killed ... and eaten, by me.’

Drake handed the pistol back to the third man. Facing Schneider, he said, ‘I am not human. And I will eat your kidneys raw.’

The screams of the three men went unheard.

On the roof, stood in a gentle breeze, Drake stared down at Schneider as the Section Chief drifted in and out of

consciousness. Next to him lay the remains of the two other men.

Drake slapped Schneider's face. 'Wake up!'

Schneider peered up, now holding his guts in with both hands.

'Were you working with Johansson to make the bomb hurt people in Iraq?' Drake demanded.

'No,' Schneider cried, his tears running down his cheeks.

'Why did you wish Kobus dead? Speak!'

'He killed ... our people ... and ... he may have discovered the operation here ... using you.'

'What operation here? Speak, or I will hurt you more.'

'Pipeline, oil pipeline.'

'You wish to blow up a ... planned oil pipeline,' Drake could read in Schneider's mind. 'And ... you wanted ... you saw an opportunity when the bomb came here, to ... set-off bombs and ... disrupt Europe's economy. You discussed this with ... Bob Russell many weeks ago.'

Drake straightened, and took in the magnificent view. 'I have stood in many tall places, and peered down at men. I thought I was evil, but I am but a child compared to you. You have no heart.'

Drake walked to the edge of the roof, and peered down at the street below, at the cars driving past, at neon signs in shops, at people out walking. 'I am not evil. Evil is as evil does.'

## The last day

At 5am, Kobus opened his eyes, now feeling rested. He found Drake sat watching the TV, the sound down. Letting down his legs, he said, 'You OK, buddy?'

'I am well. I am ... resolute, I believe, but I also suffer *disillusionment*.'

'Good word.' Kobus eased up, walking stiffly. 'What are you *disillusioned* about?'

'Schneider came to the hotel, to kill you and to capture me.'

Kobus stopped. 'And?'

'Their bodies are hidden on the roof; we shall have to leave this hotel before their discovery.'

Kobus put a cigarette on his lip and limped towards a chair. He sat facing Drake, and lit up. 'Did you sense anything in him?'

'He was not part of the plan of Johansson, but wished the bomb to go off so that he may destroy a long pipe for oil, to harm Europe. It was the ... *opportunity we afforded*, if I say it correctly.'

Kobus rubbed his forehead. 'Unfortunately, you do.'

'When your phone made a noise I took it quickly to the bathroom, under a towel. I desired that you sleep.'

'Thanks.' Kobus eased up, wincing. 'I'll take a hot shower, it should help.'

‘I have a shirt for you, I believe the correct size.’

‘And I know now why we brought all that money,’ Kobus said as he hobbled towards the bathroom. ‘I figured it out.’ He added nothing further.

Out of the shower, twenty minutes later, Kobus felt better, the new shirt put on, his dusty old jacket on top. Drake handed over a bandage he had bought, Kobus taping up his ankle. When done, Kobus tested his weight on it.

‘Is it well, your leg?’ Drake enquired.

‘It’s good enough for the few short hours I’ll need it for.’ He lifted the phone and ordered room service, two breakfasts, tea, orange juice.

The food arrived on a trolley twenty minutes later, Kobus tucking in, Drake making the effort to sample everything - the sauce sachets opened without incident. Little was said as they ate. When done, Kobus eased back, the dawn coming up, the day threatening to be warm. He lit up after stirring his tea.

‘Should be a beautiful day,’ Kobus noted.

‘In my day, it was said that you would experience bad luck in the afterlife to die on a day of poor weather.’

‘Bad luck to die on any day, apart for the allotted one. Unless you believe that our lives are controlled, and everything we do is pre-ordained.’

‘I do not believe that the heavens take control of man,’ Drake stated. ‘To do such evil, to think such thoughts, cannot come from the heavens.’

‘Hope you’re right, buddy.’ Kobus took a slow drag, taking in the view, Istanbul just waking up, a grey-blue colour to everything. In the distance, he could see large ships heading along the straits, the city’s tall minarets dominating the skyline.

‘When ... shall we go?’ Drake asked, seemingly in no hurry to go anywhere.

Kobus took a moment. ‘The wind will drop for noon, but they could set off before then. My guess would be that Kamil sets it off when the streets are busy with tourists, maybe ... 9 or

10 o'clock.' Kobus finished his tea, and took a long hard look at the innocent face of the young man sat opposite. 'Are you ready?'

