

Revenge

K2
Book 3

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Glossary of abbreviations

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

UNA - Swiss Military Intelligence

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

MI5 - British Intelligence (domestic)

CIA - Central Intelligence Agency, USA, overseas intelligence service

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

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

DOD - Department of Defense - USA

MOD - Ministry of Defence - UK

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

SOE - Special Operations Executive, British WWII covert operations
OSS - USA, like SOE, WWII, overseas

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

IRA - Irish Republican Army, terrorist movement

ETA - Spanish/Basque separatist/terrorist movement

Red Brigade - Italian communist/terrorist/crime gang

KGB - Soviet Intelligence, prior to 1990s.

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

SIB - British Military Police

BKA - Federal German Police, similar to FBI

SVR - Russian Intelligence, formerly KGB

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

Wehrmacht - general term, German armed services WWII

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

FARC - Colombian guerrillas/communist

British military slang

Oppo - opposite number/close working buddy

Pongo - soldier - derisive

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

Regiment - he was 'Regiment' - he was SAS

Rock Apes - RAF Regiment - defensive unit of airfields

Rupert - officer/upper-class - derisive

Beast - punish soldier

Stripy - Air Force Officer, derisive term for ranking stripes

Billets - accommodation/food

Civvy - civilian

Badged - qualified entry to SAS, receipt of cap badge

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

QT - on the QT, on the quiet

Stag - on guard duty

England. The hunt.

Mr. Grey adjusted the strap on his sniper rifle, wrapping it around his left forearm. He cocked the weapon, a fresh 5.56mm Teflon round now in the chamber. Lifting his head, he shut his eyes against the bright sunlight, the wind caressing his cheek: east to west, three m.p.h. he estimated. He made a slight adjustment to the rear of the weapon's telescopic sight. This would be a daylight shot, fifty yards, inclined.

The weapon eased into his shoulder as if a third arm returning to the body; it felt natural, it felt part of him. He wiped the palm of his right hand and carefully took charge of the pistol grip, acquiring his target through the telescopic sight. Finger inside trigger guard, finger on trigger, first pressure taken. He focused on the target's home. And waited.

Five minutes passed before any movement was noticed. He adjusted his aim, noting that his quarry was obscured. This would be a tricky shot, so he made his final estimate and a final adjustment.

More movement.

He fired, a gentle crack through the silencer. He lowered his weapon as a K2 guard ran forwards, trowel in hand. The man started digging furiously, a few seconds later lifting up a dead garden mole. Groans and words of abuse wafted up towards Grey as he sat on Broadlands chimneystack, looking pleased, and holding his camouflaged weapon between his legs as if it was a large green cock.

Shiny red tractor

1

Johno handed the busty young blonde, Alison Star, a pair of ear defenders, both now stood in the dungeon firing range. ‘Put these on.’

‘You’re not wearing any!’ the Internet glamour model protested. She stood now in jeans, and a tight, almost see-through top, her hands on her hips.

‘I’m used to it, love.’

‘I grew up on a farm. I can shoot, as my teddy will prove!’

Johno cocked a teasing eyebrow. ‘You shot your teddy?’

‘Hit it with a twelve gauge, I blew it to bits.’

Johno offered her an amused, quizzical look. ‘Why, in particular, did you shoot the teddy?’

‘We were shooting a video on the bed, I was all wet, it was there. So I threw it out the window after.’

Johno stared. ‘Lucky teddy.’

‘Hey!’ She slapped his arm, a wry smile breaking across her face.

Johno lifted the MP5. ‘This is what I used in the SAS. It’s an MP5, 9mm close-quarter weapon. Effective range: fifty yards.’

Alison grabbed it and turned it over, picking up a magazine and clicking it in. ‘So this SAS thing, that’s like our Delta Force, right?’ She cocked the weapon and checked the safety setting, selecting automatic as Johno keenly observed, his mouth opening. As she stepped up to the firing station, Johno eased in behind her.

She held the weapon into her shoulder and lined up the sights. ‘Johno, you don’t need to hold my ass ... or my boobs, for me to shoot straight.’

‘Just trying to be helpful.’ He stepped back. ‘Got to get the right ... stance, you know.’

Alison smiled without him noticing, firing three four-round bursts, tearing a big hole in the middle of the target.

‘Oh yeah,’ Johno slowly let out. ‘A porn babe with an MP5! If only the boys in the Regiment could see me now.’

She *made safe* the weapon, resting its stock on her hip. ‘I’ve been shooting since I was four. What else you got?’

‘Would you like to try a fifty calibre, or rocket launcher?’ he asked with a grin.

‘The rocket launcher, I’ve never fired one.’

‘I should hope not, young lady.’ He wagged an accusing finger. ‘Bring the MP5, it’s a dodgy neighbourhood.’ She slung it over a shoulder.

Driving down the west side of the camp, Alison noticed a tractor working parallel to them. She was ‘trying out’ a Range Rover, getting used to the European right hand drive and ‘stick-shift’, unaware that the Range Rovers were British imports, and in Switzerland they drove on the right.

‘Oh, look!’ she screamed. ‘I love tractors!’

She swerved off the tarmac road, bumping across the recently mown grass and right up to the worried tractor driver, Johno’s head bouncing off the roof. Guards watched curiously from the West Gate, many with binoculars. Tooting the horn several times convinced the tractor driver to stop. She jumped out, slowly followed by Johno rubbing his head.

‘Alison Star?’ the old tractor driver asked, heavily accented.

She put her hands on her hips. ‘And how would you know that?’ she playfully demanded.

‘Yeah,’ Johno sternly repeated, the old man shrugging. ‘How would *you* know that?’

‘I want to have a go on your tractor!’ she told the old driver.

Stunned, the driver said, ‘You want to ride my tractor? It is such an honour. And you with a machine gun as well.’ He stepped down, admiring her form, being glared at by Johno.

Alison jumped up and re-started the shiny red tractor, Johno clambering up beside her. There was room for two on the seat, just, so he put an arm around her. Jerkily, the tractor pulled away, Alison delighted. She steered it across the grass, going around in circles.

‘You got oil on your top,’ Johno shouted above the tractor’s engine noise.

‘What?’

‘Your top. Oil!’ He massaged the offending area, adding oil, which had been absent before.

She put her chin on her chest. ‘Oh, hell. You got a t-shirt?’

‘Yeah, other end of the camp.’ He pointed back towards the castle.

‘Here, take the wheel.’

He held the tractor’s steering wheel as they headed across the grass and towards the road. She took the top off and inspected it, then glanced around, a hand across her boobs. ‘Will anyone mind?’

‘No,’ he lied. ‘Switzerland, they invented naturism. You can go almost anywhere here naked, it’s the law.’

‘Really? Europeans are *so* ... cool.’

‘See that lake. All along the edge is nude bathing and swimming,’ he lied. They turned onto the road, Johno hiding his grin.

‘Herr Otto, there is a naked woman with a machine gun driving a red tractor towards the castle!’

Managers and staff turned, calling up camera images. Otto started to gently head-butt the nearest wall as Thomas sprinted outside. ‘I used to run a secret organization - with discipline, order, dedication, hard work...’

Beesely stood on the castle lawn with Herr Mole and a manger, all now holding clipboards and reviewing security. He ticked another box. ‘Right, lakeside?’

They turned to face a small pillbox sunken into the grass, the manager pointing at another some twenty yards away.

‘They manned?’ Beesely asked.

‘Yes,’ the manager replied. ‘Two men in each, machine guns and a fifty calibre rifle, food and water.’

‘OK, good.’ Beesely ticked another box. ‘Castle?’

Herr Mole answered, slowly and heavily accented, ‘We have the natural advantage ... the original positions for the bow and arrows make for the excellent rifle positions. They were blocked, but some have now been re-opened ... to give a complete arc of fire covering the maximum range.’

‘Good, good.’

Mole continued, ‘The roof door has been strengthened, and slots made to fire out from. The new restaurant glass is as before, we cannot strengthen it unless we use steel –’

‘And then lose the view of the lake,’ Beesely cut in. ‘No, no, glass – as before - is fine.’

Mole added, ‘The temporary outpost on the cliff top is now ready, and manned with four men; machine guns, fifty calibre sniper rifles and 66mm anti-armour weapons. Plus the new surface-to-air missiles. But we fear the journey to the position ... and the outdoor storage ... may be harmful to the function of the missiles.’

‘We’ll review it. They have food and water?’

‘Yes, sir,’ Mole answered. ‘But at the moment they are on twenty-four hour rotation.’

‘Night sights?’

‘Yes,’ Mole answered.

‘Motion sensors?’

Mole explained, ‘We received a batch of one hundred independent motion sensors from the Israelis. They are linked to a central computer and display, which is monitored all day. We have tested it, and all seems in order.’

‘Good, good. Lights?’

‘There are now special lights in many places, and they are designed to blind anyone using a night sight. They emit light of a special frequency.’

‘Israeli?’

Herr Mole confirmed with a nod.

‘OK. Lake?’

They all turned as Herr Mole pointed, ‘There are now lights under the lake, at the shoreline, and motion sensors with the cameras.’

‘Do they work?’

‘We detected a dead body when it drifted close to shore.’

Beesely’s eyes widened. ‘Really? One of the attackers from the other week?’

‘Yes, sir. We also detect many fish, and one man who fell out of his canoe. It seems, perhaps, too sensitive.’

‘Never mind, it’s better to be safe than sorry. Right, what about outside the perimeter?’ Beesely asked.

‘We have bought approximately one hundred new cameras for our grid. They have upgraded the grid to cope, and now we operate a redundant video room with six staff. In the main command centre we can see many kilometres distant.’

‘What about those hills over there?’ Beesely asked, pointing.

‘There are now cameras, but we do not believe they will survive the winter.’

Beesely faced him, adopting a concerned look. ‘Oh? How do we get around that?’

‘Cameras do not work well on exposed mountains. We are looking at alternatives. Also, the motion sensors will be less effective ... when covered in three feet of snow.’

‘Yes, I can imagine. But when there is snow ... it will be easier to see attackers; they’ll leave tracks!’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘OK, let’s concentrate the cameras more on the roads around the mountains, than the mountains themselves.’

The sound of the tractor grew louder. At first, Beesely thought someone might be cutting the grass, as they had been in previous days. Then the sound became distinct, obvious now that a tractor approached. They all turned and stepped to the edge of the grass.

The bright red tractor sped along the camp road, from the west and towards them. Standing in a line, they silently observed the topless girl with the slung MP5 sitting next to Johno. The tractor's seat was spring-loaded, and she bounced along, her best assets swaying wildly. She waved politely as they passed, driving past the castle and down towards the camp, bemused guards outside the courtyard stood watching, Thomas grinning and waving.

Beesely, Mole, and the manager stood motionless, watching as the strange image moved out of sight. Beesely's expression was one of resigned indifference, with a hint of disappointment thrown in. He studied his list, then turned Herr Mole's clipboard towards him. 'No, I don't see *mobile armed nudist security detail*. Do you?'

Herr Mole ran a finger down his list his, studying it for a moment. Then, for the first time in Beesely's recollection, the strange little man turned upwards and cracked a smile. 'Mobile nudist security...?'

Beesely put a hand on his shoulder. 'Do you need a stiff drink as much as I do?'

'Yes, sir.'

2

In brilliant sunshine, Dame Helen stepped slowly and awkwardly across the hospital lawn, Mike hovering ready at her elbow. Two guards observed from a discreet distance, her nurse holding the Zimmer frame Helen had been practising with. She had been using it for four days, but now she felt ready to attempt a few unaided steps.

Unknown to her husband, and the hospital staff, she had woken several times during the night, and had experimented with a few steps when no one could see her struggle. Now she was making good progress, but hindered by the weight of the cast on her leg.

‘Great, darling, great,’ Mike quietly encouraged.

Tabitha appeared, spooning out large lumps of melting ice cream from a family-sized tub. Seeing her mother now walking, she trotted quickly across and observed.

Dame Helen advanced a further two steps, turned around, and stepped slowly back the opposite way. ‘The walking is not so difficult,’ she commented in a strained whisper. ‘Bloody ankle hurts so much. It’s the weight of the cast.’

She risked a further two steps and, with the help of Mike, eased down onto a bench. Turning to the nurse, she said, ‘Can you give us half an hour?’

The nurse placed the Zimmer frame next to the bench, smiled with Swiss politeness, and wandered off to attend other duties. Mike sat to one side, Tabitha the other.

‘Now that’s a view,’ Dame Helen enthused.

The three of them looked out over a lake, and towards the mountains in the distance. Directly below her room lay an area of neatly mown grass, beyond that a field carpeted with yellow flowers leading down to the lakeside, tall pine trees bracketing the view without spoiling it; an image that could have been found adorning any number of calendars.

She put an arm around Tabitha. ‘You OK, baby?’

‘I’m not a baby!’ her daughter quietly protested, finishing her ice cream.

‘You’ll always be my baby,’ Dame Helen softly insisted.

The guard’s sudden movement caught their attention, Dame Helen noticing them tapping their earpieces: visitors.

Tabitha jumped up as Detective Susan Hayes youngest daughter appeared. The girl sprinted towards them, the two girls running across the lawn together a second later.

Susan appeared with her husband, followed by her two eldest daughters. She rudely waved Mike away as she stepped up to Dame Helen. ‘Mike, go play,’ she firmly told him. Mike gave her as much of a defiant look as he dared, before joining Susan’s husband, Patrick. Susan sat, and immediately started to intimately check Dame Helen’s face, the bruises and stitches. ‘I spoke with the head quack. We can get the cast off, then a plastic adjustable thing that you can take off or wear in the bath. So you, my girl, have a date with a Jacuzzi.’

‘Oh, thank God. This thing is killing my ankle.’ She touched the cast, now covered by well-wishers signatures.

‘Right, they said that when the cast is off you can have hydro-therapy, and gentle massage of the leg muscle and joints. It should help with circulation.’

Her two eldest daughters wandered down the grass and sat on a bench, checking their mobiles, little interest in much else. Two guards brought out trestle tables, followed behind by hospital staff carrying plastic trays piled high with food.

‘Good timing,’ Dame Helen pointed out.

‘Christ,’ Susan exclaimed, eyeing the abundant offerings. ‘I’ve put on six pounds since I’ve been here!’

‘Hell, enjoy it.’ Dame Helen waved a hand towards the hills. ‘Go walk up that mountain later.’

Susan declared, counting on her fingers, ‘Today I’ve booked a hydro massage, regular massage, aroma therapy, foot massage and head massage at the same time - whilst eating chocolate and strawberries and cream.’

Dame Helen shook her head, offering a playful scowl.

Susan defiantly added, ‘I’m going to enjoy it while I’m here! And this lot does anything I want.’ She sighed contentedly.

‘They know who your father is,’ Dame Helen quietly reminded her.

‘I know; I’ve never felt like this before. We were in the next town, twenty miles odd, and they have this little train that goes around a mountain - you’ll have to try it – the girls wanted a go.

But it was stopped, driver's day off or some holiday. Next thing we know the drivers turn up in a flurry, and *we're* the only ones in the train. It stopped at the top of the mountain, waited as long as we wanted.'

'Be careful, Susan,' Dame Helen cautioned. 'He has enemies. If you knew what happened here a few weeks ago ... half the world's best assassins came after him.'

'And he sent them straight to hell,' she pointed out, tipping her head in a question.

'I probably shouldn't tell you this,' Dame Helen began, reaching across and holding Susan's hand. 'But you had a half-sister, Jane. She was ... murdered a few weeks ago.'

Susan looked out over the lake. 'Oh.' After a moment she turned back to Dame Helen. 'What happened?'

'A right wing group planted a bomb in the castle, and it killed her. Beesely went mad, *reputedly* killed around thirty of them, and wounded a hundred more.' Susan's eyebrows shot up. Dame Helen continued, 'He caught the man who did it.' She turned away.

A moment passed. 'And?'

Without turning, Dame Helen answered, 'Trust me, I have nightmares about what they did to him.' She faced Susan. 'Don't go there.'

Susan nodded as she considered it, Dame Helen lifting her gaze and commenting, 'Talk of the devil.'

Susan had just helped herself to a plate of strawberries, but now glanced around as Beesely and Johno came into view. Johno shook her husband's hand, immediately swapping jokes: *How many Susan's does it take to screw in a light bulb? Fucking light bulb wouldn't dare go out!*

Beesely walked down to the bench. 'How are we both today, ladies?' he buoyantly enquired. He sat next to Dame Helen, half on the bench, and facing Susan.

'Better,' Dame Helen offered. 'They're spoiling us rotten.'

‘Peeing down in the UK,’ he informed them. ‘So make the most of it, ladies.’

‘And there’s no London traffic here!’ Susan pointed out.

Beesely made eye contact with her. ‘I hear you’ve been keeping the doctors ... *on their toes*?’ he teased, a look of mock seriousness.

‘You mean, making a complete pain in the ass of myself,’ Susan admitted, wolfing down a large strawberry.

Dame Helen frowned her lack of understanding.

Beesely explained, ‘She’s been pushing your doctors hard. I firmly believe that six weeks of recovery will be effected in just three. They’ve even brought in two American specialists, some sort of experts in rapid recovery.’

Dame Helen scowled at Susan. ‘Detective Hayes?’

‘What? Ma’am?’ She shrugged. ‘He’s got the money, so sod ‘em, they like a challenge.’ She swallowed another strawberry. ‘Oh, that reminds me, get me a copy of your house key; day before you get back I’ll clean and stock the fridge.’

Dame Helen held Beesely’s hand. ‘Don’t know where you found her, but she’s a Godsend.’

‘I’m proud of her,’ Beesely declared.

Johno and Patrick approached, grabbing food.

Susan gave Johno an unfriendly stare. ‘So, Johno, tell me ... found yourself a nice girl yet?’

Johno studied her, not quite sure what she meant, or was implying. Or what she knew. ‘I’m saving myself for the right one. I’m still practising, you see. I’ve got the book and video, but just can’t seem to get the technique right.’

Beesely scowled at him, Dame Helen giving him a motherly, disappointed look.

Susan added, ‘Someone needs to take you in hand!’

‘When you’re big enough,’ Johno countered.

She stood, Johno and her husband taking a step back, equally fearful.

Johno turned to Patrick. ‘Was she sweet and nice when you first met her?’

‘Yes, for about a week!’ They retreated in the face of overwhelming force.

‘You, Susan, are what he has always needed,’ Beesely said with an approving smile.

‘He’s a big kid,’ Susan commented, sitting and watching them go.

Suddenly serious, Beesely stated, ‘If you read his file you would understand. Get him to take his shirt off sometime.’ She frowned her lack of understanding. He added, ‘You could not find a patch of skin six inches square without a scar; just walking through this hospital makes him tremble. He should be in a glass case in some research facility. And it baffles me every time I see him walking around, cheeky smirk on his face; he should have died ten times over.’

They observed Johno stuffing down strawberries.

‘Does he have ... psychological problems?’ Susan delicately enquired.

‘You would think so, but he has always managed to make me proud. He has a stubborn streak a mile wide, so every time he gets shot or stabbed he gets right back up. I had several evaluations done, and they all came to the same conclusion: every time the bad guys knock him down he equates it to his step-dad hitting him and his mother. So his anger kicks in, he gets right back up and fights back.’

Dame Helen said, ‘And what he did in London was remarkable.’

Susan turned, a question in her eyes. Dame Helen faced Beesely, an invitation for him to explain.

Beesely quietly informed Susan, ‘He was in the helicopter’s co-pilot seat, flying the darn thing. But Otto, Thomas and myself ... we were in the back.’

Susan’s eyes widened. ‘And he rammed that terrorist car? With you in there?’

‘Without a second thought,’ Beesely proudly reported.

‘He could have killed you all!’

‘Yes, my dear, and he didn’t blink. He has a wonderful set of railway tracks underneath it all. When it comes to the crunch, he has a clearly defined sense of right and wrong, good and evil.’

They again observed Johno as he joked with Patrick.

Beesely added, ‘If someone pulled a gun on either of you two he wouldn’t hesitate to put himself in front of you. I give him a lot of slack, he’s earned it.’ His brow furrowed slightly. ‘Unfortunately, the car dealerships around here don’t know that. They close their doors when they see him coming, and people in the local town get off the streets.’

When Johno noticed Mike being a little quiet in the background, nervous in his company, he approached him. ‘How’s ... Tabitha taking it?’ he delicately broached.

Mike glanced towards his daughter, seeming unwilling to discuss the matter with Johno. ‘She’s in denial according to the doctors, complete denial.’

‘That’s normal for youngsters.’

Mike shot Johno a quizzical, sceptical look.

Johno explained, ‘I’ve had a lot of counselling myself, mate, hundreds of hours, and read a hundred fucking books on the subject. Even cats suffer depression after their owners die.’

‘Really?’ Mike absently enquired.

‘Yep. But a new owner and a lot of stroking usually fixes them. Sometimes a change of scenery helps – literally. Time, Mike. She just needs time.’

‘Or a complete change of scenery,’ Mike muttered, loud enough for Johno to hear.

Johno slid his gaze across to Helen, giving Helen a brief, but concerned look.

* * *

At a lakeside café, Luzern, Otto sat down opposite Minister Blaum, a quick glance at the view that was now impressing the tourists – yet old and familiar to him.

‘How goes it?’ Blaum asked in German.

‘Well,’ Otto stated, ordering a coffee from a guard stood nearby.

‘You could have warned me about the attack helicopters,’ Blaum grumbled.

‘I wanted to see the look on your face,’ Otto replied with neutral features.

‘Hmmm,’ Blaum let out with a disapproving look. ‘I swear K2 will give me a heart attack. What’s been happening?’

‘We continue to bolster defences, recruit ex-SAS staff, and train our agents. I think, Minister, we are beyond the point where *our enemies* could bother Switzerland through any use of force or stealth.’

Blaum nodded. ‘That is my assessment also. I have had no contact with ... *them* for some time, and I have noticed a fresh attitude towards us from certain European Ministers.’

‘Good,’ Otto let out as his coffee was placed down.

‘Any mention of *the list* or the treasure?’

‘None,’ Otto came firmly back with. ‘Although we have been pre-occupied with ... *other* matters.’

Blaum glanced out of the café windows, and across the lake. ‘Yes,’ he reflected. ‘Still, it is strange. We know for sure that British Intelligence knows about the list, they had a hand in its theft.’

‘If Beesely does know, he is showing no interest, Minister.’

‘And your *assessment* of them?’

‘They are ... strangely honourable, not interested in financial gains for themselves, more interested in finding and attacking criminals and terrorists. As Johno said the other day – *the game for the game’s sake.*’

Blaum nodded gently as he considered Otto's words. 'I must admit, I like Herr Beesely far more than I would have imagined. And even Johnno.'

Otto tried, and failed, to suppress a grin. 'He has his own ... charm. And for me, it is odd to be in the presence of someone who will so readily give his life for what he believes in. You know, after the helicopter incident Beesely offered Johnno ten million pounds - and said that he could go his own way.'

'And?' Blaum puzzled.

'He refused, choosing to stay at Beesely's side.'

'That *is* odd. Everything about him would suggest a drunken womaniser -'

'Oh, he's that as well,' Otto confirmed with a cheeky grin.

'And yet he would rather fight ... than retire to a luxury hotel,' Blaum pondered. 'Could he, Johnno, be working for someone ... else?'

'He said something the other day which I am not sure I understood. He said that the danger and the fighting helped him define himself, that he would be terrified to be alone with his own thoughts too long.'

Blaum puzzled it. 'I suppose, if we all sat on a beach for a year, at the end of the day we are left only with ourselves. And if we don't like who we are...?'

Otto tipped his head in agreement, the café now bustling with a coach load of Japanese tourists.

* * *

On their way back to the castle, Beesely and Johnno diverted into Zug to pick-up Thomas from football practice. After some pleasantly Swiss, yet determined nagging of Beesely by the boy, the three of them headed to Zug's tourist trap and the pastry shop. Their vehicles were cheekily parked in the local police station's car park, just a short walk down a gentle hill towards the arcade.

People out shopping moved to one side when they recognised the distinctive trio, some stopping and offering polite Swiss head-tips, Beesely offering them all warm greetings in return. In the pastry shop, they found only one couple in attendance, both of them K2 employees from a sub-section near Zug that organised foreign travel, tickets and hotels. It remained one more of the dozens of divisions that Beesely was still getting to grips with.

The shop's owner and staff had grown used to Johnno and Thomas – and the resulting mess, now not as nervous as her first meeting with 'infamous' Herr Johnno. The arrival of 'Herr Director', however, was a little nerve-wracking for the staff.

Johnno and Thomas plonked down immediately, Beesely greeting the two ladies and shaking their hands before complimenting them on the display. Asking for a tea, he joined the others, four guards sat as far away as the small shop allowed – just beyond arms reach. The Bavarian Napoleon was soon placed down.

'Christ,' Beesely quietly let out. 'If Otto or the company doctor's see this *they'll* have the heart attack they are always warning *me* about.'

Johnno picked up a spoon. 'Fuck e'm, you only live once.'

Beesely tried some of the cake with a teaspoon. Looking up, he let out several moans of pleasure.

'It's Johnno's favourite,' Thomas explained, chocolate already around his lips.

Two large offerings of the same cake were placed down for the guards, Beesely turning his head.

‘It’s my rule,’ Johno cut in when he noticed.

Beesely focused on him. ‘Your ... rule?’

‘Whenever I’m in a café, bar or restaurant around here – all K2 staff eat for free, off duty or not.’

‘Ah, yes, Otto did mention something. It must make you popular, and it makes up for the driving.’

Thomas laughed, cake now down his front.

Beesely pointed a hooked finger towards the cake. ‘Is this the same –’

‘Yes,’ Johno cut in. ‘In the restaurant.’

‘And our fridge!’ Thomas added.

‘I’m not allowed,’ Beesely sighed.

‘You’re the fucking boss-man, you do what you like,’ Johno implored, taking a large mouthful.

‘It’s not that easy; the doctors do the blood work-up every day. Still, they’re amazed at my health as it is. Mustn’t grumble. They’re waiting for the onset of diabetes.’

Johno held his gaze on Beesely, mildly concerned. ‘That a problem?’

‘No,’ Beesely confidently replied, trying a small piece of cake. ‘At my age it’s practically a certainty. They have lots of clever drugs, but if they miss the start-point then there are a great many nasty side effects ... like swollen feet and blindness.’

‘How *are* your eyes?’ Johno asked as he cut off a large piece of cake with his spoon.

‘Not too bad, considering. But the diabetes will affect that when it kicks in.’

‘How long till it kicks in?’ Johno asked without looking up.

‘Supposedly, about five years ago.’ They laughed. Beesely glanced at Thomas – and the state of his face - then focused on the guards. ‘If I see anyone with chocolate around their mouths as we drive back...!’

‘And not a word to Otto, or the doctors!’ Johno threatened with a smile.

Thirty minutes later they were back on the road, another unscheduled stop, a surprise that Thomas wanted to show them. They parked alongside a large red brick house, not looking dissimilar to a school, Johno noted. The gardens were untended, a very old cat sat on the path; too old, too warm, and too not-bothered to move. They stepped around it, Thomas giving it one quick stroke.

Thomas did not bother to knock the front door, he just turned a large knob and pushed open the heavy wooden door. Inside, it immediately felt much cooler than the midday heat, a polished marble floor and a musty old smell greeting them. On the hall walls hung numerous faded black and white photographs, reminiscent of school groups.

‘Thomas?’ an elderly woman greeted, some surprise in her voice. She straightened when she noticed Beesely. ‘Herr Director?’

‘How do you do?’ Beesely said, offering a hand. They shook.

‘Come, sit, some lemonade,’ the woman said, heavily accented.

‘No!’ Thomas called from out of sight. ‘First I show them!’

The woman smiled to herself, before directing the guests into the room that Thomas had ducked into. Beesely and Johno stepped into a large drawing room, the central feature being the grand piano that Thomas now sat behind.

Thomas waved the adults towards the seats. ‘Sit. Shut up. Listen.’ The adults sat, shut up, and listened as Thomas started his piece, Beethoven, watched admiringly by his tutor, soon to be followed by admiring glances and appreciative nodding by Johno and Beesely.

‘He’s good,’ Beesely whispered.

Johno watched with a pride that would have only been enhanced if the boy had truly been his own. When Thomas finished, he got an appreciative clap from the adults. In the garden they sat on wobbly iron chairs that had seen better days,

a heavily overgrown and very old garden – but still attractive and restful.

‘How long have you been playing?’ Beesely asked Thomas.

‘Maybe ... five years.’

‘How old was Beethoven when he started?’ Johnno asked the lady.

‘I believe ... five years old.’

‘How often do you come?’ Johnno asked Thomas, sipping his homemade lemonade.

‘Twice a week,’ Thomas answered.

‘When you remember,’ the lady scolded.

‘Thomas?’ Beesely called, a frown at the lad.

‘Sometimes things happen at the castle,’ the boy said, his eyes wide and his gaze held firmly on Beesely.

Beesely sighed. ‘That’s true. Sometimes ... *things* do happen at the castle.’

‘Look,’ the lady called. She pointed with a shaky hand up towards a rear window; a bullet hole covered by paper.

Beesely was not pleased. ‘Madam, we will fix any damage like that,’ he firmly indicated, before focusing on Thomas. ‘Make sure they remember to replace the glass,’ he scolded.

Thomas lowered his head and sipped his lemonade.

Johnno pointed towards the end of the garden. ‘End of the runway is about five hundred yards that way,’ he explained, a knowing exchange of looks with Beesely.

‘Apologies, madam,’ Beesely offered. ‘We will fix it.’

‘It is not the concern,’ she offered. ‘I worked for Herr Gunter for thirty-five years.’

Beesely and Johnno made eye contact.

‘What ... work, did you do for him?’ Beesely delicately enquired.

‘Translator. German, French and Russian.’

‘Could you teach Thomas some Russian?’ Johnno asked, the boy lifting his head.

‘Of course,’ came the answer.

‘It’s always useful,’ Johno commented, making eye contact with his young charge, Thomas shrugging.

* * *

Guido Pepi answered his mobile phone, stood now in his vineyard. ‘Yes, sir.’

‘Report,’ came a German voice

Pepi adjusted his sunglasses. ‘The head of British Intelligence is convalescing in Zug, and K2 are arming themselves heavily; bunkers, machineguns, not to mention their new attack helicopters.’

‘The Swiss are gearing up for a fight, which surprises me. They have sat on their hands for forty years, now they have some guts at last. But these weapons are useless against us, we do not fight guerrilla wars. What else?’

‘There is talk of a high ranking American going missing in Bern, the day before the attack on K2. This man was, apparently, the superior of late Henry O’Sullivan.’

‘His superior ... in what organisation?’

Pepi handled a bunch of grapes, inspecting them. ‘That we don’t know, but they call themselves The Lodge.’

‘Lodge? American freemasons? I am familiar with no such group with any power.’

Pepi put a hand in his pocket. ‘So maybe this joint venture between Henry and Luchenkov was for Henry to move up to their Grand Master when this other man disappeared.’

‘What has that to do with their attack on K2?’

‘We may never know, now that Henry is dead, and Luchenkov is keeping secrets from us.’

* * *

The local newsagents in the village of Church Fenton were now used to the very polite Swiss gentlemen, who popped in most days, usually the first visitors when the shop opened at 7.00am.

Their purchases were typically the same; an assortment of newspapers, several litres of milk, fresh bread, plus many of the second-hand paperbacks that the shop owner sold - thrillers being a favourite. Today, Hans was off-duty, he and Henri out for a drive in one of the black Range Rovers, stopping off at the newsagents at 5pm.

‘Good day, Miss Dawson,’ Hans offered with a polite head-tip.

‘You’re late today,’ she idly commented.

‘A day off,’ Hans informed her with a pleasant smile.

The shop door now opened, by a shoulder being rammed into it, the two youths that entered nudging Hans as he fumbled for change.

‘Apologies,’ Hans offered immediately, a reflex action.

‘Fucker,’ the first youth commented, loud enough to hear.

Hans went to pay for the magazine he now held, but found Mrs Dawson focused on the youths, a worried look etched into her face. With his head low, he glanced sideways at the youths, the two teenage lads now opening the fridges and grabbing four-packs of cider cans.

‘You over eighteen?’ she pointedly demanded.

‘Don’t fucking hassle *me*, bitch!’ came back, twelve cider cans hastily stacked up on the second youth.

‘Oy!’ she shouted with a pointed finger. ‘Put them back.’ She started moving around the counter.

The youth with the heavy stack of cans stepped towards the door. A quick sidestep from Hans, and the youth’s path was blocked.

‘Get out the fucking way, tosser,’ the youth barked.

The door opened and two large, roughly dressed men entered; workman’s clothes, muddy boots, bright yellow safety

waistcoats. Hans glanced over his shoulder briefly, turning side on.

‘Da,’ the youth with the cans called, ‘this bastard wants some bother.’ Now the lad’s Irish accent could be detected. The men stopped, a curled lip and hard glare for Hans, looking him up and down.

‘Oy! Out!’ Mrs Dawson shouted. ‘The lot of you.’

The youth tried to advance past Hans, stopped with a hand on the cans, the reaction from his father instant. The man stepped forwards, closing the gap quickly. With his right hand, Hans punched, a hard blow to the chin stopping the man dead. The big man crumpled as his son dropped the cans.

The lowest can split and hissed as the father slipped sideways into the birthday card carousel, half caught by the man behind. The son wasted no time, a right-handed punch well aimed for Hans, blocked by Hans with his left forearm as he moved with the direction of the lad’s momentum. A second later the youth’s arm was outstretched past Hans, an elbow to the youth’s face breaking the youth’s nose, and sending him also into the birthday card carousel.

The second man had straightened, and now stepped awkwardly over his friend. A sidekick from Hans to the man’s ribs sent him flying backwards, and into the shop door. The first youth now had a knife in his hand, a scream issued by Mrs Dawson.

Mr. Dawson appeared from the rear as Hans turned and focused on the knife, taking a step towards the youth. The youth swung the knife towards Mr. Dawson, causing him to jump back and grab his wife. Turning his attention back to Hans, the youth was surprised to find a Browning 9mm high-power automatic pistol aimed at his head.

‘Put the knife on the counter,’ Hans calmly suggested, a hand in his pocket, the red button on his phone pressed three times.

The Dawson’s emotions were now mixed; a pistol trumped a knife as far as dangerous weapons go.

The boy stared at the pistol for several seconds, breathing heavily and shifting his weight from either leg. The look on Hans' face finally convinced him, the lad placing the knife on the counter just before the door was forced open, Henri shouldering the second man out of the way. That man was struggling to get up, a pistol to his temple curtailing his enthusiasm for that idea.

Hans stepped to the youth and holstered his weapon. With the youth distracted, the lad's eyes on the holster, Hans struck straight to the jaw, the youth collapsing backwards into the Rice Crispies.

Hans turned to face the Dawsons. 'Apologies, you will be compensated for any damages here.'

He turned to Henri and tipped his head, Henri holstering his pistol and dragging the first man roughly into the street, a good kick to the ribs given. The second man followed, Hans dragging the protesting cider youth into the street. Finally, the first youth was dragged out as the police arrived, closely followed by two black Range Rovers. With the Dawsons now stood just outside of their shop, a small crowd was gathering.

The two police officers approached cautiously, one a WPC. The male officer, a well-built forty-year-old, took in the scene, and the unconscious forms now on the pavement as the WPC called for an ambulance and more officers.

The look on the Dawsons faces caused the officers to glance around as six men armed with MP5s approached. Sheer terror was etched into the officer's faces as the senior agent approach, reaching into his pocket.

'Warm day for it,' the agent offered in near perfect English. He handed over his fake ID, that of a Commander in Special Branch.

'Sir?' the male officer called, a heavy frown taking hold.

The agent nodded towards Hans and Henri. 'Ours, foreign lads we're training up, Interpol Exchange, usual bollocks.' He

surveyed the bodies. ‘Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear. You know these handsome gentlemen?’

The male officer regarded the laying forms as the WPC started putting them in the recovery position. ‘Gypos by the looks of it. A load of them pulled up on the common last night.’

‘That’ll be good for the ducks,’ the agent offered. ‘Roasted, or deep fried?’

The male officer managed a reluctant smile. ‘Where you based, sir? Round ‘ere?’

‘Not far, and not supposed to say. Old manor house, been converted, covered firing range, few classrooms, access to the Fens.’ He pointed at Hans and Henri and motioned towards their Range Rover, the pair mounting up and heading off.

‘We’re going to need details –’ the officer began.

‘Like fuck you are!’ the agent barked. ‘My boss will call your boss in a while.’ He stepped closer, adopting a threatening look. ‘As far as I’m concerned, this lot got into a fight and... knocked each other cold. Rest is up to you. But make no mistake,’ he quietly threatened. ‘If this gets into the local rag, you’re going to wake-up to find me at the bottom of your fucking bed!’

The officer blinked, taking a half step back.

The agent added, with a pleasant smile, ‘Have a nice day, what’s left of it. And don’t forget to log their ethnic origins!’ He turned, a circular motion of his raised arm, the K2 agents mounting up and heading off.

* * *

An hour later, Otto approached Beesely on the command centre companionway. ‘There has been a problem in England, at Broadlands.’

‘At the house?’ Beesely questioned.

Otto explained, glancing out over the command staff, ‘A guard was shopping in the local village, the shop they use, which I believe you call a *newsagents* –’

‘The Dawsons?’

Otto turned back to Beesely and nodded. ‘Four men entered, intent on causing trouble for the shop owner. Our agents hurt all four men, the local police arriving.’

‘And?’

‘Our senior agent convinced the local police he was your Special Branch.’

‘Ask Dame Helen –’

‘Already done so, she has made a call.’

Beesely took in the command staff. ‘Was our man at fault?’

‘I do not believe so. A young man drew a knife on the shop owner -’

Beesely snapped his head around. ‘He drew a knife on Mrs Dawson!’ Beesely was outraged. ‘Who were these men?’

‘I believe they are what you call ... travellers and gypsies.’

‘In Church Fenton?’ Beesely asked in a forceful whisper.

‘They are encamped on the village green, apparently.’

Beesely wagged a finger. ‘I want them removed ... any which way,’ he growled.

Back to work

1

‘Seen this?’ Johno asked as he ambled into Beesely’s office an hour later.

Beesely lifted his head, peering at Johno over the rim of his glasses. ‘Hmmm?’

Johno sat, opening *The Sun* newspaper onto the desk. ‘The British Government sent an expensive unmanned sub, an ROV, down to that Lynx in the North Sea.’

‘She has nice breasts.’

Johno pointed at the opposite page.

‘To recover the Lynx?’ Beesely asked, squinting over his glasses at the headline.

‘No! You couldn’t salvage anything useful, it’d all be ruined. They went to look at the bomb.’

‘Oh, right. So what did they find?’ He eased back.

‘Low levels of radiation, so they opened the box.’

‘They ... opened the box?’

‘And irradiated the fucking ROV, which packed up pretty quickly, all six million quids worth of it. When they brought it up they detected high levels of radiation, so had to cut it loose and let it sink. Then they sent down its twin, closing the box. It packed in, and was too radioactive, so they cut that one loose –’

Beesely rolled his eyes. ‘Twelve million pounds of taxpayers money?’

‘Yep. Now the Europeans are sending a team to check on the radiation wafting around the North Sea, thanks to the British team opening the frigging box.’

‘How to win friends and influence people. Oh, by the way, what about that helicopter in *our* lake?’

‘What about it?’

Beesely shrugged. ‘Can we salvage it?’

‘Not at that depth. It’s deeper than the frigging box in the North Sea! And why bother?’

‘See who they were ... what equipment; something useful may come of it.’

Johno turned the page of the newspaper. ‘I’ll get it depth scanned; I know they have a boat here with that on. If it’s shallow we can have a poke around.’ As he scanned the headlines, he softly mentioned, ‘You know what they found when they opened the box?’

‘No. What?’

‘Nothing but ball bearings. There were no explosives, no kind of mechanism.’

Beesely considered it. ‘So they were ... what, just to be spread around? Dropped into the water supply maybe?’

‘Tricky without a good suit made of fucking lead. Anyone handling the ball bearings would have been as bad as Ricky in thirty minutes.’

‘So they were on their way to meet someone -’

‘I considered that. It’s the only explanation ... someone else with the bomb, and they just needed the ball bearings to stuff inside.’

‘You don’t sound sure?’

‘Any arrests by MI5?’ Johno toyed.

‘None,’ Beesely firmly answered.

‘And yet ... every agent and copper in the UK would have been flat-out looking for them. So far ... squat.’

Beesely folded his arms. ‘Your theory, young sir?’

‘That we all missed the main players, who must have been hung out in London, right under *all* our noses. So either the main bomb crew were lucky, or very fucking good at what they do.’ His phone went as Beesely puzzled that statement. ‘Yeah?’

‘Johno, it is Simon. There are nine new recruits just arrived, if you want to frighten them.’

Johno jumped up. ‘I’m on my way.’

‘What’s wrong?’ Beesely asked, mildly concerned.

‘New recruits.’

Beesely sighed. ‘Johno, do you take some ... *sadistic* pleasure in shocking and frightening them?’

Johno gave it some thought. ‘Uh ... yes.’ He bolted out, leaving Beesely shaking his head.

The new recruits now stood lined up and ready for Johno, the instructors all in on the joke, the nervous newcomers not expecting anything more than a test exercise, a forced march around the mountain on this pleasant summer’s day. Johno walked into the barrack room with a pronounced limp.

The first instructor clicked his heels and snapped a quick head-tip. ‘Commandant.’ Kev made a similar gesture, trying not to grin, but none of the English soldiers could mimic the Swiss very well.

‘Where’s Mr. Grey?’ Johno loudly demanded of Simon.

Simon snapped to attention. ‘He is on his way, sir. A fresh injury slows his progress.’

Johno nodded his acceptance of the excuse, making brief eye contact with Simon. He began his patrol of the line; these men may have been new recruits, but they were hardly fresh faced. They were a mixture of ages, from twenty-five to thirty-five. The oldest man looked tough, the youngest keen and attentive. He stopped at the elder man. ‘Your previous experience?’

The man came to attention. In German-accented English, he explained, ‘Swiss Army for six years, French Foreign Legion for five years.’

Johno left him alone. Winding up this man would not be easy.

Grey limped slowly in. ‘Sorry, sir, they had to operate on my knee.’ He dragged his leg across as Kev closed in.

Johno faced the line, his hands on his hips. ‘OK, now listen up. You’ve all volunteered to join K2, and you all have an idea of what we do. We spy, we steal, we bug, we kill – and we get attacked.

‘In recent months we’ve suffered a number of attacks, here at the castle, and we’ve lost guards. But keep in mind that if you’re shot and injured, we’ll still make use of you here, you won’t have to leave K2.’

He faced Kev. ‘You see this instructor, he was shot just two weeks ago ... up the road at the castle.’

Kev took off his shirt, stepping closer to the line and displaying the recent scars from where he had been shot.

Johno explained, ‘The bullet went straight through, no major damage, just a slight loss of use of the left arm from time to time, a bit of numbness and pain when he sleeps.’

The recruits took in the scars, front *and* back.

‘Kev here was back on duty within three days of being shot! Thank you, Kev.’

Kev dressed and stepped away, a sly glance at Mr. Grey unseen by the recruits.

Johno beckoned Grey closer. ‘Mr. Grey here has been working with us longer ... and has obviously been injured more often as a result.’

Grey limped forwards, his left hand tucked into his shirt. With his right hand, he took out the apparently limp left arm and let it swing. With the one ‘good’ arm, he unbuttoned his shirt, assisted by Johno when he struggled with it. Wide-eyed, the recruits took in the scars. Grey made a slow limping circle for them to view all his scars, Johno finally putting Grey’s shirt back on for him.

‘As you can see, we have a policy of keeping our staff, even after they’ve been wounded - and wouldn’t be employed by anyone else.’ Now it was his turn. He handed Simon his jacket, eased off his shoulder holster, and placed it around Simon’s head as he unbuttoned his shirt.

Even the elder recruit winced, and the youngest appeared as if he might be having second thoughts.

Johno stepped forwards. ‘I’ve been shot seven times, blown up, stabbed, and beaten.’ Holding up his arms, he performed a

slow turn. 'You, gentlemen, need to know what you're here for. You are here ... to fight. Make no mistake - this is a dangerous occupation; just by standing in this compound you're in danger.

He started to dress. 'A few months ago we suffered a nerve gas attack.'

'Nerve gas?' the elder recruit repeated.

'Yes. A group of Bavarian Nazi's put a small nerve gas device in the castle restaurant, and killed seven people. *Not* ... a pleasant way to die.

'We were then attacked by a hundred mercenaries sent by the CIA - that 'bank robbery', as the newspapers described it. But it was no bank robbery, and there's no gold here. They came to kill us - to destroy K2.'

The recruits glanced at each other.

'And in London we intercepted a radioactive dirty bomb. That bomb killed one of our best agents, dying a horrific death from radiation poisoning.'

He patrolled the line, and wagged his finger. 'Make no mistake, gentlemen - if you work for K2 then you're in the front line. You'll be at risk *all* every day. You may be called upon to kill, to stand and fight ... and to risk your lives every day.'

He stepped backwards, taking in their faces. 'Is there anyone who has any second thoughts about joining us?' he softly asked.

The room fell silent, the instructors keenly observing. The recruits straightened, stood tall and erect. They even looked proud, Johno considered. He waited, but no one flinched.

Johno took a breath. 'OK. One of the things you'll be required to do ... is to act upon orders without question.'

Two guards closed in behind Mr. Grey. Grey glanced at them, clearly concerned.

Johno stated, pointing at Grey, 'This man has given us long and good service, but was noticed drinking on duty yesterday. He drinks to ease the pain he has, but this is no excuse, someone could have entered the camp, or there could have been an accident with a firearm.'

He turned and faced Grey squarely. ‘Your injuries are no excuse. We’ve told you before.’

Grey lowered his head, making no comment.

Johno pointed at the youngest recruit. ‘Step forwards.’ The man did so smartly. ‘Punch him.’

The young man hesitated, glanced at Grey, looked back to Johno, finally stepping closer to Grey. At striking distance he again stopped. ‘This man is a cripple, sir,’ he protested.

Johno took a step towards the young recruit. ‘If we caught a woman, a young and attractive woman, spying on us – would we take pity on her? If we did, we’d probably all be very dead very quickly.’

The young man faced Grey, but still did not strike him.

‘Back in line!’ Johno snapped. When the young man fell back into line with the others, Johno commented, ‘Your honour will get you killed some day, son.’ He pointed at the elder man. ‘You! Forwards.’

The elder man walked quickly forwards and up to Grey, on the floor with a bloody nose a second later.

‘Stand up!’ Johno barked.

The man clambered up, bewildered, and holding his nose.

‘Mr. Grey here may be a cripple, but he has worked for us for a long time. Never make that mistake again. Just ‘cause someone looks like a cripple, that doesn’t mean they are!’ He pointed at the next recruit. ‘You!’

The man stepped forwards.

‘Hit him!’

Cautiously, the man stepped towards Grey. He gave a feint to the left, but attacked from the right. Grey bobbed one way then the next, a half step back and a chop to the inside of the man’s arm. The recruit’s pain was evident, shaking the arm and trying to recover its use.’

‘Back in line, arsehole!’ Johno barked. He pointed at the next man. ‘Forwards.’

The next man walked forwards with a calm confidence. Johno stopped him with a hand. 'What's your background?'

'German Army, and various criminal gangs, sir.'

Johno nodded. 'OK. Hit him.'

Grey blocked the first move with his good arm. Then got hit. Johno's eyes widened.

As the man pressed home his attack, Grey suddenly starting to use his 'limp' hand, noticed by the recruits. And Grey was struggling. Blow after blow came in, quick and fast, Grey's movements anticipated and countered.

Simon stepped closer as Grey took a series of body blows, now getting knocked about by the new recruit. Johno was amused, but also surprised. As were the rest of the instructors.

Then Grey took a blow to the head, wobbling backwards. What had started out as trick to shock the new recruits was rapidly becoming a full-scale fight, both combatants seemingly equally skilled. And Grey was now looking worried.

Facing a relentless attack, Grey took a big step back, took a breath, and seemed to stop. He adopted a different stance, not seen so far, as the man aggressively pressed home his attack. Grey hit his opponent in solar plexus, knocking the wind out of his attacker. He hit the man immediately in the throat, less force and from less distance – not so much force needed for the effect desired.

Winded, and now with the shock of a crushed windpipe, the man stopped – wide-eyed. Moving in half a step, and leading with his shoulder, Grey thrust upwards with the flat of a palm into the man's nose before the recruit could react. The recruit's head got snapped back with the last blow, dead before he hit the floor. The instructors closed in, Simon quickly checking the man's pulse.

'Don't bother,' Grey said between breaths. 'He's dead.'

Johno stood over the body. 'You killed him?'

'I want his fingerprints and his ID back-checked,' Grey firmly requested, panting.

Johno glanced at Grey, at the body, then at the line of recruits – who were now looking more shocked than when he had displayed his torso. ‘What?’ he asked Grey.

‘He’s a plant,’ Grey suggested.

Simon snapped his head up. ‘A spy?’

Grey nodded, regaining his composure. ‘Only place on the planet they teach the moves he made ... is in Japan, a select group of gangs. Yakusa.’

‘Why the fuck would *they* be sending someone here?’ Johno demanded.

‘*They* ... didn’t,’ Grey calmly pointed out. ‘That’s where he was trained.’

Simon had been knelt over the body. Johno now grabbed Simon by the shoulder, lifting him and spinning him around. ‘Did his fucking record say he’d been to Japan?’

‘No,’ Simon insisted.

