

SLAK

Part 1 - Mode C

Chapter 1

A tall Sikh is walking slowly through the thickening patches of mist drifting in and out of the trees surrounding a north London apartment block. He has a small piece of paper in one hand, a heavy case in the other and is looking at the apartment numbers. Everywhere the windows are dark and the only illumination comes from the dim path lights. Natwah Singh shivered slightly, partly from the cold breeze and partly from anticipation. Cynthia, her name had been, and she had the familiar wide-eyed look of all the girls at the Club.

Here it was, number 42. He peered at the row of buttons by the side of the door and then held the piece of paper up to a distant light. Cynthia Dorly, the top apartment. He pressed the button. There was a pause, the door buzzed and swung open loosely. Slender, genuine blond and about 18, he remembered. He manoeuvred his case through the door and across the small foyer. Waiting for the lift he looked around curiously. What did she do? He had known an actress once - 'surrounded by queers' was her problem. Well, he had sorted that out for her. With a soft thump the lift arrived and he entered, swinging in the case containing his Kit, and pressed "4". It was amazing the effect the Kit had on some girls, often the quietest-looking ones. In the mirror he glanced smugly at his lean face under the turban and the muscles bulging under his dark suit. Complacently he ran a finger over his black moustache and his pulse rate rose as he imagined long silky blond hair spread out over the pillow, wide unfocussed eyes and pouting red lips ...

The lift stopped and he athletically shouldered his way out. Before him there was a small stretch of carpet and an open door. He entered to find himself in a small utilitarian corridor with a further two doors. He paused there a moment but all he could hear was some odd atonal music from behind one of the doors, rather like the music of the homeland he had never seen. The other door was heavily padded and ajar. He pushed it fully open and entered a well-equipped, brightly lit private gymnasium. He stood there a moment looking around in surprise at the wall-bars, hanging ropes and - ah, by the side of a vaulting-horse a large plastic-foam mat. A faint bitter-sweet smell hung in the air. He was about to prod the mat to test its resilience when he heard footsteps in the corridor outside and the figure of a small stocky man wearing jeans and a blue long-sleeved shirt appeared in the doorway. He had a neutral expressionless face. Natwah stiffened. Husband? Boy-friend?

'Mr Singh?', said the man in a rather high-pitched voice. Natwah relaxed and nodded.

'Miss Dorly will soon be here. Will you change now?' He had a slight Cockney accent.

Without waiting for an answer, the figure disappeared and the heavy door closed silently.

Odd. Brother perhaps. Nothing to fear from that little runt anyway. He humped his case over to a slatted bench and started to undress, carefully folding his dark suit over it. He unzipped his case and pulled out the tunic, unfolded it and slipped it on, shivering slightly at the touch of the cold white nylon. He fastened the girdle and then reached in for the flexible protector and pushed his left arm into it. He bent his arm, checking for freedom of movement and hearing the over-lapping joints grate. Then he reached in for the three sections of the trident which he lifted out, carefully screwed together and leant its slim 1.80m length against the bench. And finally the big weighted net. He unfolded it and holding the trident harpoon in his right hand, automatically ran the net between his fingers, straightening it so it fell evenly.

The Retiarius gladiator was ready for battle!

He smiled to himself and lowered his arms, folding the net over the bench, the weights in the edge tapping against the wood. He wouldn't need a net for the battle tonight - the fish was more than willing!

He glanced at his wrist-watch impatiently, then sat down. 9:35pm already.

Suddenly there was a click and he turned round to see framed in the doorway the small man who had appeared before. But this time he also was dressed in the uniform of a gladiator! Shin-guards, arm-guards, half-cylindrical shield, broad 70cm long sword, and a helmet shaped like a fish. A Murmillo gladiator - symbolising a fish, the natural opponent of a Retiarius! All authentic as far as Natwah's swift gaze could tell, the fluorescent light gleaming on the polished armour.

'Idiot!' said Patel. 'What the hell do you think you're playing at? Where's Cynthia?'

The small man ignored him as he clumsily entered, the corner of his shield catching the side of the door-way with a clang. He recovered, heeled the door shut with a crash and marched past Natwah to the end of the gym, shin-guards clanking. Inconsequentially Natwah noted the bitter-sweet smell was stronger. There the Murmillo gladiator halted and turned round to face Patel. With a rasp he drew his sword and raising it said in his silly feminine voice: 'Morituri te salutant!'

Natwah looked at him in disbelief, not knowing whether to laugh at or pity an obvious mental defective. But without further ado the small man dashed at Patel, his sandalled feet thumping on the hardwood tiles of the gym and his sword inexpertly slashing. Natwah came hastily to his feet, parrying blows with his left arm. Mental defective or not, that was a real sword!

'Give over! Shove off!'

But his words had no effect. With face set under the helmet, the small man continued the attack, forcing Natwah back against the bench. Half amused, half irritated, he held off the attack with the protector on his left arm and reached out for the trident. What the devil was the matter with the man? He felt the weight of the blows on his arm reminding him the sword was of steel! If he wasn't careful he could get a nasty cut. He must be a boy-friend or husband after all. Natwah was now hastily parrying strokes with his trident as well as his left arm, the steel blade rasping along its slender length. The man was completely berserk!

'Look, I didn't know she was married,' he shouted. 'Just give over and I'll leave.' He didn't want any trouble with a kinky husband. Aie, when he told them about this at the Club he would get a laugh. He carelessly lowered his guard a moment and the small man leapt forward and with a lightning-quick thrust nicked Natwah in the left thigh! Natwah leapt back, incredulously looking at the red blood running down his leg.

'You stupid fool! Look what you've done! You're out of your tiny mind!'

He reached behind him and snatched up the net, in his haste almost catching his foot in it. Tie him up - that was the only way! And then call the police.

Automatically he ran the net between his hands and with the trident in his right hand moved purposefully forward into the centre of the gym, as he had done so many times at the Club. The Murmillo eyed the net and backed away cautiously. Natwah knew the Retiarius only had one throw and it had to be very carefully timed, but when it fell correctly it was completely effective. The weights sewn in its edge would carry it over, and the victim would be as helpless as a caught fish. Then a quick thrust of the harpoon and it was all over. Of course at the Club they never went that far ...

It was the classical duel of the slow-moving heavily-armed against the lightly-armed quick-mover, and that was why it had retained its popularity for so long in the

Munera - the deadly duel-to-the-death gladiator contests of Ancient Rome. Bloody hell! The fool was dangerous, advancing behind the shield and now, after the successful attack on his thigh, stabbing rather than slashing. He was uncoordinated but ferociously quick, holding his sword underhand like a knife-fighter, and he didn't seem to be getting tired carrying around that heavy armour. Natwah thought he would have to finish this quickly, using the tactics of which he was a master. He started by circling quickly around, then thrust the shaft of the trident between the Murmillo's legs. A quick twist should have sent his heavy opponent crashing on his back, but the Murmillo leapt up at the last moment, and Natwah himself had to jump back to avoid the gleaming sword-point. Right, this was serious, the hell with sparing him.

He advanced again, this time with the trident in the left hand. The Murmillo was turning to follow him, shield up and too far forward for a successful cast to envelop both man and shield. So Natwah swung the net like a whip, the weights hissing through the air and swinging in behind the shield. He heard then clanging against the Murmillo's fish-shaped helmet. But his opponent had thrust his head forward and down at the last moment, taking the viciously swinging weights on his helmet, instead of his face. Another swing of the net but this time the edge of the shield came up and hooking the net, almost jerked it out of his hand. Devil! He hadn't seen that counter before. He stabbed desperately upwards with the trident, but the Murmillo parried it easily with his sword.

With a shock Natwah realised that something was wrong. His opponent should by now have been lying in a corner of the gym, neatly trussed in the net, while Natwah with relief was dialling for the police. Instead, the Murmillo was learning incredibly quickly and it was Natwah who was on the defensive. The weight of his armour seemed no hindrance to the Murmillo and he made no unnecessary movements.

Natwah attacked again, the weights in his net hissing as this time he swept it low, attempting bolas-like to wrap them round his opponent's legs. But the Murmillo merely leapt up with both legs clear and the net passed harmlessly under, rattling on the hard-wood floor. Natwah was panting now and bitterly regretting the heavy meal he had eaten with his friend Ali before he came here. He had tried all his tricks, but the Murmillo with his terrifyingly expressionless face seemed to anticipate every move, blocking his every attack, fiercely stabbing and slashing and forcing Natwah on to the defence. Now he was backing Natwah into a corner of the gym, and Natwah knew that if this happened it was the classical end for the Retiarius, who must have room to swing his net. He must make his cast, it was now or never!

Blinking the sweat out of his eyes, Natwah swung his net above his head, round and round, letting the weights open it out into a menacing hissing canopy. The Murmillo, eyes upwards on the net, retreated, sword up ready to slash. Round and round, the weights whirring, the Retiarius slowly advancing and the Murmillo retreating before him, their sandalled feet scraping on the white wooden floor. But Patel's breath was rasping and his arm was aching - the Retiarius could not keep this up for long. He must make his cast! With a last despairing whirl he flung the net and as it flew through the air he ducked and with the last of his force followed it up with a thrust of his trident between the Murmillo's widely spaced legs. And he almost succeeded! The Murmillo, eyes on the flying net, caught it with his sword-point and swept it to one side, but stumbled heavily over the trident. But then he recovered with lightning rapidity, dropping the edge of his heavy shield onto the out-stretched shaft of the trident, slamming it to the ground, almost wrenching it from Patel's hand and pulling him forwards onto his knees. Immediately the Murmillo leapt forwards and

thrust his shield at Patel's face, catching him a heavy blow on the forehead. Natwah stunned, knelt there on hands and knees, head hanging down loosely, blood dripping from his nose.

The Murmillo looked upwards a moment and uttered a strange barking cough. Then with a single movement he crisply sheathed his sword and took a step backwards. Natwah groaned and tried to pull himself up, the Murmillo watching him expressionlessly as though expecting something. But Natwah was at the end of his strength, and could only look up pleadingly. Some faint expression (contempt?) glowed an instant in the gladiator's opaque eyes. Whatever it was, it was the last thing Natwah saw in this world as with a swift movement the Murmillo drew his sword again and thrust the 50mm wide blade into Patel's upthrust throat. Without a sound the Sikh collapsed forward, his life's blood pumping out, slowly spreading and staining the clean white wooden tiles a bright glistening red.

The Murmillo dropped his sword and shield then went to one corner of the gym, returning with a small portable battery-powered electric tool. He stooped over Patel's lifeless body and the tool whined. After a minute he put the tool down on the floor and leant forwards. There was a long slurping sound.

Chapter 2

It was a beautiful summer morning when I levered myself along Whitehall with a springy step. It was going to be one of those rare dry sunny days when the weather seemed completely in agreement with the spirits. Optimistic, a new challenge, a new world opening, new friends, new opportunities. And not bad for a man who had been suspended from one of the top jobs in the country for conduct "contrary to procedural regulations of the Metropolitan Police." I'd show some of those stupid rule-bound functionaries that my place was still in the front-line. I had not the temperament to slow down and had refused their well-meant offer. I would not be put out to pasture as a section head in "Administrative Duties". Career change at 36 is a great risk, but as in a miracle, it was working! And to fill my cup further, they were already bitterly regretting my absence, if the calls I had received from them were any sign.

Without thinking I had taken the customary route and after passing the slowly turning "New Scotland Yard" sign, went up to the porter.

`Morning, Chief-Inspector.'

`Morning Bill. Just "Mister" now,' I said, with a smile. `I have to see Chief Inspector Seeger.'

The porter picked up a phone, looked down at his desk and punched some buttons. He spoke briefly then looked up.

`Yes, he's waiting for you. Go straight up. You know where his office is.'

I did indeed I thought, as I paced through the well-known corridors, smelling the familiar odour of linoleum polish. It had been **my** office for the last 5 years. I tapped on the door bearing the large new sign `Chief-Inspector N. Seeger', and walked in. A small dapper man of 42 in a dark-blue suit was standing up, speaking into the phone.

`Well, it's all yours now, Peter,' Seeger said impatiently, running his hand over his thin black carefully arranged hair. He affected a slight American accent, to remind everyone that he had worked a year at Interpol.

Seeing me enter, he waved to the chair in front of his desk.

`You'll just have to lean on them then. And listen laddie, I want a full report on my desk by 9 o'clock tomorrow.' He cradled the phone, sat down and noted something

on his desk calendar. He looked up, stretching his thin lips in a seldom-seen smile. He wanted something from me, but was damned if he was going to ask for it.