Drake stood. 'I am ready,' he flatly stated, but managed to both look, and sound, tired.

Kobus eased up, and took in the holdalls of cash. 'Can you take those, buddy?'

They took one final look around the room, Kobus checking his pistol. He had nine rounds left.

Sounding afraid now, Drake asked, 'Shall we not fill in the questionnaire as to the quality of service and cleaning?'

Kobus forced a smile, but said nothing.

Downstairs, Kobus attended the internet room, and Googled for what he was looking for, printing off a map. Outside the hotel, they headed towards a taxi, but Drake halted.

'Ramirez is here.'

They turned to see the jeep approaching, the vehicle easing to a halt. Ramirez wound down his window. He was now in clean clothes, stitches visible on his forehead. After staring out at them for several seconds, his arm on the door, he simply said, 'Need a lift?'

Kobus glanced at Drake before opening the door. Drake threw in the holdalls of cash, and clambered in.

Pulling off, Kobus handed Ramirez the map. 'Find that place first.'

They pulled off onto a quiet street, everything grey in the dawn light.

'Schneider's dead,' Kobus informed Ramirez as they drove.

Ramirez took a moment to respond. '*Was* he dirty?'

Drake said, 'He came in the night with two men, to kill Kobus and to capture me. He planned on blowing up a long oil pipeline, and wished this bomb to give a ... screen of smoke.'

Ramirez shook his head. 'You think you know people, and you think you're making a difference and defending your nation.'



‘He was defending his nation, by knocking back Europe,’ Kobus pointed out. ‘That’s in America’s interest.’

‘There has to be another way,’ Ramirez said. ‘Europe is our ally for fuck’s sake.’

‘Each nation does what’s best for that nation. It takes an individual ... to look beyond borders and flags.’ Kobus lit up. ‘Did you talk to your family?’

‘I did, and it reminded me about a few things – like Schneider, as well as Drake.’

‘Don’t make a mistake today,’ Kobus told Ramirez. ‘This is not your fight.’

‘With all due respect, you can go fuck yourself.’ He made firm eye contact. ‘This is everyone’s fight.’ He faced the road. ‘If this bomb was in New York, would a ... Turkish agent risk his life to stop it? No, like fuck he would. We’re better than that. *I’m* ... better than that.’

‘Of that ... I have no doubt,’ Drake said from the rear.

Twenty minutes later they arrived at another church, this one not in need of any immediate repair, yet still very old. Driving around the side, they could see a door and a bell. Kobus eased out on an empty street, no one at all about, and rang the bell repeatedly.

A click and a clunk led to the door finally opening, a bearded face peering out.

‘You speak English?’

‘Yes?’

‘I want to pay for the church to be repaired, the one where they were protesting yesterday.’

‘You call at this hour?’

‘I’ll be leaving soon.’ He waved over Drake with the holdalls. ‘Two million Euros.’

‘Two million?’

Drake knelt and opened the holdalls. The stunned bishop led them inside, Drake placing the bags on a wooden table.

‘Why so much money, and why now?’ the bishop asked.

‘The timing wasn’t down to us. Anyway, I want you to repair the church, and ... should it be completely destroyed –’

‘Destroyed?’

‘Yes, destroyed. Should it be completely destroyed by ... *vandals*, I’d like it rebuilt, stone by stone.’

‘Rebuilt?’

‘Yes. If and when the time comes, I want it rebuilt.’

Drake closed in on the bishop. ‘You had prayed for assistance, angered by the lack of help you get from Greece, Serbia and Russia. You even used a profanity at the Greek patriarch.’

‘How do you know this?’ the bishop demanded.

‘And this morning when you woke, when *we* woke you, you had again this dream of a field on fire.’ The bishop stood rigidly shocked. He stared back at Drake. ‘I am an angel,’ Drake said with a soft smile.

The man’s brow pleated. ‘An ... angel?’

Kobus pulled out his pistol, Drake lifting his shirt as he stepped back. Kobus fired twice – the bishop shrieking. Drake bent slightly, two lines of blood created. And two holes were now visible in the wall behind. Drake stepped closer to the bishop, the wounds closing up before the man’s eyes. He wiped away the blood, no scars left.

Kobus faced the stunned bishop, putting away his pistol. ‘I want you to promise me ... that the money will be used for that church.’