‘I want his record gone over!’ Johno barked. Simon lifted his radio and stepped away as Johno faced the line of recruits. ‘Not a word of this to *anyone!*’

He took a breath, calming a little as he took in their faces. ‘This man –’ he pointed at the body. ‘- was a spy sent to infiltrate us. If he had been captured alive then we would have tortured him for weeks. You’ve all heard about *the chair*, it’s no rumour.’ He pointed at the man with the nosebleed. ‘Go to the medics.’ An instructor led the man out.

Next, he addressed the youngest recruit. ‘Learn to do what you’re told, when you’re told – or people will get hurt, both you and your fellow agents.’

He stepped away then turned. ‘Oh ... and welcome to K2; the pastries are great, and look out for curry night.’

Simon, Kev and Johno closed in on Grey.

‘You OK?’ Johno asked Mr Grey.

‘A bit sore here and there,’ Grey said with a shrug. ‘But a good lesson; it’ll teach me not to get complacent, especially around here.’

‘You nearly lost,’ Simon pointed out.

Grey focused on him. ‘I was trying to behave like a skilled cripple for a new recruit,’ he pointedly remarked. ‘It took three or four good moves on his part till I realised what he was. Then I killed him.’

‘You could have just disabled him!’ Johnno complained.

‘Doubt it,’ Grey calmly responded, touching his face. ‘He would have been trained on how to swallow his tongue. Besides, one wrong move and he would have killed me, which is exactly what he came here to do.’

‘What?’ Johnno puzzled.

Grey explained, ‘I don’t think this is about you. More likely he came for me.’

‘The Lodge sent him?’ Johnno asked in a whisper.

‘*Someone* there, or connected, did. *They* ... are just about the only ones who have a small, select group of western agents trained in Yakusa techniques.’

Johnno grabbed Grey by the arm and led him out. ‘Beesely. Now.’

Beesely rubbed his forehead and sat back, staring at Grey for several seconds. ‘You know that it was me who set-up the Yakusa link.’

‘Someone’s idea of a joke?’ Grey asked.

Beesely gave it some thought. ‘It could well be. Are you sure that *you* ... were the target?’

‘A new recruit wouldn’t get near the castle for six months, sir,’ Grey suggested. ‘I doubt anyone wanting you dead has the patience.’

‘But Henry is dead,’ Beesely noted, more to himself than Grey or Johnno.

‘Yes, sir, but his lieutenants are still out there.’

Beesely focused on Johnno. ‘There are not many agencies, in fact only one, that could fix this man’s past so well that we would not spot a problem.’

‘Lodge,’ Johno stated. ‘That guy was recruited four weeks ago. And *we* approached him, not the other way around.’

Beesely nodded. ‘And we did so for his links to, and knowledge of, the gangs he worked with. Someone ... knows our M.O.’

Otto stepped in. ‘We are going over this man’s record. So far, there are no problems. And we have identified two people who knew him many years.’

‘Pick them up,’ Beesely quietly suggested.

‘Already in hand,’ Otto answered.

Beesely explained, ‘If The Lodge *did* create this man’s identity, then the witnesses will be none the wiser. They will have been ... *fed* a story over many years, this chap flying in every few months and pretending he’s been in town all the time. The only thing to look for is gaps, definite gaps when they could not swear they actually saw him. Those gaps will be when he was ... *away*.’

Johno eased forwards. ‘So this was started when knob-head Henry was still alive.’

‘Yes,’ Beesely agreed. ‘A time bomb, and I shall have to see if I can devise some strategy for looking for such people in the future.’ He focused on Grey. ‘Well done, anyway. Good job you spotted that guy, albeit by accident.’

‘Don’t worry, sir. I’m sure Johno would have accidentally run him over before he could have done any real harm.’

Beesely offered Johno unhappy scowl. ‘Whilst Mr. Grey is here, let’s make good use of him - and his skills. You, my boy, could learn a great deal. It may even help you to keep me alive longer. I am, after all, only mortal.’

‘I’ve read your file, sir,’ Grey began. ‘And you certainly don’t qualify as mortal.’

Beesely straightened, adopting a proud smile. ‘Thank you, Mr. Grey.’

Johno turned his head to Grey. ‘Don’t go getting him started on the bleeding war stories – we’ll be here all day.’

‘Mr. Beesely’s record is remarkable; I don’t even come close.’

Beesely eased his head towards Johno. ‘Back in my day, I could have whipped *your* arse, layabout!’

‘Hah!’ Johno let out, standing, Otto smiling smugly.

Beesely pointed towards the door. ‘Go do some work. Runt!’

When Johno had left the office, Grey commented, ‘The apple fell far from the tree, sir.’

‘The bleeding apple fell from the tree, rolled down the sodding hill, got swept out to sea and ended up on a desert island being raised by ... wild pigs!’

Otto suppressed a grin, Grey smiling as he stood.

‘You sure you’re OK?’ Beesely asked, pointing at Grey’s cut face.

‘Of course.’

‘Don’t you start with the *of course*. I get enough of that from *him*.’ He jabbed towards Otto with his pen.

* * *

The next day offered a cloudless sky, but remained crisp and fresh, a magnificent view out over the lake and mountains. Johno and Otto stood waiting outside the castle, stopwatches in hand, as crowds of staff and guards waited for the winner of the improvised road race. They glanced at each other as Mr. Grey came into view, groans echoing as guards lost bets to each other.

Grey glanced over his shoulder, but did not ease up the pace. He quickly came to a halt in front of them, glistening with sweat in his running vest and shorts. Out of breath, he panted in a controlled fashion, but stood erect. Otto and Johno walked a few steps, improving their view of the road; nothing, no K2 runners.

‘Bollocks,’ Johno muttered.

‘Can I shower now?’ Mr. Grey asked, already mostly recovered.

‘Sure,’ Johno reluctantly conceded, Grey walking down the compound.

Three minutes later, the first SAS runner came in, ‘Swiftly’ Maddocks, a former marathon champion. He looked completely spent as he halted, his hands on his hips, bent double and panting strongly.

‘Swiftly?’ Johno questioned. ‘Hah! You let the frigging Yank beat you, tosser!’

‘He’s good,’ Swifty coughed out. ‘And I’m thirty-fucking-eight!’

Then came the first K2 man, to belated and sarcastic cheers and some rude suggestions.

Otto glumly stated, ‘This man, he was the marathon runner for Switzerland.’

* * *

Twelve K2 agents jumped down from vehicles and onto the gravel at Broadlands, greeted by Hans stood with his arms folded.

‘You been causing trouble, Hans?’ a man asked.

Hans shrugged. ‘It got *you* here, away from your desks and off your fat arses. What are the orders?’

‘To remove these people, *any* way we like.’

Hans’s face slowly creased in a broad, sadistic smile.

* * *

On the grass outside the castle, Mr. Grey now stood in shorts, vest and trainers, pads on his fists and feet. Directly opposite him stood his opponent, similarly dressed. Simon, the senior guard, stood a good five inches taller and four stone heavier; it appeared something of a mismatch.

Johno stepped onto the grass, the improvised outdoor arena surrounded by two hundred onlookers. ‘Right, don’t forget,

you're on the same side – and this is just training. Don't try and hurt each other. Too much.' He stepped back and waved a hand.

Simon made the mistake of lunging forwards in attack. Grey closed the distance quickly, sidestepping, guiding Simon's punch past his head with his left hand and clocking him on the chin with his right - stood behind Simon a moment later as the big man wobbled, slumped and crumbled. Otto threw his stopwatch over his shoulder as groans went up. Money changed hands.

Next came SAS trooper 'Mavo', Third Dan black belt and former Karate instructor, a product of the infamous Abergavenny Karate School on the Herefordshire border. He stepped up confidently, watching Simon being carried off.

'Are you ready?' Johno formally asked.

Mavo bowed slightly, respectfully acknowledged with a nod by Mr. Grey.

'Fight!'

Mavo took a half-step as the crowd shouted its support. He adopted a defensive stance, hoping Grey would move his body weight and momentum forwards. But his opponent remained upright, smiling. Grey took a leisurely step forwards, just about to the distance where Mavo could land a blow or kick.

Mavo took the bait, and quickly moved in with a fast sweeping leg. Grey launched himself upwards an instant later, a kick to the side of Mavo's head, landing softly as Mavo went down in the opposite direction. Dizzy, but not out cold, Mavo could not continue. Groans filled the air.

Johno glanced at Otto, both peeved. He stepped onto the mat. 'Mr. Grey, put one hand down the back of your shorts.' Grey complied, bets hurriedly placed. Johno called out two more SAS troopers. 'Right, you two, kill the arsehole, or I'll kill you.'

Pulling on gloves, they approached, one on either side of Mr Grey. Grey angled himself so that he could see both opponents from the corners of his eyes, lowering his head slightly.

'OK,' Johno shouted as he stepped back. 'Start!'

The two troopers moved forwards, adopting fighting stances, Grey remaining motionless. One trooper moved around behind him, then charged, his partner charging in a moment later. Grey waited.

The first kick came in low. Grey blocked it with the flat of his trainer to a knee, shifted his weight and angled his hip, hitting the trooper square on the jaw a fraction of a second later. Swapping from one leg to the other, he kicked out immediately the other way, catching the second trooper in the face. It was all over, loud groans of complaint filling the air.

2

Johno and Otto slumped into chairs in Beesely's office.

'Problems?' Beesely asked, noting their sighs.

'It's Mr. Grey,' Johno stated.

'Oh?'

'Yeah. We hate him,' Johno explained.

Beesely took off his glasses and held them, concerned. 'Not working out?'

'He is OK,' Otto offered. 'But we hate him.'

Beesely hid a smile. 'Why, pray tell, do you hate him?' He folded his arms and sat back.

'We can't find any faults with this guy,' Johno reluctantly admitted.

'Oh dear.' Beesely made a 'tut-tut' sound. 'Did he ... er... win the road race, perhaps?'

'Yep.'

'And the shooting competition?'

'Yep.'

'And the un-armed combat?'

'Don't even go there. He beat two troopers with one hand.'

'Oh deary, deary me. What can we do?' He put his glasses back on. 'Let me tell you a secret. He does the job I used to do,

back in the 1950s. I actually set up some of the training programmes that he's benefited from.'

They both sat up, glancing at each other as Beesely continued, 'You see, America is a much larger country than England, far more people to select from. A small fraction of them make it into their special forces. Of those soldiers, a few are selected to do *his* job. From a hundred, they whittle the list down to just the one for the chairman's bodyguard, the top candidate. And the fail rate is very high. So is the mortality rate, I'm afraid. In three years he will have gone through more than SAS troopers do in a lifetime, all intensely packed in. Yanks have no shortage of cash, or resources.'

'It's not fair!' Johno quietly protested. 'When I got badged I had second-hand everything.'

Beesely smiled, addressing his file again. 'Be grateful he's on our side. Now, go and play nice, children.' He smiled, looking up. 'You know, that has a double meaning. The condescending 'children', and the reality.'

A manager appeared in the doorway holding an envelope. He hesitated at the door, but Beesely waved him in. 'Sir, this was placed with a Bern solicitor by Herr Oliver Stanton -' Beesely stopped smiling and straightened. Johno eased upright. '- to be delivered to you seven days after his death or disappearance.' He handed over the envelope and left.

Beesely quickly opened the envelope, impatiently observed by Otto and Johno. The first page was blank except for just two words: Project Darwin. 'Silent alarm,' Beesely quietly stated, making eye contact with Otto.

Startled, Otto jumped up and ran outside.

Johno jumped up and retrieved an MP5 from a cabinet, slapping a magazine in and cocking the weapon. 'How long 'til the bullets start flying?'

'Not long,' Beesely quietly answered as he read the second page. 'All managers, please.'

Johno stepped outside. ‘All managers!’ he called before returning. ‘What is it?’

‘You have your lighter with you?’

Johno fumbled through his pockets before handing it over. As Otto returned, Beesely burnt the first page. They all observed the paper change colour, folding in on itself with a barely visible flame at the edges. It was just ash as managers began to arrive. Beesely grabbed the ashes and mashed them up, making sure that no one could ever decipher what had been written on the paper.

Johno stood to the side of the desk as the managers pulled out chairs. Otto remained standing, Herr Mole the last to arrive, pen and paper in hand.

Beesely took a deep breath and raised his head, slowly taking in all the faces. Finally, he said, ‘Apologies, ladies and gentlemen, but the fighting is not over yet. I have received today ... a letter from the late Oliver Stanton, placed with a Bern solicitor, to be delivered to me after his death - or if he could not be found. It explains, in part, why he was killed. It also goes somewhat towards explaining what the attack upon us was all about.’

He ran a hand across his scalp. ‘That attack was always seen as a bit odd, since a large force attacked us in daylight - and not very well. Since then Johno has made his concerns felt, and we have all considered what may have been going on. *Really* going on.

‘First, Johno surmised that the attack on us was planned years ago, long before I came here. I think that attack plan was made to kill Gunter, if necessary, by the CIA.’

Murmurs shot around the room.

‘They had a contingency plan for dealing with K2 if they had to. That’s not so unusual - they have plans for all sorts of contingencies, some very strange indeed. It is significant that the attackers arrived here without being detected, something of a massive failing by K2 on its home turf.’

Otto put in, 'What we have determined, is that they assembled outside Switzerland, and drove across our borders inside lorries, not stopping or talking to anyone. Those lorries let them out close to Zug. None of the men were in Switzerland for more than a day, none used credit cards, none stayed in hotels or made calls on mobiles.'

'Yes, very professional,' Beesely agreed. 'But then they went and attacked us in daylight, without being told of our strength. It was a deliberate distraction, of us and the Swiss authorities.'

'For what purpose?' Herr Mole enquired.

'That, we shall have to unravel. Part of that distraction was the kidnap of Oliver Stanton; he was grabbed the night before the attacks took place. If we had not been distracted, and knew he was missing, we may well have used all our resources to try and find him - and those responsible. I would hope that we would have prevailed and found Olly, but we will never know. In addition to kidnapping Olly, I think part of the plan was to discredit or to expose K2.'

'Discredit us?' Otto enquired.

'With all those mercenaries getting killed, and all the fighting, I think Henry was hoping for the world's press to descend on us and ask a lot of difficult questions. If we had been *exposed*, then we certainly would not be able to operate well, and we certainly would not be able to do what I propose to do next. And that, ladies and gentlemen, may be what this was about - to stop me reacting to the piece of paper I just burnt.'

He held the remaining documents. 'It makes a little more sense now. Henry knew that if I got my hands on this -' he waved the pages. '- that I would be able to use K2 to probably stop him, and to stop his plans. Olly suspected him, which is why he came here in person, probably to check out some facts, and to leave this document for me.' He took a measured breath. 'He probably knew that he would be killed.'

‘Why come to us?’ Johno asked. ‘He was Chairman of that powerful Yank group. So what could we do ... that they couldn’t?’

‘He came to us because, quite simply, he would not have known who to trust in the US. Henry did not work alone - he had a great deal of help. The question remains ... as to who? Otto, I want Mister Grey sent to the States immediately. Tell him to get in unnoticed and to stand by. Tell him ... he will be going after those who killed Oliver Stanton.’

Otto stepped out.

‘Herr Mole, using your own passport, get yourself to America on a normal flight. When you leave here you are on your own. The only thing on you connecting you to us should be your satellite phone. In fact, arrange that to get sent in the Swiss diplomatic pouch, several of them. Go.’

Mole stood and turned.

‘Wait,’ Beesely called. Mole turned back. Beesely ran a hand across his bald scalp, taking a breath before focusing on the odd little man. ‘What’s in this paper could turn out to be far more harmful to us than any dirty bomb. I know you have *commitments* here, but they are not as important as the mission I have for you. If this gets out ... it’s all over.’

Mole took a moment to think. ‘I understand,’ he stated. He turned and limped out.

‘What *is* this about?’ Johno curtly asked.

‘I dare not go into detail, we have to make sure that we get as far as we can before we are noticed. Any loose discussion of this ... problem, and we could be compromised quickly. What I will say is ... that one part of the CIA is up to no good and the other part does not know about it. But, if what Henry was involved with goes ahead unhindered, the world will never be the same again.’

‘Well,’ Johno declared wistfully, ‘we had seven days in the sun. I should have known it was too good to be true.’ He slumped onto a cabinet, MP5 ready.

‘OK,’ Beesely began, taking a moment to think, and staring down at his desk. ‘I want a massive examination made ... of anything that occurred in Switzerland from 6pm the night before the attack, to midnight the following day. Anything at all that may relate to ... well, anything unusual.’

Managers started making notes as Otto returned.

‘We were deliberately kept busy. I also believe that they wanted me dead, but that was a secondary consideration. Right, I want a list of all Americans and Canadians flying into Switzerland, France, Italy, Austria and Germany, for a week before and flying out a week later. Their names should be cross-matched in any way we can, and against any databases we have. A team came here and did something without us noticing. I want them.’

He lifted the papers in front of him. ‘In particular, I want every chemical company, bio-sciences, or research facility in Switzerland investigated, for anything that may have happened during that time period - the time of the attack. I want a complete list of reports not actioned by us during that time period, no matter how small or insignificant.’

He handed a manager one of the pages from Oliver’s letter. ‘These research facilities are to be very closely, but very discreetly investigated, for anything that may have happened when we were distracted. I also want to know everything about them - directors, shareholders, staff and projects. *Especially* ... what projects they worked on. Be discreet, but bribe or kill anyone in your way. I want results ... *at any cost.*’

The manager stepped out.

‘Otto, I want plans made ready to destroy those facilities if necessary.’

‘Destroy them?’ Otto questioned.

‘I can’t explain yet, just make the plans.’

Otto made notes.

‘Right, I want any agents we have who are old or female to be sent to the US, make use of diplomatic cover for some. Send

them on regular flights, looking like tourists, and get some of our better agents there *without* going through passport control. In fact, send them indirectly, via Mexico or Canada. Otto, Johno remain, rest of you to work please.'

3

The managers left quickly, the last man closing the door behind him.

'So, what *is* this about?' Johno pressed, now moving around the desk and sitting.

Beesely studied the third sheet of paper. He sighed, 'What it is about, in part, stems back to the Vietnam War, when the CIA realised they could not win a conventional fight. They tried all sorts of weird and wonderful scientific experiments, including Agent Orange, and a host of other chemicals - which just ended up giving their own troops cancer in later life. At one point they bred snakes, poisonous ones, and dropped thousands of them along the Ho-Chi-Min trail.'

'What happened then?' Johno asked.

'The snakes ate the rats, and the Viet Cong's hidden food stores lasted longer. Not quite the desired effect.'

'Did the snakes attack people?' Otto enquired.

'We never saw any evidence of it. However, one experiment was way ahead of its time, far too early; the research just wasn't there to back it up.'

'And it is now,' Johno stated. 'And that knob-head, Henry whatever, he was involved?'

Beesely nodded, looking saddened. 'I am only guessing here, but I think Olly found out, that's why he went missing. I also think that Henry saw an opportunity when our Russian friend placed a bounty on my head; get rid of Olly and make it look like the Russian, attack and expose us - maybe even kill us, and at the same time distract us. I think that list I gave the managers was the reason for the distraction.'

‘What was on the list?’ Johno asked. ‘Chemical companies? They into chemical warfare?’

‘The labs probably played a part, but no, not chemical warfare. It’s a Signature DNA virus.’

‘What’s that in English?’ Johno curtly demanded.

‘It’s a modified virus, one that would only target members of certain ethnic groups. The original idea was that it would just attack the North Vietnamese, once sprayed over the jungle.’

‘Did it work?’ Otto asked.

‘No, they never got that far. But technology, and genetics, has moved on a great deal. If this project has been finished, then they should be able to programme the virus for specific ethnic groups.’

‘Like what?’ Johno puzzled. ‘Like Arabs?’

‘Yes, like Arabs. Problem is - where does the virus stop? It would not stop at the borders of say, Iran. It would keep going, affecting those who had the right genetic marker, which would include a great many Europeans, Asians, Indians, and all of North Africa. Then it would probably keep going, mutating as it went.’

‘Handy. So if they use it, they could just wipe us all out,’ Johno quietly stated.

‘They would not be so stupid,’ Otto protested, appalled at the idea.

Beesely agreed. ‘*They* ... probably would not, but I keep thinking about our Russian friend. He had the money to buy the virus blueprint and the research.’

‘Why would he want one?’ Johno shrugged. ‘They can’t programme it to attack the West; we’re too much like them.’

‘I don’t think the Russian target would be the West, rather the Muslims.’

‘Muslims? Why?’ Otto asked with a frown. ‘The Russians have no problem with the Muslims!’

Johno pointed out, ‘You’re forgetting Chechnya. *They’re* Muslims.’

‘And are probably very inbred with ordinary Russians,’ Otto scoffed.

Beesely began, ‘I read an article the other week: the Russians reckon that within two generations there will be more Muslims in the southern regions of the old Soviet group than ‘white’ Russians. And our Russian friends are just as racist as anyone else, if not more. They are very critical of what the British Government has allowed to happen to London.’

Johno rubbed his moustache. ‘So this is that Boris guy’s idea for getting rid of them, right after he destroys the Western economy. He ends up President of a strong Russia, no Muslims to bother him - a white Russian utopia.’

‘But Boris is in jail, his assets seized,’ Otto pointed out.

‘Yes,’ Beesely agreed. ‘So who has the virus? Did he take delivery?’

Otto sat back, deep in thought. Johno slumped, rubbing his moustache with a forefinger and thumb.

Beesely eased back in his chair. ‘There is another problem, unrelated to our Russian friends. Back in the seventies, I helped to expose and shut down a project. It was the same virus technology, but this time aimed at America’s black population. You see, the only time they got the virus to work really well was when they targeted the gene for Sickle Cell Anaemia. It worked almost one hundred percent effectively.’

‘Sickle Cell?’ Otto repeated.

‘A large proportion of the Afro-Caribbean population has the trait, dormant or active. This virus could wipe out twenty percent of them.’

‘White *American* utopia,’ Johno pointed out.

‘But the virus would go to Africa,’ Otto suggested.

‘Which would not make some CIA analysts unhappy. Africa has a massive untapped wealth of oil, metals and minerals. The only problem is the warring nations.’

Otto stood, clearly disturbed by what he was hearing. ‘I think we should report this to the American authorities.’

Johno got up as well. 'The virus is not the biggest problem.'
They both quizzed him with their looks. 'What happens if the
blacks in America hear about it?'

'It could spark a civil uprising,' Beesely reluctantly admitted.
'Soon to be followed by economic downturn in the States.'

'Rapidly followed by every other country,' Otto finished.

Outsourcing

1

Beesely sat transfixed. Three white boards on easels were now spread across the left of his office, but so far there they revealed no obvious pattern or link. The directors of various research facilities were laid out; one had shares in two companies, the second run by his son. Companies were laid out; some manufactured for others, some handled research for the others. Nothing. No significant connections.

He swivelled his chair the opposite way. Another three white boards stood shoulder to shoulder, this time illustrating hotel guest lists, passenger manifests, and listings of recent overseas visitors.

Johno sat opposite. He watched Beesely's furrowed brow move back and forth between the boards. 'You're straining your eyes,' he quietly pointed out.

'What?' Beesely asked without taking his studious gaze off the boards.

'Stand next to them. You're straining your eyes.'

'Yes, yes.' Distracted, Beesely continued to stare.

'Tell you what *would* help.'

Beesely turned. 'Hmmm? What? Help?'

'Dame Helen and the detective.'

Beesely squinted as he thought, then immediately brightened. 'My dear boy, you are absolutely right. This is just their game.' He tapped his desk phone. 'Have Dame Helen and Detective Hayes - oh, and their families of course - brought here. Tell them we have a crisis. Put the families upstairs, Dame Helen and Detective Hayes to my office. Send in Otto, please.'

'We'll need some desks in here.'

Otto stepped in a minute later.

‘Otto, I have sent for Dame Helen and Susan, they can help. Kindly have some desks brought in here, please.’

Otto hesitated. ‘Dame Helen is not well,’ he quietly reminded them. ‘And they will be in danger.’ Obviously concerned, he glanced across at Johno before turning back to Beesely.

Beesely slowly stood, sighing. ‘I know,’ he quietly and apologetically began. ‘But this is too important. There are no innocent bystanders today.’

Forty minutes later the guests arrived, Dame Helen pushed in a wheelchair by Susan, Patrick in tow. Beesely sombrely greeted them, organizing tea and coffee.

‘Wow, what a set-up,’ Patrick let out.

‘Let us just hope it is as efficient as it looks,’ Beesely glumly responded. Sitting on the fridge, Johno waved lazily, MP5 slung over a shoulder.

Susan seemed concerned. ‘In the last ten minutes I’ve seen more armed men than I’d care to. What’s going on?’

‘Please, have a seat,’ Beesely requested. They pulled up chairs. ‘Dame Helen, I cannot apologise enough for bringing you here in your present condition, but I need your brain and your experience.’ He turned towards Susan and her husband. ‘And I need some good detectives. I have a puzzle to solve.’ He gestured towards the boards.

‘What’s happened?’ Dame Helen asked, clearly concerned.

‘It looks as if a rogue element of the CIA has perfected a geno-virus and has, or is trying to at least, sell it to the Russians. That is what the attack last week was all about.’

‘My God,’ Dame Helen breathed out.

‘What’s the frigs’ a geno-virus?’ Susan curtly demanded.

Johno hopped off the fridge. ‘You release it ... and it kills just blacks, not whites.’

Her eyes widened. ‘You what?’

Beesely cut in, 'It's a virus that can target ethnic groups, such as Arabs. It seems that the Russians may want to eliminate *all* of the Chechens. And others.'

'Problem is,' Johno began as he stretched his back, 'that it would probably be coded wrongly and just kill everyone on the fucking planet.'

Beesely rested his weight on his hands, leaning across his desk toward them. 'Right now, I'm in the co-pilot's seat, and you are all sat in the back of the helicopter. I'm asking a lot of you, I know, and we may be putting your families in harm's way by being here.'

Dame Helen asked, 'And how much harm would our families be in out there if Project Darwin goes live?'

Beesely straightened. 'You know about the project?'

She tipped her head at him. 'We helped them with the project.'

'We?' Beesely repeated.

'The British Government, when the US Congress tried to stop the research back in the nineties. They farmed it out to offshore companies, far from prying eyes. More recently, with their ban on stem cell research, we offered to help. Last year, in fact.'

Johno laughed, pointing at Dame Helen. 'Give that woman a biscuit!'

'Sorry?' Beesely asked, turning.

Johno stepped to the white boards. Whilst still looking at the group, he thumbed at the boards. 'Offshore bio-chemical companies?' he said with a large, false grin.

'By God, that's it!' Beesely boomed. He turned back to Dame Helen. 'They finished the project overseas! Right bleeding here in Switzerland.' He banged the table.

Otto regarded the boards. 'My God!'

Beesely declared triumphantly, 'That's why Olly came here in person, to check them out and to warn me!'

Johno added, stepping back to the desk, ‘And that attack on us was to stop us noticing them covering their tracks – to distract us, maybe even destroy us. With these bio-labs on Swiss soil they must’ve known that we’d be all over it sooner or later.’

‘You have earned your keep, Helen,’ Beesely announced.

‘Still got to find it and stop them,’ Johno glumly pointed out.

Beesely sat back down. ‘Right, ladies and gentlemen: on these boards is what we think we know. We need to find patterns, links, and coincidences.’

Patrick stood and took off his jacket. ‘Keep the coffee coming,’ he said as he approached a board.

Susan stood. ‘Get me a laptop and web link.’

Otto stepped out as Johno wheeled Dame Helen to the other set of boards, fetching a pen and paper for her.

Ten minutes later, Patrick turned from a board. ‘Mister Beesely? Would it be fair to say that most Americans fly into the UK first, and then connect to Switzerland?’

Beesely turned to Dame Helen, a questioning look.

‘Yes, a fair assumption,’ she agreed.

‘I need a phone,’ Patrick stated.

Johno handed him his satellite phone. ‘Just pretend that God is on the switchboard. Press green and ask away.’

Patrick pressed green. ‘Hello?’ he gingerly began.

‘Operations.’

‘I’d like to be put through to the switchboard of British Special Branch, London.’ He waited.

‘Scotland Yard,’ came a woman’s voice a few seconds later.

‘Extension fourteen-ten, please.’

‘Records?’ came a moment later.

‘Johnson, please.’

‘That you Paddy?’ came a familiar female voice.

‘Yes, get Johnson for me, quickly please.’

‘Paddy!’ came a man’s buoyant voice a few seconds later. ‘How’s Switzerland?’

‘Great, great. Listen, need a big favour, off the radar.’

‘Oh dear.’

‘I need passenger manifests of all flights to or from the US, last two weeks.’

‘What you up to Paddy?’

‘Helping out some Swiss friends,’ he whispered, being keenly observed.

‘Christ, you mean ... *you know who?*’

‘Yes. Can you get me those lists?’

Johno and Beesely watched with interest. Johno shrugged, noticed by Dame Helen.

‘Be my arse if I did buddy,’ the man down the phone pointed out.

‘My arse too,’ Patrick replied.

Dame Helen waved him over then grabbed the phone. ‘This is Dame Helen Eddington-Small.’

‘Ma’am?’ came a startled voice.

‘Do as he asks, or I’ll send his wife around to see you.’

‘Yes, Ma’am.’

Patrick finished his call, giving Johnson his email address. He hung up.

Dame Helen informed Beesely, ‘I could get those lists. You seem to overlook who I am. I’m injured and on leave, but still the head of SIS!’

Beesely cleared his throat, and tapped the monitor in front of him. ‘This computer accesses the British Police National Computer –’ he made eye contact with Dame Helen. ‘- *and yours.*’

‘I should have figured that,’ Dame Helen said with a scowl.

2

Food was brought in, dirty plates taken out, fresh tea and coffee offered, Patrick and Johno sneaking out for cigarette breaks in

the courtyard. Beesely's office was packed with warm bodies as the first review meeting commenced an hour later.

'So, what do we know?' Beesely keenly asked.

'We have six American or Canadian visitors to those facilities,' Patrick offered.

'Any links between them?'

'Two sat next to each other on the flight from New York and the connection from Heathrow,' Susan explained.

'OK, good, I want those two people under the spotlight.' Managers took notes. 'What about their hotels?'

'They shared a hotel with two other Americans and one Canadian,' a manager offered.

'OK, look closely for a link, and check out the other three.'

'We have isolated five possible security incidents on the days in question,' Otto informed the group.

'What sort?' Johnno asked.

Otto glanced at his notes. 'Some files missing, some samples missing, a lab fire, an intruder sighted, a chemical leak injuring three researchers.'

'It doesn't seem very significant,' Beesely complained. 'If they were covering their tracks they would have been more ruthless, destroying the labs.'

'Not if they didn't want us to jump right on it,' Johnno pointedly remarked.

'Yes, perhaps,' Beesely admitted. 'Let's assume that these labs were involved with a chemical weapon development programme.' That was for the benefit of the managers, not let in on the full story. 'I want the best scientists we can find at short notice, who could probably figure out the science behind what these labs were doing.'

Otto eased his head forwards. 'We indirectly own majority shareholdings in three of these labs. We can order the people here.'

Beesely suddenly felt foolish. 'Do so. Quickly please. With records of what they were working on.'

Susan asked, 'I know none of you are scientists, but what would you need for this chemical or biological weapon? Would you need a vat full of the stuff, a small sample or just instructions on how to make some?'

People glanced around at each other.

Johno suggested, 'You'll need a sample of the stuff.'

'And to transport it?' she asked.

'Frozen, I guess,' Johno said with a shrug. He turned to Beesely with a slight frown. 'Fat bastard?'

'Mr. Short!' Beesely tapped his phone. 'Put me through to Mr. Short, Secure Transit Limited, London.'

They waited.

'Yes? Beesely?'

'Mr. Short, how are you?'

'Good, good. Things are going well. Do you guys need something ... moved?'

'No, I need to know if you moved anything discreetly from mainland Europe last week, to the States.'

'We moved lots of things. What you looking out for?'

'Frozen samples. Secure packages, temperature controlled.'

'Hang on.' They could hear keyboard tapping. 'Right. We moved frozen samples from Germany, France, and three from Switzerland. Were they yours?'

'Not quite. But I want all of the details faxed over to me ten minutes ago - my operator will give you the number. Oh, and Mr. Short, not a word of this to anyone.'

'Of course.'

'And I want the billing and delivery info, credit cards, etc.'

'I'll print them off now.'

Beesely hung up.

'Lucky break,' Johno suggested.

'My dear boy, why do you think I recruited him in the first place?' Beesely proudly pointed out, causing Otto to smile. 'Right, what else?'

‘Trace the money,’ Susan suggested, her husband agreeing. ‘Always trace the money.’

‘Probably passed through here anyway,’ Dame Helen suggested.

Beesely lifted his gaze up to Otto, a grin creasing one cheek.

‘I’ll call them,’ Otto said with a smile.

‘OK, everyone, one hour break.’ He clapped his hands together and they started to empty the room. ‘Helen, you OK?’

‘Even if I’m not, this is one fight I’m not missing. These bastards took my daughter away from me.’

Susan stopped and snapped her head around. ‘What?’

Beesely lowered his head and sighed. ‘The people behind this, *they* were the ones that rammed Helen off the road.’

Dame Helen lifted her head towards Susan, an angered, yet confident expression offered. ‘So I’m not leaving until we nail this lot.’ Stunned, Susan and her husband wheeled out Dame Helen.

3

Thirty minutes later, the leader of the Society and his deputy arrived by helicopter, a short flight from Zurich, Beesely welcoming them into his office. They noticed the boards and enquired about the tight security.

‘We have another problem,’ Beesely admitted. ‘And I need your help.’

‘We are not the army!’ their elderly leader suggested, his accent thick and his words slow.

‘It is not an army that I need, it’s to find a few bank transactions.’

They glanced at each other. ‘What is happening?’

Beesely settled himself behind his desk. ‘Those radioactive bombs in Bavaria and England - it was a Russian, Boris Luchenkov,’ Beesely carefully pronounced, speaking slowly and

clearly for them. ‘He tried to buy a chemical weapon from some Americans. If it is used, millions could die.’

Again they glanced at each other. ‘What do you ask of me?’ the old man said, clearly concerned.

‘I need details of large sums of money passing through Swiss clearing houses, from Russia or from Russian oil sales, going to American accounts, maybe Caribbean tax havens.’

‘What you ask is not ... legal. The Swiss government would not be the happy.’

‘*You, my friend, are the government,*’ Beesely quietly, but firmly pointed out. He could not be sure if he detected a slight hint of a smile in the old man.

‘We can make not the promise. And if there is any more ... *opportunities* with the stock markets...?’

‘I shall let you know straight away.’

The old man and his deputy stood, shook hands politely and left, leaving Beesely watching curiously after them.

* * *

Beesely woke from his chair-nap and hour later, walking out to the command centre and glancing at his watch. He sought out Otto, signalling for a meeting. It took ten minutes to assemble everyone.

‘Right,’ Beesely began, accepting a fresh coffee. ‘What have we discovered?’

‘We’ve now got the passenger manifests,’ Susan offered. ‘Some don’t match up, so someone has altered a computer somewhere. Fortunately, the good old-fashioned British Police still back up to magnetic tape.’

‘Good. What do we have on these new players?’

Susan continued, ‘I think we have a group of seven, all linked; six Americans, and one Canadian.’

Dame Helen informed them, 'I ran them through the link we have with the US immigration computer. That was, before we received a high level enquiry as to *why* from across the pond.'

'Really? Hit a nerve, did we?'

'Yes, a few of them are CIA,' Dame Helen explained. 'Two are US Army doctors of some sort.'

'That would make sense. Unfortunately, they are now onto us. We have had our time in the shadows, now we can expect some trouble.'

'Here?' Susan asked, clearly concerned.

'No,' Beesely said confidently. 'After what happened last week the Yanks will be reeling; another American attack and they will be at war with Europe. Maybe something subtle and small scale, a few snipers –'

'Snipers!' Susan barked. 'Our rooms have windows!'

'My dear Susan, your windows are bullet proof.'

Otto was handed a sheet of paper by a manager. Standing, he studied it as he slowly took a few steps forwards. 'Bank transfer details,' he stated. 'From the Society. They are coded.'

'Coded?' Beesely repeated.

'Bank short-codes, all numeric,' Otto explained, not having looked up.

'Can we decipher it?' Dame Helen enquired.

'Otto spent twenty years running a Swiss bank,' Beesely proudly announced. He lifted his head. 'Any use, Otto?'

Still reading, Otto informed them, 'One transaction, from the Amsterdam oil market, five hundred million dollars, authorised by a bank in Tomsk, Siberia, routed – unusually - direct to a Cayman Islands account, a bank that is well known for its ... *discretion.*'

Beesely stood. 'Right, that bank in the Cayman Islands, buy it!'

'No need,' Otto quietly suggested, still studying the paper. He glanced quickly at Dame Helen. 'They work for us, indirectly.'

‘Really? Let’s put some pressure on them, then,’ Beesely suggested.

‘No need,’ Otto repeated without looking up. He took out his phone. ‘Grand Cayman Bank, Mister Dupont.’ He waited. ‘Mr. Dupont? Herr Director, K2, Switzerland. I want to know about account 1928-3829-887. Quickly, please.’ He waited. ‘How much? It is still there. Transfer it to us immediately. Yes, it is ours, stolen by a member of staff. You will be rewarded, one half percent. Be quick, and no discussion of this.’ He hung up.

‘Did you just do what I think you did?’ Beesely asked, now adopting a stunned look.

Otto glanced at a manager and the man stepped out. ‘Yes, I took their money.’

Johno stepped towards him. ‘You nicked their five hundred mil?’

Otto nodded, seemingly insulted by their surprise at his action.

Johno held up his hand, forefinger and thumb almost touching. ‘Are they going to be just a teensy-weensy bit pissed at us?’ Otto shrugged.

‘Beesely,’ Susan called, pointing at herself. ‘New washing machine.’

When the manager returned, he announced, ‘It is there.’

‘Hide it,’ Otto ordered, the man sliding back out of the door immediately.

‘Right.’ Johno rubbed his hands together. ‘They got the chemical weapon, we got their money. Now what?’

‘Good question,’ Beesely said as he sat. ‘I would suppose that they’ll come after us, after their money.’

‘And you’ll cut their bollocks off, right?’ Susan asked.

‘We’ll certainly give it a good go. But we still need to get that weapon, which is probably in America. Do we have that list from Mister Short?’ A manager handed him a copy. ‘OK, let’s get back to it. Everyone, let’s keep at these boards and links in

case we are missing anyone, or any *thing*.’ The managers filed out.

Johno remained. He suggested, ‘Maybe they’ll trade their money for the virus?’

‘That depends on whether or not the Russians have it already,’ Beesely glumly stated.

‘The one thing you’ve not done so far ... is talk to those Yanks at The Lodge?’ Johno nudged.

‘And for good reason,’ Beesely replied without looking up, studying the pages on his desk.

‘Don’t know who to trust?’ Johno probed.

Beesely glanced up at him and nodded. ‘Henry could not have been working alone.’

‘Why not get them all together on speaker-phone and spill the beans like before?’ Johno suggested.

‘And risk it getting out? No, that could cause more problems than it solves. I need to remove the damaged organ *without* the body knowing about it. If this gets into the American press ... besides, they have my number, and so far no call to say how their investigations are going.’

As Johno turned to walk out, he said, ‘So that guy Henry was in it for the money.’

Beesely drummed his fingers across the desk. ‘In it for the money,’ he quietly repeated. ‘In it ... for the money.’

Stocks, shares and options

1

Otto walked back in. 'You called?'

'Yes, yes. Sit.' Beesely hurriedly gestured to the nearest seat. He picked up his pen, selecting a clean sheet of paper. 'Right, stock market trading - you're an expert, right?'

'Yes, of course.'

'Of course,' Beesely agreed with a smile. 'Right, what can we do to make the US stock market jump around?'

'The Dow Jones it is called, a collection of its top companies. What can we do?' Otto shrugged lightly. 'It is a large market, much bigger than London, but there are certainly some things we can do to affect daily movements. But there are laws and rules; we would attract attention, and maybe the Swiss Government would not be so happy.'

'Oh? Can it be done without anyone noticing?'

'To a lesser degree.'

'What's in that combined fund, us and the secret bank Society?'

'Three point one billion,' Otto stated.

'Is that a lot? I mean, for stock trading?' Beesely asked.

'It is a good size, but not so big in comparison to others. Our strength is in the fact that we have discretion to use it as we please, not according to fixed rules.'

'So, if we knew that the US market was going to dip we could make some money from that knowledge?' Beesely asked.

'We would buy short index options, 'puts', or sell index futures. Then, when the market falls, we would make money. But afterwards, the Americans may see it ... and ask questions.'

'I'm not worried about that,' Beesely insisted. 'What else? What else can we do?'

Otto gave it some thought. 'We increase the volatility and then sell index options. We make money even when the market goes sideways.'

Beesely made notes. 'I will not pretend I understand that, but ... but good.'

'Markets move on rumours. If we started a rumour, then that may have an effect on its own.'

'That's good too.' Beesely keenly took notes.

'There are two different levels of market trading - public and institutional.'

'Institutional?' Beesely repeated.

Otto explained, 'Large investment companies, the pension funds, they make large transactions outside of the normal stock market; they go direct to the buyers and sellers. The public, they go through the computerised system - large numbers of small transactions; they do not know the person they are buying or selling from.'

'What if we used large sums ... in this public system thing?'

'It would move quickly and volatility would increase.'

Beesely checked his paper. 'And then we would ... sell options, yes?'

Otto nodded, regarding Beesely carefully. 'What do you have in mind, and why?'

'Just an idea at the moment, we can think about it later. Right, companies and their controlling shares, how does that work?'

'In which country?'

'You mean it varies?' Beesely asked, adopting a puzzled look.

'Yes.'

'Oh.' Beesely considered it. 'Well, say the US.'

'If it is a public listed company, then any majority shareholder or group with more than five percent of shares takes control, or defers its voting rights if they are simply investors.'

'Only five percent? Great!'

Otto seemed suspicious, a slight frown forming. ‘What are you thinking of?’

Beesely cracked a wry smile. ‘I am thinking, my boy, that we may be going about this the wrong way.’ He took a breath. ‘OK, those Swiss chemical and bio-science companies - we have shares in some?’

‘Yes, we have majority shares in three, but we do not *run* the companies; we elect investment managers, and we sign over their voting rights to the company board.’

‘But we *could* run them? Directly?’

‘Yes.’

Beesely eased back. ‘Do so. Immediately. Send in teams of our people, I want full control. I want every project analysed in detail—’

‘We have already arranged that.’

Beesely waved his pen threateningly. ‘But can we be sure that ... at some point in the future this will not happen again?’

‘I understand,’ Otto offered.

‘Those other companies, can we buy controlling shares? I mean, without wasting money?’

‘We have an extra half-billion to use,’ Otto reminded him with the barest hint of a professional Swiss grin.

‘While I think of it, send ten percent to the Society, thank them.’ Otto made a note. ‘Then buy those shares. When we have control, send in a team.’

Otto’s eyes widened. ‘For all of the companies on that list? Some are very large.’

‘Can we use our bank’s managed funds as a sensible investment?’

‘Yes, of course; this is why the bank already has shares. But the bank cannot run the companies; an investment management company would have to be elected, then a board selected.’

‘Do we have one of those?’

‘Several, in many countries,’ Otto cheerfully explained.

‘Good, good.’ Beesely ran a hand over his scalp. ‘I think I have a plan, a lesson from your book. You see, I think the Americans made a fatal mistake.’

‘They outsourced,’ Otto coldly suggested.

Beesely made strong eye contact. ‘Yes, they did. If this germ crap was developed in some American military lab we would have a problem, but *they* ... are audited by Congress these days. So we have them by the short and curlies.’

‘Short and curlies?’ Otto carefully repeated.

‘Pubic hair!’

‘Ah. I see.’ He didn’t. He stood, a slight frown forming. ‘I will send the Society the money, I am sure they will be happy. The scientific reports and scientists will be here soon.’

Beesely raised his eyebrows. ‘That was quick!’

‘They are mostly based near Zurich.’

‘Gather them upstairs, in the restaurant, make sure it is empty when they arrive. These scientists –’

‘They are K2 men.’

‘Excellent. In which case, bring the perishers down here.’

2

Kirkpatrick stood and welcomed a uniformed Delta Force Colonel into his Pentagon ‘D’ Ring office.

‘Come in, Colonel. Have a seat.’

‘I’ll stand,’ the Colonel stated with cold menace. ‘This won’t take long.’

Kirkpatrick hovered above his seat, studying his guest before easing down. ‘Problems, Colonel?’

The officer threw down the thick file he had walked in with. ‘When I first received this I thought it was maybe an exercise, some scenario - a paper exercise only. But then I noticed the satellite photos and the witness statements and appraisals, so I wondered why we may be planning a sneak attack on a Swiss bank installation –’

‘It’s not a bank!’ Kirkpatrick quietly, yet firmly insisted.

‘I know that ... *now*. You know how? I tracked down the sole survivor of that half-arsed attack on this same *facility* just two weeks ago. The guy was crying his heart out on the Internet for anyone who’d listen.’

‘Did he co-operate?’

‘Oh, he was very helpful. Of course, the guy’s a bit of a basket case now, having been forced to watch all the wounded survivors get slowly burnt alive. I dare say he has some *issues*.’

Kirkpatrick eased back.

The officer continued, ‘Of course, it may affect any soldiers selected for a mission like this, knowing what’ll happen to them if they are wounded or captured. These Swiss freaks make the Viet Cong look like girl scouts!’

He took a breath and sat, dropping a notch in anger. ‘I’ve done what you asked, I’ve reviewed the installation. The question was, could a covert team get in there and destroy it? Well, I spoke to the survivor, and put together a list of men and equipment in that compound. Then I had a chat to an old buddy in Mossad, and it seems they supplied this facility with millions of dollars worth of sensing kit - top of the range stuff that *we* couldn’t detect, nor hope to evade. Sensor grids with computer links, thermal cameras, motion sensors, fucking underwater sensors!’

‘Can it be destroyed if necessary?’ Kirkpatrick pressed, now getting angry himself.

‘*Everything* can be destroyed if necessary. But your question was - *can it be destroyed discreetly?* The answer to that is ‘no’ - not by a frontal assault, the firepower needed would be noticed by the Swiss authorities. Not to mention the estimated casualties of around a hundred of our troops. They have pillboxes, snipers with fifty calibre rifles, surface to air missiles and, apparently, a squadron of Apaches.

‘I didn’t see a lot of that detail mentioned in your request! This is not a military job, Mister Kirkpatrick. If you want into

that place, it's a spook job - softly, softly.' He stood. 'And good luck.'

* * *

'OK, crazy people,' Johno called.

Men waved and smiled, most now sitting on deckchairs in the hotel grounds and enjoying the weather. Several were in gym kit, a few jogging around the hotel gardens, one now walking hand-in-hand with a prostitute.

Dr. Manning walked out. 'Johno,' he flatly offered.

'What's up, Doc?' Johno said with a playful grin.

Manning gave him a disappointed look. 'We've had to put an alcoholic into cold turkey.'

'Pity,' Johno offered, not too concerned. 'Don't worry about rules and regulations, Doc. Force him cold turkey.'

'I can't say I approve of a lot of this, but it does seem to be helping a number of them. Two want to work for you straight away, they keep asking.'

'Fine. Tell them they have to pass the physical, push them to get fit and call us, we'll get them on the shooting range for a day.'

'What about family visits?'

Johno shrugged. 'Send a Learjet or something bigger for the families; it should do the men a world of good. But let's hide the hookers on *family day*, eh?'

Two men walked out in gym kit. 'Right, Boss?' they called, smiling and waving as they started jogging.

Johno and Manning watched them go. Manning sighed, 'One of those tried to kill himself a year ago; I saw him for a while before he moved away and stopped attending sessions. He did a few months inside for assault.'

'I'll fix him,' Johno confidently suggested.

'With the resources you have here, you may well do that.'

'Do they chat to you?'

Dr. Manning studied Johno for a moment. ‘Yes, strangely enough.’ Johno focused on him, a questioning expression as he lit up. Manning continued, ‘At first they didn’t bother, when it was made clear to them *by you* that they didn’t have to. Now just about half of them volunteer for sessions.’

Johno nodded. ‘Good. What about you, you OK?’

Manning’s eyes narrowed. He took a long breath. ‘You’re not the man you were a year ago, Johno.’

‘Ain’t that the truth. But keep it quiet, I’m still playing the sympathy card.’

Manning smiled.

‘Anything you need, Doc?’

‘No, your representative here fixes everything before I even mention it. He’s damned annoying.’

Johno laughed. ‘Welcome to Swiss efficiency. This ain’t fucking British Rail, Doc!’

3

Beesely’s office was large, but it now seemed cramped with all the attendant warm bodies. The managers were present, there being no room for deputies today. The three scientists sat at one end, everyone now facing them: one was a biochemist, one a geneticist, and one a doctor specialising in biochemistry. Ranged in front of them were the known research projects from the affected laboratories and chemical companies.

‘Gentlemen,’ Beesely began, stood now between the puzzled and nervous scientists and doctors, and the rest of the staff. ‘In front of you ... are files relating to research projects in a number of laboratories in this country.’ He suddenly stopped. ‘Oh, sorry, you all understand English?’ They nodded.

‘Good, good. Right, we believe that the Americans were using these facilities to develop biological weapons or viruses.’ The scientists were shocked. ‘So we need to know what they were up to. Behind you are white boards with marker pens,

please go through the files and add the summary to the boards. Feel free to talk loudly about what you find, and what you assume as you go. Coffee in ten minutes.’ Beesely sat back down.