`James, I asked you to drop by because I've just been having a chat with the Commissioner and he seems to think that as you sat at this desk for so long, you might be able to give us an input,' he said, his small black eyes watching me calculating. I looked at him. A smarmy, devious, `desk' policeman, disliked by his men, and obviously nervous in spite of his confident gestures. Rumour had it that he had long schemed for my position, and when I had over-stepped the mark with those Arab terrorists and been suspended, he had seen the vacancy as his last chance. He had vowed that not only would he follow the Rules of Procedure to the letter but he would introduce modern methods and double efficiency. But now he found himself actually sitting at my desk in charge of an important investigation, and it was not as easy as he had thought. Not at all.

`It is the duty of every good citizen to help the police,' I said ponderously. `Which particular "input" did you have in mind?' I was being deliberately obtuse -there could only be one. The papers were full of reports of a serial killer, the perpetrator of the dramatically named `Brain Drain' murders.

`We were all behind you at your trial,' he said, inconsequentially changing the subject, `and felt you did the only thing you could have done under the circumstances.' He lined up the calendar on his desk. `But rules ...,' He shrugged. `The Commissioner said we would miss your experience, and he's right. We sure could use it now.'

He waved his hands over a row of glossy photographs laid out on his desk.

`All the victims are from the Martial Arts scene. You'd think they'd be able to take care of themselves. But no. They all get beaten at their own speciality. And then a hole is drilled in the head, as neat as you please, and the brain is removed. Sucked out, if we can believe Forensic. Three so far, one in Birmingham, one in London and another in London last night. A Sikh.'

I glanced idly at the photos.

`I'm glad the Commissioner still remembers me,' I said, `but I really have my hands full now with my new company, and in any case I could only suggest things that you must have done already. Just keep going according to the book - the murderer must have made a mistake somewhere.'

Seeger scooped up the photos and snapped a rubber band around them. He waved them impatiently.

`Sure, we're doing all that. But it takes time and in the meantime we're getting a hell of a roasting in the media.' He meant **he** was getting a roasting.

`What we want is someone who will look over all the evidence and give us a new view-point. Someone like you.'

`I'm sorry, Seeger,' I said, not without some sympathy. `I'd like to help, but detecting is a full-time job and I've got my life-savings in "Safe". I just can't leave it now. You could try offering a reward,' I added as an afterthought. Seeger made a gesture of rejection and I half agreed with him. Offer a reward and the police switchboards are immediately flooded with calls, mostly from cranks, which however all have to be investigated.

We chatted about a few other subjects and then I looked at my watch.

`I'm sorry,' I said again, and stood up.

Seeger stood up too and came around his desk, photos in hand.

`Very well. But look at these sometime: you may think of something.' He pushed them under my unwilling arm.

Chapter 3

I parked my car outside a rather run-down office-block in North London and still carrying the photos from Seeger, opened a door marked "Safe Ltd. Surveillance, Data Protection". I walked down a creaking corridor to my office.

Mike Daley, a burly 6 ft 2, 23 year old American student, looked up from the PC on his desk set next to mine, brushing his blond hair out of his eyes. He stood up, we shook hands and he called me "Sir". I hung my coat behind the door then leaned over his shoulder, looking at the screen.

'You seem to be getting the hang of that thing,' I said encouragingly.

'The ICE order for your surveillance cameras came in this morning. And they ordered 25, not the 20 in our proposal!' he said, a smile on his wide face. A good lad Mike, I had known his father since he was third secretary at the US Embassy and so when he mentioned his son was looking for a temporary job during his college vacation, and I was just starting up ...

'Great,' I said. I dropped the photos face down on my desk and picked up the phone. 'Does Phil know?' I asked him. 'He must get on to them right away.'

I started to punch in numbers. Mike turned round on his stool to face me.

'He's real pleased. He figures he can modify our old ...' He stopped, looking at the photos on my desk with the "Scotland Yard" stamp across the backs.

'Wow! "Scotland Yard"!,' he said. 'Can I ...?'

'Go ahead,' I said dialling. He picked them up and removed the rubber band.

'Yuk!' he said, fanning them out. 'I didn't realise ..., they're much worse than they show on your TV. Jeez, when the English get into murder they really do it gruesome. That's three now in three weeks, isn't it? One after the other. I'm sure glad you're helping them: they don't seem to be getting anywhere on their own.'

I put the phone down unused. I had just had Seeger trying to pressure me to help, and here this young man was doing the same thing. I looked at him with exasperation.

'Yes, they did ask me to help, but I said the same thing to them I'll say to you. I'm no longer on the Force. Hunting murderers is a full-time job and my full-time job now is director of "Safe". How do you think business would fare if your Director went haring off playing detective?'

But Mike was not listening. He had just seen one of the photos. It was of the Sikh. His head was to one side to show the hole drilled just above the left ear.

'This is a Retarius,' he said. 'Look, this is his Rete, his net.'

'Indeed,' I said, 'What's that, and how do you know?'

He looked slightly embarrassed.

'Well, I'm kinda interested in the AMA, the Ancient Martial Arts scene, you know. It's a big thing in London. You've got some of the top players. In fact it's one of the reasons I chose to spend my vacation in London.'

The "AMA scene". Of course I had heard of them. MGM were doing a remake of the Roman epic "Quo Vadis" at Pinewood Studios in the suburbs of London and had needed lots of extras. All the gladiator uniforms had been imported but there was no shortage of home-grown out-of-work actors to wear them, amateur and professional. And after the shooting of the gladiator scenes, some enterprising company had bought up the uniforms and now hired them out to small clubs which had sprung up all over the place and were teaching their members the different ways that gladiators had fought. The clubs were particularly popular with yuppies and young office

workers, who used to practise in their lunch hour. They even had simulated combats with blunted weapons. I had seen the end of a program on TV about it.

'And I suppose you have green belts and black belts like in Judo?' I asked, faintly interested.

'Sure,' he said absently. He had picked up a magnifying glass from my desk and was looking at the last photo. He gave a gasp.

'I thought so! I know this guy. I recognise the ring on his finger. This is Natwah Singh - I met him at a reception and it was he who introduced me to an AMA club. He's the son of the Indian ambassador. Why would anyone want to murder him? He was a real nice guy.'

'Really?' I said, standing up surprised. 'Are you quite sure?' I said, reaching for the photo. I had never met the son. But once, a long time ago, I had had to lock up his father, Gopal, when I was just a police constable walking a beat, and he a Junior Administrator. He had been "Drunk and Disorderly" on a Boat Race night and it had been a struggle to get him into the cell. He had been sprung the next day but we had somehow become friends. He used to introduce me as the "fascist pig who had put me in prison" and laugh uproariously. We had remained in contact but we didn't meet very often these days.

Chapter 4

That evening, accompanied by Mike, I drove across the river and drew up outside a shabby building in the East End of London. I looked around the dilapidated surroundings then turned to carefully lock my car. A neon sign flickered erratically - 'Tai Kwan Do and Ancient Martial Arts School, proprietor Max Krupka, 2nd Dan.'

Mike had told me that Max Krupka had been a sergeant in the Paratroop Regiment and a member of the Army Karate team. Part of his service had been spent in Germany and he had married a girl from Hannover. She had died in a car accident a year ago and the single daughter was being brought up by Max. After finishing his ten years service he had started up his own Martial Arts Club and had recently jumped on the "Ancient" Martial Arts band-wagon. Mike said he was a "tough cookie" and a bit of a rough-diamond.

'And this is where the son of the Indian Ambassador to the Court of St James trained?' I asked incredulously.

'Max Krupka was one of the best fighters and is now a great teacher. What Natwah likes, .. er .. liked, was that they didn't know him from Adam here.' He paused. 'He liked to get away from all that diplomatic crap. He said he was "persona incognito" here.'

Two stocky young men carrying sports bags politely stood aside as we entered. Mike nodded to them.

'Could you tell Max we're here?' he said.

He led the way to Max's office. A small red-haired girl about 13 years old and wearing a navy-blue school-uniform was working industriously at an exercise book on the corner of the desk. When we entered she looked up startled, her short hair falling back to reveal big golden eyes.

'Hi, Roz,' said Mike. He waved his hand vaguely. 'Roz, er .. Rosemunde, is Max's daughter. Rosemunde, meet James Murdock.'

The small slim girl stood up, made a neat curtsy and held out her hand. Surprised, I shook it. She really was quite pretty.

'I am very pleased to meet you,' she said formally in a high clear voice, looking at me directly.

I looked down at her nonplussed. I knew nothing about little girls. Were they all so well behaved? I thought about friends' daughters fleetingly seen and doubted it.

She must have realised that we had some business with her father so she closed her exercise book, put it in a leather satchel and with a quick smile at Mike, left the room.

I glanced around at the battered though orderly desk and at lists of names pinned to the wall. Behind the door was a lurid poster of a bird-headed being stepping out of a flying saucer and assuming an exaggerated karate stance.

'Good God! Who's bird-brain?' I asked.

'Science fiction,' said Mike. 'It's his only interest outside the martial arts. Apart from his daughter, of course.'

I took off my overcoat and folded it over my arm. There were some steps outside and a dark stocky, thick-necked 35-year old man with a rather ugly face entered. He had the broad shoulders, self-confident air and erect bearing of an ex-soldier. He was wearing Kendo uniform with the wooden sword, the "bokuto", in his hand. He looked at us impassively.

'Hi, Max,' said Mike, holding out his hand.

Max looked down surprised at Mike's hand, then suddenly remembering Americans always shake hands, transferred the bokuto to his left hand and extended his arm. There was a short embarrassed silence.

'Max,' said Mike. 'This is the guy I wanted you to meet. James Murdock - Max Krupka.' Max didn't offer his hand.

'I brought Mr Murdock because he was once with the police and I figured he could speak to some of Patel's friends. Perhaps they know something they didn't tell the police.'

'Well, he could hardly be more useless than the two stuck-up pigs that came here this morning,' said Max in a nasal Liverpool accent. He turned and slammed his bokuto into a rack on the wall. I looked at him coldly, surprised at the instant enmity. How could he have such a well-behaved daughter?

'The police-force in London is very undermanned,' I said evenly. 'I'm sure they did their best in the time available.'

'As soon as they saw Patel's mates were a couple of Pakis they were in and out like a dose of salts,' said Max contemptuously.

'Max, for Chrissake,' said Mike. 'Mr Murdock came here because I asked him. I think we should see Ali and Jan.'

'He ain't going to believe a couple of nig-nogs any more than his mates. And anyway, only Ali is here.'

I took my coat off my arm and started to put it on again. It's only a waste of time to question a hostile witness.

'So let's see Ali,' said Mike. He took the coat out of my hands and hung it up. Max hesitated a moment then opened his office door abruptly and walked out. We followed him.

We walked rapidly along the side of a large exercise area, empty but for two men, dressed as gladiators, who were practising in one corner. They ignored us as we entered a warm changing room, smelling of soap.

A tall handsome turban-wearing Sikh was just taking off the jacket of a Kendo uniform. He had obviously been practising with Max.

'Ali, this man wants to talk to you.'

I extended my hand to the rather surprised Ali, who shook it. I then looked around, sat down on a bench and pulled out my notebook.

'Perhaps I should introduce myself Mr. ...?' I paused interrogatively.

`Ali. Ali Naik.' He had a sing-song Indian accent.

`Right. Mr Naik, then,' I said writing it down. I looked up at him. `My name is Murdock and I was in the London Metropolitan Police for a number of years, but I have now er... retired and so you are in no way obliged to answer my questions.'

`Oh, but you will, won't you Ali?' said Mike.

`Er, yes, sure, of course. If it will help.' He slipped the jacket on again and sat down too.

`Good. Now first. How long have you known Mr Singh?'

`About a year.'

`Did you know who he was?'

`Who he was? He was a student - economics or something.'

`And what sort of person was he?'

`He was OK.' (Glancing at Max) `He was our best Ret, he was number three here. We used to go out sometimes. Cinemas and pubs, you know. He was OK.'

`Did you see him at all yesterday?'

`Yes, we met in a pub at half seven for a meal but he left around half eight.'

`Did he say where he was going?'

`No, but he was all ponced up so I just sort of thought ...'

`What did you think?'

`Well, he was very popular. He had lots of friends.' He looked at me.

`You mean girl-friends,' I said.

`Yes.'

`So he was off to see a girl. The person who killed Natwah Singh was probably not a girl, and certainly not a friend.' I stood up and looked at a poster on one of the lockers. Jesus, hadn't the investigating officer identified Natwah Singh as the son of the Indian Ambassador?

`And you told all this to the police?' I asked, over my shoulder.

`The police? They didn't ask me.'

We returned to Max's office.

`Is there anywhere here where I can make a phone-call?' I asked.

Max looked with surprise at his desk, as though to check his phone was still there.

`"Privately",' I said.