‘I ... I will do as you ask,’ the bishop assured them, staring wide-eyed at Drake.

‘Thank you,’ Kobus said as he turned, leading Drake out.

Back in the car - Ramirez curiously watching them get in - Kobus said to their voluntary driver, ‘This next part ... will be a one-way trip.’ He held his look on Ramirez, and waited.

Ramirez swallowed, turning his head to the empty street ahead whilst gripping the top of the steering wheel. 'I sat up all night, staring up at the sky from my apartment's balcony. It was evening time Stateside, so ... I called a few friends, had a chat. Then ... then I stared up at the stars, and there are a lot of them up there.'

He turned his head back to Kobus, but then lowered his gaze. 'I ain't never met an angel before, nor someone like you. You ... see it all clearly.' He made eye contact. 'Fact is, I wanted to kick your ass; you made me feel useless, made me feel like a coward. You ... you made me take a good look in the mirror, and there's only one way that I could ever look in the mirror again, and that's if I'm here, and giving it a hundred and ten percent.'

'And as for dying ... that's a risk I've taken before, and I had a family before. This is no different, except that this time I'm sure about what I'm fighting for.'

'And what are you fighting for?' Kobus gently nudged.

'A three mile blast radius. And, because none of these fuckers would do the same for my family. I'm not doing this for their families, I'm doing this for mine, and setting an example.'

Kobus heaved a big breath, and blew out. 'Can't say fairer than that. Next stop, and final stop, another church.'

Ramirez drove off along an eerily quiet road.

When Ramirez's phone trilled he pulled over. 'Ramirez? Sir? Yes, sir. I'll pass you over, sir.' He turned to Kobus, an arm outstretched, the phone hovering. 'The President.'

Kobus hesitated before taking the phone, his eyes wide. 'Kobus van der Schule.'

'Kobus, can I call you Kobus?'

'Yes, Mister President.'

'A lot of folks over here wearing out the carpet, sick with worry - as you can imagine. I was hoping for some good news.'

That villa that blew up, and they found the bodies of three of our servicemen from Iraq, and their equipment, so we're certain the bomb is there with you. And now the senior CIA staff over there have gone missing.'

Kobus took a moment. 'You'll find their bodies on the roof of the Sheraton Hotel, Mister President.'

There came a long pause. 'Would you like to explain that last statement?'

'They came for me, I defended myself,' Kobus stated, exchanging a look with Drake.

'And just *why* ... would they come for you, as you put it?'

Kobus took a breath. 'A long time ago, in the Middle Ages, in Eastern Europe, the magistrate and the captain of the guard would sometimes go out and massacre the inhabitants of a village on the shore, leaving behind the curved swords of the Moors – the Arabs. Seeing the swords, and the dead villagers, the king would be fooled into giving the magistrate and guard captain more coin. You, sir, are the king, the CIA the magistrate, and Schneider, Johansson and Bob Russell – they were the guard captains.

'You didn't get into the job you're in by being a fool, so don't start practising being a fool now. Those men were dirty, they conspired to make a big bang so that you'd increase their budgets – and they didn't care how many people died.

'I know where the bomb is, I'm just half a mile from it, and about to go defuse it, and I'll do so for my own reasons, not anyone else's. And, at the end of today, I'll be dead. It would be nice to think that the *dumb bastard* in the White House didn't see curved swords on the ground, and blame the Moors. Then, maybe, my death might mean something. Over ... and out.' He hung up.

Ramirez blew out. 'Hell, we weren't planning on surviving today, so why should I worry about being fired.' He shook his head. 'Jesus.'

Reaching the church, a few cars now on the roads, buses taking people to work, they drove slowly past, no signs of activity.

‘Drake?’ Kobus called.

‘They are inside, they make ready, and are tired from working all night.’

‘They must have a way in that’s not visible,’ Kobus noted scanning the outside of the church. ‘And those doors are all blocked up with stone. Storming in is out of the question.’ As he looked up, he could see plastic sheeting across broken windows – fresh plastic sheeting, oddly out of place on the dated relic.

‘They probably know that,’ Ramirez pointed out.

‘They used the drains,’ Drake stated. ‘Here.’

Ramirez took the first left turn past the church, and eased to a halt outside the shutters of a closed shop. Drake eased out, studied a storm cover for a few seconds, and stamped down on it. As Kobus checked the quiet street, Ramirez unlocked the metal box in the rear of his jeep, an M4 handed to Kobus, spare magazines pocketed, a torch grabbed. A second torch, a smaller one, was pulled from the glove compartment and handed to Kobus.