The scientists glanced at each other for several seconds, before the eldest man stood and grabbed a marker pen. ‘OK, give me the company names.’

The remaining two men read out loud the company names, from the covers of the multi-coloured plastic folders. The elder scientist listed them on the board, spreading them across the board laterally. He then immediately, without further reference, started to write underneath the company names the types of services they offered, four or five sections for each – and from memory.

Beesely glanced at Otto. Otto tipped his head and cracked a small smile of approval.

Next, the elder scientist started to ask for projects, listing them for each company. When he had finished, the other two men stood up and grabbed pens. They moved the tables away, so that they could walk freely in front of the boards. Each man used a different coloured pen to draw lines of common links between the five listed companies, twenty-four listed services and almost fifty projects.

Ten minutes later, Beesely tapped his phone. ‘Tea and coffee,’ he whispered.

The scientists continued for another five minutes, but then seemed excited about something.

Beesely stood. ‘Something?’

‘Yes, we think so. This is not a complete picture, other companies must have been involved.’

‘Such as who?’ Beesely asked.

They discussed it amongst themselves, and filled-in the names of extra companies at the end of the board. Otto sent a manager to the board. The man copied down the names and hurried out.

‘Well?’ Beesely pressed.

The scientists turned. The elder man said, ‘There is a common factor between all of these companies, and some of the projects. It was easy to find when you pointed towards the given projects. It is Sickle Cell research and gene therapy.’

Beesely turned and glanced at the staff, a knowing look.

The lead scientist added, ‘They are attempting to use gene therapy to turn the dominant Sickle-Cell trait into recessive.’

Beesely nodded. ‘And what if they had it wrong ... the other way around?’ he delicately probed.

The scientists all stared down the long office with puzzled expressions. ‘Then they ... would make healthy people sick,’ the elder man said.

‘Gentlemen, take these boards and files with you.’ Beesely turned to Otto. ‘Otto, find them an office to use.’ Addressing the scientists, he ordered, ‘I want that map of companies expanded. I want to know everything about that project - and who was involved, no matter where in the world. Your resources are unlimited. I especially want to know about American companies involved in this.’

They were about to leave with the boards, when Beesely called, ‘Gentlemen, gene-therapy: why might these companies need to send frozen samples to the States?’

They shrugged. ‘For the first test subjects, to be injected into the bone marrow.’

‘And where might that be done?’

The elder scientist explained, ‘A hospital that specialises in such matters, a genetics department. Most likely a university research department of medical genetics.’

‘Thank you, gentlemen. Please work quickly.’ They stepped out.

After staring at the floor for a moment, Beesely turned to a manager. ‘I want a list of all hospitals or clinics, anywhere in the world, involved in ... what he just said.’ He sat as tea and coffee was brought in.

‘Not an attack on Arabs?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘No one is going to pay for making Afro-Caribbeans sick!’ Susan added. ‘It doesn’t make sense.’

‘Yeah, it does,’ Johno stated. They all focused on him. ‘You got to test your product someplace first.’

‘Test it?’ Susan repeated, adopting a disgusted look.

‘Sure,’ Johno said. ‘They test in on American blacks, refine it, and then switch the gene marker thingy around to Arabs; same bullet, different target.’

Beesely rubbed a hand across his scalp. ‘So, Boris was not buying it for immediate use.’

‘There are Russian elections in a year,’ Dame Helen pointed out.

‘A little time for manoeuvring,’ Beesely coldly stated. ‘Or a thorough field test of the technology, on something innocuous.’ He sipped his tea, then tapped his phone. ‘Get me Elle Rosen.’

‘Can *they* be trusted?’ Johno asked, looking concerned. ‘*They* would love a weapon against Arabs.’

Beesely took a breath. ‘There is one very good reason why *they* will help us.’

Dame Helen suggested, ‘Their genetic markers would be very close to that of the Arab world.’

‘Close enough,’ Beesely emphasised.

‘Shalom?’ came from the phone.

‘Elle, Beesely, bit of a crisis. Need you and a senior decision maker here today. Jet is on its way.’ He pointed at a manager, the man raising his phone.

‘Beesely, do you go looking for trouble, my friend?’

‘Yes. Get here quick, WMD threat to Israel.’ He hung up.

‘That’ll get the juices going!’ Johno suggested with a concerned look.

‘OK, let’s shake the tree and see who falls out.’ Beesely tapped his phone. ‘David, at The Lodge in Virginia, please.’

He put his fingers to his lips, so they all understood to be quiet, as clicking could be heard.

‘How may I direct your call?’ came an American accent.

‘David, please. It’s Beesely here.’

‘One moment, sir.’ They waited.

‘Beesely, how’re things in Europe?’

‘Surprisingly good for a change. Are we on speaker phone?’

‘Yes, top five members here for an early meeting. Did you wish to address the full group?’

‘No, nothing important, just to say we’ve pinched the money.’

‘The ... money?’

‘Yes, the money Boris paid Henry. We have one of the Russians held captive, and one of Henry’s people, and we turned them with a little *persuading*,’ he lied, glancing at the managers. ‘We obtained the bank details and access codes, and grabbed five hundred million dollars. You know, I have always fancied a string of hotels of my own, so maybe now I will buy one.’

‘That’s ... good news, Beesely. Hope it gets used purposefully.’

‘Oh, it will. Any news your end?’

‘We’re still mopping up.’

‘Good, good. Anyway, thought I’d let you know the good news. Bye.’ He hung up, his features shifting down quickly from pleasant, to businesslike.

Johno edged closer. ‘Why don’t you just put up a fucking sign outside: come shoot at us!’

‘We do not know that anyone else there is involved,’ Beesely insisted, a flat palm thrust towards Johno. ‘But, if they are, then this will help to flush them out.’

‘And seriously piss them off!’ Johno added, helping himself to a biscuit.

‘If they come our way ... then fine,’ Beesely insisted, his head lowered.

‘Will they?’ Dame Helen asked. ‘Come our way?’

‘I hope so,’ Beesely answered, steel in his voice. ‘We have to stop them, and the best way of doing that is still an old fashioned bullet between the eyes.’

‘This time,’ Otto began, ‘no one is paying them. I do not know if they will use their own money for such an adventure. Not for revenge. They will be using more money to chase after lost money. And we are more than ready.’

Susan eased forwards. ‘Beesely, I’m a tough old boot, but my family are here.’

Beesely faced her. ‘Right now this is the safest place; if I thought otherwise I would send you off. Do not worry,’ he reassured her. Then softer, ‘Of course, you are free to go whenever you please if you wish to. The same for you, Helen.’

‘I’m staying,’ Dame Helen quickly insisted, turning to Susan. After a moment, Susan glanced at her husband.

‘I’m in,’ he offered with a shrug.

‘OK,’ she said with a loud sigh. ‘What’s next?’

‘What’s next is that Otto deploys our full force,’ Johno suggested.

Otto stood and walked out with two managers.

‘Full force?’ Susan asked.

Johno grinned. ‘You ain’t seen nothing yet, Detective. Those soldiers outside, they’re just the compound guard - another *five hundred* behind them. Plus our air force.’

Susan cocked an eyebrow. ‘You have an air force?’

‘We don’t just go around on tractors, love,’ Johno said with a wink.

Beesely said, ‘Susan, Patrick, Helen, check in on your families please. Then, when you are ready, back to the passenger manifests and common links. And do not worry - the rooms upstairs have six foot thick walls, all sorts of detectors, bullet proof glass, and there’s a twelve-man SAS team on the ground level.’

‘Bloody hell!’ Patrick let out. He and Susan wheeled out Dame Helen.

* * *

Otto and Beesely were sat making plans as a manager rushed in. 'Sir, one of the American men on the list, we have found him. He used his credit card in New York, a hotel at the airport, a Mister Glass.'

Beesely glanced at Otto, and then addressed the manager. 'Send Mr. Grey, if he has already reached the States, if not use one of our men.' The manager disappeared. Beesely turned to Otto. 'Did he say ... credit card use?'

'Yes, we have their credit card details from their airline tickets, hotel use -'

'Could you transfer money, you know, *into* their bank accounts?'

'Yes. We traced their private bank accounts. What did you have in mind?'

Beesely sat staring out of focus. 'Right. Transfer a couple of million to that Russian we use -'

'Vladimir?'

'Yes. And get him to transfer a couple of million from the bank account of a known gangster - hopefully one in Siberia - into to the account of Mr. Glass. In fact, to all of the men on our list.'

Otto cocked a surprised Swiss eyebrow, smiled, and stood up.

'Oh, and Otto, transfer *another* twenty million odd to this Russian, and ask him what he can find out about Boris's empire and what he can do to ... you know ... generally *fuck him up*, as Johnno so eloquently puts it.'

'I hope we do not adopt too many of Johnno's sayings in our business life.'

* * *

Pepi stepped down into the villa's basement, his visitor waiting.
'Sir. A pleasant journey?'

'Fine, fine. What news?'

'We now know what the strange attack on K2 was all about.'

The visitor straightened. 'Jah?'

'Henry O'Sullivan, and a rogue element of the CIA, were conducting germ warfare experiments in laboratories around the world, because – it seems - the US Congress has banned them in America. They had many projects running in Swiss laboratories,' Pepi reported. 'All of which seem to have had sensitive projects and research removed on the day of the American mercenary attack.'

'Mein gott.'

Pepi tipped his head. 'K2 believes that Luchenkov paid Henry O'Sullivan half a billion dollars for this research.'

'What? The Americans would never sell this research to the Russians!'

Pepi smiled.

'What is it?'

'This germ, if released, would kill Arabs, not westerners.'

'Ah, so ... if the Russians release it –'

'They ... would get the blame.'

The German smiled. 'I like this man, he should have been working with us! He was playing Luchenkov better than we were!'

'And now K2 are wasting their time going after all the people involved in this research, whilst putting themselves at odds with the CIA.'

Across the pond

1

Mr. Glass stepped out of the shower, to find Mr. Grey standing in front of him. They stared at each other for a moment; Glass surprised but controlled, the stranger oddly calm.

‘What are you doing in my room?’ Glass demanded, thinking it some simple mistake.

‘I’m in the service of my country,’ came the cold answer.

Mr. Glass started towelling himself dry, hoping to buy some time as he thought. He was now in his early fifties, greying and overweight, the faded tattoo on his forearm that of the US Marines. ‘If you’re in the service of your country, then you probably know who I work for. I’m also in the service of my country.’

‘Do you like puppies?’

Glass frowned at the stranger. ‘What?’

‘Puppies. Do you like puppies? I have some to find homes for.’

‘What the hell are you talking about?’ Glass demanded, getting louder.

‘My previous boss, he had a dog, third set of Labrador puppies.’

‘Previous boss?’ Glass delicately probed.

‘Oliver Stanton.’

Glass paused mid-wipe before continuing, ‘Yeah, who did he work for? CIA?’

‘No, a higher agency.’

‘State Department, the White House?’ Glass asked, avoiding eye contact.

‘A golf club in Virginia.’

Glass froze, and stared at Mr. Grey. ‘This guy Stanton was Lodge?’ he asked in a strained whisper.

Mr. Grey stepped closer. 'He was the chairman, this past fifteen years. And he was a patriot, a man who loved his country, until he was murdered - by people more interested in money than the good of their country.'

Glass was horrified. 'No, that can't be right.'

'He was a private man, he kept a low profile.' Grey took another small step.

Glass squinted into the stranger's cold eyes. 'Who ... who sent you?'

'I'm going to ask the questions. And the answers will determine how much pain you feel.'

Glass dropped his towel and rushed the slim man in front of him.

* * *

Johno walked into Beesely's office at midnight. 'Grey just called; he's got some names and leads. He apologies for not making a thorough interrogation, he was interrupted by room service.'

'And the man, what's his name -'

'Glass. Grey decorated the hotel room with his fucking entrails, it's on CNN already. Room service boy went out the window, twelve floors down to the road. Splat!'

Beesely sat back. 'I guess Mr. Grey had some anger to work out,' he quietly commented. 'Any useful intel?'

'The drugs are being put together in Arizona, tests going on in six hospitals in Mississippi. He's got some names, he's going after them.'

Disappointed, Beesely said, 'After what happened to this Glass fella, they will probably all go to ground. Mr. Grey has lost perspective.'

'He said to ask you if you wanted a puppy.'

Beesely frowned. 'Puppy? Is it some sort of code?'

‘No. Stanton’s daughter text’s him most every day, asking about her father. Family is trying to find homes for some puppies.’

‘I had forgotten. One of his daughters died in a car wreck, and they adopted the baby. Girl must be ten or so by now. She’s the grand-daughter.’ Dame Helen was wheeled in by her husband, Mike, Beesely standing for her. ‘Hello Mike.’

‘Mister Beesely.’ He forced a formal smile.

‘I’ve made some calls,’ Dame Helen began. ‘We have some assets in the US that the Americans don’t know about.’

‘They think you are still in charge?’ Beesely asked.

‘I *am* still in charge – I’m just on sick leave!’ she barked. ‘Remember?’

‘Yes, sorry my dear. No need to bite.’

‘They’re awaiting orders,’ she offered, a degree calmer.

‘Send some to Arizona, some to Mississippi,’ Beesely suggested.

She nodded. ‘Anything new?’

Beesely glanced at Johnno, and then at Mike. ‘Well, we ... caught up with one of the men in New York.’

‘And?’

‘He talked before he died,’ Beesely responded.

She shook her head. ‘I don’t need to know the details. I’m going to call it a day, I hurt all over.’

‘We could fetch get doctors for you,’ Beesely offered. ‘We have some always here –’

‘They’ve already seen me. I just need some pain killers and a good night’s sleep.’

‘Of course. Anything you need, let us know.’

Mike wheeled her out. ‘Rooms are fabulous,’ she called from the corridor. Beesely slumped.

‘You look like shit,’ Johnno said as he sat on the side of the desk.

‘Camp bed,’ Beesely ordered. ‘Check the perimeter, then lock us in.’ He lifted his head. ‘And *you*, you sleep –’ he waved his hand. ‘- way over there someplace.’

With a smirk, Johno walked out, MP5 slung over a shoulder.

In the Great Hall, Johno came across the ‘old dogs’ and the rest of the ex-SAS team. ‘OK, everyone, front and centre!’ He clapped his hands. ‘C’mon, roll-call.’

They slowly assembled, men coming through the large wooden doors from the courtyard and drawbridge, also out from the castle reception area, boots echoing across the cobbles in the courtyard.

‘Kev? What the fuck are *you* doing on stag?’ Johno shouted.

Kev grinned. ‘Last time I got a nick I got a quarter million pounds. I was hoping for something a wee bit more serious this time.’

Johno stepped up to him. ‘Are you completely fucking mad?’ His words echoed around the cavernous room.

‘It was just a nick,’ Kev insisted. ‘Doctor says I’m fine for guard duty!’

Johno shook his head. ‘Jesus.’ He stepped back and surveyed the troops and guards. ‘OK, new roof position manned?’

‘Yes, Boss. There are four lads up there.’

‘The stairwell?’

‘Six on the stairs, Boss.’ The relevant men raised their hands.

‘Those new firing positions, the arrow slits?’

‘All manned with sniper rifles, Boss.’

‘Any fifty cal’s inside?’

They glanced at each other. A guard raised a hand. ‘There are two in the lower bunker, in reserve.’

‘OK, they’re not much use in here anyway. Hands up the courtyard squad.’

Six troopers raised their hands. Johno moved along them and back, noting faces.

‘OK, the Great Hall gang?’

The 'old dogs' raised their hands, along with six guards.

'Reaction force?'

'Eight troopers in the courtyard, two bullet-proof Range Rovers,' Kev stated.

'OK, everyone got spare ammo?' They had. 'Everyone got food and drink?'

They pointed to a corner of the Great Hall. Two new vending machines had been placed there, several water containers stacked underneath.

'OK, good.'

'What kinda trouble wees expecting?' Kev asked.

'Round two, same idiots.'

Troopers glanced at each other. 'They won't get within five miles!' Kev insisted. 'Not even on a red tractor!' A few laughs and rude comments shot around the room.

'Then I'll sleep well knowing that *you* are on guard. To your stations, people!' Johno ordered.

A shot rang out, coming from the direction of the lake.

'Heads up!' Johno ordered. 'Form squads.'

The courtyard and Great Hall squads charged through the courtyard, and to the edge of the drawbridge, a roar of boots echoing on the cobblestones.

Johno raised his phone. 'All outside lights on!'

Another two shots rang out, clearly fifty calibre rounds; K2 agents firing outwards.

'Report!' Johno shouted into his phone.

'Diver in lake! He has been shot!'

'Cease fire!' Johno shouted into his phone. 'Cliff top! Report.'

'Cliff top here. Single diver, hit three times.'

'Any movement?'

'No.'

'Hold your fire. Lakeside units, grab the body.'

They waited several minutes.

'Herr Johno?' burst from the phone.

‘I’m here, go ahead.’

‘This body is weeks old.’

Johno raised his phone. ‘Stand down, dead body in the lake, an old one.’ Groans echoed around the courtyard. ‘Back to normal alert stations. Cliff top, well done. Stay sharp.’ He turned. ‘Back inside.’

He made his way quickly to the guest quarters, knocking first on Susan’s door. ‘Susan, Patrick, you awake?’ he whispered, an ear to the door.

The door opened, Susan still dressed as before. ‘Just how the hell do you expect us to sleep with that bloody artillery barrage going on?’

‘Sorry. There was a dead body floating in the lake, and the boys thought it was an intruder.’

‘What were they firing?’ Patrick keenly asked.

‘Fifty calibre.’

Patrick’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Jesus, talk about overkill!’

Johno shrugged. ‘They’re accurate to a mile. Nothing gets near this place. Sorry again.’

Dame Helen came down the corridor from the lift, wheeled by Mike. ‘What was the excitement?’

‘Just a body in the lake from the last episode, but the boys don’t take any chances. Sorry if it startled you.’

‘I’m going to hit the painkillers and get to bed. You’ll need a bomb to wake me.’

Johno offered her a look mock surprise. ‘Don’t go saying that, not around here.’

‘Are the boys trigger happy?’ Beesely asked, meeting Johno on the command centre walkway.

‘Nah, not really; a body in the water would look just like a real diver. I’d have shot at it.’ He yawned, leaning on the wooden rail.

‘Perimeter?’

‘All tight as fuck. Nothing, and no one, will be getting in here; it’s got to be four times stronger than last time.’

‘Don’t go kipping in here, we don’t want a riot.’ Beesely winked, turned, and closed his office door.

Otto approached. ‘The photocopy room is ready. It is quiet and, as you English say, *cosy*.’

‘Sound proof?’ Johno asked with a wink and a grin.

‘A thick door, yes. And a camp-bed on the floor.’

‘We seem to have a full complement of staff?’ Johno said as he straightened and surveyed the busy command centre.

‘After the last attack, many complained, especially the women and the junior grades.’ Johno shot Otto a questioning look, Otto explaining, ‘They want to stand and fight, not go home.’ Johno offered Otto a puzzled look. Otto suggested, ‘Swiss pride and stubbornness.’

Johno straightened. ‘I’m not that tired, I’ll probably roam about a bit. Inspire the troops.’

‘Your Admiral Nelson did this, I believe, before a battle.’

Johno put a hand inside his shirt, one behind his back, tipped up his nose and walked out trying to look dignified.

Otto quietly added, ‘But *he* ... was killed.’

* * *

The Gypsy’s dogs were a problem; close approach of the Gypsy camp on Church Fenton village green would be hindered by their warning barks. The dogs would have to be dealt with first.

Downwind, and across the pond, three stealthy black figures crept through the bushes, inch by inch. Six night-sights now focused on the camp, and particularly on the dogs, the agent’s whispered observations relayed by satellite link to the attacking group. In total, half a million pounds worth of electronics now focused on the Gypsy camp and their six tatty caravans.

A cottage for rent, on the edge of the green, had been hurriedly leased that day, agents entering from the rear and

taking up station at dusk. Real-time infrared cameras now focused on the green, and the three roads accessing it. Three hundred yards along each road, nestled into bushes, expensive cameras watched the roads, satellite relays feeding their images back to Broadlands.

‘Group one, you are clear.’

‘Roger.’

A window in the cottage was gently coaxed up an inch, a silencer peeking out. Across the pond, the first man released safety with a ‘click’. The second man knelt, an elbow on his knee, sniper-rifle tight into his shoulder. There were three dogs, so three shots would be required, timed to the exact same instant.

‘All stations report.’

‘Cottage One, clear. Ready.’

‘Mobile One. Ready.’

‘Mobile Two. Ready.’

‘Mobile Three, area clear.’

‘On my mark, fire on three. Standby. One ... two ... three.’

Three gentle cracks, no barking.

They waited a full four minutes in pitch blackness, noting a gentle breeze, the smell of summer meadows, an aircraft high overhead somewhere, a dog barking in the distance.

‘Mobiles withdraw.’

The two snipers on the green slowly withdrew, inch by inch, eight minutes to reach the path, before running softly into a lane. They ran across a field, some two hundred yards, down another hundred yards of lane, and then into the back of a waiting van.

‘SAS go!’

Four ex-troopers moved from a lane, and onto the common; black fatigues, balaclava masks, sacking over their boots. They moved silently across the road, slowly approaching the camp, splitting into two groups of two. On the grass they stepped slowly, each laboured stride taking four seconds to complete, their boots muffled by the sacking.

At the first dead dog, they reached down and placed it into a sack, cutting the rope that had tied the animal to a caravan leg, backing up slowly. Two minutes later, and the first two men were back in the lane, closely followed by the next two men. The last trooper silently opened the bottle he carried, and poured the contents over the grass where each dog had died, the chemical eating away the blood and leaving no trace.

He backed up, joining his colleagues three minutes later. From the lane, they walked softly a hundred yards, cut across a field, and joined the road some two hundred yards further on, a van waiting. They clambered in, and waited.

Thirty minutes later, the observers checked the cameras and reported in. All was quiet. Next came the tricky bit.

2

Special Agent Bambitou ducked under the yellow police tape – the tape blocking the start of this airport hotel’s corridor, and straightened his six foot four frame. Two of his colleagues quickly following him, all now dressed in loosely fitting blue FBI waistcoats over their suits.

The lead detective glanced up at the large black man approaching. ‘Mr. Bambitou.’

‘Mister Dawson.’

‘*Detective Dawson.*’

‘*Special Agent Bambitou.*’

They smiled.

‘What we got, Mick?’ Bambitou asked. ‘I got a *special* call to be here -’ he checked his watch. ‘- at this lovely hour.’

‘Yeah, I got a special *causal enquiry* from way up high about this guy.’

‘Rumour is he’s CIA,’ Bambitou whispered.

Dawson lifted his eyebrows in mock surprise. ‘You don’t say?’

‘Is it as bad as they say?’

‘Oh yeah, hold onto your lunch. Someone had a score to settle, and this guy was sliced and diced. Signs of torture first.’

‘So, CIA man was made to talk,’ Bambitou muttered.

‘Yeah, but about what?’

‘About stuff we don’t need to know, I’m guessing. What’s the connection with room service?’

‘No police record; college lad, a local. He probably walked in on the interrogation, maybe heard a scream.’

‘And got thrown out the window for his troubles.’ Bambitou sighed. ‘Has anyone from –’ he pointed up. ‘- *above* turned up?’

Detective Dawson tipped his head towards the other end of the corridor. Two men in suits were talking into their mobile phones.

Bambitou studied them, sighing. ‘Some days I love this job.’ His phone rang as the two nondescript men in suits walked towards him. ‘Bambitou. Yes, Bob?’ He listened, his features sullen. He sighed loudly. ‘OK, copy to me.’ He closed his flip phone as the two men stepped level.

‘Special Agent Bambitou,’ the first man coldly stated.

Bambitou tipped his head to both men in sequence. ‘VIPOUO-1, VIPOUO-2.’

They both offered unfriendly stares. ‘Excuse me?’

‘VIPOUO - VIP of unknown origins.’

The two men forced a quick smile, then displayed ID badges from the Department of Defense. ‘This is a sensitive matter, and one for which we’ll require expect close co-operation.’

‘Good,’ Bambitou loudly enthused, the two men slightly startled. ‘I do love co-operation.’ The two DOD men glanced at each other. ‘Perhaps we can start with the *five hundred thousand* dollars paid into this gentleman’s bank account from a known Russian gangster - upon his return from Euro-Disney.’

The two DOD men glanced at each other again, clearly concerned, but also confused.

‘You see, distinguished visitors, the FBI is now going to proceed along the lines that this ... *gentleman* was a dirty little bag of shit, up to no good.’

The two DOD men pushed past and left.

Detective Dawson stepped closer, watching them go. ‘Must have been something you said.’

A dirty war

1

Beesely was already awake when the arrival of Elle Rosen and 'superior' had been announced. They were coming from the airport under heavy escort.

He stood as Elle stepped into his office some fifteen minutes later. 'Elle, welcome,' he said with a forced, tired smile.

'Sir Morris, hello again.' They shook. 'And you met my associate before.' Elle moved aside and allowed in the same man who had attended previously. They shook.

Sounding tired and concerned, Beesely said, 'Please, come in, have a seat. Tea and coffee is fresh, it just arrived. Food?'

'I ate on the plane,' the second man said with a quick flat smile, now looking a little jet-lagged. The two Israelis sat, Beesely pouring out three coffees.

'What do I call you?' Beesely asked as he sat.

'Mosh,' will do, the older man answered.

Elle put down his coffee. 'So, Beesely, some day you just call to say 'hi' eh?'

Beesely forced out a long hard sigh. 'Apologies, gentlemen. To quote the man from, what is it, Zohar Chemicals - *we have a lot of problems.*'

Mosh leant forwards. 'He has refused to come back, I understand.'

Beesely made a face. 'Yes, I suppose he would. He arrived here in the middle of a small war.'

'And now you seem to be on alert?' Elle enquired, making it seem a complaint.

'Yes, another crisis. But don't worry, no one will be getting near this place now.'

'Not least because of a squadron of American Apaches!' Mosh pointedly suggested.

‘They do have the ... *deterrent* effect, don’t they?’

‘Did you get to the bottom of the attack?’ Elle asked.

Beesely eased back. ‘Yes, it was the CIA.’

The visitors both shot upright. ‘What?’ they asked at the same time.

‘Not official CIA action, of course; a rogue element.’

‘Why did they want you dead?’ Mosh asked, clearly stunned.

‘For the same reason you are here today, I’m afraid. Well, tonight. It was all part of the same thing.’ Beesely made direct eye contact with Mosh. ‘I trust you are familiar with Project Darwin?’

‘What?’ Mosh forced out in a strained whisper, although it was clearly no request for clarification.

‘It seems that they have finished the project. Oh, and it looks as if they may have sold it to the Russians.’

Mosh jumped up. ‘Are you crazy?’

Beesely stood. ‘Mosh, please. Have a seat.’

Mosh glanced at Elle and slowly sat.

‘Project Darwin?’ Elle repeated, wide-eyed.

‘Does he not know?’ Beesely asked. Mosh shook his head. Beesely addressed Elle directly. ‘It’s germ warfare, I’m afraid. Very nasty, and very dangerous germ warfare.’

Mosh rubbed his face. ‘You can tell him the truth.’

Beesely sipped his coffee as he faced Elle. ‘It’s a signature DNA weapon. It’s a virus, but coded to attack people with certain DNA characteristics, such as Afro-Caribbeans with the Sickle Cell trait.’

‘That’s terrible,’ Elle admitted, clearly confused. ‘But what does it have to do with a threat to Israel?’

Beesely explained, ‘The virus DNA trigger could be set to that of the Arab populace, or any other ethnic group. We think that is why Boris Luchenkov was trying to buy it –’

‘Trying to buy it?’ Mosh interrupted. ‘He does not have it yet?’

‘We do not know. We do know that the men involved were paid, and not just for attacking me. They received five hundred million dollars, and you would not need that much to send mercenaries my way; a tenth would do.’

‘So he may have it,’ Mosh considered, his head lowered.

‘We are investigating.’

Elle had been thinking. ‘What would the Russians want with it?’

‘Chechnya,’ Mosh informed his subordinate.

‘Problem is,’ Beesely quietly began, ‘if the Russians release the virus, and it kills Chechen Muslims, then it keeps going into the Middle East, randomly attacking anyone who has the relevant genes, which is where you come in. Whether you like it or not, you are closely linked – genetically - to your Arab neighbours. Not to mention geographically.’

‘So this virus would spread out across the Middle East,’ Elle said, thinking out loud.

‘And would probably take a number of your people with it,’ Beesely coldly stated. ‘That is ... assuming that it does not mutate and just kill all of us.’

‘How could they be so stupid?’ Mosh angrily asked of himself, barely above a whisper.

‘Money, in part at least,’ Beesely stated. ‘Five hundred million dollars that we know about, and possibly a great deal more. Oh, we pinched that back, by the way. Plus ... plus there may be those in the CIA happy to see the virus spread around the Middle East, to thin out the population a bit. And it gives them plausible deniability if the Russians release it - they can always say that it was a Russian-made virus. The one thing in their favour is time; the virus would not be quick.’

‘Do you know who is behind it?’ Mosh asked, now looking up.

‘Oliver Stanton was killed by his number two, Henry O’Sullivan. I do not know who else was involved from the top end, but we are actively pursuing the little people.’

Mosh nodded. 'What do you need from us?'

'We need assets inside the States that the Yanks don't know about, plus access to any Jewish-controlled investment companies.'

'Investment companies?' Mosh repeated, a slight frown forming.

'I have an idea. I am planning on taking control of a few companies involved in this research, and we will need plenty of investment capital.'

'And this capital, it will not be lost?' Mosh enquired.

'No, it will be invested in top one hundred US stocks. No risk, maybe some short term ... er ... what did Otto say ... *volatility*. What I need is to tell your investment people in the States when to buy and when to sell, and when to put out rumours. And that will need to be carefully co-ordinated.'

'And then, you can be sure that you will stop them?' Elle eagerly asked.

'No.'

Elle sat back, looking disappointed.

Beesely added, 'I can do the best I can until they kill me and my people. I cannot risk going public with this, the fall-out would be just as bad as if they used the damn thing. The Arab world would unite against us. You, gentlemen, need to keep this under your hats.' Beesely sipped his coffee. 'I will send you ten million towards the use of your assets in the States.'

Mosh leant forwards, and eased up. 'Mister Beesely, our people do not do what they do for money.'

Beesely also now stood, walking around the desk.

Mosh took his hand. 'Keep your money, use it for what you need to do.' He held Beesely's hand with both of his. Softly, he promised, 'Tomorrow night we will be ready to make some investments - Elle will remain and help here.'

Beesely offered him a pained expression. 'Send someone who looks and sounds ... less *Israeli*. This is Switzerland, after all, and K2 is full of big strapping Aryans.'

Mosh seemed momentarily surprised, then his features softened. 'I know what you mean. We will send some French investment managers.'

'Sorry,' Beesely quietly offered them.

'It is not your fault, Mister Beesely,' Mosh quietly and forcefully insisted, heaving a deep sigh. 'Do not worry about it.'

Elle shook his hand. 'Shalom. Oh, think of a password phrase for your people to identify themselves to our people and vice versa.'

Beesely smiled. 'Question: who is on the shiny red tractor? Answer: Alison Star.'

Elle frowned as he walked out, considering the password.

* * *

Gypsy's did not, as a rule, have their vehicles stolen out from under them at night. But if they had witnessed the methods now being employed they might have been impressed by the ingenuity, if not the audacity.

The first vehicle was a transit van and, thankfully for the K2 men, it was now empty in the rear and parked on the edge of the green. Four long metal poles were placed underneath it, each padded with rubber. Eight men, four ex-troopers and four K2 agents, now lifted in unison, a slight creak issued from the vehicle's chassis.

Trying hard not to laugh, they plodded slowly forwards, each man straining with the weight. After fifty yards they gently laid down the vehicle, at the start of the lane and next to the rented cottage. The metal poles were removed to the rear of the cottage, the driver's window circumscribed by a glasscutter. With the door now open, an agent leant in and released the handbrake, the vehicle soon pushed silently along the lane, and destined for an isolated quarry lake some twenty miles away.

The door to an open-topped truck turned out to be unlocked, the handbrake released. With a gentle push, they edged it into

the pond, inch by inch and with no splashes, until its engine was now half submerged. With wet feet, the agents withdrew. At the edge of the green, they stopped dead and crouched, a caravan door opening.

The man emerging into the dark walked briskly to the pond's edge and unzipped, beginning his midnight constitutional before turning his head and noticing the truck. A silenced shot through the neck prevented him from crying out.

'Action! Action!' burst over the earpiece radios.

Two agents ran forwards, grabbing the body by the arms and dragging it towards the road.

'Clean up detail forwards!'

Two troopers grabbed the legs of the body, four men now carrying it down the lane. At the rear of the cottage they stopped, shoving the gypsy into a body bag.

Now there was a blood trail. And blood on agents. The cottage had been rented by phone and using false identities, but this was still a concern. With the body bag dosed in water, it was carried through the lane and to a van, the van leaving immediately.

In the lane, the last of the chemical blood neutraliser was spread on the tarmac. It covered an area of perhaps twenty yards, and reached back towards the green. The reserve bottles at Broadlands were ordered, as the majority of agents and staff got ordered out of the rented house. They moved silently down the lane, across the field and to the main road, jumping into vans that pulled off quietly without their lights on.

The senior guard stepped out of the rear of the rented cottage and into the lane, stood assessing the scene with hands on hips. He checked his watch. Three hours of darkness remained, but the first of the local farmers would be on the move an hour before that. With just two agents remaining, he waited for the chemicals, observing the caravans from a window. The camp remained silent.

Twenty minutes later, and the chemicals were being spread down the lane, followed by water thinning it out. At the point where the man had been shot, a liberal amount was spread around, more again used back along the trail. Finally, buckets of watered-down bleach swamped the rear of the rented cottage, and the lane as far as the green.

Two hours remained before dawn, two hours for the chemicals evaporate on this warm night. And the bleach would throw off any trail for police dogs to follow. The remaining agents diligently checked the cottage for any traces, wiping down surfaces.

As dawn started to break, the cameras in the hedges were duly retrieved, the cottage cleared and given a final wipe down.

The van used to transport the body was now on its way to Dover, headed for Zug with false number plates. The contaminated clothes of all the men involved were burning on a pyre at Broadlands, together with webbing and boots, all now thoroughly ablaze on the gravel driveway. The men had washed thoroughly, chemicals used under their fingernails and in their hair, fresh clothes placed on.

At dawn, an anonymous call had been made to the police, someone pretending to be a local resident complaining about the truck in the pond. Thirty minutes later, and the Gypsy's were awake. And not happy.

Shouts had roused those locals whose houses and cottages faced the green. More complaints, genuine ones, reached the police. Thirty minutes later, a full hour after the first call, a patrol car arrived.

The single remaining Gypsy vehicle was now being employed to try and tow the lorry from the pond, which seemed firmly stuck in the mud and not co-operating. The police officers tried hard not to smile as they approached.

'They stole our dogs!' a woman complained, stood in a nightdress with arms folded.

'Stole your dogs, madam?' the first officer repeated.

‘The villagers,’ she pressed.

The officer’s eyes widened. ‘The villagers? They stole those mangy mutts were saw yesterday, the one’s you said you’d set on us? Those mangy mutts?’

‘And a van!’ she added.

‘And was it ... *your* van?’ the second officer asked.

She gave them a colourful and imaginative mouthful before storming off. Getting nowhere with the Gypsies, the officers accepted tea and toast from a villager, a retired police officer, before heading back.

2

‘Did you see that?’ the first American patrol officer asked, jerking upright in his seat.

His partner in the squad car snapped his head around. ‘No, what is it?’

‘That looked like a kid driving that hire Lexus.’ He started the patrol car, eased out onto the Jersey highway and put on his lights. A minute later they had closed the gap.

‘Christ, that kid can barely see over the wheel!’

‘That kid is bald!’

The Lexus slowed, indicated, and pulled over onto a grass verge, both sides of this road heavily wooded. The officers gathered their equipment and ticket-pads, and stepped out. Herr Mole wound down the window and looked up through his thick glasses as the officer peered in.

‘Oh,’ the officer stumbled. Then he noticed the cushions that Mole now sat on.

‘Uh, is this your vehicle, sir?’

‘No.’

The officer frowned slightly. ‘Did you hire it?’

‘Yah. At zer airport.’

‘Do ... you ... have ... some ... identification?’ the officer asked, his words slow and carefully pronounced.

Herr Mole showed the officer his passport. The man thumbed through it lazily, realising he was wasting his time. 'Where ... are ... you ... going?'

'Johnz-townz.'

The officer pointed ahead, before noticing a large sign for Johnstown. He handed back Mole's passport. 'Thank you, sir.' He rolled his eyes and walked back to his patrol car.

* * *

A new dawn over the hills greeted Johnno at the drawbridge. He placed a cigarette on his lip as he took in the calm lake, took a final drag as a Range Rover pulled up, and then threw away the cigarette stub. The reaction squad jumped down, stretching. 'Anything?' he quietly asked.

'Nope, not a sausage,' the first trooper said.

'You sound disappointed.'

'Kev got a quarter million.'

'Don't you start, we don't pay out when you get killed!' Johnno pointed out. The squad assembled. 'Right,' Johnno began, summoning some energy. 'Food, shower, kit back on, eight hours sleep - in your kit, weapons never more than arms distance.'

'OK, Boss,' they yawned.

'Where's the bird on the tractor?' a trooper sarcastically called.

'In the Maldives on a bloody photo shoot,' Johnno informed them.

'And here you are, just us to look at.' They laughed.

'Fuck ... right ... off!'

* * *

Otto appeared in the doorway to Beesely's office. 'Yes?'

'Come, come. Sit.'

Otto sat, looking as fresh and as immaculate as normal.

‘Right, there are some French investment managers on their way here -’

‘French?’

Beesely glanced at the doorway. ‘Mossad,’ he whispered. Then louder, ‘They are going to help with my master plan.’

Otto squinted, concerned. ‘Master ... plan?’

‘I am taking a leaf out of Gunter’s book!’

Otto stopped dead and mocked surprise. ‘I hope not.’

‘Not everything he did was ... you know, unpleasant. Do we have sleeper agents in pharmaceutical companies around the world?’

‘Some, yes.’

Beesely tapped the table. ‘I want a list of companies. I also want a room set up somewhere for command and control of investment operations.’

Otto’s brow slowly knitted. ‘What do you have planned?’

‘We are going to buy controlling shares in drug companies, and biological research companies and the like.’

‘Why?’ Otto pressed.

‘So that we can dictate what projects they work on, of course. I have the Jewish investment community on board, probably a few others. Oh, get hold of the Society, tell them *big ... big ... big* investment opportunity and to send some representatives, we need to co-ordinate carefully and move quickly. And you, my boy, need to be fresh when the US markets open, which is when?’

‘About 5pm our time,’ Otto stated as he stood. ‘With all these groups trading in a co-ordinated fashion, the American Securities Exchange may investigate us.’

‘Which is why we need to trade on that ... whatsit small thing?’

‘Public trading area.’

‘And carefully. Thankfully, my man Otto is a genius at these things.’ Otto cracked a smile. ‘No bullets today, Otto. We are

fighting the CIA the one way that they will respect. With money!'

War without bullets

1

Susan and Patrick wheeled in Dame Helen as Otto walked out, exchanging greetings.

Beesely stood up to welcome them. 'How did you sleep?'

'Fine,' Susan replied. 'Like a five star hotel up there, room service and all!'

'Good, good. Helen, are you OK?'

'Fine, but it's not so easy to sleep with the leg. When I turn over it wakes me.'

'Anything you need?'

'No,' Dame Helen firmly answered. 'We've had breakfast and now we're ready to press on. No *visitors* during the night?'

'No live ones, at least. Sorry about the noise, but our boys spotted a dead body in the water and thought it a diver, and shot it up.'

'What are those things in the ceilings everywhere?' Susan asked, wheeling Dame Helen nearer to the white boards.

'They detect nerve gas or chemical weapons,' Beesely informed them.

Patrick closed in on his wife. 'You had to ask!'

'Any news?' Dame Helen enquired without looking around.

'You can cross Mr. Glass off the list, there is no piece of him left bigger than would fit in a shoe box.'

Patrick ran a red line through his name, Dame Helen glancing over her shoulder, a reproachful glare at Beesely.

'Anyway,' Beesely called, 'the big show kicks off around 5pm.'

'Big show?' Susan asked, concerned.

'We ... are going to screw with the Dow Jones index,' he proudly proclaimed. Dame Helen wheeled herself around, a questioning look, Beesely announcing, 'We are going to be

fighting with money and sleight of hand today, not bullets. Have a rest before the big show, it will go on until ... well, eight hours after 5pm I guess.'

'I have friends in the City,' Dame Helen offered. 'Large UK finance houses sometimes get tip-offs from us.'

'Tut ... tut ... tut. You're as bad as K2. But warn them something big, big, big is going down later. Are they any good at spreading rumours, perchance?'

She glanced at Susan and Patrick. 'You might think that, I couldn't possibly comment. Besides, these two may arrest us.'

Susan stepped to the desk. 'I want a new washing machine, a conservatory, and a new car,' she counted out on her fingers.

Beesely smiled, turning to make direct eye contact with Dame Helen. 'I doubled the amount in that secret retirement fund of yours. It's for Susan and the family.'

Dame Helen nodded. 'We need to be very careful; Met' cops with large amounts of cash would attract attention.' She glanced at Beesely from under her eyebrows, then addressed Susan. 'But we have a way of you *winning* it in a competition.'

Beesely laughed as several large TV sets were wheeled in and lined up. 'What are these for?' he asked.

'They will have real time information about American stocks, sir.'

'Ah, excellent. We can watch the show from here.'

'Beesely,' Dame Helen called. 'I've been doing some thinking, and I made a few calls last night.'

'Oh?' He walked around and sat on the edge of the desk.

She continued, 'As far as I know, any complex Signature DNA virus cannot, yet, be released into the air, it has to be direct - close quarters, or blood to blood. So, how are they going to infect a large population?'

'Good point, unless they have found a way to spray it around.'

‘I’m reasonably sure they can’t. This Sickle Cell sample test - it’s a series of big needles. So how do you inject a population without them knowing about it?’

‘Jabs!’ Susan suggested.

‘What?’ Beesely asked, turning to her.

‘Yes, she’s right,’ Dame Helen agreed. ‘W.H.O!’

‘W.H.O?’ Beesely repeated with a slight frown. ‘The World Health Organization?’

‘Tamper with their jabs,’ Dame Helen suggested. ‘They spend a lot of time in the Middle East giving kids jabs. And where do the jabs come from?’

It was a leading question, Beesely straightening. ‘UN, New York, bought in bulk from Western pharmaceutical companies.’ He walked around his desk and tapped the phone. ‘I want the scientists to factor in the World Health Organization, assuming that batches of immunisation jabs might be tainted. I want to know how and where they are produced, where they go, who ships them and how. And quickly.’

‘Sir,’ buzzed from his phone. ‘A woman visitor just slapped Herr Johno in the courtyard.’

‘Why do people always say that as if they are surprised?’ he asked the room in general and no one in particular. He pressed a button. ‘Are these visitors French Investment Managers perchance?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Send them down here to me.’ He pressed END and sat back.

‘Who are they?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘The cavalry,’ Beesely announced with a broad smile. Then, directly at Dame Helen, he said, ‘International Congress.’ He winked.

‘Oh,’ she said.

Two attractive ladies in smart blue suits stepped in, followed by two male colleagues.

‘Welcome. Please, do come in.’ Beesely then gestured towards seats, then pressed his phone. ‘Fresh tea, French coffee and bagels, please.’

They pulled up seats as Johno wandered in, immediately being scowled at by the ladies, shot dirty looks by the men. Johno smiled a confident, flirty smile down at the woman who had just slapped him.

‘I see you have met my gardener,’ Beesely said, tipping his head towards Johno. ‘He drives the tractor.’

‘Gardener?’ the woman repeated in a thick French accent, studying Johno. ‘Pah!’ she spat out. Susan closed in and folded her arms, staring at Johno.

Johno gave the attractive French lady a deliberate Gallic shrug, grinning. ‘What? All I said was - *yeah baby*.’

Faster than anyone would have anticipated, the French lady had his wrist from her seated position, standing quickly, Johno over the desk and a moment later, his face down into Beesely’s papers.

From where he sat, Beesely casually eased forwards, put one hand on the desk, the other hand on top, lowered his head and put his chin on his hands, his face close to Johno’s. ‘Does that hurt?’ he enquired in a whisper.

‘Yeah,’ Johno coughed out in a forced whisper.

‘Is that your bad shoulder, or the good one?’

‘The bad one,’ he strained to get out.

Otto walked in, stood with his hands clasped behind his back.

Beesely added, ‘So, it must hurt a tad then?’

‘Yeah, some help would be appreciated.’

‘Really?’ Beesely sat upright. ‘He wants some help. Let’s vote on it. Patrick?’ No response came. ‘Susan?’ Again no response, or assistance, was offered. ‘Helen?’ Nothing. ‘Otto?’

‘I think he looks comfortable,’ Otto suggested.

Thomas walked in and stood next to Beesely. The situation was explained to him, Thomas voting in favour of Johno.

‘It would appear that Thomas wants us to help you. And it would not be seemly for you to struggle against a mere slip of a girl with him watching.’

Johno made eye contact with Thomas, then eased up and straightened. The woman tried her best to continue to twist Johno’s arm, using all of her strength, but Johno just smiled back at her. He eased his arm up and righted it, despite her best efforts. Shocked, she let go and stood back.

Beesely explained, ‘Young lady, he could kill you with a single blow - he is playing with you. Johno, sit.’

‘Johno?’ the lady repeated, shocked. Her colleagues glanced at each other.

‘Yes, young lady. Johno, be so kind as to take off your shirt, please.’

Johno shrugged before unbuttoning his shirt, easing it off as he maintained eye contact with the woman who had pinned him down. Dame Helen winced, as did Patrick, Susan straightening and grimacing. The French were equally shocked.

‘OK, Johno, let’s not put our guests off their lunch.’

Johno started to dress as Thomas, impressed, stood next to him with his arms folded.

Beesely addressed the French delegation. ‘Welcome to Schloss Diane, and to K2.’ He repeated it in French.

‘Your security is quite the surprise,’ the same woman said, heavily accented.

‘We have a lot of problems, to quote a well used phrase.’ He gestured towards Otto. ‘This is Herr Otto, my number two, and an expert banker and stock trader professional.’ They nodded towards him. Turning the opposite way, Beesely gestured towards Dame Helen, ‘This is Dame Helen, the Director of British Intelligence.’ That shocked them. Finally, gesturing towards Susan and Patrick, he said, ‘And these are part of the ... personal bodyguard for Dame Helen - English Special Branch.’

Fresh tea and coffee was brought in, interrupting proceedings.

Beesely turned to Otto. 'Do we have a trading area set up?'

'Yes, there is a trading link in the office block. It is fully equipped.'

'Good, good.' He returned to the French. 'Do you know why you are here?'

'Yes,' came collectively back.

'And you have links set up to the States?' They nodded. 'We will start around 5pm Central European Time. Before then, start to slowly off-load shares in the companies we are interested in, small deals and very discreet.' He made eye contact with Otto. 'That goes for *our* bank as well, and our ... *friends*. Bet on the drug stocks falling with those —' he glanced at his notes, squinting. '- stock options. *Puts*?'

The French took notes before starting on their coffee and bagels.

'Right,' Beesely began as everyone else sat. 'This is the plan, although all of it cannot be discussed openly, nor some of the reasons behind it.'

He addressed the French directly. 'If you have any questions or doubts, you will have to talk to those who requested your presence here. OK, we are going to be *off-loading* drug stocks, plus stock in those companies that we are interested in. Then we are going to put out rumours about over-stocked drugs and a price crash, plus rumours of investigations into various drug trials.

'Then we are going to try and force down the Dow Jones through problems with the drug sector. After which, when we are ready, we will reverse strongly - using the small public trading area - and try and take them by surprise, collecting as many shares as we can in certain companies. And it should all be great fun. Any questions?'

The French seemed confident.

'OK,' Beesely began. 'Otto will take you to your office. Please, ask for anything you need.' Beesely stood as the French placed down their half-drunk coffees and followed Otto out.

‘Sir,’ buzzed from his phone.

‘Yes?’

‘There are three representatives from the Society here.’

‘Send them to Otto in the stock trading room.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘I should call the Prime Minister,’ Dame Helen suggested. ‘If this gets out of hand there’ll be tough questions in the morning.’

‘Then perhaps,’ Beesely began, ‘we should wait until the morning before we tell him. He needs plausible deniability, as they say.’

She shrugged.

‘I’m still a bit confused,’ Susan said, grabbing a tea.

Johno eased up off the cabinet. ‘It’s simple really. We use our friends in low places to cause the stock market to crash, then we buy shares in the companies involved in the dodgy research, then we send our own people in to make sure they do as we say from now on.’

Beesely sat back and folded his arms. ‘Not as stupid as you look, are you?’

Johno took a biscuit. ‘Good job she got the bad arm.’

‘I know.’ Beesely turned to Susan. ‘He was shot in that shoulder, not too much feeling.’

‘I’ll remember that,’ she threatened.

Dame Helen wheeled herself closer. ‘You do realise, that with control of these companies and the supply chain, there’s no need to track down the bad guys. They can’t produce enough for it to be effective.’

