

**Crucifix**

**K2**  
**Book 6**

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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



## How to win friends and influence people

### 1

‘Johno, what you doing visiting your old man in hospital?’ Beesely light-heartedly enquired, sitting up in bed. ‘Bored were you? Need someone to take the piss out of?’

‘Nope, needed a chat, off the radar. C’mon, we’re going swimming.’

Covering his torso in a t-shirt, Johno carried a reluctant Beesely on his back and down the pool steps, one hand on the silver railing.

In the warm water Beesely let himself float, aided by a bright yellow lifejacket. ‘So, what’s this all about?’ he quietly asked.

Johno dragged his father to the far side of the pool, where water gurgled noisily. He held his gaze on Beesely for several seconds. ‘I know why Helen came here.’

Beesely frowned his lack of understanding with that statement. ‘I would have thought it obvious why she came, and not for your charms, that’s for sure!’

Johno smirked. ‘That was the first clue.’

‘Clue?’

‘To why she really came. Who gave her a nudge, and why.’

Beesely was shocked. ‘Are you suggesting she’s been compromised?’

Johno checked over his shoulder at two guards stood now at the far end of the brightly lit pool. ‘Would you have seen *any* scenario ... where a woman like her jumps into bed with me?’

‘A bit far fetched, yes, but I didn’t want to pry – I figured you knew what you were doing. So, what have learnt? Is she a threat to K2?’

Johno steadied himself with a stationary breaststroke. ‘No, not a threat to K2, she needs us to help her.’

Beesely copied Johno’s breaststroke, manoeuvring closer. ‘Help her do what ... *exactly*?’

Johno’s features hardened. ‘Take revenge for the British people. For Portsmouth.’

Beesely stared hard. ‘Not Luchenkov? Someone pulling his strings?’ Johno nodded. ‘Who?’ Beesely nudged.

‘If you don’t know you can’t *react* the wrong way if you meet them.’

‘Government level?’

‘Nope, private body, not much of a political agenda. If they did ... then I could respect what they do.’

Beesely stared at the water’s surface for several seconds, taking a reflective breath. ‘You’ll strike at them with K2?’

‘Big time,’ Johno carefully mouthed.

‘And ... Helen?’

‘Sent here to try and nudge us towards doing that job. *Plausible deniability* – as they say.’

‘Does she know you’re onto her?’ Johno shook his head. ‘Otto onto her?’

Again Johno shook his head. ‘And he can’t know yet. Like you, he needs to ... *react* in the right way, he’s not much of an actor.’

‘Unlike you!’ Beesely said with a proud smile.

‘Best there is,’ Johno said with a grin.

‘Do you ... care for Helen?’ Beesely delicately broached.

‘Sure, adds a lot of quality to my life. Proud to walk around with *her* on my arm.’

‘Did Mike really ... you know?’

‘Yeah, bit of a paradox there. UK got hit, caused her to get kicked out, scared him off, just as she was ... *requested*, if not *ordered*, to come here, to see if she could use K2 to attack this group.’

‘When you came back from Malta –’

‘No, Mossad didn’t tip me off - I don’t think they know. If they do know, and didn’t tell us ... then, well a bit naughty. No, I went for a swim and a priest approached me, spilt the beans. Lucky break.’

‘And could this ... priest have been lying, working for-’

‘No, he told me Molarini had been prepped ready for the chair.’

‘Ah. Sacrificial lamb?’

Johno nodded. ‘Still, we need to proceed as if I’m a thick git.’

Beesely cocked an eyebrow. ‘Shouldn’t be so hard for you.’ Johno smiled widely, Beesely softly asking, ‘And is... *God* tied into this?’

‘Yeah, but *they* ain’t pulling the strings. So we’ll need a new operation title, something along the lines of ... Quadruple Bluff.’

‘Should be interesting. You covered all the bases?’

‘No, I like to see the ground in front of me before I firm up my ideas.’

Beesely had drifted away, grabbed now by Johno and brought back. ‘You’ll risk K2 to attack this group?’ he cautiously enquired.

Johno lifted his eyebrows, offering an enigmatic grin. ‘There’s a paradox there that I’ll explain at some point.’ His features hardened as he took a moment. ‘But after what they did to the UK - hell yes, all out, them or us when the time comes.’

‘That’s why the dispersal - some of it survives.’

Johno agreed with a nod. ‘The priest told me a lot, hinting at stuff he didn’t really understand, but stuff *we* know about. It all clicked into place. And ... before this is over you’ll thank old boy Gunter.’

‘What?’ Beesely puzzled, astonished.

‘Keep it in mind for later. You’ll see.’

\* \* \*

An hour later Johno sat staring at the dungeon wall, beer can in hand, the smell of chlorine in his hair. Thomas walked by, noting the look on Johno's face before stepping out. When he returned, twenty minutes later, Johno was still staring at the wall.

'Johno, I can smell burning!' Thomas joked.

Johno turned his head. 'Hmmm?'

'What are you thinking about?' Thomas asked, plonking down opposite.

'Big problem, inside an even bigger one.' He sighed. 'You OK?'

'Yes. Later, Helen is teaching me golf,' the lad excitedly got out.

'Good.' Johno went back to the wall.

'Can you tell me what the problem is? Is it secret?'

Johno turned his head. 'Hmmm? Secret. Well ... a bit.'

'Then tell me without names and things.'

Johno offered the lad a warm smile. 'I need to tackle someone like Shue again, but much smarter. They're not stronger than us, not with guns and weapons, but smarter - *lots of money.*'

'The Vatican?' Thomas whispered.

Johno shook his head. 'They're involved, but not the main problem.'

'You can go and talk to them while we surround them, like before?' the lad enthusiastically offered.

'Already considered that, but they're large, maybe three hundred of them, all over – many countries. They're not in one place.'

Thomas sat studiously thinking. 'Maybe Helen knows what to do?'

Johno wagged a warning finger at the boy, offering him a stern look. 'I don't want to worry her with it, so don't say anything! OK?' Thomas nodded. 'We want her to be happy



here, yeah? Not too many problems.’ Again Thomas nodded, this time with enthusiasm. Johno sighed. ‘So, short arse, how do you deal with a lot of people at the same time?’

‘Do we have enough men to fight them all?’

Johno shook his head. ‘Each time we kill someone there are at least six good agents covering all the angles. We’d need ... a thousand agents.’

‘What about the American men you’re going to visit?’

Johno glanced at the wall. ‘They may not ... you know, want to do what I want to do.’

‘Can we give people money to help us?’ Thomas asked. ‘Mercantile?’

Johno smiled. ‘*Mercenary*. Could do, but we can’t trust people like that. Later on they’ll talk, say what they did. No, on a job like this you can only use top agents – people you can trust.’

Thomas let his shoulders drop. ‘What is the second problem? You said two.’

‘Treasure, my boy, treasure,’ Johno loudly stated. ‘You read the book on the Templars I gave you?’ Thomas confirmed with a nod. ‘Some of that treasure is what the Vatican wants, some of it the Israelis want back, ‘cause it was theirs to start with. Some of it probably belongs to the Arabs, and it all got moved from France. So they all have a claim to it.’

‘Why is that a problem for us? Do we have the treasure?’

‘No, but some of these people think Gunter might have had it, or knew where it was. So they’re being ... you know, a pain in the arse.’

‘Let them fight each other for it,’ Thomas suggested. ‘We sell it to the strongest one.’

Johno rolled his eyes. ‘You’ve been watching too many movies. They ain’t about to fight each other...’ His words trailed off, his gaze directed back to the wall. ‘But ... but there may be a way to piss them *all* off.’ He raised his phone. ‘Duncan, newspaper guy.’ They waited.

‘Johno?’ came a sleepy voice a few seconds later.

‘Yeah. Listen up, want you to stir up some shit.’

‘On what?’

‘Templar treasure.’

‘You what?’

‘Templar treasure. You know what that is?’ Johno curtly pressed.

‘Yes. But what’s that got to do with anything?’

‘I’m sitting on it.’

‘Jesus ...!’

‘Quite. So this is what I want you to do. Start a small, but serious debate – well away from your good self – about who really should get it back if it’s found. They *were* French, mostly, the modern day Templars in Scotland would have a say, the Israelis would want Solomon’s baubles back, the Arabs would want their lot that got nicked from mosques, and they all claim the fucking Ark as theirs. I want this story in each relevant country nudged along, whatever it costs. Drag the Saudis in, even fucking Nova Scotia.’

‘Nova Scotia, what they fuck they got a claim on?’

‘Some silly sods think the Templars sailed from Paris to Canada in thirteen hundred or something.’

‘Yeah, right.’

‘Exactly. So forget that bit, hit the rest.’

‘I’m with you. So, what’s in there altogether?’

‘Dunno, ain’t dug it up yet.’

‘I though you said –’

‘They all think it’s under the castle, may well be, who knows.’

‘Be a shit load of publicity for you if it is!’

‘That’s the problem.’ He hung up.

Mr. Grey emerged from his dive into a narrow mineshaft, checking his wrist computer. K2 climbers and cavers lifted him out of the murky water, sitting him on a stone ledge. With his mask off he breathed deeply in an out.

‘Cold?’ a K2 guard asked.

‘No, not too bad.’

‘Anything?’

‘I dismantled a stone wall, definitely artificial, old as well. Took up all my time, and silted the water. Needs a day to settle. Some trinkets I got with the metal detector, lot of old nails.’

‘OK, warm drink, update the map.’

Clean, dry, and now warm, Grey stepped into the newly decorated restaurant, taking in the décor, a decorator fixing a bland watercolour to a wall. Finding Johno sat with the Israeli representative, the same man he had met in Malta, Grey stepped over and sat.

‘Anything?’ Johno asked, mildly interested.

Grey placed down a handful of small items. ‘Your *experts* will have to say.’ He shook the Israeli’s hand. ‘Hello again.’

‘Call me Casper, please.’ He set about examining the items found so far as Grey sat. ‘This coin is ... perhaps fifteen hundreds, quite common.’

‘So there was a mine back then?’ Johno asked.

‘Not necessarily, it could have been hidden much later,’ Casper suggested as he picked through the items. ‘This is pagan!’

‘Does that help?’ Johno asked, hiding a smile.

Casper offered him an intolerant glance, just as the Vatican’s representative arrived, a full Cardinal in his flowing red and purple robes. Johno watched Casper’s reaction with amusement.

Casper stood. Then, as an afterthought, offered a hand. ‘How do you do?’ They shook.

‘I’m Cardinal Diaz, archaeologist to the Pope,’ the man said in an American accent. He faced Johnno, who now slowly stood. ‘And you, sir, need no introduction.’

They shook, a head tip from the Cardinal.

‘Want a cuppa?’ Johnno asked.

‘Ah, that’s English slang ... tea, yes?’

‘How do you take it?’ Johnno asked, straight faced, but with a hint of mischief in his eyes.

‘Black, with mint leaves, please.’

‘Spent any time in the Arab Quarter of Jerusalem?’ Johnno asked as he stepped away.

The Cardinal cocked an eyebrow. ‘Some. Ten, twenty years. Who’s counting?’

Casper offered a long sentence in perfect Arabic, getting back an equally perfectly pronounced reply from the Cardinal. Johnno ordered the Cardinal’s drink, getting a ‘Shokran’ from the cleric.

‘Afwan,’ Johnno offered without looking around.

‘Ah, I was warned in advance ... *never* to underestimate you.’

‘This should be fun then,’ Johnno said with a smirk, gesturing the cleric to a seat, everyone now settling themselves. ‘You staying local?’

‘Zurich - a short, beautiful drive.’

‘Don’t forget curry night,’ Johnno suggested; an invitation.

‘Curry night? Sounds interesting.’

‘Next one is two days time, school canteen, dishes from all over the world.’

‘Ah, excellent. I worked in the Far East for many years, developed quite a taste.’

‘Let the staff here know about any favourites, we’ll get some sent in.’

‘That’s ... very accommodating of you,’ the cleric offered, carefully studying Johnno as his tea was placed down. He

noticed the mint leaves floating in his tea. ‘You had some in stock?’

‘Anticipated your arrival,’ Johno lied.

The Cardinal was caught momentarily off guard, before offering a polite, diplomatic smile. Pointing at the items found by Grey he said, ‘That’s all, so far?’

Johno gave a slow, lazy nod. ‘Our head diver’s a lazy git.’

Grey turned his head and gave Johno a look.

The Cardinal said, ‘Ah, I would surmise that this rather fit looking gentlemen is your ... *head diver*?’

Grey faced Diaz, a threatening look. ‘Amongst other things.’

‘Ah, some *secret agent* type? Excellent, adds a spice to life.’

Johno eyed Diaz with a slight frown. ‘You’re not, you know, quite such a boring old wanker as I figured.’

Diaz beamed. ‘I did three years in the US Marines before I found God. Was a base jumper in my youth, long before the craze took off – if you pardon the pun.’

Johno laughed. ‘We should have some fun then. You play golf?’

‘Hell, yes.’ Whispering he added, ‘Most of us do, you know.’

Johno face Casper. ‘You?’

‘No. No golf, *or* base jumping. Chess is my game.’

‘Excellent,’ Diaz enthused. ‘I think we shall have plenty of time to kill.’

Johno faced the kitchen staff. ‘Oy, find a decent chess set, leave it out here.’ He faced Diaz. ‘I think Helen plays well. And if either of you are really bored, I’d appreciate one of you teaching my lad, he’s the best in his class already.’

Diaz and Casper made eye contact, cold, diplomatic head tips exchanged.

‘So,’ Diaz began. ‘I was told if I was to get anywhere with you, Johno, that I should be blunt and to the point. In fact, I was

probably chosen for this assignment due to the fact that I am regarded as ... a bit loud and un-diplomatic.'

'Fire away,' Johnno offered.

'Well, let's start simple. If you found the treasure here, tomorrow, what would you do with it?'

Casper stiffened.

Johnno noticed, but held his gaze on Diaz. 'Let me ask *you*... a question first. Off the record, who do you think has the best claim to it?'

'A difficult question.' Diaz gave it some thought, trying to read Johnno. 'Well, they were French, the treasure housed in France, but – at the end of the day – they were part of Holy Roman Empire, a branch of our church, working under a direct remit from the Popes of that period.'

'True,' Johnno conceded with a head tip. 'But, if they possessed treasure that was ... *taken* – some might say *stolen* – from under the Temple Mount, might not the Israelis have a claim?'

Diaz smiled widely, glancing at Casper. 'Not a decision that I have to – fortunately – make.'

Johnno firmly stated, 'Wrong.'

Diaz's eyes narrowed. 'Excuse me?'

Johnno's features turned to stone. 'If I find it, the interested parties will have to convince me which part is theirs before they get it back. You, they sent, so you stay – no replacements, no backup. If you don't convince me, you don't even get a fucking look in.' He stood. 'And welcome to Schloss Diane, the Bavarian Napoleon is great.'

Grey followed him out the door, a glance back and smile at Diaz.

The Cardinal faced Casper. 'Is he joking?'

'He has already threatened to destroy any relics he finds, if he believes they will lead to ... religious unrest around the world.'

'Destroy them?'

Casper nodded. ‘The day you think you know what is going through *his* mind, leave, because you will be completely wrong in your conclusion.’

\* \* \*

On the stairs Johno stopped Grey, using Grey’s mobile to call The Lodge.

‘Mr. Grey?’

‘No, it’s Johno. Listen up, I want Elle Rosen and his superiors in Washington tomorrow or the next day.’

‘You are coming here, sir?’

‘Nope. Just do as I ask.’ He hung up.

‘What’s all that about?’ Grey asked, pocketing his phone.

Johno stared out of the window, letting out a heavy sigh whilst fixing on guards slowly ambling across the grass below. ‘If things don’t work out, and your superiors asked you to put a bullet in me, would you?’

Grey glanced out the window, taking a moment. ‘If they did, and I didn’t, I’d get the bullet.’

Johno reflected on that statement, a glance up at the grey sky. ‘Then it’s nice to be in the position I’m in - no one can ask me to kill you if this all gets messy.’

‘Not ... *strictly* accurate.’ Johno turned his head. Grey continued, ‘If you accept Lodge rules and decisions, they could order you to kill me.’

‘I’d never do it. If they want me to play fetch, it’s on my terms. Besides, I’d give you a running head start.’

‘Ha! With your knee I’d give *you* the head start!’

3

Beesely sat with Helen and Otto, quietly progressing through the mountain of paperwork that recent events had generated.

Johno ambled in. ‘That’s what I like to see, someone else doing the paperwork for a change.’

Beesely eased back into his wheelchair. ‘And just how much *paperwork* have you done since you’ve been here?’ The three grilled him with glares as he slouched down.

‘I kind of see myself ... as a male lion –’

‘A what?’ Helen asked.

‘A male lion.’

‘A lion *is* male,’ she corrected him.

Beesely turned to her. ‘Have you not seen the video?’

‘What video?’ she asked.

‘Otto, dig it out, please,’ Beesely suggested. ‘It’s the video of Johno’s interview to work here, when we first came over. Our Swiss friend here didn’t warn them about Johno, they didn’t know what to expect.’

‘Ah, so ... did he pass?’ she lightly asked.

‘No,’ Otto and Beesely said together.

Beesely added, ‘But the video has passed into legend around here. You must be the only one who *hasn’t* seen it.’

‘Anyway,’ Johno began, ‘to business. Grab the managers, will you, got a question.’

‘Problem?’ Beesely asked.

‘Is this K2?’ Johno retorted.

Beesely and Otto made eye contact, Otto tapping the phone and ordering the managers.

When assembled Johno addressed the group. ‘I want an assessment made, kind of immediately, as to how many agents and guards we have, plus freelancers, that could be employed at maximum – should we need them – that can fight or kill. I want a number.’

‘Is this going to worry me?’ Beesely grumbled.

‘Not yet,’ Johno carefully mouthed with a grin.

‘I would guess three hundred and fifty guards,’ Otto began, ‘a hundred and fifty agents, access to another fifty freelancers.’



‘So, five-fifty?’ Johno mused, the managers seeming to agree. ‘But on a normal operation, of most kinds, we would use a group of three to six agents covering each other, watching roads, etc. Yeah?’ The group agreed. ‘Which means - how many *teams* could be produced?’ Johno asked.

‘Around one hundred,’ Claus suggested after a moments thought. ‘At best, two hundred.’

Johno nodded to himself. ‘I’d like that figure checked, and then I’d like to know how many more we could drag in if need be, you know, in an emergency.’

‘Are you going somewhere with this?’ Beesely pressed.

‘Just planning ahead, being ... diligent. Oh, Claus, can you ready the Gulfstream in the morning. Me and Thomas off to Rome to pick someone up and then to Malta for the day to meet someone.’

‘And these ... people?’ Otto asked with a curious look.

‘Can’t say just yet, you know, bugs and all.’ He stood.

‘Johno,’ Helen called. ‘Is it ... *wise* to keep us all in the dark?’

‘If it was important I’d tell you. Minor trip, soon be back.’ He left.

‘He’s getting secretive,’ Beesely grumbled.

‘We *were* bugged, and infiltrated,’ Claus pointed out. ‘And if he is meeting someone in Rome, maybe best we don’t know yet.’

‘Makes sense,’ Beesely conceded. He faced the managers ‘OK, thank you for your ... *short* attendance, let’s get those figures for face fungus, eh?’

Otto stood. ‘If you will excuse me for five minutes.’

In the courtyard Otto caught up to Johno, walking alongside. ‘If there is a security problem here, I would like to know about it.’

‘So would I,’ Johno quipped.

‘What?’ Otto puzzled.

‘I’m going to test security, so I’ll be acting a bit odd.’

‘This trip to Rome –’

‘Send some agents to see who’s waiting for me, but don’t go through the managers.’

‘You suspect someone?’

‘I already know of at least one ... *person* reporting out.’

‘What?’ Otto gasped in a whisper.

Johno half turned his head and nodded as they walked, now on the tarmac.

‘We must get rid of this person!’ Otto forcefully whispered.

Johno stopped. ‘I have a better idea. We feed them false information, see who they’re connected to, then go after them all.’

That seemed to appease Otto. He reluctantly nodded.

‘Don’t discuss this with anyone, in case it slips out or you react to them in the wrong way and tip them off.’

‘You think the Vatican still has an interest?’

‘Without a doubt.’

Otto sighed and walked back in, his shoulders hunched.

## It's my first day in the job

### 1

The Gulfstream broke through the clouds, a burst of brilliant sunshine and a view of the Alps to the south.

Johno lifted the armrest phone. 'Pilot, head to Lisbon to re-fuel, then Azores and Washington, States.'

'Washington, sir?'

'Yeah. Contact operations and have a flight plan sorted. Thanks.'

'Sir, that is an odd route. It would be normal to fly the northern circle -'

'I don't want to pass through UK airspace or UK Atlantic air traffic control. Got it?'

'Yes, sir. And we can reach the Azores without re-fuelling, sir.'

The plane changed course as it climbed.

'Not Malta?' Thomas asked, intently studying the brilliant white cloud tops below them.

'Nope, it was a trick; see who'd be waiting there for us.'

\* \* \*

'Eminence,' came an out-of-breath gasp, the cleric at the end of a jog through a very long corridor.

Cardinal Rumon clasped his hand together in front of himself and waited.

'Herr Johno from K2 is flying here, to pick someone up and then take this person to Malta to meet someone else!'

Rumon let his hands drop, glaring down at the messenger. 'Get our best people to the airport, find out who it is, the same for Malta airport. Go, quick.'

He stepped to the window and peered down over St. Paul's Square, his concern etched into his face.

\* \* \*

Three cars burst out of the Vatican South Gate and onto the Via di Porta Cavalegger, heading east before turning south towards the municipal airport, another group heading west towards Da Vinci Airport on the coast. Unknown to them, K2 gents were filming with high quality video all cars exiting today, the same vehicles clocked a second time at the airport, their drivers and passengers recorded as they exited their vehicles.

Rumon just made a mistake. At Malta airport he had also shown his hand.

\* \* \*

At noon Beesely was sat opposite Helen, innocuously taking about the changing structures of MI6 over the years.

A manager stepped in, offering a puzzled look. ‘Ma’am, Herr Director, Johno has changed course mid flight, heading now for Washington.’

‘He ... knows what he’s doing,’ Beesely suggested, but sounded neither firm – nor confident. ‘Thank you.’

The manager stepped out as Otto stepped in.

‘You’ve heard?’ Beesely asked him.

‘Yes,’ Otto stated as he sat. ‘And ... something else. I took the liberty of sending men to Rome Airport and Malta. They have photographed a large number of ... *strange individuals* greeting arriving aircraft.’

Beesely laughed.

Helen said, ‘He was testing the water.’

‘And now,’ Otto added, ‘we have the faces and the vehicles of the ... interested parties.’

‘So,’ Helen said with a sigh, easing back into her chair. ‘I guess the presence of our Vatican friend upstairs hasn’t put them at ease yet.’

‘Obviously not,’ Beesely commented. ‘But I’d love to see the look on their faces later.’

\* \* \*

Cardinal Rumon laughed loudly. Finally he said, ‘I like this man, Johno. He has fed our insider some bait and we took it. After more than a thousand years in office we should know better.’

‘He suspects our agent?’

‘Oh yes. But maybe he suspects a group. This flight plan would have been accessible by dozens of people. We’ll see.’ He walked off, still grinning.

\* \* \*

Whilst waiting for a take-off slot on the Azores Johno checked his watch, doing the maths before asking to be put through to Stanton.

‘Johno, you’re calling at a respectable hour!’

‘That depends on where you are.’

‘Where are you then?’

‘Be with you in about four hours, so put the kettle on, Boss.’

‘Mossad is here. And concerned,’ Stanton queried.

‘Need a word.’

‘Them or us?’

‘Both, but you first.’

‘I’ve got appointments –’ Stanton began.

‘Not after you hear this you won’t.’

‘Oh hell.’ A loud breath could be heard. ‘More trouble?’

‘Take everything that has happened since we joined K2, add it up and it still wouldn’t total what’s about to happen.’

Stanton did not respond immediately. ‘I’d really love to think you’re exaggerating, but with you guys it’s always worse than you say.’ He sighed. ‘Jesus. You need a full meeting?’

‘Nope, just you. Can’t risk this getting out.’

‘What the hell are you saying ... *we’ve* been compromised?’

‘Reckon so, old buddy,’ Johno said in an accent. ‘But not to worry, we’ve got two high level moles back in K2 as we speak.’

‘Jesus,’ Stanton repeated.

‘If it’s not too much trouble, I want independent FBI security, not your lot. Already got someone in mind as well.’

‘Is that necessary?’ Stanton asked, clearly concerned.

‘Yes.’

‘Well, they couldn’t come inside, obviously, nor should they know anything about us.’

‘You wangle it, any which way you like.’

‘How about Secret Service?’

‘No. FBI, Boss, if you don’t mind,’ Johno pressed.

‘Let me see what I can do. Hell, you just joined and your turning everything on its head already.’

‘You’ll see why. Oh, and don’t tell anyone I’m coming. See ya soon.’ He hung up.

‘Will we be able to see the White House?’ Thomas keenly enquired.

Johno nodded. ‘Oh, yeah. Might go inside and all.’ He redialled. ‘Special Agent Bambitou, FBI, New York office.’ They waited.

‘Hello?’ came a deep, rich voice.

‘Hey Bambi!’

‘Who the hell is this?’

‘The people from Switzerland.’

‘Oh ... right. What’s up?’

‘I’ll be in Washington in three or four hours, FBI is laying on some security, CIA’s been compromised again. Just wondering if you’d be a love and protect me while I’m there?’

‘I got some time off, I’m in Atlanta.’

‘That near Washington?’

‘Hour’s flight. Anyway, why the hell would I want to help protect *you*?’

‘Because I’m just about to expose some shitbags, the kind you don’t like. If they kill me, they win – world takes a step backwards.’

A sigh could be heard. ‘When and where, Limey?’

Johno laughed. ‘Get your big black arse and your size thirteen boots to DC, I’ll call you when I’m there. And don’t worry about flights and hotel bills - we’ll sort it for you.’ He hung up smiling.

‘Who has a black arse?’ Thomas asked.

‘We’re going to meet some big American basketball players.’

‘Great!’ Thomas enthused.

## 2

At Ronald Regan International Airport, Virginia, several FBI vans stood waiting in an isolated corner.

Johno stepped down into a clear sky, but a biting cold wind. ‘Should have gone to bloody Malta!’ he muttered.

The FBI walked forwards, dark blue shiny jackets with large FBI letters in yellow.

‘Very subtle,’ Johno told the lead man.

‘Sorry, sir, but we only got notified twenty minutes ago. Welcome to the States. You’re Swiss, right?’

‘Nope, British.’

‘British?’ the man puzzled.

‘The less questions the better, *me old son*.’

The lead agent looked beyond Johno and to the plane. ‘Your bags, sir?’

‘Just this,’ Johno stated, tapping his small bag. ‘So lead on, G-Man.’

‘Are you FBI?’ Thomas asked, wide-eyed.

‘Yes we are,’ came back in tandem as Johno and Thomas suddenly became flanked by six agents, a van door opening for them. ‘Where to, sir?’

‘Pick a hotel at random, centre of Washington. Something expensive.’

The lead agent eased down opposite Johno in the van, eyeing him carefully as the door slammed shut. ‘Are we going to get any clues as to what this is about?’

‘Need to know basis,’ Johno offered the man. ‘Execute some random course changes.’

‘Is there a specific danger to you, sir?’ the agent pressed as the convoy headed off.