`"Privately", said Max derisively. `Yeah, I'm sure you don't want us to hear what you say to your mates in the police. What a shambles! "They didn't ask me" (He imitated Ali's accent.) I'm wondering how much they talked to the friends of the other fighters who were killed.'

He paused a moment, his head on one side.

`I knew one of them. We could go round and talk to his mates.' He paused again then looked directly at me. `You could talk to them.' Ex-sergeant Max Krupka obviously didn't find it easy to ask for things.

`Now just a minute,' I said, holding up a hand. `I promised Mike I would speak to Patel's friends, and I admit the inquiry was not done as well as it could have been. But I didn't say I would take over the whole damn investigation of these murders. I have neither the time nor the authority.'

`It's on your way home,' said Mike persuasively holding my coat out for me.

`Very well, on the way home,' I said crossly, pushing my arms into the sleeves. All hell would break loose when Natwah Singh was identified. I would have to phone the information in when I got home.

Max then unselfconsciously pulled off his Kendo uniform and tugged on a pair of scrubbed clean jeans and a stiffly-ironed green military-style shirt. He rapidly

buttoned it, tucked it into the jeans, and zipped up the jeans crisply. He thrust his feet into calf-length boots, pushing the jeans into the top, and zipped them up too. Head up for a quick check of his appearance in the wall mirror, he ran a comb through his hair and picked up the phone on his desk. He punched a button.

‘Roz,’ he said quietly, ‘I have to go out. I should be back ...’ he glanced at the wall clock. ‘...at about twenty-two hundred. Will you be OK?’

There was a smile on his ugly face as he listened to her reply. He put the phone down gently and turned to us.

‘You got wheels?’ he asked brusquely. Mike nodded. ‘OK, let’s go.’

Chapter 5

After a drive across London through light traffic we were soon drifting past the ostentatiously under-stated Dorchester Hotel entrance and Max said:

‘Left there, where it says “Dorchester Parking”.’

I changed down and turned in. A uniformed porter stepped forwards officiously.

‘Excuse me sir, this is private parking. Are you a hotel guest?’

I could sort this one out. I turned to Mike, pointing to the glove compartment.

‘There’s a police pass there, in a blue folder,’ I said. He reached to open it but the porter suddenly caught sight of Max in the back seat.

‘Oh, I’m sorry sir,’ said the porter. ‘I didn’t see you for a moment.’

He smilingly raised the barrier, saluting the car as it passed. I was impressed, but drove down the ramp without comment.

‘Wow!’ said Mike, admiringly.

I parked between a Lamborghini and a Rolls and we all climbed out. Guided by Max we entered a lift and he pressed a button.

A few seconds later the lift opened on a warm brightly-lit, blue-carpeted corridor opposite a glass door marked ‘Ogashi Sports Club’ in probably real gold lettering. Max opened it and we followed him in. Behind the reception desk a dark short-haired muscular young man in Judo costume was looking through a filing cabinet. He turned towards us and his flat face lit up with pleasure.

‘Max!’ he said with a surprised look. ‘Is there something on I don’t know about?’ He had a very public-school accent.

‘No, Peter,’ said Max. ‘It’s unofficial. Is Perce in?’ Peter leaned forward over the desk to look up the corridor.

‘He went past here a minute ago.’ He raised his voice. ‘Perce! It’s Max Krupka!’ A door down the corridor half opened and another public-school voice replied:

‘Be there in just a tick.’

While we were waiting two very beautiful young girls appeared from the other end of the corridor, sauntered down it, smiled at Peter, eyed Mike invitingly and left the club.

‘Groupies,’ said Peter.

‘We have them too,’ said Max.

‘But not like those,’ said Mike.

‘Oh, I dunno,’ answered Max. ‘Did you ever see that ...?’

This fascinating conversation was interrupted by the door opening fully and the appearance of a tall blond young man with a thin aristocratic face. He was wearing a Judo tunic with elegant black trousers and shoes. He shook Max’s hand heartily, slapping him on the back.

‘Wotcha wack, it’s good to see yer again,’ he said in an exaggerated Liverpool accent. ‘What can I do for you?’

There was a pause then Max said: 'It's about the murder.' The atmosphere chilled. 'I've brought someone who may be able to help. Can we talk?'

Perce looked up the corridor and then said:

'The ladies' changing room is empty. Pete, can you bring in some chairs?'

A few minutes later we were all sitting or draped over stools and benches under harsh fluorescent lights. There was a faint smell of embrocation. Max started:

'Natwah Singh, who was at my School, was done in last night. He was the third "Brain Drain" murder. It was on the box this morning. The crazy who is doing this is only hitting us in the Martial Arts scene. There could be more and the police are doing FA. We gotta do something ourselves.' I could see his military experience at making short reports was standing him in good stead.

He looked across at me.

'Which is why I've brought James Murdock, who used to be a copper.' There was a silence and all eyes swivelled towards me.

'Yes, I was a policeman ...' I began.

'A Chief-Inspector at Scotland Yard,' said Mike in his Californian accent.

'Thank you, Mike,' I said. 'Yes, Mr Krupka has kindly invited me here but I have to say immediately that there is very little I can do. I have retired from the Force and no longer have any authority to require answers from witnesses. Nor do I have any way of influencing the path an investigation may take. I am a private citizen.'

I was about to add that I was a very busy private citizen, but didn't.

'He was round my place doing alright talking to Patel's mate and I think he could do the same thing here,' said Max.

'If you can do anything, sir, we'd be very grateful,' said Peter, looking at me.

I glanced around at the earnest young faces and sighed. I thought of telling them about some of the irrational random murders I had solved, where no logic, no brilliant detective work was possible. They were solved by sheer brute force, by hundreds of men watching (in one case) shoe-stores up and down the country, until a psychopath finally repeated himself.

'Tell me about the man that was killed in your club,' I said to Peter, in answer.

'Paul Hudson was his name. We called him "Soapy", of course.' Everyone nodded except Mike, who looked baffled. 'His speciality was Peruvian knife-fighting. He had learnt it as a film extra. He was the British champion - which means he was the World champion as no other country recognises it - even Peru. He and a few of his friends used to meet here occasionally - they had a club. We rented him our gym facilities.'

'Was he here on the night he was murdered?'

'Yes,' answered Perce. 'He had phoned in to see if there were any letters for him. I told him there was one and he said he would come around and pick it up and do an hour in the gym at the same time.'

'And then what happened?'

'Well, he read the letter, and left again immediately. I remember being annoyed that he cancelled his hour in the gym at such short notice.'

'Did he say why he did that?'

'Not to me,' said Perce.

'He looked very pleased and said he wouldn't need the gym,' said Peter.

'Do you remember his exact words?'

'Well, not exactly but I sort of got the impression that ..er..' He looked around embarrassed. '..that he had some other sort of exercise laid on.'

'"Laid on", I like it,' said Mike, grinning.

`So you think his remarks were consistent with the supposition that he had a rendezvous with a young lady?' I said. This was a murder investigation, not a music-hall turn.

`Er, yes, I suppose so.'

`And you told this to the police?'

`Everything except that last bit.'

`So like Patel, he had a heavy date,' said Max.

No one answered and I was writing in my notebook. After a while I looked up.

`What is Peruvian knife-fighting?' I asked.

Peter looked across at Perce who said:

`It's done with a knife and a shawl. Each fighter wraps most of the shawl around his left arm to act as a shield, but he lets a length of shawl hang down in front of himself.' He demonstrated with a towel for the shawl and a ball-point pen for the knife. `The shawl hides the knife and it can also be used to catch the opponent's knife and pull it to one side.'

`You know Paul was knifed,' I said. `And when his body was found there was a shawl wrapped around his arm.'

`Where there any cuts in the shawl?' asked Max, who had been listening closely. I looked at him approvingly.

`Yes, there were a number of slashes in the part guarding the arm, but only one hole in the hanging part. This hole had Paul's blood on it.'

`It was weird,' said Perce. `Only a beginner would slash at the arm. And the single thrust shows Paul must have been killed by an expert.'

`Same as for Patel,' said Max. `His arm guard was covered with sword slashes, but he was finally killed with a single thrust too.'

`Assuming the murderer is the same person,' I said, `it looks as though he is both an expert gladiator and an expert knife-fighter. Either is out of the ordinary: someone who has both abilities must be quite unusual.'

`Not forgetting Joe Smith,' added Max. `The bloke up North who was killed with a fencing sword.'

`But that's incredible!' said Mike. `Someone that good's gotta be known.'

`Exactly,' I said, closing my book. `You must have the information between you. You could try to find him from your side.'

There was an excited babble of conversation but I looked at my watch and stood up, followed by Mike. Peter turned to me and said:

`Thank you for taking the time to come and see us, sir, and giving us some new ideas.' He held out his hand and I shook it, thinking however that what I had said was pretty obvious. The outsider seeing the wood for the trees.

As Mike and myself left the changing room, the voices rose again, Max's deep voice prevailing:

`I'll call Fred in Birmingham and see if he's got anything new. And then we've gotta start looking through our files. Maybe it's the same bloke under different names so we'd better check ...' The door closed on their voices.

Chapter 6

A few days later I was with a customer when I received a call from Mike, saying Max wanted me to call him. It wasn't until the late evening that I was free.

`Good of you to call back, Mr Murdock,' said Max. `Look, something's come up.'

`Yes?' I said warily. I had wasted an evening on these murders and didn't want to waste any more.

`Our best Threx got in a shunt and is KO in hospital. We needed his Kit so we opened his locker and found a note from a bird.'

There was an expectant silence. The message had been given and now I was expected to reply. I felt my vision blurring.

`If you could repeat that?' I said finally.

`One of our top gladiator fighters was in a car smash and was knocked unconscious. We needed to show his Kit to a bloke from the TV so had to break open his locker. In the locker we found a note from a bird called Cathy, inviting him to her apartment tonight in Docklands. OK?'

`So far.'

`The note goes on to say Jack, that's our bloke in hospital, should come round to her flat at 10pm.'

`It does sound a bit suspicious,' I agreed.

`And here's the clincher! The note says he should bring his Kit!' There was a rustle of paper. `It says, "Will you please come in your wonderful gladiator uniform. You look so handsome in it".'

Damn, I thought. That sounds like the real thing. I just can't ignore it - I would have to report this to Seeger.

But just a minute, Cathy must be known to Jack for the trap to work.

`And what does Cathy say about all this?'

`Right. There is a girl who hangs around the Club called Cathy. I just called her up but the bird who shares her flat says she's on a holiday in the Isle of Man and isn't coming back till next week.'

`Could there be another girl called Cathy?'

`Mebbe. But this one is Cathy Hardcastle and one of the blokes recognised her fist.'

And Jack himself can't say anything as he is still unconscious, I thought.

`You're thinking this is a trick to get your top fighter off alone,' I summarised.

Silence was answer enough.

`Very well,' I said briskly. `It sounds as though you may have found something. Give me the address of the flat he's been invited to.'

Max read it out. I copied it down carefully on a piece of paper and continued:

`Now I must report this to the officer in charge of the case and he will contact you.' There was a disappointed pause and he hung up.

*

I dialled the private number of Seeger.

`Murdock, here' I announced. `I think I've got something for you on the "Brain Drain" murders.'

`Indeed?' said Seeger.

`You will remember that murder number three was of a member of the Max Krupka Martial Arts School. Well, Mr Krupka himself has just called me to say he has found evidence indicating another murder is being planned for this evening. He's pretty steamed up as it's a member of his School again.'

`And?'

`The attack is supposed to take place in Docklands at 10pm tonight. If you act quickly you should be able to set up an ambush. You have ...' I looked at my watch, `...one and a half hours.'

`Just give me his number; I'll decide what to do when I've spoken to him.'

Arrogant fool, I thought angrily as I read out Max's number then hung up.

*

Half an hour later I was in my office writing up a report on my last customer visit and Mike was typing at the word processor. The phone rang.

It was Max and he was furious.

'Who's this prick Seeger?!' he shouted down the phone. 'And how come he's in charge of an important case like this? He's now got less than an hour to plan an ambush and he takes five minutes giving me stick for not going through official channels and another five minutes warning me off. Doesn't the stupid bugger realise that this is a golden opportunity to grab the crazy and if we miss out more fighters are goin' to get the chop? Or doesn't he care as only AMA fighters are being knocked off?'

I heard this tirade uneasily. What was with Seeger? He shouldn't have spoken to Max like that.

'Don't take on, Max,' I said placatingly. 'Seeger certainly cares: he will gain a lot of kudos if he breaks this case. And don't worry - he will call in a specialist anti-terrorist team to set up the ambush. They have been carefully trained and have plans and procedures for all eventualities.'