Beesely took a breath and stopped smiling, ‘True. But, my dear Helen, you should have realised by now that K2 has a reputation to maintain: screw with us, and you die a horrible death. And besides, they killed a friend of mine - rammed another one off the road.’ He made strong eye contact. ‘So they pay.’

She turned away quickly and went back to the boards.

The TV screens flickered with alternating red and green squares, abbreviations of US public companies listed on the Dow Jones Index. Pre-opening trading did take place, those that controlled the markets, the ‘market makers’, marking down some stocks at a lower price before normal trading started. One screen detailed the index itself broken into five-minute segments, a third would show a graph of movements minute by minute.

All drug stocks had opened down, thanks to Beesely’s group selling on the European markets, and the start of the rumours. People were *off-loading*.

‘What is ‘the spread’?’ Beesely asked Otto.

‘It is the market maker’s commission, how they make money. You buy at ten dollars, sell back to them at eight dollars - the same as currency conversion at the airport. The two dollars is the spread. When the markets are volatile the spread increases.’

‘And before that you would sell options?’

‘Not really. If you are a market-maker, then you would want to sell options when the markets are volatile, hoping they become less volatile. When the markets are volatile the options are more expensive than when things are quiet.’

‘Are we doing that today?’

‘No, this is a short-term exercise. We have taken large bets on the drug stocks falling, all around the world. We have also off-loaded much of our drug stocks with institutional dealers who do not suspect.’

‘Ah, done outside of the markets, yes?’

Otto nodded. ‘Yes, done yesterday, listed on the markets today.’

‘What’s that?’ Beesely asked, pointing at a screen.

‘It has opened down fifty points, drugs stocks tumbling.’ Otto took a closer look, running an expert eye over many figures.

Dame Helen wheeled herself closer, Susan and Patrick stuck to the boards, Mike remaining with the children.

Otto turned. 'We, and our partners, will not get the chance to off-load as much as we had hoped for. Someone has been greedy and bet heavily on a falling market. That probably worried the market-makers, so *they* are off-loading.'

Beesely pressed a button. 'Tell all our people to off-load as best as they can.'

'Yes, sir.'

He sat back and watched the boards. 'Is it a big problem?'

'No, the drug stocks were low recently, so keeping the stocks is not so bad. The aim is to get more than five percent in as many companies as we can, through stealth.'

The screens turned red, almost everything red.

'Christ, they are *all* bleeding red!' Beesely pointed out.

'Large basket trades,' Otto suggested.

'Basket trades?'

'When futures and options are traded, they relate to baskets of shares in the markets, in the proportions of the sizes of the companies. If you buy a *future*, you are buying all the underlying stocks in their size proportions. The option and future is simpler than buying all the stocks.'

'Fascinating!'

'It is all automated,' Otto explained before he answered his phone. Putting it away, he turned back to the screens. 'We have arranged for some serious rumours to start in thirty minutes. Coordinating them will be ... impossible.'

Beesely pressed a button. 'Tell all our people that rumours start in half an hour!' He sipped his coffee.

Dame Helen turned. 'I can't predict when my lot will start the rumours. It could be anytime.'

Otto turned to her. 'The British acted too quickly. They bet heavily before the fall.'

'Does that help or hinder us?' she asked.

'It helps the second stage, not the first,' Otto explained.

Fifteen minutes passed.

‘A lot of those are blue ones?’ Beesely queried.

‘Not drug stocks, they are down fifteen percent on average. But there is good trading in the oil stocks.’

‘What can we do about that?’ Beesely asked.

Otto turned and faced Dame Helen, his arms folded. ‘Rumours?’

‘Reuters,’ she said. ‘You have people?’

Otto nodded. He raised his phone, ‘I want Reuters to report ... Americans and UN agreed to treble, rather than double, Iraqi oil output.’

‘That will hurt,’ Dame Helen suggested, clearly worried.

‘Hurt who?’ Beesely asked.

‘Your friends in Reuters for one,’ she suggested. ‘As well as anyone not paying attention today.’

Beesely pressed a button. ‘Tell all our friends to expect a crash in oil.’

‘Dip ... in oil,’ Otto corrected.

They waited.

‘Christ, you see that?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘It is happening,’ Otto informed her.

Beesely walked up to a screen, watching the graph plummet. ‘How significant was that?’

‘The Dow Jones just dipped seventy-five points in a moment. That is rare,’ Otto explained.

‘How long will it be before the White House and the UN deny the rumours?’ Beesely asked.

‘Perhaps only a few hours,’ Otto suggested.

‘How can *we* know first?’ Beesely asked.

Otto gave it some thought. ‘Any unscheduled press announcement by the White House or the UN would be this news.’

Beesely walked back to his desk and pressed a button. ‘I want to be warned of any press conferences by the White House or the UN.’

Johno walked in. 'Got the game on?'

'It's started,' Beesely informed him without taking his eyes off the plummeting chart. He pointed at it.

'Ouch. But are we winning?' Johno enquired.

'Yes,' Otto flatly answered, studying the screens. 'You know, I miss doing this.'

'What?' Johno asked. 'Going off getting shot at, are we?'

Otto smiled back at him. 'My life before ... it seems so different. So quiet.'

Patrick and Susan had closed in, watching the screens, mesmerized along with everyone else.

* * *

An hour later the Dow had fallen more than two hundred points.

'Sir?' buzzed from Beesely's phone.

'Yes?'

'There is a joint statement from the White House and UN in ten minutes.'

'Warn everyone that oil will recover.'

'Yes, sir.'

He stood and approached Otto quickly. 'How low are the drug stocks?'

'They have lost eighteen percent, but slowing.'

'OK, take profits on the down bets now.' He rushed to his phone, as Otto raised his. Beesely pressed CALL. 'Tell everyone that drug stocks will be slowing their rate of fall. And to be ready.'

'It is happening much quicker than expected,' Otto warned from across the room, his phone to his ear.

'What is? The reversal?' Beesely enquired.

'No, the whole thing,' Otto explained. 'I had hoped that the stocks would fall for more hours yet.'

'Have they fallen enough to help us?' Helen asked.

‘Yes, it is a good price, which was low to start with,’ Otto answered her.

Johno stepped forwards. ‘Can we now bet on the drug stocks rising?’

‘My next call, and simply a matter of timing.’ Otto issued orders into the phone.

‘Getting it back up is always a matter of timing,’ Johno said directly toward Helen. She offered him a disapproving look, and turned away.

The press conference was keenly watched, a complete denial made by the White House. Oil stocks recovered quickly.

Beesely pressed a phone button. ‘OK, tell everyone to buy drug stocks. Maximum effort.’

Johno approached the white boards at the far end, away from the action. He glanced through aircraft passenger lists, stopping and frowning at one. He was about to walk away when he stopped and turned. ‘Dame Helen? Do you mind?’ he called over to her.

Susan turned, wheeling Helen across. Johno held his finger on a passenger that flew back from the States with Mr. Glass and friends, in fact, in the seat behind them.

‘Could be just someone with the same name,’ she said, squinting.

‘And if it isn’t?’ Johno quietly pressed. She elevated her gaze, suddenly horrified. Johno added, ‘Adds a whole new dimension as to *who* rammed you off the road, and why!’

Susan looked at the name. ‘Who is that?’

‘The head of MI5.’ Johno turned. ‘Beesely!’ he shouted, Beesely and Otto spinning around. ‘Someone with the same name as the head of MI5 is linked in!’

Dame Helen tapped Johno’s leg. ‘Give me your phone.’ He handed it over. ‘This is Dame Helen, I want to connect to my office, to Willis.’ She waited. ‘Willis, find out quickly if Rawlins took a flight to the US last week.’

‘Hold on,’ Willis requested.

They waited, Dame Helen's hand trembling. Johno reached down and held it, Helen looking up and making eye contact with him.

'Helen, you there?' Willis called.

'Yes,' she replied, her voice now breaking.

'Apparently, he was supposed to be in Canada, family thing for a few days.'

'What day to what day?' she asked.

'Flew back in via New York last Wednesday, 15th July.'

She glanced at the board and burst into tears.

Beesely moved quickly. 'Susan, Patrick, take her to her room, get the doctor!' he ordered, grabbing Johno's phone. 'Willis?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Not a word of this to anyone!' he barked. 'Understand?'

'Yes, sir.'

He hung up and walked briskly to his desk. Sitting, he tapped his own phone. 'Get me Rawlins, head of MI5, London.'

'What are you doing?' Johno complained. 'We should grab him!'

'Wait!' Beesely snapped, Otto moving closer so that he could listen in.

'Rawlins here.'

'This is Sir Morris Beesely.'

'How are you?' came a casual, rather unfriendly tone.

'Fine, fine.'

'And how can I help *you*, exactly?'

'You can shed some light on your movements last week. Canada, was it?'

Rawlins paused. 'Why would you be interested in my movements, Sir Morris?'

'Do you still like to play on-line gambling?'

Another pause. 'What are you getting at?'

‘Seems that, unfortunately for you, some of the anonymous players you have been playing against are well known international terrorists and criminals.’

‘You ... bastard!’

‘Quite. And it takes one to know one.’

Rawlins paused again. Softly, he asked, ‘What are you after?’

‘The truth, because right now you are in the frame for murder.’

‘Murder? What are you saying?’ Rawlins shrieked.

‘You flew back from New York last week, 15th wasn’t it?’

‘Yes, connection from Quebec. What of it?’

‘The two men who sat in front of you –’

‘Yes, I knew them, they’re US Defense Department. What of it?’

‘*They* ... are the some of same chaps that rammed Dame Helen off the road, killing her daughter. You see where that leaves you, Mister Rawlins?’

Another long pause preceded, ‘I was *not* involved in that!’

‘You have ten seconds to explain those gentlemen before I call the Prime Minister.’

‘We’re helping them, a joint project,’ Rawlins hurriedly explained.

‘What kind of project, exactly?’ Beesely demanded.

‘Secret stem cell research in the UK, stuff they can’t do in the States.’

‘Rawlins, you bleeding idiot –’

‘What? What is it?’

‘It’s not stem cell research, it’s bio-weapons. And they are not official US Government, they are selling it to the Russians - one Boris Luchenkov.’

‘What?’ Rawlins screamed.

‘Save yourself a long jail term, Rawlins. Pull out all the stops, and send me everything you know. They played you for a fool, which does not seem so hard to do.’

‘I had an official request from DTI and the Defence Minister!’

‘Who were duped as well. I expect the files by tomorrow.’ He hung up and sat back, running a hand over his bald scalp.

‘You believe him?’ Johno asked.

‘Yes, it would be easy enough to get State Department requests to help them with stem cell stuff - it’s no longer allowed in the US, been dodgy for a few years. Besides, by all accounts this *is* stem cell research - it’s just the end use that’s in question.’ He faced Otto. ‘I want all UK companies involved in stem cell research. Add them quickly to the list to buy into.’

Otto lifted his phone, returning to scan the screens.

Beesely stood. ‘I need to pop upstairs for five minutes.’

After the knock, Susan opened the door for Beesely. He glanced in hesitantly before stepping inside. Sitting on the bed next to Dame Helen, he held her hand as Mike paced up and down, his arms folded.

‘It was not Rawlins.’ She did not respond. Beesely continued, ‘He had official requests for stem cell research on the quiet, he helped them out. It now looks like they duped him, as well as our Government.’

‘Get back to it,’ she whispered, turning away and closing her eyes.

‘How is Helen?’ Otto enquired upon Beesely’s return.

‘She was recovering well, but that was a bit of a shock. She’ll be OK tomorrow.’

Patrick walked in. ‘Back to work.’

‘You ordered out?’ Johno asked. Patrick nodded, returning to the boards.

Beesely glanced at the TV screens and sighed. ‘How are we doing?’

‘Drug stocks are stable, we are *accumulating*,’ Otto indicated.

‘That’s a stock market term,’ Beesely stated. He read his notes. ‘High volume trading when the price is not moving. Yes?’

Otto smiled. ‘You are learning.’

‘How much do we have?’

‘A quarter of what we might need to get control of twenty two smaller companies.’

‘Sounds as if we’re a long way away from what we need?’ Beesely grumbled.

‘The Society is helping, and they make us look as the small fly,’ Otto offered.

‘Small *fly*,’ Beesely corrected him, smiling. ‘How does that help?’

‘Tomorrow we will meet, and they will assign the voting rights of their stock to us, giving us control.’

Beesely was mildly shocked. ‘They’ll be happy to trust us?’

‘They have nothing to worry about; we do not have access to their money or shares, only control of the projects and the boardroom.’

‘Ah, right.’ Whispering, Beesely said, ‘And then there’s the French group.’

‘It would make sense if we assign our rights to them,’ Otto suggested.

‘Really? Why?’

‘They have American links, so our involvement will not cause problems. Foreign companies are not allowed to control certain technology companies in the US.’

‘Ah, yes. Good idea. Any clue as to figures?’

‘None. We would have to talk with the Society tomorrow, when all transactions are settled.’

Beesely sat down, taking out his chocolate.

‘You need a kip?’ Johno asked.

‘Not yet, I had one earlier.’

‘Sir,’ buzzed from his phone.

‘Yes.’

‘One of the men we are interested in has used his credit card in Germany.’

‘Grab him, bring him here. Several teams, be discreet.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Lucky break,’ Johno muttered.

Beesely tipped his head. ‘Did they not all fly back to the States?’

‘Snuck back in?’ Johno queried.

‘Suspicious.’ Beesely pressed his phone again. ‘That man in Germany, I want discreet distance observation only. Tag him with trackers and bug him. Do not kidnap him, OK?’

‘What you thinking?’ Johno pressed. ‘That he’ll lead us to others?’

‘No, I’m thinking it smells too much like bait. He’s out of the country, like that other one, Glass, yet his credit card is here.’

‘Maybe someone nicked his credit card, using it for child porn.’

Beesely grimaced. ‘Child porn?’

‘That’s what most perverts do, they use a nicked credit card to access the dodgy sites, instead of their own credit card.’

‘Really?’ Beesely stared ahead. ‘Otto.’ Otto stepped closer. ‘We have the credit card details of the American and the Canadian men who were involved? Enough to sign them up for porn sites?’

‘Yes, we have access to the card clearing companies that the airlines use.’

‘Right, sign them all up to several of the worst porn sites.’ With a curious frown, Otto lifted his phone. Beesely added, ‘There’re supposed to be some certain sites that the FBI watches. I read about it. Do we know them?’ Otto shook his head. ‘OK, sign them up for *numerous* sites.’

‘What’ll that achieve?’ Johno asked. ‘Other than pissing them off, *and* getting them divorced.’

Beesely grinned. ‘When you figure it out, get win a cookie.’

The Gypsy's lorry had, eventually, been freed from the pond, and the engine re-started after several hours of hard work. Now it was being driven along an 'A' road some ten miles from Church Fenton. Beside it a Range Rover tried to overtake.

As the Range Rover pulled alongside, a cooler in the rear was opened, a specially loaded magazine quickly slapped into an M4. The weapon was cocked as the lorry cabin drew near, the lorry driver's window open just a crack.

As the Gypsy driver turned his head, the first round hit his window, a specially fashioned hard plastic that shattered the window, but that also shattered itself – now in a hundred fragments back along the road. The second round was frozen sugar crystal, hitting the driver in the neck and puncturing his aorta. Third and fourth rounds, also sugar crystal, were quickly fired into the face of the passenger, one penetrating his eye.

The Range Rover's brakes were hit hard, the lorry speeding onwards for several seconds before veering off to the right and into a ditch, hitting a tree. Both driver and passenger, not wearing seatbelts, went through the windscreen. The Range Rover drove on.

The shooter turned his head to the agent in the rear. 'The sugar crystal is hardest when frozen. Now it will dissolve quickly in the blood of the men. And if a sugar round hit something other than flesh it would shatter into a million pieces. In the blood of these men it will look like they had a can of that Red Bull drink, that's all. No coroner has ever found it yet.'

* * *

'This is odd,' Bambitou's assistant reported, flicking her hair over her shoulder.

'What?' Bambitou asked.

Ms Tracey explained, ‘That dead CIA agent, he just signed up for some of the child porn sites we monitor,’ she said with a frown. They both stared at the computer screen.

‘Someone steal his card?’

‘No, I saw it listed in evidence. But this is the same card.’

‘They order a pizza with it?’

She looked up, a scowl evident. ‘No.’

‘So not cops then!’ he joked.

‘I’ve tracked back the IP address. It’s one of those dead-end addresses, somewhere in Europe.’

‘So, his buddies in the European branch of the CIA are having a joke at his expense.’

‘Oh.’ Flashing on her screen caught her attention.

‘What?’

She opened a new window. ‘The same card just opened accounts on two-dozen more sites. It was done from the same IP address, untraceable.’

‘Someone likes their kiddy porn,’ Bambitou stated.

‘This is odd. The same IP address just opened up dozens more accounts, on other credit cards.’

‘Busy puppies!’

She studied the screen. ‘You know what, I think you’re going to owe me several large and expensive dinners,’ she confidently announced, a cheeky wink at him.

‘What you done?’ He glanced at the screen, then back to her smile.

‘One of the names of the other credit cards, he sat next to our stiff, Mr. Glass, on a flight recently. Someone is giving us them on a plate.’

‘Slow down, honey. Say that again in English.’

‘Dead CIA man, and his buddies, are all being signed up for porn sites, knowing that we would be watching and could cross match.’

Bambitou stood, looking deadly serious. ‘Honey, speculate, you’re good at that.’

She made a face. ‘They are all up to no good, and someone wants to bring that to our attention.’

‘Who else is going to see that?’ he asked, pointing at the screen.

‘CIA, NSA.’

‘There goes the neighbourhood. Never mind.’

‘Oh ... my ... God.’ She looked up, suddenly horrified. ‘These men, they were all in Switzerland when that thing was happening!’

Bambitou dropped his coffee. Looking out of their New York window, he said, ‘From now on, Ms Tracey, I won’t call you Dick.’

Bambitou walked into the New York director’s office, suddenly stopped in his tracks by the two DOD men.

Director Chambers appeared harassed. ‘Bambitou, come on in, we were just ... discussing the case.’

Bambitou sat, before shocking his boss by putting his feet up on the desk. He took out his revolver and placed it down onto the desk, to the curious observation of his superior.

Chambers stared at the feet, the revolver, then Bambitou’s expression. ‘Special Agent Bambitou?’ His subordinate folded his arms and stared at the two D.O.D. men. ‘Bambitou?’ Chambers repeated, more surprised than annoyed.

Bambitou began, ‘I just had a look at the computer. I pulled out a list of six names, the Canadian gentleman I ignored. Do the names Phillips, Welt, Preston, Schooner and Daley mean anything to you?’

The D.O.D. men glanced at each other, offering stern faces for Bambitou. ‘We cannot discuss government operatives.’

Bambitou pointed at them. ‘You know ... you really, really should not have said that. You should have denied all knowledge of these men.’

‘Bambitou, what is this about? And why the hell are your shoes on my desk?’ Chambers was getting louder.

Bambitou turned his head to his boss. 'Our hotel stiff, sliced and diced - CIA by these gentlemen's admission - is linked to six other men of a similar ... *persuasion*. What they have in common are two things, besides their persuasion. One, they flew to Switzerland or Europe the day before that bank robbery thing, flew back the day after. Two, they all had large sums of money deposited into their accounts upon their return.'

Chambers' jaw dropped. He and Bambitou turned back to the two DOD men, who were now less than sure of themselves. Chambers pressed a button on his phone. 'Send in four agents. Armed.'

Bambitou picked up his revolver and let down his feet. 'Gentlemen, you are under arrest for ... conspiracy to conceal grand international robbery.'

4

Johno wandered back into Beesely's office and glanced at the boards. Approaching Beesely's desk, he said, 'Herr Mole just rang, he took a call whilst Stateside from that Russian. There've been four explosions in Luchenkov's businesses and houses, lots dead, this Boris fella stabbed in prison, but apparently still alive.'

Otto stepped nearer. 'We paid Vladimir. He's attacking Luchenkov,' he explained.

Beesely considered it. 'Keep the pressure up on him; we want all of Luchenkov's infrastructure smashed.' He stood and looked towards the animated TV screens. 'How's it going?'

'Like a yo-yo,' Otto carefully pronounced.

'We making any money?' Johno asked.

'Yes, a great deal,' Otto replied. 'And we now have as much of the drug shares as I believe we will need.'

'How much longer is it, you know, the Dow ... operating?' Beesely asked.

‘Open,’ Otto corrected. ‘It will be *open* for another three hours.’

‘Where is it now?’ Beesely pressed.

‘It has recovered everything it has lost. It will be reported as a *one-day shakeout*, and there will be some difficult questions asked.’

Beesely gave a quick, pained expression. ‘Will Swiss banking laws protect us?’

‘Yes, I think so. We will say that we were acting for others.’

Susan wheeled in Dame Helen, Beesely immediately walking around to her. ‘Are you OK?’

‘Fine,’ she snapped, clearly irritated. ‘How goes the war?’

‘Good. I think we got everything we wanted. And we made a little money as well.’ He asked Otto a question with his expression.

‘Perhaps ... two hundred million dollars.’

‘Bloody hell!’ Susan let out.

‘Sir,’ buzzed from his phone.

‘Yes,’ Johno said, pressing a button as he sat on the side of the desk.

‘The American Ambassador, sir.’

‘Tell him Beesely is washing his hair.’ He hung up.

Beesely turned back to Dame Helen.

‘I’m fine,’ she quietly insisted, coughing. ‘Fight the good fight, eh?’ She did not seem convinced by her own words.

‘And we’re winning,’ Beesely enthused, adding, ‘Slowly.’

‘Any strawberries?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘That’s more like it,’ Susan approved. She turned to Beesely, ‘Spoil us with some nice food.’

Johno pressed the phone. ‘We want strawberries, ice cream, and an assortment of milkshakes, plus local chocolate and cake.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Good boy,’ Susan sarcastically offered. ‘Did you learn to use the phone in the Army?’

Otto answered his phone, facing away from them. ‘He is washing his hair.’ He hung up and turned back around. ‘The Americans are very keen to talk with you.’

‘Really,’ Johno began, frowning heavily and shaking his head. ‘Can’t think why?’

Beesely turned to Otto. ‘Are we in trouble with those stock market regulators?’

‘The Securities Exchange,’ Otto informed him. ‘And no, I do not believe so. It would take a week to find out exactly what happened.’

‘Still, we should shut it down,’ Beesely suggested, clearly concerned.

Johno pressed the phone. ‘Tell all our stock market friends that we are *out of the game*.’ He hung up.

‘Sir?’ buzzed back from the phone.

‘Christ!’ Johno quietly let out. ‘Yes?’

‘Minister Blaum for Herr Beesely.’

‘OK.’ Johno eased up off the desk as Beesely walked back around and sat.

He pressed a button. ‘Minister Blaum?’

‘Beesely, what on earth is going on?’

Beesely winced and glanced at Otto. Otto returned a neutral expression, as usual. ‘Going on?’

‘I just had the American President on the phone!’

Beesely glanced around the faces.

‘Now we’re in the shit,’ Johno quietly suggested. ‘He wants his money back.’

‘Minister Blaum, what did the President want?’

‘He wanted to convey to you of his best wishes ... and that he assures you that he will investigate the attack on your bank with vigour and get to the bottom of it. He wants you to call him.’

Johno turned to Susan. ‘Slap me.’ She did. Hard. ‘Nope, it still feels like the Twilight Zone.’

The group stared at each other. Beesely held up his open palms in a question.

Blaum added, 'Beesely, he is offering compensation for you.'

Otto's jaw dropped.

Beesely finally said, 'That's good to know. I'll ... get back to you.' He hung up. Silence claimed the room for many seconds.

'Sir,' buzzed from his phone.

'Yes?'

'Mister Rawlins, MI5.'

Beesely glanced at Dame Helen. 'Put him through.'

'Beesely?'

'Yes?'

'I just had a long and difficult conversation with the Prime Minister.'

'And?'

'He's very annoyed at being duped by the Americans, there's a discreet top-level enquiry under way, all known projects cancelled. We're launching our own enquiry.'

'That's good to know, Mister Rawlins.'

'Listen well, Beesely. My loyalty to my country is not in doubt. I'm on your side and a potential ally, under the right circumstances. I don't approve of organizations like yours running outside of the law, but I respect what you've done. Don't make the mistake of thinking I'm on the opposing team.' He hung up abruptly.

Beesely eased back into his chair, quizzing Dame Helen with his look.

She quietly let out, 'I guess he's not such an arsehole after all.'

Johno stepped closer. 'We never did stitch him up.'

'No?' Beesely asked with a concerned look. 'You mean, I was bluffing him?'

Johno laughed as the requested food appeared.

'Sir?' buzzed from his phone.

‘God, what now?’ Beesely asked, irritated.

‘Sir, David from The Lodge.’

Calmer, he said, ‘OK, Put him through.’

‘Beesely? It’s David.’

‘How are you David?’

‘Right now? Wishing that you were the damn chairman!’

‘Really, why?’

‘Pressure. And all of it related to you!’

‘Pressure?’

‘*Someone* ... signed up six CIA agents to kiddy porn sites –’
Johno glanced around the room at the various faces. Otto put a hand over his eyes. ‘- which tied them together and their recent trip to Europe. They also had large sums of money transferred to their bank accounts after the trip. One was killed in a New York hotel room, chopped to pieces, so the FBI got involved, noticing the money and the link and the kiddy porn. They told the President, who now thinks that some element of the CIA attacked you. The White House is reeling.’

‘Well, I’m afraid that I am going to have to spoil your day, David.’

There was a pause. ‘What’s going on, Beesely?’

‘You don’t know, do you? What Henry was really into?’

‘He took money from Luchenkov to attack you, using it as a blind to kill Olly, moving him up to number one.’

‘Nope.’ Beesely waited.

‘No?’

‘No. Any other ideas?’ Beesely toyed with him.

‘That’s what happened, we have all the evidence,’ David insisted.

‘Groups within groups, lies on top of lies.’

‘Sorry?’

‘Are you sitting down?’

‘Yes.’

‘Are you alone?’

‘Yes.’

‘Henry got hold of Project Darwin technology, finished it off, and tried to sell it to the Russians.’

Johno winced and held his hands to his face. Helen and Susan glanced at him, startled and unsure as to what was going on. David made no response.

Beesely continued, ‘That’s what those six CIA guys were doing, destroying the evidence and covering their tracks. Unfortunately, they left some. You still there?’

‘God, Beesely, you’ve got to help us out of this. If the FBI get hold of this ... Jesus! Either way we are screwed. They came to attack you ... or they came for the bio-weapons. This could bring down the President!’

Susan shook her head. ‘I’m not really here.’

‘Want a slap?’ Johno whispered.

‘David, leave it with me, I’ll see what I can do. May be some favours asked.’ He hung up and eased back. ‘Well, that *is* interesting. We have the American President over a barrel.’ He noticed the food. ‘Have some strawberries, they look great.’

Otto stepped forwards. ‘When I go home to my girlfriend ... I do not tell her what I do in my work.’

‘Why?’ Johno asked. ‘Afraid she won’t believe you?’ He grabbed a milkshake. ‘Hey, Pistachio!’

Susan took it off him. ‘My favourite.’

Beesely sat drumming his fingers on the desk, staring out of the open door.

Johno noticed. ‘I know that finger drum. You’re about to be a sneaky bastard, aren’t you.’

Without answering, Beesely grabbed a fresh sheet of paper. He started scribbling pictures on the paper, circles, before joining them up; some had dotted lines, some solid, even some arrows. Otto wandered past, glancing at the pictures. He did not understand them. Johno had a look, laughing. Waiting, they tucked into the strawberries and cream, Thomas appearing and grabbing some before disappearing a minute later.

‘Haven’t seen the little monster much lately,’ Johnno realised as Thomas left.

‘Johnno,’ Dame Helen called. ‘You are a moron sometimes.’ Johnno stopped and stared, raising his eyebrows at her. Otto turned to her, frowning. Dame Helen added, ‘There are four teenage girls upstairs, all older and taller than him.’

‘Oh!’ Johnno let out, turning to Otto. ‘Hormones.’

Otto suddenly realised. ‘Ah, yes. I understand now.’

Beesely laughed, his self-generated mirth not detracting from his drawing. Finally, he looked up. ‘OK, I have a plan. But it is complicated, mind you.’ He looked across the desk, frowning. ‘What happened to the strawberries?’

‘We ate them,’ Johnno said. ‘You’ve been scribbling for half an hour,’ he lied.

‘Was I? That long?’

‘So what’s the big plan?’ Johnno asked. ‘Took bleeding long enough.’

Beesely wagged his pen. ‘We cannot risk telling the President about the germs, we will have to deal with that ourselves. We cannot threaten The Lodge either. We are not out the woods yet, and we are going to have to get sneaky.’ He checked his notes. ‘OK, I think I am ready. Everyone sit please, this may take some time. Right, what’s first?’ he asked himself. ‘Ah yes.’ He pressed a button on his phone. ‘British Prime Minister, please. Any difficulty, tell them it’s important.’

‘Sir, it’s eleven o’clock in the UK?’

‘Really? Might have to wake him. In fact, tell him it’s a crisis.’

They waited a full two minutes.

‘Sir Morris?’ came the British Prime Minister’s cultured voice.

‘Yes, Prime Minister. Did I wake you?’

‘I was just about to nod off. What’s the crisis? Is it these bio-labs?’

‘The Americans have tied in some of their currently serving CIA agents to the attack on us *and* the bio-weapons. And now the FBI has found out.’

‘That must be very awkward for them. Surely you are not suggesting the American Government had a hand in it?’

‘No, Prime Minister, it was a rogue element. But the President is over a barrel and could lose his presidency if this gets out and goes pear shaped.’

‘I’m not sure where you are going with this; I would have thought you would be rather unhappy with them right now?’

‘I am a practical man, Prime Minister. There is a solution to the benefit of us all, including yourself.’

‘Me?’

‘Yes. I would like you to call the President, straight away if you don’t mind, and tell him that I am ... an MI6 plant under your direct control.’

‘What?’

‘Then I’m going to release a statement exonerating the CIA agents. In fact, I am going to recommend them for a medal.’

‘A medal?’

‘It’s the only way to let the President off the hook, Prime Minister. Plus you will get the benefit, sir, and the Americans will be asking you for favours in the future if they think you influence me.’

‘That’s ... extraordinary, Sir Morris.’

‘Yes, Prime Minister, but necessary to protect what we believe in. Will you make the call for me? Tell him that *you* – personally - will sort it?’

‘I’ll ... I’ll do as you ask. But tomorrow I want a full brief.’

‘Thank you, sir. Good night.’ He pressed END. They were staring at him. ‘Method in my madness,’ he insisted with a wry smile.

Dame Helen asked, ‘How is the President going to get off the hook?’

Beesely held up a finger and smiled coyly. He pressed a button. 'Minister Blaum, please. At home if necessary.' They waited.

'Beesely?'

'Yes, Minister. Hope I did not wake you?'

'I am not so old, Herr Beesely, although I have aged some since you came to Switzerland.'

Dame Helen smiled.

'Sorry, I was just talking with the British Prime Minister.'

'Did you wake *him*?'

'Yes. Anyway, listen. Need you to release the following statement through your press office straight away, copy direct to the American President, then a copy to every American news agency. And I mean *every one*.'

'What are you up to Beesely? Is this to do with the strange stock market trading today?'

'I'm afraid I don't know anything about - what did you say - *stock trading*. You would have to talk with Otto about stuff like that.' Beesely crossed his fingers and held them up.

'Oh ... OK.'

'Listen, do you have a paper and pen? You will need to have this down accurately.'

'OK, I am ready; this phone records.'

'This is what to release. The Swiss Government, and the Directors of the International Bank of Zurich, with its facilities in Zurich and Zug, would like to *thank* the American Government, and in particular the CIA, for its timely assistance in last week's attempted robbery. They had tried to keep the role of the CIA and British Intelligence secret, but the information has now leaked out.

'We wish to thank the six CIA agents who infiltrated the gang and flew to Europe undercover, pretending to be part of the gang. Their role was crucial, and they helped to save lives in Switzerland. We will be recommending these men for medals, both in their home country and in Switzerland -'

‘Beesely ... what are you up to?’

‘Just bear with me, all will be well. To continue, medals in Switzerland ... We would also like to point out that payments made to them by the bank itself or other, as yet unnamed benefactors, were not authorised by the Swiss or US Government and have caused a great deal of embarrassment for the agents themselves, their families and their superiors. The money has been handed over to the President’s office, and has been earmarked for various charities.

‘Neither the Swiss Government, nor the directors of the bank involved, blame the US Government for anything ... and hold the US President in the highest regard. The CIA acted diligently in its actions, and were in discussions with us at all times.’

‘Beesely, this is horse shit you are giving me!’

‘You know that, Minister, and I know that, but the American people do not know that. Please do as I ask for now, then pop down tomorrow some time.’

‘OK, I will do it. But, I seriously hope you know what you are doing.’ He hung up.

‘OK,’ Johno began. ‘I don’t know about anyone else, but I’m really fucking confused.’

‘Clever,’ Dame Helen offered with a grin. ‘President is off the hook, and now owes a few favours to our Prime Minister. These six guys are in the spotlight, so is what they may have been up to. The now Prime Minister owes you a few favours. Three birds with one stone.’

‘What happened to the French?’ Beesely asked, suddenly concerned.

‘They are still trading,’ Otto informed him.

Beesely ordered, ‘Stand down silent alarm, but stand ready. Johno, take the French to the Spa Hotel, make sure they are comfortable.’

Johno stopped dead and stared. ‘Me? You mad?’

‘Madness in my methods. Go.’

Johno stood, shrugged at Otto, and left.

‘They do not like him,’ Otto puzzled.

‘One does,’ Beesely said with a wink. ‘Besides, they made a great deal of money today, so they will be buoyant. Right, Otto, tomorrow: I want the French here at twelve noon, Blaum before or after, the Society same time as the French. Ask our bank CEO, Mathius, to invite the US Ambassador to Zurich for lunch and a photo opportunity in the morning, arrange it tonight. Full review tomorrow of drug companies, and how many we control.’

He turned his head. ‘Helen, your input was very helpful, thanks. Susan, Patrick, apologies for spoiling your holiday. Now please get lost before I fall asleep in front of you.’

* * *

Pepi kicked over a chair in anger, causing his daughter, Maria, to rush in.

‘Papa!’ She righted the chair. ‘What is it?’

Pepi leant against his desk. ‘What else would make my blood pressure rise?’

She sighed, offering a sympathetic look. ‘K2?’

Pepi nodded. ‘They have sent money to Russia, destroying Luchenkov’s infrastructure. They are trying to kill him in prison, he was stabbed today.’

‘You have a meeting with the bosses tomorrow,’ she pointedly reminded her father.

Pepi made eye contact, his concern evident. He swivelled and grabbed a report, thrusting it at her.

She read the detail. ‘British Prime Minister, Director of the CIA, the American President!’ She looked up and waited.

Pepi let out a breath. ‘K2 is rapidly becoming the focus of Western Intelligence.’

A hard day on the DAX

1

Johno walked into the office block next to the castle, and into the room set up for the French, the air thick with the smell of coffee and French cigarettes. The traders were sat around chatting, obviously done with any practical trading.

‘Are we all done, ladies and gentlemen?’ They all turned toward him. ‘If you’re ready, we have a five star hotel and Spa waiting ready for you. And a French chef!’

‘We came down for the day,’ a man informed him, although he looked pretty tired to Johno.

Johno held his hands wide. ‘Least we can do is look after you. If you stay at the Spa tonight we’ll fly you back tomorrow, Learjet or helicopter. I’ll even fly you myself.’ They laughed. ‘No, seriously; I’m a pilot as well.’

‘A man of many talents,’ the arm-lock woman noted.

‘I won’t boast. Not when the lights are on at least,’ he said with a grin.

‘We have no spare clothes,’ the second woman suggested.

‘Ask room service, they’ll buy you some, there’ll be no charge.’

‘I like this hotel!’ the man suggested.

They glanced at each other, chattering quickly in French. ‘OK,’ they said, standing. ‘The hotel.’

K2 staff began cleaning and re-arranging desks as Johno led the visitors out. They clambered into two Range Rovers, Johno driving one.

* * *

Special Agent Bambitou eased out of his car and slowly approached an isolated, three-story wooden house. A blanket lay

over a body in a field some fifty yards away, just visible in the dawn haze, yellow police tapes sectioning off the road and garden.

Another body lay face down in the garden, also covered. Bambitou stopped and took in the ploughed field; a large flock of birds circled, looking like vultures waiting for some carrion.

He turned to face the house. Two windows with bullet holes, he noticed. The rest of the house appeared well decorated enough; it certainly looked lived-in. There were two cars in the rear, new and expensive, and clearly out of character with the property - and this area of Long Island. Coughing away a lack of sleep, and a long drive, he walked inside in his bright blue FBI jacket.

‘I’m the Sheriff,’ a voice called, sounding equally as tired. The sheriff stepped up, pen and notebook in hand.

‘Special Agent Bambitou. FBI.’

The Sheriff glanced at the large yellow letters on Bambitou’s jacket, then made eye contact and waited.

‘It does what it says on the tin,’ Bambitou joked. ‘What we got?’

‘Spies.’

Bambitou raised an eyebrow as deputies shuffled past. ‘Spies?’

‘Each of the stiffs had two or three really good IDs, plus a shit load of high-tech weapons. Rifles loaded with Teflon rounds.’

‘Not local boys then?’ He coughed out a short laugh. ‘How many?’

‘One in the field, one in the yard, five in here.’

‘How did they die?’

‘That’s the good bit, and why they pay you the big bucks. Press will be all over it. First two men: broken necks, no sign of a fall or struggle. One was killed with a knife, obviously thrown, one shot between the eyes, one died with a crushed windpipe, and one was beaten senseless and cut-up, maybe tortured.’

‘Question is, who did what to who? What about the guy in the field? Last man standing?’

‘There’s a trail of blood, but no blood trail on the rest. So yeah, maybe.’

‘How did that one die?’

‘Neck wound. Looked like the broken end of a bottle. He had some sort of phone in his hand.’

‘Sort of?’

‘Weird thing. It’s still there.’

Bambitou turned and stepped out, across the road and into the muddy field to the lone body. He could see the trail of blood, way too much for anyone to survive such a wound. The man’s arm stretched outside the blanket, a large phone in his lifeless hand.

Bambitou crouched down next to the strange phone. The only other phone he had seen of this type had been when sailing; a satellite phone. It started to chirp. Bambitou checked over his shoulder. No one was looking.

Loosening it from the dead man’s grip, he raised it. He noted the two large buttons, red and green. He pressed green and lifted it closer to his face.

‘Mr. Grey, this is operations. Status, over,’ came a polite female voice.

‘I’m afraid your Mister Grey is dead, lying face down in a field in Long Island. Who are you?’

There was a pause. ‘Who are you, sir?’ the polite voice asked.

‘This is Special Agent Bambitou of the New York FBI. Now it’s your turn.’

‘One moment please.’ He could hear a click as he waited. Unknown to him, he was being carefully observed through a powerful telescopic sight.

* * *

‘A good evening with the French?’ Beesely asked, barely registering Johnno’s laboured entrance.

‘God, what happened to you?’ Susan asked, she and Patrick now concerned. Dame Helen ‘tutted’.

Johnno limped in, looking as if he had slept rough after a drunken fight; his lip was cut, a black eye forming.

At first Otto was genuinely concerned. ‘You were attacked?’ he asked, stepping quickly across.

‘Oh, yeah,’ Johnno said as he winked and smiled. ‘Slapped and beaten silly.’

‘What happened to you?’ Otto pressed, now very confused.

‘A little French lady happened to him,’ Beesely suggested without looking up from his file.

Otto cocked an eyebrow and tipped his head.

‘You had a fight with that French girl?’ Susan asked, suddenly horrified.

‘No, Susan,’ Beesely explained, glancing up at her. ‘He had rough sex with her.’

‘How did you know about her?’ Johnno asked Beesely.

‘A travelling shoe salesman once told me ... that if a girl hits you it is because she likes you. Also, that if you really infuriate a girl it is usually because she loves you - and yet can’t control you.’

Otto smiled. ‘What does that t-shirt of yours say, Johnno?’

‘Success is measured by the number of women you *really* piss off!’ Johnno quoted.

Beesely looked Johnno over. ‘Was it worth it?’

‘Oh, yeah. But I’m not a fan of hairy armpits.’ He took Beesely’s lukewarm coffee and downed it quickly.

Patrick hid his envious smile, Dame Helen shaking her head. Beesely called them all to order as newspapers were brought in. He handed them out.

‘Scan these for any relevant news, stock markets or problems in the States.’ He tapped his phone. ‘Get me Duncan, newspaper reporter, London.’ He waited.

'Hello?' came a sleepy voice.

'Did I wake you?' Beesely toyed.

'Yes,' came firmly back.

'That analyst we hired, I almost forgot him. Need him on the job hundred percent today, looking for any stock market irregularities. You too. I will need you bright eyed and bushy tailed in an hour or two. What's the time there?'

'Six thirty?'

'What time did you get to bed?'

'About six thirty.'

'You had best get yourself a coffee then, or doze by the phone.' He hung up.

Adrienne, telephone operator and the head decorator's daughter, appeared in the doorway. She knocked and peeked in. Beesely smiled warmly, waving her in. She trotted in, placed down a tin of Quality Street chocolates and kissed Beesely quickly on the cheek. 'From London, sir.' She trotted out without waiting.

'Lovely girl,' Beesely muttered, opening the tin.

'Didn't get my peck on the cheek again,' Johno complained.

Beesely peered at him from under his eyebrows. 'Had a look in the mirror this morning, have we?'

2

A manager ran in and gave Johno a note. Johno read it quickly as the man waited. 'Can it be traced?'

'No, sir.'

'Put it through here.' The man ran out. 'Mr. Grey is dead, FBI have the body.'

Beesely straightened and breathed loudly, running a hand over his bald plate.

'Hello?' came a bass baritone voice from the desk phone.

Johno turned the phone closer to himself. 'Hello yourself. Mr. Grey is dead I hear?'

‘You don’t sound American, neither did the young lady who I spoke to before.’

‘British Secret Service,’ Johnno stated, Dame Helen raising her hands in complaint.

The caller paused. ‘British Secret Service? Well, there are seven dead bodies here. They belong to you?’

‘No. The one you took the phone off was an agent for *your* government, just about the best there was. Treat his body with respect, FBI man.’

‘And the other six?’

‘How did they die?’

‘Two broken necks, one throwing knife, one shot between the eyes, one crushed windpipe, and one tortured to death. Found the guy with the phone fifty yards away, he bled out from a neck wound. Don’t suppose you want to tell me what this is all about?’

‘The man with the phone was one of the good guys. The rest are still yours, but battling for the wrong team. One a hero, the others financially motivated. Understand?’

‘I think so. Any chance this is linked to that Swiss thing?’

‘You might think that, I couldn’t possibly comment. Listen, FBI man, do you believe everything you read in the papers?’

‘Not always.’

‘Cast a discerning eye over this morning’s headlines. Read between the lines.’

‘Can I call you again?’

‘What purpose would that serve for either of us?’

‘I don’t like these spy shits running around my back yard. Any help from any quarter would be appreciated. It’s not like I’m going to get any from my own government.’

Johnno turned his head to Beesely. After a moment’s reflection, Beesely nodded. ‘Keep the phone somewhere safe. But jerk us around and there will be one hell of a penalty.’ Johnno hung up and then stood, walking to the end of the office.

‘Who was Mister Grey?’ Susan delicately enquired.

‘That the man I met?’ Dame Helen asked.

Beesely nodded at her. ‘He was one of our best agents. A great loss, but he lost perspective. He went looking for revenge.’

‘So do we!’ Johnno firmly pointed out.

‘Not hand to hand, we don’t. It sounds as if he walked into that damn house unarmed - something to prove. We would blow it up from a distance.’

‘Anyone want four puppies?’ Johnno quietly asked.

Beesely sighed. ‘Stanton’s wife will take it hard, and the young girl.’

* * *

Bambitou stopped at a petrol station and pulled in. Stretching, he eased out and walked over to the newspaper stand. Putting in quarters, he took out three papers. Switzerland! What a surprise, he considered. Sitting in his car, he started to read the papers.

3

Johnno’s satellite phone started to vibrate. He stepped to the far end of Beesely’s office. ‘Yeah?’

‘There is a Flight Lieutenant McNamara, RAF Marham, on the line.’

‘Put him through,’ Johnno keenly encouraged.

‘Johnno?’

‘Yeah. That you Rupert?’

‘Are you any better looking?’

‘Fuck off!’ They laughed. ‘What you up to? Still shuffling papers around a desk?’

‘I’m not really an RAF officer, not most of the time. Remember that *other* unit I mentioned?’

‘Yeah, Trooper Snoopers.’

‘Well, we received some traffic intercepts about four-man ex-SAS team that has been working in Africa, real hard cases.

They're in Switzerland, heading after your boss.' Johno clicked his fingers at Beesely as he walked across the office, his features suddenly turning to stone. 'All we know is something about a hotel spa.'

'Otto!' Johno screamed. 'Silent alarm at the Spa Hotel!' He sprinted out.

Beesely stabbed at the phone. 'The hotel Spa is under attack. Get us some helicopter support if available - Condor Squadron!'

In the courtyard, Johno screamed at the SAS reaction squad as he ran. 'On me!' They ran out. 'Vehicles! Hotel Spa!' He jumped into his silver Mercedes SL, the vehicle unlocking automatically as he neared it. However, Mercedes designers were more interested in the safety of their customers than in sound effects and, despite selecting 'sport' mode, the coupe pulled off without tyres screeching and with excellent road holding.

The troopers piled into the Range Rovers, K2 guards in the driving seat. Hitting the horn hard, Johno shot down the camp road, people flying out of the way. With the gates rapidly approaching, he desperately used the horn. They were opening, but not quick enough; he smashed his offside without stopping, turning hard right out of the gate, and soon heading towards the spa.

At speeds of up to ninety kilometres per hour on heavily forested country roads he near-missed several locals, covering the two miles to the Spa in a matter of minutes.

The entrance to the Spa did not host a gate, just two large brick pillars terminating a low hedge, leading inside to the gravel forecourt and ornate carp pond with gentle fountains. Unfortunately, the Spa nestled sedately between thick woods with picturesque nature walks, making a stealthy approach easy enough for a potential attacker, observation of the Spa a simple enough task.

He slowed, tooting the horn as he turned in, and skidded sideways across the gravel, noticing many elderly guests

walking to and from the entrance steps. Halting, he reached across to the glove compartment and grabbed a Browning 9mm. Still stretched awkwardly across the seats, he released the magazine, checked it and re-loaded, pulling the slide back.

His windscreen shattered; a high-power shot, silenced. Two further shots tore up his seat. He pushed the passenger door open and scrambled across, dumping himself roughly onto the gravel with a forward roll.

A hollow, tinny sound indicated that they were puncturing the bodywork, hoping to hit him. They obviously did not have the angle, he considered, or he would be dead. A tyre burst and hissed.

Now on his back, he looked up at the four-storey hotel, guests in windows peering down at him. From under the car he could see the feet of guests moving about. They were in the crossfire. He raised his pistol above the bonnet and fired three times into the air.

Now the elderly guests were shrieking and moving inside. And they were probably confusing the sniper, he considered. He jumped up and sprinted towards the side of the hotel, a single shot cracking past him and throwing up gravel.

As he reached the safety of solid walls the Range Rovers came skidding in. Johnno frantically waved, making a hand signal of a gun – a forefinger and thumb - thrusting towards the woods to the east. The first Range Rover pulled in right next to him, the second going around in a large circle, spewing gravel and speeding back out of the driveway.

Johnno grabbed his phone as troopers piled out. ‘Sniper to the east, in the woods. Surround it!’ He grabbed troopers by the scruff of the neck and threw them towards the side of the hotel as they emerged, all wearing their usual black fatigues and carrying MP5s.

A K2 helicopter, an Italian-made Agusta, shot past, banking hard and flaring out as it tried to slow. It circled as Johnno led the troopers to the Spa’s side entrance, the men now bent double.

Reaching the emergency exit to the pool, a glass door, they found that it was wedged open with a pink flip-flop. Johno grabbed and opened the door, rushing in, a burst of warm moist air stinking of chlorine greeting him. Screams went up as he raced around the edges of the pool, pistol in hand, four troopers behind, plus two guards bringing up the rear. They ran past the sauna and steam room, and into the men's changing room - startling grey haired and pot bellied German businessmen - before bursting into the Spa reception. Additional K2 guards joined him as he sprinted to the stairs and quickly up two flights, his knee registering its opposition to this morning's chosen method of exercise.

A turn to the right, and three doors down, he banged hard with his fist. 'Claire!' He could hear a muffled scream before he jumped clear of the door, his back to the wall. 'Hostage!' he whispered.

Two troopers positioned themselves behind him, two directly opposite. The men made ready as two shots came through the door, digging into the wall opposite.

'Those are ex-troopers in there!' he whispered. The men glanced at each other. 'They won't fall for any tricks, they *know* how we work'.

Johno put his face as close to the door as he dared. 'You're surrounded, boys, nowhere to go!'

The drone of helicopters grew louder.

'Johno, come in!' came a badly distorted stereo voice from each of the trooper's radios.

Johno grabbed a radio from one of the troopers stood next to him. 'This is Johno, go ahead.'

'This is Apache One. We have the room on thermal imager. Two walking around, one on the floor, over.'

'Do you have a safe firing solution?'

'Negative, over.'

'Standby.'

He turned to the trooper opposite. 'Kick the door down. *Without ... getting shot!*' he whispered.

The man turned to his buddy. 'Grab my harness.' He lowered his MP5, stood at an angle - as much as he dared - then lunged and kicked. Solid, the door would not budge. Two more shots cracked through the door, the men ducking tight into the wall.