Johno eased forwards. ‘If this visit has been compromised, then this van is about to be punctured by a shit load of bullets!’

The agent straightened. ‘We weren’t warned of the threat level!’ he complained. Lifting his radio he said, ‘Head into the centre, random course changes, threat level Alpha.’

The front seat passenger turned his head. ‘We ain’t fucking kitted for this!’

‘I know!’ the lead agent barked. He faced Johno, clearly angered. ‘If we get hit ... then some fucker’s going to pay!’

‘How about,’ Johno teased, ‘the fuckers who attack us!’

‘You know who?’

Johno nodded.

‘And?’ the agent pressed.

Johno eased back, glancing out of the window. ‘Classified, way up there. Sorry.’

‘Fucking marvellous.’ The agent sat back, also now glancing through the windows. Raising his radio he said, ‘Hilton Hotel.’

‘Which one?’ crackled back.

‘Massachusetts Avenue.’

Thomas peered out the windows, keenly attentive as Johno lifted his phone.



‘Book us a room, Hilton, Massachusetts Avenue, two or three adjoining rooms for my FBI escort, stock them all with the best bar snacks and drinks and some nice gifts for the FBI guys. Ta, love.’

The lead agent studied the satellite phone. ‘Your secretary?’

‘Note quite.’

‘And we can’t take gifts on duty.’

‘Got a family?’

‘Wife and three kids. *Who* ... I’d like to see tonight!’

‘We’ll arrange for you to *win* a trip for five to Euro-Disney, all expenses paid.’

The agent’s eyebrows lifted. ‘My youngest is fifteen going on twenty-five. And he can’t stand the sight of me!’

Johno smiled. ‘Then we’ll arrange a week in a Swiss Health Spa next summer, for all of your guys.’

Johno’s phone chirped. He pressed the green button without lifting it. ‘Yeah?’

‘It’s Beesely. CIA just called, they know you’re there.’

‘Problem?’ Johno asked, still focused on the agent.

‘George Holmes just extended an invitation to visit Langley and the White House, so now the President knows.’ The agent stared back.

‘Fob ‘em off, tell ‘em it’s a quick personal trip, yeah?’

‘I’ll see what I can do.’

Johno hit the red button.

‘Just who are you, sir?’

‘Can’t say.’

‘Be easier to protect you if we knew the threat,’ the agent pointedly remarked.

Johno’s features hardened. ‘Sometimes, it’s better to die with your secret, than let it out. If the wider world knew what was going on there’d be political unrest and financial problems. Like your own CIA, my group removes threats without it getting on the front page. Sometimes, you just got to do what’s

right. Which can mean taking it to the grave instead of risking it getting on CNN.'

'But then, don't the bad guys win?' the agent quietly posed.

'Not if *you* keep me alive, they don't.'

The agent sat back, carefully studying his charge. 'Is the funny moustache a disguise?'

\* \* \*

Johno stared out of his hotel room window as Thomas explored the palatial bathroom.

'Please, sir. Those windows *are not* bullet proof,' a coloured agent pointed out. He drew the curtains.

'Scaredy-cat,' Johno joked, getting an odd look back. He bounced on the bed as the lead agent entered with Bambitou.

'You requested this agent?' the senior FBI agent asked, a quizzical and unhappy expression. Bambitou stood in jeans and jumper, wrapped up against the cold.

Johno eyed Bambitou's boots from where he sat on the end of the bed. 'What size are *they*?'

'Thirteen,' Bambitou answered.

'Good guess then.' He stood, extending a hand. They shook. 'Jesus, big hands,' Johno noted. 'You're an excellent bullet stop.' Bambitou lifted his eyebrows. 'There's a room booked for you, all paid, airplane tickets on their way,' Johno explained. 'Order anything you want.' He faced the senior agent. 'Can you give us ten? Check the other rooms, yeah?'

The agent glanced at Bambitou and withdrew, closing the door, Johno leading his guest towards a seat as Thomas appeared.

'Wow!' Thomas let out. 'He's really big!' He ran over. 'What basketball team do you play for?'

'I'm an FBI agent, son.' They sat.

Thomas closed in on Bambitou. 'But you play basketball?'

Bambitou glanced at Johno, then back to Thomas. 'In college.'

'Can I have your autograph and a photo?'

Bambitou frowned at Thomas.

'Thomas, later,' Joho instructed. 'Order some room service.'

Thomas found the menus and sat reading them.

'Your kid?' Bambitou enquired.

'Yes.'

'Sounds European?'

'He is, he's Swiss,' Johno said as he watched Thomas. 'His mother worked in our kitchens, got killed in a nerve gas attack.'

'That didn't make the papers, certainly not here.'

Johno had not taken his gaze of the studious boy. 'Our fault he got orphaned, so I adopted him.'

'Good of you,' Bambitou said after a moment. 'Where are the other guys I met? Fit guy and the dwarf?'

Johno faced his guest, his features hardening. 'Fit guy is fine, *dwarf* ... got himself killed in the line of duty, trying to save others.'

Bambitou shrugged. 'Sorry.' After a moment he asked, 'What you need me for?'

'Bullet stop, like I said.'

Bambitou offered Johno a pair of tired eyes. 'And the shooters?'

'Same bunch, or similar. Rogue element.'

'They're not official?'

Johno shook his head. 'No. *And* your lot cleaned house after the last episode.'

'Not enough?'

Johno gave his guest a reluctant tip of his head. 'I think you're probably not compromised, and that's what I need - an honest man.'

'To help protect you?'

Johno nodded. ‘Random itinerary for a few days, route changes, and keeping an eye on that lot outside – just in case.’

Bambitou sighed. ‘Then I’ll start by checking them out. Thoroughly.’

Johno offered his guest an amused grin. ‘Earning your keep already.’

Bambitou squinted at Johno. ‘Is the funny moustache a disguise?’

Johno faced Thomas as the boy fell off his chair laughing.

### 3

After a thirty-minute helicopter ride south of the capital Johno and Thomas landed on an innocuous looking golf course; a large hotel complex in the distance, a two-storey clubhouse close by, a sprinkling of security guards dotted around.

Stepping down from the helicopter they were greeted by a man in a suit with stern features, a quick handshake for Johno, before being led into the clubhouse. An airport-style metal detector was the first line of security, some odd-looking wands the second, followed by a quick frisk.

Through several doors they followed their initial host at a brisk pace, the walls adorned with golfers in pose, many celebrities or former Presidents. Finally they were there, the inner sanctum; a simple room with a stone fireplace and a large table which Johno recognised from prior video conferences. Stanton sat at the head of the table, two guards behind, but out of earshot from normal conversation.

‘So, this is where it all happens?’ Johno asked as he walked around, checking the photographs on the wall. ‘Where did Beesely sit?’

Stanton eased up. ‘When in attendance, which was never often, anywhere the annoying bum liked.’

They shook. Stanton gestured Johno to the nearest chair, Thomas checking each photograph carefully, mostly on tip-toes.

Johno sat, running a hand over the table's cool surface. 'What is it about big tables?'

'Traditional meeting places, tables. And for eating off, of course. I suppose, during the Middle Ages, they ate and then they discussed business - dual role.' Stanton cut the end off a cigar.

Surprised, Johno asked, 'We can smoke in here?'

'No smoking bans here ... yet!'

Johno lit up, refusing a cigar from Stanton.

'So, Johno, some problems? Problems big enough for a personal visit?'

Johno took a moment. 'First, a question. Any link between Henry and the Vatican?'

Stanton lit his cigar, taking many seconds. Finally he made eye contact. 'Links, without a doubt. Unwanted links, hard to pin down.'

'Why?'

'First, Henry was an Ambassador to Italy. So, if the question is, did he know people in the Italian Government, then yes - of course. Did he know people in the Vatican - certainly. Was he running operations that we were not aware of ... then I'd say no. Unless, of course, you are about to prove me wrong.'

Stanton waited, Johno just staring back as he smoked. He continued, 'What you need to understand about the Vatican is that since the Second World War they've helped us - the CIA - run operations on a large scale around the world, against communism. Their priests could go where we couldn't, so were a great ally. Still are, to a small degree, in Central America.'

'And did ... Henry run these kind of operations with the Vatican?'

‘No, not his area. Although he would have played his part in Gladio.’

‘I read up on that recently.’

‘And?’ Stanton posed.

‘For the most part counter productive. Force didn’t destroy communism, their desire for a bigger television set did.’

Stanton smiled. ‘A very simple explanation that would explain a hundred thousand word thesis on the subject. So, any *specific* concerns about Henry?’

Johno glanced at the ceiling. ‘I got a tip-off recently, from a Vatican insider.’

Stanton’s eyes widened. ‘About Henry?’

‘And a lot of other stuff. War’s back on.’

‘Which ... *war* ... are we talking about here?’

Johno faced his host. ‘The same one.’

Stanton frowned his lack of understanding. ‘Which one?’

Johno sighed. ‘They’re all connected. The nerve agent attack on us, Henry, Kirkpatrick, Luchenkov, the dirty bomb attacks on London, the Vatican, Shue and even old boy Gunter.’

‘Christ, how is all that lot connected?’

Johno reached across and tapped his cigarette over Stanton’s ashtray. ‘Same spider in the middle, pulling the strings every step of the way.’

Stanton straightened, surprised. ‘What the hell are you getting at?’

‘*You tell me* ... how they connect, lord and master of all he surveys.’

‘Up to now I didn’t think they did.’

Johno stood and walked in a small circle. Facing Stanton again he began, arms held wide, ‘Imagine a table, just like this, with some people sat around it. Imagine a hundred powerful and rich men, a dozen at the top table. Sat with them is Henry, next to Luchenkov. Sat next to them ... a cardinal or two.’

Stanton stared. ‘Luchenkov, Henry and the Vatican? On the same fucking table?’

‘Part of the same group, or linked to it. Certainly under its influence.’

‘Henry would never attack the UK!’ Stanton barked. ‘Nor would the Vatican!’

‘Guess you’re not as smart as you like to think you are,’ Johno stated, his eyes cold. ‘Guess K2 has reached maturity of late.’ He sat back down, slouching as best he could in the rigid seats and taking a drag.

‘You have proof?’ Stanton gasped.

Johno nodded. ‘Getting rid of the British Prime Minister was the right thing to do, but for the wrong reason.’

‘How’s *he* connected?’

Johno blew out. ‘He started this whole thing off. And rightly so, I suppose.’

‘How so?’

Johno turned away, staring at the fireplace. ‘You lot went to Def Con Three over the attacks on the British Navy, the harm to NATO. If you had a target to strike back at, would you?’ He faced Stanton and waited.

‘Of course.’

‘Are you sure? Would you cut you left hand off if it misbehaved?’

‘You’re not making much sense, Johno!’

‘If the people responsible were allies, would you strike at them?’

Stanton eased back. ‘That depends. We would, obviously, wish to cut-out the rotten elements without harming an ally, and quietly.’

‘Which is just what I was considering doing,’ Johno said with a menacing smile. ‘But ... but I’d have to kill three hundred and fifty people to do so.’

‘Three hundred and fifty? You have a list?’

‘No, not much of start on it either,’ Johno reluctantly admitted.

‘Start making some sense, huh?’ Stanton implored.

‘Let’s work backwards. Ship full of explosives goes bang. Ship sails from the Far East, stopping off in a ... *French* port, where the explosives are packed -’

‘French!’

Johno nodded.

‘Jesus! The fall-out from that could rip Europe apart!’

‘And NATO in Europe. So, French explosives, paid for by a French millionaire with the assistance of his buddies in the French Secret Service.’

Stanton stood, aghast at the suggestion. He turned full circle, thinking hard. Facing Johno he said, ‘How the hell did we miss this?’

‘A cautious tight group who don’t like Yanks, or Brits. Or Jews.’

‘What else?’ Stanton whispered.

‘The reason for the boat. Well, simple really – the dirty bombs didn’t achieve the desired effect.’

‘Desired effect?’

‘To scare the British Prime Minister.’

‘Scare him? Away from what?’

‘You know, they were never intended to be made into dirty-bombs, just driven into London and found - a message for the P.M. *Don’t mess with us!* But he didn’t heed the message, thanks in part to K2, so a firmer message was needed – a real kick up the pants, and something that would dislodge him as well.’

‘The British Prime Minister ... was threatened by a foreign power?’

‘Not by a foreign power,’ Johno explained, ‘but by a group of private individuals ... who have grown pretty damned strong. And you’re still disappointing me by not knowing who.’

Stanton sighed. ‘I’m disappointing myself as well. Henry got the better of us.’

‘Groups within groups,’ Johno quoted.

Stanton coughed a quick laugh. ‘So, who are they?’



‘*They* ... are a wide web. And that’s their strength and our weakness. Are you sitting comfortably? Then I’ll begin.

‘After the Second World War Switzerland had made a lot of dosh from dealing with the Germans, not to mention the Nazi treasures hidden in deep dark vaults. You lot went after them for a while, stopping when the Cold War heated up – people like Gunter and Shue spying on the Russians, so they were left alone. *Their* money went to fund some of Europe’s largest corporations today. There is, apparently, a hidden room somewhere with files as to how those corporations got started.’

Stanton gave a look of mock concern. ‘Jesus. That could upset a few.’

Johno carefully nodded, making firm eye contact. Continuing he said, ‘Back when the European Union started people could immediately see the potential for corruption, which is far greater in countries like Italy, Greece and Germany than it is in the UK. The Brits are too stupid to defraud anyone.

‘So people started to issue EU contracts to their mates, making good money. That grew into an institutionally corrupt group, well connected to Ministers in Europe. Maggie Thatcher had a go at them, got some money back, but didn’t rock the boat too much. There’s also some suggestion that some of those well-placed IRA bombs had a helping hand.

‘Anyway, this group started by taking millions from the EU budget, but now probably takes a couple hundred million a year, part of that laundered directly through the Vatican.’

Stanton slowly nodded, looking disappointed. ‘We know the Vatican launders money for the Mafia, and others. But they’re still valuable allies.’

‘They’ve stepped up a gear,’ Johno pointed out. ‘Their church takings around the world have fallen, and they need the money to keep the lights on – and their vicars kept in kiddy porn.’

‘Does this ... *group* have a name?’

‘They’re known as the Basel Group.’

‘Basel? They’re freemasons. Christ, half the former heads of Europe are members! Presidents, ministers, industrialists and financiers, not to mention royal families. Most of their top table would be instantly recognised.’

Johno nodded his agreement. ‘And they’d be very unhappy if the UK Government made good on its promise of widespread forensic accountants looking up their skirts.’

‘That’s what triggered this? A British threat to expose them?’

Johno confirmed with a saddened nod. ‘And now that they think they’ve got away with it – what comes next?’

Stanton took a long breath. ‘And just what the hell is K2 planning on doing? You expose this lot and Europe is rocked to its core!’

‘Really? You noticed that aspect as well, did you?’ Johno sarcastically offered.

Stanton puffed his cigar for several seconds. ‘So? What’ll you do?’

‘Only thing we can do ... kill them all.’

Stanton stood again. ‘Kill them all!’ he barked. Are you mad? Most of them are celebrities, crown princes or former presidents! Don’t you think you’ll be noticed?’

Staring into the fireplace Johno stated, ‘For what they did ... it’s a price I’m prepared to pay.’

‘K2 will be destroyed, you’ll all end up in jail, or dead!’

‘Goes with the territory, Mister Stanton,’ Johno coldly stated.

Stanton sat. ‘Just how the hell could you expect to get away with it?’

‘No need.’

‘No need?’

‘If my plan works then the bad guys are all linked to each other by their deaths. We’ll make sure the financial irregularities hit the papers - the media will do the rest. They’ll all blame each other with their silence.’

‘The effect on the EU will be horrendous!’

Johno made strong eye contact. ‘And what effect will letting them grow have? How long till they threaten you?’

Stanton considered that question carefully, taking several puffs of his cigar.

‘Besides,’ Johno added. ‘The Governments of Europe will soon see the corruption, going to great lengths to hide it. It’s their necks as well.’

‘I need time to think about this, discuss it—’

‘No. No time, no discussion.’ Stanton was taken aback. ‘You either help me, my way, or we part company.’

Stanton said nothing for several seconds. ‘And what way would that be?’

‘I need you take down fifty people ... off the list, including those far and wide on the chosen day. I also need you to nudge Mossad into helping. And no discussion of this with your buddies here, can’t take the risk. If we attack and lose, they’ll expose K2 and shut us down in a minute. If they know we’re coming - same deal. Only way to be sure – is to kill them all on the same day.’

Stanton slowly nodded. ‘That makes sense, although I can’t believe we’re even discussing this.’

Johno eased up, facing Stanton squarely. ‘Think about it then, let me know ... because we’re doing it with you, or without you. If it destroys K2 and kills us all, so be it. But if you decide against helping, don’t discuss it here till it’s done. Then don’t ever contact us again.’

‘Now who’s being threatening?’

‘The stupid foot soldier about to give his life for what he believes in.’ He led Thomas out, Stanton watching him go.

‘By God he’s a Beesely.’

## Coming of age

1

Stanton sighed so loud his wife put down her book, marking the page.

She gestured towards a chair. ‘Beesely?’

‘No, his son.’

‘Johno?’

Stanton gave his wife a tired nod, looking drained. ‘He’s a chip off the old block as the Brits’ say, although I can’t do the accent.’

‘He’s here? That’s why the change of plans?’ she gently enquired.

Again Stanton nodded. ‘This is going to be bad, very bad, which is why I’m discussing this with you – and not the group.’

Her brow furrowed as she eased forwards. ‘Is that ... wise?’

‘Doubt it, but Johno suggests they may have been compromised.’

‘Again? Dear me! Who ... this time, is linked in?’

‘The Basel Group, Euro-freemasons.’

‘*They* never caused anyone any problems. They don’t allow Americans in, but they’ve never been an issue. What have they done?’

‘They were behind the attack on the British city of Portsmouth.’

She straightened. ‘Why on earth would they get involved with such a thing?’

‘Seems they piggy-backed Luchenkov’s desires to inflict harm, to warn off the UK Government from investigating their finances.’

She took a moment. ‘I can see that would be a problem, it could put a lot of powerful and prominent Europeans in the dock. Would shake-up the European Union as well.’

‘They obviously took the threat from the Brit’s serious, a threat to send in forensic accountants by all accounts. If they back-dated that investigation it would put a thousand prominent figures in prison, including former Prime Ministers and Ministers.’

She eased back, still holding her book. ‘So, how will you solve the paradox?’

Stanton lifted his eyes and tipped his head. ‘I’m not in the driving seat, John is.’

‘What will he do?’ she puzzled.

‘Go all out after them, destroying K2 and Europe in the process.’

She considered it, placing down her book. ‘Have you attempted to ... *refine* his approach? Or even stop it.’

‘He said an interesting thing tonight. Given the success they’ve found, Basel that is, in getting away with threatening the UK... what comes next?’

Now it was Mrs Stanton’s turn to sigh. ‘He’s got a point. They’ve grown strong, and won this fight. How long before they have their own political agenda for Europe? Since they never wanted to talk with you, we’d have to assume that their ... *future agenda* will not be palatable to us.’

Stanton nodded to himself. ‘They’ve moved quickly from mafia-style construction contracts to large-scale terrorist attacks. If they adopt a French attitude to us...’

‘How will K2 deal with them?’ she enquired.

‘Quite clever, and practical. Kill them all on the same day.’

Her eyes widened. ‘How many people?’

Stanton lifted his head. ‘Three hundred plus!’

‘My God. The publicity!’

‘That’ll help, actually - all these people will get linked by the time and method of their deaths. After that, everyone will assume some mafia style bloodletting, corruption at the core, European Governments going to great length to play it down. As soon as the story hits, the families of those dead will go to

great lengths to disassociate their loved ones from the group, or they get tarred with that brush as well.'

'Seems like he's given it a great deal of thought,' she conceded.

'As I said, practical in its audacity,' he reluctantly admitted.

'And the chances of success?'

'With that many factors in play, not good. But the more they kill, the better their chances of the Europeans burying it. Twenty would hit the papers, a hundred would cause questions before outrage.'

'And our part?' she delicately broached.

'He wants us to take down fifty from the list of three hundred.'

'That's still a lot.'

He shrugged. 'If we brought in freelancers from all over - just for one job each then out - maybe it could be done. One shooter per subject, none of which is expecting trouble - we'd hope - or too well protected.'

'Sounds like you're considering it?'

The puppy ran in, followed by his granddaughter, both warmly greeted before the girl chased the puppy into a conservatory.

Stanton added, 'If we don't help ... we lose K2, Johnno was quite blunt about that - help or else. And faced with the prospect of losing control of Europe - from the inside out - not that much of a choice.'

\* \* \*

A knock on the door and the hotels' manager was led in. He quickly closed in on Johnno. 'Sir, we've had a lot of complaints.'

'Really? Snoring was I?'

The manager stumbled. 'Snoring? No, sir. The security! There's now a SWAT team here.'

‘Really? I must be more popular than I realised. Tell you what, turf out everyone on this floor, give them ten thousand dollars compensation, bill it to me ... along with all the rooms.’

The manager straightened and blinked. ‘Sir?’

‘You heard. I’ll have a million in cash brought straight around. Will that ... you know ... fix your whinging?’

‘I, sir, have not been ... whinging, as you say. The guests –’

‘Are going somewhere else,’ Johno finished off, leaving his firm gaze on the manager. The man stepped briskly out.

‘You enjoyed that,’ Bambitou suggested, Johno’s smirk suggesting he was spot on in his assessment.

Another knock was followed by Elle Rosen and Mosh appearing.

Johno jumped up. ‘Elle, come on in.’

Thomas said hello very politely, enquiring about the paintings.

‘They were very well received,’ Mosh offered with thanks. He shook Johno’s hand, an odd look for Bambitou.

Johno faced Bambitou. ‘Sorry, mate, but can you step out for a moment.’

Bambitou eased up his six foot four frame. ‘Sure, need a leg stretch.’ He offered the visitors quick nods before closing the door.

Johno kicked out two chairs and sat. ‘Want anything?’

‘No, we’re fine,’ Mosh said. ‘So, how is Beesely?’

‘Much better since the stroke, left side not co-operating though.’

‘And now *you* seem to have taken a much greater role within K2,’ Mosh stated.

‘Beesely passed ownership to me. Dumb idea, but that’s life, eh.’

‘Your entry to the Lodge would not have been taken lightly,’ Mosh pointed out.

‘There’s no accounting for taste,’ Johno said with a smile. ‘Besides, they probably did it to rope me in.’

Mosh made brief eye contact with Elle. ‘And now a ... *firm* request from Mr. Stanton that we listen to what you have to request. He seems to be ... *concerned*.’

‘So he should be,’ Johnno said, the smirk gone. ‘You guys familiar with The Basel Freemason Group?’

‘Some,’ Mosh answered. ‘They are a well-established European freemason group, centred around Germany and Italy. They don’t like Americans, or British.’

‘Or Jews!’ Johnno pointed out.

‘Or Jews,’ Mosh quietly admitted after a moments reflection.

‘Got anyone inside?’ Johnno bluntly asked.

‘On the periphery of the French branch,’ Elle informed him.

Johnno nodded slowly to himself. ‘Had any problems with them?’

‘No,’ Mosh adamantly replied. ‘Why your interest?’

Johnno glanced out of the window. ‘You guys are not as smart as I’d hoped you were.’

‘Johnno?’ Elle quietly nudged a few seconds later.

Johnno turned back, studying them both for a moment. ‘They were behind the nerve gas attack on us.’ The visitors glanced at each other. ‘They were also in bed with Henry O’Sullivan, possibly the real buyers of the signature DNA virus.’ Again the visitors made eye contact, worried looks exchanged. ‘And the final piece of the puzzle - that you don’t seem to have - they influenced Luchenkov, facilitating the attack on the UK.’

Mosh stared back, stunned. ‘Why?’ he gasped.

‘The UK Government threatened to send in forensic accountants, to go back through all EU projects since day one.’

Mosh slowly nodded to himself, looking concerned. ‘All EU countries have always known, but turned a blind eye to it.’

‘Lodge are worried,’ Johnno began. ‘Someone else setting the future direction of Europe; un-elected, corrupt, anti-American, anti-British.’ He watched them both carefully as they considered his words.



‘We had no idea they had gone so far,’ Mosh admitted. ‘But we have heard rumours.’

‘They risk destroying Europe ... and their own gravy train,’ Johnno suggested. ‘If the UK Government releases what it knows to the press...?’

‘It would be chaos,’ Elle noted. ‘But why has the UK Government remained silent?’ Johnno grinned widely. ‘Ah,’ Elle let out. ‘They have you and Beesely!’

Johnno pointed out, ‘If we deal with it, and get caught, Europe doesn’t break apart. If the PM sends in the Navy it does. Odd really: Brits’ get attacked, now keen not to lose Europe. Sometimes, doing the right thing really stinks, eh?’

‘What will you do?’ Mosh asked in a concerned tone.

‘Kill them all,’ Johnno carefully mouthed. ‘All three hundred and fifty two members.’

The visitors straightened.

‘How the hell do you expect to get away with it?’ Mosh demanded.

‘We don’t,’ came back without any thought. ‘If we lose... we lose. But we’ll take down most of them as we go.’

Mosh glanced at Elle, his chest heaving a deep breath. ‘All out war.’

‘Johnno, you’ll lose everything,’ Elle cautioned.

‘After what they did ... besides, how long till *they* come for me? We’ve locked horns for months, lost fifty dead and hundreds wounded. We’re getting worn down and they haven’t thrown their best punch yet. Soon be a reckoning. Rather it be on my timescale than theirs.’

‘There doesn’t seem to be much alternative,’ Mosh quietly admitted.

‘None that I can see,’ Johnno indicated. ‘And I’ve given it a hell of a lot of thought. My poor old brain has been on overtime.’

‘What do you want of us?’ Mosh finally asked.

‘First, couple thousand rounds of ammo, 9mm, glass, Perspex and sugar-crystal bullets, light load. Then, a thousand brand new unregistered pistols with silencers, still in their boxes. Don’t care what it costs, and I want it delivered to the UK, not Zug. We have a mole or two there reporting back to Basel.’

‘You have been compromised? Again?’ Elle asked.

‘It’s Europe - these fucker’s back garden,’ Johnno admitted with a shrug.

‘You did not need to drag us here to discuss weapons,’ Mosh pointedly commented. ‘What else?’

Johnno faced Mosh squarely. ‘If you’re up to it, I’d like you to kill thirty people off the list around the Med.’

Mosh stared back. ‘You are assuming a lot ... of our friendship.’

Johnno continued, without reacting to the last statement. ‘They’ll be a bunch on holiday around the Med - Greece, Southern Italy, a Nile Cruise, Malta.’ He waited. ‘We’ve already helped you ... financially. There’ll be further assistance in what Beesely mentioned the other day, the holocaust claims against the Swiss banks.’ He eased forwards. ‘Mosh, we’ve already pushed the Swiss as much as we dare.’

Finally, Mosh took a breath and said, ‘The publicity around Europe would be horrendous, the effect on the public...’

Johnno grinned.

‘What?’ Mosh asked.

‘If these fuckers are all killed in the same way, just as the newspapers report massive financial irregularities...’

‘Some will not wish to be associated,’ Elle cut in with. ‘Many will hide the fact.’

‘Including,’ Johnno said with raised eyebrows for emphasis, ‘some Governments. As soon as they know what’s happening they’ll panic and try and cover it up.’

‘Wouldn’t you?’ Mosh put in. ‘The papers will crucify the Governments. The Italian Government will fall. Again.’