'"Plans and procedures" my arse!' snarled Max. 'I served two tours in Northern Ireland and you can't set up sod-all in an hour. I just know Seeger's goin' to screw it up. The only way to play it now is for someone to take Mike's place and that's gotta be me. I'll dress up as a Threx and fix the psycho. The AT team can pick up the pieces later.' The phone was slammed down.

Damn. I rang Max back immediately but all I got was an answering-machine.

'That was Max Krupka, wasn't it?' said Mike from the PC. His voice must have been audible across the room.

'Yes. What's a Threx gladiator?'

'"Thraex". The Thraex has a helmet, shin-guards, small round shield and a dagger. Why do you ask? Is anything wrong?'

'Yes,' I said, and quickly explained what Max had found. 'And now he intends to dress up as a Thraex gladiator and meet the murderer in the place of the fighter who is in hospital.'

'Jesus!' said Mike. 'We gotta stop him! That murderer is mad and has killed everyone he has met so far. We gotta persuade Max to keep away and leave the arrest to the cops. He's got a daughter to think of.'

'He's not answering his phone,' I said, thinking rapidly. I looked at the wall clock. 9:10pm. 'I must go to Docklands and see if I can stop him there.'

I picked up the paper with the address on it and stuffing it into my pocket, made for the door.

'And I'm coming with you,' said Mike, unhooking his coat and pulling it on.

'I hoped you'd want to,' I said. 'I can do with a navigator.' I handed him the address.

Chapter 7

Because of an accident on the A1206 it was not until 9:50pm and dark that we finally arrived in Docklands, the sidelights of my car revealing deserted concrete-mixers and stacked tools as we slowly made our bumpy way over half made-up roads.

'This must be it,' said Mike, his face a faint glow in the dash-board lamp as he bent over the map.

I pulled in beside a newly-built apartment block standing alone. We stepped out and quietly closed the car doors.

It was a dark and windy night. Docklands, tucked away in a loop of the River Thames and once such a busy part of London, had become a strange lost corner. The old Victorian warehouses were being slowly refurbished to make way for yuppy residences and office blocks. Freight to and from Europe now went by container carrying ships from the east-coast port of Felixtowe.

I looked around. Silence except for the gusting wind bringing in the salty smell of the estuary. Blackness except for a few faint lights on the other side of the river. The apartment block itself, except for a dim light in the lobby, was in darkness. Most of the apartments were apparently not yet occupied, probably because of the exorbitant rents being asked. I shivered and thrust my hands deeply into the pockets of my dark overcoat.

'It's on the 5th floor,' whispered Mike. 'Do you think the killer's there already?'

I shrugged in the darkness. Where were the police? They should be here - they could force their way through traffic better than we could. And then I saw a police car - parked in the shadows opposite the lobby! Easily identified by its stubby VHF aerial. But it was empty - where was everyone? Had they seen Max and followed him up to the top flat? I touched Mike on the arm.

'Go round to the back of the apartment block and tell me if you can see anything,' I whispered. 'I'll stay here and watch the front.'

Mike disappeared silently but reappeared almost immediately.

'There's a police truck there. The headlights are shining on a big door that's gotta be the entrance to an underground car-park. Five or six of 'em are standing round and one guy is fiddling with the lock - they're trying to break in.'

I looked around. If the action was in the underground garage there should be someone here too - another exit from the garage would surely be via a lift to the apartment lobby.

Nothing.

Fumbling with the car keys I opened the car trunk and reaching in pulled out two big spanners. I gave one to Mike.

'Let's see what's going on down there.'

We ran up the steps to the glass doors, thrust them open and swiftly crossing the empty lobby, made for the lift. I pressed the call button and we waited impatiently until suddenly it appeared from below. Spanners ready, we snatched the door open, but the lift was empty.

'In,' I said, then pressed the button for "Garage". If the police were interested in it we could at least look there first. A short drop and we were opposite a steel door. I crashed it open and closely followed by Mike entered the brightly illuminated garage.

The garish overhead fluorescent lights were on and I could see immediately that this was where it was. My God, there had been a fight!

There were blood-stains on the concrete floor and to one side lay a long curved dagger near a large half-cylindrical Roman shield. As we entered the garage my foot clanged against a discarded brass shin-guard, kicking it forwards. But where were Max and the Brain Drain killer? There was a shout of despair from the corner.

And then I saw them! We had arrived in the nick of time! Max was almost on his knees against a concrete pillar and another figure, who could only be the Killer, was viciously stabbing down at him with a short Roman sword. Max was holding up a small shield with both hands, desperately parrying. The sword blade was repeatedly rasping on the tiny protecting shield as he staved off the deadly short-arm thrusts.

At the noise of our entry his attacker span round and for the first time I saw the Brain Drain Killer!

He was a short stocky figure in a dark-brown sweater wearing a tall brass helmet. Framed between the chin-strap and the out-jutting peak of the helmet was a broad, pale and completely expressionless face, like a tailor's dummy. But there was nothing expressionless about the way he instantly switched his attention away from Max and focussed his empty eyes on us. With the swift dainty deadly steps of a fencer he slithered towards us, his broad sword-blade horizontal, glittering under the fluorescent lights, the point flicking like a snake's tongue.

Holding up my spanner uselessly, I leapt to the right and at the same time I felt Mike move to the left. This was bloody dangerous! The Killer was lightning fast and with a sword he could outreach us and easily take us one at a time. Sweating with fear I dodged to the right again and ... suddenly the lights went out! They must be on a timer and the timer had just counted out.

I flinched as I felt the wind of the sword blade as it stabbed past my cheek. And now, in the dark, I noticed a strong sweet feral smell hanging in the air. Before I could identify it there was a deep clang off to the right as someone's foot struck the shield. I dropped to my hands and knees and heard a hiss as the blade passed closely over my head in an vicious sweep. I froze, feeling the gritty concrete floor under my hands, breathing silently through an open mouth, cursing for getting myself and Mike in such a deadly situation - trapped in an underground car park with a sword-armed psychopathic Killer! At any moment he would stumble on me and a slash or a thrust would be equally lethal. I cringed, waiting for the pain of a steel sword-blade slicing muscle and sinew.

Silence - no one would make the slightest noise for fear of attracting the attention of the Killer. I could hear him pacing around and the hissing of his swinging sword as it cut murderous circles in the darkness. He had moved away from me so I raised my head and risked a shout.

'Get behind the cars! Hang on until the police come!' I hoped the echoes would confuse his sense of location. There was a pause and then some scuffling sounds.

Now I could hear the Killer behind me, sliding his hands against the wall, looking for the door to the lift and the light switch that would be next to it. Where were the police? What were they doing? In a moment he would find the light switch and we would be exposed again.

At last! There was a faint shout deep in the darkness followed by a sudden crash, the roar of an engine and the scream of tearing metal. The police had evidently not been able to open the garage door and so had rammed it with their truck. There were more louder shouts, faint lights appeared in the darkness and then suddenly, flickering on one after the other, the garage fluorescent tubes came on again.

I saw the Killer gladiator standing near the wall, one hand stretched out and the sword drawn back ready for a thrust. He stiffened then spun round to look irresolutely towards the garage entrance, hidden round a bend. His face was as ever completely expressionless. He remained immobile a moment and then his eyes lit on my cringing form. He took a quick step towards me, sword ready. But again his attention was distracted by echoing shouts from the far end of the garage. He stooped, picked up his shield, paused indecisively and then turned abruptly and ran silently towards the garage entrance.

Two burly blue-uniformed figures appeared around the corner, the fluorescent lights reflecting from the metal facing on their helmets.

'Hey, you there! Stop!' shouted one, seeing him coming and raising his truncheon. They were the last words he uttered as without breaking his step the gladiator's sword glittered in a vicious thrust and the policeman fell limply to the

ground. The other constable attacked bravely and we could hear the clang as his truncheon struck the gladiator's shield. There was another thrust, apparently not lethal this time as the fallen figure was shouting.

`Watch out! He's armed!' And then the gladiator disappeared from view around the corner. A few distant shouts, and a pistol shot, echoing through the garage. Silence again descended.

I turned to Max.

He was dressed in blue jeans and a navy-blue sweater and his pale sweat-streaked face was hardly recognisable under a tall brass helmet. He leant weakly against a concrete pillar, one arm with a small shield strapped to it hanging down limply. He had a brass shin-guard on one leg and blood was dripping from his right arm making a small pool at his feet.

`I'm all right,' he croaked, seeing me looking at his arm. `It's not serious.'

`You fought him!' said Mike.

`Yes,' said Max shakily putting his hand to his head and slowly pulling off the helmet. He suddenly gasped and shivered.

`Shock and blood-loss,' I said to Mike. `We've got to get him to a hospital.'

There were distant shouts from the end of the garage, making ghostly echoes. Then the echoing bang of another pistol shot.

I looked quickly round the battlefield under the glaring fluorescent lights. I motioned towards the dagger and the shin-guard.

`Are these yours?'

He nodded weakly. I picked them up.

`Let's go.' We each took an arm and helped him into the lift. While Mike pressed the button I slid down the sleeve of Max's pullover and examined the slash on his forearm which was still slowly bleeding. I bunched the pullover in the bend of his elbow and folded his arm back against his chest.

`Hold it there.'

We guided him out of the lobby and down the steps, around the corner of the apartment and into my waiting car. At the other end of the road a car was on fire and black moving figures were silhouetted against the red glare. A helicopter with a flashing blue light underneath it was approaching with a loud clattering sound.

I started the car. We left the way we had come and no one noticed our departure.

It had been one of the worst organised ambushes I had ever seen.

Chapter 8

Mike and I were dozing on hard chairs in the empty waiting room of St Clement's hospital emergency department. The grey door to the dressing-room opened and Max emerged slowly with a fresh white bandage on his right arm, a piece of paper and a bottle of pills in his left hand. He walked over to us and sat down heavily. His face matched the colour of the door.

`You're a bloody fool to have done that, you know,' I said. `You did nothing but risk your life pointlessly. What would happen to your daughter if you had died?'

`Leave my daughter out of it,' he said angrily. `I saw the killer and can describe him. And that's more than anyone else has done so far.'

`So did we and half a dozen policemen.'

`If it wasn't for me you wouldn't of. I fought him for about ten minutes. You must be able to get something from that.'

`All right,' I said pulling out my note-book. `What happened?'

Mike was about to protest that Max was too tired and weak from loss of blood to answer questions and should be in bed, but a look from me reminded him that interviews are best conducted as soon as possible after the event. In the same way fighter pilots are debriefed immediately on landing.

The following is a more-or-less verbatim account of what happened to Max from the time he arrived at Docklands and located the apartment block.

Chapter 9

He didn't see any accident on the A1206 so he arrived on time at a building site near to the apartment block at 9:35pm, having driven like us on side-lights.

He began to realise that he was all on his own. His anger was cooling and his resolution beginning to weaken. He remembered that Natwah had been very quick and an expert with the net, yet he had been killed and then his brains... He blanked his mind off hurriedly. And that Peruvian knife-fighter - you had to be lightning fast for that, much good it had done him. And the fencer Joe Smith, he was at the top of the Northern League and was slated to visit Paris with the British team next week. His head too ... He was beginning to regret his

outburst to me where he had said he was going to meet the murderer - it wasn't easy to back out now. If it hadn't been for that stupid arrogant sneering policeman he wouldn't have spoken to me so impulsively! And why the fuck hadn't he phoned around to get someone to go with him, to cover his arse? He swore to himself. Shit, he *had* to go on. He looked at the dashboard clock.

Another 15 minutes to go. He reached back into the car and tilting the driving seat forwards, lifted out a heavy sack which clinked as it moved. Instead of bringing the short dagger and small shield of the Thraex gladiator, he had thought of arming himself with something more lethal. Like with one of his Samurai swords, whose use so resembled his favourite sport of Kendo. But the strange mind of the psychopathic killer might not be tempted unless the ancient Roman gladiator contest rules were followed exactly. Which meant the murderer himself would be armed as a "Samnes" gladiator - helmet, large shield and straight sword.

The invitation had said 'come in your wonderful uniform' so he had better get ready now - and just hope no one would see him in the apartment lift. He undid the draw-string of the sack and pulled out the shin-guards. One at a time he buckled them over his jeans, resting his foot against the running-board. Then the helmet with its chin-strap. Finally the small round shield with the curved dagger clipped to its inner surface. His muscular left arm, covered as it was with his dark sweater, would not slip under the strap, so he pulled the sleeve back and then grasped the grip. With the shield in place he realised he could not see his wrist-watch, so he twisted it to the inside of his wrist. 9:55pm. Time to go.

He drew the dagger, its heavy curved blade gleaming dully in the distant lights, weighed it in his hand a moment then slid it back into its scabbard.