Drake tucked his arms in tight, and dropped down into the hole. Slamming the car door, Ramirez waited, checking the street as Kobus eased quickly down, grabbing an old metal ladder that presented itself. Ramirez followed, his nostrils soon assaulted by the pungent aroma. In an inch of water, or at least what they hoped was water, they followed Drake in the dim torch light.

He turned right after a few yards, and towards the church, rats scurrying away ahead of them. With their heads ducked, Kobus and Ramirez followed, sloshing along, their torches illuminating the water, as well as dated brick work.

Ten yards along the next fork of the drain, Drake halted and looked up, his face bathed in a shaft of grey light. Whispering, he said, ‘A heavy object sits on the cover, a man sat nearby.’

‘Is there another way?’ Kobus whispered.

Drake peered down, moved quickly and caught two large rats that squealed loudly in protest. With an elbow in the rungs of a rusted metal ladder, he climbed higher, placing the rats through a hole. Dropping down, he caught two more, and repeated the exercise, Ramirez and Kobus exchanging puzzled looks.

Drake finally explained, ‘The man who sits watch does not like rats.’

‘He ain’t fucking alone, bud!’ Ramirez whispered.

Drake peered up. ‘The man walks off, and ... complains about the rats.’

‘Go!’ Kobus urged.

Drake scrambled up the ladder, and moved the cover as quietly as he could, a wide shaft of grey light now penetrating the sewer. He disappeared. Kobus went up next, inching his head out and peeking around, finding scaffolding and loose stones piled up, an ornate floor under the loose stones. He bent double, his weapon prone, covering the area as Ramirez eased up.

Drake reappeared, kneeling. ‘We are ... at the point where people come in.’

‘The vestibule,’ Ramirez whispered as he settled alongside Kobus.

Drake nodded. He thumbed over his shoulder. ‘Here is the place for many people to sit, and beyond is a plastic wall, six men working, and Dr Kamil.’

‘Are they ready?’ Kobus urged.

‘They will be ready soon.’

‘How many men in total?’ Kobus asked.

‘Six work with Dr Kamil, two men sit at a door beyond – north, two at the west door, two at the east, four sit like praying.’

‘Fuck...’ Kobus let out. He heaved a deep breath, a look exchanged with Ramirez. ‘We need only disrupt the bomb by

damaging the plastic sheeting. If we move now ... Drake, you can tear down the plastic. And Drake, you're our best hope.' Kobus held his look on Drake, who nodded.

Drake snapped his head around. 'Men come.'

Kobus nudged Ramirez. Whispering, he said, 'Go left, I'll go right, Drake – down the middle when we distract them.'

Kobus eased up, jumped over a low wall of loose stones, and slid to the right of the nave, right into the view of two gunmen. He fired from the hip, they fired back, the reports echoing loudly around the high stone ceiling, spent cartridges tinkling off the stone floor.

As Kobus felt the punch in his left shoulder, he could hear Ramirez firing, but was soon on his back and staring up at the arched stone work. His left shoulder came alive with a burning pain, a hit just in from the armpit. Forcing a breath, he sat up, took rough aim and fired a long burst without aiming too well. Two men went down as the arch above him splintered, the masonry hit two dozen times in a just a second, stone raining down on Kobus and cutting his face and hands.

A scream, echoing, distorted, Kobus unsure of anything at the moment. It sounded like Ramirez was still firing. Kobus eased up, rolled over as masonry fell onto him, and spun around, firing a burst with more anger and hope than efficiency. He saw a man hit, others ducking down, just as a long wooden bench flew onto the men, knocking them away like toys.

Drake skidded to a halt next to Kobus, and dragged him out of the firing line, rounds pinging off the stone work. He propped Kobus up against a large stone. 'You are shot twice,' Drake reported, fear in his eyes.

'Go,' Kobus urged. 'Leave me.'

Drake jumped across to the left of the vestibule, and dragged back Ramirez, their driver again covered in blood from a head wound. Drake sat Ramirez up against a wall, opposite Kobus, as a deafening crescendo reverberated around

the church, sharps of stone flying about, large pieces of stone falling down.

Ramirez coughed up blood, bright red blood, and dropped his weapon.