Johno shrugged. 'We'll pay what's needed –'

Mosh raised a flat hand, cutting off Johno. 'When do you act?'

'Five days or so.' Johno shrugged. 'Depends on them, they may move first.'

'Do you think they know you are coming?' Elle asked, a concerned frown.

'Nope. They may suspect we'll turn on them, that I'll fix soon, just to keep them quiet. Stanton hasn't informed the Lodge, and I don't want you fuckers advertising the fact. Not even Otto knows what I've got planned yet, no one at K2 does – so I'm reasonably sure *they* don't know yet. If they did, they'd expose K2 for sure to the papers, put pressure on the Swiss Government to get rid of us.'

'Why haven't they done that yet?' Elle asked.

Johno shrugged. 'They have moles inside, plus I reckon they have their own plans for K2. We, did, apparently, do their bidding by removing Shue. And Gunter for that matter.'

'Besides, right now they want a quiet Europe, especially after the attacks on the UK. They must think the Yanks got Luchenkov, so probably sweating a bit right now. Stock markets are fucked up, which hurts them as much as anyone. But there is one way to be sure they don't know I'm coming.'

'What's that?' Elle asked.

'I'm still breathing,' Johno said with a grin. 'Besides, they haven't quite worked out yet why we get so much help from the Yanks. These fuckers don't seem to know much about the Lodge, certainly not Beesely's relationship with them. Think that caught them off guard a bit.'

Mosh nodded in agreement. 'Where do you want the weapons sent?'

'Swindon, our rescue force. No sooner than three days, no later than five. Contact will be Kev.'

'We'll give you a decision on the other matter in a day or two.' Mosh stood, followed up by Johno.

Johno took Mosh's hand and made strong eye contact. 'If you and Stanton don't help, we'll probably fail. So this may be goodbye.'

Mosh reluctantly nodded, lowering his head as he led Elle out.

Thomas walked over. 'You spoke nice and soft and pleasant to them, not like to the Pope. I am proud of you.'

Johno laughed, messing up the boy's hair.

From the hotel lobby Johno made a call on a public phone. 'Kev, that you?'

'Shit, Johno, middle the bastard night!'

'Where are you?'

'In the new place, first fucking day and ya wakes me. Gotta be bad luck or something.'

'Listen up. Day after tomorrow, Swindon, meet me. Between now and then I need you to round up as many ex-troopers as you can if they're up to some wet work.'

'Jesus, what's up?'

'Got some spies in K2 keeping a tab on me, need to be careful. Need some outsiders.'

'What's the job?'

'Found a bunch of people in bed with Luchenkov, his mafia contacts around Europe. We're going after them.'

'These friends of Luchenkov's –'

'They supplied the wherewithal for the attacks on the UK and us, logistics and handholding. He had a lot of help from some mafia cockroaches.'

'We going for them?'

'Big time, probably won't survive it, they're well connected as fuck – some stuff I can't say on the phone.'

'Christ,' Kev sighed. 'Count me in, Boss. I'll make some calls in the morning.'

'How's the new estate?'

'Lovely, for the whole day I had it, fucker!' He hung up.

Guido Pepi cut the end of a cigar and eased back as his assistant approached. Sitting with his back to a gentle log fire he lit up, the large desk in front of him bare but for a single file, a buff coloured folder.

‘Sir.’ The assistant waited reverently, the room lights off, the only illumination coming from the flickering yellow flames.

Pepi looked up, running a hand through his long and thick silver hair.

‘Sir. Johno is in America, Beesely and Otto are in Zug with Dame Helen.’

Pepi blew out a sizeable pall of grey smoke. Calmly and confidently he asked, ‘Any more ... tricks from our friend?’

‘No, sir.’

‘Anything happening at K2?’ Pepi asked in a deep, rich voice.

‘Nothing significant, sir. No mention of the group, no investigations.’

‘And the British?’ Pepi asked.

‘A new leader will be announced today, sir, and no investigation from their authorities. The trail ends with Luchenkov.’

‘And he knows nothing of interest. Any news as to his whereabouts?’

‘At K2 they believe he was picked up by the Americans.’

Pepi chuckled. ‘Maybe they took him to Guantanamo!’ He eased up and walked to the window, looking down at the house lights in the distance, a clear night and full moon bathing the Tivoli countryside in a soft grey light.

Without looking around he added, ‘We will wait a few weeks, let things settle. We need our people close to the British to see how their investigation goes.’

He turned. ‘Then we shall have to deal with the K2 leadership.’

\* \* \*

A knock at the bedroom door and Maurice Edwardo, head of the Marseille mafia, was shown in. Johnno, Thomas and Bambitou sat eating pizza, Edwardo waved over, now warmly wrapped in a heavy coat.

‘Sorry about the cuisine,’ Johnno offered. ‘Not up to French standards.’

‘I have eaten,’ came back in a thick French accent. Edwardo stood just five feet eight tall, a portly figure. He dragged the last remaining empty chair over and sat. ‘A long way to come for a talk, Herr Johnno,’ he grumbled.

‘It’ll be worth it,’ Johnno assured him. ‘Edwardo, this is Special Agent Bambitou of the FBI.’

Edwardo was immediately uneasy.

‘Don’t worry, you’re not in any trouble,’ Johnno quickly put in, enjoying his guests discomfort.

‘And just who is this ... gentlemen?’ Bambitou enquired, a professional interest in the new arrival.

Johnno faced him, a slight grin. ‘The kind of fella that would get you sacked if you sat in a room with him eating pizza.’

‘Oh.’ Bambitou stood. ‘I need a shower anyway.’

‘Give us twenty minutes,’ Johnno suggested as Bambitou headed to the door.

With the door shut Edwardo asked, ‘What is so important that we must meet here? I take a risk at the airport!’

‘We got you good false passports,’ Johnno scoffed. ‘Stop complaining.’

‘So, what is it?’ Edwardo pressed.

Johnno wiped his hands with a tissue. ‘If you had to, how many people could you kill in a single day – people in the South of France?’

‘How many?’

Johno nodded.

Edwardo made a face. ‘Maybe ... twenty.’

‘Could you make that ... maybe thirty?’

Edwardo gave a large, Gallic shrug, making another face. ‘Maybe. But it will not be easy.’

Johno offered him neutral features. ‘Twenty million dollars.’

‘These people, they cannot be killed by K2?’ Edwardo pointedly enquired.

‘K2 is very busy, we had many men killed and injured recently.’

Edwardo considered it. ‘These people, they are very important?’

Johno nodded. ‘Some famous, some politicians, one a former Prime Minister.’

The guests’ eyebrows shot up. ‘It will not be so easy, the police will look very hard afterwards,’ Edwardo complained. ‘The gunmen, they will want to go away for many years.’

‘Forty million dollars, my final offer. But make no mistake, when you leave here – no discussion of this with anyone, not even your family or number two. When I contact you with the list and send the money you order it done and then send the gunmen away. You ... must be out of France when it happens.’

Edwardo’s expression suggested he agreed with that idea. ‘Of course. This is a big problem for us all if the police know.’

‘Yeah, well the last time we gave you a job the French police came to see us the next day.’

Edwardo was horrified. ‘They knew?’

Johno gave him a quick nod.

‘So, why not arrest us?’ Edwardo puzzled.

‘That, my friend, is a bit of a mystery. But I have an idea. So when you go back, trust no one, give the money to the gunmen alone so they don’t know each other. The other

problem ... is that these people must all be killed in a certain way, so that the police know they're linked together.'

'Are you crazy, they will connect us?' Edwardo hissed.

Johno shook his head. 'They'll connect to the people who kill in this way. When *you* do this job many others will do similar killings - the police *won't* think about you.'

'You want the police to think it is you?' Edwardo gasped.

'Not quite, we'll be using someone else's methods. Relax for a day, Edwardo, but be back the day after, make ready. Your money will be in Panama.'

'Ah, good, away from Europe. I will travel with my family.' He stood. 'I will wait your call. After this, I am tourist – maybe forever!'

'Oh, one more thing, nearly forgot. Three weeks ago a large consignment of explosives was loaded into a ship in Marseille. Ship's name was –'

'Nan King, registered in Malta, operated by a Cambodian company,' Edward finished off. 'I thought you might ask this question some day.'

'And?' Johno pressed.

Edwardo reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a rolled up file, a dozen pages and numerous photographs. 'And how much is this worth?'

'An extra twenty million dollars. Which, for what this is ... is a snip.'

Edwardo handed it over. 'Then it is good fortune I am a suspicious man.'

Johno held up the file. 'Does anyone know about this?'

'I was very careful when I could see *who* was organising the shipment.'

'Good man.'

'Now I am definitely tourist for life. An ... exile.'

Johno smiled as Edwardo left, the Frenchman never having taken his coat off.

'How many is that?' Thomas asked, closing in.



‘If all goes well, fifty by the Yanks, ten by Kev’s gang, thirty by our French buddy, another thirty by Mossad – that’s a hundred and twenty.’

‘So, you have to kill another ... two hundred and thirty.’

‘Still a lot,’ Johno sighed. ‘It would mean just two men for each target. They can get the job done, but a big risk of getting caught.’

‘Why?’

‘Some assassins are very good, just the single man – sneak in, do the job, sneak out. Simple. But if you’re going after someone in a town, in a house or big villa, they’ll be lots of people around, guards and dogs. You need some men to watch the street, some to silence the dogs, some to watch the exits, some to monitor the police channels. More people you have the better your chances of success. Team effort.’

Thomas nodded studiously, considering ‘tradecraft’.

### 3

Grey emerged from the dark water with his dive buddy, both warmly clothed in dry suits, several inner thermal layers for the cold water in the flooded cave. He passed up a rope, grabbed by waiting K2 cavers. Spitting out his regulator he said, ‘Pull on that, there’s two dead divers attached.’

‘Dead divers?’ the K2 cavers gasped. ‘But only you went down?’

‘They’ve been there thirty years!’ Grey shouted.

‘Ah, divers from before,’ the K2 caver surmised.

Thirty minutes later Mr. Grey broke the news to the interested parties, Casper and Cardinal Diaz. ‘The two dead divers have kit from the late sixties, which fits the time line. They’re well preserved if you want to take a look, I’m sure K2 will try and identify them.’

Diaz carefully studied Mr. Grey. ‘Anything else ... of interest?’

‘Signs that the divers were there for quite some time, maybe a year or two of searching.’

‘And they did not find anything,’ Diaz noted.

‘Our equipment today is much better, so we may find what they missed, or ... we may just waste a lot of time.’

‘Can the cave be drained?’ Diaz asked.

Grey smiled. ‘My thoughts exactly. There’s a cave-in beyond where we found the divers. I think it blocks the lake water, so we might be able to secure this end of the cave, then add a pressure door above it – with an airlock, pump in air then remove the cave-in.’

‘How will that help?’ Casper enquired.

‘With the air pressure up the water will be forced back, showing us where it comes out, then the tunnel end in the lake can be sealed. Maybe.’ He shrugged. ‘If this end of the tunnel is anything more than two metres above the lake surface we could pump it dry. After all, it probably filled with rain water over the years, not necessarily lake water.’

‘I believe,’ Diaz began in patronising tones, ‘that we are forty metres above the lake?’

‘And the cave well goes down fifty metres, after rising ten metres from the grass outside.’

‘So, it will be close then,’ Diaz conceded.

Grey made firm eye contact. ‘Can’t use satellite altimeters in a cave, Cardinal.’

‘I suppose not,’ Diaz admitted. ‘Do you mind if I look at the bodies?’

‘Help yourself, sir.’

Diaz stepped out, Grey and Casper watching him go.

‘He is not very trusting,’ Casper noted.

‘Can’t blame the fella, he has his orders. And if the treasure is found, with the naughty bits in there, his job gets a lot

harder.’ Grey finally faced Casper as the man sat. ‘You not wanting a look, sir?’

‘I am sure, Mr. Grey, that if K2 wished me to be convinced by evidence either way, they could do so quite effectively.’

‘A pragmatist!’

‘No. A Jew! We gave pragmatism to you lot. Anyway, *where is* our illustrious adjudicator?’

‘States, I think.’

‘And will he be gracing us with is presence anytime soon?’

‘Let’s hope not,’ Grey said with a wink, turning and heading out.

Grey found Otto in the command centre a few minutes later.

‘What news?’ Otto enquired, straightening and clasping his hands behind his back.

‘Nothing so far, sir. But I’d like to get some specialist kit, give it a dry search.’

‘Dry ... search?’

‘We can seal up the shaft, put in a small air chamber, pump high-pressure air in and force the water out. If the seals hold we can move around freely, no diving gear, then check the walls.’

‘Given the dead divers, have they not already been checked thoroughly?’

‘Unlikely, sir. Hence the use of divers. The tunnel was flooded back then, and very difficult to do anything in dive suits other than find what’s under your nose, thirty minutes at a time.’

Otto put his chin out. ‘So, pumping out the water could reveal a secret passage,’ he said, looking past Grey. Making eye contact again he ordered, ‘Write down a list of what equipment you will need –’ Grey lifted a page. Otto took it. ‘How did you know I would approve it?’

‘Sooner that cave is explored by ... *all* ... interested parties, the sooner you can get back to normal life.’

Otto offered him a glum look. 'Leave it with me for an hour.'

## Hail to the chief

### 1

Flicking idly through the hotel advertising literature, on what to see and do in Washington on a chilly September night, Johno noticed the advert for a theatrical agency, 'White House Too!' They had a look-a-like President.

He grinned to himself. With Thomas in his own room he made a call on the hotel phone.

An hour later they sat watching television, chairs re-arranged, feet up, pizza and popcorn. With a knock at the door Bambitou slowly eased up, an indignant glance at Johno – who had not made any move in that direction – then answered the door.

'Mr. President,' Bambitou dryly stated. 'Please, come in.'

Thomas jumped up, hastily closing pizza-box lids and panicking. Two 'Secret Service' agents walked in, dark blue suits, shortly cropped hair, earpiece radios. Thomas tried to both hide his frantic hand signals, and get Johno up at the same time. Johno looked around as 'Mr. President' entered. Thomas stood wide-eyed and nervous, but also delighted to be meeting the President of the United States; his friends would never believe this.

Johno eventually eased up as the last two Secret Service agents stepped in and closed the doors. 'Alright, mate?'

'Mister Johno. I've heard a lot about you.' They shook.

'You're not as tall as you seem on the TV,' Johno joked. He turned, a gesture towards Thomas. 'This is my lad, Thomas.'

The President leant in and shook. 'Glad to make your acquaintance, son,' he said in a broad Texas accent.

'Sir,' was all that Thomas could get out.

Bambitou stood at the back, a resigned, almost bored, look.

The President began, addressing Johnno, 'Had to come here to meet, would be awkward if people saw *you* at the White House.'

'Yeah, no bother. Want some pizza?'

'Sure, starved. Those White House meals are all fancy pants and no substance. Like a good steak, myself.' He faced Thomas. 'How about you, son, you like a good steak?'

Thomas nodded enthusiastically. 'Yessir.'

The President messed up his hair, winked and joined Johnno, grabbing a slice of pizza. 'Good pizza. Never get this in the White House.'

'Have you discussed my request with your cabinet yet?' Johnno asked.

'Yeah, but we ain't interested in helping out you Limeys that much.'

Johnno stood straight, seemingly offended. 'Why not?'

'We got our hands full in Iraq, so ask somebody else.' The President took a mouthful of pizza.

'That's *our* pizza,' Johnno curtly pointed out, snatching it back.

'Hey, ya all in my capital, asshole!' He snatched it back.

Thomas took a breath. And held it.

Johnno took a large piece from the box, landing it on the President's chest, his nice white shirt and tie, as the Secret Service jumped in. Two grabbed Johnno whilst the second two pushed the President quickly out of the bedroom door. With Thomas watching, Johnno got dragged by the elbows and out of the door, Bambitou stopping Thomas from following.

'Best not to interfere,' Bambitou said as he closed the door. 'We need to get a good lawyer for Johnno. How do you contact your people.'

Wide-eyed, Thomas lifted his phone.

Otto stood in his kitchen, Marie worried by the look on his face as he stared at the phone in his hand.

‘Otto, what it is?’ she asked, now seriously concerned.

‘Johno threw a pizza ... over the American President. He... he needs a lawyer.’

Marie lifted a hand to her mouth. ‘My God!’

Minister Blaum dropped his phone, his wife firmly believing that he was having a heart attack.

K2 managers ran about, shouting into phones in the command centre, others stood staring at each other, dumbstruck.

Like wildfire, the gossip went around the K2 guards, who, for the most part, laughed hysterically. The great hall housed several ready squads, all of whom were now laughing, their K2 colleagues a little more sedate, the guard commanders worried.

Pepi stood and stared at his assistant, stubbing out his cigar. For a whole minute he was lost as to what to say or do. Finally he said, ‘Well ... I .... I guess this works to our favour.’

Mr. Stanton noticed one of his aids running towards the Lodge table, where he now sat with his head of security.

‘Sir,’ the aid gasped, a little out of breath. ‘We just picked up an intercept. Johno pushed a pizza into the President’s face!’

Stanton stared for a moment, finally glancing at his head of security before turning back to the aid. Without looking down he hit a button on his phone.

‘Yes, sir?’

‘Where’s Johno?’

‘At his hotel, sir.’

‘And the President?’

‘Dallas, sir.’

The aid stared at the phone, puzzled.

Stanton asked, still staring at the aid, ‘And what’s happening at Johno’s hotel?’

‘He had a visit from a group of stage actors, sir.’

The aid dropped his shoulders.

‘Thank you,’ Stanton said towards the phone, hitting a button. He took a moment. ‘Where ... exactly ... did that news go?’

The aid sighed. ‘Right across Europe, sir.’

Stanton rubbed his face before facing his head of security, a grin forming. ‘That should give those Euro-slackers something to talk about!’

Otto knocked on Beesely’s door twenty minutes later, a little out of breath and looking harassed. A nurse let Otto in, Beesely now sat in his wheelchair.

‘Ah, Otto, come in.’

Otto stepped in. ‘You have not heard the news?’

‘News?’ Beesely repeated.

Otto turned to the nurse. ‘Leave us, please.’ She stepped out. With the door closed Otto approached Beesely. ‘There has ... has been an incident with Johno and the American President.’

‘Incident?’ Beesely gasped.

Otto took a moment to compose himself. ‘He ... apparently pushed pizza into the face of the American President.’

‘Pizza? Well, at least it wasn’t a cream pie, eh?’

Otto blinked, frowning as Beesely started to laugh.

‘He ... he needs a lawyer. I have already spoken with the Embassy in Washington.’ Beesely laughed all the more. Otto was astonished. ‘It is no laughing matter!’ he gasped.

‘It wasn’t the President - it was an actor. He did it to wind-up Thomas.’

Otto raised two clenched fists and faced the window, a grizzled expression. ‘I will kill him!’

‘President is in Texas at some summit, read it today. And you, young man, should have more faith in Johno. You actually thought he’d do it?’



Otto lowered his arms, his teeth still clenched. 'I called the Embassy, our President. Max Blaum is making plans to fly there...'

Beesely roared with laughter. Otto kicked a wall before lifting his phone.

## 2

With a knock on the door Bambitou eased up, stepped across the large bedroom and opened the door, letting in Mosh and Elle for the second time.

He faced Johno, offering tired eyes. 'I know, I'll stretch my legs.' Grabbing his coat he closed the door behind himself.

Johno pulled out chairs for the guests, Thomas making tea from a room-service trolley.

'What would you like to drink?' Thomas asked the guests. 'Tea, coffee or mineral water?'

Mosh smiled. 'Tea, black, no sugar. Thank you.'

Elle said, 'Tea, English style.'

'Like Johno?' Thomas asked.

'No,' Elle quickly put in. 'Just half a tea-spoon of sugar, not six!'

Laughing, Thomas fixed the drinks as the guests settled themselves.

'So,' Johno began. 'What's the word?'

'Not such a difficult decision in principal,' Mosh began. 'But when our superiors factored in The Basel Group's links to Luchenkov and al-Qa'eda -'

'A vested interest,' Johno finished off. 'Like I said to Stanton, if they've gone this far ... what's next for them?'

'And that is the greatest concern,' Mosh said in reflection. 'Not to play down what they did in England. The difficulty is in the political fallout, either way.'

'Either way it shakes up Europe,' Johno stated. 'If the full truth got out Europe's screwed. If what I do gets out - a lot of

enquiries, scandal, corruption. Could set Europe back twenty years.'

'And if we do nothing, the final outcome may be even worse,' Elle added. 'Either way, it's a very bad situation. No one will be a winner here, everyone loses something.'

Thomas placed down the drinks, being a dutiful host, finally sitting next to Johnno.

'May I enquire, Johnno,' Mosh began, eyeing Thomas, 'if it is ... *wise* for your boy to know what goes on?'

'Thomas here has saved my life ... more than once. We're in this together, to the end.' Thomas proudly straightened, earning odd looks from the visitors. 'So, what's the word?' Johnno pressed.

'We're not allowed to help in a large way,' Mosh stated. 'We're allowed to help logistically, with intelligence, but ... I think you will find a large number of our people taking holidays in a few days, especially around the Mediterranean. Because we can't ... put this on the books, as you say, we'll need some money for their ... direct expenses.'

'You like Panama?' Johnno asked.

'Never been,' Mosh stated. 'Why?'

'You'll have an account over there in a day or so. Ten million dollars enough?'

'More than enough,' Mosh answered, an eyebrow lifted.

'Use it, let's do this properly,' Johnno encouraged. 'Sorted the hardware?'

'Ready when you are. Give us eight hours notice,' Elle suggested.

'Final problem,' Johnno let out with a sigh. He took out a piece of crumpled paper. Holding onto it he said, 'I need the people on the list ... *dispatched* in a particular ritualistic way.' The visitors both stiffened. 'That'll tie them all together, not just the timing.'

He flattened the paper and held it so that both Israelis could see it. They read the detail then glanced at each other, both mildly shocked.

Mosh said, 'Given that some of these ... persons, will be in hotels, such methods will prove ... *impractical*.'

'I figured that, so just the closest to it you can get without risking your people getting caught. So long as *part one* is always there, not a problem.'

Mosh glanced at Elle. 'Part one, as you say, will cause a lot of problems for ... *them*.'

'*Them* ... need to detach themselves from such things in future.'

'Quite a ... *loud* message, Johno,' Elle cautioned.

'But necessary,' Johno insisted. 'They should stick to their remit, not getting involved with this crap.'

Mosh stood. 'You have your reasons for this, we have ours. When can we have the list?'

'When I get hold of it,' Johno said with a pained expression as he stood.

'You don't have the list?' Elle asked.

'Not complete and up to date, no. Do you guys know some of the people on the list?'

'Some, yes. Perhaps fifty,' Mosh admitted. 'But not many on the top table.'

'Well, send me what you got ... send it to Kev in England, no contact through K2, just in case. And don't tell Kev what it is, label it up as ... good wine producers.'

They shook.

'Let's hope you survive this,' Elle offered Johno with a concerned look.

'It's all out war,' Johno coldly stated. 'Them or us – it always was, right from day one.'

\* \* \*

For the second time in as many days Johno landed at The Lodge, this time alone, Thomas at a basketball game with Agent Bambitou. Stanton welcomed him with a handshake and tired features. He poured out a wine for Johno, topping up his own glass.

Johno lifted the glass. ‘Your good health, Dr. Evil.’

Silently, Stanton lifted his glass.

‘Prost!’ Johno added before sipping the wine.

‘That Swiss?’ Stanton asked.

‘Don’t think so, I think they say it in Germany and Austria as well. So, how goes the evil empire?’

Stanton forced a weak, tired smile. ‘Same old problems. Just been thinking about wheat shortages caused by us switching heavily to ethanol production. Plus the Chinese need for raw materials has driven up a lot of metals three-fold.’

‘World’s coming to an end,’ Johno said, finishing with a sigh. ‘You buy into this Tipping Point crap?’

‘Very much so. But that’s next year’s problem, let’s solve today’s, eh?’ He eased his face forwards. ‘Not least, your relationship with our President.’

Johno grinned. ‘You heard, eh?’ Stanton shot back a disapproving look, Johno taking a breath. ‘Mossad is on board ... in a small way, and I got another thirty on the list ... *covered.*’

Stanton’s features turned sullen. He faced the table. ‘How many will you try and tackle yourselves?’

‘Start at the top and work down with everything K2 has to offer. Good thing is – and this is between us for now – old man Gunter had been planning this very fight for forty years! Clever old fucker knew it would happen some day, hence K2 and the excessive number of agents and guards. Being a Swiss fucker helped, always planning ahead. Swiss Government had a hand in letting old boy Gunter build up K2 as well.’

‘Ah...’ Stanton said without looking up. ‘Some pieces falling into place now.’

Johno added, shrugging, ‘We’ll get who we can off the list. If there’s a gap we’ll search for them, but anyone who does survive will leg it.’

Stanton’s expression suggested that that was something of an understatement. ‘With the top end gone, no one will be able to rebuild all the links that were in place. As with us, they take decades.’ He sipped his wine. ‘It takes a long time to know if you can trust someone, work with them, sure that they have no other agenda. We’re all about longevity – we don’t deal with people who have short term agendas.’

‘Hah! My agenda has a week to run, then I get myself killed.’

Stanton studied Johno for several seconds. ‘I’ve seen you put your life on the line for what you believe in many times, giving up the chance to sit on a beach. That’s why we voted you in –’

‘Not to rein me in?’ Johno toyed.

Stanton could not resist a smile. ‘You’re not as dumb as you look.’ They laughed.

‘So, what’s the word, Bossman?’

‘First, we have an obligation to help the British. Second, we have an obligation to secure NATO flanks. Third, we have an obligation to pursue terrorists, especially those attacking our allies. We even have an obligation to protect Beesely and hunt down those who’ve attacked him.’ He cut the end off a cigar.

‘You also have an obligation to your members...’

‘True enough. But, under the circumstances, I have to take a tough decision without them, which is rare. But like you said, Basel is well connected. If they see you coming it’s all over.’

‘So?’

Stanton sighed. ‘So, I’ll tackle fifty on that list, worry about the consequences later. The one good thing we have in our favour ... is the truth. If France or Germany get difficult we point towards Portsmouth.’

‘Which should shut them up *real* quick!’

Stanton tipped his eyebrows as he lit up. He blew out a pall of grey smoke. 'You've done your homework, quite a good tactical thinker. So how come Dame Helen didn't come along?'

'She's a spy.'

Stanton eased upright. 'What? She's been compromised?'

'Only by me,' Johno joked. 'Twice a night, front and back.'

Stanton was puzzled. 'Who's she spying for?'

'British establishment. Men in grey suits.'

'Who, in particular?' Stanton pressed. 'Not the outgoing Prime Minister.'

'Nope. I think you know them, gang of former heads of intelligence, Generals, all 'Sirs' with exclusive London clubs. British version of you, General Rose at the centre.'

'Ah ... him.'

'You monitor them?' Johno risked.

'Obviously not. If it's *who* I think, then they are a loose, fluid group, not really any fixed structures. Besides, how did *you* know about them?'

'That's for another day, Dr. Evil.'

Stanton laughed. 'Poor Dame Helen.'

Johno glared at him. 'Sorry?'

'Having to be nice to you!'

Johno fought the urge to smile, and failed. 'Listen, when the list comes, I'll be giving you Germany and the north. That way you can fly your boys in on Military jets, no customs, back out the same way.'

Stanton agreed. 'Poor old Dame Helen.'

Johno stood. 'I'm her bit of rough!'