Feeling rather foolish and half hoping someone would notice him and make him abandon the whole crazy dangerous idea, he started walking across the building site, making for the half made-up road outside the apartment block. The shin-guards were heavy and he had to keep his legs slightly apart to stop them clanking together. He walked steadily along the side of the road, the light from the distant entrance making distorted reflections on the few parked cars.

Well, this was it. He had a last look up the dark deserted road and then mounted the three shallow steps to the glass entrance door. He pushed his way into the small empty dimly-lit new smelling lobby and pressed for the lift. With a soft sigh it arrived.

He hinged open the glass door and entered. Apartment 10, right at the top. Swallowing nervously and pulse thumping, he pressed the button for the 5th floor, looking at his sweating face under the gaudy helmet in the bevel-edged, incongruously pink-tinted mirror. As he flexed his knees and loosened the dagger in the scabbard he had a sudden strange feeling that something wrong was happening!

The lift, after a surprisingly short journey, stopped with a soft thump. He looked up startled at the glass door of the lift and suddenly realised the lift had not gone up but down! Outside was the rough metal door leading to the underground parking. Before he could react, the garage door was wrenched open and standing in front of him, no more than a yard away was a short figure dressed in Roman armour! Gleaming eyes under a high helmet surveyed him over the edge of a large half-cylindrical shield and a short straight sword blade stretched out at him, impatiently prodding him out of the lift, like a cockle out of its shell. The Samnes gladiator was waiting!

It would be suicide to stay where he was, hemmed in. He must get out! With an instinctive movement of the small shield Max parried the sword tip and reaching behind him with his free hand, thrust against the rear wall of the lift. He convulsively leapt out of the lift and jumped to one side.

The door slammed closed behind him and he was alone in an underground park garage with a homicidal madman who had already killed at least three times!

He snatched the dagger out of its scabbard and held up the shield, but the gladiator was not attacking. Instead he had lowered his shield and facing Max was raising his sword vertically in some sort of salute. Max could see he was a small man, no more than 5ft 6ins tall, clean shaven and with a pale neutral expressionless face - almost like a tailor's dummy. His thin lips moved as he shouted something in a foreign language in a high voice. Then down came the sword, up came the shield, and he rushed ferociously at Max, swinging his sword. Max had his shield up immediately but instead of feeling the impact of the sword blade there was a loud grinding sound as the Samnes's sword tip struck the unexpectedly low garage ceiling. White dust fell, but this was only a momentary respite. Sideways delivered slashes crashed against his shield and they danced around each other, feet scuffing on the gritty floor and breath panting. Max tried to close in with his dagger but every time he managed to deflect the sword, the big Samnes shield came up. It looked like a standoff and Max remembered what had happened to the other fighters. His best chance would be if he could force a quick conclusion.

The Samnes was only slashing at his head - Max's shin-guards were heavy and useless, limiting his mobility. How could he get rid of them? He moved quickly around the Samnes, away from his sword-arm then suddenly bent down and slashed at the leather straps of his right shin-guard. It fell free forwards and he kicked it clanging towards the Samnes, hoping to trip him. This seemed to infuriate the latter who made renewed attacks, this time slashing down lower, at Max's legs. But his left guard was still in position and this was the only exposed leg as they circled around. Twice it was struck, but Max was a lot more manoeuvrable now. He feinted to the right, away from the sword-arm again, as though he wanted to cut off his other shin-guard. The Samnes spun round to follow but Max danced to the left and for a moment saw the murderer's exposed back. He leapt forwards and stabbing the left shoulder at the full extension of his arm, saw the blood spurt out. But immediately the Samnes completed the turn and the big shield came up again. Max had to leap back from the frenziedly swinging sword.

Eyes locked they continued sliding around each other, Max confidently probing for another opening and exultantly seeing that the Samnes's shield was slipping - the wound in the left arm must make it difficult to hold up its weight. Seeing an opening Max jumped forward and with the edge of his small shield pushed down the top of the big Samnes shield, exposing the left arm again. Using all his strength Max stabbed out again but at the last moment the Samne's shield came up and his dagger struck the top edge a heavy blow, a numbing shock running up his arm. Shit! He leapt back just in time to avoid the swinging sword!

But suddenly there was a shift in tactics. With a loud clang the Samnes threw his heavy shield to the ground and changed the grip on his sword. Wounded left arm on his hip and right leg advanced, the Samnes was now attacking like a fencer! This was a dangerous change! Sword held high and horizontal in the classical fencing pose, the Samnes was no longer slashing, but advancing in short mincing steps and making quick deadly thrusts. Max tried to deflect the thrusts upwards and dash under his guard with his short dagger, but the Samnes, freed of the weight of his shield, parried or leapt back agilely out of reach each time.

After a few minutes of this strenuous exercise, Max was tiring. His shield was getting heavier and heavier and now and then he was obliged to support it with both hands to hold it against the increasingly rapid thrusts. The murderer's energy seemed inexhaustible as he danced around Max, outreaching him with his longer sword. Sweat was running down into Max's eyes as the cold fluorescent lights shone down pitilessly on the deadly and more and more uneven contest.

Why were the fucking lights still on? Shouldn't there be a time switch in a garage? If only he could switch the lights off! A quick glance showed there was a press-type switch by the door - and there was a piece of wood or something jammed into it, holding it on permanently! If only he could dislodge it, he would be saved! Gasping and desperately parrying the rain of venomous thrusts that grated off his small shield, he slowly retreated backwards and choosing his moment, reached out and slashed quickly at the switch, dislodging the piece of wood which fell to the ground.

Nothing! The bloody lights were still on! But of course, the timer would hold the lights on for another two minutes or so. If he could only avoid the sword-blade for that long!

Now he had his back to a pillar. He had dropped his dagger and with both hands on his tiny shield was desperately parrying the faster and faster thrusts. Pushed in front of him it was the only thing that was saving him! Up, down, to the right, to the right again, now to the left ... The Samnes completely dominated him. A sudden pain in his right forearm! The Samnes stopped an instant, stepped back and raising his sword said something like `have-it!'

And just before the blade came down again Max remembered what was going to happen to him! He imagined the first early commuter descending to the garage for his car, opening the garage door and switching on the lights and finding his lifeless body with holes where his eyes had been, his skull empty, his brain sucked out of his head! The vomit rose in his throat but fear was stronger. Child-like he longed to run and hide behind one of the parked cars. Away from that terrifyingly expressionless face with the saurian eyes.

But before he could move, the killer was at him again! Now he was on his knees, almost pleadingly holding up his shield, fending off the endlessly stabbing point, the pain in the muscles of his forearms well-nigh unbearable, the edges of the shield slippery with his own blood and it seemed all over when suddenly

the garage lift door opened and we crashed onto the scene!

Chapter 10

'Right,' I said putting my book away, my forehead covered with sweat as though I had survived the same combat as Mike. I took a deep breath and looked around to find I was in a quiet hospital waiting-room. I faintly remembered some road-accident victims had arrived, been treated and had left while I was writing.

'I'll take you home,' I said to Max. 'And I'll drop you off on the way,' I added to Mike.

There were no complaints as I shepherded them out to my Jaguar in the hospital car-park.

*

Two days later I was sitting at my desk at "Safe" and slightly sweating as I put the phone down. I had just had an uncomfortable call from Sir Peter Roncali, the Chief Commissioner of Scotland Yard. Mike looked across at me sympathetically.

'That was the top man at Scotland Yard. I only met him twice in my whole career. He was furious. Seeger lost three men killed and had four wounded. The murderer slashed the tyres of the two police cars and managed to set one on fire. He then escaped on foot, taking all his gladiator kit with him. Incredible.'

'Any finger-prints?' asked Mike, trying to be helpful.

'None,' I said. 'All the fresh finger-prints have been identified with Max or inhabitants of the apartment block. Sketches of the murderer's face have been sent to all the papers and will be seen on TV tonight, but there's not much hope as it's so neutral.'

'I think you were lucky,' said Mike seriously. 'In the States you could have been arrested for hindering the police and removing the main witness.'

'And not only in the States,' I said. 'I slightly calmed Sir Peter by saying I had had to get the witness to hospital as soon as possible to save his life. And told him I had sent a complete report to Seeger. Now he wants a copy for himself.'

I flipped open a copy of that morning's "Telegraph".

'Three policemen were killed. There's the manhunt of the century on. They're offering a reward of ten thousand pounds for information leading to the arrest of ... It's just a question of time before they catch him now.' Scotland Yard must be like an upturned wasps' nest. I thought a moment but really there was nothing else I could do. I pushed the "Telegraph" paper aside and looked across at Mike.

'So do you think we can get back to work now?' I held up a sheet of paper that had lain two days untouched on my desk. 'We have to get these proposals out.'

Mike hesitated, then took it.

'Yes, sure. But I guess there's one other thing you oughta know,' he said. 'Max says that the blood on the right sleeve of his pullover was his own, but that the blood on his left sleeve came from the killer.'

Another complication.

'Then he should give the pullover to the police immediately.'

'Yes, but he didn't notice it until later and Seeger was so hostile to him when he interrogated him - he left him locked up in a cell for a whole morning - that Max said ...' He paused, probably filtering out Max's actual words. '.. Max said that if he saw Seeger one more time he would hit him. He thinks that Seeger deliberately hexed him to take Mike's place and meet the killer on his own. To act as a decoy for the police.'

I opened his mouth to protest, then closed it. Seeger *had* behaved very provocatively to Max. It was the devious sort of thing Seeger was notorious for.

'Well, he'd better hand it over now and let them analyse it,' I said.

'I have a friend at Chelmsford Hospital,' said Mike unexpectedly, 'and *he* has analysed it.'

'Well all right,' said I irritably. 'Then hand the analysis over to Seeger. Although how your friend's going to talk his way out of that I can't imagine.' I was getting totally fed up with this case. It had nothing to do with me and was interfering with the running of "Safe" on which my future livelihood depended, unless I was prepared to survive on my small police pension.

'That's the problem,' said Mike. 'I have the analysis here. It's odd.' He opened his desk drawer, pulled out two sheets of paper stapled together, and handed them over to me.

I took them unwillingly. The first sheet was the familiar blood-test form, except that instead of the "Caversham Forensic Laboratories", it had "Chelmsford Hospital" for the heading. I scanned down the list of figures showing globulin, cholesterol, blood group etc. It seemed fairly normal. The second sheet was the gene print and was much less familiar, as it was a new and only recently introduced technique. It was supposed to give a unique "print" for every blood sample. I looked down it rather blankly until I saw the spiky hand written note at the bottom:

"The genetic material in the sample is unlike anything seen in this laboratory in the three years of its existence. Nor have we found any references to it in the literature. Although strongly resembling normal DNA, there are important differences in particular as regarding ..."

I looked up.

'So it's unusual. But even I know that gene-printing is a new technique, they're probably discovering new gene characteristics all the time.'

'Perhaps,' said Mike. 'But my friend was really excited and wanted to know where we had got the sample. He says it's something completely new.'

I imagined the analysis arriving on Seeger's desk and him making long phone calls to find why the blood had not been analysed by the police laboratories. And then he would send for Max ...

'I think we should go visit my friend,' said Mike.

'Very well,' I said resignedly. 'But only after you have sent out these proposals.'

Chapter 11

Late that evening Mike myself and Max were all sitting in a small old-fashioned tiled laboratory with wooden benches. The shelves were filled with rows and rows of small bottles, I recognised a centrifuge and there were pieces of wet paper with black marks on them drying under an infra-red lamp. It all looked surprisingly primitive for a laboratory specialising in genetic research.

Dr Carstairs, a tall, distinguished young man with a high aquiline aristocratic nose and wearing an impeccably pressed white lab coat and white cotton gloves, had met us at Reception. He had led us here down a long corridor past laboratories seemingly filled with young girl researchers in white smocks.

'And these girls are all doing genetic engineering?' Mike had asked, exchanging a smirk with Max.

Max had said nothing but the way he had eyed one shapely young researcher in black stockings who had preceded us down the corridor showed pretty clearly that he preferred "Nature's way".

Dr Carstairs had then picked up one of the enigmatic pieces of still damp paper, pointing out various unintelligible black marks on it with suppressed excitement.

After ten minutes of this, we were all looking restless and so, after glancing at the other two, who seemed equally baffled, I said:

'I'm sorry. My background is police and I know something about blood tests, but gene-printing is rather new to me. Could you please explain in more simple language what is so unusual about the blood sample Max gave you?'

Carstairs halted in mid-flow and looked abashed.

'I see, sorry about that, I thought you were all ...er...you know.'

'Could you start right from the beginning,' added Mike. 'I don't know *anything* about gene-printing.'

Dr Carstairs faced us and put his hands behind his back.