Kobus tried to ease onto his side. On a knee, he lifted his M4 up and fired overhead, no idea what he was firing at. When it clicked empty, he drew his pistol, blood now running down his face.

‘Stay down,’ Drake urged, a quiver in his voice, a tear in his eye. ‘Stay down.’

Kobus lifted his arm, spitting out blood, and vainly fired overhead with his pistol. When empty, he slumped back against the wall, seeing Drake through a cloud of white dust.

Drake slowly straightened, partly shielded from view by a column. Tipping his head back, he screamed like a young man, before screaming like Marcus. Despite the sounds of gunfire, Drake produced a noise like every bone in his body was breaking, a desperate scream rising up and filling the church.

Ramirez peered up, his last few seconds of consciousness, as Drake’s clothes split and came away, Drake growing in size. Kobus peered up through one eye, the other now full of dust and blood, peered up as the beast grew in size, the beast’s misshapen head soon to the ceiling of the vestibule.

Wings appeared, wings of grey skin, giant hooks at the joints. The last thing that Ramirez caught sight of were claws, four feet long and curved.

Another scream rose up, but this time the gunmen stopped firing, the church shaking and resonating with the sound, an unearthly sound. The church fell silent as the beast turned around and bent down, facing Kobus. With one eye still functioning, Kobus looked up at a jaw that could swallow him whole, fangs that were twelve inches long.

Kobus smiled, just before his head dropped.

The beast reared up, tipped his giant head back, and roared, enough to shake the building and loosen dust. Spinning, it



ducked into the nave, scratched a step along the stone floor, and reared up to its full height. With its wings outstretched, its legs straightened, it filled the nave as it roared.

Two of the gunmen opened fire, the rest simply ran.

The beast took a giant stride and swung with a clawed hand, sweeping a gunman aside, the man smashing into the wall, dead in an instant as every bone in his body broke. Lurching forwards, the beast stamped down on an injured man, the man's screams silenced. Knocking aside benches, the beast advanced on the plastic curtain, heavy footsteps shaking the church.

A terrified Dr Kamil looked up as the plastic was torn down, peering at the beast through his respirator. Kamil glanced up at the red mist, then down at his readouts of temperature and density, a hand hovering over the detonator switch. As he watched, waiting desperately for the right density, the giant beast picked up a gunman, biting the man in half, a second man grabbed, his juices squeezed out by a giant hand.

The beast picked up an assistant in a gas mask, and threw him at a second assistant, killing both men, scaffolding tumbling down on the men. Lifting a metal pole, part of the scaffolding, the beast jabbed at a man and skewered him. With the man still on the pole, the beast jabbed a second and third man.

The dome fell silent.

Dr Kamil could now only hear his own frantic breathing within his respirator, a hand hovering over the button as the beast moved fully into the dome, now shrouded in red mist. It turned and squared itself up with Kamil – being careful not to damage the detonators, huge eyes peering down. It stopped. It stood immobile, like a giant gargoyle, waiting.

Shaking uncontrollably, Kamil read the readouts once more, and hit the button.

The President, and those in the room with him – he had been on speakerphone, traced the mobile phone used by Ramirez. Now, four helicopters flew towards the church, approaching at a thousand feet, a quarter mile out.

Looking ahead to the target church, the pilots saw flames erupted from the dome, a blossoming flower of red flame created, spreading out fifty yards.

‘It’s gone! It’s detonated!’ the pilots shouted. ‘Abort, abort!’ They banked away.

As they did, the Major peered through the window as the church dome collapsed in on itself. ‘It didn’t work, no blast outside the church!’ To himself, he said, ‘He did it, Kobus stopped it.’

The President took the call, thanked the caller, and stepped to the window of the Oval Office, peering out into the dark, a reflective moment taken. With his jacket off, sleeves rolled up, he put his hands in his pockets, and stared out the window.

The dome of the church had gone. Now, just clear blue sky hung above the rubble, rubble charred black and covered in places with grey dust, shaped like a volcano reaching skywards. The church’s ancient stone walls were scorched black with the heat, delicate swirls of grey dust floating around like ghosts, smoke lifting up in the still warm air as wood smouldered. The only sound was the echo of distant sirens, the growing sound filling the void.

A brick moved, and tumbled down the mound of rubble, clattering and echoing. A second brick fell. Slowly, through the grey dust, a hand reached out, flexing its fingers.