\* \* \*

As Johno stepped back into his hotel room he found Thomas and Bambitou sat in silly hats made from foam, Thomas waving giant foam hand mitts. 'Who won?' he asked.

'It was a college game, local league,' Bambitou explained.

‘I got their autographs and team photograph,’ Thomas loudly and enthusiastically reported, waving the large mitts.

‘Good.’ Johno made eye contact with Bambitou. ‘Thanks for that.’

‘He’s a good kid. But he did tell me a bit about your current problems. And, over the burgers, told me all about the cave in the Czech Republic.’

‘Can’t believe everything you hear,’ Johno told Bambitou, Thomas now worried about breaking a confidence.

Johno sat and lifted a box of chicken nuggets. ‘Flying back tomorrow,’ he told Thomas. ‘Pack, get ready, then to bed.’

‘OK.’ Thomas went without argument.

Bambitou watched him go. ‘He’s a good kid.’

‘Yeah,’ Johno let out. ‘But don’t repeat anything he said. Be bad for you.’

‘Never did do what I was told, Limey,’ Bambitou came back with. ‘Anyway, these bad guys – some secret organisation over in Euro-Disney?’ Johno glanced at Bambitou from under his eyebrows as he ate, but said nothing. ‘They work like the mafia here, building contracts, right?’

Johno reluctantly nodded.

‘And I understand that your bank has more money than God, yeah?’

Again Johno nodded.

‘Well then, dumb fuck, you don’t need to shoot some of these fuckers, you buy shares in their dodgy business, take control, then fire their white Euro-arses! If you’re controlling the companies, you’re controlling the dodgy contracts!’

Johno lifted his head, staring at ‘G-Man’. ‘Fuck, you’ve given me an idea.’ He lowered his head, thinking.

After a moment Bambitou said, ‘You’re welcome.’

Johno wagged a finger. ‘Pieces of a puzzle.’ He loudly called, ‘Thomas!’

Lifting his phone he said, ‘Get the Gulfstream ready, heading straight back. Ta, love.’

‘Something I said?’ Bambitou dryly commented.

‘You may have just given me the opening move in this game.’

He lifted his phone again as Thomas stepped back in. ‘It’s me. Listen, I want a database set-up by time I get back – all companies in France, Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria – in fact, all European countries except the UK, if they are worth more than ... er ... no, forget that. Make the database of the top one thousand companies in Europe where the directors are European, not British and where there is a, you know, a big private ownership of some of the shares.

‘I want all directors cross-linked in the database, then the addresses of the directors. Tell Otto I’d like him working flat out on it. Ta, love.’

‘What is it?’ Thomas asked.

‘You told our good friend here some stuff –’

‘Not important stuff –’ Thomas started to protest.

Johno cut him off with, ‘It’s OK. Bambi gave me a great idea.’

‘Bambi?’ Thomas puzzled.

Smirking, Johno nodded towards Bambitou.

As Thomas faced the FBI agent, Bambitou said, ‘My mother used to call me that when I was a boy.’

‘Ah, Bambitou, so Bambi,’ Thomas surmised.

‘No,’ Bambitou unhappily corrected. ‘Because ... she thought I looked like Bambi.’

Johno and Thomas both roared with laughter. Johno said, ‘Thomas, pack quick, we’re leaving now.’ The boy ran back to his room. ‘And you, kind sir, if you have anything you ... *desire*, pick up the phone.’

‘World peace, end to hunger, bring back afros and disco?’ Bambitou listed as he eased up.

‘I’ll have a go at the first one this week, mate.’



Otto knocked and entered Beesely's room, discharging the nurse. Beesely was sat upright in bed reading reports.

'Johno has given me a task,' Otto stated, pulling close a chair.

'Oh yes?'

'He wants a database of the top one thousand companies in Europe, not British, plus directors shareholdings and their home addresses.'

Beesely puzzled it. 'What on earth for?'

'He did not say, but it must be to do with ... what he considers the current threat. He is heading back.'

Beesely gave a small shrug. 'Best sort it then, maybe use the bank, not our people here.'

'They already have this database, up to date and in great detail – as you can imagine.'

'Good, good. So, how go the caves?'

'Nothing so far, but we have now sealed the entrance-'

Beesely was immediately worried. 'Sealed it?'

Otto smiled. 'With an air chamber and concrete.'

'Ah, so pump out the water?'

'No, pump in air, push the water down and out, watch the lake in the morning to see if bubbles come up, then maybe to seal that end.'

'Giving us a dry cave to walk around in. Yes, clever.'

'Mister Grey's idea,' Otto informed him.

'When will it be ready?'

'Tomorrow.'

'Well, that should either attract more interest in us, or finally solve a puzzle. Strikes me that Gunter moved here for several reasons – good defence, plus the caves.'

'The question remains - what is in the caves?' Otto posed.

Beesely tipped his head and gave a resigned look.

## A bit early for visitors

### 1

It was dawn when Johno and Thomas touched down back at Zug's private airfield, Johno ordering their drivers dismissed, taking a Range Rover to Zurich with a second in tow, Mavo driving. At Otto's apartment block a guard opened the door and welcomed them.

'He asleep?'

'I believe so, sir,' the guard cautioned.

Johno, Thomas and now Mavo took the lift up four floors, stepping out to two guards, greetings exchanged.

Johno banged on the door. 'Wakey, wakey!'

A minute later it was unlocked, Otto stood in a robe, but looking wide-awake.

'Didn't wake you, did we?' Johno asked, pushing straight in.

'No, fortunately,' Otto informed them. 'Marie is not well, so we were up.'

'Get the kettle on then.' Johno sat on a sofa in the spacious lounge, taking in the apartment that he had never visited, Mavo stood by the door.

Otto reappeared a moment later. 'So, what brings you here?' he said as he sat. 'Something *interesting* ... in Washington? Not least, throwing pizza at the President?'

Johno laughed, Thomas kicking him. 'Chatted to the Lodge, induction, usual stuff. I think they only want me in to keep an eye on me.'

Otto studied him for several seconds. 'Yes, that makes some sense.'

'Got a computer here?'

'Yes, of course.'

'And a link to the bank?'

'Yes, of course,' Otto repeated.

‘And, no doubt, a photocopier.’

‘No, I use a scanner. Get with the technology, Johnno.’

Johnno smiled, producing several crumpled pages. ‘Copy these then, then tick them on that database and start cross matching. But only here, and only if your computer whatsit has the cable out, no link to the bank.’

Otto studied the pages. ‘These people –’

‘Are somehow connected between Henry from the Lodge, the Vatican and Luchenkov,’ Johnno explained. ‘That’s all you need to know for now.’

‘And the reason for this ... investigation?’

‘Find out who helped Luchenkov attack us,’ Johnno stated with cold features.

‘And then?’

‘We give them the chair.’

Otto stood and stepped into another room as Marie appeared, nightgown tightly wrapped.

Johnno stood. ‘How are you, babes?’

‘Not so good, a little fever, but nothing to worry about. How are you?’ As she waddled she held her lower back, easing down slowly into a comfortable sofa-chair.

‘Good. Just got back from America. Thomas saw a basketball game.’

She smiled towards the lad. ‘Oh, good.’

Otto returned a minute later, handing back the sheets. ‘What would you like to drink?’

‘Usual.’

‘Vodka Red Bull?’ Otto dryly asked.

Johnno smiled. ‘No, two teas, please.’

Otto came back in a few minutes later with two mugs of tea, milk and many sugars for Johnno, sitting in his previous position opposite him.

‘Tell me,’ Johnno began. ‘Can someone have shares in a company and not declare them?’

‘Yes, and in many ways,’ Otto responded. ‘We hide our ownership of many companies, going through several others. They are known as *proxy* companies or holdings.’

‘And how good is K2 at identifying the hidden owners?’

‘Very. It was something that Gunter set-up twenty years ago - special software to search and cross match, plus access to private files not available normally. A great deal of K2 time went into this.’

‘Good old Gunter,’ Johno enthused.

‘Sorry?’ Otto asked with concern in his voice.

‘Good that he had the foresight,’ Johno explained, sipping his tea. Otto stared back, a slight frown evident. Johno put down his tea. ‘The people on that list, can you track them without ... *anyone* knowing?’

Otto considered the request, easing back. ‘I can search the existing files without any outside contact, plus request fresh updates of general information without attracting suspicion.’

‘That may be enough. But how recent would the home address information be?’

‘We have extensive databases of everyone in Europe, police files –’

‘But would we be noticed, if you searched on certain names?’

Otto reluctantly nodded. ‘It is possible.’

‘Then do the most you can *before* we get to that stage, getting the final addresses a few hours before we strike. Take those names, find out who they know, who they work with, where they travel regular – all off old databases, it’s better than nothing. Besides, people don’t move that often.’

‘And when we have these lists ...?’

‘Then we sit down and decide what we’re going to do about them,’ Johno offered him.

Otto stared back for a moment before nodding his agreement.

‘I’ll need you to make some plans, so that we can hit those databases hard on a certain day, maximum effort without getting seen, then the rest – getting seen.’

‘And when -’

‘Tomorrow, or the next day at the latest. Which reminds me, can you chuck Mossad ten million dollars, Panama account, open another for a forty million and give it to me to give someone – *without* K2 managers knowing!’

Otto grabbed a pad and paper from a coffee table. ‘What has Mossad to do with this?’

‘They’ll help, when the time comes, people in far off places where they can assist.’ Otto made notes. ‘Then ... then I’d like you to move what assets we can to Panama.’

Otto faced Johno squarely, a concerned look. ‘Is there something you are not telling me?’

‘There’s lot’s I’m not telling you, save it being intercepted before we’re ready.’

‘And when ... *it*, is ready, we will all discuss your plans?’

‘Like I said before, Otto, *your* final say on everything.’

Otto regarded his half-brother carefully for many seconds before Johno stood.

‘Oh, nearly forgot, best piece of the puzzle. I need to use the Bank Society, need their help, but first ... need to know if any of their members are linked to the bad guys. So do me a favour, look at travel databases a year old, go back five, look for any Society members flying regular to Rome, Italy or Malta – then cross-match the dates. In fact, why not stay here today, this is kinda important.’

‘Very well,’ Otto agreed, a glance at Marie. ‘I will be interested, also, to see what names come up.’

\* \* \*

‘Hey, old fucker.’

‘Johno, back with us already. How was Washington? *And...* the President?’

Johno grinned. ‘Cold, should have gone to frigging Malta.’ He closed in on Beesely’s bed. ‘What’s up with you?’

‘Bleeding flu or something,’ Beesely grumbled. ‘Bit of a fever.’

‘It related to –’

‘No, just a bug. Old, you see. You’ll find out some day!’

Johno tipped his head forwards. ‘Wanna bet!’

Beesely stopped smiling. ‘How was Olly?’

‘Fine.’ Johno absently took in the room.

Beesely waited. ‘That it?’

‘Walls have ears.’

‘Hmmm. Well then, everything ... *on track?*’

‘Going well. Had a good idea or two, another good idea or two given to me. Oh, Otto doing the homework I gave him from his apartment today.’

‘Homework?’ Beesely puzzled.

‘Bit of research into some companies I think we should buy into.’

‘Really? Good ... *opportunities*, are they?’

‘Should think so.’ Johno smirked. ‘But you know the one good thing about having a majority share in a business?’

Beesely grinned. ‘You can set direction, and cancel projects.’

‘And ... fire people,’ Johno added with an enigmatic smile.

‘People ... whom you don’t like?’

‘People ... who have friends, we most definitely don’t like.’

Beesely nodded enthusiastically. ‘War with money!’

Johno stepped to the door and turned. ‘I learnt that trick from someone ... can’t remember who, some sneaky bastard.’

In thick rubber suits Mr. Grey and his dive buddy stepped down awkwardly through the steel air-lock hatch, their aluminium air-tanks passed down one at a time, four in total, plus two small yellow reserves: 'Ponies'. Positioned five metres above the cave's water-level, they closed the heavy metal hatch and spun the latch wheel.

Grey pressed the button on an improvised intercom. 'OK. Go ahead.'

A blast of compressed air hissed from a nozzle. Holding their noses, the two men intermittently cleared their ears.

A minute later, when the gushing eased, Grey hit the intercom button. 'OK, stop.'

He checked his pressure gauge. It registered the equivalent of ten metres water depth, but the pressure was falling very slowly as anticipated. Shining their torches down awkwardly between their legs and feet they could now see the water level dropping.

Grey hit the intercom. 'Water level falling. Anything on the lake?'

'No, nothing,' crackled back.

In the dungeon Thomas sniffed, long and hard. 'Pooh!'

Grey hit the intercom. 'OK, another ten bars.'

Another hiss of gushing air drowned out any chance of normal conversation, the men now seeing that the water was low enough to glimpse the top of the horizontal cave section below.

'Come on,' Grey encouraged. 'Let's get kitted.'

The two of them clambered awkwardly down the first set of steps, scuba tanks over a shoulder, masks around their necks. Without fins on their feet they placed their tanks on fully and turned their air on, tested the regulators with sharp, loud bursts of compressed air, before stepping down into the cold, murky water, up to their waist now.

‘Do we wait?’ the second man asked.

‘We already know the layout,’ Grey encouraged, checking the tops of the tunnel walls with his torch and banging with the end of a large knife. As they progressed they stepped cautiously over rocks on the cave floor, hidden under the murky water, a shower of drips raining down from the cave ceiling.

Grey illuminated the ceiling ahead. ‘It bends to the right a little. Didn’t notice that before.’

They progressed slowly, testing the floor with their booted feet and feeling their way. Fifty metres in and they could see the rock fall ahead.

‘What’s that?’ the second man said, pointing to the ceiling.

Grey illuminated a hole with his torch then tested the floor with his foot. ‘Remember that small pile of rocks?’

‘Yes. They came out this hole?’

‘Probably years after the divers bought it. I’d have noticed it.’

They inched closer.

‘That’s a passage!’ Grey suggested, his words now echoing. ‘Stand back.’

He eased back, hitting the rocks at the edge of the hole with his knife. They fell with a loud ‘plop’. Jabbing up he loosened more rocks, soon a hole big enough to climb into. ‘Goes up at least five metres, at an angle, then levels off. Top of that far ceiling looks dry.’

‘Ladders?’ the second man suggested.

Grey nodded, turning immediately. They trudged back, the going quicker now, just twelve inches of water. At the shaft base they loosened the ladder they had climbed down, easing it around the bend, just about forcing it through. Carrying the light aluminium ladder they made quick progress, the shower of drips now almost deafening and making all conversation a shout.

With the ladder forced up into the new passage they had a method of access to the tunnel’s offshoot. Grey dropped his



tanks, telling the second diver to keep his on for now – just in case, before clambering quickly up the steps.

At the first bend in the passage, little wider than he could manoeuvre in, the passage levelled off, growing in height. On elbows and knees, cradling his torch, he crawled forwards until he could stand up. A skeleton greeted him, hung in a rusted cage from a wall; executed, being left as a reminder to others.

‘How you doing,’ Grey whispered.

Scanning with his torch he noticed ancient brick walls either side of the narrow passageway, several bricks missing. A rat ran forwards, sniffing towards him before turning tail and scurrying away.

‘Suit yourself,’ he muttered towards the fleeing rodent.

A few steps further in he stopped and shone his torch through a hole left by a missing brick, revealing another passage – and another skeleton in a cage.

‘Harrison Ford ... eat your heart out!’

‘OK?’ echoed up the passage.

‘Yeah!’

‘Anything?’

‘No!’

Thomas walked out of the snug and glanced around the dungeon. ‘Hello?’

Brick by brick, Mr. Grey easily made a hole in the old wall, finally just kicking the lower bricks in. Kneeling as best he could in his dry-suit he peered in with his torch. The draped Nazi flag came as a surprise.

Grey shouted down the passage, ‘I’m going around the bend, be ten minutes.’

‘OK,’ wafted back up.

Grey headed on, smiling to himself. Bent double his suit let out a loud rasp of air as he put a leg through the enlarged hole and stood up. ‘Excuse me.’

He found numerous flags draped along the left wall, reminiscent of the throne room that Johno and Thomas had found. Against the right wall rested numerous old wooden boxes, all sodden and rotten, stretching away from another skeleton hung in a cage. Knowing Gunter’s fondness for booby-traps he stepped slowly on, scanning the floor and the ceiling.

The boxes contained little of interest, mostly damp old clothes, plus some rusted old machine pistols as with the throne room, leading him along to a strong metal door. The edges of the door revealed no wires or traps, but also offered no handles; no purchase from which to pull or push it. He tried a gentle push, but it was firmly shut – locked from the other side.

Retracing his steps he shone his torch at the walls, looking for another door, but found nothing. Ducking back through the hole he loosened more bricks and then straightened up. ‘What’s behind door number two?’ he muttered. ‘Hopefully, not the consolation prize.’

With a single brick missing he reached in and started to remove other bricks, easily pulling them from the wall. When a moderate sized hole presented itself he shone his torch through.

‘Well, that’s more like it.’

\* \* \*

Thomas walked out of the snug, sniffing and listening. ‘Hello?’ he asked again, now angered. He surveyed the room, checked the sauna area then returned to the snug.

A scratching sound came from somewhere, followed by an odd banging. He listened intently; it was coming from Johno’s room. Stepping in he turned the lights up fully and waited.

He could hear more metallic banging sounds; they were coming from under Johno’s bed. Jumping down he lifted the

blankets and listened. Yes, it was definitely coming from the floor under the bed. He dragged the bed clear with a loud scraping sound. And waited.

A section of floor gave way just as Johno stepped in. He drew level with the boy, a heavy frown at the moved bed. They stared at the hole in the floor as the dreadful smell hit.

Mr. Grey stuck his head through, barely recognisable due to the dirt on his face. ‘Hey.’

‘What’s wrong with the fucking lift!’ Johno shouted.

Grey smiled. ‘Lift me up.’

Thomas ran forwards and started dragging Grey up, a hand from Johno.

‘Don’t you ever make your bed?’ Grey asked.

‘No,’ Thomas and Johno said at the same time, still focused on the hole.

‘Where does that go?’ Johno asked, pointing at the hole and peering down into it.

‘Under here are three big rooms, small passage onto the flooded cave. They’re just like the throne room.’

‘Like the throne room?’ Johno puzzled. ‘You mean –’

‘Yeah, Gunter was there.’

‘Any treasure?’ Thomas excitedly asked.

‘Lots of it,’ Grey responded.

‘Any ... *naughty* items down there?’ Johno knowingly enquired.

Grey offered a reluctant nod.

Johno pointed at the hole. ‘Then get your arse back down the way you came, flood that cave and tell them you found fuck all. Quickly, we’ll cover this.’

‘What about the treasure?’ Grey complained.

‘It ain’t going no where,’ Johno growled. ‘Now fucking move it!’

Grumbling to himself, Grey reluctantly eased himself back into the hole, Johno and Thomas kicking the debris in with their feet, Grey’s shouts of complaint distorted and echoing. A

minute later the dartboard's wooden backstop covered the hole, some clothes on top, finally the bed.

'Get the extractors on,' Johno told Thomas. 'Then spray.'

'God, what *is* that smell?' Helen asked, appearing in the doorway.

'Drains backed up a bit,' Johno informed her, a kiss on the cheek as Thomas trotted out.

'I was beginning to think you'd abandoned me,' she toyed.

Johno gestured her out of the snug and to the sofa. 'Got to be cagey at the moment, still some junior managers wired into the Vatican.'

'Yes, we heard. Otto's men noticed quite a reception committee at Rome and Malta airports.'

Johno gave a big shrug. 'See. Might even be bugged here. Not leaving you out, just need to be careful.' They sat.

'Careful ... working on what?'

'I tracked back some of the kit used to attack us. Seems that Luchukov had some mafia help around Europe.'

Helen seemed concerned. 'We'll go after them?'

'Of course,' he insisted. 'They knew what they were doing. Probably knew who we are as well.'

'And you can't say what the plan is?'

'When the time comes you'll be right there in the thick of the teas and coffees, adding your brain power.'

'You didn't call from the States,' she softly mentioned.

'K2 phones can't be trusted.'

'Oh,' she let out. 'Thomas called on his mobile, see how I was. Several times.'

Johno laughed loudly. 'If I thought for a second that you missed me ... I'd be a *very* happy man.'

That did not please her. 'Meaning?'

'Oh ... nothing.'

'Meaning?' she pressed, a degree louder.

Johno shrugged. ‘Well, it’s just that ... I think you like what I did to help you, you and *your self-respect*, more than you like me ... as a person.’

She took a long moment to respond. ‘And that bothers you?’

‘Not in the least. *Whatever reason* ... you stay at my side, I am happy with, no matter what it is. Happy, and grateful.’

That caught her off-guard. ‘Oh.’

He stood. ‘Let’s get some grub, and out of this smell.’

### 3

Mr. Grey and his dive buddy opened the upper hatch without the need to decompress from their time in the pressurised air; it was well within guidelines. With the hole made into the dungeon floor the water had not returned, Grey right about the rainwater; wherever it had pumped to, it was staying there, no bubbles observed at the lake.

He had, however, opened up a hole in the cave-in, letting in some water, now four foot deep in the cave.

‘Anything?’ was asked as he emerged, Diaz stood close.

‘Yeah,’ Grey enthused. ‘Got the water out - just a few feet deep now. Second passage, dry at the top, goes back quite a way, caved in at the end.’ He straightened up with help, Diaz closing in.

‘Anything ... *interesting* in the new passage?’ Diaz pointedly enquired.

‘Not so far, but lots to explore now the water’s out.’ Grey turned, facing the second man. ‘That cave doesn’t look safe.’ The man nodded. ‘What do think, curved ceiling supports?’ Again the man nodded. ‘How many?’

‘At least fifty!’

Grey faced a senior guard. ‘Get a hundred curved bits of wood –’ He extended his arms. ‘- this diameter. Then wood for the supports, maybe some metal supports as well. No one goes

further till we secure that first section, could collapse at any time.'

'And how long,' Diaz began, 'will that take?'

'Couple of days, maybe,' Grey responded. He added, with stern features, 'I'm not burying anyone in there!'

'Of course,' Diaz agreed, turning and walking off.

\* \* \*

Blaum met Otto in a Zurich supermarket, their trolleys alongside each other's.

'Johno has given me a task,' Otto quietly stated, innocuously scanning the shelves.

'Oh?'

'Cross matching names, travel, share ownership.'

'And?'

'It will lead directly to the Basel Group.'

'As expected.'

'He is being very secretive, and yet insists that any final say on action will be my personal responsibility.'

Blaum glanced across before grabbing detergent. 'You brought them into K2, so that would be a normal courtesy.' He shrugged, making a face.

'It would seem so, but I am suspicious.'

'He is heading towards a showdown with Basel, which is fine,' Blaum insisted.

'We must tread very carefully. Any mistakes now and we lose everything,' Otto cautioned.

'From what you have said, Johno is giving no one any clues, not even you. So there is no chance of a leak from within K2.'

'That is the one good thing,' Otto stated.

## Making use of what you've got

### 1

Johno called to Claus from the command centre companionway then entered Helen's office, slumping in his old seat.

She faced him, looking up from her file. 'Need me ... Boss man?'

'No, not really,' he responded. 'Just your undying love and devotion.'

She cocked an eyebrow.

Claus entered. 'Sir?'

'Can I have ... a list of Italian, or European, construction companies, the top twenty in Europe, not the UK, and their majority share ownerships.'

'Moment.' Claus stepped out.

'Something?' Helen asked, taking off her glasses and easing back.

'Vatican is supposed to launder money for the Italian mafia, and *they* like their dodgy construction companies.'

She seemed concerned. 'You're going after the Vatican?' she delicately broached.

'Let's just say, taking some of their toys off them,' he enigmatically replied.

Claus returned five minutes later with several folders and fresh computer printouts. 'This is an area that we are experts in. In fact, we sell this information to our customers,' he proudly stated.

'Good,' Johno enthused.

Claus stood rigid. 'Is there some area I can help you with?'

Johno waved Claus to a chair, lifting the first printout, the top twenty companies. He picked number six, an Italian company. In the folder he found the share ownerships, otherwise hidden – but not to K2. As Claus had stated, and

Johno had recently become aware of, K2 specialised in searching for this kind of information.

He ran a finger down the list of shareowners. Many were companies linked back to private individuals or other investment companies. His finger stopped at the third largest slice of share ownership; a Saudi investment group. ‘Hmmm.’

Helen and Claus exchanged glances.

Next he noticed a large number of shares owned by a Russian oil company. ‘Oh. Hmmm.’

Helen and Claus suppressed smiles and quizzical looks.

Another investment company, linked to a well know American Jewish family. ‘Ahhh.’ He lifted his face to Claus. ‘I remember what Beesely did with the drug companies, how we got control. This company, Encosol. How many shares would we need to control it?’

Claus stood and closed in, looking at the page that Johno held up for him. ‘The largest block there ... is ... six percent. We would need seven percent at least, but there are several large blocks, so if they grouped together against us they could elect a new board, under their control.’

‘So how much would be needed ... to be sure?’ Johno asked.

‘Perhaps ... fifteen percent at least.’

Johno studied the share blocks with a finger under the amounts, mumbling as he added several. ‘OK, I think I can persuade twelve percent to give their voting rights to us. Which leaves –’

‘Just three percent,’ Claus finished off.

‘Call it ten percent to be sure. How much would that cost us?’

Claus scanned the share capitalisation and the current value. ‘Around ... one hundred million, sir. Pounds!’

‘OK, very quietly, and discreetly, start buying as much as we can. Put some rumours out, lower the stock like before, be a sneaky shit.’



Claus straightened. 'May I enquire as to the purpose, sir?'

'No,' Johno carefully mouthed.

'How long to –'

'Within two days,' Johno firmly stated. 'Go to it.'

Claus stepped out, Helen now staring.

'Are you going to share this with your ... Head of Intelligence?'

'If we control this company, we control the dodgy contracts ... and the money laundering. Vatican will have to be nice to us.'

'Just a guess here, Johno, but if the board of this company are mafia, or organised crime, then seeing us sitting on the board may ... agitate them somewhat.' Johno smiled widely. 'Ah,' she slowly let out. 'You want to agitate them. Shake the tree and see who falls out.'

'Shake the tree, and see who gets a broken neck!' He raised his phone. 'Elle Rosen, Mossad.'

They waited.

'Johno, how ... are you?' Elle cautiously offered.

'Good, mate. Listen, need a favour. Another one! There's an Italian construction company called Encosol. Your buddies in the States - one's we gave the pictures back to - their investment company has a big stake in it. I want their voting rights stuff ... for a month or so.'

'What for?'

'Some of the people on the board need to meet me.'

'A strange way of getting an introduction, Johno.'

'Trust me, get it, need it tomorrow.'

'Tomorrow!'

'Yep. Call me back.' He hung up.

Facing Helen he said, 'Be a love, hit the phone and organise the Saudi Ambassador for a quick visit.'

'Saudi?'

'Oh, and the Russian Ambassador.'

'Russian as well?'

Johno nodded as he stood. ‘Quick as you can, love. Ta.’ He stepped out, meeting Mr. Grey in the courtyard. Whispering he said, ‘Anything in the basement that would interest the Arab world?’

‘Could be,’ Grey said with a shrug.

Johno put his face close. ‘Pop down, find some. One hour.’

Grumbling to himself, Grey headed to the dungeon, Johno ordering Mavo to go with him.

\* \* \*

Otto answered his phone to Minister Blaum. ‘Saudi Ambassador? Russian? No, I have no idea, I am working from home today. The only other thing to happen today is this company Encosol, he was enquiring about share ownership. Ah ... I have an idea. He wants to take control of it. Why? Guess who’s on the board. Yes, should be interesting. Very interesting.’