'Try - *four three three two,*' Johno whispered. The doors had card sweeps and punch codes.

The troopers gave him a look, shaking their fists, then knelt down and then punched the numbers. The door popped open, and a trooper reached around and pushed it. A burst of automatic fire tore up the wall opposite, a small watercolour now hanging at an angle.

Johno grabbed the radio and stepped down the corridor, K2 guards now pushing inquisitive guests back into their rooms. 'Apache One, wait ten seconds, then shoot-up the room for exactly five seconds, nowhere near the occupants. Understand, over?'

'Apache One, Roger that.'

Johno took up position. 'Ready? Watch my hand. You right, us left.' They nodded and waited.

Guests popped their heads out of their rooms before quickly slamming the doors, and police sirens could now be heard. Then hell and thunder descended on room 112.

The troopers winced at the noise and lowered their heads, shielding themselves with their arms. Masonry flew through the open doorway, and the corridor wall opposite the door seemed to be spitting concrete at them in defiance at its treatment. The roar was deafening, not least the drone of the Apache coming through the now broken room windows.

Johno's hand had been raised throughout as he counted down, now it dropped. They stormed in.

The first trooper could see legs under a cabinet and a pistol to its side, an Uzi sub-machinegun emerging. He opened up through the cabinet, a full magazine emptied.

Johno rolled over the bed and landed right on top of the second gunman as he lay on the floor next to Claire, a pistol to her head. He thrust his pistol into the man's neck.

'Johno?'

Johno straightened. 'Pete!'

'Clear!' came from somewhere. Then again, 'Clear!'

Two troopers stopped at the head of the gunman, weapons primed. Dust wafted around the room, sirens wailed, and the drone of Apaches filled the air.

'Johno, what are ... what are you doing here?' the man strained to get out, his face covered in dust.

Johno stared down at his old friend. With a dangerous tone, he answered, 'I'm head of security here, you dumb fuck!'

'Christ, Johno, if I'd known...'

'Where's the fourth man?' He jammed his pistol in harder.

'Back-up van, up the road,' Pete coughed out.

Through gritted teeth, Johno ordered. 'Two things. First, take that damn pistol out of the face of my girlfriend.' The man's mouth opened in surprise. 'Second, get your mate on the radio and tell him to surrender. Right now!'

Pete chucked his pistol at the feet of the troopers. A trooper grabbed Claire by the arm and dragged her unceremoniously across the carpet, crunching broken glass and debris. Reaching for his, radio Pete called, 'Steve, mission scrubbed. We're caught. And Johno is here, plus a hundred other fucking troopers!'

Johno lifted the man up and pushed him onto the bed, attending Claire as she brushed dust off her blue suit and coughed out dust. 'You OK?'

Troopers started to handcuff Pete with plastic ties.

Johno turned. 'No! Take him to Beesely. Now!'

Claire took a deep breath, then turned and stared out of the window at the hovering Apache, noticing the other helicopters circling, the air now full of the sound of sirens wailing. She put her hands on her hips and turned to back Johno, glaring.

Grabbing him, she quickly took him by the hand and out of the room as guards eased by, down the corridor and past the perplexed soldiers and guards.

Her female colleague stood peering nervously out of a doorway. Claire pushed her inside and closed the door. 'Lock it, Michelle,' she told her friend as she started to strip, frantically tearing her clothes off.

Johno stared, open-mouthed. 'What ... *now?*'

'Your heart is beating fast, oui?'

Her friend grinned before starting to undress as well

Don't shoot the messenger

1

Thirty minutes later, Beesely ordered, 'I want every guest at the Spa moved someplace else, given a free stay, and all compensated ten thousand euros immediately.' He hung up as Pete was marched in, the man's eyes taking in as much detail as he could find.

Nervously, Pete stepped forwards. Glancing at Dame Helen, his eyes narrowed. He turned to Beesely, before turning back and saying, 'My God, you're the head of MI6!'

'That's correct,' she coldly stated, eyeing him carefully.

Beesely leant to one side and looked beyond Pete, frowning a question at a guard.

'He is one of the attackers at the spa. Johno said to bring him to you, no handcuffs.'

'Oh.' Beesely sat back and regarded Pete coolly. 'I'm surprised you are still alive,' he quietly stated.

'I used to serve with Johno, in the Paras and SAS.'

'So he spared you, for the moment.' Beesely eased forwards, his elbows on the desk. 'Listen well. You will tell us exactly who hired you, and you will assist us with finding them, or we will tie you to a chair and slowly burn your damn skin off.'

'You don't need to threaten me, sir,' Pete quietly stated, suppressed anger in his voice. 'Johno's a mate. If I'd known...'

Beesely squinted across the desk. 'Did you know who we were?'

'No, sir. Or I would have killed the tossers hiring us, you can be sure of that. I love the Regiment; I'd never go up against my own people.'

Beesely eased back. 'No, I don't believe you would. Not many would, you are all too closely knit. Still, no chocolates for you.'

‘We had no idea, sir, we just got the instructions and the money, sir. Good money,’ Pete rapidly got out.

‘How much?’

‘Two million a piece, sir, from a South African merc’ company.’

Beesely blew out through pursed lips. ‘That is a good price for a job like this. I assume most of it was *payment upon completion?*’

‘We got a quarter mil’ up front, sir. But you can have the money, I don’t want it,’ he spat out, disgusted with himself.

Beesely stopped suddenly, an anguished look at the open doorway. ‘Where’s Johno? Was he hit?’

‘No, sir. He was helping the French lady.’

‘How did you know about her?’ Beesely demanded.

‘We got a message this morning, told to grab her; told that she was the girlfriend of the bodyguard of the boss. Plus to grab the old man if he showed.’

Beesely straightened, scowling. ‘I’m ... the *old man.*’

Pete lowered his head. ‘Sorry, sir.’

Concerned, Beesely made eye contact with Otto. ‘Someone was watching the spa.’ Otto stepped purposefully out. ‘How did you like our air force?’ Beesely asked, putting out his chin.

‘Don’t want to be on the receiving end of an Apache again. Saw them in the first Gulf war.’

‘Quite the deterrent, aren’t they!’

Pete frowned slightly, a questioning look. ‘What *is* this place, sir?’

‘It’s the secret headquarters for a powerful intelligence agency, with close links to MI6, CIA and Mossad.’ Pete was stunned. ‘Yes, young man. You went up against an organization bigger than MI6, stocked full of ex-SAS troopers. Last week we had an attack on this place by a hundred mercenaries. Four Hercules aircraft, packed with SAS landed, and *sent them all straight to hell*, to quote a phrase.’

‘Jesus,’ Pete quietly let out.

Johno limped in five minutes later, looking beaten, dirty and injured, his shirt now only done-up via three buttons.

‘Dear God, Johno, you alright?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘Yeah, yeah,’ he said with a nod, opening the fridge and taking out two beers. He handed one to Pete.

Beesely followed that action with some interest. ‘Johno, this man attacked us,’ he said with quiet concern.

‘No he didn’t,’ Johno quietly rebutted. ‘He did what he was paid to do. He was duped, as with Rawlins, and those mercs’ last week.’

Otto came back in, also surprised by the beer.

Johno noticed his concern. He sat on the cabinet, addressing the group as a whole. ‘Problem with a secret organization ... is that no one knows about it, so they don’t fear attacking it. That Russian idiot, or whoever, he can keep hiring people who don’t know about us. And we just shoot them, losing a few people every time.’ He eased back against the wall and waited for their reactions.

‘It is true,’ Otto admitted with a sigh.

Beesely made eye contact with Dame Helen, her expression suggested Johno was correct. ‘What are you suggesting?’ he asked, swivelling his chair around to face Johno. ‘One hour programme on the BBC?’

‘Yes, but not on us.’ Johno sipped his beer.

‘Not on us?’ Beesely queried.

‘No, make it a programme on the Swiss Secret Service and counter terrorist groups. We stage it, we pay for it, and we let everyone in the world think that the Swiss are tough nuts.’

Beesely brightened. ‘That might help.’

‘And,’ Johno began, pointing with the forefinger of the hand holding the beer can, ‘We give Pete here an expense account and a job.’

‘A job with us?’ Beesely snapped.

‘Yeah. We show Pete here all we have to play with, then send him around the world, chit-chatting to every mercenary,

security agency or gunman he can find ... and he lets them know what they'd be up against.'

Beesely glanced at Otto, who seemed to agree. He sighed and sat back. 'Very well. But let's do it properly, co-ordinate it well.' Otto agreed.

'Sir,' buzzed from his phone.

'Yes.'

'There are Swiss Ministers here to see you, sir, American Ambassador still trying to get through, American President waiting your call back.'

Pete stared at the phone, his jaw dropping.

'I'm going to shower and see the doctor,' Johno said as he eased up. 'Pete, with me.'

* * *

In the Great Hall, Johno called in all troopers and castle guards that were nearby, still sipping from his beer can.

At that moment, the second surviving attacker was brought in, bound and beaten. 'Untie him!' Johno angrily ordered. 'Now! And get him a doctor!' His words echoed around the cavernous enclosure.

The guards did as he asked as more men assembled, Johno scrambling up onto the large antique table. 'Listen up.' He now addressed close to fifty men. 'The men who attacked the Spa didn't know who we were. One of them is a friend of mine.' He pointed at Pete. 'And he will be treated as such, so will the other men.' He wagged a warning finger around the group, guards glancing at each other.

'These men ... are good men, well trained ex-SAS soldiers just trying to make a living, by doing the stuff that men like us do.' He counted out the words with a chopping motion of his hand. 'Men ... like ... us.'

He waved a hand at the entire assembled group. 'If you lot weren't here, where would you be? You'd be hiring yourselves

out for work like this! Many people have been duped into attacking us because they were not told who we are. Don't ... take it ... personally! I don't.' He pointed at himself.

Pointing at the courtyard, he said, 'British Intelligence were conned by the Yanks. Those mercenaries last week, they were conned by the people who sent them; slaughtered, set up and left to die. You, gentlemen, should feel no anger towards these people. If they knew us, they would be our friends and allies.'

He paused, calming a little. 'In the future, we'll let the gunmen of the world know who we are. If they still attack us, knowing who we are, then they deserve everything they get.' He thumbed towards the courtyard. 'Like that fucking Swiss Minister who sold us out ... and that Yank who took Russian money.' He pointed at the group. 'They, gentlemen, are your enemies - not the foot soldiers they send. Not the pawns in the game.'

He took a sip of beer. Isolating the 'old dogs', he pointed them out. 'During the Gulf war, did we get angry at the foot soldiers?' He held out and upturned palm, a slight shrug. 'No. We got angry at the officers in charge, the arse-holes sending them our way.'

He sought out Pete in the crowd. 'This man, and his buddy, are now on our side. They would have been all along if they knew about us. I want them to be treated with the respect they deserve, the bodies of the other two flown to their homes for their families. They were *soldiers*, just doing a job like you fucks.'

2

Beesely turned to Dame Helen, both now close to the computer monitor.

'Quite the speech,' Beesely proudly stated, reaching for a chocolate.

She nodded. 'To quote a phrase, he's not as stupid as he looks.'

Minister Blaum was shown in. Beesely stood. 'Ah, Minister, we were just talking about you.'

'That does not fill me with joy, Herr Beesely. You know, Switzerland used to be a quiet backwater.' He faced Dame Helen.

'This is Dame Helen, the Director of British Intelligence.'

Blaum was surprised, leaning over and shaking her hand. 'Are you well?'

'I was in a car accident,' she coldly stated. 'I've been making use of your excellent Swiss health spas.'

'Good,' Baum enthused. 'How are you finding our country?'

She turned to Beesely. 'Perhaps you should tell him.'

Blaum straightened and gave Beesely an unfriendly look.

'Minister, we just had ... an incident, at the Spa up the road.'

'Incident?' Blaum pressed.

'Well, four armed men attacked the place, took hostages...'

Blaum slumped into a chair, a hand on his eyes.

Dame Helen touched his arm. 'Don't worry, I feel like that most days around here. Have a chocolate.'

Blaum looked up as Beesely added, 'We shot them with an Apache attack helicopter. There are no civilian casualties, the situation is contained, the guests compensated and moved to another hotel.' Beesely sat back down and pressed his phone. 'Tea and coffee please.' He faced Blaum. 'So, to business.' Blaum sighed as he took out notepad and paper. 'First, I think that I could get most, if not all, Jewish groups to stop any claims against Swiss banks.'

Blaum was visibly shaken. 'You can do this?'

'I think so, yes.'

'My ... God,' Blaum let out.

'Right, starting at the beginning. Before you ask, or anyone else tells you, we, K2, and our friends and associates around the

world caused, hang on –’ he glanced at his notes. ‘- a *one day shakeout* on the Dow Jones yesterday.’

‘Really?’ Blaum asked with a smile. ‘How much did you make?’

Beesely straightened, frowning. He made eye contact with Dame Helen, who was equally as surprised.

Blaum glanced from face to face. ‘What?’

‘We thought the Swiss Government would be mad at us?’

Blaum shrugged. ‘This kind of thing goes on all the time. Did Otto not say?’

‘No,’ Beesely said with a scowl. ‘He didn’t.’

‘How much did you take them for?’

‘A great deal. But we used it to buy controlling stakes in a lot of drug companies.’

‘Are you going to squeeze that sector?’

Dame Helen eased forwards. ‘If I was you, I’d go with your original thought, and put your head in your hands.’

Blaum darkened. ‘Beesely?’

Tea and coffee was brought in. They waited.

Beesely began, ‘I can’t give you a complete picture, you might not sleep well.’ Blaum’s shoulders dropped. ‘But that attack on us last week was ... not so much about the Russian, he was ... just the *opportunity* it afforded. The attack was to mask several Swiss bio-science companies being relieved of sensitive experiments and files.’

‘My God, what did they get? Was it industrial espionage?’

Beesely held up hand, silencing him. ‘The Americans are no longer allowed to conduct certain experiments on US soil, so they are sub-contracted around the world.’ He glanced at Dame Helen. ‘These experiments were germ warfare.’

Blaum almost hit the roof. ‘They were doing these experiments here?’

‘Please, Minister, sit.’

Dame Helen dryly commented, ‘I preferred him with his head in his hands.’

Beesely turned to her. 'You are not helping, young lady.' Addressing Blaum, he said, 'Please, Minister, calm down. We have a lot to go through.' Blaum slumped. 'We are buying into the drug companies so that we can control what they work on and stop them.'

'That is what ... what the shakeout was for?'

'Yes. And now we have control of most of the companies that we want, and the Swiss bank Society has signed its voting rights to us. We have control, so we can stop it ... if it's not too late.'

'These germs, they are here?'

'No, Minister, and there is no risk of contagion. These germs need to be injected into people.'

Blaum was confused. Frowning, he asked, 'Injected? What use are they as a weapon?'

'It's not that kind of weapon.' Beesely gave Dame Helen a pained look. 'We think they aim to contaminate World Health Organization immunisation programmes, so that the jabs given to people in the Middle East and elsewhere are tainted.'

Blaum sat staring out of focus. 'They are all shipped through Geneva,' he quietly stated.

'Can you help get our people in place?'

Blaum nodded. 'I have close personal friends in the World Health Organization; whatever you need, ask.'

Beesely observed the man's pain. 'OK,' he softly began. 'Moving right along. We, are going to make a film about Swiss Secret Service and Counter Terrorism Teams, to make everyone around the world think that Switzerland has a very strong intelligence service. That way ... they will think twice before attacking us.'

Blaum sullenly nodded. 'That seems a good idea.' He sipped his coffee.

'That reminds me,' Beesely muttered. He pressed CALL.

'Yes, sir.'

'Get me Duncan, London.'

They waited.

‘Duncan here, awake for a change.’

‘Get yourself, and a good photographer that you can trust, over here pronto, domestic flight. You’ll be met at the airport. Bye.’ He pressed END.

‘What was that?’ Helen asked.

‘A friendly reporter; I am going to run a story on just how tough Swiss security is. Minister, cheer up, we are going to win this.’

Blaum blew out. ‘What else?’

‘Just back us up when we need it. And in the meantime, keep up the story about how happy we are with the CIA. Hang around upstairs if you will, we may need you a bit more today. Have some food, use a room, shower, relax - you look worn out.’

Blaum slowly stood, bowed his head at Dame Helen and left.

‘Poor guy,’ Helen stated, popping a chocolate into her mouth. ‘He has to clean up after you.’

3

Johno limped into the restaurant, still damp from his shower, wearing a t-shirt, jeans and nothing on his feet, Pete trailing behind. He raised a finger to the catering staff. ‘Two teas, plate of doughnuts, love.’

Patrick and Susan had pushed together three tables, and were now sitting with their files, plus an assortment of cups and plates. Mike sat reading a book near a window.

‘Christ, Johno,’ Susan began, concerned. ‘You look worse than this morning.’

A doctor and nurse walked briskly in. Johno ignored the medics as he sat and they set about checking him, earning some strange looks.

‘There was a gun-battle up the road,’ he casually informed them, wincing at a cut in his scalp as it was examined. The nurse handed the doctor a tube of cream and a medical staple-gun.

‘Gun battle! Were you hurt?’ Susan asked, standing.

‘Ricochet, just little bits of masonry. Oh, this is Pete, we served together in the Paras and SAS.’

Susan politely introduced herself, as did Patrick. Mike waved.

‘Where’re the sprogs?’ Johno asked as opaque plasters were placed onto cuts on his hands and face, now being attended to like a boxer in the ring.

‘The great invention of computer games,’ Susan explained. ‘Followed quickly behind by the great invention of unlimited TV channels. They spend a lot of time down in your place, the dungeon.’

‘I removed all the offending items, the guns and grenades.’ Susan shot him a look. He raised his hands. ‘I’m Joking. It’s all safe.’

‘Your boy Thomas is in his element,’ Patrick explained.

Johno smiled to himself. ‘Thomas organizing, is he?’

Susan rolled her eyes. Pete finally sat as teas were brought out.

‘How goes the war?’ Mike asked from the corner.

‘Good,’ Johno answered. ‘We’re getting ahead. Your dear lady wife seems to be in her element, it’s certainly taken her mind off things.’ Johno immediately regretted that last statement, looking pained.

‘It’s OK,’ Mike quietly suggested. ‘You don’t need to feel bad - I’m quite happy she’s busy and involved. Moping around in hospitals wasn’t doing her any good. She doesn’t have time to think here.’

Johno nodded. ‘That’s not registering as a good thing, but I know what you mean.’

Blaum wandered in, placed down his briefcase and asked for a whisky.

‘Tough day for someone?’ Johno asked without looking around, checking his watch.

Blaum stepped closer. ‘Were you hurt in the ... *incident*?’

Pete kept quiet, his head lowered. Johnno answered, 'Just ricochet.' Then he called, 'Herr Blaum, what's your first name?'

'Max.'

'Can I ask a favour, Max?'

'What is that, Johnno?'

'See that fella in the corner with the book, can you take him for a stroll around the grounds, and tell him the story of your family.' Johnno finally twisted his head around up, holding a serious expression.

Blaum stood solid for a moment, glancing at Mike before turning back to Johnno.

'Mike,' Johnno called whilst still fixed on Blaum. 'Your indulgence please.'

Curious, Mike marked his page and stepped over, Johnno turning back to his doughnuts.

Blaum glanced at the back of Johnno's head before gulping down his drink. 'I could do with a walk.' They left.

'What was that all about?' Susan asked.

The doctor curtly informed Johnno that he was OK, and left with the nurse.

'Interesting fella, Herr Blaum,' Johnno began. 'He's their equivalent of a Home Secretary ... and he's had quite a life. He lost two daughters ten years apart, adopted four times. Now he heads up their adoption programme, as well as a lot of children's charities around the world.'

Susan glanced at Patrick.

Johnno added, 'And he tried to hide from us the fact that the youngest adopted kid nearly died from meningitis recently, right in the middle of all the troubles. Kid is not out of danger, and may be blind and paralysed. So when it comes to bereavement counselling - that guy's an expert.'

'We may have something,' Patrick suggested, changing the subject. 'These manifests don't include aircrews, nor do they included military flights, nor stuff like DHL.'

‘Good point. Grab a manager or two, get them onto it. Run with the ball guys, we ain’t short of resources. Shit, that reminds me.’ He grabbed the phone on the side of the food counter. ‘Get me RAF Marham, Flight Lieutenant McNamara. Say it’s a family matter to get through the switch board.’ He waited.

‘McNamara here,’ came a minute later.

‘Johno here.’

‘Thank God. I was beginning to think I had a family that I had forgotten about.’ They laughed. ‘How was the intel?’ the officer enquired.

‘Good, check your bank account in the morning.’

‘No need for that, Johno.’

‘Trust me, we have more than we know what to do with.’

‘Always welcome, then.’

‘Any other bits of intel’, get on the blower,’ Johno requested.

‘So what happened?’

Johno glanced at Pete. ‘We hit them with an Apache, two down unfortunately, but two ... converted.’

‘An Apache? Shit!’

‘It does have an effect on people. You stay in touch, Rupert.’

* * *

Pepi read the report, laughing. Maria stepped in, puzzled by the laughter. She approached, a question in her expression.

‘K2 has put out a story, labelling the CIA as heroes, thanking the American President for their assistance in foiling the attack on K2. It lets the Americans off the hook, and diverts attention away from the men involved with the germ warfare. Brilliant. I like this man Beesely, and the way he thinks.’

Bambitou sat next to Tracey with a sigh. ‘Hey Dick.’

She gave him one of her looks, before noticing the hoard of papers he now held. ‘Bored, were you?’

‘I wish. You’ve seen these?’ He plonked them down on the side of her desk.

She scanned the top paper, images of Switzerland. ‘Yeah, some. And CNN this morning. Why? Is it connected?’

‘I got a tip-off. It’s a pile of hooley.’

She puzzled that statement. ‘So they’re not heroes, then?’

‘What does the military do when one of their boys fucks up and goes all Rambo?’

‘Bury him with a medal, cover up the truth?’

‘Right,’ he let out. ‘So these six shits get a medal, and their own private cover-up.’

She gave him a quizzical look, almost a smile. ‘What are you going to do?’

‘Don’t know yet. But I may have a source.’

‘Hell, it’s not as if you enjoy the job. *So what* if they boot you out.’

He straightened and smiled. ‘Always the optimist.’

‘Hmmm, let’s see: Special Agent Bambitou, forty-eight years old - and with a bad back, and even worse attitude - or the Pentagon. Place your bets, ladies and gentlemen.’

‘Hey, I’m forty-seven! For another week.’

‘Aw, bless. You enjoy it. Oops, nearly forgot.’ She handed him a CD. ‘What’s your taste in snuff videos?’

‘Snuff videos? Not my department, thankfully.’

‘This is interesting,’ she said waving the CD. ‘An American mercenary being tortured to death.’

‘What’s interesting, babes? He get caught some place like Iraq?’

‘Nope. Right at the beginning of the video you can hear, *welcome to Switzerland*.’

His eyes slowly widened. ‘An American mercenary ... getting caught and tortured in sunny Switzerland? Our airport stiff had signs of torture, so did one of the Long Island gang.’

‘Somebody’s after something,’ she commented with a flick of her hair, returning to her computer screen. ‘Oh, I didn’t watch the CD, but they say he was *not* asked any questions. This was punishment.’ He stepped to the door and turned. ‘What?’ she whispered when she noticed him watching her.

‘Any more ‘Oh’?’

She pursed her lips. ‘Nope. That’s it.’ He turned. ‘Oh, Boss was asking for you.’

He smiled to himself as he left.

Reconciling docket

1

Otto stepped into Beesely's office with several files. He sat down promptly and placed the files on the desk, organizing them into groups. Dame Helen wheeled herself closer to the desk, grabbing a chocolate.

'Are we all sorted?' Beesely asked, straightening and taking off his glasses.

'A week's work in a few hours,' Otto firmly pointed out, his expression reflecting his pride in his work.

Beesely's cheek creased into a hidden smile. 'And?'

'We have balanced all the stock transactions, options and futures from yesterday. We are close to forty million euro better off from the directional trades. That sum is available to be spent as cash.'

'Good,' Beesely enthused. 'What else?'

'We bought a great deal of drug stock. It has increased in value already, and its shortage continues to cause the rise, almost fifteen percent overnight.'

'Shortage?' Beesely puzzled.

Otto carefully explained, unwrapping a chocolate. 'If the availability of a stock is not so great, the price increases; supply and demand.'

Beesely lowered his head, a puzzled expression taking hold. 'So it's going up ... simply because we bought a lot of it?'

'Yes. What we bought is now worth two billion euro more than when we started, if it was sold now.'

'But if we sold it all now...' he held up his hand to pause Otto, and checked his notes. Reading carefully, he slowly stated, 'The increased liquidity ... would cause it to fall ... before we could sell it at a good price?'

'Correct,' Otto said with a smile. 'You win a chocolate.'

Beesely glanced at the near empty tin, a quick frown, then turned to Dame Helen. 'I find it all fascinating.'

Otto added, 'The Society has bought enough so that we, and the Jewish groups, can take control of many companies that we are interested in. There are already many news stories about this.'

'I want at least one K2 man well placed in each one!' Beesely firmly ordered with a pointed finger. 'One of those ... investment banker chaps.'

'It is being organized. The one thing we are not short of ... is bankers!'

Beesely and Helen both laughed.

'Sir,' buzzed from the phone.

'Yes.'

'The Society is here.'

'Show them down here, please. Tea and coffee.'

'You should have a canteen right there,' Dame Helen suggested, pointing at the far wall.

'What *is* next door?' Beesely asked Otto after glancing at the wall.

'Afile store room,' he informed them with a slight shrug.

'Move it. Put a small kitchen and toilet in there.' Then, as an afterthought Beesely asked, squinting at Otto, 'Is that practical?' Otto nodded and made a note.

Three Society members stepped in a minute later, one whom Beesely recognised, Otto greeting them all warmly.

Beesely walked around the desk and greeted them all personally in turn as well. 'This is Dame Helen, the head of British Intelligence,' he announced finally. They were mildly surprised, if not concerned, as they took seats. Beesely noticed. He caught her eye as he walked back around his desk, stating, 'She very kindly arranged for rumours to be spread in the British and American stock markets. That helped us a great deal yesterday.'

The visitors brightened a little as tea as coffee was brought in.

‘You have the accident?’ their spokesman asked her, heavily accented.

‘A car crash, but I’m OK,’ she quickly and curtly got out, her injuries now an inconvenience, suddenly feeling self-conscious of her appearance.

‘OK, gentlemen, first things first. I think we can get the International Jewish Congress to stop any Holocaust claims against you.’

They glanced at each other, surprised. ‘That would be... most helpful,’ their spokesman cautiously offered.

‘But I may need some favours in return. That will come later. And those favours will not be conditional, as before. So, how did you do yesterday?’

‘We had a good day on the markets,’ they admitted.

‘Excellent. And you are happy to sign over voting rights on the drug stocks?’

‘We are,’ their spokesman said with a slight bow of his head.

‘I want one of your people, alongside one of ours, on the board of each company.’

‘It is no problem. This is something we do every day. We are the best in the world at this.’

Beesely smiled. ‘I do like a confident man.’

‘It is correct,’ Otto proudly offered.

‘Can you, Otto, take these gentlemen to the trading room, and make sure that we have everything as precise and efficient as a Swiss bank.’

Otto stood, collecting his files. ‘Our solicitors and the other bank solicitors are here already, along with government solicitors.’

Beesely’s brow furrowed. ‘Government solicitors?’ he repeated.

‘With transactions of this size it is normal,’ Otto informed him, very matter of fact. Beesely stood as they left.

‘Yet another round of tea and coffee that no one managed to touch!’ Dame Helen pointed out, Beesely trying one of the coffees.

‘Sir,’ buzzed from the phone.

‘Yes.’

‘David from The Lodge, sir.’

‘OK, put him through.’

‘Beesely?’

‘Yes, David. How are you on this fine day?’

‘Mind if I ask if you were dabbling in the stock markets yesterday?’

‘You don’t need to ask, David, you are an American. Just come straight out with what you want.’

‘So what’s going on ... exactly?’

‘We *shook out* the Dow Jones, then accumulated drug stock. We now have control of most the drug and bio-science companies that were involved in Project Darwin, across Europe and the States. It’s war with money, David. War ... with money!’

‘What are you planning on doing with these companies?’

‘Simply keeping an eye on projects, suspicious or otherwise. Nothing more complicated than that.’

‘What about our stem-cell research projects?’

‘I have no problem with genuine research for medicine. It’s the other kind I have a problem with, and so do you ... I am sure. So your Government’s investments are quite safe. The genuine ones I mean.’

‘You may attract attention from the rogue units, Beesely.’

‘What, like large-scale commando attacks? I think, David, that you will find my defences ten times stronger than before, and my ability to reach anyone, *anywhere*, has been increased a hundredfold.’

There was a pause at the other end. ‘Sounds as if you’re planning on becoming a player?’ came the concerned voice.

‘Tell me, David, did The Lodge spot the Darwin project? Did they stop it being sold to the Russians?’

There was a long silence. ‘We took our eye off the ball with that one.’

‘Fine, I will help to keep you focused in future. I will... bring things to your attention.’

‘Sure you don’t want to be chairman?’

‘Positive. And now you know exactly what I am up to. To quote a phrase - *always doing the right thing!*’

‘Well, we’re all very grateful for how you helped the President. Some quarters are obviously not so happy about recommending those *guys* for medals. Talk about playing a joke. Christ, President wants to meet them!’

‘I want to meet them as well. Is that something that a man of your calibre can assist with?’

‘Two are dead for sure. We altered the credit card details as best we could, and removed the child porn - for obvious reasons. The CIA took the money. The men are on the run, six *other* men being presented to the President next week.’

‘And what of the puppet masters for these six? The same puppet master that tried to kill Johnno a few hours go?’

There was another pause. ‘What? Is he alright?’

‘He’s fine. And we chopped up some more of the bad guys. We are getting rather good at it now. All things considered, I think the man with the pistol was a tad surprised to find himself being shot at by an Apache! So, what of the puppet master? Henry is dead, and yet we have a fresh attempt.’

‘We’re having trouble pinning it down.’ David sounded both apologetic, and uncertain of many things.

‘The chairman should not have trouble with such matters, he never used to!’ Beesely suggested.

‘Times have changed; now there are more splinter groups, more departments,’ came the flimsy excuse.

‘Groups within groups, lies on top of lies.’

‘It’s been said before,’ David joked, sounding unsure of himself.

‘I will investigate, David. Do not ... get in my way.’

‘You have seniority ... you are entitled to. I’ll help where I can.’

‘Have a nice day,’ Beesely mocked. He hung up with a finger stabbing at the button.

‘What was all that about?’ Dame Helen enquired, a concerned tone. ‘I’ve heard this ‘Lodge’ name before.’

Beesely sat back, staring out of focus, past her and out of the open door. ‘It is best not to enquire, my dear.’ Then he carefully mouthed, ‘Dangerous.’

‘Groups within groups,’ she repeated with a sigh, scowling at no one in particular.

‘Which reminds me.’ He pressed CALL. ‘Do we have people in South Africa?’

‘Yes, sir. They are going after the man who hired the Spa attackers.’

‘Good. Listen, I want to buy an influential share in *all* South African security companies involved with mercenaries.’ He pressed END. ‘With a bit of luck we can track back from this South African. I doubt it, but we may get lucky.’ He lifted the near empty chocolates tin.

‘Why on earth are you involved in the Jewish Congress claims against Swiss banks?’ she enquired.

‘Good job you reminded me.’ He pressed CALL. ‘Elle Rosen, Mossad, London.’

Dame Helen raised an eyebrow.

‘Beesely?’ came from the phone.

‘Yes, how are you, Elle?’

‘That is the first time you have enquired. Normally you tell me that some big problem is happening!’

Dame Helen laughed, earning a reproachful glance from Beesely.

‘Listen, small favour, Elle. Could you ask the International Jewish Congress if they wouldn’t mind ... dropping any Holocaust claims against the Swiss?’

‘What?’ Elle shrieked. ‘What are you asking? In your position you should be helping us with those claims! You’re on the inside!’

‘I *am* helping,’ Beesely firmly insisted. ‘I am helping to get you and the CIA ... *a prize more valued.*’

There was a pause. ‘Do you mean what I think you mean?’ Elle enquired.

‘Yes, so be patient. I will send you two hundred million dollars for the families. Hell, it’s probably some of their money anyway.’

‘Not so funny, my friend.’

Beesely took a breath. ‘Just do as I ask, Elle. And I think you will find a lot of pressure on you from the President to the same effect.’

‘I have been watching the American news. Sometimes I think you are just the bit crazy. Then a day later ... just the bit brilliant.’

‘Elle, I make it up as I go along, you know that. Will you make the call?’

‘I’ll make the call. It’s not like I need friends in the world.’

‘Good, good.’

‘And Beesely, some day you just call to say hi, eh?’ The line went dead.

‘I’m sticking with crazy,’ Helen offered.

‘You may be right, my dear,’ he sighed. ‘You may be right.’

‘So, coming back to my original question, what’s this Jewish stuff all about?’

He glanced at the doorway. ‘The men you met earlier are from the secret Swiss banker’s Society; it dates back three hundred years odd. They tend to choose Swiss Federal Presidents, or kill the ones they don’t like. They have a lot of financial clout, not so much firepower. I’ve made friends with them.’

She tipped her head. ‘And?’

‘And if I have the key to the door, I could remove the funds of most of the world’s terrorists and organized crime lords overnight. Iranians have money here, so do the North Koreans, the Syrians, Saddam’s family is said to have an account with ten billion dollars in. IRA had accounts, ETA, Red Brigade - you name them.’

‘But how would the Swiss react?’

‘Not well, it would destroy a chunk of their economy.’

‘So they won’t give it up!’

‘Not all of it, no. And they may get very upset with K2 if we pry.’

She rubbed her aching leg. ‘Delicate.’

Beesely sat back. ‘But they did help me liberate some stolen EU funds from Nigerian politicians.’

‘Did the Nigerians complain to the Swiss Government?’ His look suggested that they were in no position to complain. ‘Oh,’ she added, offering a disapproving stare.

‘Thing is, we do not want to stop the world’s terrorists using Switzerland. We just want a peek up their skirts once in a while.’

‘How eloquently phrased. You, sir, have been spending too much time around Johnno.’

Snappers and scribblers

1

‘Ah, Duncan, come in,’ Beesely enthused as the reporter appeared in the doorway. He stood and gestured Duncan - and his visibly nervous photographer - to seats. ‘Good flight down?’

‘Hour and a bit,’ Duncan commented. ‘Took longer to get to bloody Heathrow and queue up.’ A guard waited just inside the doorway.

Beesely focused on the photographer, a welcoming smile. ‘Are you the snapper?’

‘Yes,’ the man coughed out, glancing around the room and wondering what he had got himself into.

‘Good. Right, this is what I want - oh, any problems with stories about ... you know what?’

‘Some,’ Duncan answered. ‘But all dealt with. It’s a well-oiled machine now, Sir Morris. And ... on occasion I take your name in vain. I had this chap sniffing around, asking questions about me, so I told him he should talk to you. He was some kind of spook, MI5 or whatever. Soon as I mentioned your name he legged it.’

Beesely made quick eye contact with Helen. ‘Excellent. Right, to your assignment, gentlemen.’ Otto walked in and sat, notepad and paper in hand. ‘You remember Otto?’

‘Yes,’ Duncan offered with a forced smile for Otto.

‘Right. Around here you will find lots of good photo opportunities. There is the training camp you saw on the way in - lots of soldiers and guns. There are the mountains, and we have a few training facilities in the hills, ask for a list of facilities and make sure that you do not miss anything.’

He gestured with thrusting hand. ‘Your objective is to make the Swiss counter terrorism services look like they can take on the world ... and win!’

Duncan nodded his understanding, his photographer less sure of things.

Beesely continued, 'Of course, all photos and finished article to be checked by us first.' He waved dismissively. 'You will be strip searched at the end, anyway.' The photographer now looked even more worried. Beesely added, 'You will be billeted up the road, at health spa, it's very nice, no chit-chat with the locals, but enjoy your stay. Oh, don't forget our squadron of Apache attack helicopters, we'll get you up in one, a few pictures from inside.'

'They the ones that helped with the attack on this place?' Duncan asked.

'No, they were Americans, based in Southern Germany. These we bought afterwards.'

'You bought a squadron of Apaches?' Duncan repeated, wide eyed. 'What ... they were second-hand on eBay?'

Otto smiled.

'E ... bay?' Beesely queried.

Otto informed him, 'Internet shopping website.'

'Ah. No. It's kind of hard to explain. Officially, they are Swiss Army.' He tapped his nose. 'So, any questions?'

'What angle on the story?' Duncan asked.

Beesely eased back. 'Secret Swiss security services, bank security etc., along the lines of ... they don't generally show off, but after the large scale bank robbery attempt they allowed you in, etc.'

'Gotcha. No problem. What timescale, Boss?'

'No hurry. Hang around a couple of days, there could be a bonus for a good job.'

* * *

Patrick stepped in with Susan, their expressions suggesting they had something of interest.

‘DHL dead heads!’ Patrick announced, holding a sheet of paper.

Beesely curled a lip. ‘What are those?’

‘DHL, a parcel carrier,’ Patrick explained.

‘Ah, I see.’

‘And *dead heads* is a term Johnno said was for pilots who don’t fly, just catch a lift.’

‘Spare pilots?’ Beesely enquired, dryly. ‘In case one breaks down?’

Patrick smiled. ‘No, they’re pilots just catching a lift, re-positioning themselves around the world so they can take other aircraft someplace.’

‘And they are linked in?’

‘Three of them,’ Susan put in. ‘All linked to the original six men via hotels and restaurants in Germany, some in Switzerland.’

Beesely puzzled that statement. ‘Are we saying the CIA use these pilots as agents?’

‘Why not?’ Dame Helen challenged. ‘They fly all around the world, and no one ever suspects them. They have stopovers in many places.’

‘Seems plausible,’ Beesely agreed, making a face. ‘So what do we have?’

Patrick handed him the sheet as Otto entered.

Beesely glanced at the sheet, then lifted it up for Otto. ‘Some DHL parcel pilots are tied in somehow.’

‘There is a DHL Captain and a regional manager at the spa,’ Otto informed them, now concerned. ‘They were questioned by the police this morning.’

Beesely stood. ‘I want our friends in the police to pick them up, and bring them here, through the rear entrance.’ Otto stepped quickly out.

‘Sir,’ buzzed from the phone.

‘Yes?’

‘An Apache has landed outside, sir.’

‘Did we ask an Apache to land outside?’

‘Herr Johno asked for it, sir.’

‘OK.’ He pressed END as Johno ambled in.

Beesely made eye contact. ‘There’s an Apache here?’

‘Visual aid,’ Johno stated as he checked the Quality Street chocolate tin.

‘Visual aid?’ Beesely repeated.

‘For anyone watching this place,’ Johno added, slumping in a chair.

‘Ah, right. Scare the buggers. We have just tied in a few DHL pilots to the original group of six men, and there were two DHL chaps at the spa.’

Johno straightened, keenly interested. ‘Where’re they now?’

‘Otto is arranging for the police to grab them.’

Johno nodded, looking tired. He lifted his head to Susan, now stood alongside Dame Helen. ‘What was the trouble earlier with your sprogs?’

‘Trouble?’ Beesely repeated, immediately concerned.

Susan reluctantly began, ‘Son of one of the builders - can’t be more than eighteen. He caught the eye of my eldest.’

‘And Susan,’ Johno stated gleefully, ‘*tactful* as she is, told the young lad she’d cut his bollocks off if he looked at her girl again.’

Beesely sighed. ‘Christ, we’ve upset the builders enough of late! Did he do anything other than simply *look*?’

‘No,’ Susan reluctantly admitted. ‘But she’s like a dog on heat, and we have enough problems as it is.’

Johno lifted the now-empty chocolates tin and shook it, giving Beesely a knowing look.

‘God, yes. What’s that girl’s name again?’

‘Adrienne,’ Johno informed him.

Beesely tapped his phone. ‘Is that you, Adrienne?’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘Can you pop in, please?’ He pressed END. ‘Susan, if you do not mind, we need a good working relationship with our

builders; we tend to wreck the place often!’ Susan glanced around the faces, not knowing what she had done wrong.

Adrienne knocked and stepped just inside the door. ‘Sir?’

Beesely waved her in. ‘What’s the name of the son of the builder working today?’

‘Otto, sir,’ she nervously answered. ‘He’s one of my brothers.’

Johno shot Susan a look.

‘Oh,’ Beesely let out. ‘Er ... well earlier, Susan here –’ he gestured. ‘- may have been a little ... *loud* with him. You see, her daughter likes your brother ... and Susan, the daughter’s ... mother ... did not want her daughter involved with an older boy.’

‘I’m sure he did not mean anything, sir,’ Adrienne nervously apologised. ‘He has a girlfriend.’

Otto walked back in.

‘Does he? Good. I mean, that’s good for him. Please tell your father that the boy –’

‘Otto,’ his namesake quietly put in.

‘- is not in any kind of trouble, but that it may be wise for him to work elsewhere whilst Susan’s daughter is here, if you understand.’

Adrienne smiled slightly. ‘Yes, sir. I understand.’

‘There’s plenty of work at the Spa,’ Johno sarcastically pointed out.

‘Yes,’ Beesely said with a sigh and forced smile. ‘Plenty of work at the Spa. And thanks again for the chocolates.’

Johno stood and walked up to Adrienne, leaning in and tapping his cheek with a finger.

‘Do you need another band-aid, sir?’ she asked with a frown.

Beesely laughed. ‘That will be all, young lady. Thank your father for me for all his hard work.’ She trotted out, smiling. He faced Johno. ‘Your technique needs work.’

Twenty minutes later, the DHL pilot and his manager arrived, having been driven through the camp; past the guards, past the ex-SAS, and then deliberately past the Apache. Finally, they were taken through the tunnel and the lower bunker before arriving at Beesely's office via the walkway, now suitably *prepped*.

Guards pushed them into two chairs arranged in front of the desk. Johno sat on the cabinet, MP5 in hand, Otto stood nearby. Dame Helen's wheelchair now rested close to Beesely, and Patrick and Susan were sitting off to one side.

The pilot offered a handsome image; tall, fit, and dark haired, a hint of grey in front of his ears. The older man was stocky, thinning on top, and had a few days growth of stubble. They both wore casual jackets over t-shirts and jeans. The gang looked the men over as their DHL IDs were placed on the desk by a guard.

Beesely had been writing when the two men had been seated. A good twenty seconds later he put down his pen, looked up and took off his glasses. He regarded them for a moment, then eased back into his chair. 'You, gentlemen, are conspicuously quiet. No protesting, no requesting of your embassy?'

'Would it do any good?' the older man finally asked with a distinct American drawl.

'It might do. Do you have any friends in high places?'

'Yes, and they'll be looking for us. This is the first place they'll look.'

'Really? Gosh, guess we will have to make sure we hide your bodies well.'

The pilot looked less than certain about the older man's stoic approach, Beesely noticing. 'What are you, CIA?'

'Yes,' the older man claimed, snarling. 'And you'll pay a heavy price for screwing with us.'

Beesely reached across and grabbed the DHL IDs. He tapped CALL. 'What time is it in Washington right now?'

'6am, sir.'

‘Get me the director of the CIA, at home. What’s his name again?’

‘George Holmes, sir.’

The pilot fixed his eyes on the phone as they waited.

‘Hello?’ came from the desk phone, a deep American accent.

‘George Holmes?’

‘Yes, who’s this?’

‘Sir Morris Beesely, calling from K2 headquarters in Switzerland. Did I wake you?’

‘Beesely? Yes, you woke me, but never mind, if you need to call me then do so. Anytime.’

‘That’s good to know, George. May I call you George?’

‘Yes, of course. Have you spoken to the President?’

‘No, not yet. Can you tell him on my behalf ... that it may be better than he does not try and speak directly with me, he needs *plausible deniability* should I ... you know.’

‘Yes, I fully understand. Good idea, I’ll call him later.’

‘Listen, small problem. Got a couple of your chaps sat opposite me as we speak, they tried to kill me this morning.’

‘What? We haven’t sanctioned any such action, and given who you are - why the hell would we? You’re on our team!’

‘Well, seems as if someone in your outfit *does not* know that.’

‘Who are these men?’ Holmes demanded.

‘They are masquerading as DHL pilots and managers.’

‘What are their names?’

‘The senior individual is down as Thierry O’Donoghue, DHL manager for Germany.’

‘Hold on a second, I’m going to make a call on my mobile.’

They waited. The pilot began glancing at the older man, the manager himself now losing most of his defiance.

‘Beesely, you there?’

‘Yes, still here.’

‘His real name is Martin Preston –’ the man visibly winced.
‘- Deputy Section Chief, Berlin.’

‘So why, pray tell, is he trying to kill me?’

‘He shouldn’t be, this is not sanctioned from above.’

‘Who ... is he answering to?’

‘To the Section Chief in Berlin, then to the European Section Head at Langley - in an ideal world. I’ll be launching a full-scale enquiry as soon as I get in, you can be assured of that.’

‘I can’t ask for more than that, George. What would you like me to do with this pair?’

‘I’ll arrange a military transport for them, if that’s OK with you?’

Beesely eased back. ‘Well, K2 has a reputation to maintain. We would normally torture and execute them, then dispose of the bodies as we usually do. I am playing a role, after all.’

There came a stunned silence from the other end. ‘There would be a lot of awkward questions, they’ll be missed.’

‘Well, maybe just one of them then. The pilot is not a Deputy Section Chief.’

‘My official position is that we want them, and I can’t deviate from that, you know that as well as I do.’

‘Very well, I will give it some thought. Pop over at some point, I will show you around.’ He hung up. Beesely made eye contact with Mr. Martin Preston. ‘He does not have a clue, does he?’

‘He’s a political appointee,’ Preston said with venom. ‘Just a figure head. The real work goes on around him.’

Beesely glanced at the side of Dame Helen’s head. ‘Some of the people in this room might take exception to that view of how the head of an intelligence organization should be treated.’ Dame Helen had not responded, she was still fixed on the man. ‘Well, I cannot just hand you over and let you run around telling people how soft I am with prisoners. But if I kill you ... he will be annoyed, and I have no wish to annoy him.’

‘I want to cut a deal,’ the pilot reluctantly stated.

Preston snapped his head towards the pilot. ‘Talk and we go after your family,’ he hissed.

Susan was on her feet in an instant, Preston half-standing and turning as if to attack the pilot. She caught him with a left uppercut and sent him flying backwards over the chair, out cold before he hit the floor. Guards rushed in, holding the pilot and grabbing the unconscious Section Chief.

‘Good God, Susan,’ Dame Helen let out.

Beesely made eye contact with Johnno, cocking and eyebrow. ‘She’s a Beesely all right.’ He turned to the guards. ‘Get a doctor for him, we don’t want him dying on us,’ he quietly ordered. ‘Then hold him in the chair room, without harm, but show him *all* of our nice videos.’

Three guards carried him out, two guards now stood behind the pilot, hands on his shoulders and preventing him from standing.

‘So, mister pilot, you want to *cut a deal*, as the Yanks like to say.’

The pilot frowned. ‘I *am* a Yank.’

Beesely made a face, feeling foolish. ‘So what do you know?’

‘He was trying to kidnap either you or your son,’ the pilot explained.

Dame Helen turned. ‘Your son?’ Johnno winked at her without the pilot noticing. ‘Oh,’ Dame Helen let out. ‘That explains a lot.’

The pilot glanced at her, none the wiser, adding, ‘They wanted to ransom either of you for something, something very valuable.’

Beesely appeared as if he was about to say something, then hesitated. ‘Something of great value? What?’ He glanced at Otto, who appeared surprisingly nervous all of a sudden.

‘I don’t know,’ the pilot added.

Beesely turned fully to Otto. ‘Ransom me for K2 cash? For bank cash?’

‘I would not hand it over,’ Otto flatly stated. Beesely stared at him. Otto added, ‘Would you wish me to, knowing that you would probably be dead anyway?’

‘No, I would never expect to be ransomed. And K2 is more valuable *with* its cash, more valuable than me and my son together.’

Johno sarcastically stated, ‘Those two ain’t worth two bent pennies!’

‘Yes, quite. So what do we have of great value?’ he posed, Otto shifting uneasily on his seat.

The pilot added eagerly, ‘He reckoned it was worth trillions, whatever it was.’

Otto quickly put in, ‘That is stupid.’

Beesely made eye contact with Otto. ‘Access to the Society?’

Otto shook his head. ‘They will co-operate only when it suits them.’

‘Buried treasure?’ Johno asked with a smirk whilst focused on Otto. ‘Oil under the lake?’

‘Something about oil, and something hidden in a vault,’ the pilot said. ‘Preston kept saying, *it’s all about oil.*’

Otto was visibly relieved.

Beesely eased back, holding his gaze on Otto. ‘If it’s about Middle East oil then we cannot help. And it’s not like we have the virus, so we cannot ransom it.’ He faced the pilot, getting annoyed. ‘What else?’

‘Not much. I’m not a full agent, I just help on the odd job, plus packages here and there.’

‘What did he talk about after a few drinks?’ Beesely asked.

‘Like I said, oil and more bloody oil - end of world scenarios - global warming, the Middle East, crap like that.’

Otto stood, very slowly, and turned to face Beesely, an expression Beesely had not seen before. ‘I believe I know what this is about. Why the CIA may have had old plans to attack Gunter, why they feared you coming here, why they wanted to ransom you - or someone you cared about.’ He turned to the

guards, 'Take him out.' Next he turned to Susan, 'Can you and Patrick take Helen upstairs, please.'