'Very well. You must have heard of the expression "Genetic Code".' We all nodded. 'Well, what it means is that all of us carry in every cell of our body a complex molecule which is really a series of instructions, coded instructions, as to how to make us out of ... er...out of food. This molecule, called DNA, is used to control our growth - from the fertilised egg up to the adult. And as we are all different, every DNA molecule is different. We here can "read" some of this code and as it's unique to every person we can use it to identify him or her if we have a sample of his DNA. Hence the term "Gene Printing" as opposed to finger printing. OK?'

We all nodded again, a little more doubtfully.

'Good,' he continued. 'Now we get to the interesting bit. "Growing-up" means making more and more cells and this DNA has to be copied over and over again, millions and millions of times, as each cell needs a copy. Mistakes can occur in the copying. And mistakes mean that the cell which hosts a badly copied DNA molecule will not do what it should. It might die or multiply like crazy and form a tumour, for instance. Now these are simple copying mistakes. But even when the DNA is in place in the cell it can also be altered by various poisonous chemicals, by viruses or even high-speed particles which can come from radioactive material, from our sun or even from deep space – what are called Cosmic Rays. Whatever the reason, if the DNA gets altered it doesn't do its programming job properly and the cell may die or form a tumour. Still with me?'

'Good, he continued. 'Now Nature has developed a way of solving this problem, of making sure the genetic message gets through without any errors. It uses something called "Redundancy".'

He turned round and rubbed some complicated diagram off the black-board, plus a note saying "Tell Alice to get more milk". He picked up a piece of chalk and wrote "REDUNDANCY" in large letters and then under it:

"Y-U C-N AL- UN-ER-TA-D WHA- I HAV- WR--TEN"

'Is that true?' he asked looking round. We nodded smiling and I was a bit surprised.

'I have knocked out 10 letters out of 35 and yet "you can all understand what I have written". That's because writing is very "redundant". Even though you can't read all the words of someone's bad hand-writing, you can usually fill in the gaps. And it's the same with the DNA code. If it has redundancy built into it, it can still be correctly "read", even though there are a lot of errors.'

We all looked at the black-board in silence.

'OK,' said Max finally. 'But that's it. Knock out any more, like the "I" and you start to change the message.'

Carstairs looked at Max's rock-like face in slight surprise.

`Good,' he said. `The sentence only has a certain amount of redundancy and can only compensate for a certain number of errors. If you make more errors than it can compensate for, you start to lose the sense.'

`Now,' he continued. `The genetic code, our genetic code, has evolved so that it has just enough redundancy to compensate for the errors that we can expect on our planet - produced by cosmic rays and the like. In fact, we can look at our genetic code and by seeing how much redundancy it has built-in, we can make an estimate of how much radiation we can tolerate.'

`OK for radiation,' said Max. `But what about all those poisonous chemicals you were talking about?'

`Excellent!' said Carstairs beaming at him. `These poisonous chemicals and the nuclear radiation which leaks from our industries have only appeared in the last hundred years or so, and we haven't had time to evolve, to adapt to them. The amount of redundancy in our DNA is not enough for present conditions. Hence the increase in cancer.'

`But we will adapt?' I asked.

`Given time, yes.' He waved a hand dismissively. `But I didn't ask you to come here to talk about that.'

He paused impressively.

`I have found that the amount of redundancy in the DNA of the sample you gave us is *five times greater* than that in normal DNA.' He looked at us expectantly.

`So if I understand correctly,' I said. `The DNA in the sample can resist five times as much radiation and poisonous chemicals as normal DNA.'

`Exactly!'

`So it must have evolved somewhere where the radiation and poisonous chemicals are much higher than is normal,' I continued.

`Like on another planet,' said Max. `That figures. I thought there was something funny about it. It's an Alien.'

There was general laughter but not from Max, who scowled.

`Well, we'll try to find a simpler explanation than that,' smiled Dr Carstairs. `But now that I've told you what is strange about the sample,' he continued, `I think you should tell me where it came from.'

I must have looked embarrassed. Carstairs had done a good job and perhaps discovered something new, something that could help the police in their search for a homicidal maniac. But if his discovery leaked out it might also conceivably help the murderer to avoid or in some way distract the police.

`As I told you,' I started slowly. `My back- ground is police. Your analysis will be handed to the department that I used to work for and they will have to decide what to do with it. I'm sure they will eventually tell you where the sample came from and then you will be free to claim credit for your discovery. But until then I cannot tell you and furthermore must ask you to keep everything secret.'

*

`Well, if nothing else, it's a pretty perfect way of identifying our murderer,' said Mike to Max, as we drove away from the laboratory.

I said nothing. It was all no doubt very absorbing, however I had to worry about something even more absorbing - the monthly rent on our offices, the monthly salary bill, the trip I must soon take to the US.

But there was something I must do immediately. something I had been putting off for too long. I phoned the Indian Embassy and was quietly informed that the Ambassador was at the Residence and not taking any calls.

I told Mike I was going out and drove round to the Residence. Gopel, Sir Gopel Singh he was now. The poor bastard, his only son. He must feel like hell.

Arriving there it was only with a lot of difficulty that I persuaded someone to send in my card.

I found Gopal sitting in a dark curtained room before a small shrine. He looked shrunken and ten years older. In his brown seamed face with the snowy moustache there was no trace of the lively young diplomat I had known. I sat quietly in the incense perfumed darkness beside him. After a while he turned to me.

'Jim,' he said brokenly. 'What is the matter with the world today? Not only has my son been killed but ... Nowhere have I heard of such a disgusting perversion, it is evil, Natwah has lost his immortal soul, he has been destroyed.' He choked.

He turned to me, grasping my lapel and looking directly in my eyes.

'Jim, promise me you will find and kill this animal!'

'Gopal,' I said gently. 'I am no longer with the police. I have retired. But the police are very capable. The murderer has only escaped detection so far because he is totally irrational. But criminals always make mistakes and sooner or later ...'

'Sooner or later! Is that all you can say to me? This man, this abomination, is going to kill and ... and ... to kill again.'

He was right, of course. I knew something about these cases; they had been my speciality at the Yard. The police had no idea as to the identity of the killer. They would very likely have to wait for more murders before they had even enough information to ask the right questions. And there would be other broken fathers and mothers suffering like Patel. I made a sudden resolution.

'Very well, Gopal. I'll do what I can. But I'm a private citizen now, you know, I can do little else but advise.'

He silently put his hand on my shoulder.

'There are many of my race in your country. My grandfather used to say that we and the English worked well together in the past. We can work together again. If you need help, please ask me.'

I left him kneeling before the shrine and tiptoed out of the room, feeling more moved than was my wont. We detectives find that hate for the game we hunt doesn't help; if anything it hinders. We can become rather clinical. It was salutary to see now and then the effect a crime has on its victims.

Chapter 12

Just before we left for the US, there was an interesting item of news on the BBC. It had come from their studios in New York. There had been an unusual murder - it had needed to be unusual for it to make the headlines in New York City, where there were on the average five every day.

This one had occurred in Central Park and was of a celebrated sportsman. Half Japanese, Mr Motusi was the American Kendo champion. Max had explained that this was a sort of imitation sword fighting where both contestants hold their wooden swords in two hands. Cuts are made at the wrists, upper body or head. These are naturally protected by leather bandages, a padded tunic and a basket-work helmet. In Japan it was a way of training for Samurai sword fighting. Imported into England it was supposed to have influenced British Army bayonet fighting. I remembered it was Max's preferred sport.

The victim had been jogging through the park in the early morning, trailed by his trainer in a car. The car had developed a puncture (later found to be due to special

nails lying on the road). Warmed up and unwilling to wait, Motusi had told his trainer to change the wheel and catch him up later. Motusi had then run off on his own.

According to the sole witness of the murder, Motusi was later seen jogging with someone else. Motusi speeded up but was apparently unable to outrun the unwelcome visitor. The unknown had finally put on a burst of speed and overtaking Motusi, pulled out a knife. At the same time he had thrown down another knife on the ground between them. He had then started to attack Motusi who had been forced to pick up the knife in order to defend himself.

'Yeah sure, Motusi was quick; I recognised him of course,' said the interviewed witness, 'but the other guy was even quicker. He just ran circles around him and then stabbed him in the neck.'

'How far away were you?' asked the interviewer.

'About 50 yards. I didn't worry any - I thought Motusi would see off the other guy.'

'What did the killer look like? Did you recognise him?'

'I told the cops all about that. He was a small stocky guy, a bit taller than Motusi but not much. And I was too far away to see much of his face - except he hadn't a beard or moustache. Kinda nothing, really.'

'What did you do when you saw Motusi fall?'

'What did I do?! Why Mister, I figured that if he could take out Motusi like that, I would be the next. He wouldn't wanna witness. I lit out round the Pond and grabbed a cop on Fifth.'

'So you didn't see what the killer did to?'

'No I didn't, and from what I hear, I'm sure glad I didn't. I tell you Mister, we got some nuts in Noo York City, but in twenny years I never heard ...'

End of interview and back to studio, still in New York.

A different interviewer was talking to a criminologist and speculating if the British "Brain Drain" killer had crossed the Atlantic and if so why. The expert was pontificating about how unlikely it was, murderers are more easily detected when they lose the protective colouring they have in their own country. It was more likely a "Copy Cat" murder. Which was a reason why the irresponsible media, sacrificing everything for viewing figures, should restrain themselves ...

The interviewer, visibly irritated by this slur, pointed out that the National American Kendo champion had been killed in what was apparently a fair fight and didn't he think the killer could well be some "expert" from overseas? In which case it was the clear duty of the media...

I switched off. It sounded like the expression "Brain Drain" still retained something of its original meaning.

Chapter 13

We had received a letter from a well-known company in the United States called "Securetec", and they had shown great interest in our surveillance cameras, in particular the memory and the motion detector. They were in New Jersey, Mike had been to College in New Jersey and we also had some more vague enquiries from the New York area, not far away. It seemed it would all come together if I took a business trip to New Jersey, taking Mike with me. I was to find out later that there were going to be still other connections between my recent experiences in England and what went on in the US.

I had been to America several times before of course, but mostly for police conferences in New York and Chicago.

We took off from Heathrow at 1pm and after six hours landed at Kennedy International at 1pm, local time. We were immediately plunged into that wildly hectic city. Mike came from California and obviously hated New York. He looked out disparagingly as our Airbus taxied up to the disembarkation point.

`OK, it's on the mainland of the US, but it's nothing to do with the real America. It's a savage cosmopolitan foreign city - like Tangiers, or somewhere. It's filled with drug peddlers, criminals, sophisticated smoothies and corrupt policemen.'

`Yeah,' he said in reply to my jocular remark, `And probably white-slave traffickers too.'

After a long passage through brusque and cynical Customs and Immigration, surely one of the rudest in the Western World, we humped our baggage over to the 100yds long Rent-a-Car counter, picked up the keys to a Chevrolet, and were soon heading south, Mike driving.

It was 3 pm, the sun was high in the sky, but my internal clock told me it was 9 pm and as we were only going to be here a few days there was no point in getting used to local time. And then getting synchronised back to British time when we returned.

We were swishing over Expressways, Belt Parkways, Turnpikes and Routes with their numbers in green shields. It was very hot and there was a brown smog hanging over everything. A long silver tail-finned Cadillac, even longer than our Chevrolet, slid past us.

We went through some toll-booths and things suddenly got better. Six lanes in each direction, a good smooth road surface and trees to hide the industry. We picked up speed and it got cooler as the New Jersey Turnpike turnoffs flicked past regularly.

It was now 4 o'clock in the afternoon local time, and our first visit was to a company at 5pm in a small town called Metuchen. We got there just on time and the meeting turned out much better than I could have expected. They were in the same business as us but a man on their board turned out to be an old police acquaintance and after the technical part of the meeting he invited us out. It wasn't until 8:30pm local time, and dark, that we were able to get away, on the plea that it was "really" 2:30am for us.

We got back on the Turnpike and zoomed down to the Hightstown exit. Mike put our card in the toll-booth slot, threw the money in the basket and we drew away.

`Let's find a motel and crash out,' I said.

A few minutes driving towards Princeton and a Travel Lodge Motel sign appeared out of the darkness.

Mike pulled in at the end of a line of parked cars and we walked to Reception. I looked around, remembering the big concrete slab pavements, sorry "sidewalks", the big white concrete kerbs and the coarse-bladed neatly trimmed grass. America is so similar to England that it's only in the fine details that I see the differences. But they must get their petrol and coffee from different localities than us. The coffee - terrible! So mild and weak. I had often tried to double-load percolators, but for some reason it makes no difference.