2

The Russian Ambassador arrived first, landing in a helicopter with Max Blaum in tow.

Johno met them on the grass, directing them to the park in front of the castle. ‘I know it’s not great weather for a stroll, but I want to speak to you ... outdoors. That way, no bugs.’

‘You are being bugged?’ the Ambassador queried, scanning the dozens of armed guards, Blaum close by.

‘Long story. Listen, I believe I know where the Amber Panels are.’

The Ambassador was shocked, stopping dead. ‘Why bring this to my attention?’

‘They’re yours. You want them back?’

The Ambassador’s eye narrowed. ‘Of course, but at what ... price?’

‘No price. If I can get them, it won’t cost you anything.’

The Ambassador was puzzled, Blaum just as surprised.

‘I don’t understand,’ the Ambassador said. ‘You will... get them, then give them to us?’

‘They’re being held by an Italian mafia group. We’ll steal the panels, hand them to you.’

‘We can have no part of such an action!’

‘Don’t worry, no one will know,’ Johnno insisted. ‘We’re very good, we don’t get caught.’

The Ambassador shot Blaum an unhappy look. ‘You did not ask me here just to hand them over.’

‘True,’ Johnno admitted. ‘Here’s the deal. There are several large corporations in Europe we are interested in getting majority voting rights in. And around five percent of the shares are held by Russian investment companies.’

The Ambassador offered a confused look. ‘You want the voting rights. That is all?’

‘And just for a month or so at that - your companies won’t lose anything. And, you get the Panels, complete and in good condition.’

‘How do you know they are ... *complete and in good condition*?’ the Ambassador pressed.

‘I saw them ... at ... the mafia stronghold. They offered to sell them to us,’ Johnno lied, Blaum frowning strongly in the background, unseen by the Ambassador. ‘Well, is it a deal?’

‘I must discuss this –’

‘You have a day,’ Johnno forcefully stated. ‘If no deal, then when we ... *visit* this mafia group the panels will be smashed during our attack.’

The Ambassador did not look like he appreciated the threat. ‘I will call tomorrow.’ He turned and headed back to the helicopter.

Blaum remained. ‘*You* have the panels,’ he whispered.

‘*He* don’t know that. And I need his help with those voting rights.’

Blaum reluctantly nodded before he turned and followed the Ambassador.

\* \* \*

Three black stretch-limousines laboured up the compound road to the curious gaze of guards and other onlookers. There was clearly not enough room for them to park and turn in the courtyard, and so they were halted outside, Mr. Freiserling organising his staff quickly.

In the dungeon snug Johno and Thomas stood waiting above the noxious hole, Bilbo and his team stood guard with Mavo near the dungeon stairs. A golden object appeared, followed by an arm and then Grey's head.

'That it?' Johno curtly asked.

'I need more time,' Grey reported. 'It's large, dark, *and* everything is boxed up and dirty.'

Johno grabbed the piece, a golden orb with a crescent moon at the top. The writing down one side certainly looked Arabic, not Hebrew. He turned his head towards the door. 'Mavo, Bilbo!'

The man came running.

'Ditch your weapons, get some torches and get the fuck down there and help Grey. He'll explain on the way-' He wagged a finger. '- and not a fucking word of this to anyone who ain't ex-SAS!'

He stepped out, throwing a towel over the artefact as the Saudi delegation made its way to the restaurant. Knocking on Casper's door he was relieved to find the Israeli in his room and not the restaurant. Pushing his way quickly in he closed the door. 'You alone?'

'Yes, of course.'

Johno unwrapped the item, a sharp intake of breath from Casper. 'I need a quick assessment of this. Is it real?'

Casper reverently cradled the piece, reading the inscription. He smiled and nodded. ‘This very same passage is detailed in at least two places in Jerusalem, carved onto stone. And not many people know where they are.’

‘Could it be a fake?’ Johnno pressed.

‘I do not think so. It is definitely gold, the right colour and surface texture, the right height, age.’

‘Fine.’ Johnno grabbed it, stepped into the bathroom and irreverently ran it under the hot water tap, cleaning it with the towel.

‘I hear we have visitors?’ Casper pointedly enquired, hands now clasped behind him as Johnno emerged from the bathroom.

‘Saudis,’ Johnno explained as he dried the artefact. ‘I need their help ... this’ll tempt them.’ He headed towards the door, Casper sidestepping and blocking his path.

Johnno stopped and stared.

‘I believe, Johnno, that my ... colleagues, will be rendering great assistant to you shortly.’

‘What’s on your mind?’

‘The treasure, of course.’

Johnno stepped closer, to a threatening distance. ‘Well, let me tell you what’s on my mind,’ he said in a strong whisper, Casper taking a half-step backwards. ‘Body bags. Lots and lots ... of body bags. Dozens, hundreds, thousands, maybe more. Fifty dead here, a thousand dead in Portsmouth. Not to mention those who are about to die... if my next little project goes tits up.’

Casper frowned his lack of understanding.

Johnno held up the golden artefact. ‘How many lives is this worth? A hundred? Ten? *One*?’ He waited. ‘How many lives would you sacrifice to get hold of this, or something like it, Hebrew writing down the side? Ten, twenty...? Well I’ll tell you how many I am prepared to sacrifice. None!’ He stepped around Casper.

‘Johno,’ Casper quietly called without making eye contact, his head lowered. ‘You cannot present that to the Saudis.’

‘Why?’ Johno demanded through teeth clenched.

Casper turned. ‘For one, that is an important religious icon. Handing it over wrapped in a ... ‘Simpsons’ towel may be seen as a cultural insult.’

Johno glanced at the towel he was holding, a quick, embarrassed glance at Casper from under his eyebrows before dropping the towel onto the floor.

In the restaurant the Saudis were mostly stood, their Ambassador sat in traditional robes, several of his staff also robed, the remainder in western suits. Fortunately, there was no sign of Cardinal Diaz. Johno stepped in, the reaction from Claus indicating to the visitors that Johno was the boss.

Johno simply walked over, placed down the artefact – resting it on its base – then stepped to the counter and ordered a tea, waiting for it. The Saudis closed in on the artefact, the Ambassador reading the inscription. Johno finally turned, Simpson’s mug in hand and sat opposite the Ambassador. He said nothing, simply sipped his tea.

The Ambassador gestured the artefact towards Johno. ‘This, is genuine?’ he asked in a perfect, and eloquent, English accent.

‘We think so. Take it home with you, find out.’

‘An ... interesting gift, from an Englishman, in a Swiss castle that belongs to a Swiss bank with ... quite a reputation.’

Claus leant closer. ‘Excellency, may I present Herr Johno, owner of the bank.’

The Ambassador took a moment to study Johno. ‘I have heard ... many rumours, about many things –’

‘If you have any questions, fire away,’ Johno cut in with.

Again, the Ambassador took a moment to study Johno. ‘This ... gift –’

‘Is the price for a private, five minute conversation,’ Johno curtly stated.

The Ambassador smiled. ‘I had not realised my ... hourly charge rate was quite so high.’ He waved away his staff, Claus following them out. That just left Johno facing the Ambassador.

‘There is ... rumour,’ the Ambassador began, ‘of Templar treasure.’

‘Here’s the deal. You get any artefacts that are Arabic from the treasure. In return, this bank gets your block voting rights in a number of European companies we’re trying to take over.’

The Ambassador eased back. ‘Your bank has always been an excellent investment, so I am sure that the investment bankers of my country would not object to such a move. After all, they will not be losing anything.’

‘You’ll need to move quickly on this, getting some voting rights for me tomorrow.’

‘Please detail them and send them to me immediately. But may I ask, what you will do ... should you find ... certain disputed artefacts?’

‘Make sure they never see the light of day,’ Johno came quickly back with before sipping his tea.

The Ambassador was mildly surprised, straightening, but then smiling. ‘We would, of course, offer a great deal for them.’

‘And could that money be used to bring back the men I’ve lost in recent weeks?’ Johno posed.

The Ambassador stopped smiling. ‘There would seem to be more going on here that I am aware of. Perhaps ... some day ... you will explain it to me.’ He stood. ‘If you get the voting rights, when ...’

‘Within a few days.’

‘That quick? Either you already have the treasure, or you know *exactly* where it is.’

Johno stood. ‘Detail, Mister Ambassador. Detail.’

The Ambassador walked around the table. Whispering, he said, ‘I liked the joke you played on the Swiss, about the American President. Very stiff, these Swiss.’ He grinned. ‘I went to Eton and Cambridge, myself. Love Monty Python!’

As he stepped out Johno stood staring after him, eyebrows raised.

\* \* \*

In the courtyard Claus called Otto. 'They have found the Templar treasure,' he whispered. 'But said nothing to us. Johno has given a piece to the Saudis.'

'Why?' Otto queried.

'I don't know, he spoke to their Ambassador alone.'

'It could be to secure more voting rights. Keep me informed.'

### 3

Mavo eased down into the dark, guided by Mr. Grey - unseen below. Thomas handed him two powerful torches, Bilbo easing down and putting his legs into the hole, Thomas strongly warned not to follow.

Shining the torch around the first large enclosure, Mavo got his bearings. 'This some kinda treasure room? Like the other one?'

'Not ... quite like the other one,' Grey informed him, a slight grin evident.

'What?' Mavo asked when he noticed Grey's expression, his torch now illuminating Grey's stomach.

Bilbo dropped down and stumbled, rolling over and righting himself. 'Jesus!' he let out, a skeleton in a cage the first thing his torch lit. 'What the fuck is this place? Some sort of ancient torture chamber?'

'Nope,' Grey informed them. 'This is where the Nazis stuffed the Templar treasure.'

'Templar treasure?' Mavo repeated in a strong whisper.

Grey led them to a line of large trunks, thick wood with iron studs. Lifting a heavy lid he revealed a chest of gold coins.



‘Jesus...’ Bilbo let out. ‘How much is that lot worth?’

‘Given what it is, forgetting the base gold value ... couple a billion I reckon.’

‘Couple a fucking billion!’ Bilbo gasped. ‘Jesus!’

‘There’s got to be fifty trunks like this,’ Grey informed them, leading them to the next room. ‘And that doesn’t include the artefacts.’

They ducked under a low doorframe, the thick wooden door propped open. The stench increased, they could almost taste it, the air thick and stale, the dirt on the floor moist – soft underfoot as they walked. The next room held dozens of similarly sized trunks running down one side, Nazi memorabilia down the opposite side, keenly investigated; flags hanging off poles, glass cases similar to the throne room, weapons displayed on the wall – all very old and dirty.

‘The odd thing is,’ Grey began. ‘Nothing down here looks like it’s been disturbed since the war.’

‘What?’ Mavo questioned. ‘That old guy, Gunter, he didn’t know it was here?’

‘I’d bet he did, that’s the odd bit. So why just leave it here rotting away?’

‘Maybe he didn’t find it,’ Bilbo suggested.

Grey stopped and faced them. ‘It’s possible. There were the two dead divers, and the secret passage getting here looked like it collapsed after the divers died. So it’s possible. But anyone going around the dungeon with a pickaxe and some determination would have found that access point.’ He stopped dead, noticed by the two British. ‘On me, boys,’ he said in a mock English accent.

They retraced their steps, ducking again into the first room and to the light in the ceiling coming from the snug. Under the hole Grey examined the debris with his torch.

Grey said, ‘See that big lump of rock, it fell out of the roof, rolled that way, and the rest of this.’

‘So it was solid enough up there,’ Bilbo surmised. ‘Gunter missed it.’

Grey looked up. ‘There’s a door at the far end, solid, locked from the other side. I’ve been trying to figure where it comes out. I reckon it would be somewhere near the drawbridge, courtyard at least. Come on, let’s check the treasure for Johnno before he gets all grumpy.’

‘Do you have to do what he says?’ Bilbo asked. ‘Aren’t you American Army?’

‘Long story, but yeah, I have to do what he says.’

They proceeded back to the second room, past the flags and glass cases.

‘Hang on,’ Mavo called. They stopped. He illuminated the dusty glass cases with their torches. ‘If no one came here after the war, who the fuck would make a museum – from stuff that wasn’t old back then?’

‘Shit, yeah,’ Grey agreed, closing in on the cases. ‘Whoever made this display did so from nostalgia, from the war. That dates it later.’

‘So it must have been Gunter,’ Mavo suggested.

‘Before Gunter ... the castle was empty,’ Grey informed them. ‘Odd bit is, he didn’t visit this lot for decades, maybe forty years by the look of it.’

‘From what Johnno said,’ Mavo began, ‘Gunter didn’t visit the other stuff, for like ... twenty years.’

‘It’s odd,’ Grey agreed. ‘Why have it here, just tucked away?’

He turned and headed to the next room, ducking again under a low archway, the thick door wedged back. This new room housed many large boxes, oddly shaped and reminiscent to the explorers of stand-up wardrobes.

Grey faced Bilbo and Mavo. ‘OK, guys, if you open something in here and you hear a *ping* sound, close it.’

‘Booby traps?’ Bilbo asked, now concerned.

‘Haven’t seen any yet, but you never know.’

Spreading out, they began opening trunks, shining their torches at gold icons, golden boxes, coins, silver coins, carved wooden objects plated in silver and gold, now split by the decaying cedar wood it adorned. Thirty minutes later they had placed into the middle of the room five items that appeared Arabic in origins.

‘That should do it,’ Grey suggested. ‘Rest will take ages to check, need some decent lights in here. Leave that lot there, we know where it is. Let’s try and find the main access point.’

He led them to the next room, past more trunks, some more flags, the skeleton in a suspended cage and the original hole in the brick wall that he first eased through. Opposite the dismantled brick wall stood the heavy iron door.

‘That makes sense,’ Grey muttered, examining the door.

‘What does?’ Bilbo asked, closing in.

‘This door, hundred years old.’

‘Eighteenth century?’ Mavo asked.

‘Or earlier. But they didn’t have the treasure back then, these trunks and boxes are nineteen thirties. They came *in* ... later.’

‘Just a dungeon before, poor old Percy and his mate for company,’ Bilbo noted, scanning the area with his torch.

‘These hinge pins are rusted, and split,’ Grey pointed out, tapping them with a finger. ‘Old iron will shatter. He turned. ‘Got your pistols?’

They had, both taken out. They backed up till they were ten feet away, almost flat against the wall. Bilbo fired first, and at an angle, so that any ricochet would bounce into the room. Three carefully aimed shots and the top hinge shattered, sharp echoes short lived as they bounced around the walls of the confined space. Two shots and the middle hinge shattered. Kneeling now, the bottom hinge went after four shots. Bilbo stood, the two troopers closing in. Grey grabbed an old rifle, smashing down on the remaining stubborn fragments of rusted iron hinge.

‘The door’s rusted in place,’ Grey suggested. ‘Need some purchase.’ He turned his head, Bilbo stood over his right shoulder. ‘Grab a sword, there’s a good chap.’

Bilbo returned with an old and rusted curved sword, Grey directing him to scrape down the narrow slither of a gap where the door joined the wall, rust starting to fall. Bilbo ran the sword awkwardly along the top and bottom of the door, working up a sweat. Finally he stood, taking a deep breath of stale air.

Grey examined the hinged side of the door carefully. Taking the sword from Bilbo he jammed it into the groove behind a jagged piece of remaining hinge, applying pressure by lifting the sword, plenty of leverage applied. The top right corner of the door moved a half-inch, an encouraging start. He repeated the exercise with the middle hinge, a few more millimetres gained, finally reversing the sword and now angling it down as he tried the bottom hinge, coaxing the door out a few more millimetres.

Relieving ‘Percy’ of his cage they broke off the chain and hook, working the hook into the top right corner and getting some purchase. With all three of them gently increasing the pressure the door creaked and resisted for a minute before opening a few inches. Penetrating the gloom with their torches inside did not reveal anything, certainly no visible wires. With three sets of hands on the door, boots against the wall, they strained to force it open.

With a loud crack something snapped, the door flung open, the three of them ending up in a pile on the floor, scrambling to get up and laughing. The door now hung at an angle, plenty of space to climb through, the explorers keenly scrambling inside. In the new room they expectantly shone their torches around, finding simply a long bare corridor, the walls looking very old and unevenly chiselled.

Grey told Mavo to wait back inside the last chamber, ‘just in case’, and he and Bilbo cautiously walked forwards, checking

the floor and ceiling for booby-traps. Ten yards in and they found a brick wall, oddly placed and obviously made to cover a door. Grey pulled a brick out, revealing another rusted iron door. ‘This is odd,’ he muttered.

‘What?’ Bilbo asked.

Grey turned. ‘That door was bolted from this side. So was this one by the look of it.’

‘So?’

‘So who the fuck bricked this up? They would have been stuck inside.’

‘They bricked it up and then they closed the next door.’

‘Why? Anyone opening the metal door would see the bricks and kick them in. This place is starting to remind me of the complex in the Czech Republic.’

‘Don’t say that,’ Bilbo encouraged. ‘I have nightmares about that place ... and I wasn’t even there!’

Grey grinned. ‘Double back.’ They turned. ‘Mavo,’ he called. ‘Can I have that sword?’

Ten minutes of jabbing at the walls and another brick wall was revealed from behind a layer of dirt. Knocking it down they found one group of bricks attached to a metal grill, perhaps ten bricks in total.

‘They made this wall, then last man climbed through and they pulled the plug in,’ Grey explained. ‘Clever puppies.’

The new passage led up a wide stone staircase, finally to another brick wall. Putting an ear to it Grey was certain he could hear cars in the courtyard, so doubled back down.

‘Why not break through?’ Bilbo asked after Grey explained the exit.

‘Johno doesn’t want anyone to know yet,’ was Grey’s answer, so they tackled the metal door.

The bricks came away easily, soon revealing a door the same size and dimensions as the last – only this one had a large handle.

‘That staircase is the access point,’ Grey insisted. ‘We’re under the courtyard.’

‘So what’s in here?’ Mavo asked.

‘Well, back there is the Templar treasure, upstairs was half the crown jewels of Europe and the Nazi treasures, so in here ... something more valuable.’

Mavo and Bilbo glanced at each other.

‘Stand back,’ Grey encouraged, turning the handle with a squeak.

‘WHAT ARE YOU DOING?’ a voice raged.

## “Buried next to the treasure...”

### 1

Grey, Mavo and Bilbo spun around. Shinning their torches they illuminated Johno, grinning, Thomas at his side.

‘Fuck!’ Bilbo let out, sighs from Mavo.

Johno and Thomas turned on bright lamps, throwing strong light around the room, the black walls reflecting very little of the new light.

‘We found some Arabic stuff,’ Grey reported, taking a step forwards. ‘Stop you from whinging.’

Johno stepped forwards. ‘Yeah, saw it. Leave it there for now.’ He hit the metal door with the side of his fist. ‘So, what do you reckon’s behind this door then?’

‘Something valuable,’ Bilbo stated. ‘And I want a fucking pay rise.’

‘If we survive the next week, you’ll get one. Beside, what’s in there *is* very valuable.’

‘How do you know?’ Grey queried.

‘Let’s just say a little birdie told me.’ He pushed the door lever down and pushed it open, holding out his lamp and stepping in.

What they found were a dozen filing cabinets and four desks in a surprisingly neat and clean room, the walls perfectly smooth concrete.

‘It’s just filing stuff,’ Mavo grumbled.

Johno yanked opened a rusted cabinet and took out the first file, a thick buff folder. Opening it on the table he called Thomas closer. ‘This may be in old German. See what it says.’

Thomas read aloud, in English, then translated the faded details.

‘As I thought, very valuable,’ Johno stated after a deep sigh.

‘What is it?’ Grey asked. ‘Company information ... dating to the forties and fifties?’

‘Yep. What this is *all* about. K2, Gunter, the fucks trying to kill us ... and the next battle.’

He took in their expectant faces. ‘When I was in Malta a priest approached me, Catholic priest, who took his father’s absolution at his death. And this, boys and men, is what his father did. He made this hiding hole and stuffed this lot in here – and the Templar treasure - after he decided he was on the wrong team.

‘The priest’s father was a Nazi, something of a shock for the cleric, to say the least. What his old man did was to act as a kind of bookkeeper for a dodgy European freemason group containing a shit load of Nazis who didn’t let on about their past - or the deep dark vaults with the crown jewels of Europe in. And all these cabinets are full of companies who got started in life with Freemason funds.’

‘You mean Nazi funds,’ Grey suggested.

‘Yep. And there’s enough evidence here to launch legal challenges to the ownership of half the companies in Europe. Not to mention the corruption and collusion and the money laundering.’

He opened another cabinet. ‘This is what the power brokers fear, what they really fear. Documented evidence of the start capital, Freemason dealings, and half the fuckers involved in this are still alive, their sons and daughters running the family business. Take all these companies, and what they’re worth today ... and you’ve got a figure in the trillions.’

Grey inched closer. ‘Johno, this could wreck the economy of Europe.’

‘I know.’ Searching through the cabinets he quickly found what he was looking for, a group of pages that he folded and pocketed. ‘Thomas, keep that file. Guys, destroy the rest of this lot.’

‘Destroy it?’ Grey gasped.



‘Hey, *you’re* the one who just pointed out the cost of this getting out. All I need is just the one file to put the shits up them, so destroy the rest.’

‘Christ, Johnno,’ Grey began. ‘Don’t you think you should discuss this ... further up the chain of command?’

Johnno stood square to Grey. ‘For what, later blackmail? If those files get into the wrong hands somewhere along the line Europe goes bankrupt – as you pointed out. So I can’t take the risk. Besides, that one file is enough, plus the threat.’

He retrieved another file, clicked his lighter and set fire to a corner, placing it on the table with Grey watching. ‘Mavo, Bilbo, burn them – that’s an order.’

‘Don’t,’ Grey firmly suggested.

Johnno slowly turned to face him, a quick glance at Mavo before offering Mr. Grey a hard stare. ‘You countermanding my order, Mr. Grey?’ he asked, softly, but with a level of threat in his voice. Mavo put a hand on his pistol.

Grey took a half step closer, offering Johnno a steely stare. ‘Someone here has to be sensible. Sir. We’re underground, dumb fuck - nowhere for the smoke to go!’ He cracked a smile.

Johnno lifted his eyes and scanned the roof, followed by the troopers.

‘Unless you want the dungeon full of smoke?’ Grey teasingly enquired.

Johnno sighed, grabbed a file and started to tear the pages, easily ripping the old files and their damp paper in half. ‘Thomas, put that file under your bed, go and ask for a meeting in thirty minutes – Otto, Max Blaum, Beesely, Helen and Claus. Scoot.’

Thomas ambled off as Mavo and Bilbo tore up files.

‘Chuck ‘em in the corner after, pee on them,’ Grey suggested. ‘It’s old paper, the ink will go quickly.’

With the files torn up, scrapped into the floor with their muddy boots and then peed on, they stopped and surveyed the mess. Grabbing mud from the passage leading to the flooded

cave, and stamping it into the files, came next. Finally they retrieved water in priceless golden urns.

## 2

Johno showered, put on fresh clothes, downed a Vodka Red Bull, and now sat staring at the wall. His phone buzzed. ‘Yeah?’

‘Sir, the people requested are all here.’

‘Thank you.’ He remained facing the wall.

Grey stepped in, also in fresh clothes. ‘It’s time ... for whatever you’ve got planned.’

‘Truth or dare, Grey-boy, truth ... or dare.’ He eased up, picking up the damp old file.

In the courtyard he signalled the ex-SAS squads – all of them - leading them all into the command centre, lining them up on the companionway to the curious observation of the staff.

In Helen’s office the requested people were sat assembled, tea and coffees already delivered. He placed the old file into the centre of the desk, retrieving the list from his pocket and placing it next to the file. Saying nothing he went and slumped into his usual chair, Grey sitting behind on the cabinet.

And then Johno just waited.

‘Well?’ Beesely asked, manoeuvring his wheelchair to face him.

Johno put a finger to his lips without looking up.

Helen lifted the list and glanced at it, working hard at controlling her reaction. ‘What ... what are these?’ she asked.

Johno checked his fingernails. ‘Ask Otto and Blaum,’ he softly encouraged.

Otto eased up and stepped to the desk, stood with his hands clasped behind his back, staring down at the file and the list. He glanced at Blaum, a concerned look, joined in their trepidation by Claus. Nothing was said for several seconds.

Beesely finally said, ‘Well? Who goes first?’

Otto sat back down, that odd move carefully observed by Beesely, who took in the various faces and their expressions as Thomas wandered in and sat next to Johnno.

Johnno blew out. Without looking up he said, ‘Helen, would you like to take that list and go back to the UK?’ As he finished the sentence he lifted his eyes, observing her from under his eyebrows.

She held her gaze on the list. ‘How long have you known?’

Now everyone focused on her, and that strange statement.

‘That you were sent here to spy on us?’ Johnno teased.

‘Spy on us?’ Otto repeated, Blaum shifting uneasily in his seat.

‘Didn’t you know, Otto?’ Johnno pointedly enquired. ‘Well, guess you’re not as smart, or as sneaky, as you would have liked to be. But we already know that.’ Otto faced him; a firm, yet surprised, stare. ‘Oh, by the way,’ Johnno put in. ‘The Templar’s treasure is below us.’

‘It is?’ Beesely asked.

‘Yep,’ Johnno sighed. ‘And in the next chamber is where I found that old file and that list. That’s what the old rumour said – *the secrets of Europe are buried next to the Templar’s treasure*, or something like that. Of course, if it wasn’t explained to you, you might not understand the riddle. Someone explained it to me, which is just as well, because I’m a bit thick.’

‘I think, Johnno, you are far more capable than you let people believe,’ Otto quietly stated, facing the carpet.

‘I’m proud of him,’ Beesely said. ‘Still, I had hoped he would have figured this all out sooner.’

Johnno slowly realised what Beesely had just said, and the implications, before slowly cranking his head around to him.

Beesely added, ‘The day Otto turned up the UK you had a secret meeting with Army Intelligence, General Sir Christopher Rose. That hotel room had more bugs than the mucky carpet!’

‘You knew?’ Johnno gasped.

‘Be a cold day in hell when you could put one over on me, layabout!’

‘Put one over on you? I told them to sod off!’

‘I know, I listened to the tapes. Still, you could have told me later.’

‘Likewise, wrinkly!’ Johno snapped.

‘Would someone like to explain this,’ Grey encouraged.

Beesely faced him. ‘Johno’s old bosses in British Army Intelligence, they asked him to keep an eye out for those files and that list, before Otto contacted us in the UK.’

‘Ah...’

Otto and Blaum made eye contact.

Helen made eye contact with Johno. ‘You ... were working for General Rose?’

‘No, is the simple answer,’ Johno replied. ‘They gave me the background to this whole mess, asked me to keep a eye out for those files ... as soon as they saw K2 investigating Beesely and me.’

‘Have you been in contact with them?’ Helen asked Johno.

‘No. You?’

‘Yes.’

Otto again glanced at Blaum.

Johno faced Otto. ‘Got a spy in our midst. In fact –’ He counted with a finger. ‘- I’d say we have seven and a half spies in this room.’

‘Oh dear, oh dear,’ Beesely lightly let out. ‘Intrigue!’

Johno checked his nails. ‘So, Otto, you’re being very quiet. Helen working for British Intelligence, I’d have thought you’d be jumping up and down right about now.’

‘In some countries, Johno, it is rude to ask a question when you already know the answer,’ Otto stated.

‘Then I shall ask a question that I am ... not sure about. Does Max know ... all of what you did?’

Otto glanced at Blaum. ‘No.’