Susan and Patrick stood, but looked to Beesely for confirmation.

'Please,' Beesely requested as he stood.

'We're in this fight together,' Susan protested.

'Some things are more dangerous than others,' Otto suggested. 'Considering what I think this is about, I am very surprised we have not had dealings with the Americans before now.'

'Please,' Beesely repeated to Susan, a hand gesturing towards the door.

With a protesting huff, Susan wheeled Dame Helen out. Patrick said 'good luck' and closed the door.

Oil under the lake?

1

Otto sat opposite Beesely, Johno sitting next to him.

‘So, what do you think they were after?’ Beesely keenly enquired.

‘Something Gunter had some foresight about, I hate to admit. I am surprised I did not think of it earlier, but Gunter had a great many ideas about many things. He had patents to several strange inventions.’

‘Christ,’ Johno quietly let out. ‘Not that fabled car engine that needs only a small drop of oil and some old cow shit?’

‘No,’ Otto informed him, a slight frown creasing his brow. ‘But we do have patents on many things that one day may be worth a great deal of money, including engines that are efficient, solar power, and others. We must have a look at them soon.’

‘Solar power?’ Beesely asked with a frown. ‘That’s it?’

‘No,’ Otto answered. ‘It is oil.’

Johno wagged a finger and smiled. ‘See, there is oil under the lake.’

‘No, there is oil under the snow,’ Otto quietly informed Beesely.

‘Alaska?’ Beesely probed.

‘In part. Gunter had a number of dormant oil drilling rights and concessions.’

‘That could be worth that much?’ Beesely questioned.

‘Not today, not for twenty years or more,’ Otto suggested.

‘That’s OK,’ Johno quipped. ‘Thomas will be old enough by then, and running this place.’

‘It is not so much the joke,’ Otto said with a wry smile.

‘So what is it?’ Beesely asked.

‘Gunter has oil drilling and exploration concessions to an area of Northern Alaska. Up to ninety nine years after the contract date, 1937.’

‘So it has thirty years to run,’ Beesely considered. ‘In twenty years odd it will be worth more, but I don’t know about trillions. Getting oil out of the Arctic is tricky and expensive. Plus all the pollution and Greenpeace protestors - *save the seal*.’

‘Till there’s a shortage, then they just won’t give a shit,’ Johnno suggested, trying the last chocolate.

‘There is one thing you are forgetting,’ Otto teased them. ‘The other favourite topic of this man: global warming.’

‘Of course,’ Beesely exclaimed. ‘When the ice melts, getting at the oil should be a heck of a lot easier!’

‘So that’s what these Yanks are after, our mining rights to seal country?’ Johnno puzzled, a sceptical frown shot at Otto.

‘No,’ Otto stated.

‘No?’ Beesely repeated.

‘The mining rights in Alaska are, I believe, less than five percent of what Gunter acquired.’

‘Five percent!’ Johnno repeated. ‘Fuck ... me!’

Beesely was staggered. ‘What other drilling rights does he have?’

Otto took a breath. ‘He has land and rights north of the current Canadian sand-oil fields.’

‘Which are mostly snow-bound at the moment,’ Beesely pointed out, thinking aloud.

‘Not for long,’ Johnno suggested. ‘the Chinese are going to make sure of that, with a new frigging power station every week.’ He scrunched up the chocolate wrapper, flicking it upwards with a thumb and landing it into the tin.

‘How big are these fields?’ Beesely asked, an annoyed glance towards Johnno.

‘If I remember correctly, they are ten thousand square miles.’

‘Shit,’ Johnno let out, his eyes wide. Then he turned to Beesely. ‘Is that big for Canada?’

‘Not really. About a hundred miles square, not a large percentage of Canada, so I don’t know why they would want it. It’s very valuable yes, but not the Holy Grail. And it’s hard land to work, with small margins at the moment.’

Otto explained, ‘It is in the prime sand-oil belt. But this is not the most valuable, I think. I must do some research. The bank also has rights to areas of Northern Norway and an island off Norway.’

‘That got oil under it?’ Johno asked.

‘Nobody knows,’ Otto suggested. ‘I do not think anyone has drilled these areas.’

‘So the potential could be huge,’ Beesely said to himself, staring out of focus. ‘Maybe the Americans know something we missing, about these oil fields.’

‘So we own the oil under the land?’ Johno asked Otto.

Otto shook his head. ‘No. If, and when, it is agreed by the governments to drill those areas, we would have the option of being the oil company doing the exploration and drilling, earning a percentage.’

‘Ah, so we don’t own the oil itself,’ Johno considered. ‘We would be ... what ... the preferred contactor?’

Otto nodded. ‘The main area of interest, and what this is mostly about, is probably Greenland.’

‘Greenland?’ Beesely questioned. ‘I have never heard of oil in Greenland. They looked in 1976 I think, didn’t find anything.’

‘It has only been theorised, and exploration is becoming a problem with the UN rights for ... the likes of Eskimos.’

‘UN Indigenous Peoples Rights,’ Beesely informed him, carefully pronouncing the words.

‘At the moment,’ Johno scoffed. ‘But when oil gets short they won’t give a fuck.’

‘What part of Greenland did Gunter buy?’ Beesely asked.

‘Most of the east coast. But I believe I read that the authorities are selling concessions on the west coast at present.’

‘So, we could be worth a bob or two if there is oil,’ Johnno said as he stood and stretched. ‘Sweet. So why hasn’t anyone offered to buy this stuff from us?’

‘They do not know,’ Otto suggested. ‘Not about all of it.’

‘Someone does!’ Beesely snapped. ‘At least about a big part of it.’

‘The rights would be no use to them at the moment,’ Otto sullenly suggested.

‘Why?’ Beesely asked, noticing Otto’s expression.

‘There are government and UN treaties to protect the lands of the Eskimos - in Alaska, Canada, Norway and Greenland.’

Johnno stared at Beesely for several seconds. ‘Unless you were kill them with a virus first! Spread over the next twenty years.’

‘One genetically targeted!’ Beesely added, his shoulders dropping. ‘Making it all appear as if it’s a natural outbreak of flu, or SARS virus.’

‘Lies on top of lies,’ Johnno muttered, taking a beer from the fridge. ‘Could be worse, we could be sat on a fucking beach.’

Beesely ran a hand across his bald scalp. ‘Any bright ideas, boys?’

‘Yeah,’ Johnno began. ‘The west needs oil, and by that I mean *us* as well, so why not let the Yanks or whatever drill the frigging oil? When the snow melts.’

Otto suggested, ‘When oil is short the Americans will take it by force, so too the Russians. The Russian Eskimos will not be a problem, same for Americans in Alaska.’

‘Unless common sense breaks out,’ Beesely quietly stated.

‘Hah!’ Johnno scoffed, sipping his beer.

‘Well, we are not at that stage yet,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘We are here and now, and so far the governments in question - and the laws, are protecting these areas as much as the weather keeping people out. Once the tipping point is reached those oil rights will not be worth anything. They are not worth much now, but between twenty and fifty years from now they may be worth

a hell of a lot - just as it becomes economical to drill those areas, *and not* politically worth pissing-off the UN.'

'Greenland belongs to Denmark,' Otto pointed out. 'So the European Union will be up against the Americans if they break the law there.'

'And the EU is just as hungry for oil as the States,' Johno added. 'So where does that leave us? Holding a hot potato, stuck between Europe and the US.'

'We should sell the rights,' Beesely suggested, with a dismissive wave. 'Take the heat off us.'

'To whom?' Otto asked. 'Which side?'

'Neither side,' Beesely began. 'To an independent honest broker. Well, independent at least. Mostly.'

'The Society!' Otto exclaimed.

'Who else? They have the money and the neutrality. No one else could handle it, unless it was sold to a government. They also have deep dark vaults.'

'Why not sell the Greenland concessions back to Denmark?' Johno suggested.

'All for Switzerland ... may be the best option,' Beesely insisted, earning a puzzled look from Otto. 'Otto, let's find some answers to some questions. Are the Society people still here?'

'Yes, their trading delegation. But it will take time to review the documents.'

'OK, let's say tomorrow at 2pm. Have the documents checked and summarised overnight, then we ask an oil expert to value them.'

Otto nodded. 'We have many top oil traders and analysts, they can make an estimate. I will arrange this.' He stepped out.

'So,' Johno began with a sigh, 'Once we're shot of the hot potato we'll let the Yanks know about it?'

'Oh, yes,' Beesely firmly agreed. 'Then we can tackle the idiots with the virus.'

Johno stood. 'Right, got a car to take back.'

Beesely winced. 'Good luck. Go armed!'

Beesely knocked on Dame Helen's door, surprised to note the sounds of high-spirited and overlapping conversations coming from within. Mike answered the door.

'Evening, Mike. Not disturbing you ... am I?'

'No, no, come on in.'

Beesely noted Mike's pleasant demeanour as he entered, surprised to find Minister Blaum sat with his jacket off and his sleeves rolled up. 'Minister?' Beesely was caught off guard.

'Evening, Beesely,' Blaum responded with a smile. 'I have taken a room, if that's all right.'

Beesely quickly took in the scene; Tabitha was sat on the bed, Dame Helen in her wheelchair and looking a little brighter. 'Of course it's all right, *you* ... are always welcome here.'

'That's what we figured,' Dame Helen mentioned. 'Dinner upstairs in an hour, we asked them for some decent chefs.'

'I do hope you did not word it like that!'

'No,' she smiled. 'We asked them about evening specialities and they showed a list of guest chefs.'

'Ah, yes. I remember now. Not easy to keep the kitchen staff happy.'

'Perhaps, Beesely, you should destroy the kitchen less often?' Blaum said with a smirk. 'They spend more time at home than they do here apparently.'

Beesely unhappily nodded his acceptance of that premise. 'We will need you tomorrow, Minister, along with your Federal President -' Blaum stopped smiling and straightened. '- and your government solicitors, to witness something.'

'Some big deal?' Blaum enquired, stepping closer.

Beesely took a breath. 'Tens of billions.'

Blaum stopped dead, appearing suddenly mortified. 'Dear God, Beesely, what ... is worth that?'

Beesely glanced at Dame Helen, Mike now curious. 'Something hidden in a deep dark vault.' Blaum took a breath and held it, his pulse racing. 'The heart of this problem.' Blaum could feel his pulse in his neck. 'Oil.' Blaum breathed again.

'Oil?' Dame Helen puzzled.

'To quote the Berlin Deputy Section Chief, CIA - *it's all about oil and global warming!* Although I can't do the accent justice.'

'What oil?' Blaum pressed.

Beesely made strong eye contact. 'Before the Second World War, Gunter bought, or obtained, some very useless oil concessions which have never been used. It seems we have the rights to a large part of Alaska, Canada, Norway and Greenland.'

Blaum's jaw dropped. 'They could be priceless!'

'They could be worth nothing. But with global warming pushing back the ice, and the price of oil rising, they could well be priceless.'

'What are you going to do with them?' Blaum asked in a strained whisper.

'Give them to the Swiss banking Society, under Swiss government supervision.'

Blaum stood frozen, temporarily immobilized and rooted to the spot, staring at Beesely.

Dame Helen turned her wheelchair towards Beesely. 'Will that stop their interest in you?'

'Partly, my dear, partly. Anyway, what is this chef like?'

'He's expensive,' Mike mentioned, as if that might be a problem.

Relieved, Blaum roared with laughter, turning to Mike. Even Helen laughed, Beesely joining in.

'Listen,' Beesely began. 'At dinner, let us all try and not talk shop.'

'Got no argument there,' Dame Helen approved.

* * *

‘There are police on every corner for five miles,’ a guard commented, holding up a hand against the midday sun.

Johno had stepped out of the proceedings for a cigarette break at the drawbridge, squinting now in the bright sunlight, and dressed in a smart new suit. The ex-SAS teams were tucked away, no Apache helicopters on the grass. Security was very tight today, but also very tightly hidden.

The guard next to him questioned, ‘All this for our President?’

‘No, it’s for the bank Society. There’s a big deal going down, and things should be quieter after this.’

‘We’ll take the fight to them?’

Johno tipped his eyebrows up and down. ‘Hope so.’

The guard’s radio crackled into life. ‘Courtyard, Legal Party One leaving now.’

‘Roger that.’ The guard pointed at two Range Rovers. They started up and moved forwards, two more moving up and taking their place, guards attending the car doors.

‘Stay sharp,’ Johno quietly ordered as he turned, heading back inside. He passed a group of suits near the lift, not knowing quite which group they were. Then he waited a full five minutes as more suits came down in the lift.

Thomas had protested, whinged, whined and generally tried everything to get out of putting his old bellhop costume back on, finally bribed with hard cash. Now he busily shuttled guests in the lift, a less than friendly welcome for his sponsor. ‘Vanker,’ he muttered, loud enough for Johno to hear.

‘Wu ... wu-an-ker. Wanker,’ Johno corrected. Finally, he arrived back in the restaurant, now a little stuffy with all the attendant warm bodies. He sought out Otto within the crowd. ‘All done and dusted?’ Johno whispered as he drew level, he and Otto now facing the centre of the crowd.

‘Done and dusted?’ Otto repeated with a curious frown. ‘I have heard this phrase, but do not know its meaning.’

‘Old days,’ Johno whispered out of the side of his mouth. ‘Ink from a bird’s feather, very wet, they threw dust on it to dry it quicker.’

‘Ah,’ Otto sighed. ‘Yes, papers signed and, more importantly, witnessed and photographed many times over.’

‘So what deal was struck?’

Mathius, the bank’s CEO, moved past and shook Johno’s hand briefly before moving off.

‘Capital sum now, percentage of gross margin on oil-fields if pumping begins.’

‘So, are we richer than before?’

‘Three times more, not including any oil revenue.’

Johno’s eyes widened, carefully regarding his step-brother for a moment. ‘If you were *really* Gunter’s son, that would all be yours,’ he whispered.

Otto considered the suggestion. ‘Then I would not have had the pleasure of meeting you,’ he whispered, a glint in his eye.

Johno grinned from ear to ear. ‘Vanker,’ he muttered, the two of them laughing sedately.

The crowd started to clap. Without a clue as to what for, they both clapped as well. Using a break in the crowd, Johno wiggled between suits towards Beesely, stopping a body distance behind him and back in bodyguard mode.

Blaum and his President were snuggling up to Beesely, photographs being taken by a K2 man. The Society were well represented, he could see, but not so keen on the photo album touch.

‘How is you?’ a heavily accented voice asked. Johno turned to find the *old man* himself. He smiled and thrust a hand out, shaking the old man’s cold and limp offering.

‘Good, sir. Alles gute?’

‘Yes. Your man Bis-el-ee is the strange-ed man.’

‘That is so true,’ Johno agreed.

The old man placed a white hand on Johno’s shoulder then shuffled awkwardly past.

A long hour later, Mike wheeled Helen into the restaurant, followed by Susan and Patrick. Beesely sat now with Blaum, Johno, Otto and the bank's CEO Mathius, jackets discarded and ties loosened.

As Dame Helen drew near she said, 'I thought you agreed *not* to destroy the restaurant any more?'

They laughed and took in the scene around them; cups, plates, spilled drinks, bits of food, the floor littered with all sorts, the kitchen counter stacked ten deep with cups.

'Help yourself to drinks,' Johno suggested. 'It's now self service – on account of the fact that the kitchen staff are *bleeding knackered*.'

Susan and Patrick grab seats. Mike pulled across a chair and sat near his wife, as Thomas walked in muttering under his breath in German. He plonked down next to Johno, folded his arms and rested them on the tabletop, finally putting his chin on his arm.

'Had a hard day at the office?' Johno enquired, lowering his head, only to be ignored.

'All done and dusted?' Dame Helen enquired.

'I must remember this phrase,' Otto suggested, as much to himself as anyone else. Mathius asked for clarification, which Otto gave.

'Bloody well hope so,' Beesely replied. 'I would not wish to do all that again.'

'How did it go?' she pressed.

'Well, I made proposals, then the solicitors chit-chatted away feverishly for five minutes, then a counter proposal, then another round of whispers, then the government lot whispering, then a provisional agreement - which would be scribbled down, then the next step. It was bleeding exhausting.'

‘For this money,’ Otto began, ‘in a short time, it is the miracle. It is the financial history.’

‘It is true,’ Mathius insisted. ‘This negotiation should have taken one year!’

‘A whole year?’ Susan queried.

‘Yes,’ Mathius insisted. ‘But it was so important that everyone wanted it done today. But also the concession Herr Beesely offered the Society was conditional on a deal today.’

‘What was the deal?’ Susan asked. ‘If we’re allowed to know?’

‘Yes, yes, my dear, you’re allowed to know,’ Beesely informed them. ‘The tricky part is over. The deal? Well, we sold oil drilling concessions and rights to the Swiss banking Society collectively - they all have a say and share in it. It was conditional on it being sorted today, and conditional on our bank getting a percentage - a generously low percentage - plus the Swiss Government has a say and veto on the use of the concessions. We received a capital sum, which was about a quarter of what we should have made. That may seem low, but oil exploration is a tricky thing, so maybe not so low.’

‘Did you make as much as on the stock markets the other day?’ Susan asked.

Otto laughed, earning a scowl from her. ‘I am not laughing at you,’ he insisted through a massive grin.

‘So ... you made a great deal more?’ she nudged. His look suggested that they had made much more.

‘There was one other ... small condition,’ Beesely informed Dame Helen through tired eyes. ‘A little skirt lifting.’

‘Ah!’ she acknowledged. ‘That should be interesting.’ She then pointed at her leg. Beesely eased up and looked over the table, noticing now a lightweight plastic cast and ankle support. Turning her wheelchair around, she stood with a little difficulty, took five reasonable steps and turned, holding up her hands in question. They applauded as she walked back and sat on a chair.

‘Right,’ Beesely said as he stood. ‘Some phone calls before I fall asleep. Otto, Johnno.’ They stood, moving slowly. ‘We will be back shortly.’

As they left, Susan rolled up her sleeves and started moving cups. ‘Can’t stand mess.’

* * *

The three Germans had screamed at length; at Pepi, at his lieutenants, and then at each other. Now they were gone, having stormed out leaving Pepi in the basement and pondering many things.

He slumped down onto a sofa, ordering out his assistants. Loosening his tie, he recognised the sound of heels on the steps. Maria sat silently. After a full minute, Pepi said, ‘Gunter stole their oil concessions. We always blamed the bookkeeper - we always thought they were with the files. Now we know.’

Maria said nothing.

Pepi continued, ‘K2 sold them to the bank society, making K2 worth at least four times what it was, and that is just in the short-term.’

‘My God,’ Maria whispered. ‘No wonder they were angry.’

‘You know what is ironic here? If these American idiots had not attacked K2, they would probably have never noticed the value of these items – they would have stayed in the vaults.’

‘K2 has grown very strong,’ she risked. ‘Perhaps ... perhaps we should work around them?’

Pepi smiled at her, a tired, reluctant smile. Whispering, he said, ‘I have had the same thought once or twice lately.’

* * *

Beesely slumped into his seat and yawned. Johnno opened the fridge and grabbed two beer bottles, handing one to Otto.

Beesely pressed CALL. 'David at The Lodge, America, please.'

'Yes, sir.'

They waited.

'Beesely?'

'Yes, David, how goes it?'

'I'm waiting for the penny to drop, you don't just call to ask how I am.'

'Hope I have not gone that far yet. Listen, just to let you know, this bank used to have some oil concessions - Alaska, Canada, Norway and Greenland.'

'Greenland? There's no oil in Greenland, except a small offshore field, and that hasn't been tapped yet!'

'Well, we sold them anyway. They were burning holes in our pockets.'

'Get a good price?'

'Let's just say that our bank is now worth four times more than it was when I woke up this morning.'

'Christ! I don't know exactly what it was worth before, but we have an idea.'

'Anyway, I want you to tell all persons in intelligence circles, CIA, NSA - and anyone who worries about the future of America's oil sources - that we have sold all of our concessions to another Swiss group.'

'Why?'

'Why? Because those oil concessions were the reason they tried to kidnap, to get hold of them. Ransom me for them. We caught the people responsible, and had a chat.'

'And *they* came after you ... for oil concessions?'

'Bits of paper at the moment, but what would a tenth of the Arctic oil be worth in thirty years time?'

'A heck of a lot. And you just reminded me of something, a study I read a few years back - taking Arctic oil by force - or other means. Funny thing is, someone mentioned it the other day.'

‘Layers of an onion, David. Olly was not killed for Project Darwin, or Russian money. Olly was killed because Darwin is step one, and those concessions we sold are part of step five or six. It’s all linked and, to quote one of your countrymen - *it’s all about oil and global warming.*’

‘Global warming?’

‘When the ice melts, drilling gets real easy up north, old buddy,’ Beesely mocked.

‘Something else that was mentioned recently as well, after the Russians claimed their part of the Arctic Sea.’

‘Are you sitting down, David?’

‘Yes.’

‘Alone?’

A shot rang out, muffled and distorted by the phone. Johno and Otto jumped up, moving closer to the phone.

Beesely pressed END. ‘OK,’ he said, seemingly not too concerned. ‘A plan ‘B’ ... I believe, is called for.’

Plan 'B'

1

'My God!' Otto said in a voice that was just about as loud as his personality would allow, sedate by British standards. 'They are killing The Lodge.'

'Can we expect company?' Johno asked, now concerned.

'I doubt it,' Beesely calmly suggested. He drummed his fingers, looking down and thinking. 'I need to sleep, I'm done in. Otto, I want those ... Internet people who -' he waved his hand.

'Web designers? Hackers?' Otto prompted.

'Yes, both, and the best there is, several of them. Oh, get onto some American theatrical agencies, find a few look-alikes for me.'

'Decoys!' Johno approved with a grin.

'Johno, perimeter. We have entertained a great many visitors today, so double check everything.' He manipulated the chair's handle and eased back. 'While I think of it, make that CIA guy talk, and then kidnap his boss in Berlin. Bring him here. And I want some good news on that damn South African. Now scoot.'

* * *

Johno called the 'action squads' to assembly, the senior guard commanders in attendance. 'OK, gentlemen –'

'Something must be up,' Kev suggested. 'Calling us *gentlemen!*' A few laughs echo around the Great Hall, the metal knights fixed to the walls looking on with curious inactivity.

'Right,' Johno began again. 'We've had a lot of visitors, and a lot of vehicles in here.' He addressed the senior guards. 'I want this castle searched top to bottom, especially the restaurant, the toilets, and the other communal areas - finger tip search and a

sweep for bugs, same then for the grounds.’ He sent them off. ‘Reaction squads, we’ve had some developments, you might get the chance to earn some injury compensation. You lot are on silent alarm.’

Weapons were cocked and checked, echoing around the high-ceilinged room.

* * *

The assassin stared down at the man he knew well, but with no regret. David lay slumped over his study desk, dark blood covering his papers and files, dripping off the desk edge and pooling on the floor.

The light on the phone flashed for a moment then went out. The caller had hung up.

Mr. Grey turned and walked out. Easing into the passenger seat of a Lexus, he fixed his seatbelt.

‘Alles in ordnung?’ Herr Mole enquired.

‘Alles gute,’ Mr. Grey responded as they drove off.

* * *

Martin Preston, Deputy Section Chief of the CIA, Berlin, had thrown-up all over the concrete floor of the chair room. And over himself. Being strapped to a chair had not helped with desired trajectories. The guards scooping it up and putting on his head had not helped either. For some reason, Mr. Preston did not seem to be enjoying the chosen video.

A guard burst in. ‘The boss called, we must make him talk - only one hour.’

‘One hour?’ the guards protested. ‘Shit. OK, strip him. Get the knives and the blow torch.’

Preston’s eyes widened.

The CIA's Berlin Chief, William Heralda, cared little for the fact that his vomit now fell across rural German villages. He did not, at this particular moment, consider people looking up, out walking their dogs, or sunbathing on this pleasant day. He was preoccupied with wondering why he was hanging upside-down out of the side of a helicopter as it sped low over the pleasant German countryside, his current situation seemingly down to the German security services.

An hour later he sat the right way up, now in front of Beesely and Otto. He was in his late forties, bald, with a round and dimpled face.

'You don't look too well, old chap,' Beesely politely enquired as he poured out tea for their guest. 'Have some tea and you will feel much better.'

A guard appeared with a towel and a bottle of water, handing them to Heralda, who welcomingly rubbed his face and neck. He quickly swigged the taste of vomit from his mouth, glancing up at a guard with an MP5. He sat breathing hard, looking from one face to the other, his cheeks reddened, and with a clear hint of fear evident. Beesely gave him five minutes to recover by stepping out to the toilet.

'You know who we are?' Beesely prompted as he sat back down.

'I had a briefing on you ... a few weeks ago. You must be Sir Morris Beesely, and this is K2.'

Beesely had been listening to that sentence with some curiosity; he could detect four different emotions in there. 'I'm afraid you will need to look for a new deputy, we tortured and killed your last one.'

Heralda stopped wiping and froze for a moment. He lowered his gaze and finished off wiping, taking another sip of water. 'He was under investigation. Internally.' He made firm eye contact. 'But you shouldn't have done that.'

To Beesely, the last part of that response revealed anger and professional pride, not any fondness for his former deputy.

‘Thing is, old chap, he came down to a hotel owned by my bank with four hired assassins, and tried to kidnap or kill me and my associates.’ Heralda’s brow had slowly furrowed. ‘Call me old fashioned, but people trying to kill me has always made me a tad upset. Personality flaw, granted, and I shall have to work on it. But, for the moment, I still get angry when people try and kill me.’ He shrugged apologetically.

‘You have the evidence?’ Heralda quietly enquired.

‘Caught red handed, given up by his own people.’ Beesely sat back and waited. ‘Would you like me to send the evidence to the President, or your director, George Holmes? Of course, this chap being your deputy may make things a tad awkward for you.’

Heralda seemed concerned, before lightening and slowly breathing out, resigned to some private thought.

‘What, pray tell,’ Beesely enquired, ‘was the subject of the internal enquiry?’

Heralda sipped his tea, a welcome relief after the last hour. ‘Routine checks showed up unusual contact Stateside. People he was talking to were NSA, some DOD. There was nothing wrong with that in particular, but it was unusual still, especially without mentioning it to me and the section.’

‘Any clues as to what he was into, other than trying to kill little old me?’

Heralda sipped his tea again, taking a moment to compose himself. ‘Why did you put out that horseshit after the big attack on you, praising the CIA and the President?’

‘Good question,’ Beesely said with a large smile. ‘Well, why did I do it? Because I believe in western democracy, rule of law, NATO, economic stability...’ He stopped smiling, just as his prisoner seemed to perk up. ‘And because I don’t like secret little splinter groups trying to manipulate the US Government

and military into making huge mistakes.’ He leant forwards. ‘Mistakes such as ... selling bio-weapons to Boris Luchenkov.’

Heralda was shocked.

‘Yes, my friend. Some of your lot were directly implicated with that, taking half a billion in payment from the Russian who, by all accounts, wants a new right-wing ... *white* Russian super-power.’

Heralda stared back, stunned and confused.

Beesely continued, ‘What do you think would have happened if the terrorists had spread radioactive ball bearings around London? Economic collapse, the end of NATO, martial Law?’ The last two words seemed to register with Herald. Beesely raised his eyebrows in a question for his guest. ‘Something?’ he probed.

‘Something alright,’ Herald quietly let out, looking down for a moment. ‘A scenario study came across my desk last week, the usual doomsday stuff.’

‘And?’ Beesely sarcastically probed. ‘Is this scenario starting to be acted out, perhaps?’ Herald glanced from one face to the next. ‘Look,’ Beesely began, sounding almost sympathetic. ‘You can help us prevent this nonsense, or ... I can send the President enough information to put you in jail. Or I can just kill you.’

Herald straightened. ‘You don’t need to threaten me, I agree with your sentiments, asshole.’

‘There we go,’ Beesely enthused. ‘And all it took was being dangled out of a helicopter by his ankles.’

Johno tipped his head forwards. ‘It’s a technique I’ve often advocated, both for business and private use.’ Beesely sarcastically nodded his agreement with that.

Otto added, ‘You English are way behind us Swiss. We have been using that for almost sixty years. You could learn a great deal from a civilised country like *this*.’

Herald glanced from face to face, and then took a breath. ‘I can get the details of who Preston was in contact with, so long as there is no come-back to me.’

‘Trust me,’ Beesely began. ‘They will be far too busy with other matters to worry about you.’

The desk phone burst into life. ‘Sir! The boy, Thomas, he has shot and killed a kitchen worker!’

Johno was up in an instant, Otto beating him through the door, Beesely walking quickly out a second later. Neither Otto nor Johno bothered with the lift, they sprinted up the stairs, Otto making good progress without the incumbent problems of Johno’s knee injuries, and bounding up three steps at a time. Johno’s determination kept him in the race, reaching the kitchen just two seconds after Otto.

A 9mm Walther PPK rested on a table, spent cases littering the floor. The four girls were crying, huddled in a corner with Patrick. Susan sat next to a defiant Thomas, a guard stood the other side. The kitchen worker lay slumped against the counter, four shots visible in her white coveralls.

Otto stopped dead in the middle of it all, panting. He glanced down at the dead woman, then at Thomas. The rest of the kitchen staff stood huddled together, peering over the counter. He knelt in front of Thomas. Johno checked the body; no signs of life, two good hits to the heart as he had taught the boy, but also two shots low.

‘Thomas!’ Otto called in a strained whisper. ‘Why?’

‘She was a spy!’ Thomas screamed.

‘He’s been saying that over and over,’ Susan calmly informed Otto. ‘That this woman was a spy.’

Otto glanced at the body, vaguely recognising the face from recent use of the kitchen, but not connecting strongly to her or remembering the woman’s name. He sharply called Herr Frieserling when the castle manager stepped in, asking a flurry of questions about the woman.

Frieserling insisted that the woman was known and that the security checks were satisfactory, rapidly and sometimes angrily exchanging with Otto as Johno checked the body.

Otto turned to Thomas, and quietly asked, 'Why do you think she was a spy?'

'She said she knew my mother,' Thomas explained, now tearful.

Armed guards piled into the doorway, Johno very firmly telling them to wait outside.

'Why did you shoot her?' Otto asked, trying to calm Thomas.

'She ... she said she was a friend of my mother, but ... but she did not know that I lived here. She ... she said the name of our village wrong. She said she was in school with ... with my mother, but the school name was not correct.'

Johno had been listening. 'A standard CIA tactic: to adopt the identity of someone who's dead, or to pretend to have been their friend.'

Otto glanced over his shoulder at Johno before turning back to the boy. 'Are you sure?'

Johno pulled out a miniature bottle of what appeared to be eardrops from the lady's trouser pocket. He read the German label. Eardrops. Up against the light, he held it, looking through the glass; there were remnants of a previous label. He could not make out the words, but he could see the small skull and cross-bones symbol: poison. 'Poison,' he stated as he stood.

Otto jumped up, glancing at it. He grabbed it and gave it a guard. 'Analysis! Immediately!' The man bolted out. Otto sought out Herr Frieserling, angered, but forcing himself to calm down. 'Run a background check: her house, her belongings, her friends and associates.' The castle manager walked briskly out.

Johno stood in front of Otto, a hand on his shoulder, both their heads tipped forwards and close. A moment passed before Johno tipped his head towards Thomas.

Otto took a deep breath and turned. 'Thomas, it looks as if she was a spy. You ... may be correct. And, if she had poison, you have saved us all.' Thomas brightened a little. 'But you should have told us, not done anything yourself! Understand?'

Thomas lowered his head and nodded.

Johno stepped up to Susan and Patrick, heaving a big sigh. 'I can't apologise enough for this,' he said, his hands upturned. Susan took a deep breath and glanced at the body, rubbing her forehead as Beesely walked in. Johno turned to the girls. 'Girls,' he called. 'This woman was a spy, sent here to harm Dame Helen and Uncle Beesely. What happened is terrible, but she came here to harm us. What we do here is important, and Tabitha's mother is a very important person, which is why we have such tight security.'

Beesely glanced at the body, then at Thomas. He met Otto's stunned gaze, and then stood next to Johno, facing the girls. 'Are you OK, girls?' Still tearful, they nodded. He turned to Susan, waving over Patrick. 'Dungeon, please. All of them. Now.' The girls were led quickly out. Beesely stood over the body. 'Was she a spy?'

Johno stuck his hands in his pockets. 'Seems like a vial of poison, they're analysing it now. She made a mistake with her cover story.' Beesely turned his head, frowning a question. Johno explained, 'She assumed an identity, using a former friendship of Thomas' mum. But she overlooked the fact that the little runt is still here. He spotted the inconsistencies straight away; she got some details wrong.'

Beesely breathed heavily. 'We were lucky. Otto, Johno, we have unfinished business.'

3

They settled back into Beesely's office, looking harassed, their prisoner being closely watched by four guards. Beesely waved the guards out.

'What happened?' Heralda delicately enquired, studying each face.

Beesely ran a hand over his scalp. 'A young lad in our charge, adopted, he spotted a spy in our midst, possibly a plant

by your lot, and he shot the woman. No particular problem with that, other than the fact that he did it in front of a room full of visitors.'

'Did you say ... CIA plant?'

'Seems that way,' Johnno affirmed. 'She adopted an identity that involved a dead friend, but she got some details wrong.'

'Send my office her fingerprints. Do it now, I'll call them,' Heralda hurriedly offered.

Beesely glanced at Otto. Otto shrugged slightly, lifting his phone and standing to one side.

'It will be done,' Beesely informed him with strong eye contact, making it sound a threat. He pressed CALL. 'Get me the assistant to the Section Chief, CIA, Berlin.'

'Samantha Robbins,' Heralda helpfully, and hurriedly, supplied.

'Did you get that?'

'Yes, sir.'

They waited.

'Chief's office?' came a woman's voice a few seconds later.

Beesely turned the phone towards the prisoner.

'It's me, Sam,' Heralda shouted.

'That was a long lunch break. You coming back?'

'Listen, some fingerprints coming your way in the next few minutes, rush job, all agencies, be difficult. Call me on my cell. Got to go.'

Beesely stabbed END with a finger, beckoning a guard. 'Find a new shirt and jacket for our guest, and some trousers. Bring a sample.' The tall guard grabbed Heralda under the armpits and lifted him upright in one swift movement. Stood alongside, the guard sized up Heralda, noting where Heralda's shoulders hit his own chest, before stepping out.

'We grow 'em big around yer,' Johnno joked.

'So,' Heralda ventured as he sat. 'Is roasting my chestnuts off the agenda?'

‘For the moment,’ Beesely informed him with a warning glare. He eased back, regarding their guest ‘What do you *like*, William?’

‘Like?’

Beesely waved a hand. ‘Vices, hobbies?’

Heralda raised an eyebrow. ‘Vices?’

Beesely’s features hardened. ‘We could find out, *very* quickly.’

Heralda gave it some thought, glancing from face to face. ‘Suppose you lot could. OK, I like young East European hookers.’

‘Any particular preference?’ Beesely nudged.

‘Small and skinny.’

‘We like to reward our friends, William. If it turns out that you are not an enemy, and you help, you get your choice of the world’s best young ladies, plus a bank account for retirement purposes.’ Heralda’s eyes widened. ‘Now, that’s not a bribe, and we are not asking you to betray anyone, we are simply offering to reward you ... for doing your job.’ Beesely jabbed a finger towards him. ‘And by that, I simply mean that you don’t behave like –’

‘Preston,’ Johnno put it.

‘Yes, like that idiot, Preston. If you are not corrupt, if you follow the chain of command, then we will get along just fine.’

‘I see no problem with that.’ Heralda sipped his tea, grimacing at the cool liquid. ‘But what if orders come down from on high, to watch you?’

‘I’d expect you to tip us off, take the money, but then do what your bosses are asking you to do. Best of both worlds, everyone is happy.’

Heralda shook his head. ‘You have a very strange way of looking at the world, Mister Beesely.’

‘Try working here,’ Johnno quipped.

‘Sir?’ came from the phone.

‘Yes.’

‘We have the boyfriend of the kitchen worker. He is German, not Swiss as she claimed.’

‘Take him to the hill camp. Interrogate him, but please make every effort to establish identity before we harm him.’ He pressed END.

Heralda tipped his head forwards. ‘Again, fingerprints.’

Beesely turned his head. ‘Otto, fingerprints on the boyfriend as well.’ Otto nodded, returning to his call. Finally he rejoined them. ‘How about,’ Beesely sarcastically began, facing Otto, ‘we increase the budget on background checks four-fold, go back through everyone?’

Otto was still clearly affected, but reluctantly nodded his acceptance of the idea, taking a lukewarm coffee off the desk.

‘OK, William, where were we? Ah, yes, you were going to let us know who, in particular, your deputy was chit-chatting to.’

He took out his mobile phone, hesitated, and then selected a number. He closed the flip phone. ‘It’s not going to work down here, is it!’

‘Actually, we have our own boosters,’ Beesely pointed out. ‘They work fine.’

Heralda selected the number, checking the signal strength as he did: four out of five bars were indicated. ‘It’s me. Sat behind a terminal?’ He waited, looking down at the carpet. ‘You logged in? Look in my directory ... staff ... Preston ... internal ... contacts. Is it open?’

He looked up and pointed at the paper and pen on Beesely’s desk. Johno eased up and moved it across, handing over a pen. Heralda started to write, five names and numbers. ‘Thanks, close it down.’ He hung up. Pushing the pad across to Beesely he said, ‘Those are the people he has –’ he tipped his head. ‘- *had* been in contact with.’

Beesely tore off the page and handed it to Otto, who ran an eye over the names.

‘One is familiar,’ Otto mentioned as he stood. He stepped out, studying the list.

‘What are you planning on doing?’ Heralda enquired. ‘Those are our people.’

‘Those *people*, young man, may be involved with selling dangerous weapons to wealthy Russians. How would *your* superiors deal with them?’

Heralda sat back and gave it more thought. ‘I think you know what would happen to them. Car accident here, drink drive conviction there, heart attack or two - all very sad, *they will be missed.*’

‘So is there any particular reason why we should not follow your example?’ Beesely pointedly asked.

‘Because first *we* would find out *who* was above them, following it back to a decision maker,’ Heralda pointed out.

‘Which is what I was planning on doing,’ Beesely said with a wink. ‘To quote the great Sergeant Johno Williams, VC, Congressional Medal of Honour - *we should not shoot the foot soldiers!*’

Otto returned and sat, to Beesely’s left.

Heralda’s brow knitted. ‘That’s the guy who crashed a helicopter into the terrorist car in London, and flew it out to sea.’

‘That’s the guy sat on my right.’ Heralda turned to Otto. ‘No, my *other* right!’

He turned to Johno, who waved, a childlike bending of his fingers. ‘Good to know you,’ Heralda offered.

‘Good to know that we don’t have to roast your chestnuts,’ Johno retorted.

Heralda’s expression suggested he strongly agreed with that sentiment. His mobile phone started to ring, the signature theme from the Lone Ranger. Beesely and Johno made eye contact.

‘Yeah?’ Heralda listened. ‘OK, great.’ He closed his flip-phone and looked up. ‘That woman was a freelance asset of our Paris branch. They have a new section head, only been there two weeks ... and a great of gossip about all sorts of strange things.’

‘Like American mercenaries?’ Beesely probed.

‘I need to be in my office to help further.’ He stood. ‘And I want ten million in a safe and discreet Swiss bank account.’ He smiled. ‘No pun intended.’

Beesely stood. ‘A million per year of good service,’ he coldly stated. ‘First year up-front, thereafter in arrears.’

‘No problem, but I’ll only be here another two years, then someplace else.’

‘And probably someplace just as useful,’ Beesely hinted, his chin out.

Heralda shrugged. ‘Step by step then. And don’t forget the girls. As soon as I read the report on you I knew there would be ... *opportunities*.’

‘I believe we have a strong presence in Berlin,’ Beesely assured him. ‘How would you like to go back? Train ... perhaps?’

‘No, helicopter is just fine, so long as I’m *inside it*.’

Beesely gestured towards the door, Otto instructing the guards, who led Heralda out. He sampled the temperature of a few cups then eased back into his seat.

‘You trust him?’ Johno asked, standing and also testing the temperature of various teas and coffees.

‘Yes, I think so,’ Beesely began, making a face. ‘The bad boys will only trust a few branches of the spider’s web, not everyone. He seems well suited - girls and money. I always trust people with vices.’

Otto asked. ‘The Paris chief?’

‘What? Oh, try and grab him, quickly. He ... is our best hope for the name of a senior person, the decision maker.’

4

Otto lifted his phone as Dame Helen wheeled herself in.

Beesely went quickly around to her. ‘Helen, I can’t apologise enough for what happened –’

‘Was that woman a plant?’ she coldly asked.

Beesely sighed. ‘Yes, CIA.’ She stared down at nothing in particular. ‘Is Tabitha OK?’

‘No!’ she said, angry, but not at Beesely. ‘She and Mike were doing much better, especially after talking with Blaum after –’ she waved. ‘- face fungus got them together.’ Johnno ran a forefinger and thumb down his moustache.

‘Blaum?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘Later. What’s been happening? I hate being kept in the dark!’

Beesely sat back down. ‘You must be feeling better,’ he quietly noted. Then louder, ‘Well, we uncovered the Deputy Chief CIA Berlin, now the Section Chief Paris is in it up to his armpits, and we have a list of five more Stateside.’

‘Christ, Beesely, if you do anything to *them* the Americans will jump all over you!’

‘Guess we shouldn’t have given that Yank *the chair* earlier,’ Johnno mentioned in passing.

‘What?’ she shrieked.

‘And his boss we dangled out of a helicopter,’ Johnno added, enjoying it.

She wheeled herself closer. ‘Christ Beesely, are you trying to start a war?’

‘Don’t worry, my dear, I have a plan.’ He shrugged. ‘What are the Americans going to do? Risk exposure of what they were really up to? No, they will go to great lengths to cover it up.’

A manager knocked and entered, Beesely waving him in. ‘Sir, we have the look-a-like actors.’

Dame Helen glanced at the manager before turning back to Beesely. ‘Actors? Decoys?’

‘We’ve got Dame Judi Dench to play you!’ Johnno joked.

‘What?’ she asked, confused.

Beesely delicately offered her a flat hand. Addressing the manager, he said, ‘I want them dressed like me, given large expense accounts, and hire genuine American security for them, at least four men for each one. They are to book themselves into

various hotels as me, Sir Morris Beesely from Switzerland. They pay for everything in cash, lots of cash. They ... er ... go to casinos a lot.

‘Right, now before they book into a hotel, I will need the name of the intended hotel a day early. Then I want Mossad and MI6 assets, plus some of ours, into the hotel the day before, set up with hidden cameras.’

‘Cameras?’ Dame Helen queried.

Beesely explained, ‘The aim is to photograph and fingerprint anyone who takes an interest in these people. That’s all, no offensive action *at all*, defence if necessary.’ He turned squarely to Dame Helen. ‘We will need your assets, not in Arizona and Mississippi for now I’m afraid—’

‘Yes,’ Johno insisted. ‘In Arizona and Mississippi – it’ll look like we’re getting close to what they’re up to, and will spook them. We may even catch a big fish.’

‘OK, that seems to make sense.’ He turned back to the manager. ‘Got all that?’

‘Yes, sir. Photograph those watching, sir.’

‘And digital photos, back here as soon as possible, email thingy.’ The man nodded and stepped out.

‘What are you up to now?’ Dame Helen asked, concerned.

‘I’m taking a leaf out of Johno’s book.’

Johno looked worried. ‘Internet porn?’

Beesely let his shoulders drop. ‘No,’ he said out of the side of his mouth. To Dame Helen, he said, ‘*We don’t shoot the foot soldiers.*’

‘So you photograph them? So what?’ she questioned.

‘Sir,’ a manager announced, stood in the doorway. ‘The web designers are here.’

Dame Helen started shaking her head. ‘How to win friends and influence people,’ she muttered.

‘I had that book sent to me, anonymously, several times,’ Johno mentioned to no one in particular.

The web designers stepped in, four of them, all casually dressed, each appearing to be in their mid twenties. They pulled up chairs as old cups were removed and fresh tea brought in.

Beesely turned to Otto and whispered, 'All security cleared?' Otto nodded. Beesely faced the group. 'OK, gentlemen, we have a project for you. Unfortunately, we need it done by tomorrow.'

They did not seem fazed by it. 'What do you need?' one asked in an English accent.

'What I need is this. I need a website with photographs of CIA agents ... that the CIA cannot stop us displaying.'

At first they were shocked, but then smiled at each other. 'Cool.'

'Good. Oh, and please correct me as I go, about web stuff and lingo. When I went to school it was chalk and slates.'

They laughed. 'A website the CIA cannot *pull down*,' one helpfully corrected in a European accent. Beesely made a note. 'And you want a photo gallery site with expanding thumbnails.'

'Excellent. Right, we need such a site, nothing special, up and running tomorrow –'

'I have one we can use,' one said.

'Good. We need to then advertise it in the States so that those people who don't like the US Government might find it.'

They burst out laughing.

'What's so funny?' Beesely asked, glaring.

'There are thousands of websites which criticise the White House, especially *black ops*.'

Beesely brightened. 'Really? How does that help?'

'We link into them, swap banners.'

'Banners?' Beesely repeated.

'Small adverts on a site. You click on it, and you go to another site,' Johno idly explained.

Beesely turned to him. 'Don't tell me *you're* up to speed on all this stuff?'

'How do you think I got Alison Star to visit us?'

‘Alison Star?’ the web designers asked, their excited questions overlapping.

Beesely offered them all looks of mock outrage. ‘How do you know who she is?’ They stopped smiling. ‘Just kidding,’ Beesely joked. ‘Lovely girl. A few days ago you could have seen her riding a red tractor naked through the grounds.’

Dame Helen cleared her throat.

‘OK, back to business,’ Beesely encouraged. ‘Right, we need a site, or sites, that have these CIA photos on, advertised to the American public. But won’t the CIA be able to –’ he checked his notes. ‘- *pull them down*, right away.’

‘Not if they’re hosted over here. And we’ll redirect and move it around. Dead stop it.’

‘Now I’m lost,’ Johnno admitted.

‘We’ll leave the mechanics to you young guys. Just have some fun and make yourselves some money.’

‘Where are the photos?’ one asked.

‘They will be sent to us soon, we already have a handful.’

‘Twelve,’ Otto clarified. ‘Plus names and cover names, fingerprints.’

‘We can display the fingerprints as photos, same deal,’ a young man indicated.

‘Fine, get to it, gentlemen.’

They stood, one stopping. ‘Sir, if you have any jobs going here, let me know. This place is *so strange*.’

5

‘Tell you the one person we haven’t spoken to,’ Johnno began as he stood. They turned. ‘Burke, in London.’

Beesely faced Otto. ‘Has he been using that account?’

‘Only in a small way. I have carefully tracked everything, and there are no links.’

Beesely mulled it over.

‘Perhaps we should bring him in?’ Johno suggested, sipping one of the web designer’s untouched teas.

‘To tell you the truth,’ Beesely quietly admitted. ‘I always figured he was a bit too stupid, either way.’

Dame Helen smiled. ‘Me too.’

Beesely added, ‘If he had pocketed the money, or used it for something cheeky then I’d have more respect for the chap.’

A manager appeared with a report. He knocked, but did not wait to enter. ‘Sir, the South African men talked, we have a link back to Paris. Same for the man Preston before he ... left us.’

‘So,’ Dame Helen realised, ‘the CIA Chief Paris was the hub.’

‘And probably expecting a visit,’ Johno insisted. ‘I would be.’

Beesely put a hand on Otto’s shoulder. ‘Halt the kidnap team for the moment, it could be a trap.’ Otto stepped out. Beesely pressed CALL. ‘Ellen Rosen, Mossad, London.’

They waited.

‘Beesely, how are things?’

‘Listen up. Berlin CIA chief is OK, Paris chief dirty.’

‘Interesting, Beesely; I had a word to that effect yesterday. He has met up with a number of Paris mafia leaders, throwing some money around.’

‘Money for what?’

‘Don’t know, can’t pry too much. Is he connected to your recent problems?’

‘He *is* the recent problem.’

‘That’s not so good. His position in Paris was a surprise, he should be three ranks higher.’

‘Took a step down?’ Beesely asked. ‘A punishment?’

‘Not a punishment, I hear.’

‘Then he’s there to oversee a large project,’ Beesely suggested. ‘Do you know the names of the Mafia men?’

‘They are known as the East Bank gang. A nasty group, mostly drugs. They execute their competitors in a fashion that would make you proud.’

‘Elle, anything you have on this guy I want, and straight away. Question, are your resources for lifting him in Paris better than ours?’

‘I would not think so. We could put a team and a plan together in one or two weeks, but I seriously doubt it would be approved.’

‘Send me what you have, warn your people.’

‘What are you going to do?’ came a concerned voice.

‘Best you not know.’ He pressed END. ‘Johno, all managers.’ Johno stepped out as Otto re-entered. ‘Otto, anyone even remotely linked to a Paris gang steps over our border ... shoot their bloody kneecaps out.’ Otto lifted his phone.

Beesely made eye contact with Helen. ‘Are you holding up?’

‘Don’t worry about me,’ she firmly insisted. ‘Start nailing some of these troublemakers. By the time I get back I want a clear desk.’

Beesely cocked an eyebrow at her. Managers rushed in and seated themselves, followed by Johno.

‘OK, are we all here?’ Beesely called. He drummed his fingers for a moment. ‘Otto, we don’t have a strong working relationship with DGSE in Paris, do we?’

‘Who does?’ Johno quipped.