And then the petrol - either it comes from a different part of the world or they refine it differently. Whatever - exhaust fumes are one of the "different" smells of America. And their big woofy cars. That one for example - a metallic silver Cadillac. It must be a popular model in the New York area. The driver, a young man wearing a sharp suit, sat with his hands clasped high on the steering-wheel, his chin resting on the back of his thumbs. He was listening to the radio and the engine was still running to keep the air-conditioner on. In Germany some officious pedestrian would probably tell him to turn it off as he was polluting the environment.

In the hot humid darkness we sauntered tiredly towards Reception and took our place behind a man and his blond-haired son who were booking in. The man was wearing bright check trousers and the son long Bermuda shorts, long white socks and a T-shirt with a large number 69 printed on it. His rear view bid fair to be similar to his father's in another five years.

Two big well-dressed men were standing at the coffee bar in one corner, one older than the other. I recognised the younger as the one I had seen in the Cadillac. Both were wearing dark 3-piece draped suits -you don't see those in England anymore. I was about to ask Mike about the meaning of "69" - I've never understood the complexities of American football - but he also was looking at them. So I glanced at them curiously again. The older, around 35, was dark and handsome in a vulgar Italian way, with cold street-wise insolent eyes. The other, much younger at about 18, and pretty rather than handsome, was looking around challengingly, throwing up peanuts and catching them in his mouth, like in an old Bogart movie. Both wore wrist chains, ear-rings in their left ears, Rolex watches and snappy highly-polished pointed black shoes.

As Mike waited to book in for us both, I stepped back and looked at some tourist brochures behind a pillar. I picked out one inviting me to visit Princeton University, the Cultural Centre of New Jersey, (an easily achievable goal, I thought maliciously) and looked across at Mike, holding it up as a suggestion. But as Mike was busy signing in, my gaze slid across to the two "Italians" again. And froze.

It was very well done, but once it's been explained to you, you can see it every time. The older mostly kept his left shoulder to the wall, but the younger was not so experienced and occasionally he turned his body towards the centre of the room. The distance between the points of his lapels and the seams of his sleeves were slightly unequal: the gap on his right was marginally larger. He was a left-hander and was wearing a pistol in a shoulder holster!

I moved quietly back behind the pillar. Through a gap in the brochure stand I could still see the reception lobby, including the Italians, but remain hidden. Mike finished the signing in and holding a key, looked around. Acting on a premonition I kept out of his sight. After a minute or so of not seeing me, Mike shrugged and went outside, presumably to drive our car round to the lodge we had been allocated. The older Italian looked around the lobby too and then said something to his younger companion. They both turned and followed Mike.

I did not need fifteen years of police experience to know that something funny was going on! Those two Italians - they were almost parodies of Mafiosi – were way out of place amongst the leisure-attired crowd still lining up to register.

The father and son made for the same door and after a moment I followed them outside and along the well-lit path. Keeping behind them, I could see Mike about 50 yds ahead, making for our car, with the two Italians about 5 yds to his rear. The father and son turned off right to their car and Mike carried on, followed now only by the two Italians. He stopped before our car and leaned forwards to open the door. I ducked down rapidly between two cars. Looking through the wind-screen of one, I saw the older man glance quickly up and down the narrow path and then they both grabbed Mike and bundled him into our car. They followed him in and after a moment's pause it backed out of the parking slot and drove around the back of the motel, the young one driving and Mike invisible in the back with the older.

Christ! What the hell was going on? Had Mike been kidnapped? He came from a fairly well-off Californian family, but hardly worth kidnapping. And if they were just after Mike they would have driven away – instead they had gone round to our lodge. They must want me too! I had been out of the police for more than a year now and

there had been a time when several people would have been delighted to get me alone in a hotel room. But they were either still locked up, or had become wise enough to realise that attacking a policeman ensures a deluxe service from the rest of the police-force.

Whatever the reason, I must release Mike. I rapidly retraced my steps to Reception to think. Reception told me Mike had booked Lodge 27 and I could get to it on foot through that door there. There was a wall map showing Lodge 27 was quite near, at the end of a straight path.

What about help? I looked at the two weedy receptionists. There would also be some cooks and maybe a gardener somewhere. Useless. I could call the police but out in the country like this it would be half an hour before they arrived. Then once they had been convinced they would call for reinforcements. And then Mike could be used as a hostage. I must try to do something myself, and quickly. I looked around for a weapon. For once there were no handy paper-knives or souvenir Indian knives in the tourist shop. I finally bought a copy of the New York Times, the Thursday edition and a good 1/2 inch thick. I experimentally rolled it into a tube about 2ft long and tapped it edge-on against a wall to test its stiffness.

The phone on the reception clerk's desk rang and after speaking a few words into it the clerk raised his voice and asked if there was a Mr Murdock. I said nothing and his eyes slid past me. He said some more words into the phone and replaced it.

I unbuttoned my jacket, loosened my tie and ruffled my hair. A quick glance through the door leading to the lodges. The path to our lodge was empty.

After about five minutes I saw the door to our lodge open and the younger Italian come out. He closed the lodge door, looked around, then purposefully made his way to Reception. I waited until he was about 10 yds away and then opened the door, stepped out onto the path and slowly walked towards him, round shouldered and with my loosely rolled newspaper over one shoulder. He hesitated then looked around quickly. Before he could say anything I said in a high voice:

`I say, old bean. Do you know where number 27 is? Terribly confusing the way you chappies number your rooms.' I smiled at him amiably.

He looked at me unbelievably. Is this guy for real?

`Sure,' he said. `It's just down here. Lemme show you.' He had a deep voice but rough, as though he was more used to shouting. He stood aside to let me pass in front of him. I sauntered ahead, my rolled-up newspaper sloped over a shoulder - the vacuous music-hall Englishman.

`That's terribly decent of you, old chap,' I chattered on, over my shoulder.

`Actually it's my first visit to America you know,' I confided. I politely stood to one side as a geriatric couple tottered past, taking the occasion to twist-tighten the newspaper.

The path was empty again.

`It's here,' he said in a strangled voice.

`Ah, how right you are,' I gurgled, changing the grip on my newspaper. He was just behind me and was obviously going to push me in as soon as his friend opened the door.

`Well, pip-pip, old bean and I just ...'

I now had both hands on the tightly-rolled news-paper and in mid-sentence thrust it behind me like a lance, aiming for the middle of his body and jumping back at the same time to give it extra force. The end should have caught him in the solar plexus but didn't! Some instinct must have warned him at the last moment and he jumped to one side. When I turned round I saw I had only caught him on the left shoulder and pushed him off balance. He recovered almost instantly and with a snarl on his face his hand was streaking for his right shoulder! I don't remember what I did but

suddenly the rolled paper had reversed in my hand and was stretched out in front of me. I leapt forward desperately and jabbed at his face. I made contact, pushing his chin aside, but it was only a momentary respite. He danced back and a pistol was appearing from under his armpit! God he had the agility of a tennis player at the net! But at that moment his heel must have scraped on the curb behind him, as he staggered an instant, his right hand flying out to balance. Too late! I drew back then thrust again, this time upwards, with all the strength in my wrists and forearms, giving him "point" in the throat! The tightly rolled paper was like a stiff wooden rod, not flexing a millimetre. He collapsed limply with a heavy flop between two cars.

I leaned sweating and gasping against our car. His flaccid arm had fallen across his body and the pistol had dropped with a clatter onto the concrete. I grabbed it immediately, pointing it at the door of our lodge. But the lights were still off and the curtain across the window remained in place. I seemed to have made a tremendous noise, but apparently not enough to penetrate the door. Crouching down I examined his gun. It was small, some sort of air-pistol, with a CO2 cylinder in the butt. I straightened up and pointing it at the ground pressed the trigger. Nothing. I found a small lever to one side. I pushed it over and fired at the ground again. A small "phutt" and a blade of grass moved slightly under the path lights. It would have to do.

I transferred my eyes to our lodge door. If I knocked for entrance, the curtain would be moved aside to check who was knocking. But the well-worn lock looked flimsy.

I took off my jacket and bunched it over my left shoulder, took a few steps back and charged the door. With a splintering crash it swung open and I almost fell into the room!

In the dim interior the older gangster was sitting in an armchair but all I could see was his hand on a large black pistol cradled in his lap. His hand tightened on the butt and the muzzle began to turn towards me. Still lurching forwards I brought up the tiny pistol and fired it at his face as fast as I could pull trigger. There were five "phutts" and then it was empty. I threw it at him and then leapt the rest of the way, diving for his pistol. But he had hardly moved. He had made an effort to stand up, his face working, but had then fallen back with a choking gasp. His pistol dropped to the carpeted floor with a heavy thump. Mike leapt from somewhere and pushing me aside, scooped it up.

'Watch out. There's another one outside!' he hissed, spinning round to cover the open doorway, the pistol snicking as he drew back the hammer.

I bent over, my vision going black, gasping for breath. After a few seconds I managed to say:

'It's alright. He's not dangerous anymore. Let's get him in here. What can you see?'

Holding the gun, Mike stuck his head cautiously out of the door. I could hear a couple standing by their car at the end of the path arguing loudly, and somewhere Country and Western music was playing.

We went outside and breathing heavily in the warm humid night hoisted up the slack body of the second hood, supporting him over our shoulders and into our lodge, like he was drunk. I jammed the damaged door shut, switched the light on and bent down to examine him. He was suspiciously quiet. I put my finger to his pulse. Nothing - he was dead!

At the same time Mike turned white-faced to me from examining the other hood.

'He's dead!' he whispered, horrified.

Chapter 14

`Let's see what they have on them,' I said. I turned out the pockets of the younger and immediately found something that made me break out in a cold sweat. A blown-up photo of myself, Mike and Max! Taken just as we were just coming out of the St. Clement's hospital in London two weeks ago - dated by the clean white bandage on Max's arm!

I looked at the photos in sick despair. So these hoodlums had really been after us! But why? Was it the Brain Drain Murderer hitting back? They had failed this time but there would surely be other attempts.

`What happened to you? What did they say?' I asked Mike.

`They just pushed me into the car and then into the lodge with a gun in my kidneys. They didn't say much and what they did was in some sort of Italian dialect.' He swallowed. `Then when the younger went out to look for you this one just sat looking at me. Unblinking, like a snake. Christ, I've never been so terrified in my life. And was I glad to see you! It was fantastic the way you came in like the Wrath of God without any warning at all! How did you take out that guy outside without us hearing anything?'

I ignored him and continued searching the younger. In his left pocket I found a small tin box with six small glass ampoules packed in cotton-wool: each one the size to pass down the barrel of the air-pistol. Inside the lid of the box was some Cyrillic lettering. There was also a wallet and money clip with \$154, a ring with two car keys and a driving licence in the name of Frank Nitty, age 18, with an address in New York. I wiped my fingerprints off everything, used his limp hands to put his own fingerprints back on them and replaced them in his pockets. A search of the other hoodlum revealed his name to be Aldo Andreoli, age 32, and likewise with an address in New York. Apart from \$54 in a money clip he had a small chromium-plated toolkit in a beautifully crafted leather box. A screw-driver with replaceable inserts, small pliers, wire-cutters and a knife. The sort of thing you can buy at Fortnum and Masons. Also a small roll of steel wire. I felt the hair rising on the back of my neck, remembering police reports I had read about the habits of the New York Mafia.

Mike sank down on one of the beds and was looking in horror at the two dead bodies sprawled on the carpet. He was just realising what had happened.

`Oh, sweet Jesus! What are we going to do?' he groaned.

All I wanted to do was to climb into our car, dash back to the airport and get back home amongst friends. I took a deep breath.

`Think,' I said, more to myself than to Mike. We looked at each other. We had one big pistol and some sort of assassin's gun.

`These are two contract killers. OK?' I said.

`And as these two have failed, there's going to be others,' said Mike, his voice cracking as he stared at the door of our room, now jammed closed with the arm-chair. `There could be another waiting outside just to check. He's probably reporting back now. And then ...'

`No,' I said. `One would have been enough to kill two unsuspecting tourists. Two law-abiding British tourists. And that was this young one - he had the special gun. The young one was ... ' what was the expression? `... the young one was "making his bones". Performing his first murder for the Mob.' The Rite of Passage which would bind him to the Mob for life. And they weren't just going to kill us off quickly. The job of the elder one was to "harden" the younger. I showed Mike what I had found in his pocket and he went pale and shivered.

`God,' he said quietly, and swallowed. He clasped the big pistol tightly in his big hands and said:

`But they've gotta check back. And when they don't ...'

`Right,' I said. `But not immediately. The man who sent these two would have thought it a simple routine job. Just the sort of thing to blood a new recruit. If they don't report back immediately he'll just assume they're stretching it out a bit. Or having a celebratory drink after.'

Mike sat down trembling, his hands wrapped around the pistol.