‘Fine. Then we’ll keep it that way,’ Johno suggested. ‘After all, Max is in no position to criticise anyone. Are you, Max?’

Max stared back for several seconds. ‘What ... are you planning on doing with those files.’

Johno looked over his shoulder at Grey, a slight grin.

Grey asked, ‘Would those be the files we just destroyed?’

Blaum jumped up. ‘You destroyed them?’

‘That is, more or less, what you wanted, Max,’ Johno suggested. ‘Or should I say, what you – and the Swiss Government – wanted, was control of the files.’

‘We needed those files –’ Blaum began.

‘No, not any more you don’t. You don’t need bits of paper when you have us. We’re far more dangerous to the Basel Group – than bits of paper.’

Blaum slumped, issuing a heavy sigh. ‘We could have counter-balanced their threats...’

‘Problem with threats, Max, is that you sometimes need to carry them out. Which would have been a big no-no, seeing as most of the crimes at the core of the Basel Group were committed ... well, let’s see ... in Basel. Which, according to my geography, is in Switzerland – strangely enough.’

Beesely laughed to himself. ‘Otto, why don’t you tell everyone what happened after Gunter’s *untimely* death.’

Otto glanced at Blaum before facing Johno. ‘Even before Gunter’s ... death, I had tracked down Beesely, without confirming any of the detail of Beesely’s past associations. I had hoped, given that I was not Gunter’s son and heir, that Beesely may have taken over, keeping me here.

‘But a day after Gunter’s death Max came to see me, to explain why K2 existed at all. You see, I did not know much of the detail, Gunter was a private man - anyone asking questions would have been dealt with, even me.’

He took a moment. ‘Gunter was a founding member of the Basel Group, making use of Nazi gold and treasures to influence the existing Freemasons of Europe, and to start

companies. By 1956 it was already a formidable organisation, the Nazi gold known about by American OSS and British SOE, and investigated, but they were more interested in the Russian threat by that time and so ... *turned a blind eye*, as you say, to the group's Nazi past. The Group offered to help the West, with agents in the former East Germany and the Czech Republic.

'The group grew in strength, but a dispute emerged about the Templar treasure and – oddly enough – about the religious treasures they held, especially by the Italians and the Vatican. A senior official was murdered, a lot of the treasure hidden from the group –'

'Hidden here,' Grey noted.

Otto glanced at Grey, then continued, 'Hidden by the group's bookkeeper, who disappeared as well. Many thought that Gunter had stolen the treasure, so he fell-out with them. But Gunter found only part of it, the part he really wanted being the files – to use as blackmail against the rest if need be.

'That need did arise, and they tried several times to kill him. In 1965 he moved here, believing the treasure to be hidden here. He built K2 to protect himself, and this place, as he searched for the Templar treasure and, more importantly, the files.'

'And that's something that has struck me many times,' Johno began. 'They always attacked here, yet we have nice big, vulnerable – glass-fronted – office blocks in Zurich and elsewhere.'

'There is no treasure hidden in Zurich,' Otto softly pointed out.

'When we first came here,' Johno began, 'Beesely noted the security. An odd arrangement, so much security for one old man, and right under the nose of the Swiss Government – something else that I gave a great deal of thought to over the months. Why good old Max Blaum let us run-amok around here. I think I know the reason, and that would be because you

*helped* to build K2 – as a counterbalance against the Basel Group. Did they threaten the Swiss Government?’

Max reluctantly nodded. ‘They claimed to have the ... those files -’

‘Which would be a problem for you,’ Johno suggested. ‘If a journalist got hold of them ... all those deep dark Swiss secrets out in the light of day, Swiss bank’s Nazi gold being used to kick-start the European economy after the war.’

Max again nodded. ‘And they have made other threats and problems for us.’

‘And you wanted rid of them,’ Johno suggested. ‘Or at least you wanted an organisation like K2 which could push back – but you couldn’t do so because of your own bleeding constitution.’

Again Max nodded, easing back in his chair.

Otto added, ‘When Max explained everything, how K2 was formed, the Government assistance, the war with the Basel Group ... I was sick. I did not stop shaking for many days, expecting to be killed at any time.’

‘But having someone like Beesely, with his contacts, sat at the head of K2 ... gave you hope,’ Johno suggested.

Otto glanced at Beesely, a gentle nod. ‘Did you suspect?’

‘Of course,’ Beesely responded.

Johno made eye contact with Otto. ‘That stuff you told us at the old house, on the first day...?’

‘Mostly true,’ Otto insisted. ‘Much of which Max does not know.’ He ended the sentence by glancing at Minister Blaum.

‘Nor, I think, do I need to know,’ Max softly stated. ‘We are all just a step away from jail, or a bullet. And the Basel Group may be here sooner, rather than later.’

‘The list is there, Max,’ Johno stated. ‘If you want it, it’s yours, and the treasure, and the money. All you have to do is ask me to leave and I’ll be on the next train with Thomas.’

Otto stared at Beesely, who remained silent. Max stared at Johno. No one said anything for several seconds.

Claus turned to Otto. ‘I believe, Otto, that our chances of staying alive ... would be far better with Johnno here, than elsewhere.’

‘That’s the most sensible thing I’ve heard for a while,’ Beesely loudly growled.

Otto held his gaze on Beesely. ‘If I had not been such a coward, if I had taken this fight on myself, Jane would still be alive, with you in the Caribbean.’

Beesely lowered his head for a moment. Lifting it again he said, ‘That may well be, but what of Europe and the UK? Turmoil, death and destruction. She was one person out of thousands that have died, and thousands more that may die if we lose this fight. It takes far more for *you* to face danger, than it does for likes of me and Johnno. And Otto, I am still proud of you.’ He offered an encouraging smile.

‘All this time you did not say anything,’ Otto softly stated.

‘Didn’t know who, in here, was reporting back to the Basel Group,’ Beesely explained. He faced Johnno. ‘Perhaps now is a good time to apologise to Helen.’

Johnno faced him. ‘Apologise? What the hell for, she’s been spying on me!’

‘Which you knew from the start, and you knew she was working for the same people as you, and yet you still subjected the poor woman to your bed!’

‘You knew?’ Helen asked Johnno.

‘Of course I knew. Woman of your quality - shacking up with me? Hah!’

‘What does that mean?’ Thomas asked, concerned. ‘Is Helen not happy with you?’

Johnno faced him, a saddened, apologetic expression. ‘We may be leaving today, Helen going someplace else.’

Thomas stood. ‘Why? Why can’t we stay together?’

‘Yes ... why?’ Beesely added.

Helen turned to face Otto. ‘Are you going to take me outside and shoot me?’ she asked, seemingly not too concerned.



‘No, they’re not,’ Johno firmly reassured her. ‘The command centre is stuffed full of my troops. If you want to leave, you can do so.’

‘I have no intention of harming you,’ Otto quickly informed her. ‘The idea is repulsive to me. I wish you to remain, if that is possible given your status with the British Government.’

‘*They* sent me to find the files,’ she reminded him.

‘Which could take ... bleeding ages,’ Beesely suggested.

‘Years,’ Grey added.

‘They may never be found,’ Max admitted.

‘Not since we destroyed the fucking things, they won’t,’ Grey quietly pointed out.

She turned to face Johno. ‘You’re the owner, and the boss. I work for you.’

Johno turned his head, making eye contact with Thomas, who’s face now brightened.

Thomas punched him on the shoulder. ‘Say something. Tell her to stay. Buy some nice flowers and things, or some treasure from the cave.’

Johno made eye contact with Helen. ‘If you’ll stay, I’ll increase your salary to ... a million a year.’ Thomas punched him again. ‘Maybe five million a year, two weeks off in the summer if you teach the little monster stuff.’

Beesely laughed.

‘I accept,’ came a quiet voice, Helen doodling with her pen.

### 3

Johno stared back, stunned. ‘You do?’

‘I do. Although not – you know – walking down the aisle *I do*, obviously.’

‘Obviously,’ Beesely repeated, Johno glancing at him.

‘Obviously,’ Grey repeated, Johno glancing the opposite way.

‘Will you lot fuck off,’ Johno suggested.

‘What does that mean?’ Thomas pleaded, stepping closer to Helen. ‘Are you staying?’

‘Yes, I’m staying,’ Helen replied, an arm around the boy.

‘Till the end of the week, when we are all either killed or jailed,’ Blaum put in.

‘Have faith,’ Beesely told him. ‘Johno has a plan.’

‘Johno,’ Blaum began, ‘had the *entire* Swiss Government and diplomatic service on panic alert. You’ll forgive my sceptical nature, but most of my colleagues have offered large sums for his murder.’

‘Part of the plan,’ Johno firmly suggested, wagging a finger. ‘Keep ‘em guessing! Which reminds me. Otto, grab a paper and pen.’ Without looking up Helen wiggled the pen she was holding. ‘Forget that. Helen, take a note, for Otto. Please. I need four large wooden boxes, genuinely dated to the thirteenth century, plus wooden timbers from a ship of that era.’

‘*Wooden* timbers?’ Helen repeated.

‘You know what I mean,’ Johno said in threatening tones.

‘And just where,’ Beesely asked, ‘is this treasure going to be found?’

‘Where else? Nova Scotia!’

‘Nova Scotia?’ Grey repeated.

Johno lifted his head to him. ‘Some plonkers think that the Templars sailed it there from Paris, winter of 1307.’

‘I read that recently,’ Helen put in.

‘What will that do?’ Blaum asked.

‘Send a lot of people that way, for one,’ Johno explained. ‘And, if it’s found on the same day that we get violent over here, might just grab the front page.’

‘Clever,’ Beesely put in. ‘Just like the British Government – release the bad news on a day when something big happens.’

‘Ah, I see,’ Otto let out, nodding.

‘Next part of the master plan. Otto, I need those names you’re working on, then I need that list on the desk programmed into your computer thingy –’

‘Computer thingy,’ Helen repeated. ‘How are you spelling ... *thingy*?’

Johno again wagged a warning finger at her. ‘Factor in their ages, look for the offspring – all male – because our buddies in the freemasons don’t accept women.’ Otto retrieved the list, starting to read it. ‘Do it at home for now, they’ll be some more info arriving from other sources as well. But first, Encosol.’ He faced Claus. ‘We started buying shares?’

‘Yes, but outside of the markets, direct to the financial institutions.’

‘If we’ve enough tomorrow, and the voting rights of the Saudis and the Russians, we make a take-over bid. Yeah?’

Claus cautiously nodded. ‘That will receive a lot of publicity.’

‘What did you offer the Saudis and the Russians?’ Helen asked.

‘Panels and Templar trinkets. Oh, while I think of it, tomorrow, no staff allowed to bring mobile phones to work and I want mobile phone jammers in place and scanners to look for radios. If - and that’s a big if – if we’re ready tomorrow night we go on lock-down till its done, no one leaving, so no chance of a leak. Someone out there is still working for the other side.

‘Max, day after lockdown we’ll need the Army surrounding this place, all our boys will be ... otherwise occupied.’

Blaum straightened in his chair. ‘May I enquire, Johno, just what you plan on doing?’

Johno eased back. ‘I’ve given it a lot of thought, as to how we may ... defeat or disable Basel. But first, what would *you* see as a good way of dealing with them, other than some stand-off?’

‘We have had the *stand-off*, as you say, for some forty years.’

‘Which hasn’t worked,’ Johno delicately suggested. ‘They’ve got stronger, *and* more aggressive.’ He waited.

Blaum looked at his shoes, a desperate sigh issued. 'I had considered that the existence of the files may be an option—'

'More stand-off nonsense,' Johno snapped.

Blaum lifted his head briefly then went back to his shoes.

'We need to deal with them once, and for all!' Johno insisted.

'Someone else will come around eventually,' Beesely scoffed.

Johno faced him. 'To quote Mr. Stanton, such relationships take decades of trust. So, a knockout blow will give us decades,' he suggested. 'Anyway, I'll leave the detail for later. Just ... in case.' He faced Otto. 'Any *Society* members on my travel list?'

'Three,' Otto replied. 'Regular, and suspicious. I have also checked the share ownerships of their banking groups and have already linked them back to Italy and directors of Encosol.'

'Then be so kind as to tell the society that we need an emergency meeting tonight at one of our hotels.'

Otto glanced at his watch. 'It may be possible.' He lifted his phone and stepped out, an indignant glance at the SAS troopers lined up.

Johno followed him out to the companionway. 'Ready squads, back to normal duties.'

Stepping back in, Blaum said to him, 'Not going to shoot us then?'

'Like I said earlier, this is your show – you invited us in,' Johno said as he navigated around the desk and sat.

'And our responsibility if it goes wrong,' Blaum unhappily added.

'We're all in this together,' Beesely told him. He faced Johno. 'Olly on board?' Johno nodded. 'Elle?' Again Johno nodded. 'Should be a good fight then,' Beesely enthused.

## Like father like son

1

At 7pm Johno and Otto reached the hillside hotel. Stepping down from the vehicles, one of the Society's staff objected to the SAS troopers piling out of the Range Rovers. A gun in his neck silenced him, Johno waving the man inside.

In the foyer they collected two more surprised aids before entering the main function room, where the members now sat around a large table. The lights were, however, reasonably bright and refreshments already being appreciated. The aids being pushed in at gunpoint caused a chorus of indignant whispers, some members standing. The troopers lined up, MP5s pointed at the group as Johno took in the members faces, slowly walking along the table length to the elderly leader.

Johno offered, 'Apologies for the soldiers, but we ... *you* ... have a security problem.'

The group's spokesman stood, an indignant look. 'What is the meaning of this?'

Johno walked to the windows and glanced out, dusk coming on, Otto stood ready at his side. He turned and faced the leader. 'If you knew that certain members of this ... Society were linked to ... let's say, certain freemason groups – with close links to criminal gangs and terrorists - would you be interested to know who they were?'

The members glanced at each other, a few hurried whispers exchanged.

The elderly leader lifted a shaky hand and hooked finger. 'Do you say they are working for Basel?' Johno nodded. The leader faced the assembled group. In German he asked, 'Who works with Basel?'

Johno rolled his eyes, wondering just who was about to volunteer that information. Not surprisingly, no one raised their

hand. The table fell silent, members now either glancing at each other or at the soldiers.

The leader looked back to Johno. 'We wish to know this.'

'And if you know this, what would you like us, K2, *your servants*, to do about it?'

The leader waved his hand. 'To remove them.'

'To remove them ... permanently?'

'Yah!' the old man said with some anger.

Johno took out a small aerosol spray that he had brought with him, walking to the first man that he recognised from Otto's photographs. As the man looked up he sprayed directly into the man's mouth. The man coughed and choked, seemed to recover, then finally slumped. Otto signalled troopers forwards, two carrying the man out as shocked whispers shot around the room.

Johno walked slowly around the group, smiling sadistically and nodding at faces as they turned up. At the next member, a tall and thin man, he pulled his victims head back and sprayed directly down into his mouth. The man coughed, holding his throat, asleep a few seconds later. More concerned whispers leapt around the table and the assembled twenty-two members.

The final man made a brave run for the door, a punch from a trooper easily taking him down. Trussed with plastic ties, he was dragged out, nervously observed by the remaining members.

Johno approached the leader. 'Apologies, Herr Director and members.'

'Basel will know,' the leader cautioned.

'Basel will have to deal with me,' Johno loudly stated. 'Someone once said – *buried next to the Templar treasure are files of great value.*'

Gasps and whispers shot around the table, stunned looks from the members.

'You have the files?' the Society's spokesman asked.

‘We do, and they are safe, away from Zug and away from the Basel group,’ Otto stated. ‘If necessary, we will use them in our defence.’

‘And the treasure itself?’ the spokesman asked.

Otto placed a golden coin on the table. ‘The treasure has not been found yet.’

The leader lifted the coin, a coy smile for Otto.

‘To business, Gentlemen,’ Johno loudly stated, waving out the remaining troopers. ‘We’re going to try and get the controlling share of many large companies in Europe. When we do so we’ll damage the Basel group. How much damage we do will depend on how much money we have at our disposal.’

‘You will buy share capital?’ the spokesman surmised.

Otto nodded to him. ‘And combine it with existing portfolios, plus that of our allies.’

‘We have many shares in their companies,’ the spokesman explained with a shrug.

Otto took out two notepads and placed them on the table. ‘If you would please write down which companies you believe are majority controlled by Basel, and people you suspect, it will help us in this fight.’

Members started to whisper names and corporations, two men rapidly writing them down.

Johno faced the leader. ‘Will you help us?’

‘Of course. Basel threaten us,’ the old man said in a heavy accent. ‘We had the problem with Gunter, but K2 stopped Basel from being in Switzerland. We will transfer money.’

‘Thank you,’ Johno offered, extending a hand to shake.

‘How is Bis-el-ley?’

‘He’s now in a wheelchair, but OK.’

Ten minutes later and the list was complete, those people they suspected - or knew of being involved - scribbled down, plus those companies they knew were affiliated to Basel.

‘Gentlemen,’ Johno called. ‘It is very important – critical - that no one discusses this till we are ready to move. No email,

careful on the telephone. Do not tell wives, girlfriends ... or mistresses!’

A few smiles broke out.

‘We will co-ordinate with you for the take-overs,’ Otto informed the leader. A respectful Swiss head tip and they left the group to debate this extraordinary turn of events.

\* \* \*

On the way back Johno’s phone went. ‘Yeah?’

‘Johno, Kev, where the fuck are yis?’

‘Shit, forgot all about you!’

‘Ya what?’

‘Listen, if you get a list of ... what was it –’

‘Wine producers,’ Kev put in.

‘That’s it. Send someone over with it, hand courier.’

‘Listen, Johno, right now I’m thinking of painting the walls here an *azure* blue.’

‘I’m with you. Change of plan anyway, get everyone here. We found some old files that will keep our enemies at bay, and ... a ... list ... of ... names.’

‘Ya been drinking again?’

‘My next chore. Tell the boys Dame Helen has agreed to marry me.’

‘Ya what?’

‘See you soon. TTFN.’ He hung up.

Otto asked, ‘Was that some sort of code?’

‘Yeah, *azure* means you’re being bugged. You drop it in casually, like ... an azure blue sea.’

‘I believe that Helen will be ... concerned at the last part of that message.’

Johno forced up his eyebrows. ‘Not as concerned and confused as the fuckers listening in!’

‘You believe that British Intelligence can compromise our satellite phones?’ Otto asked, clearly concerned.



‘No, that was his mobile. He dropped the satellite phone in a lake when he was fishing. Have to get him another one.’

‘I will take it out of his pay,’ Otto suggested, straight-faced.

‘What are you ... Swiss?’

## 2

Johno found Helen in the restaurant playing chess against Diaz, Casper playing against Thomas. ‘Who’s winning?’

‘Casper’s very good,’ Thomas whispered, not taking his eyes off his board.

‘And this good lady is quite a tactical thinker, somewhat aggressive at times,’ Diaz said, looking up and smiling formally at Johno.

‘Anyone want anything?’ Johno quietly asked.

Helen raised a finger whilst studying the board. ‘Hot chocolate, small slice of Napoleon.’

‘I’m afraid I’m rather full – *curry night!*’ Diaz informed him.

‘Bugger, I missed it,’ Johno let out, ordering Helen’s refreshments.

‘Busy man,’ Diaz noted, returning to the boards.

Johno sat next to Thomas, facing Diaz. ‘We just had some experts check out some old timber trunks.’ Casper lifted his head. Johno continued, ‘Turned out to be sixteenth or seventeenth century.’

‘Never mind,’ Diaz whispered, eyes on the board as he moved a piece.

‘We did find some old Jewish stuff, seventeen hundreds, piece in your room,’ Johno quietly told Casper.

‘I’ll have a look later,’ the Israeli offered.

‘Don’t tell the Pope,’ Johno whispered.

‘I heard that,’ Diaz quipped.

‘Check mate,’ Casper informed a dejected Thomas, a fatherly gaze at the lad.

Johno told the boy, 'You learn more from losing, than you do from winning,' Johno himself being carefully studied by Diaz.

Casper stood. 'Do you want to show me this ... whatever it is?'

Johno said: 'Wooden carving.'

As they stepped out Diaz watched them go with interest, Diaz himself being carefully assessed by Helen.

'He doesn't take sides,' she suggested, returning to the board. 'He'll see the pieces in play in front of him, then he'll make his choices.'

'A field commander,' Diaz suggested. 'I believe your Wellington was the same.'

'He was once on a mission to Bosnia – Johno, not Wellington – and it was all carefully planned –' She moved a piece. '- but when he got there, the field he was supposed to sneak across was flooded, so he went around. From the opposite side of the field he could see the old minefield signs.'

'Lucky.'

'Yes,' she let out slowly. 'He is ... a very lucky man, when it comes to surviving. Check.'

They made eye contact.

\* \* \*

Casper lifted the lid off the box. Frowning strongly, he lifted the heavy item then gasped, collapsing backwards. Fortunately the bed was there, Johno making no effort to move Casper's way, or to assist. Casper slid to the floor, his back against the bed.

'You'll need to keep this quiet.'

'You know what this is?' Casper gasped.

'I don't give a fuck what it is,' Johno coldly stated, Casper turning his head. 'It's not about to find a cure for cancer, stop

any wars ... or bring back Afros and disco. And there's a condition that comes with *that*.'

'A ... condition?'

'Yeah, it don't see the light of day for ten years. If that's not agreeable it's going in the fucking lake.'

Casper reverently cradled the object; carved Cedar wood covered in inscribed silver plate, wrestling himself to his feet. 'What do you mean?'

'I mean, if you want to take that home to play with you keep it under wraps. Jewish eyes only, no TV.'

Casper stared at the object, gently nodding to himself. 'I do not think our scholars will have a problem with that.'

'Best frigging verify it's real first –'

'No, no need for that, I was hoping for this piece, I know it well. These words could only be faked by a very small, select group. Even the style of the characters is as expected.'

'Fine. Go stick it in your cupboard.' Johno turned.

'Thank you,' Casper offered.

Jhono stopped. 'Before you pop back upstairs, take the stupid smirk off – Diaz will be jealous.'

Casper took a quick step towards Johno. 'You have more?'

'They'll be shipped out tomorrow. If you're here after that you'll be killed in the crossfire.'

Casper shot Johno a horrified look. 'You will be attacked?'

'Unless we do some attacking first. But, if all goes tits-up, it'll be frigging Armageddon around here.'

\* \* \*

Helen stepped into the dungeon an hour later, Johno mellowing on the sofa after three pints, 'Legends of Disco' playing in the background. She poured herself a wine and sat opposite. And waited.

'Her Majesties Government know what they need to know,' Johno softly informed her without making eye contact.

‘How?’ she asked, none too worried by the revelation.

‘Kev’s phone was bugged, so I made a point of dropping in a few hints.’

She nodded before sipping her wine.

Now he faced her. ‘So, why *are* you staying ... slack draws?’

‘Your obvious charm and turn of phrase.’ He waited, sipping his beer. She finally said, ‘I was heading here before General Rose came around to my house. As I told you before, I wasn’t ready to give up my job. Besides, nothing left for me there.’

She ran a finger around the rim of her glass. ‘It looks a bit odd on your CV – *former head of SIS*. Not that many people willing to give us jobs. Best I could hope to do would be to write technical books, or join the Strategic Services Institute, play war games and scenarios, write up reports.’

She peered into her glass. ‘It’s a great height to fall from. No ... net.’

‘You could still work here and *not* put up with me,’ Johno offered, a slight smirk evident.

She couldn’t resist a brief, broad smile into her glass. ‘And I like Thomas.’

‘Well, reason enough to stay then!’

She continued to study the inside of her glass. ‘And ... I like being treated like a princess. Mike never quite knew how to deal with me, he often thought that I wanted a ... a new highbrow book on some military campaign, when what I wanted was a hug – and the occasional good shag.’

Johno laughed. ‘You can’t say *shag*, you’re a lady.’

She raised her gaze to him. ‘And you’re ... an insatiable animal in bed. A bonus that makes up for the face fungus.’

Again Johno laughed, Thomas stepping in and tentatively sitting next to Helen.

‘Is everything OK?’ the lad nervously enquired.

‘Yeah, everything’s OK,’ Johno confirmed. ‘Apart from the smell.’

Thomas ran and put the extractors on. Coming back he said, ‘No security tonight?’

Johno squinted at him. ‘What do you mean?’

‘No troopers on the stairs.’

With a puzzled, and annoyed look, Johno stepped to the stairwell and opened the door an inch. Two silenced shots registered immediately with Johno. ‘Under the bed,’ he whispered to Thomas, grabbing Helen and practically lifting her towards the snug. He closed his bedroom door, but it had no lock. Reaching under the bed he pulled off the dartboard, Thomas sliding down into the hole in a second.

‘Legs first, eight foot drop,’ he whispered toward Helen, forcing her quickly towards the hole. She swivelled awkwardly around and dropped down, her fingers resting on the rim for a second before disappearing into the blackness.

Johno copied her move; sliding legs under first, legs down into the hole, body down, elbow out stopping himself from falling, bed adjusted, dartboard grabbed, a hand on the side, dartboard over, light gone.

‘Look out,’ he whispered into the pitch-blackness, dropping down a second later.

### 3

The gunman entered the dungeon on his stomach, pistol with silencer in his hand, the stairwell’s lights now out. He stopped, listening more than looking.

A minute later he was concerned. For the three of them to remain silent would be unusual; Johno was special forces trained, but Helen and the boy were not. He eased up, sweeping the room with his pistol.

A quick look to the right, into the firing range. Clear. The gym was brightly lit, and no way out, so was discounted. The

sauna could have steam, so the snug seemed the first option. He stepped silently forwards, noting the half-drunk beer glass and the split wine glass – pointing towards the snug. He smiled.

Stepping silently he reached the door. Back to the stone wall, he opened the door with a foot, knowing exactly the layout and dimensions of the rooms. He waited, an ear to the breeze caused by the extractors, his nostrils full of a pungent odour. Puzzling the smell took many seconds.

It was oddly quiet. In he stepped; toilet ahead, showers, Johno's room, finally Thomas' room - converted from a store area.

With his back to the toilet wall he retrieved a small CS gas canister, nudged the door with his foot, clicked the top of the canister and dropped it in as it started hissing, the thick wooden door closing. He waited. Beyond a minute he was sure that the woman and the boy would be screaming.

Next, Johno's room. He tapped the door with the end of his silencer. No response, no sounds, another CS gas canister tossed inside. Another minute and he was starting to doubt himself. Stepping quickly back to the main room he stopped and listened, half out of the doorway. Nothing. He turned, stepping silently to Thomas's room, another knock at the door greeted by silence, another CS canister thrown in.

Now he was genuinely starting to doubt himself. Back in the dungeon he ran quickly to the sauna area, time against him. Checking the empty cubicles, easily viewed by the clear glass, he quickly eliminated this room.

Back in the dungeon he considered a secret passage, secure in the knowledge that there wasn't one. Staring again at the spilt wine glass he cursed, rushing up the steps.

Johno clicked his lighter on and showed the way. 'Stay close,' he whispered.

With Helen placing one hand on Johno's shoulder, one hand holding Thomas, they pressed forwards into the dark. They

ducked under the first arch, past the treasure and into the corridor.

‘That next room is where the files were,’ Johno whispered. ‘Behind us is the treasure.’

Johno took a long five minutes to re-locate the stairwell. They stepped slowly up, still holding onto each other. At the blocked end of the stairwell Johno could hear cars.

‘This is the courtyard,’ he whispered. ‘It’s a thin wall by the sound of it, but everyone will know where the treasure is.’ He turned to face Helen.