‘No,’ Otto answered, a slight grin at Johno’s remark.

‘Do we have any contacts inside the East Side gang?’

‘East *Bank* gang,’ Johno corrected. Then whispering, he added, ‘The other’s a musical.’

‘Yes,’ a manager nodded as Beesely glared at Johno. ‘I have good sleeper agents and contacts.’

‘Excellent. Right, tell them to contact the boss of the ... gang –‘ he glanced at Johno. ‘- and to call me as soon as possible.’ The man stepped out. ‘OK, we can now be reasonably sure that –’

‘Intruder! Shots fired!’ burst from the phone.

The managers remained seated. Johno eased up and drew his MP5, cocking and checking before stepping into the corridor. He made a few hand signals and returned, sitting on the cabinet directly behind Beesely.

‘Report,’ Beesely calmly ordered, a button on the phone held down.

‘Sir, a single man, far west end of compound, camouflaged. He is wounded, but alive.’

‘It’s getting dark,’ Johno informed the group, checking his watch.

‘Silent alarm,’ Beesely ordered.

Johno stepped closer. ‘No, try this. Minimal lighting, draw back the guards inside, use the sensors and cameras, let them get close and grab them. We have tranquillisers now, and this attack won’t be big, it’ll be stealthy - ones and twos.’

Beesely’s wave around the managers approved the idea, the managers quickly issuing orders into their phones.

‘Standby helicopters,’ Johno added, ‘and drop a police cordon five miles out. Then start working inwards with our boys.’

Beesely nodded his approval. ‘Good. Right, let’s continue. This Paris gang, who may already be knocking on our door it seems, are linked to the Paris CIA chief, who seems to be behind a large part of our problems. Oh, let’s see if we can get his bank details and credit cards.’

‘They won’t fall for that,’ Johno scoffed. ‘His bosses will ignore it.’

‘Perhaps. But that depends on what happens next.’ He raised a finger. ‘I have a plan. Right ... er ... Paris gang, I want their boss to call. We have the South African man, and that tracks right back to Paris, so did the idiot from the Spa, so did the ex-SAS mercenaries who came up from Africa.’

‘So did nine of the mercs’ who hit us the other week,’ Johno pointed out. ‘All South Africans.’

Otto leant forwards. ‘And we have determined that the assembly points for the mercenaries were mostly on French soil.’

Beesely drummed his fingers on the desk as he thought. ‘And yet ... no word from the French. A bit slack.’ He raised his head. ‘OK, what else?’ he asked himself. ‘Right, websites are being created, and we will post on them the faces and details of CIA agents involved in this. After that, they won’t be able to work, and so will be let go by the agency, in most cases at least. They will also attract the attention of the FBI and others. We also have my doppelgangers about to ruin my reputation in America, no doubt, in their choice of suits!’

‘Some of them will be killed,’ Johno pointed out as Otto turned on the desk computer and quickly called up compound cameras.

‘That cannot be helped,’ Beesely insisted. ‘We need to step up a gear.’

‘Sir?’ came from the phone.

‘Yes?’

‘Call for you, from Paris, a Monsieur Leponte.’

‘Put him through, please.’

‘Allo? Mister Bis-el-lay?’ came a heavily accented voice.

‘Yes, good evening. You are Leponte?’

‘Yes. I can speak the English. You ... Herr Director, K2?’

‘Yes. And what type of business are *you* in?’

‘I think you know this. We are East Bank.’

‘OK, I will keep this very simple. How much money to kidnap the CIA chief in Paris?’

‘Ah ... but he is the business friend.’

‘How much?’

‘A million dollars.’

Beesely was taken aback, glancing at Otto. Otto frowned and shrugged at the low amount.

‘Mister Leponte, I will give you five million dollars on delivery, safe and alive. Understand?’

‘Yes, of course. And it is the good fortune.’

‘Why?’

‘Tonight we wants the meet to talk of you.’ Laughing could be heard in the background.

‘Did you help him last week? In his actions against us?’

Leponte hesitated. ‘My people helped him last week, yes.’

‘Do you know how many of the men who attacked us are still alive?’

‘No.’

‘One of them.’

‘One?’

‘Yes. One. Those who were injured were burnt alive.’

‘I have heard this.’

‘Keep that in mind in your business dealings with us. Call me again when you have him, I will send helicopters.’

‘OK.’

‘Mister Leponte, a deal is a deal. If you make any problems for us ... we will come for you.’

‘I understand this.’

‘Call me soon.’ He hung up. ‘I want my five million back. As soon as we have the Paris chief I want the East Bank gang wiped out.’

‘That’ll piss-off the French security services,’ Johno cautioned.

‘Why, these men are gangsters?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘Which, I hear, kill suspected al-Qa’eda for the DGSE from time to time, tail them and sell info,’ Johno pointed out.

‘I have heard this also,’ Otto added. ‘But, there is an alternative. They have a small war with a gang in Marseille.’

A manager raised his hand. ‘I have a good contact in this Marseille gang. They are stronger.’

Beesely faced the man. ‘OK, pay your gang to attack the East Bank ... in force. Hell, supply them with weapons and intelligence. But let’s be careful, we don’t want the French authorities on our backs.’

‘A minute ago you were ready to wipe them out,’ Johno pointed out.

‘I can see sense when it is presented to me by someone of your calibre.’ He held his gaze on Johno.

Johno tipped his head and squinted at Beesely, Beesely winking at Dame Helen without Johno noticing.

‘Sir, intruder on mountain,’ came out of the phone.

‘We should get that Israeli arms dealer back,’ Johno joked.

‘I am very tempted to introduce our friend on the mountain to an Apache,’ Beesely quietly stated, almost to himself as he squinted at the computer screen. Otto had the movement sensor grid up, Dame Helen closing in. Three yellow dots had turned green in a line.

‘They’re probably French,’ Johno suggested. ‘And our new friend, Lepontey, is playing both sides off against the middle, money from both groups.’

‘For another day,’ Beesely threatened without taking his gaze off the screen.

‘Mountain command post to command centre,’ crackled from the desk phone.

‘Yes, go ahead.’

‘We have tranquillised a man on the mountain, sir.’

‘Good. Bring him down quietly.’

‘The attackers haven’t been well briefed,’ Johno insisted. ‘Same shit. It’s almost as if they want us to kill them.’

‘It is a trick,’ Otto confidently suggested. ‘For the newspapers.’

‘Newspapers?’ Dame Helen repeated.

Beesely explained, ‘Our CIA friend probably wants Swiss media against us. That would mean our toys get taken off us. Suppressing the news the last time was tricky and expensive, but the story of the bank robbery answered all their questions well enough. Good thing about the Swiss, is that any questions about banks are taboo most of the time.’

‘But gun battles are not,’ Dame Helen muttered. Then louder, ‘Blaum and your bank guy are still here.’

‘Ah, I had almost forgotten.’ He pressed CALL. ‘Minister Blaum, please.’ They waited.

‘Yes, Beesely?’

‘Are you OK to stay here for a while longer, some unwelcome visitors outside?’

‘I have not heard anything?’

‘We are using tranquilliser guns where we can.’

‘Ah, an excellent idea. Is it not safe for me to leave?’

‘It probably is OK, but I would not wish to risk you.’

‘My wife will be struggling –’

‘I may not have mentioned this earlier, Minister, but Johno brought something to my attention. We have two home-helpers at your house. And a driver.’

‘That is not necessary,’ Blaum quietly suggested.

‘Least we can do, given the fact that you have to ... *clean up after me.*’ He glanced at Dame Helen. ‘So call your dear lady wife, and keep your head down until morning, we are sweeping the area outside.’

‘The visiting chef is still here –’

‘We cannot use the restaurant at the moment, it has a glass roof!’

‘Very well. I will try the dungeon bar.’ He hung up.

A big fish

1

The CIA Paris Section Chief, Emerson, checked the dark street as he clambered out from his car and straightened. The wide, tree lined suburban road seemed quiet enough, dotted with large gates set into high stone walls that had seen better days. He closed the door on his driver and bodyguard and stepped up to the gates of the Leponte residence for the third time, not expecting any trouble, a quick glance over his shoulder at the street.

Unlit, the gates opened into a dark courtyard as on previous occasions, dark shadows of men nestled into the walls. He walked across the cobbles, around a fountain that had also seen better days, and into the slit of light coming from a heavy wooden door ajar. The inside of the house offered a stark contrast; well decorated, colourful and modern. It was nondescript on the outside, drug dealer's lair on the inside.

'Emerson! Come in, come in,' Leponte called, a glass in his hand. 'I am glad you are here.'

'Really?' Emerson muttered, not interested in engaging his contact in anything other than business. The Paris chief was now forty-five, but with a good physique, and still a good head of dark hair.

'Drink, Emerson?'

'No,' Emerson pointedly replied.

'That is unfortunate.'

Emerson stopped and stared down at the shorter man. 'Why? Good year, was it?'

'No. It was drugged.'

Emerson's eyes widened, his anger quickly growing. 'Drugged?'

'Yes, my friend. Now we have to do this.'

Emerson could feel the sting in his butt cheek, spinning quickly. The man who had injected him had stepped back sharply, smiling broadly at his victim.

Emerson reached for his pistol, Leponte grabbing Emerson's arm and relieving him of his Berretta, his guest now wobbling backwards.

'Why?' Emerson demanded in a strained whisper, his eyes flashing with anger.

'Five million dollars, my friend. That is why.' Leponte was now all business, his eyes cold. He made eye contact with his men, the two of them catching Emerson just in time; his captive would not have been as profitable with a broken skull. Emerson groaned and struggled, staring up at his captors. 'I ... can give you ... more.'

'Money is no good to me if I am dead, Mister Emerson,' Leponte pointedly remarked. 'You sent a hundred men to K2 - good soldiers - and only one survived. I have been doing my research, Mister Emerson. This K2 is very strong, a match even for you, and I wish not to sit in the chair.'

In the street, Emerson's driver and bodyguard closed their eyes and looked away, to preserve their night vision, as a lorry made its way along the road. The lorry trundled slowly towards them, nothing out of the ordinary.

But with their eyes closed they could not have known what was coming next. They heard and felt the impact as their car's wheels prevented sideways motion against the high curb, and buckled. They were crushed in upon themselves, rolling over and flattening as if a coke can. Their crushed car, unfortunately, made a decent ramp for the lorry's large wheels, and the lorry kept going, crushing them in this 'terrible accident'. The lorry hit the wall and stopped dead, the police having been called a full minute earlier.

Beesely woke at 2am and wandered outside. Many of the same staff seemed to be still on duty, about a quarter now in the rest area. The command area was quiet, voices low.

A manager walked to the space below him as Beesely rested his arms on the wooden rail. 'We have Emerson, sir.'

'Emerson?'

'The Paris CIA Chief.'

'Ah, good. Any problems?'

'No, sir. We made the swap outside Paris, he's at the airfield.'

'Bring him here, get the doctors to check him. I want to see him 10am. Any problems outside?'

'We have six men, sir. All captured.'

'Oh, excellent. Any casualties?'

The man hesitated. 'One guard accidentally tranquillised, sir.' He shrugged.

'Is he OK?'

'Sleeping, sir.'

'Obviously. Have we contacted the gang in Marseille?'

'No, sir. We have not fixed an amount.'

'Twenty million, paid five million at a time, week by week based on results. Communicate that to them.'

'Yes, sir.'

Johno walked out of the lower bunker entrance, MP5 slung over a shoulder. He noticed Beesely without breaking stride and gave a quick, lazy wave. They met at the top of the stairs.

'Perimeter review?' Beesely asked as he fell into step, heading towards the main entrance.

'Yeah, all quiet. Just couple of stealthy amateurs.'

'French?'

'Some just thugs, some Foreign Legion.'

'Legion? They have some very good boys,' Beesely questioned.

‘Then these are their rejects, we took them down easily. But, in fairness to our boys, they’re coming along in leaps.’ They walked the short distance to the Great Hall, troopers jumping up.

‘Boss?’ one called. They closed in.

‘All quiet?’ Beesely enquired.

‘Down here, yes,’ the trooper grumbled.

Beesely eyes narrowed, focusing on the trooper, concerned by the tone. ‘Something on your mind?’

‘The ex-SAS boys are holding the castle, sir, when they’re the best suited to tranquillise the visitors on the mountain. We should be up there, catching the ground huggers.’

Beesely clasped his hands behind his back. ‘A fair point, but the reason you are here is because the castle and the VIPs are important, and you’re best at keeping them safe.’

‘Besides,’ Johno added in level tones, ‘you’re doing a good job at teaching the camp guard teams. You can’t be everywhere. How you gunna feel if you’re up there when a large force attacks this place? Be gutted then.’ The trooper accepted this point with a shrug and a nod, earning a friendly tap on the head from Johno.

Johno led Beesely up the stairs. Guards stood in pairs at each turn, all politely greeted. The restaurant was cleared of staff, most of the lights off, Kev and the ‘old dogs’ manning the area; two were now awake, two sleeping across the cushioned seats.

Beesely shook Kev’s hand and whispered. ‘All OK?’

Whispering, and glancing over his shoulder, Kev replied, ‘Most action we had was a wee rock falling off the cliff. It cracked a window.’

‘Do not tell the builders!’ Beesely whispered with a grin. He patted Kev on the shoulder, and took the lift to the dungeon.

As the lift door opened they were surprised to find a small and sedate party in progress. Minister Blaum, Mike, and Dame Helen were grouped around Johno’s bar, the lights low.

‘We’re not intruding, are we?’ Beesely whispered.

‘It’s your castle,’ Blaum pointed out. He pulled up a chair for Beesely, pouring wine into a glass.

‘Anything new?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘Six sleepy visitors,’ Beesely informed them. ‘French.’

Johno grabbed a bottle of beer, noticing - and then waving to - a guard sat in the shadows. The man waved back as Johno leant against the bar. Thomas appeared from Johno’s snug and stepped across, wearing a tracksuit and now rubbing his eyes. He stood in front of Johno, facing the group, his sponsor resting an arm on him.

Beesely added, ‘And we grabbed the Paris Chief. That should be a turning point.’

‘He’s the key?’ Blaum asked.

‘He’s a player. And, I think he knows the decision makers and the whole strategy. So fingers crossed. Cheers.’ He sipped the wine.

‘That’s fifty quid wine,’ Mike pointed out. ‘And it’s in *his* bar.’ He thumbed at Johno.

Beesely offered them a look of mock outrage. ‘What are you saying? That Johno doesn’t know a good wine?’

They all faced Johno and laughed. Johno saluted them with his bottle, and sipped.

‘I believe that Mr. Freezer selects the booze,’ Beesely pointed out.

‘Freezer?’ Dame Helen queried. ‘Do you mean Herr Frieserling?’

‘Sorry, it’s just that Jane used to call him that,’ he explained, suddenly becoming reflective. ‘She said that he was a bit of a robot, which to this lot is quite the compliment.’

‘She was your daughter,’ Blaum quietly stated.

Beesely forced a quick, polite smile. ‘Yes. Forty-one years old, you know.’ He held Helen’s hand. ‘Not a bad age to get to.’

‘You did not marry?’ Blaum asked.

Beesely shook his head. ‘What I was involved with would shock Helen here. I worked well outside the law, well outside

what British Intelligence knew. A family would have been selfish, they would have been in danger.'

'What about face fungus?' Helen asked.

Beesely glanced up at Johnno. 'Indiscreet sixties.'

'He is your son?' Blaum asked, clearly surprised.

Mike was caught off guard as well. He faced Johnno. 'You'll inherit the bank?'

'Not bleeding likely,' Johnno sighed. 'I'm no administrator, I'll go sit on a beach.'

'Huh!' Beesely quietly let out. 'You would not sit still on a beach for a week.'

'You could always get Helen back when you pop off,' Johnno suggested.

Now she said, 'Huh!'

'Not such a bad idea,' Beesely commented.

'Surely ... Otto ... will run it,' Blaum suggested after a moments thought, a glance at his shoes. Beesely half turned his head and nodded. Blaum studied Johnno for a moment. 'You ... will work for Otto?'

'Yeah, no problem. Life is so much easier when you don't need to think.'

Beesely turned to Blaum. 'Don't keep your problems private, Max. We need to have a closer relationship.'

'For what ... purpose, exactly?'

'You'll be President some day soon.'

'I will?' Blaum puzzled.

'He will?' Mike asked.

'Do you not want to be President?' Beesely asked.

'I ... have not thought about it.'

'Every politician,' Dame Helen insisted, 'thinks about that at some point.'

Blaum carefully studied Beesely. 'Are you suggesting that you ... help me?'

'Hell no. I'm just suggesting we rig the election.' They laughed.

‘You are serious?’ Blaum pressed.

‘If you want it, it is yours. I’ve done my research, the Society is behind me.’

‘The Society ... endorse me?’ Blaum questioned.

‘History in the making,’ Mike noted.

‘Corruption in the making,’ Helen noted.

‘The Swiss are not corrupt,’ Blaum insisted. ‘They just do not report crime as well as some other countries.’ They laughed. ‘You know what I really want to do?’ he asked, looking across at Beesely and pointing. ‘Your rescue force.’

‘It’s yours any time you like. Just make sure that your successor is not so good at reporting crime.’ They chuckled.

‘Hey,’ Helen called. ‘Get that guard in the corner over here in the light.’ She tapped Beesely’s leg. ‘You’ll like this.’

Johno signalled the man over, the man stepping into the light. ‘Hey!’ he quietly called. ‘You trying to take the piss out of me?’

Thomas laughed, as did the others. The guard’s moustache was a ‘Johno’.

‘No, sir,’ the guard insisted as Beesely stood and turned. ‘I have this for one year. It is common for Germany and Switzerland.’

‘There’s *your* doppelganger!’ Helen told Johno, laughing. ‘Get some more of them, and send them out in the town.’

Beesely turned, mock concern etched into his face. ‘Dear God, Helen, we have to live and work in this town. They close their businesses now when they see *him* coming. The car dealerships run away shrieking.’

The guard laughed, earning a glare from Johno. ‘Sorry, sir, but it is true. Many the stories and jokes about Herr Johno’s driving,’ he explained, his head lowered.

‘Tell me one,’ Johno insisted.

The guard glanced around the faces. ‘How many Johno’s does it take to screw in the light bulb?’ They waited. ‘Johno cannot reach the light bulb from the car, so he destroys the house

first with the car, lifting the light-fitting from the floor and swapping the bulb.’ The group were hysterical.

Johno just stared, finally grinning. ‘That’s good. I like it.’ He stopped grinning. ‘Cheeky bastards.’

Beesely beckoned the guard with a hook finger. ‘I want you go up to the managers. Get a team of men to follow you, dress like Johno, and travel around the local area. Drive a silver Mercedes. But be careful, there are irate husbands and car dealers to avoid. Oh, and I want any more Johno jokes emailed to me. Go!’ The guard stepped out.

‘Don’t go encouraging them,’ Johno quipped.

An hour later, the only two drinkers remaining were Johno and Dame Helen, the good lady not so keen to let go of her wine glass.

‘What’s it like?’ she asked after several seconds spent studying him. ‘Being shot.’

‘Too quick to worry about for the most part,’ he said with a sigh. ‘It feels like being punched hard, then a warm numb feeling. Then, depending where you’re hit, some pain or not.’

‘Pain ... or not?’

‘If you’re hit in a muscle, like the arm, the trauma force – the shock wave going through your flesh – makes it all go numb. Like a dead leg after being punched. What hurts is the secondary stuff, like being hit in the stomach.’ He gazed into his beer. ‘The body’s chemicals get mixed up, stuff going where it wasn’t designed to go. That hurts. Like someone pouring acid into your veins.’

‘I never thought I’d ever feel like a soldier on the front line,’ she softly admitted.

‘Your *job* ... got you into that wheelchair, love.’

She nodded slowly. ‘Not something I ever expected. No senior intelligence officers have ever been in harms way.’ She let out a big breath. ‘I set a precedent.’

‘Don’t take this the wrong way, love, but fuckers like you have been sending people like me out into *harms way* for hundreds of years, many not to return.’

She lifted her head and stared back for a second, before looking away. ‘Yes,’ she blew out, reflecting on Johno’s words. ‘It does give me a new appreciation for what goes on.’

‘Well, you’re now an honouree member of her Majesty’s Armed Forces wounded club.’ He toasted her with his glass. She made no comment. ‘It took some balls for you to come here, in your state,’ he softly added. She frowned a question back at him. ‘You should be back in the UK, crying your eyes out. Yet here you are, accepting our dubious hospitality. Even after everything that’s happened to you, you’re still on the clock.’

‘On the clock?’

‘Playing head of MI6, keeping an eye on us,’ Johno said with a knowing grin.

‘You’re not as stupid as you look, are you.’

He smiled widely. ‘And you, my lady, are still a pleasant sight for the eye, even with the bruises and the wheelchair.’

She blinked, then scowled at him. ‘You’re drunk.’

‘Nope, not even close, love.’ She stared back. Johno added, ‘First time you turned up at the house – lousy stiff outfit – it did nothing for you. I’d burn that one, you looked a hundred years old.’ Her eyes widened. ‘But the second time, in the sweat-shirt and jeans – very nice. Nothing better ... than a quality bird dressed scruffy.’

‘Quality bird?’ she repeated, trying to hide an amused grin.

‘Well educated, top job in the UK.’ He smirked and tipped his head.

She gazed into her glass. ‘I’m not feeling such a *quality bird* at the moment.’

‘Victim syndrome,’ he stated, a cold edge to his voice. ‘It’ll pass. Trust me, I know. Right now you’re feeling violated, helpless, wanting to strike back ... and busy being angry at yourself for letting your kid die. There’s a solution. Stop feeling

sorry for yourself, and focus on getting mad at the bad guys and getting even. If you don't get a handle on that, and quick, it'll eat you up for years, babes.'

She studied her drink. 'You know, I read your file, after the first time we met.' She lifted her eyes. 'You're not the person described in that file.'

'What can you learn from a school report, eh?' he joked. He took a breath. 'Your old man, Mike, he don't seem to know how to handle you ... if you don't mind me saying.'

Without looking up, she asked, 'And how would you... *handle me?*'

'What you need is a night out, a few drinks and some loud music so that you can forget yourself in the crowd. Then a quick tasty kebab and a good shag.'

She laughed, a hand quickly to her mouth. 'If you can get your mind out of the gutter long enough, Sergeant, push me back me back to my room.'

'Want a Kebab first?'

3

Assassins did not, as a rule, toot their horns as they approached their intended victims, but Herr Mole tooted the horn of the hire Lexus again as he navigated slowly up a dirt track to an isolated log cabin in *upstate* New York. Agent Schooner drew his pistol, and peered out of the window from behind net curtains, noting a light blue Lexus labouring slowly up the dirt track. Confident that this was nothing dangerous, he gave the rear of the cabin a quick check and locked the solid wood door.

Back at the front windows he watched, suddenly startled that no one appeared to be driving the car. His grip on his pistol tightened before he noticed the head of someone in the driving seat. Were they hiding, he wondered.

The Lexus slowed and pulled up, just nudging a fence pole, slipping back a little before the handbrake was applied.

He frowned. *Who the hell was driving?*

Herr Mole opened the door and stepped out, Schooner glancing at the wall calendar. This cabin was hired out intermittently, especially when he was away.

The cabin had been left to him by his uncle, a welcome weekend retreat and a great meeting place for persons of his persuasion. Now he studied the scribbled marks; it was not down as being rented, but mistakes had been made before, the owner of the motel on the highway handling the bookings.

‘Idiot!’ He cursed the man. Quickly, he checked the rear again, stuffed the pistol down his back and stepped out. Squinting in the late afternoon sun, he checked the tree line as he stepped down and onto the dirt track.

‘Hey there!’ he called, as friendly as he could make it sound, waving at the odd little man limping towards him.

‘Parle vous Francias?’ Herr Mole offered with a wave.

‘Fucking great,’ Schooner muttered. ‘You er ... you speak English, buddy?’

Now the little Frenchman stood just a few yards away.

‘Yes, I am speaking the English,’ Mole replied.

A familiar ‘crack’ registered just before Schooner felt his knee give way. Cursing himself for walking so easily into a trap, he reached for his pistol. Before his hand got anywhere near the weapon his other knee buckled, another crack echoing off the trees. He fell forwards as the pain started to register.

The little man continued to step forwards. Schooner turned on his side and reached for his pistol. Another crack, and his arm flew back around towards his head, his elbow shattered and his arm now limp. The little man stopped level with Schooner’s head, the CIA agent unable to lift his head higher than could afford him a view of Herr Mole’s legs.

‘Bastard!’ Schooner spat out.

‘I have some questions for you, my friend.’ All of a sudden the little man’s English sounded a great deal better. And his accent was suddenly Germanic.

‘Screw ... you,’ Schooner got out in a strained whisper.

The little man knelt onto Schooner’s remaining good hand. Lifting his head, Schooner could now see a miniature blowlamp, no bigger than his attacker’s hand. With a quiet roar, a small blue flame appeared, little more than an inch long.

‘You’re K2,’ he spat out.

‘He is,’ came a voice, an east coast American accent.

Schooner strained his neck to see. There stood a man in camouflage gear, holding a M4 assault rifle with a long silencer and telescopic sight. Feeling betrayed, he demanded, venom in his voice, ‘Who sent you?’

Mr Grey answered, ‘Beesely sent me. And I’ll make you this promise. Answer the first question correctly ... and you get a shot to the back of the head.’

Schooner considered his options, lowering his face to the cool dirt. For several seconds he studied an ant labouring along with a leaf way too big for it. He had considered this day for many years; when, and where it might happen. Well, here it was - that day. ‘Kirkpatrick,’ he let out. ‘Fuck ‘im.’

‘Would that be James Kirkpatrick, Section Chief, Research and Development, Langley?’

‘Yeah, that’s the fucker; God of the doomsday scenarios.’

The little man stood up and stepped back. A crack, and Schooner felt his lower jaw disintegrate; teeth, bone and blood now a half-inch from his eyes. Another crack, the good elbow gone. Footsteps. They were leaving. And he would be remaining.

That day. That day would be a very long day.

Edwardo Maurice, the head of the Marseille mafia, had finished eating, and now sat listening to a discussion on the merits of the European Union, his family and friends sat around a long table. His sons were equally balanced for and against even tighter

control of French life by the Brussels bureaucrats. Twenty people remained assembled at this harbour-side restaurant; most family, some ‘employees’.

A man in a white shirt appeared at the door, beckoning a sleepy waiter to him. He whispered in the waiter’s ear. The waiter straightened, before walking quickly to Edwardo as two ‘employees’ stepped closer to the visitor.

The young waiter stood behind Edwardo, bent low and whispering into the ear of the boss. ‘Sir, this man says he is an envoy from the director of K2 in Switzerland.’

Edwardo snapped upright, his sudden movement noticed by the ensemble. With a curious frown, he waved the visitor over and to a seat. After a careful visual inspection of the visitor, he cordially offered, ‘Food? Some wine?’

‘No, thank you, sir,’ the visitor politely declined, his accent local, but refined.

Edwardo eased back. ‘So, you work for the boss of K2?’ he asked.

‘Yes, sir. And he desires to convey to you that he wishes you every success in your ... *dispute* with certain Paris ... *gentlemen*.’

The boss glanced at his number two, concerned, then back to the visitor. After a moment’s reflection, he asked, ‘And how much ... *success* does he wish for us?’

‘Complete success, sir, which is why he has made available to you sophisticated weapons, information and ... twenty million dollars.’

Edwardo and his number two again exchanged looks. ‘That is a lot of ... success, he wishes. Why, in particular, does he wish *us* this success?’

‘The gentlemen in Paris attracted his displeasure, sir.’

Edward made a face and gave a large, Gallic shrug, before sipping his wine. ‘When does he wish us to ... talk with the gentlemen in Paris?’

‘Tomorrow, sir.’ Edwardo raised his eyebrows. The visitor added, ‘In the morning you will have five million good wishes. And every week, if ... progress is good.’

‘The gods have sent us a gift,’ Edwardo said to no one in particular. ‘An opportunity not to be missed.’ He tipped his head at his number two, who hurriedly left the restaurant.

* * *

‘Hey, Dick,’ Bambitou quietly offered as he entered.

His assistant gave him a look. ‘Don’t know why I’m so good to you.’

‘Maybe it’s because you’re my assistant? Paid to *assist* me.’

‘Oh, yeah. I forgot.’

He smiled ‘What you got?’

‘State Trooper killed, upstate New York. Shot went through his windscreen, through him, and kept going; Teflon.’

Bambitou rubbed his chin. ‘What was he doing?’

‘Nothing, just on patrol. Car crash suggests he was hit as he drove, from ahead.’

‘Those he was pursuing were pros.’

‘Could be. Anyway, they did a sweep of the area, spoke to residents and farmers, found one lonely cabin with a man in critical condition, splayed out face down near the cabin.’

‘And?’

She raised a finger. ‘Pistol stuffed down his back, not fired recently. Shot in each knee-cap and elbow, then through the jaw - left to the worms.’

‘Nasty. A punishment, not an execution.’

‘He’s still alive, but critical. Oh, he’s on the *list*, by the way.’

‘And his ... gainful occupation.’

She glanced up, winking. ‘Computer refers all enquirers to the Department of Defense.’ He walked to the door, stopped and turned. ‘Oh,’ she said. ‘Email for you. Death threat.’

‘File it with all the others.’

Making new friends

1

Beesely sat hunched over the desk reading a file, Johnno cleaning his MP5. Otto sat reviewing documents, intermittently offering some up for Beesely to cast an eye over. Thomas was keenly observing Johnno, making comments when he remembered just what should go where. It was 9am and calm.

‘Sir, there is an unauthorised helicopter approaching!’ burst from the desk phone.

‘Cliff top!’ Johnno firmly stated out without detracting from his educational activities.

Beesely pressed a button. ‘Have the cliff top outpost cover it, but do not fire unless they are hostile. What type of helicopter is it?’

‘French-made Squirrel, sir. As with ours.’

Beesely turned to Johnno.

‘Four soldiers at best,’ Johnno informed him, unconcerned.

Thomas ran around and called up the image on the computer screen, Beesely and Otto peering over his shoulder, the lad now adept at selecting the various images. The helicopter slowed, eased lower, and landed on the grass to the west of the office block. As they observed, a man and a woman, both smartly dressed, jumped out and walked towards a waiting Range Rover. Thomas adjusted and selected the images as the vehicle brought them the short distance to the castle.

‘Sir?’ came from the phone.

‘Yes?’

‘They are DGSE, sir. French Secret Service.’

‘About bloody time,’ Johnno muttered.

‘Check for weapons and listening devices. Politely. Then bring them down to my office.’ He drummed his fingers for a few idle seconds, then scribbled a note. He handed it to Otto,

who immediately stepped out. Johnno started to assemble his MP5.

Beesely remained seated as the French entered, Otto following his lead.

The woman appeared to be in her late thirties, smartly dressed in a dark blue suit with a white blouse. Her features were pleasant, yet businesslike. She held herself with confidence and authority, and seemed to be the superior of the man accompanying her. 'Mister Beesely, I am Geraldine Nouveau, DGSE, Paris. This is Jacque Iconou,' she said in excellent English.

Beesely sat back and gestured them towards seats as Dame Helen wheeled herself in. She took up her station next to Otto as the guests sat.

'You are Herr Otto Schessel,' Ms Nouveau noted, tipping her head politely at Otto, her colleague repeating the gesture. Then she turned the other way to Johnno. 'You must be Sergeant John Williams.'

Johnno gave her a childish wave. 'Getting used to hairy armpits.'

She frowned slightly before turning to Dame Helen. 'I am sorry, Madame, but I do not recognise you.'

'Dame Helen Eddington-Small,' she coldly announced.

Ms Nouveau's eyes widened. She glanced at Beesely, before turning back to Dame Helen, clearly caught off guard. 'You... are the director of MI6?'

'On sick leave.' She tapped her plastic leg cast.

'Apologies, madam, and on behalf of the French Security Services ... condolences for your loss.'

'Thank you,' Dame Helen curtly responded. 'Why are you here?'

Beesely glanced at the side of Dame Helen's head, hid a smile, and turned his gaze back to the visitors.

Ms Nouveau delicately asked, ‘May I be so bold as to enquire, Madame, your link to this organization?’

‘The British Government and its security services work very closely in co-operation with Sir Morris Beesely.’ Ms Nouveau considered that very carefully as Dame Helen asked her, ‘Why are *you* here?’ Amused, Beesely folded his arms.

Ms Nouveau organized her thoughts. ‘Last night, a Marseille criminal gang was approached and offered a large sum of money to attack a Paris criminal gang - apparently on behalf of this organization. That was the subject of a high level meeting this morning. I am here to clarify matters before arrest warrants are considered.’

‘So,’ Dame Helen began, ‘you have people watching criminal gangs in your country?’

‘Of course.’

‘And yet you didn’t notice, the other week, that Paris gangs were helping launch a large-scale terrorist attack on Swiss soil?’

‘I cannot discuss such operational matters –’

‘Well either you knew or you didn’t,’ Dame Helen pressed, getting louder. ‘If you did know, and didn’t warn the Swiss, they will issue arrest warrants for *you*.’

Minister Blaum walked in and pulled out a chair so that he sat behind Dame Helen, next to Otto.

‘Minister Blaum,’ Ms Nouveau noted with a polite tip of her head, a slight reddening of her cheeks.

‘Did I miss something?’ Blaum asked.

‘Yes,’ Dame Helen replied without turning. ‘This lady, from the French DGSE, was about to admit to complicity in the criminal attack on a Swiss bank last week.’

Ms Nouveau straightened, annoyed.

Blaum stated, ‘If that is correct, then our visitors will be arrested and held.’

The visitors glanced at each other.

‘Sir?’ buzzed from the phone.

‘Yes?’

‘George Holmes, Director CIA, sir.’

‘Put him through.’

‘Sir Morris?’

‘Yes, George, how are you?’

‘Up very early to make this call.’

‘How’s the President?’

‘Good. He’s very grateful for your assistance.’

‘Listen, George, some bad news for you. Well, there is, as they say, good news and bad news.’

‘Let’s have the good news first.’

Beesely made firm eye contact with Ms Nouveau. ‘The good news is that I am one of yours, and you can be assured of my loyalty and service, George. Not to mention my discretion.’

‘That’s good to know. What’s the bad news?’

‘Your Paris chief, Mister Emerson, is dirty.’

‘Christ!’ He paused. ‘How ... dirty are we talking here?’

‘Would cost you your job, George.’

There was a pause. ‘Christ! Was he involved in that stuff the other week?’

‘Up to his armpits, George. He relieved Boris Luchenkov of half a billion dollars.’ The visitors glanced at each other.

‘Beesely, is there something you can ... do?’

‘Already in progress, this will never see the light of day. And no need for you to discuss this ... higher up, if you know what I mean.’

‘I know what you mean.’

‘Bear with me, George. I’ll clean house as best as I can.’

‘Appreciate it, Beesely. Dinner at the White House when you’re ready.’

Beesely closed in on the phone. ‘Listen, George, I need you to keep something in mind for the next few days, just between you and me. I’m in Switzerland, and will be here for the next few days.’

‘Oh, OK.’

‘Talk soon. Bye.’ He hung up and turned to Ms Nouveau. ‘I’m sorry, you were saying something before we were interrupted?’ As a matter of accidental timing, Johno cocked his MP5.

She glanced at her colleague. ‘I ... will have to consult with my superiors, sir.’

Her mobile phone rang, startling her. ‘Apologies, sir, I did not think it would work down here.’

‘We have boosters, and I suggest that you answer it. It could be important.’

Everyone focused on her, her cheeks reddening as she lifted her phone. ‘Yes ... sir ... yes ... sir ... sir ... will do, sir.’ She folded her flip-phone.

‘Sounded important,’ Beesely casually noted.

She forced a large breath. ‘Our Security Minister wishes to convey his apologies ... for not sharing relevant information with you about various criminal gangs, where the information could have been of use to you. We will, of course, co-operate fully in future.’

‘That’s good to know,’ Beesely enthused. He turned his head and smiled. ‘Thomas, if you please.’ Thomas walked up to the computer screen and zoomed in on the helicopter.

The French pilot now stood chatting to a guard fifty yards from his helicopter, both of them smoking. The drone of another helicopter was of immediate interest to him, the man glancing around to see what it was. Coming in low across the lake, the black Apache approached like a stalking cat. ‘Apache!’ he noted.

‘We have a squadron of them,’ the guard keenly informed him.

The Apache nosed up and climbed to a hundred feet, banking as it approached the west end of the compound, the drone of its engines bouncing off the hillside and resonating, making it sound more like three helicopters. Now heading parallel to the

lakeshore, its chain gun turned and focussed, the pilot pointing at the movement, keenly interested. Then he stopped smiling.

The Apache let loose with a ten second burst as it passed, a deafening roar sounding similar to a sustained slip gear in an old car, shell casings falling into the lake.

The DGSE Squirrel splintered into a thousand pieces before bursting into flames. The Apache banked hard, and dropped to just a few metres above the lake surface as it eased away across the lake, showing its rear to the French pilot with a wiggle of its tail rotor, its point made; it had scent-marked its territory, peed on its spot, and seen off the interloper.

The guard lifted the pilot to his feet, dusting him off, before forcibly turning him to face what remained of his helicopter.

Two large bangs, fifty calibre rounds, were closely followed by large chunks flying off the helicopter; they echoed around the hills, coming back twice before dissipating. Then a missile streaked down from the cliff-top, hitting the wrecked helicopter and doubling the visible flames.

The guard continued to politely dust down the pilot as other guards randomly took shots at the helicopter.

Ms Nouveau was on her feet, along with her colleague, staring at the images from the second screen, their mouths hanging open. A manager walked in and silently handed her three train tickets.

Beesely stood. 'Well, if there's nothing else, young lady, I believe you have a train to catch. And, unlike British trains, these are always on time. Swiss, you see.'

After the guests had been shown out, tea and coffee was brought in.

Blaum forced a few breaths, forcing himself to calm down. He said, 'That helicopter ...'

'Will disappear,' Beesely reassured him. 'If they give you any hassle we will buy them a new one.'

‘OK,’ Blaum finally agreed, still breathing heavily. ‘Now I *must* go.’

Dame Helen stood up and hugged him. ‘You take care.’

‘I will probably be back soon,’ he suggested, giving Beesely a sideways glance. He waved collectively at the room.

Beesely sat. ‘Right, ten minute break, then we can take a pop at the big player.’

‘The Paris Chief?’ Dame Helen asked.

‘Not sure you should be here for this,’ Beesely pointed out.

‘Hell, I’m up to my armpits in this already. You fall - I fall.’

‘I had best make sure that I do not fall then. Break, everyone.’

* * *

A quick check of his boat before work was common for Kirkpatrick, the marina just a half-mile from the Pentagon. At the moment his time was split between his office here, with the Department of Defense, and at Langley. Here was preferable, he had quick access to the love of his life.

The gate guard nodded and greeted him. Kirkpatrick smiled back at the man, someone he could rely on to call in a storm to check the boat’s tethers. As he walked along the narrow wooden boards, he noticed an Air Force colonel in uniform checking another boat.

Another fifty yards and there he was. His boat ... was submerged. He stood and stared, bullet holes visible, lots of them.

Mississippi

1

The smartly dressed Englishman raised his head from his paper, making brief eye contact with an elderly Jewish couple sitting opposite. The couple put down their drinks and stood as the Englishman went back to his newspaper, the slow moving couple stepping outside the Red Roof Inn, Brandon, Mississippi, just east of Jackson.

It was a small roadside hotel, less than fifty rooms - some in the main structure, some motel style. Keeping an eye on strangers would be easy enough.

An oddly dressed elderly man walked in, flanked by four large men in suits, and up to the desk.

‘Yes, sir, how may I help you today?’ the young lady clerk enquired, a smile as bright as her blue-and-red uniform.

‘Beesely is my name, Sir Morris Beesely from London, England.’

She smiled politely, checking the computer for a reservation. ‘Yes, sir. You’re booked in for two days, standard room with breakfast.’ She glanced at the four security men, forcing the smile to remain cemented in place, and processed the visitor’s arrival.

‘How will you be paying –’

She had hardly uttered the words when the well-dressed elderly man plonked down a wad of hundred-dollar bills on the counter.

Reaching for the money, a crack sounded.

In slow motion, the man’s mouth seemed to open and vomit forth blood and teeth at her. She felt the pain in her arm a moment later as the old man dropped down below the height of the counter, leaving her with the image of a car halted outside, a window wound down, a man with a rifle.

The car sped off as the security men started running. Screams went up, not least those coming from her own lungs as she lost control of her own body.

The smartly dressed young Englishman rushed outside, the Jewish couple now cowering. 'Are you alright?' he enquired, kneeling next to them. 'Get them?' he whispered.

The old man raised his magazine, revealing the end of a camera lens.

* * *

Bambitou walked back into his office, coffee in hand, a black tea for Tracey.

'Quick, quick,' she whispered, waving him over.

He ambled across and placed her drink down.

She quickly added, 'Just got this, emailed to you personally from a dead-stop email address.' She called up the image of a man with a rifle leaning out of a car; his face, and that of his driver, clearly visible.

'So?'

'It says ... Brandon, Mississippi. So I checked the wire: drive by shooting, Red Roof Hotel, Brandon, Mississippi. -' she looked up, smiling excitedly. '- half an hour ago!'

He straightened. 'Get those two suspects out to all agencies, and to our Mississippi branch.'

'Wait, there's more,' she said, excited. 'The email says *Go to Mississippi, University Genetics Department. Wait.* And this is where it gets a bit foggy.' She called up more screens. 'Guy shot in Brandon was a New York stage actor named Rufus O'Connor, booked in as a Sir Morris Beesely.'

'Some sort of identity scam?'

'Hold onto your hats. This is where it gets interesting. One, Sir Morris Beesely is English -'

'Of course.'

She shot him a look. ‘Says here, Born in Church-Fenton, England. Served with British Army, Guards, then Special Air Service –’

‘Hold it, that’s SAS ... counter terrorism unit?’

‘Yep. Then the rest is down as Government Service, which could mean anything - such as British Secret Service. So I did a little digging.’

‘And?’

She suddenly seemed apologetic. ‘Sorry, Boss.’

‘Boss? When the hell have you ever called me ‘boss’? What ya done, Tracey?’

‘I used your access codes to check him out,’ she explained, a pained and apologetic expression offered.

‘And?’

‘Three emails came back straight away, wanting to know why we are enquiring. Director CIA, Director FBI and the White House.’ Bambitou slumped into a chair. ‘Sorry, Boss. You’re wanted in Washington, like ... right away.’

‘Get me a flight to Mississippi,’ he quietly stated. ‘Book me a room.’

‘Oh, Red Roof. Got the details here.’

2

Emerson was handcuffed and barefoot, and now wearing a tracksuit provided for him, albeit a little short in the leg. His eye was bruised, a lip cut, his eyes heavy and sunken, the result of the wrong dosage of tranquilliser from Leponte’s amateur experiments with chemistry. He angrily shrugged off the guards as they threw him into a chair in front of Beesely’s desk, threatening looks for his captors.

‘Tea, coffee?’ Beesely pleasantly enquired.

‘Screw you!’ Emerson quietly let out.

‘I would have thought,’ Beesely began, ‘that the sight of your friend, Mister –’

‘Preston,’ Otto assisted him.

‘Mister Preston, that you would be a little more co-operative, Mister Emerson.’

‘You won’t touch me!’ he confidently snarled.

‘Why, just because you are four ranks above him?’

Emerson was surprised, but soon regained his angry expression.

Beesely poured him a tea anyway. ‘Correct me if I am wrong, but there are another three ranks above you, not including the director, who is appointed by the President?’

‘Fascinating insight,’ Emerson spat out.

‘And above him there is the President, and above the President are ... those who play golf in a Virginia Lodge.’

Emerson straightened. ‘Who have you been getting intel’ from, not the bitch here?’

Beesely followed his look towards Dame Helen, sat in her wheelchair, before emptying the scalding hot liquid into Emerson’s lap. Emerson controlled his pain and struggled as Beesely sat back down. ‘No, young man, not from this good lady. You see, young man, I spent a long time playing golf in Virginia.’

Dame Helen was listening intently.

Emerson squinted. ‘You? You were MI6, just that! And that was a hundred years ago.’

Johno laughed loudly.

‘So you were meant to believe. I would not expect you to know me since you are not *top table*.’ He rapped his desk with his knuckles.

Emerson now seemed more confused than angered. ‘Who do you know on the top table?’ he challenged.

‘I certainly knew the chairman, Oliver Stanton, before your lot killed him.’

‘What?’ Emerson called in a strained whisper. ‘He’s dead?’

‘Killed by Henry O’Sullivan, who I’m sure you know.’ Emerson lowered his head, thinking hard. Beesely continued,

‘Of course, when Henry’s actions were discovered, he was ... *let go* ... by the top table. Heart attack, terrible shame. I sent a card. Then the new temporary chairman, David, was killed. Single gunshot to the head.’

‘No chairman has ever been killed,’ Emerson muttered, as if that was a mark of great achievement by The Lodge, something that had made it stand out against other, similar organizations.

‘And now three are dead,’ Beesely calmly noted. ‘So far, that is. Perhaps, young man, things have gone too far.’ Beesely eased back into his chair.

Emerson raised his head, a pained expression. ‘Who *are* you?’

‘I was, a long time ago, personal agent to the chairman.’ Emerson was visibly shocked. ‘Later I became British representative, then deputy chairman.’ Helen listened with keen interest.

Emerson sat forwards, shaking his head. ‘No, no, that can’t be.’

‘It’s all falling down around you, Mister Emerson. The chain of command is out of kilter. And that cannot be a good thing.’

‘If you are who you say you are, you know Tipping Point is being reached,’ Emerson insisted, staring oddly out of focus.

‘Who do you think wrote the original report?’

Emerson’s eyes widened. ‘You?’ he accused with his tone.

‘*With this hand I pen these words with a heavy heart, my fear for the future herein described.* Yes, young man, I wrote it. The three tipping points: one, the oil economy, two, the Middle East, three, a climate change.’

‘And they’ll converge in five years or less!’ Emerson claimed, almost pleading.

‘I know when they will converge, so do others. But unlike you, some of us still have hope for the future. Some of us think that mankind will surprise itself and actually do something sensible. Like ... saving its own neck.’

‘Hah!’ Emerson coughed out, avoiding eye contact.

A manager stepped in quickly, handing Beesely a note before retreating.

Beesely read it. 'Mister Schooner is in critical condition.' He read on, Emerson glancing up briefly. 'Oh, nasty. That had to hurt. Glass, entrails around the room. Nasty. Preston, tortured and killed. Welt, broken neck, paralysed, but still alive. Oh, dear, Mr. Kirkpatrick's boat sank.' Emerson raised his head. 'But he was not on it, unfortunately.'

'They sank his boat?' Johno quietly queried. 'Bastards!'

'And here is the kicker, Mister Emerson. This is where you ... get some unwarranted attention.' He turned one screen so that Emerson could view it as Otto typed commands into the other computer. 'Www dot sneaky bastards two dot com,' Beesely read from the paper. 'It's had twenty-five thousands hits so far,' he proudly announced. He turned to Otto. 'Hits?'

'Visitors.'

'Ah, good. Twenty-five thousand visitors.'

Johno jumped up and grabbed Emerson, pushing his face close to the screen. Clearly visible were a lot of faces he was familiar with.

'What have you done?' Emerson whispered.

Beesely teasingly explained, 'We have created a website of everyone involved. Well, everyone on your side - dead and alive. They are visible for everyone to see - FBI, CIA, NSA and the White House. Not to mention CNN. An ... *expanding thumbnail gallery*.'

Emerson was horrified, staring wide-eyed at the screen. 'You fucking idiot -'

Johno banged Emerson's head into the desk. Twice. 'Pay attention when the nice man is explaining stuff, like.'

Beesely eased back into his chair, swivelled and stood. 'You see, Mr. Emerson, rats like you and your colleagues work best when in the dark. Out in the light they wilt and die.'

'That's mushrooms, Boss,' Johno quietly pointed out, looking embarrassed for Beesely.

Beesely walked around the desk, his hands in pockets. 'What do you think your masters will do when they see that site? Which, by the way -' he glanced at Otto. '- has your good self in there.'

Several images appeared, many of them Emerson naked and unconscious.

'Oh, yuk!' Johno shouted. 'Fuck's sake! You could have warned me!' He pushed Emerson into his chair, guards closing in.

Beesely flicked his wrist at the guards. 'Take him away.' They dragged Emerson out.

3

Kirkpatrick sat staring at the website, all the lights on his desk phone now lit.

'You have email,' sounded repeatedly from his computer, a female voice with mockingly kind and civil tones.

In front of him sprawled a pile of messages: British Government investigating US stem cell research, US research companies taken over by Swiss groups, all Swiss research facilities under investigation.

Preston missing, Emerson missing - his driver and bodyguard crushed to death. Now Emerson unconscious and naked on this website, next to Preston. Had they been tortured by K2? Had they given him up? With K2's fondness for videoing their torture, was an email attachment winging its way to the White House or the FBI?

Welt and Schooner tortured and killed, their photos on the website. What had they given up? Phillips and Daley not reporting in. Henry O'Sullivan dead, David dead. And strangest of all, no mention of the project; no mention of what these men were up to.

His door handle turned. Locked, a second later it was kicked in. Kirkpatrick closed his eyes for a moment, images of a cell in Leavenworth surfacing.

A sharp pain in his neck, a man stood there, a man he had seen many times before. He withdrew the dart, squinting at the man for a moment. He thought he remembered where he knew the man from, just before he lost consciousness. Mr. Grey, dressed as a paramedic, holstered the dart-gun.

Tipping point

1

‘So what’s that Tipping Point bollocks he was on about?’ Johno asked, slumping in front of the desk, grabbing yet another of one of the unused drinks. Dame Helen wheeled herself closer.

Beesely sat. ‘It is ... a theoretical threshold, based on a number of factors, after which society breaks down and we all plunge into doom and darkness.’

‘And *you* wrote this?’ Dame Helen queried, concerned.

Beesely offered her two flat palms. ‘I did not make the world as it is, I simply quantified certain conditions which, when met, point towards a *tipping point* - a point beyond which it would be very hard to simply carry on as we are.’

‘So are we?’ Johno asked. ‘At that point?’

‘In some areas, yes, in others ... no. There are a great many variables involved.’

‘And you wrote this report for the CIA?’ Dame Helen pressed.

Beesely reluctantly nodded. ‘In the sixties and seventies. And since then it has been refined and checked, but never refuted or proven wrong. Unfortunately.’

‘So what are the conditions?’ Dame Helen enquired. Otto turned his chair and made himself comfortable.

‘Three main ones: The oil economy and US deficit, the Middle East becoming a single state, and a sudden climatic event that causes mass migration - uncontrolled migration. And even back then we understood the dangers of global warming. Problem was, successive White House administrations refused to do anything.’

‘Because of an oil based economy,’ Dame Helen pointedly remarked.

Beesely tipped his head and raised his eyebrows, agreeing with her. ‘All oil is sold around the world in dollars, and all the US Federal Reserve has to do is keep printing them to keep the US a superpower. Truth is, they are bankrupt, have been for a while.’

‘Bankrupt?’ Johno repeated with a sceptical look.

Otto interjected, ‘If all the dollars around the world returned to the US, and people demanded gold - or goods - for their dollars, there’s not enough gold or goods to settle the debt. But that is disputed, since US assets are greater than the debt. Of course, selling American buildings and businesses to foreign debtors is not factored in - that would be stupid.’

Beesely nodded his agreement. ‘China, technically, owns thirty percent of America - they hold so many dollars. Saudis own ten percent - that we know of.’

Johno eased forwards. ‘So what happens if China wants its dollars in gold?’

‘America would be bankrupt overnight,’ Beesely pointed out.

‘The Chinese would never do that,’ Dame Helen suggested. ‘They wouldn’t want to have their largest customer stop buying from them.’

‘But it has to stop somewhere,’ Otto suggested. ‘It cannot keep going like this. It will reach breaking point. Or, *tipping point*.’

‘How long?’ Johno asked, keenly interested.

‘Less than twenty years,’ Otto replied. ‘According to some studies.’

Johno focused on Otto. ‘Just when you think your own problems are difficult to solve, something else even bigger pops up, eh?’

Otto stared back, unsure as to what Johno was referring to, Beesely glancing from Otto to Johno. Dame Helen lowered her head, deep into her own thoughts.

After a moment, Johnno turned his head a notch toward Beesely, and asked, 'So what are the sneaky shits going to do before that point?'

'Keep finding oil, for one,' Beesely pointed out, Otto still focused on Johnno.

'No matter whose garden it's in,' Johnno said with a sigh. 'Or who they have to kill to get access to it.'

'That's a short term consideration, yes,' Beesely admitted. 'But they are looking at a battlefield with many factors in play.'

'How does the Middle East affect the oil economy?' Dame Helen asked. 'I thought oil would last there for another fifty years?'

'It may do,' Beesely began. 'The prediction of doom and gloom is one of a greater Islamic state, stretching from Pakistan to Morocco. For most of the past thirty years those in the know propped up the Iraqis, because they are the key for the whole region, the centrepiece. If they turn into a unified Islamic state then the domino effect will be unstoppable, according to some CIA reports. Best policy for the CIA has been to keep the Sunni Muslims strong and in power, not the Shia. The so-called 'war on terror' against Saddam made things much worse, and moved us a step closer to that Middle-East tipping point.'

'Why's that a problem?' Johnno scoffed. 'They don't have the firepower to take on the West. Manpower, yeah, if you count the cannon fodder. And most of the time they fight amongst themselves.'

'That's where the climate comes in,' Beesely explained as he rubbed the bridge of his nose. 'If global warming goes up just a few more degrees, then most of that area gets real toasty —'

'Then all those fuckers will want a flat in Islington!' Johnno suggested. 'Willing, this time, to fight their way in, not sneak in.'

'Yes,' Beesely sighed. 'They will move north, both into Europe and Russia.'

Dame Helen raised her eyebrows. ‘Hence the Russian interest, they can see it as well.’

‘They have their own studies, similar to mine, similar conclusions. And *they* are more worried than the CIA. They ... have the inviting wide open spaces of the Russian Steppes.’

‘Can’t stop global warming,’ Johno suggested in a resigned tone.

Beesely faced him. ‘Probably not. Another problem is that most of the predicted *new-discovery* oil reserves of the next fifty years are either in little neutral countries, or disputed areas. Like the Arctic or Antarctic.’

‘Which is why we fought for the Falklands,’ Johno put in. ‘Staging area for a mad scramble for oil in the Antarctic.’

‘So the Cold War may well hot up again,’ Dame Helen thought out aloud. ‘And this time with China a major player.’

‘And India,’ Beesely added. ‘Plus some reports have Brazil becoming the super-power of the South Americas; its economy and resources have *huge* potential, not least for ethanol production and export.’

Johno stood. ‘So, before doomsday and the big firework display, all these idiots will be posturing and getting into best position.’

‘Killing Eskimos and Mississippi blacks,’ Dame Helen said with a snarl. ‘Do these idiots really think that will make a difference?’

‘Unfortunately, my dear, some of these idiots take it very seriously, hence the recent problems. If they are this frisky *now*, just think what they will be like in ten or twenty years time. It’s all about planning ahead.’

‘Can it be fixed?’ Otto asked in a saddened tone.

Beesely considered Otto’s unborn child and wife-to-be, the wedding postponed again. ‘If you believe that common sense will break out across the world.’

Johno opened the fridge and grabbed a beer. ‘We’re doomed then.’

Dame Helen wheeled herself square to Beesely. 'You wrote the damn report,' she quietly stated. 'Do *you* think there's a solution?'

'Several, my dear,' he answered with a warm smile. 'I wrote the *damn* report that started all this, least I could do is try and help. And we are off to a good start. But when you get back, I do not think your desk will be as clear as you might like it.'

'So what's your theory?' Johnno asked, loudly opening a can.

'I wrote a thesis on it for the NSA in 1985. It was not well received, but understood by those capable of understanding it.'

'And?' Johnno nudged.

'Simple. We are already seeing it now. I called it Reversed Economic Migration. At the moment we see people moving from poor countries to rich in order to find work.'

Johnno snorted, 'Or in the case of the UK, moving to a flat in Islington to sit on their arses and take the dole, because we're too damn soft.'

Beesely shot him an unfriendly look. 'That's one way of looking at it. But I have read some reports that suggest that our low-paid migrants are boosting the UK economy, by quite a chunk.'

'So what's the Reverse theory?' Dame Helen asked.

'Simple. Many Brits buy homes in Portugal, some live there permanently, their kids even go to school there. What are the chances of Britain attacking and bombing the Algarve?'

'None,' Dame Helen said firmly, 'because of the social and financial integration.'

'Exactly. Rich Russians are moving to Western Europe to buy football teams, Indian and African doctors have always moved to the West. It's only a matter of time before rich Chinese start buying holiday homes in Bournemouth! And then ... boys and girls, it starts to get harder for countries to fight. People stop flag waving, give up their original country, and go where the best opportunities are - citizens of the world, drifting after the work and schools. At that point, or some degree of it

greater than thirty percent, we'll see a shift from country to self. The individual is more interested in self and family than nationhood.

'There are those who believe that the solution is simpler, that China won't fight America. After all, what bank goes and shoots its customers? If they sit down and restructure the debt then they should find a solution to the benefit of all sides. The problem is American pride, and the lack of travel abroad by Americans. Some, like the CIA think-tanks, see war as a better option - the customer shoots the bank manager, and therefore doesn't need to pay back the debt.'

2

'Sir, your special visitor is here,' buzzed from the phone.

'Send him in please, fresh tea and coffee, thanks.' Beesely straightened his tie.

'*Special* visitor?' Johno repeated with a quizzical frown.

Beesely stood. 'Mister Emerson was correct, no chairman of The Lodge has ever been killed. You don't get to that position by being second rate, and you don't hang on for fifteen years by being a bit slack.'

A white-haired man walked in, flanked by two smartly suited men with earpiece radios. 'Hello Johno.'

Inch by inch, Johno slowly stood, his mouth opening. 'Oliver Stanton,' he quietly let out. 'Well I'll be buggered.' Shocked, Dame Helen stood up.

Stanton extended a hand to Helen and they shook. 'Please, rest your leg, Dame Helen. And ... thank you for everything you've done here these past few days.'

'You were watching?' she asked.

'Beesely kept me up to date without anyone noticing; we had to be done to flush out the conspirators.'

He turned to Otto and shook hands. 'Well done, Otto, excellent work.'

Otto bowed his head politely. ‘Thank you for the Apache helicopters.’

‘You’re more than welcome.’ He stepped around to Johno. ‘And you, young man. I read a psych’ report on you not so long ago, and they had you down as a manic depressive with suicidal tendencies. I think if those same shrinks had observed your last three weeks they’d have to eat their words.’

Nervously, Johno said, ‘You didn’t see the thing with the tractor did you ... or the French lady?’

Stanton laughed loudly and shook Johno’s hand before turning to Beesely. ‘And you, you old rogue. I had you down for a gonner several times recently, but you surprised me time and again.’

‘One does one’s best,’ Beesely mocked him.

‘A brilliant strategy; the stock markets, the website.’ He turned to Johno. ‘And that speech - *we don’t shoot the foot soldiers*. Christ, I never knew you had it in you, Johno. You confounded them every time.’

His features hardened. ‘And what you did in London.’ He started to rap the desk with his knuckles. Beesely joined in, followed by Otto and even Dame Helen. ‘Remarkable, young man, remarkable. You see, some people feel that this planet is screwed. Then we go and see examples of humanity like that. Remarkable.’

‘Or just plain stupid,’ Johno suggested with a shrug.

Stanton laughed. ‘You just carry on being stupid.’ He patted Johno’s arm as Thomas wandered in. Noticing the strange guards, he saluted them.

‘And you, young man, you spotted a spy and shot her,’ Stanton said in German. Thomas saluted again as Stanton sat.

Johno made eye contact with Otto. ‘You knew he was alive?’

‘Yes. But not why we had to hide him.’

Beesely explained, ‘We could not have pulled this off without Otto knowing some of it. Had to use K2 men to make Olly disappear, and stay disappeared from the world’s agencies.’

Dame Helen swivelled her wheelchair towards Beesely. ‘And me you obviously *didn’t* trust.’

He gave her an apologetic look. ‘Never knew if you were reporting back to the Prime Minister, or anyone else.’

‘And now?’ she pressed.

‘Now I would trust you with my life, or K2, my dear.’

She seemed genuinely touched. ‘Oh.’

‘You know about Mr. Grey?’ Johnno asked Stanton, suddenly serious.

‘Alive and well, and shooting the hell out of the bad guys with his new best buddy Stateside,’ Stanton replied.

‘Oh.’ Johnno frowned. ‘Who’s that?’

‘Herr Mole, of course. Another brilliant move.’

Beesely began, ‘I learnt long ago, that secret agent types have a great deal of pride. They don’t believe people like Herr Mole are spies or agents, because they don’t want to. It has always worked well for me.’

Johnno blew out hard. ‘Christ, if I saw Mole hobbling towards me on a dark night I’d shoot the strange little fucker.’ They laughed. Johnno added, ‘So you gotta tell the wife now?’

‘She knows, I discussed it with her before Beesely and I hatched this plan.’

‘In the Bahamas,’ Johnno suggested.

Stanton nodded. ‘Beesely landing up here was like a godsend. At first he didn’t know if Otto was on the level, so Beesely had him give Mossad, CIA and MI6 –’ he glanced at Dame Helen. ‘- a shit load of money, to see how he would react. He didn’t, so Beesely sent more money to Jewish foundations. Otto seemed on the level.’ He became serious. ‘And after the bomb, aimed at Otto, Beesely was sure about him.’

He turned to Dame Helen. ‘When you didn’t touch the money we had our doubts about you. Your predecessors would have had no problem with it.’

‘Long time ago, maybe,’ she insisted. ‘Different structures now, no Lone Rangers.’

‘Perhaps that’s just as well,’ he added. Then he made eye contact with Beesely. ‘And that forgery you two set up to get you here ... Jesus, our best people went over that. Talk about brilliant. We found people who swore they knew them, your brother and his wife, Gunter’s sister.’

Beesely glanced at Otto, smirking, and then back to Stanton. ‘You’re not as smart as you might like to think you are, Mister Chairman.’

Stanton’s brow furrowed. ‘What do you mean? What you two been up to?’

‘It is not a forgery,’ Beesely explained, enjoying the look on Stanton’s face.

‘What?’

‘It really did happen, Gunter was a relative.’

Stanton’s eyebrows shot up. ‘Wow. So the inheritance is genuine?’

‘Of course not,’ Beesely teased. ‘You think Gunter would leave this to me - British Secret Service!’

‘So ... how?’

Johno edged closer. ‘Gunter sent his missus to try and recruit Beesely in 1963. He banged her, and Otto was the result.’

Beesely could not decide who was more shocked, Stanton or Dame Helen. Otto tipped his head when they stared at him, their mouths open.

‘Life is strange sometimes,’ Beesely commented, enjoying the moment.

‘It is in this bleeding family,’ Johno muttered.

Stanton focused on him. ‘You’re not!’

‘I am.’

‘Christ! I was surprised when Beesely kept you on, despite the injuries and attitude.’

‘Hey, a moment ago I was *remarkable!*’ Johno pointed out, wagging a finger.

Stanton shook his head. ‘Fact stranger than fiction.’ He faced Beesely. ‘I guess I should not keep any more secrets from you

either then. You know my late sister's oldest kid?' Beesely stopped smiling.

'Jesus,' Dame Helen quietly let out, rolling her eyes.

'Yep,' Stanton affirmed. 'I saw no purpose in saying anything before. She's a doctor in California.'

'There's another one of his upstairs,' Dame Helen pointed out. 'A London Detective.'

'God, Beesely –' Stanton began.

'It was the sixties,' Johno sarcastically informed him. 'And sex was a great stress reliever!'

Beesely leant forwards. 'If you have quite finished. Son.'

'Don't you *son* me! I'm remarkable, ya old git.'

Beesely shrugged towards Stanton. 'You see now why I avoided telling them.'

Stanton roared with laughter.

Let's shoot some foot soldiers

1

Bambitou had waited for a dial tone. Nothing. He pressed the green button again and waited.

'Are you the same gentleman we spoke to before?' came a professional and detached female voice.

'This is Special Agent Bambitou, New York FBI. You British Secret Service?'

'One moment, please.'

'This is Johnno. That you ... *Thadius*?'

'You been reading my file?'

'Of course. And I liked what I read. You're a real pain in the ass for your bosses, just like me.'

'Good. So why am I in Jackson?'

'University of Mississippi, Genetics Department, Sickle Cell programme. Need you to grab all their gene-therapy samples. Officially.'

'Why?'

'They were intercepted by ... white supremacists. Tainted.'

'What?' Bambitou shrieked.

'You heard. Now, we need this done very quietly, Mister FBI man. We don't want another race war, do we?'

'What the fuck's going on?'

'Oh, and tell the genetics departments of each university and hospital in Mississippi-land ... that they will each get \$5million anonymously tomorrow.'

'What's going on? And what's this got to do with Switzerland, British Intelligence and these CIA shits?'

'Good question, can't answer yet, maybe never. If you want to save a lot of lives you'll help us.'

As he listened, Bambitou observed the laboured progress of a very short, bald man with a limp. The man glanced at him once through thick-rimmed glasses.

‘How do I know you’re not jerking my chain?’ Bambitou demanded.

‘You seen the website?’

‘Yeah, all over fucking CNN. You do that?’

‘Yep. Now follow the evidence, FBI man. Then bury it as much as you can. We don’t want a fresh set of race wars, do we? My people will be close by.’ The phone went dead.

Bambitou had been standing on a corner a hundred yards away from the Red Roof Hotel. Now a light blue Lexus pulled up, the window down.

‘Excuse me, please?’

Bambitou had to look twice. At first he thought that a kid was driving, then he registered the bald head and the thick glasses. He stepped closer and lowered his head. ‘Yeah?’

‘Are you heading to the Genetics Department, Bambi?’

It was a shock. Not the strange little man, not the very slow and menacing accent, but that someone was calling him ‘Bambi’, a name that his mother had not used since he was five years old.

The man added. ‘If you are, come inside the vehicle.’

Bambitou shook his head, checking the street quickly before climbing into the rear. The car pulled slowly around the next corner before stopping outside a McDonalds. As Bambitou glanced at the diners the opposite door opened, a fit looking man sliding in.

The newcomer stared at Bambitou as the Lexus pulled off, cutting up another vehicle and earning some loud horn anger. Bambitou turned his head and peered out of the rear window at the irate driver of the vehicle behind. He faced the second man, who seemed unfazed. Pointing a large black finger at Mole, he asked. ‘Can he drive?’

‘Not very well,’ came the calm reply.

‘What is ... he?’ Bambitou asked, nodding at Mole.

‘Top agent, a deadly killer,’ Mr. Grey announced with neutral features.

Bambitou’s eyebrows shot up. He studied the back of Mole’s head as Herr Mole struggled to see where he was going. ‘Who are you people?’ he softly enquired.

‘We work for the people down the phone,’ Mr. Grey informed him in level tones.

Bambitou’s eyes widened. ‘You’re British Secret Service? You’re a New Yorker and he ... he’s from outer space!’

Mole glanced at him in the rear view mirror, then swerved to avoid a parked car.

‘Jesus!’ Bambitou cursed at the back of Mole’s head, gripping the seat in front of him. ‘Is this your way of frightening me or something?’

‘No, Bambi,’ Mr. Grey stated, his features cold.

‘And stop calling me that, fuckers!’

‘As you wish,’ Grey responded.

‘And where we going?’

‘To the university genetics department,’ Mole stated in his slow, oddly threatening accent. ‘You must give them the good news and the bad news.’

‘Bad news is their gene therapy drugs are tainted,’ Bambitou suggested. ‘Good news is ... they get \$5million?’ Grey nodded. ‘Are you going to tell me what this is all about?’ Bambitou ventured as they turned onto Highway 80.

‘Not really,’ Grey offered. ‘Can’t.’

‘So I just have to trust you?’

‘Not entirely.’

Bambitou’s K2 phone chirped. He faced Grey, a sarcastic look. ‘Should I get that?’ Grey nodded. Bambitou took out the phone, pressed green and held it to his ear. ‘Yeah?’

‘Special Agent Bambitou?’

‘Yes. Who’s this?’

‘This is Sir Morris Beesely.’

‘The real one? Not the fakey little actor?’

‘The real one.’

‘And you’re British Secret Service?’

‘No.’

‘No?’

‘No, the woman sitting next to me is British Secret Service. I run an organization in Switzerland.’

‘So that’s what these six shits were up to? Something to do with you?’ Bambitou enquired.

‘Trying to kill me for the most part, trying to cover their tracks also.’

‘So there was no bank robbery attempt?’

‘No. Part of your CIA kindly sent a hundred mercenaries after me.’

‘And you lived to tell the tale?’

‘The British Government sent four plane loads of SAS troopers across, and your kind government sent a squadron of Apache assault helicopters to assist. All but one of the mercenaries died. And that one we deliberately let go.’

‘That never made the papers!’ Bambitou pointed out.

‘Thankfully, no.’

‘So what you after from me?’

‘You seem to have come across this by accident, our ... little problem. But you could be useful to us.’

‘Useful how? I ain’t spying for no foreign power!’ Bambitou insisted.

‘Yes, you will.’

‘You seem very sure of yourself. If you’ve read my file you’ll see I can’t be bought, or threatened. Not even by the demented midget’s driving!’

‘We have no intention of threatening you, Special Agent Bambitou. There are two reasons why you will assist me in stopping the CIA splinter group from doing what it is planning on doing.’

‘Yeah, what are they?’

‘First, you lost several members of your family to Sickle Cell Anemia related illnesses. And second, those gene-therapy batches were not tainted by white supremacists. They were carefully engineered over thirty years, at a cost of hundreds of millions of US tax payer’s dollars.’

Bambitou threw down the phone. ‘Stop the car!’ he roared.

Mole pulled up. Bambitou shoved himself out before the car had fully stopped, and made a few steps before halting. He turned to a dumpster and kicked a large dent into it, smashing a huge claw of a fist down onto its plastic top and breaking it. The dumpster took the beating of its life. A young man came out of the back of a shop, observing the scene before hurrying back inside.

Finally, Bambitou slumped against a wall, crying. Grey and Mole waited, each with their own thoughts.

When the young man finally peered outside, the big black man was gone, so was the car, the dumpster now a wreck.

2

They eased to a halt outside the Genetics department; Bambitou’s FBI badge had gained them access to the campus with no problem. Now they waited.

‘Will this attract the attention of the CIA shits?’ Bambitou asked. He only turned to face Grey when he had finished.

‘Yes.’

‘And they’ll come after me?’

‘Hopefully. You wish to pull out?’

‘No, I want to look them in eye. But there’re only one and a half of *you*.’

Grey raised an eyebrow. ‘There are more assets close by.’

‘Got something for me, more than a .38 revolver?’

‘In the trunk.’

Bambitou nodded. He opened the car door and headed for the genetics department.

* * *

‘What’s this place?’ Bambitou asked an hour later as they bumped along an isolated dirt track, a half-mile from the highway.

‘This is the holiday home we booked with your credit card number an hour ago,’ Mr. Grey explained.

The Lexus halted and parked up. After a small roll backwards Herr Mole got the handbrake. They all clambered out.

Two men appeared in the doorway covered in camouflage netting, sporting green-painted sniper rifles, nothing that Bambitou had ever seen before. Mr. Grey offered the two walking bushes a flurry of hand signals that Bambitou could not follow. The two men ran across the gravel track and into a field, ducking behind a hedgerow.

The boot noisily opening caused Bambitou to turn. He stepped to the rear. The little guy was strapping on a bullet-proof vest and a black helmet that seemed way too big for him.

‘Now he looks like fucking Darth Vader!’ Bambitou dryly pointed out.

Mole grabbed an M4 and a spare magazine, walking purposefully to the rear of the house. Mr. Grey took a harness full of equipment and slipped into it.

‘There’s stuff on there I’ve never seen,’ Bambitou remarked, not expecting too much of a response.

‘And you should hope you never do again.’ Grey threw on a large camouflage costume and was instantly transformed. Finally, he pulled two camouflaged soft-boots over his shoes. He lifted out a green-painted Colt-Commando with night sights and silencer before slamming the boot.

‘What about me?’ Bambitou asked. ‘My weapon?’

‘Inside the house. But don’t be seen holding it, you’ll scare off the visitors. Put the lights on when dark, show your face.’

‘So I’m the bait?’

The walking bush moved quickly off into a small cluster of trees, gone in an instant.

Alone now, Bambitou turned and looked back down the dirt track, figuring it would be dark in an hour. ‘What the fuck am I doing here?’ he whispered to himself. He sighed heavily, turning and walking to the house. Inside he found an M-16 on the table. He released the magazine and checked it, loaded and cocked the rifle, setting safety on.

The fridge was fully stocked by the helpful rental agency, a gift basket of fruit on the table. His mouth felt dry and he opened a soda, settling in front of the TV. As an afterthought, he turned his chair towards the dirt track, within reach of the M-16. And waited.

Dusk came down, followed by night. Now he sat in the light, and anyone could walk up to the house and shoot at him through the windows, he considered. The stress was building; his trust had been placed firmly in the strange little man and the walking bush.

The door opened and he grabbed the M-16.

‘Cool it, Bambi!’ Mr. Grey encouraged, moving out of line of shot. Bambitou’s heart was pounding. ‘Come out and help us move the bodies.’

Bambitou plodded heavily towards the open door, M16 ready. Outside, he took a moment to let his eyes adjust to the dark. A man lay just five yards from the door, obviously dead, the man’s weapon lying next to him. Another lay ten yards away, and he could see two black blobs dragging other bodies along the track.

‘Are they dead?’ Bambitou whispered as he stepped forwards.

‘Yeah, quite dead. Take that one to the ditch over there.’

Bambitou slung his weapon. ‘I didn’t hear a thing!’

‘Then we earned our keep this night,’ Mr. Grey said flatly.

Bambitou dragged the man to the indicated ditch and tossed him in before returning to the house, finding ‘Darth Vader’ inside.

The little man took off his helmet. ‘You can close your eyes for two hours. I will watch you,’ he told Bambitou.

‘What happened?’

‘A four-man team came to kill you. We killed them.’

‘Are they going to be missed?’

‘We are counting on it,’ Mole indicated in threatening tones.

‘Who were they?’

‘Irregulars, freelance mercenaries in the service of your CIA. Your weapon, Mister Bambitou.’ Mole pointed.

‘What?’

‘Do not sleep with it, you may wake up and shoot.’

Bambitou put down the M-16 and sat, finishing the flat soda.

‘Would you like some tea or coffee?’ the little man offered in his strange accent.

‘Yeah, please. Saw some doughnuts in there, too.’

Herr Mole made tea for them both.

* * *

Gunfire woke Bambitou three hours later. He jumped up, then immediately got back down, grabbing the M-16. Breathing hard, he looked for the light switch as a burst came through the window, showering him with glass.

He crawled on all fours across the glass, dragging the M-16. At the door he could see the light switch, just inside the door. It would mean standing up to reach it.

Footsteps. Whispers.

The windows were gone, the net curtains blowing in the breeze, the cool night air registering on the sweat of his face. He made ready the M-16, fumbling to knock off the setting for safety. Back against the solid fridge he sat and waited.

A face at the window. He fired a shot burst. A burst came back, but too high, the ceiling fan now off kilter and squeaking.

Another burst was followed by a man crashing through the door. Bambitou raised the M-16, but the man just fell forwards, covered in blood, his earpiece radio falling out. Blood flowed quickly across the polished lino floor.

He focused his aim on the door, his breathing laboured, his eyes wide. A shot rang out, puncturing the fridge door, something inside hissing.

He rolled away, behind the sofa, and took up a lying stance, covering the front door but with a view of the back door, masked from the window by the sofa. A quiet crack, and the light bulb blew, plunging Bambi into total darkness. That had been a silenced shot, he considered, one of the home team.

He licked his dry lips and focused on the doorway. Footsteps, crunching gravel, a shape. Who was it? The fit man? Darth Vader's younger brother?

A darkened head now peeked in. The home team knew where he was, *they* would not have to look. He aimed and fired. The shape screamed for a few seconds. Then silence. He waited.

A helicopter. Rescue? Reinforcements? More of the opposition? Helicopter getting closer, louder. A strange sound, getting louder. The helicopter hit the dirt track, a rotor blade slicing through the house, an almighty bang. Debris rained down on him.

Bambitou finally lifted his head, noting a large rectangular hole through the wall, lit by the dull moonlight. 'Christ!' The helicopter, whoever it belonged to, had crashed. A sudden orange glow illuminated the front of the house as bright as daylight. He could now see a man crawling along, rifle in hand. The man suddenly turned over, now lying still.

Ours look like bushes, he told himself. Not one of ours, be positive. He aimed through the doorway, his heart pounding in his ears, his breathing erratic.

A car, headlights, a loud, long burst of automatic fire. No more car sounds. Another long burst, impacts of bullets on metal, a scream.

A hand on his neck, pinning him down. He froze.

‘OK, Bambi?’ The hand came away, now lifting him up. A bush stood next to him, the voice was the man from the car.

‘Fuck, you scared me!’ Bambitou whispered. ‘What’s happening?’

The bush responded, ‘Most dead, one wounded. C’mon, say hello.’

The bush took him by the arm and out of the front door, leading him to a body brightly illuminated by the burning helicopter, the man’s mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water, his eyes moving.

A burst of fire from the rear of the house caused the bush to disappear before Bambitou knew he had even gone. He focused on the wounded man, who was now trying to reach for his weapon.

Bambitou aimed, before stopping himself. He was FBI, and this was wrong; his oath, his duty. He should be giving this man - this *prisoner* - first aid and arresting him.

Another burst erupted from the rear of the house. Startled, Bambitou accidentally nudged the trigger, shooting the potential prisoner three times in the head.

‘Shit! Sorry!’ He crouched and checked the area, breathing hard.

Mr. Grey stepped towards the attacker that Herr Mole had just shot, assault rifle prone, eyes darting every which way. Herr Mole remained in his little foxhole at the rear of the house. Finally Grey stopped next to the man, kneeling at his head. The man spat out blood and rasped.

‘You made a fatal mistake, my friend,’ Grey whispered. The man tried to raise his head, to get a final image of the camouflaged sniper kneeling over him. Mr. Grey poked a finger into the insolent eye. It closed. He felt the man’s collar, his

jacket fabric and then the man's shirt. Grey added, 'When trying to shoot Mole, wear camouflage!' He stood, placing his foot on the man's neck.

A slight vibration in his pocket indicated a text message on his private cell phone. Puzzled and curious, he opened the flip phone and touched a key; Stanton's old mobile number displayed. He pressed 'OPEN' and read the message in blue light.

Are you really sure that you don't want a puppy?

He smiled inwardly, lifted his foot off the man's neck and humanely put a bullet through the man's ear.

* * *

Ten miles away, Mossad had chosen to adopt a typically Israeli approach to their task. They waited a half-mile from the isolated holiday home, just three miles from the edges of suburban Jackson. Now they observed it through night sights.

Five men could be seen crawling along, slowly getting closer to the target house. The first bright green blob, as viewed through the night sights, was now only a few yards from the back door to the bungalow. The Mossad agent glanced at his colleagues, shrugged, then pressed the button on a remote detonator.

Three miles away, the residents of suburban Jackson opened their mesh doors and listened. The explosion had sounded close. The blaze in the shell of the bungalow blinded the Mossad night sights. They scanned the area for a minute, shrugged, then packed up their equipment.

The approach of the MI6 assets was wholly different in style and execution. Their five *guests* were already inside the house, puzzling over the large amount of cash on the table, and not knowing the bills were seized forgeries. The cocaine under bed was, however, quite real. So were the six pipe bombs.

Sirens punctured the night as the ATF task force moved quickly along the small access road, towards the holiday home from both directions. A river prevented easy escape to the east, an open field to the west offering no cover.

A minute later the house was surrounded, the British assets packing away their equipment.

Epilogue

1

Mosh walked into a padded room at the ‘Children of the Holocaust’ hospice in a Tel Aviv suburb. On the padded floor lay a man with bandages over his hands and feet, a patch on his eye.

Registering a presence, the man looked up with his good eye. ‘Where am I?’ he got out in a raw whisper, his mouth dry.

Mosh squatted close to the man. ‘You are in Tel Aviv, my friend. In a mental asylum.’

The man’s one good eye flashed and widened. He tried to get up, that chosen action hindered by a lack of fingers and toes. He winched at the pain from trying to use his hands. ‘What happened?’ he coughed out, glancing around the room.

‘You took on K2, my friend. That’s what happened.’

‘K2? Beesely?’

Talking softly, Mosh answered, ‘Yes, my friend. They cut your fingers and toes off, took away your eye and ... a few other body parts, Mr. Kirkpatrick.’

Kirkpatrick raised the bandaged stubs, now realising that he could not wiggle his fingers.

Mosh added, ‘Not to worry, our people will be make sure you are fed and looked after. Your bills have been paid for the next forty years, which includes twenty-four hour suicide watch.’ He stood. ‘I guess the idea is for you to think about what you did, Mr. Kirkpatrick.’

Mosh closed the padded door on the screams, then glanced into the next cell at the man huddled into the corner. Rudenson lifted his good eye for a moment, before returning to his own thoughts.

* * *

Otto and Beesely had been firmly told, by Johnno, to be at the drawbridge at exactly twelve noon. Now they walked out with a handful of guards and most of the managers. Several collapsible tables had been laid out, equipment spread around, and several groups of guards now sat listening to lectures or taking part in practical equipment tests.

Johnno walked over to Beesely and Otto, Thomas trailing behind. 'OK, white collar workers, pay attention.' He led the way to the first table. 'Here we have Big Dave, crazy person number one, sleeping rough on London streets two weeks ago.' He put a finger to his lips and gestured Beesely closer.

They listened as 'Big Dave' gave a lecture on disarming combination motion sensors on car bombs to a group of twelve guards. Each guard held a mock device with actual motion sensors, several giving off a quiet 'bleep' when moved too sharply.

Beesely and Otto listened for five minutes, intrigued, then followed Johnno to the next table. 'Mickey' was giving a lecture on silent and efficient killing techniques, plus improvised weapons.

'Nasty,' Beesely whispered to Johnno, as Mickey simulated slicing a guard's throat with a weapon improvised from a coke can. They moved on.

Next came a group around a car. 'Skinny Pete' held a stopwatch, and was now timing guards as they ran across, slid under the car and tampered with it.

'That's it?' Beesely asked after a guard spent less than two seconds under a car. 'What did he do?'

'You wouldn't want to drive that car after,' Johnno commented with a wry smile.

They moved on. A long trestle table had been covered with household items, now rapidly being turned into improvised

bombs as John McAvoy, know as Big Mac, stood cracking jokes. He threw something he had just cobbled together ten yards to the nearby trees, a boom echoing around a second later.

‘Keep *him* out of our bleeding kitchens!’ Beesely whispered. ‘Enough trouble there!’

Johno laughed, then faced the training groups. ‘All instructors!’ he bellowed. ‘On me!’ The four instructors jogged over and lined up.

‘Gentlemen,’ Johno called. ‘This is Sir Morris Beesely and Otto.’

Beesely shook the hand of the first man. ‘What’s your background?’

‘Paras, then SAS for two years. Broke my leg badly, so had to quit, then bomb disposal, sir.’

Beesely nodded. ‘What are you teaching?’

‘General to advanced bomb disposal, twelve lectures, six written tests for the guys and two dozen practical tests, sir.’

‘Sounds thorough,’ Beesely commended. ‘Good.’ He shook hands with the next man.

‘Big Mac, sir. I make up bombs so that *he* has to defuse them.’ They laughed. ‘Johno has asked me to put together a programme so that some of your guys can sneak into a place and blow it up without using anything they brought with them.’

‘Oh, excellent,’ Beesely enthused, turning to Otto. ‘No evidence left behind.’ Otto nodded his approval. Beesely faced the next man. ‘And you were teaching silent killing.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘So,’ Beesely began, ‘our guys can sneak in, kill the occupants quietly with household items, and then blow the place from their kitchen leftovers.’

He shook the hand of the last man. ‘Well done. And welcome to K2.’

‘An honour, sir,’ Big Mac offered.

‘To your duties!’ Johno ordered. The men walked back as Johno waved in the managers, a half-circle forming around him.

‘These guys were on the scrap heap a few weeks ago. Now they’re back on their feet and teaching. And the important thing for us is this – they’re keen to work, they love us to bits for rescuing them off the streets and hostels in the UK, and they’re quite literally ready to fight and die for us.’

‘An excellent recruiting ground,’ Beesely enthused. ‘Motivation is everything, and these guys had nothing. Good work Johno, very good work.’

Beesely turned to Otto. ‘Let’s keep the recruitment and selection process going.’

Otto suggested, ‘We should start with a hostel or camp in the UK, first level selection and clean-up, plus an assessment of skills. Then second stage nearby, third stage here.’

Beesely glanced at Johno, a question.

Johno cocked a teasing eyebrow at Otto. ‘Sounds very practical. You’re not ... Swiss ... are you?’

The managers laughed.

* * *

Otto glanced around the pastry shop. He had heard about it, but had not visited till now. The guards remained outside as Otto, Johno, Beesely and Thomas sat, the only occupants.

‘Usual, love,’ Johno loudly called. Then he faced Beesely, exchanging a quick look when Otto faced away from them. ‘You’re not allowed sweet stuff, are you?’

‘No,’ Beesely agreed, Otto turning back.

‘Not to worry, they’ve made some of the Napoleon Bavarian with no sugar, and just the ingredients that we checked with the doctors. Probably tastes like crap.’

A minute later, the supposedly modified cake was placed down, a medium slice for Beesely. He tried it. ‘Not bad,’ he enthused.

Otto tried some as well. ‘Yes, good for artificial sweetener.’

‘So,’ Johno began, addressing Otto, ‘you bring your woman anywhere around here?’

‘No. We live on the edge of Zurich, so always to be in the city for restaurants and cafes. We have friends in the city, not related to the bank –’

‘Just as well,’ Johno remarked. ‘All talking bank bollocks over the meal.’

Otto held his gaze on Johno for a second. ‘Yes. And since she has become pregnant we have developed friendships with many ... couples, and other pregnant women.’

Johno tried to hide an amused grin. ‘So ... doing lots of ... couple stuff, eh? Furniture, decorating, schools and kindergarten...?’

Beesely glanced at Johno, and then waited for Otto’s response.

Otto gave it plenty of thought, his head lowered, sampling Thomas’ cake. ‘I would not have believed it possible to talk for three hours about a choice between just three kindergarten.’

‘Well,’ Johno began, ‘she’s probably trying to be ... very thorough. You know, Swiss culture an’ all.’

‘She is French,’ Otto pointedly reminded Johno, a quick glare.

‘Yeah, but you’ve rubbed off on her – all your good habits.’

Otto’s eyes narrowed, focusing on Johno, not quite understanding the sarcasm.

Johno continued, ‘Does she wake you up in the night and send you to the kitchen for strange sandwiches?’

‘No,’ Otto firmly replied, adopting a glum look. ‘She sends me into the city, to the all night burger bars.’

‘Can’t you ... order in?’ Johno ventured, a sly grin.

‘Where possible I send guards out,’ he admitted. ‘They are looking forwards to the baby being born.’

Beesely smiled to himself, noticed by Otto.

‘Why not live in the castle?’ Thomas loudly asked.

‘Be plenty of baby sitters!’ Johno suggested.

Otto took a bite. 'I'll take a year off, and leave you two trouble makers to run things.'

Beesely smiled. 'I wish I could honestly say that everything will be fine, and that you will be a great father. But since I have *zero* experience of that particular subject matter, best I not try and offer any kind of advice. My policy has always been to take the kids back into the house after they are forty years old. And then *house trained!*'

'House ... trained?' Johno queried with a slight frown.

'Something that Otto told me he was during the first week here,' Beesely explained. 'Slight error in translation.'

'What is it?' Thomas asked, his lips covered in chocolate.

'House trained,' Johno repeated. 'When you teach a young dog, a puppy, to go to toilet in the garden or the small tray, and not on the floor in the house.'

'Are we getting a puppy?' Thomas excitedly asked.

'No!' three adults said at the same time.

Thomas cursed under his breath in German.

When Otto went to the toilet, Beesely quietly asked, 'That cake -'

'The full monty,' Johno cut in with. 'Nothing artificial.'

'Thought so. Have some delivered, labelled up as *Beesely only, medicinal use!*'

* * *

The off-duty guards and agents had been warned not to enter the school cafeteria until Johno had arrived. Now he stepped in with Thomas in tow, through quite a crowd gathered in the school playground on this pleasant evening. With the doors flung open the guards, agents, parents - and a selected group of children - wandered in to see whatever the big surprise was.

The aroma hit them first; the very fragrant, and very pleasant aroma of cooked food. They had all figured it was a meal, since

they had been warned to have no lunch or evening meal. Now, at 7pm, the ‘big surprise’ was about to be revealed.

Johno walked to the centre of the school canteen and stood on a chair, waving the group forwards. ‘OK. Listen up! You Swiss make some nice food, but your evening meals lack something that us British have in abundance. Bloody foreigners!’

He gestured to the beginning of the food selections, numerous chefs and cooks stood ready to assist. ‘Each of you take a plate, go around the room in sequence, but listen carefully.’ He wagged a finger. ‘Only take a small sample of each dish, reading the label and seeing what it is. The trick here is to sample everything, not to fill-up on just one thing. OK, ladies and gentlemen, help yourselves.’

Like polite Swiss employees, they formed a neat queue and started placing small samples onto their plates. Thomas, however, went straight for his favourite and grabbed a big plateful.

Five minutes later, Johno was advising one of Thomas’s teachers, married to a guard, how best to eat popadoms, loading it up with different flavours from the chutney tray. She and her husband were pleasantly shocked by the taste effect.

Arranged around the room were, in sequence; Indian, Thai, Bengali, Sri Lankan, South African, New Orleans Cajun, Chinese, Cantonese and Burmese dishes, the chefs flown in special from around Europe, a few resident in Switzerland.

The children were loving it, never having tried the majority of dishes, and going back for more several times. Thomas’s favourite was the Indian chicken Tikka and Chinese skewered lamb – covered in what he described as ‘the green stuff’. Fortunately, the chef’s had made enough for a small army. More guards turned up with wives and girlfriends in tow, being briefed on what to do by their colleagues.

After thirty minutes, the available water was rapidly running out and more being ordered, tissues dispensed as people tackled the very tasty, yet very hot dishes.

Johno wandered around the room, greeting guards and wives, and asking them which dishes they preferred. The head teacher put in an appearance, seeing what Johno was doing to his school cafeteria, before getting firmly nudged towards the spicy offerings, spending the next hour sampling dishes and chatting to parents. It was just as well he partook, since Johno told him he was going to run the event every month.

The ex-SAS crew put in an appearance an hour later, a large number of the Swiss wives wishing to retreat in the face of moistened hairlines. The chefs re-loaded the selections and the British boys tucked in. Sitting next to Johno and Thomas, Mavo and Kev plonked down.

‘This is more like it,’ Kev implored. ‘Good bit a wee Indian and Chinese.’

‘Stay away from the Burmese spicy meatballs,’ Johno suggested.

‘Wee bit hot?’ Kev asked.

‘Tasty as hell,’ Johno explained. ‘But the after-shock hits you with a kick.’

‘We won the war yet, Boss?’ Mavo asked as he tucked in.

‘Yeah,’ Johno confidently replied. ‘We killed most of the main players. The twat behind it all is in a mental asylum, his chestnuts getting roasted every day. Be a bit quieter now. How’s the shoulder?’

‘Fine, fine.’ Kev tucked in.

Thomas offered Kev a strange dish on a clean fork. Kev tried it, nodding his approval.

‘Goat testicles,’ Thomas explained.

As Mavo roared with laughter, Kev spat into his hand.

‘It’s not,’ Johno explained, laughing as Thomas ran off.

‘Wee little bastard,’ Kev cursed. ‘Takes after yee.’

‘That he does,’ Johno said with a contented look. ‘That he does.’

* * *

Wearing his ceremonial Masonic robes, Guido Pepi addressed the gathering at this Strasbourg Masonic Lodge. Present this evening were the Top Table, plus the First Tier of twenty-four senior ‘brothers’, all Masters of their individual geographical lodges.

‘Brothers.’ He waited for them to settle. ‘I stand before you now, humbled, to report upon the subject of K2 in Switzerland and, in part, our continued search for *the list*.’

A dull, reverberating sound filled the hall as members gently banged their fists on the old wooden tables, a sign of displeasure with the mention of K2 and the list.

Pepi waited. ‘Brothers, it is now certain that the Americans have made good use of K2 – its people and its structures - for their own dirty work. There appears to have been an internal struggle within the CIA and other American agencies, K2 being used in this proxy war, both in Europe and the United States.’

Another rumbling of fist banging echoed around the room, louder this time.

Pepi waited for it to subside before continuing. ‘The influence of these Americans upon K2 is obviously a concern, but we can also report that these Americans - and the new *occupiers* of K2 – have shown no interest *whatsoever* in the treasure or the list.’

Now knuckles tapped the table top instead of the sides of fists, a sign of approval.

‘There have been no excavations at the castle or elsewhere, no interest shown, no enquiries made, no historical documents examined. I believe, gentlemen, that we can congratulate our organisation on doing a good job of suppressing the existence of the files and the list.’

Loud wrapping of knuckles echoed around the large hall, Pepi taking a moment for a sip of water. From high above, in a corner alcove, a camera watched the events, relayed back to the basement of Pepi's Tivoli villa. Seven elderly men sat watching the screens, dutifully waited upon by Pepi's daughter, Maria.

Pepi continued, 'We have begun plans to ... finally finish-off K2, and their new American friends. The longer that this association continues with the Americans, the more likely it will be that the Americans learn of the list... or turn their attentions towards us. Those plans will be risky and costly to this group, but we have little choice.'

A mixture of fist banging and knuckle wrapping echoed around the hall, stewards carefully noting who was doing what.

Pepi added, 'We must dislodge the American and British interest from Switzerland.' In recess, Pepi took a call in his private chambers at the rear of the hall. 'Sir?'

'Douvelle, the Paris Master, arrange for his health to suffer. He continues to oppose you. Consider Schell from Vienna as a replacement.'

'Yes, sir.'

* * *

The next day, Otto and Johno were laughing so loud in Beesely's office that managers were lifting up onto tip-toes and trying to get a peek into Beesely's office from the command centre.

Johno grabbed another beer from the fridge, and one for Otto. Both cans were opened simultaneously, deliberately spraying each other. They clicked cans and sipped, re-reading the report in their hands, now soiled with beer. Beesely wheeled in Dame Helen, followed closely by Susan and Patrick.

'Get yourselves a drink,' Johno buoyantly implored.

Otto rushed to his feet and stumbled, running a concerned hand down his tie, but unable to remove the smirk.

‘Otto!’ Beesely softly chided. ‘I am surprised at you!’

‘What’s the celebration?’ Dame Helen asked, puzzled by their antics, but amused.

Johno waved around the report. ‘Not celebrating, not funny really. Well, little bit.’ He laughed, followed by Otto trying hard to suppress his grin, both wiping the tears.

‘OK, what’s the joke?’ Susan asked, hands on hips.

Johno took a breath and tried to compose himself. ‘The Canadian, the one we thought was part of the CIA team.’ Otto shook his head, looking at his feet. ‘Turns out he had nothing to do with it.’

‘Oh hell,’ Dame Helen quietly let out, clearly concerned for the man.

Johno continued, ‘We signed him up to those porn sites.’

‘My God,’ Susan exclaimed in a strong whisper. ‘Did he get arrested?’

‘Yes,’ Otto said with a smirk. ‘And bailed.’

‘And why, pray tell, is that so funny?’ Beesely pointedly enquired.

‘He also got half a million dollars in his account,’ Johno pointed out with a huge grin.

‘Was he happy with the money?’ Patrick asked, glancing from Johno to Otto for any clues of explanation.

Otto laughed, quickly putting his hand to his mouth.

Johno added, ‘His wife ... emptied the account and ran off with his solicitor!’

Patrick laughed. Susan stood shaking her head, still perplexed.

‘There is more,’ Otto strained to get out.

Johno added, ‘The American’s accidentally named him and ... and listed him as a hero undercover CIA agent – using the list we sent them - making this guy a celebrity overnight. He sold his story to the newspapers in Canada!’

‘What story?’ Dame Helen asked. ‘If he wasn’t one of them?’

Otto and Johno crumpled together.

‘He made it up, sold it, got two million dollars!’ Johno laughed. ‘It’s a great story.’ He lifted a newspaper and shoved it towards Helen.

‘We should recruit this man,’ Otto suggested, wagging his finger. ‘What he can do is remarkable! And I never knew that Berlin was the capital of Switzerland. Or that we all speak ‘Swiss’, something this man is very fluent in!’

Beesely shook his head, displaying a slight grin.

‘That’s not all,’ Johno strained to get out. ‘Not the best bit.’

Otto explained, a knowing look exchanged with Beesely, ‘He was visiting Germany, Bavaria, to help his uncle, who had a ... *bookstore*. And, it seems that some *vanker*, burnt the bookstore down!’

Beesely straightened, suddenly concerned, glancing at Susan and Patrick under his eyebrows. Dame Helen sat shaking her head, offering a scowl for Beesely.

Patrick and Susan glanced at each other. ‘What?’

Beesely caught Johno’s attention, sticking out his chin and raising his eyebrows in a question. ‘Did you not promise to pick a certain *someone* up at the airport?’

‘Oh shit!’ Johno jumped up and wobbled, hurrying out.

* * *

An hour later Beesely, eased up from his chair as the American Ambassador and the President’s ‘special envoy’ were shown into his office. Otto bowed his head and greeted them, very Swiss-like, shaking hands then introducing Beesely. Johno slowly, and reluctantly, stood, Alison Star easing up off the cabinet after an encouraging head-tip from Johno.

‘Sir Morris Beesely. I have heard a great deal about you,’ the Ambassador said as they shook hands. How much he knew was, as yet, unknown.

‘Welcome to Schloss Diane ... and to K2, Mister Ambassador.’ Beesely turned, gesturing towards Johno. ‘And this is Johno.’

The Ambassador shook Johno’s hand. ‘And I’ve heard even more about you.’ It was said with a slight furrow of the Ambassador’s brow and a quizzical stare. Johno simply shook the man’s hand and made a ‘welcome’ face.

Then the Ambassador turned to Alison, thinking her perhaps part of the team. He stopped dead, his eyes widening. ‘Alison Star?’ He smiled then quickly hid it.

She put her hands on her hips. ‘And how would you know that?’ she sternly, yet playfully asked.

‘Yeah,’ Johno repeated. ‘How would *you* know who she is? Is the President a fan?’

All eyes now fixed on the Ambassador.

His cheeks reddened. ‘Er ...’