‘What about the flooded cave?’ Thomas suggested.

‘I’m not dressed for a flooded cave!’ Helen forcefully whispered. ‘Knock a hole through there and sound the damn alarm!’

Johno lifted his phone and pressed green. ‘Hello? Hello? No good.’ He pocketed it.

‘There is another steel door,’ Thomas said. ‘Mister Grey told me about it. I know the way.’

‘Johno, you two may enjoy this stuff – I’m claustrophobic! Open a damn hole.’

‘If I do, the mole knows about the treasure here!’

‘That ... *mole* just tried to kill us! It sounded like he shot one of the guards, who might still be alive.’

Johno stared at her outline, her concerned features illuminated by the flickering lighter flame. He let out a breath then shoulder butted the wall, making a dent and loosening a brick. With some of the bricks removed he could feel a layer of concrete. Loosening several bricks and letting them fall he made a hole two foot square. With a brick as a tool he smashed the concrete, immediately pushing his head forwards and into the light.

Placed right in front of the hole stood a white board, duty rota shifts displayed, and preventing anyone from seeing him. He pushed his head through, an elbow and then finally his

phone. ‘This is Johno. Alarm, lock down, no staff leave, mobile phone jammers now!’

An alarm sounded, the clatter of boots on tarmac sounding as ready squads ran in or out.

Into the phone he quietly stated, ‘Ready squads to the dungeon! Intruder! Intruder! Doctor to the dungeon.’ He eased back in. ‘Give it a while, they’ll get to the dungeon.’

‘They must know!’ Helen whispered. ‘Basel is onto us!’

‘Maybe. Maybe it was Diaz with some inside help, pissed off about the treasure. Casper could have got noticed.’ His phone crackled. Moving closer to the hole he could hear, ‘Johno, it’s Grey, where are you?’

‘Cave exit, courtyard.’

‘Bilbo’s mate, Dave, is dead, Mark critical. You got Helen and Thomas with you?’

‘Yeah, we’re fine.’

‘Dungeon is full of tear gas.’

‘Put the extractors on. Oh, and have the courtyard cameras turned off, then come out to us.’

Five minutes later Johno helped Helen step across a pile of bricks and into Grey’s arms, Thomas next. Stepping out he met the ready squad, most of whom knew about the cave. ‘We two men down?’ he sombrely asked. They nodded.

Mavo said, ‘Someone knocked off the cameras near the dungeon, and the stairwell, don’t know how the boys got caught off guard.’

‘Someone they knew,’ Johno suggested. ‘Or someone they didn’t fear.’

Otto stepped up to them, flanked by guards. ‘You are... OK?’

Johno nodded, deep in thought. ‘Lock down, no one goes out.’

‘It has been arranged. Whoever did this is still here. We are going over the tapes, but some have been erased.’



‘A junior manager,’ Johnno stated.

Otto reluctantly nodded. ‘They may know our plans.’

‘Doubt it,’ Johnno stated. ‘This might be about the files, someone might have seen the one I gave you.’

‘Or someone further at the Society is also a traitor,’ Otto suggested as they turned and headed inside.

Johnno thumbed towards the hole. ‘Seal that up, four guards at all times.’

Otto lifted his phone and gave the order.

On the companionway Johnno stopped at the top of the main stairs. ‘Your attention please.’ He waited. ‘We’re on lockdown, with all outgoing mobile calls jammed, and other calls monitored, because someone here –’ He pointed. ‘- is a traitor.’

Staff glanced at each other.

‘No one goes home till we say. If you need to contact family, write the message and give it to Claus. Make yourselves comfortable, ladies and gentlemen – we have a spy to catch.’

He slumped into his usual chair in Helen’s office, Thomas next to him. Helen sat in the desk chair, examining her dirty hands and suit, Otto sat off to one side as she ordered refreshments.

Grey stepped in a minute later. ‘What the hell happened?’

‘Lucky that hole was there,’ Johnno let out. ‘Otherwise, a shootout.’

‘You had your weapon?’ Grey queried. ‘And the kid’s armed like Al Capone!’

Johnno made strong eye contact. ‘Yes, *and* baggage.’

‘That would be me,’ Helen noted without looking up.

Bilbo stepped in, his look piercing Johnno like a knife.

Johnno stood and stepped slowly around to him. After a moment he offered, ‘Sorry.’

‘The boys knew the risk, but I want this fucker,’ he growled.

‘Take a fucking number and get in line,’ Johno whispered. ‘Get back out there, stay sharp – *no mistakes tonight!*’

Bilbo took in the faces as he withdrew, a long hard look at the command staff from the companionway.

Johno faced Otto. ‘Draw up a list of everyone here, then don’t try and prove which one did it, try and prove where each one was at the time, leaving just who’s left.’ Otto stood back up. Johno wagged a finger. ‘Do it yourself, trust no one!’

For the first time in memory, Otto loosened his tie before he stepped out.

Johno turned to Grey. ‘Where was Diaz?’

‘I’ve been watching him like a hawk. He and Casper were playing chess, arguing like hell – good twenty minutes before the alarm went off. But he sure as hell ain’t no cardinal.’

‘What do you mean?’ Johno asked.

‘I’ve watched the way he walks, holds himself. I’d say he’s special ops’ for certain. Seen his hands.’

‘Yes,’ Helen put in. ‘Not an academic’s hands. But he was supposed to be an archaeologist, so maybe the work hardened them.’

‘Cardinals don’t dig, they supervise,’ Grey suggested.

Johno made eye contact with Grey, tipping his head towards the door. ‘Baby-sit our friend. Send down Casper.’

## Traitor in our midst

1

Casper appeared as Helen and Johno sipped fresh coffee.

‘Have a seat,’ Johno curtly suggested.

Casper sat. ‘Problem?’

‘Where was Diaz for the last half hour?’

‘For that time, with me and Mr. Grey in the restaurant. Why, what has happened?’

‘Someone just killed a friend of mine, a second man is critical and someone came for us three,’ Johno explained.

‘My God.’

‘I’m shipping you out *now*, it’s not safe.’

‘And the ... *artefacts*?’

Johno angered quickly. ‘What’s more important to you, your life or the fucking baubles?’

Casper stiffened. ‘The baubles, as you put it. They have been missing a long time. If it’s my life for them, then fine.’

Johno stared his disbelief at Casper. He leant across and hit the phone. ‘Send in Claus.’

When Claus arrived Johno ordered, ‘I want Casper taken down to the treasure, tag what’s Jewish, move it out immediately, heavy escort. He’ll be going with it, Zurich flight, Gulfstream or Learjet. Stand ready to move the rest of the treasure tonight. And I want four troopers taking Casper to the airport.’

Claus gestured Casper towards the door.

Casper stood. ‘Good luck.’

‘Yeah, whatever,’ Johno said with a wave. With his head lowered and a studious look taking hold, he turned to Thomas. ‘When you came to the dungeon, before the shooting, there was no one there?’

‘No.’

‘What about in the foyer?’

‘I think there were people behind the desk, moving something.’

Johno made eye contact with Helen. ‘The gunman slipped past when they were distracted, waited in the stairwell, fired up when they returned.’

‘Would they both go like that?’ she queried.

‘No, not even if Otto ordered them to. One would stay.’ He stared at the doorway, a heavy frown still firmly in place. ‘If someone they trusted, or fancied, asked them for help...’

‘Fancied?’ Helen repeated. ‘Oh, Frieserling’s assistant, very attractive.’

He stood and walked quickly out, collecting the two troopers stood guard. At the junction of the foyer and the great hall he called the ready squad then stepped behind the foyer desk, Mr. Frieserling and his assistant, Hilda, sat reading novels. They both now stood.

‘May I help you, Herr Director?’ Frieserling offered.

Johno sat on a table opposite and stared at them, two troopers just inside the door, four looking over the reception desk. ‘Got some questions. Please, sit.’ He waited. ‘Did you move some furniture tonight?’

‘I do not believe so,’ Frieserling responded.

Hilda snapped her head around to him, a puzzled expression forming. ‘You forget, sir, we moved the desk.’

‘Why do you say that, no desk has been moved?’

Johno glanced at the troopers. Weapons were raised in sequence. ‘Hilda, did Mr. Frieserling ask you to fetch the two soldiers to move a desk?’

‘Yes, sir.’

Frieserling jumped up, facing her. ‘That is not correct.’

‘Sit ... the fuck ... down!’ Johno growled.

Terrified, Frieserling sat.

‘One of you is lying,’ Johno coldly stated. ‘We could torture both of you, but that might be ... unfair.’ He stood and closed the gap. ‘Either of you been in the dungeon any time lately?’

‘No,’ was the common answer.

Johno nodded to himself, waving Frieserling up. Stepping closer Johno leant in and sniffed Frieserling. ‘An odd aftershave, Mr. Frieserling. What do they call that ... pond water fresh?’ He stepped back and sat. ‘What do you think a chemical analysis of you shoes and clothes will reveal?’

They waited, nothing forthcoming from Frieserling.

‘Fetch Bilbo,’ Johno ordered, Bilbo appearing ten seconds later from the courtyard.

Noticing the faces, and the looks, Bilbo focused on Mr. Frieserling.’

‘I’ll give you one chance for a quick death,’ Johno offered Frieserling.

Hilda stepped off to one side as ‘Mr. Freezer’ stood solid, frozen to the stop. He seemed more angered than afraid, trembling, Bilbo edging closer to him.

Johno let out a resigned sigh. ‘Take him to the chair room. Bilbo, your call.’

Bilbo took down Frieserling with punch to the nose, troopers dragging the guest manager out.

‘He was a traitor?’ Hilda gasped. ‘I knew him for five years!’

Johno faced her. ‘Search this place, look for the gun.’

Otto met Johno on the companionway. ‘Is it true?’ he asked. ‘Mr. Frieserling?’

Johno nodded, taking in the command staff going about their business. ‘He didn’t even try and defend himself. So I’m thinking Vatican again.’

Otto sighed and faced the staff. ‘I will go through his record, but *they* seem to be very efficient.’

‘They’ve had a long time at it,’ Johno offered. ‘Him being in the foyer gave him a prime location, but why come after me now? What was he waiting for?’

‘The treasure has only just been admitted to,’ Otto suggested.

‘Vatican knew all along where it was, we even suggested we’d give them the religious stuff. So why trigger him to go all Rambo now?’

‘Perhaps he was Basel, he must have seen the file.’

‘I got someone else in mind,’ Johno enigmatically suggested. ‘We’ll see.’

‘Sir! Gunfire in Herr Beesely’s room!’

They both turned and ran, troopers following; up two flights of stairs and to the second door on the left. With his pistol drawn Johno opened the door, a dead nurse slumped against the left wall, blood spatter up the wall.

‘It’s OK!’ Beesely shouted.

They burst in, Johno and Otto followed by two troopers. Beesely sat in his wheelchair, pistol in his right hand.

‘What the hell happened?’ Johno asked, holstering his pistol as he studied the dead nurse, counting at least six gunshot wounds.

‘When she drew a pistol and started to casually fix the silencer ... I figured I should do something. Silly cow didn’t realise a kept a pistol under the blanket on my lap.’

Johno and Otto closed in on him, Otto kneeling and holding Beesely’s arm.

‘We just rumbled Mr. Freezer,’ Johno informed Beesely.

‘Never liked him,’ Beesely grumbled. Loudly he ordered, ‘Move the damn body before she bleeds all over my carpet.’ The troopers dragged her out, closing the door. ‘That’ll need a wash down,’ Beesely casually noted, pointing at the wall.

‘We shall move you to another room –’ Otto began.

‘Pah! She doesn’t bother me, nor the blood. Sort it later.’ He made eye contact with Johno, smiling. ‘Survived another night!’

‘Night’s not over yet, and I just survived another attempt.’

‘I heard. Still, the tear gas will kill the smell of the caves, eh? And your socks!’

Johno laughed, pouring out a whisky. He handed it to Beesely, who now took a sip.

‘So, that all of them?’ Beesely asked.

‘Doubt it,’ Johno offered. ‘Mr. Freezer might talk, *your* stiff won’t.’ He lifted his phone as Otto stood. ‘This is Johno. All staff other than managers are to turn off their mobiles, placing them into an envelope with their names on and then given to Claus. All admin staff are to hand in their weapons, except managers. All weapons are to be checked. Everyone is then to be searched, and everyone going in or out is searched each time. Ta, love.’

Beesely offered Johno a concerned look. ‘Can you bring forwards your plan?’

‘So so. The list is incomplete.’

‘Two hundred so far,’ Otto explained as he stood and straightened his suit, ‘but some are obviously questionable. We may well kill people who seem to be linked, but are not.’

‘So we need more time,’ Johno admitted. ‘I need one of the top table, then he can lead us to the rest.’

‘Many off the old list are dead, sons running the business,’ Otto suggested.

‘Euro-Freemasons are hereditary!’ Beesely pointed out.

‘Then perhaps two hundred and fifty,’ Otto informed them.

‘Three hundred and fifty-two actual members,’ Johno explained. ‘And that’s up to date.’ He grabbed Beesely’s glass and took a sip before handing it back.

Beesely took another sip. ‘Got some work to do then, boys.’

Johno lifted his head to Otto. ‘Now it’s out in the open, all out crossing check, all staff on it.’

Otto touched Beesely’s arm, offering an encouraging smile before he left.

Johno ambled back into Helen's office ten minutes later. Helen now sat with Otto, earnestly going through the list, both computers powered up and working, his laptop from home sat on the desk next to two other laptops, all now scrolling through bits of information as various computer programmes ran. 'That looks complicated,' Johno mentioned as he sat.

'The patterns are there, in the data,' Helen responded, still focussed on a screen. 'We've devised a points system, so that those more ... well, rich and powerful – and influential – plus old, are at the top, younger, less well-off individuals at the bottom.'

'Seems about right,' Johno offered. 'Can we get all managers in 'ere?'

Helen hit the phone, calling the managers. When assembled, Mavo and his buddy stepped inside, carefully observing the managers.

'OK, boys and girls,' Johno began. 'We're at crisis point. All of us, and I mean – all of us, are in danger from the Basel Group. Is there ... anyone *not* familiar with the Basel Group?'

None of the managers responded, many sat with heads lowered, looking to Johno a little ashamed and embarrassed now that the name was out in the open.

'OK, then. Moving on. We should have, by now, collected in all mobile phones and weapons. Has that been done?'

They confirmed it had been, Claus indicating that the phones were under lock and key in a cabinet, and that mobile boosters had been switched off, outside lines restricted and monitored carefully. Radio scanners were also in operation outside.

'OK,' Johno began with a sigh. 'We have the files that Basel wants and, hopefully by now, they *know* that we have them. If not, tomorrow they will, I'll make sure of that. We also have a list of original members of the Group and the companies



they founded. That, boys and girls, gives us the heart of their operation.

‘What these computer ... *thingys* –’ He made brief eye contact with Helen. ‘- are doing, is cross-matching that list with others, to see who’s connected and who the present day members are. When we have that list, if it takes a day or a week, we’ll act against them. In the short-term I need every computer expert we have working on these lists. When we have a name they need to be checked to see just who they are - and whether or not we believe that the people outside of the main list - are actually Basel members. You can eliminate the British and Americans, probably the Russians too.

‘But make no mistake, boys and girls, if we don’t get that list accurate we’ll probably be destroyed, all of us ending up in jail or shot - as Max Blaum put it.’

A manager raised his pen. ‘I have ordered in five of our best computer programmers, they will be here in ten minutes.’

‘Good,’ Johno offered. ‘What else can we do?’

Otto eased his head forwards. ‘When we are ready, when we have finalised the list as much as possible, we can cross-match against the police and Interpol files.’

‘Which Basel will see straight away, yeah?’ Johno asked.

Otto reluctantly nodded, looking dejected.

Helen faced Otto. ‘Can we get an old magnetic tape backup of Interpol’s records, say ... from six months ago?’

‘I believe so,’ Otto offered.

‘Try it then,’ Johno encouraged. ‘Our priority must be travel databases. They’re spread from Portugal to Italy, so when they meet-up some must fly. That destination we need ... their meeting place.’

Otto explained, ‘Up until twenty years ago they met in Basel, the border of Germany, France and Switzerland – for obvious reasons. Then Gunter forced them out, so they were believed to have met just across the border in Strasbourg.’

Johno nodded. 'So let's get as many of the hotel details there as we can, flights in and out of Strasbourg, trains, border crossing logs, whatever we can.'

Helen put in, 'There seems to have been bi-annual meetings in Malta in the past six years.'

Johno gave it some thought. 'Vatican has some operations on Malta, that's why I spooked them with my dummy flight there. So, all hotels in Malta as well, and flights relating to those dates. If everyone gets added to the database, then ranked as Helen and Otto are already doing, we should pick up the bodyguards as well.'

Otto offered, 'I will alter the parameters to look for them, since they will have no shareholdings, but will be present amongst the travel databases.'

Johno's satellite vibrated, starting to chirp in ascending tones. 'Yeah'

'It's Bilbo.'

'Did he talk?'

'Yeah, French Secret Service, so was the nurse that took a shot at Beesely.'

'As I figured. OK, good work, head back.' He hung up. Facing Otto said, 'Mr. Freezer was DGSE.'

The managers glanced at each other, a few whispers exchanged.

'Then they know about the files, *and* the Templar treasure,' Otto surmised.

'The files are not much harm to them,' Johno quietly stated. 'All the big French companies are state owned, not many on the list.' He sighed. 'No, I think they'd like the treasure back.'

'Should we not give them some of it?' a manager tentatively asked. 'We do not want to take on the French Government.'

'Best have a chat with 'em, then,' Johno lightly suggested, a smile for the female manager who suggested it. 'First, we send them a calling card, since they were kind enough to try and kill

us. I want the bodies of Mr. Freezer and the nurse *dropped* from a helicopter onto the DGSE headquarters, Paris. And tonight.'

Otto stiffened, clearly concerned.

'That'll get their attention,' Helen softly stated in disapproving tones, staring wide-eyed at the desk.

'It'll also let them know that we're onto them, so they'll be concerned – about just *what* we know,' Johno insisted. 'They don't want to get caught anymore than we do!' He took a big breath. 'OK. Anyone want to add anything?'

A manager raised a finger. 'I took the liberty of drawing up a list from our sources, and other police databases, of suspected or known assassins and hired gunmen. There are thirty-seven of a reliable nature, if that is not a contradiction in terms, that could be *paid* to assist, should we need them.'

'Good, more the better,' Johno enthused. 'What's our total number of people who can shoot?'

'I believe we could reach five hundred using our guards and security staff,' Claus stated.

'Fine. Put them into groups of two, but I want our best agents in groups of three, plus a set of twelve groups of five. Ready them to move out day after tomorrow if we're on schedule and still breathing. Which reminds me.' He lifted his phone. 'Elle Rosen, Mossad.' He waited.

'Johno?' came from his phone ten seconds later.

'Yeah, listen. Hardware, Zug, fast as you can, private airstrip.'

'It's already in Europe, Netherlands, we'll move it now.'

'Thanks. No bill here, be sorted in Panama.' He hung up.

'Something?' Otto enquired.

'New hardware, thousand pistols with silencers, untraceable, plus assorted ammo – glass, Perspex, sugar-crystal. If our people go after Basel we'll try – at least – to have nothing tracking back here.'

Otto nodded his approval, a glance at Claus, who also seemed to approve of the idea.

Johno said, 'Right, tomorrow we try and take control of Encosol.' He made a face. 'Where *are* their bleeding headquarters?'

'Genoa,' Claus informed him.

'Could drive there,' Johno mumbled, thinking aloud. Lifting his head and talking louder he said, 'OK, that's our first nudge at them, hopefully getting me in front of their top table.'

'For what ... purpose, exactly?' Otto enquired.

'See who they are, sound them out, identify them, get a feel for them.'

'See the pieces in play,' Helen stated without looking up.

'Yep. Then I'll make a final choice.' He stood. 'So, let's get those lists cracked, yeah?'

The managers stood and filed out, Claus being the last manager out and closing the door. Johno grabbed a biscuit off the desk as Otto returned to his computer software endeavours.

'If Basel are aware of any of this,' Helen warned. 'They'll move first.'

Standing, Johno faced Otto. 'What could they do, other than another attack on this place – which would take days to arrange?'

Otto considered Basel's options. 'Their best hope would be to expose us in the newspapers, which would mean the Swiss Parliament asking some difficult questions—'

'Which would mean Max Blaum would have no choice but to shut us down,' Johno finished off. 'Fine, we can counter that with hard cash. Warn every newspaper contact we have, tell them they can spend whatever they want this week to suppress stories about us. Basel probably own some of these papers, but are they daft enough to waste that much money?'

Otto lifted his phone and stepped to the end of the room.

'You OK?' Johno softly asked Helen, sitting on the edge of the desk and facing her.

She eased back, rested her head on the chair and swivelled it as she thought. 'You seem to forget why I'm here.'

Johno lifted an eyebrow. ‘My charm and turn of phrase?’

Helen fought back a smile. ‘Besides that. If it’s a fight with Basel, I’m in all the way. They took Sophie ... and wrecked my life.’

Johno sighed. ‘That seems like a long time ago.’

‘Not to me,’ she pointedly replied.

‘Not to worry, old man Gunter did his homework. He’s given us all the aces against these fucks – everything is stacked in our favour, except their connections to European politicians. And I’m sure he could have taken them down before.’

Helen puzzled that statement. ‘So why didn’t he?’

‘Probably not daft enough to do what I’m about to do,’ Johno said with a grin.

‘What ... *we’re* about to do.’

He tipped his head in agreement as Otto returned.

‘Johno, Helen and I have some work ... if you don’t mind. Computer *thingy* work.’

Johno turned his head from Otto to Helen. ‘That’s what I like about the Swiss, very polite when it comes to telling you to fuck off.’

\* \* \*

Two DGSE security guards, stood at a gate at the rear of the DGSE Headquarters in Noisy-le-Sec, Paris, jumped out of their guard station when they heard what they thought was a car crash. Glancing around the well-lit car park a second noise caught their attention, causing the two men to run towards it through a light drizzle.

They stopped dead after ten yards and stared, finding a naked woman embedded into a car, its alarm sounding, its hazard lights flashing; the roof had collapsed, the windows blown out. They lifted their radios and screamed for assistance as they ran to the second car, who’s alarm was now noisily protesting being disturbed.

They discovered a man's body, covered in blood, along with unusual red and purple burn marks. He lay face down, head and shoulders through the Mercedes windscreen as a fine, misty rain gently fell onto the surreal scene.

## Anglo-French relations

### 1

Max Blaum sat waiting in Helen's office with the French Ambassador at 7am, Johno having been woken at 6.30am by Claus. Otto stepped in first, greeting the Ambassador and ordering the sombre looking diplomat a coffee.

Johno stepped in a moment later with Helen, his dear lady partner looking far more awake and refreshed than he did. Helen sat off to one side, Johno taking the lead in this meeting. He sat and calmly ordered coffees for himself, Helen and Otto. Finally, he faced the Ambassador, the same man that had been present during Luchenkov's attack. 'So, what brings you down here again?'

'Some difficult questions, Herr Johno,' the Ambassador unhappily stated as Beesely motored himself in.

'Survived another night,' Beesely said to no one in particular. 'No more French Secret Service agents trying to kill me!' He manoeuvred around to be sat facing the Ambassador.

The French Ambassador offered Beesely a puzzled frown. 'Did you say ... French Secret Service trying to kill you?'

'Yes. Isn't that why you are here – to apologise and hand over the culprits who sent them?'

'Culprits?' the Ambassador repeated. 'I have no knowledge of such an ... absurd allegation.'

Beesely turned to Johno. 'Someone hasn't had their coffee this morning!'

The Ambassador stared indignantly at Johno. 'What is going on? I am here because two members of your staff were found dead in Paris last night, at the Headquarters of the DGSE.'

'Really?' Johno asked. 'How did they die?'

'Not least, a fall from an aeroplane!' The Ambassador was getting louder.

Johno inched his head around to Otto. ‘I thought we used a helicopter?’

‘We did,’ Otto stated, Blaum sat wide-eyed, but silent. ‘Please, Ambassador, everything is in the detail. Try and be accurate.’

The Ambassador looked like he might explode with rage. ‘Try and be accurate!’ he repeated through clenched teeth. ‘You murdered two people and dropped them from a helicopter in Paris!’

‘Well,’ Johno sighed. ‘They were your people. Be a bit odd to drop them ... what ... in Berlin.’

‘Our people?’

‘Yeah, they were DGSE - long-term sleeper agents,’ Johno explained, enjoying the diplomat’s pained expression. ‘Last night one tried to kill me, another Beesely. We have a videotaped confession, naming names on your side, plus contact phone numbers, dead-letter drops, addresses of safe houses in Paris. We could send it to the world’s media if you like.’

The Ambassador took a moment and calmed himself. ‘I have no knowledge of any link between these ... people, and our security services.’

‘Keeping you in the dark, are they?’ Beesely enquired, a slight grin evident.

The look on the Ambassador’s face suggested he did not entirely disagree with that assessment.

Johno eased forwards, resting his arms on the desk. ‘Look, mate, nothing personal, but since you are just a dumb messenger boy –’ The Ambassador’s eyebrows shot up. ‘- why don’t you arrange for a senior figure in your security services to pop around and have a chat, eh? I’m sure we can clear it all up, there and then.’ He stood and waited.

The Ambassador glanced unhappily at Blaum, stood up and then and stormed out.



Blaum stood, closed in on the desk and whispered, 'The amount of money being offered by the Swiss diplomatic core for your death is growing by the day!' He turned and trotted quickly after the French Ambassador.

Beesely manoeuvred around in his wheelchair till he was square to Johnno, a cautious, if not concerned look.

'Don't worry,' Johnno offered. 'Got an ace in the hole as far as the French are considered, just couldn't tell *him*.'

'Whilst we're all here, let's get the war council sorted,' Beesely suggested.

Johnno thumbed Helen towards her chair as he slumped into his usual seat. Otto called the managers, taking five minutes to assemble, many of the managers looking less than fresh for a change.

'So, where are we?' Johnno finally asked.

Claus answered, 'We believe we have ninety-percent of the list complete, plus thirty bodyguards.'

'Good,' Johnno offered. 'Right, today I want five of those bodyguards picked up and sent to the chair room. We need answers. And from the time we pick them up, not long to find those answers.' The managers took notes.

'We have the voting rights, Saudi and Russian,' Claus explained. 'Should we give the Russians the Panels?'

'Not yet, let's see if they stick to their side of the bargain. They'll wait a day or so. Right, what else?'

'We have eleven percent of the shares in Encosol,' Otto put in. 'Enough to launch a bid by itself.'

Johnno and Beesely exchanged grins.

'And with the Saudis and Russians?' Johnno asked.

'Almost twenty five percent, an unstoppable block,' Otto explained.

Johnno pointed towards Otto. 'Fine, launch the bid faster than has ever been achieved in the history of bids. Set a new record, I want to be in there ... sat on the board, today.'

Otto tipped his head. 'It will be, as you say, unprecedented, but not impossible. Our teams are standing by in Genoa; solicitors, investment managers and security staff to replace those there. It will be... a shock for many, and will make the news of Europe today.'

'Excellent,' Johno loudly enthused. 'The treasure moved out?'

Claus explained, 'Casper took a dozen pieces and has left Switzerland. Four boxes will be landing in Nova Scotia shortly, the remainder has been split and scattered to our vaults.'

'So nothing left down there?' Beesely asked, a little surprised.

'No,' Claus informed the room. 'The Arabic objects are in another vault.'

'Open it up downstairs, clean it, check for other passages,' Johno suggested. 'Never know, there may be something valuable hidden!' Many of the group laughed.

'Diaz still here?' Helen asked Claus, who now responded with a quick nod. She faced Johno, a question in her look.

Johno shrugged then faced Claus. 'Show him the empty vaults, tell him it has been moved elsewhere, send him off. Don't show him the old files -'

'They were burnt, sir,' Claus cut in with.

'In which case, show him that room, tell him what was there – in detail, then send him off.'

'What will that achieve?' Beesely grumbled.

'Take the heat off this place, for one,' Johno answered. 'Also, it'll let them know we have the files, which should scare them silly. Hopefully, they get that news as we go play monopoly with Encosol in Genoa. Trust me, I learnt from the best.'

Otto smiled. 'Carry a big stick, but talk softly.'

That earned a broad smile from Beesely. 'We're going to win this, boys.'

'And girls,' Helen softly added.

Thomas wandered in. 'The dungeon smells OK now,' he said as he went around to Johno.

'Good. Get on your computer, look-up a company called Encosol in Genoa, we'll be going today hopefully. You can brief me.' Thomas stepped back out.

Claus put in, 'Sir, *we* can do that for you?'

Johno let out a loud, irritated sigh. 'I'm doing it to make him feel involved.'

'Ah, yes, sir. Sorry,' Claus offered.

Johno made eye contact with Otto, a teasing smile. 'What's the youngest age a board director can be?' Everyone laughed.

'That'll give them something to think about!' Beesely loudly enthused.

Otto focused on Johno. 'Do you do these things deliberately? Do you have a book of things that are certain to upset a Swiss banker? If we nominate Thomas as chairman everyone will know.'

'If we survive the end of this week we'll worry about it then,' Johno suggested.

\* \* \*

'Sir!' Pepi's aid loudly called as he stepped quickly forwards.

Pepi looked up from his breakfast, unhappy at being disturbed.

'Sir! A hostile takeover at Encosol!'

Pepi stood, staring incredulously at his assistant. 'How is that possible? How is it possible that we did not know?'

'Sir, it's the International Bank of Zurich.'

'K2!' Pepi exploded, throwing down his napkin.

'They have secured the voting rights of the Russians and the Saudis.'

Pepi turned and stared hard out of the window. 'Have our people there remove any files that are -'

'They can't, sir.'

‘Can’t!’ Pepi roared.

‘There are private security guards, lawyers and police outside the headquarters, at every exit, court orders to prevent the removal of files prior to a meeting of the board at 2pm today.’

‘Get my helicopter ready. Wait, what percentage do they have?’

‘Twenty-five percent, sir. Even with all of our associates we could not hope to match it.’

## 2

Johno, Thomas and Claus landed by helicopter on the roof of the Encosol building at 1.55pm, greeted by two unhappy looking security guards. Claus spoke to them in Italian and handed over a sheet of paper, but they already knew what to expect, directing the party downstairs.

An hour earlier the bank’s staff had descended on the Encosol offices en-masse, documents thrust into the faces of the security staff and managers as Encosol staff observed. Now, K2 bank staff made their presence felt in every office and department, the security staff being dismissed and replaced by Swiss private security staff from a branch of K2 in Genoa. The whole operation had been sewn up in little over fifteen minutes.

Led by the remaining company security guards, Johno’s party walked quickly down the stairs, two floors, and to the boardroom where the majority of the existing board now sat assembled, Pepi sat at the head of the table in the chairman’s seat.

Carrying a briefcase, Johno walked slowly around the large desk, taking in the faces of the men, circling the table once as Claus stood to one side. As Johno came back around he earned some odd stares for his meandering stroll. He stopped next to Pepi. ‘You appear to be in my seat.’

Pepi stared up, smiling menacingly, easing up and moving to a vacant chair.

‘Thomas,’ Johno called.

Thomas walked over and sat in the chair, spinning it once as the board observed.

Johno eased down opposite Pepi and clicked open his briefcase. ‘Do you all speak English?’ he asked. They nodded, Pepi remain silent. Johno closed the lid of the briefcase and rested his arms on it. ‘I’d like to talk, nay negotiate, only with those who are part of a group that opposes my organisation.’ He waited.

Pepi fiddled with his cigar.

‘Feel free to light it if you wish, sir,’ Johno offered, Pepi surprised by the offer, the tone and the salutation.

Pepi turned his head and asked five men of the nine present if they would not mind waiting outside for ten minutes. The men filed out, Johno’s briefcase camera filming those remaining. When the door closed Johno again opened the file and retrieved the solitary remaining Basel file, sliding the dirty old file across to his rival.

Pepi knew what it was immediately, a glance at his colleagues. ‘And just what, Herr Director, would you like me to do ... with that?’

‘Destroy it if you like, we have the rest,’ Johno offered.

Again Pepi glanced at the other men. ‘Then you are in a... powerful position. The Swiss Government must be happy.’

‘They don’t know,’ Johno pointedly answered. ‘The files were shipped out, now being held outside Switzerland. As is the treasure.’

Pepi slowly nodded to himself. ‘So, they were buried together after all.’

‘And Gunter never found them.’ Johno eased up, taking gold Templar coins from his pocket and handing them to the Basel members.

Pepi picked up and examined a coin. ‘Of course Gunter never found them, or he would have made problems for us. And what will you do with them?’

Johno eased back into his chair. ‘Sell them to you, if you like.’

‘And why, knowing what they are and what they are worth, would you do that?’

‘Because you morons have me all wrong!’

Pepi blinked, straightening.

‘I’m here to chat to you, to try and resolve any differences we have. That doesn’t mean we join forces and take long hot showers together.’ Again Pepi blinked. ‘It means that we avoid each other, whilst respecting the distance between us. You have your interests, we have ours.’

Thomas pressed a button on the desk phone. ‘Can I have some lemonade, please. And some ice-cream.’

Pepi suppressed a laugh at Thomas.

‘I wouldn’t laugh at him,’ Johno cautioned. ‘He’s the new chairman of the board.’

Claus stepped across and handed Pepi a legal document, nominating Thomas as chairman.

‘And that has been verified in court and lodged,’ Johno informed the group. ‘Be in all the papers today, complete with his photo.’

‘Sit up straight,’ Thomas told the Basel members, Claus closing his eyes for a moment.

‘You ... have a strange sense of humour,’ Pepi told Johno, a dangerous stare as Thomas span in the chair. ‘You make a mockery of this company.’

‘It is mine, unless you want it back. Of course, if I stay, our forensic accountants will go through ... *everything*.’

‘What is it you want, Herr Johno?’ Pepi finally demanded.

‘Simple. I want to address your top-table, then to negotiate a peace. If that’s acceptable, we sign our voting rights back to

you and leave. We also hand over the rest of those files, and some of the treasure, say ... thirty percent.'

Pepi was taken by surprise, easing back and facing his colleagues.

Johno's phone rang. He lifted it. 'Yeah?'

'Sir, the Head of the French DGSE will be in Zug in one hour.'

'OK, I'm flying straight back.' He stood.

'Problems?' Pepi coyly asked.

'French Government not happy about something. I think they want the Templar treasure back.'

Pepi shrugged. 'Maybe you should give it to them.'

'Maybe I'll give it *all* to you, if we negotiate.'

Pepi stood, clearly puzzled by many things.

Johno lifted his briefcase. 'Thomas is in charge, and he has some ideas on global expansion ... and clever ice-cream making machines.'

Johno led Claus out of the boardroom, back up to the helicopter pad, leaving the five Basel members staring at Thomas as he span in the chair.

### 3

Helen grabbed Johno by the arm in the castle foyer, an angered look. 'Where the hell is Thomas? You left him there!'

Johno offered her two flat hands. '*His* idea. Quite a good one at that.' She glared at him, waiting. 'Look, he's got his special Gameboy and a satellite tracker, he'll be ... just as safe as he is wandering around this place.'

She turned and stormed off, Johno and Claus following her towards command centre, uneasy glances exchanged.

In Helen's office they found Otto, Helen and Beesely sat opposite two new faces, Blaum sat alongside the guests. Unlike the meeting that morning with the French Ambassador Johno now took the time to greet both men, a firm handshake and a

welcome in French. The visitors already had refreshments, so Johno sat without ordering more, Claus closing the door.

‘The files you need, are there,’ Otto informed Johno, pointing at a group of files and papers. ‘I prepared the documents myself, no one else ... has the detail.’

Johno opened the folder and glanced at the contents, closing it and offering the visitors cold, formal smiles. ‘So, who do we have visiting us today?’

The first man, dressed in a formal dark-blue suit and appearing to Johno to be in his early fifties, identified himself as Claude Ronson, the French Interior Minister himself. The second man, dressed in a more casual blazer and looking far more weather-beaten, introduced himself as Philippe Golon – no position of employment offered.

Johno took a glance at Beesely, who seemed concerned at what Johno might say or do. ‘Gentlemen, let us get straight to the point, so that we don’t waste your valuable time. Do you have weak hearts?’

The French were puzzled.

‘Weak ... hearts?’ Ronson repeated.

‘If I tell you something ... very shocking, will it affect your hearts?’ Johno slowly and carefully asked.

The French again glanced at each other and at Blaum.

‘I do not believe so,’ Ronson firmly stated in a mildly impatient tone.

‘Good then. So, just to give you a chance to surprise me, why are you here, gentlemen?’

Ronson eased forwards slightly. ‘We are here because you have formally accused the French Government of ... further attempts to either attack a Swiss banking facility or to harm you and your staff. Given previous ... *oversights* on our behalf, relations with the Swiss have been set back. We are also here because it would ... appear that two of your staff were murdered, then dropped from a helicopter onto the offices of the DGSE, Paris.’



‘No *appeared* about it,’ Johnno stated. ‘They tried to kill us, we tortured and killed them, then dropped them in Paris to get your attention.’

Both of the French straightened, clearly astonished, and concerned at what they were hearing. Blaum sat quietly, hoping he would survive this day with his job – and Franco-Swiss relations - intact.

‘We cannot simply ignore such a claim, nor can we avoid reporting this matter to the police and courts both in France and Switzerland,’ Ronson insisted.

‘No, you won’t report it,’ Johnno confidently told them, shaking his head.

‘And just *why* ... would we not do that?’ Golon asked.

Johnno took the first photograph from the file. Without looking up he said, ‘I asked you before if you had weak hearts.’

He glanced at Claus, who stood and took the photograph, handing it to Ronson. Johnno gave them a moment to look at it.

Finally, Ronson lifted his head. ‘What is this?’

‘That’s the boat, the Nan King, which exploded in Portsmouth, killing - in total – eight hundred people, sinking the Ark Royal. You’ll notice the name has been changed. But, with a boat of that size, you can easily match it to the Lloyd’s Register. These days they have photographs to stop fraud.’

‘Why are you showing us this?’ Golon asked, now holding the A4 black and white photograph.

Johnno handed a second A4 photograph to Claus, who handed it over. Ronson held the two photographs next to each other. Clearly, it was the same ship. After a moment they both looked back to Johnno.

‘If you check the background of the second photo, you’ll just be able to identify where she took on board the explosives.’

Golon lifted the photograph to his eye, focusing on a signpost, clearly French. ‘She put into a French port?’ he questioned, surprised, but not concerned. ‘When?’

‘Two days before she exploded,’ Johno quietly stated, a firm stare at Golon.

Ronson stared hard at Johno, his mouth inching down millimetre by millimetre.

Johno handed another two photographs to Claus, clearly showing Marseille in the background. Now both Golon and Ronson breathed quickly, glancing at the photographs, Ronson licking his dry lips.

Ronson finally faced Johno. ‘You –’ He glanced at Helen. ‘- and British Secret Service are certain that this ship, under a false name, stopped in Marseille?’

Johno pursed his lips, lifted his eyebrows and nodded mockingly.

Minister Ronson announced, ‘Then, after due investigation, the French Government may have a great apology to make to the British people for allowing this ship to dock undetected. This could cost many people their jobs ... and be devastating news for our two countries.’

Johno eased forwards, resting his arms on the desk. He studied Ronson for a moment, before lifting another group of pages. ‘I asked you before if you had a weak heart, Minister.’ He laid out the photographs on the edge of the desk, four in a line, close-ups taken with a telescopic lens of two men talking with port officials. ‘Those two men, arranging the delivery of nine tonnes commercial grade explosive, are both DGSE – we have the proof.’

Johno waited for it to sink in, Blaum just as shocked as his French counterparts. Beesely, Otto and Helen all sat with their heads lowered, offering no comment.

Ronson and Golon sat mesmerised by the photographs, Johno watching them shift and squirm, Ronson’s face reddening and Golon swallowing rapidly. Both of the French had to know that the very least that this news would do would be to get them both sacked.

That was before they factored in DGSE agents being involved with the Portsmouth explosion. That could clearly lead to allegations of criminal neglect, if not conspiracy, and the fallout with the British, Europe and the rest of the world would be devastating for French prestige, and their economy.

Golon's resolve stiffened. 'No one ... in the French Security Services, would have *assisted* terrorists planning an attack on England.' Ronson nodded his agreement with that statement as Golon spoke.

'Well then, gentlemen, first things first,' Johno loudly stated. He handed over a page detailing Mr. Frieserling's particulars, complete with a small photograph of him in the corner, second a page on the nurse. 'Those are the two people who ... *landed* in Paris.'

He turned to Otto, who now clicked commands with a computer's mouse. The screen facing the French came to life, part of the torture of Frieserling where he stated the names and details of his contacts.

Morbidly curious, the French watched for a minute before Otto cut the images, Johno handing over to Golon a page of detail, the detail that Frieserling had given up.

Johno explained, 'That's the information he gave us, and we've already checked it. You, Mister Golon, are welcome to check it again at your leisure ... if you wish.'

A nod towards Claus and the senior manager stepped out, returning and dragging a chair across, facing the French. Bound and gagged, a man in a crumpled suit was led in by two troopers, the man's face bruised, his lip and eye cut. The troopers shoved him into the seat and stood behind, hands on the man's shoulders after releasing his gag.

Golon recognised the man, a flurry of questions in French. For the most part Golon seemed outraged by one of his staff being treated in this manner, as Johno fully expected.

Ronson stood. 'What is the meaning of this? You kidnapped this man?'

‘He,’ Johnno calmly stated, ‘was the handler of Mr. Frieserling and his associate. On the sheet you have you’ll see the contact information Frieserling had for this man – *your* man. Including, when and where he was recruited ... and where he attended training courses in France.’

Golon again exchanged a flurry with his subordinate, this time the trussed prisoner simply looking away and refusing to answer. Roson joined in the questioning, not getting any answers; the French finally making eye contact, their concerned etched into the faces.

Johnno made eye contact with Claus, a signal given. Claus stepped out again, signalling someone forwards, before dragging around two more chairs and placing them next to the prisoner. Two more men were dragged in, both of these dressed only in loose-fitting overalls, barefoot and clearly tortured. The troopers dumped their two charges into the chairs, the men semi-conscious and suffering from the effects of the torture.

Golon recognised the men from the photographs, stepping across and rapidly demanding answers in French. He did not get any.

Johnno eased up and stood in front of the prisoners. Facing the semi-conscious men he said, ‘If you tell the truth you can leave here today with the French Minister.’ He eased back against the desk and folded his arms.

The prisoner sat closest to Johnno eased his head around to Golon, focusing his good eye, the other swollen. ‘We work for the Basel Freemason Group,’ he said in French.

Johnno sat back down, ordering fresh drinks. Looking up and addressing the French he said, ‘Gentlemen, please, have a seat.’

The French sat, clearly stunned and staring intently at their countrymen.

Johnno explained, ‘We’ve traced the explosives, also French, donated by a senior member of The Basel Freemason Group. And, gentlemen, the Italian part of Basel must have known that

if this ever got out it would be the French that got the blame, not them.

‘We, K2, along with British Intelligence and the British Government, have enough evidence for a solid case, and we’re collecting more all the time. We also have the secret files that the Basel group have been searching for these past forty odd years, files that show a great deal of corruption at the heart of the European Union involving former French Ministers and French Companies; corruption, tax evasion, bribery and murder. It would obviously be very *difficult* for you ... should that find its way to the courts and newspapers.’

Ronson and Golon stared back as drinks were brought in, Johno ordering the prisoners removed. With the door closed the room fell eerily quiet.

Golon finally said, in a less than confident voice, ‘Can we interrogate these men further?’

Johno handed over three CDs of the interviews so far. ‘It’s all on there. If you want more, you can talk to them here.’

Ronson nodded his head. ‘When you invited us here, you knew all this.’ He glanced at Blaum. ‘We came ... under a false pretext.’ Johno nodded his admission. ‘So what is your ... *agenda*?’ Ronson pressed.

‘Quite simple really. To find the people behind these terrorist attacks, and deal with them in a way that means Britain *does not* go to war with France.’

‘The Basel Group are too well connected,’ Golon suggested. ‘Too well embedded.’

‘Leave *them* ... to us,’ Johno confidently suggested, gesturing towards the drinks placed down for the French, but not touched yet. The guests lifted their drinks, sipping silently for many seconds.

‘*We* ... will not survive this,’ Ronson softly stated.

Helen looked away, those words a painful reminder of her own circumstances. Beesely noticed, closing in and placing a hand on her arm.

Johno lifted his gaze to Claus, who had remained standing throughout. Claus stepped to the desk and began tearing up the photographs and sheets, Johno tearing up the remainder of the file, Claus finally taking back the CDs and breaking them over the side of the desk, all curiously observed by the French, heavy frowns at this odd action.

‘If you co-operate with us, gentlemen, you’ll survive,’ Johno suggested.

‘Co-operate ... how?’ Golon enquired, suspicious of the statement.

‘We have a common enemy, and we have a common goal,’ Johno began. ‘We both want to rid ourselves of the Basel Group, to find and punish those responsible for terrorist acts and, more importantly, to prevent it from happening again.’

‘Why did Basel get involved with this business?’ Golon asked, a pained expression.

‘The UK Government threatened to send in forensic accountants to investigate *all* EU contracts, going back to the start of the EU.’

Golon and Ronson glanced at each other, slight shrugs.

Johno continued, ‘They were behind the radioactive dirty bomb attacks, meant as a warning for the British Government to back off. They also had a hand in the rogue CIA element that attacked us, making use of French gangs. Again, you would have got the blame, which I guess you did to a certain extent.’

Ronson took in the faces. ‘As you say, we have common goals. But are you saying that you –’ He gestured towards Helen. ‘- and British Intelligence will suppress this evidence?’

Johno eased forwards, resting his elbows on the desk and interlacing his fingers. ‘We, and the British Government, have no desire to destroy the economy of Europe,’ he emphatically stated. ‘We’re also the holders of this evidence. The only other people to know everything are Basel, and they’re not going to incriminate themselves. By time we’ve finished burying the evidence there’ll only be memories left – nothing tangible. That

... we'll work very hard at.' He waited, a sideways glance at Helen.

Ronson sipped his coffee, his features brightening. 'We will co-operate with you in *every* capacity - civil, the security services ... and our military. You will have the fullest co-operation possible.'

Johno eased back, a glance at Blaum before he again faced Minister Ronson. 'You may wish to distance yourselves from us, we're about to go to war with the Basel Group. We may not survive *and* we may end up in the newspapers.'

'And this ... war -' Ronson began.

'Will break a lot of laws,' Johno finished off.

Ronson spoke with his head lowered. 'Considering what has happened, and what is at stake, you have my full co-operation.' Now he lifted up. 'Regardless. If this ... *evidence* is all true, which I suspect it is, and we do nothing, we will make this problem worse for France - each day that passes.'

Golon offered, 'What we know about Basel will be here in the morning. If you need any logistical support -'

'Probably best you let us get on with it, that way no chance of any leaks,' Johno firmly suggested. 'When we act, you'll know it's us.' He shrugged. 'After that, if we're still alive, try if you can to contain things in France, play up the corruption and conspiracy stuff, blame the fucking Italians. But please, when you leave here, don't discuss this on the phone, or to anyone that doesn't need to know. If it leaks to the newspapers ...' He finished with a large Gallic shrug.

The French stood. Golon offered, 'I will send you Pascal, who visited here before. He will be your liaison, should you need it.' He placed down a business card.

Ronson faced Blaum, who had followed the French to their feet. 'You have carried a heavy burden by the sounds of it. If there is anything you need, don't hesitate to contact me.'

They shook. Johno walked around, firm handshakes for the visitors before Claus showed them out. Blaum closed the door,

standing with his back to it as he held the handle. He took in the faces.

Beesely motored himself around to Blaum. ‘Do you still have any doubts about who should be sat in that seat?’

‘None,’ Blaum said with a smile. ‘He is – as you English say – a chip off the old block.’

‘Damn right,’ Beesely affirmed. ‘And I’m more surprised than you are!’

Blaum waved collectively at the room before stepping out and closing the door.

Otto stood, letting out a long and heavy sigh. He faced Johnno. ‘I could not have done *that*, nor do I think I would have tried such a method. I am ... beginning to learn my limitations.’ He stepped out, Johnno grabbing a beer from the fridge.

Swivelling to face Helen Johnno said, ‘Went OK then?’

‘As Otto just said, I don’t think I could have done that.’

‘Nonsense, you’re much better at this stuff than I am,’ Johnno insisted.

Beesely motored around. ‘Helen, you’re used to doing things in a conventional sense. Johnno sees people and objectives, not countries and departments - simple, but effective. And the French never had any choice at the end of the day, their objectives *are* the same as ours. We needed to give them just the right evidence in just the right way, leading them to a heart stopping moment of theatrics. And for that Johnno deserves a bleeding Oscar!’

‘He is full of surprises,’ Helen admitted. ‘I had no idea that was about to happen.’

‘All his idea,’ Beesely insisted.

Claus stepped back in. ‘They have taken the bait.’

‘Bait?’ Beesely queried.

‘They’ve kidnapped Thomas,’ Johnno explained, none too concerned, raising a flat palm to Beesely. ‘And before you ask, his idea.’ He turned to Claus. ‘Tracker working?’



‘Yes, sir. And we have received several messages. They are heading towards Rome.’

The desk phone came to life. ‘Sir?’

‘Yes?’

‘It’s a Senor Pepi for you.’

‘Good, put him through.’

‘Herr Director?’ came a mocking tone.

‘This is he. That you, Mister Pepi?’

‘Of course.’

‘Well? Do I get to negotiate?’

‘You have not asked about your boy.’

‘To tell you the truth, I’d forgotten all about him.’

‘Vanker’ could be heard in the background.

‘He is safe and well, not kidnapped, just accompanying us to the meeting to save him travelling back and forth.’

‘Good idea. You fix a meet, next couple of days, let me know.’

Pepi paused at that, the suggestion of Thomas held by them for a few days. ‘We are preparing a meeting for tonight. Is Midnight OK with you?’

‘Midnight is fine, I’ll be coming alone.’

‘Fly to Rome and wait for my call, but be in Rome before 11pm.’

‘Sure. When in Rome.’

‘When in Rome ... what?’

‘That’s the saying, *when in Rome*.’

Pepi paused again. ‘Yes, but when in Rome ... do what?’

‘Be there on time.’

Another pause came from Pepi’s end. ‘I will call later.’ The line went dead.

‘When in Rome...?’ Helen repeated.

‘You had me there as well,’ Beesely suggested.

‘It’s ... er ... a code, just me an Thomas know.’

‘Oh,’ Helen let out, a deep ridge creasing her brow. ‘For a minute there I thought you were just rambling on a pile of manure.’

‘They’ll find the bugs on Thomas,’ Beesely cautioned. ‘Know it’s a set-up.’

‘First, grandpa, these bugs are extra special. They’re totally dormant electronically till he stamps his foot, then a short burst, untraceable. If they scan him ... nothing. Second, his Gameboy has been modified. They can scan all day, take it apart – won’t be noticed unless you’re the frigging expert from hell!’

He tapped the desk phone. ‘There’s a Basel top table meeting tonight, somewhere near Rome. I want all passenger manifests from twelve-noon today till midnight heading that way, agents on the Italian border logging everyone.’

‘Yes, sir.’

‘They took the bait,’ Beesely repeated. ‘If the top table meet then we’ve got them, by God!’

Johno nodded before raising a vertical finger, a coy smile breaking across his face.

‘What?’ Helen asked.

Johno turned and tapped the desk phone. ‘Oliver Stanton.’ They waited ten seconds.

‘Hello?’ came Stanton’s rich voice.

‘Mister Stanton, Johno, got some good news.’

‘Yeah, what’s that?’

‘Just had a big meeting with the French, their Interior Minister himself and the head of the DGSE.’

‘That can’t have been pretty. What’s the good news?’

‘They’re on board.’

‘On board?’

‘They’re just as pissed-off with Basel as us, and now that they know they’re in the dock for helping with the attacks on the UK can’t be helpful enough. They’re sending a top liaison guy, offered us full support of their entire intelligence services, army and anything else we like. Talk about lots of co-

operation afterwards, closer links, them having a say in what we do. Bleeding marvellous.'

Beesely grinned to himself, noticed by Helen.

'Well ... that's ... good news. Did you broker this deal, or Beesely?'

'Not me!' Beesely shouted. 'The boy did it all himself. French falling over themselves to help out.'

'Maybe they have their own agenda,' Stanton cautioned.

'Doubt it,' Johno countered with. 'And with them right on the border, might just survive this fight.'

'They'll help? Directly?'

'Yep, shooting war starts soon, they're waiting for their part of the list.'

'Christ, Johno. That'll put it out in the open, with the French having a hold over you.'

'Well ... K2 is a European operation at heart.'

'I got some people here, I'll call you later.' He cut the line.

Johno laughed, almost silently.

Beesely shook his head. 'You, my lad, are a devious little bag of shit!'

'I'm lost,' Helen offered. 'What's going on?'

Beesely faced her. 'He just hinted to Stanton that we're about to get into bed with the French, who can't stand the Yanks, and that the French may influence K2 in the future. Right now Olly will be sweating, probably calling a top table meeting.'

Claus stepped in, a strongly disapproving stare at Johno before he manipulated the video conferencing screen, switching it on and selecting CNN. He glared again at Johno before stepping out.

ABSOLUTE CHOAS TODAY AS THE FABLED  
TEMPLAR'S TREASURE HAS BEEN CONFIRMED  
FOUND IN NOVA SCOTIA. THE PRESIDENT HAS  
ALREADY STATED THAT NO IMMEDIATE

ALTERATION WILL BE MADE TO AMERICAN HISTORY, NOR HOLIDAYS SUCH AS COLUMBUS DAY.’

‘Oh dear,’ Johnno said with a grin. ‘Vatican won’t be pleased.’

‘Nor your new friends in the French Government,’ Helen pointed out.

‘Why’s this happening today?’ Johnno asked with a furrowed brow. He hit the phone. ‘Why was the Templar Treasure discovered today, it was supposed to wait?’

‘I believe, sir, that the eminent American geologist who found it made a mistake in the day required.’

‘Oh, OK.’ He eased back and faced Beesely and Helen.

‘Be a lot of busy puppies in Rome tonight,’ she pointed out.

Johnno blew out, his shoulder’s dropping. ‘We’re not ready. Besides, this news will probably run for days.’

‘Weeks!’ Beesely snapped, an unhappy stare at his offspring.

‘Sir?’ came from the phone.

‘Yes?’

‘Mr. Stanton again.’

‘OK, put him through.’

‘Johnno, you fucking arsehole!’

‘Who me?’ Johnno cut the line. Turning back he shrugged. ‘Wrong number.’