`Yeah, OK, maybe. But then when they hear nothing they're gonna ...' He stood up convulsively again, and paced rapidly up and down the room.

`Jesus!' he said, as it hit him again, `What the *fuck* are we going to do ..? We've gotta call the cops but even that ...'

`Get the bodies away from here first,' I said.

`To where? And how's that going to stop them coming after us again? These guys are businessmen. If they accept a contract they've gotta deliver.'

I was beginning to have an idea.

`Not far away,' I said to his first question. I wasn't sure about the answer to his second.

`Look, move our car away and back theirs in its place. It's dark, no one will see you.'

`But Christ Jim, this is *murder!* We gotta call the cops!' he said, his voice rising.

`I was a cop, Mike,' I said calmly. `That's not going to bring them back alive again. And do you want them alive again? One was a gangster, the other was just learning to be one, killing us as a sort of final exam. My idea's better.' I knew it was now.

`Bring their car round,' I repeated, handing him the keys to the Cadillac.

He thrust the gun into his waistband and left unwillingly. I heard our car being driven away then looked around the motel room with the eye of an investigating officer. All the pellets from the air-pistol had entered the older gangster. There were no blood-stains. The younger hood just lay on the ground, sightless eyes looking upwards, his face slightly blue. Paralysis of the muscles expanding the chest had caused asphyxiation. Tough, but he had been going to kill us.

I stood up and looked at the door. The screws holding the metal fixture to the frame had been pulled out, but they could be jammed back with some match-sticks. I needed two more items - one I found in the form of two thick blankets folded on a shelf above the coat cupboard. I pulled them down. The other item - I felt the vomit rising in my throat... was not here.

I heard a car arriving outside, then silence as the engine was switched off. I turned down the bedside light and opened the door to Mike's tall figure. His forehead was beaded with sweat, and it wasn't just the humidity.

`OK,' I said. `Let's lift them into the front seat.'

`The front seat!' he whispered. `Are you crazy? Someone'll see them and how will I drive?'

`If we put them in the boot they'll leave traces. I know what I'm talking about. And I'm driving.'

He shrugged. I looked out of the door and finding the path outside the lodges empty, we bent down and quickly installed the two bodies in the front of the Cadillac, the younger one in the driving seat.

I went back to the room returning with the two blankets.

`I'm going to the end of the parking lot. Follow me on foot.'

I pushed the body of the younger gangster to one side and drove the car slowly to the far corner of the car-lot, parking it at an angle and bumping one wheel of their car up on the curb, as though it had not been under control when it got there. I switched off the engine, left the hand-brake off and climbed out.

'Can you get me a sharp knife from somewhere?' I quietly asked Mike's shadowy figure as it appeared out of the darkness. 'Try the dining area or the kitchens. But don't let anyone see you.'

'How big a knife?' he whispered. 'I have a Swiss Army knife.'

'That'll do. I'll ask for it when I want it.'

The next bit was complicated. I had to make it look as though the older gangster had fired a shot in self-defence. Without waking everyone up. And there had to be powder residues on his hand. I requested the pistol from Mike and reluctantly he handed it over.

I moved to the other side of the car and opened the door, preventing the body of the older gangster from falling out at the last moment. I put his pistol in his hand, cocked the action, wrapped the blankets around it and climbed in, pushing him before me.

'I have to fire a shot,' I whispered to Mike across the top of the car. 'Let me know what you hear.'

'You have to fire a shot...' he said dazedly. He drew in his breath with a gasp as my idea struck him. 'You want to make it look like a hit by another Mob!'

I closed the car door securely, wrapped the blanket tightly about both our hands, pointed the barrel downwards at the floor, put my finger over his from the left side and pressed the trigger. There was a loud bang and the pistol recoiled heavily, leaping out of my hand and falling on the floor.

I unwrapped the blanket and arranged the body with its head lying back against the seat. I used the blanket to wipe the car handle and climbed out.

'Well?' I whispered.

'A thump, but not too loud. I don't think anyone heard it. It might work at that,' he added as an after-thought.

I went in the left-hand door, wiped my prints off the steering wheel, put the young hood's cold hands on the wheel for a moment then climbed out. We went back to our lodge and I painstakingly washed my hands.

There's a public call-box outside,' I said to Mike, drying my hands. 'Can you call Max in London and tell him why he should watch out? Imagine someone is listening and keep it short.'

I made to sit down on the bed and then as if with an afterthought said: 'Oh, and can you lend me your knife now?' He handed it over without comment and left to make the phone call.

I slowly returned to the gangsters' car. What I had to do was an abomination, but absolutely necessary. I did it quickly, feeling dizzy with nausea, almost throwing up as I closed the car door again. I cleaned the knife carefully and then stood there leaning against the car sweating and breathing deeply, thinking of the sea, of green fields, of anything. I returned unsteadily to our room and opened my case.

I was gulping whisky straight from my duty-free bottle when Mike returned.

'Yeah, I got through OK. He said ...Hey! You alright? You don't look too good.'

'I'm OK. I just need to get my head down. We've got an important appointment in ...' I looked at my watch, made a calculation, '...in 5 hours. The best thing we can do is act normal.' I took another pull at the bottle and started undressing.

`There's two dead bodies out there,' he said, looking at me with revulsion. `How can you just turn in and go to sleep?'

His revulsion would have been much greater if he had known what I had been doing with his knife.

Chapter 15

I had asked for us to be called at 7am the next morning. I wanted to get away from the Traveller's Lodge before daylight.

As is usual after flying westwards, there is no problem in waking up for the first few days - it was 1pm internal time and I had only lightly slept the last two hours. Mike had already paid our bill the evening before so we just showered, shaved, packed our bags and left. I had left the blankets used yesterday by the door so I would not forget to take them too. As a final precaution I smudged my hand over all surfaces, just in case one of us had left a print on the gangsters' car somewhere.

We drove off slowly, noting in the mirror that the silver Cadillac was still where we had left it, one wheel up on the curb.

It gradually got lighter and after driving for about half an hour we pulled into a diner near Princeton Junction for breakfast. I listened continually to the car-radio, but there was nothing on the news about dead gangsters being found in a motel parking lot. Just commercials, banal local news and pop-music.

We ate an excellent leisurely breakfast and finally made our way to Protec Inc., the real reason for my visit to the States.

*

Although not important to this story, we really had a meeting of minds with Protec. Bill Small, the President, was ex-police like me and we were able to relate lots of "in" jokes to each other. In spite of his name he was an enormous man whose good-natured smile didn't seem to have been soured by twenty years duty as a New Jersey State Trooper.

`Yeah, sure, if you're not careful you can get a whole wrong impression of humanity. You most only see the worst side - no one ever calls up the cops and says: "C`m on over Bill, we're having a helluva time!" He slapped me on the back.

`But I met a great little woman, and she taught me to believe that there's goodness in everyone. I'm hoping you'll meet her before you go back.'

But more important than our rapport, our equipment complemented theirs, they wanted to represent us in the US and I saw a big market for their stuff in Europe. If it were not for our respective lawyers restraining us, (his sitting next to him - mine at the end of a telephone line in London) we would have signed a deal immediately. We left them to work out the fine print and went to lunch, returning for an afternoon session.

Pleading jet-lag again, we were able to gracefully avoid a dinner invitation but could not avoid an invitation to the New Jersey Riflemans' Association annual meet, the next day, Saturday. We booked separate rooms in the Ramada Inn and I fell asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow.

*

At 4 o'clock the next morning I just couldn't keep my eyes closed anymore (10am internal time my wrist-watch told me) and so sitting on the edge of my bed I watched that strange phenomenon, the early-early shows on American TV. Old black and white movies, some of which I had seen in my childhood. Weird religious "shows" with someone earnestly relating how Jesus had advised him to buy IBM stock when everyone else was selling - just like he had been having a chat with his stockbroker. I

always feel myself floating in the air when I hear this strange and peculiarly American mixture of hard-nosed business know-how and touchingly child-like naivete.

And there was something about an underworld shoot-out. At a peaceful motel, not far from here, two gangsters had been killed. The police were not giving any details but a serious-faced young lieutenant said they were quite sure it was a Mafia hit by a rival family, probably because of a dispute over a drug "concession" I was very grateful he didn't say that this was because of the way the bodies had been mutilated. Mike in the next room might have been watching the same channel.

He added that this could well signal an outbreak of gang warfare. It didn't seem to worry him.

I knocked on Mike's door and we went to the "Morning Room". He had seen the same item on another channel and looked more relaxed than when I had seen him last.

After the usual wonderful "Riviera" breakfast in the "Morning-room" (where I couldn't prevent my eyes from bugging at a young woman pouring maple-syrup over her bacon and eggs), we were picked up by Bill and a trim 40-year old, pleasant-faced woman who was introduced as Flo. Flo had apparently been persuaded to come to the Meet because of the possibility of meeting a real Scotland Yard detective.

'You know Flo,' he said, after we had shaken hands. 'Over in Olde Englande even the crooks are gentlemen. When you catch them they always say "It's a fair cop, Guv." Right, Jim?'

'That's right. But it's getting worse,' I said. 'The other day I called up someone to arrest him and he wouldn't even come to the phone. I had to write him a letter.' I shook my head and clicked my tongue peevishly, 'It's the effect of television, you know.'

'What?!' said Flo, momentarily believing. 'You mean to arrest a guy you just telephone him and ...?!'

In this jolly fashion we drove to the New Jersey Riflemans' Association, affiliated to the National Riflemans' Association - or "National Gun-nuts" as Mike disparagingly called them.

Chapter 16

The Riflemans' Meet, "Fair" would have been a better word, was reached after a one-hour drive through rolling dairy-farm countryside and small old-fashioned towns with wooden colonial-type houses. "Allentown", "Imlaystown", "Englishtown", flipped past – evidence that this part of New Jersey must have been settled from England.

We turned into a gateway, bumped over a field and parked. It was 11 o'clock, a warm humid sunny day and there wasn't much free parking space left. We climbed out and walked towards the entrance, listening to military music relayed over loudspeakers.

There were lines of booths and camouflage-coloured tents, and as we walked round I could see it was the good old American mixture of commerce and show-biz. The open-air booths were selling every type of firearm from muskets to assault rifles, ("modified for single-shot only", Bill assured me seriously), Russian Kalashnikovs, Israeli Uzis and even the new British ultra-short rifle that was giving the Guards regiments so much trouble when they tried to "Present Arms" with it.

There were other booths displaying rifles with long thick barrels and elaborately sculpted butts through which the shooters twined their fingers.

We watched a "quick-draw, Western style" competition where each contestant had to draw and fire a blank - timed by a big clock. Also the same thing "Eastern style" from a shoulder holster. All taken very seriously.

More realistic, an old farm building had been converted into a "Combat Range". As the contestants went through it, man-sized target figures popped up. The pistols banged convincingly but Bill said the hits were determined by a laser beam from each gun. We were introduced to Hank, a tall rangy cowboy-looking type of about 35, who was the winner. Hank was an ex-US Marine weapons instructor and was the popular National "single-combat" champion. With a pistol he was supposed to be able to "shoot out the pips of a three of diamonds at fifty yards". He would be defending his title later.

The big attraction however, was set up in a nearby wooded valley. "Battlefield" it was called and they used "gotcha" guns - air-guns that shot plastic balls containing paint. Each side had a flag mounted somewhere which they had to defend and at the same time try to capture their opponents' flag. Without getting hit by a paint-ball, of course. We watched two teams assembling, dressed in camouflage smocks, wearing masks and goggles and checking their "gotcha" guns.

'Those paint-balls can be quite dangerous,' said Bill.

A man with a "referee" arm-band was explaining something to them, pointing it out on their maps. One team mounted a Land Rover and to encouraging shouts and whistles from the crowd drove off waving their club flag. The referee had a hand-radio up to his mouth.

'They go to the end of the valley, about a mile away, set up their flag and then start their attack,' said Bill. It all looked very military and no one was smiling. After a while a loud-speaker outside announced that the "game" was about to start and we were invited to see the action in the big tent over video monitors. We reluctantly sat down on wooden benches in the hot tent and looked at various static woodland scenes on the monitors. There was a big map of the valley pinned to a board in front of us and someone was explaining it, indicating the various features with a laser pointer.

It was very well done, the remote controlled video cameras (supplied by Bill's company) performed faultlessly and we were able to see most of the action. Coloured counters were moved on the big map so we could follow the tactics of each side. The audience were very involved, shouting warnings to special friends and groaning when one was hit and had to lie down dead.

A "battle" took 30 minutes exactly and we watched two before coming out stretching into the sunlight.

Bill and Flo were talking to a group of their friends so Mike and I went around some more booths. In the distance the loud-speaker announced a "single-combat" duel in the wood, but we decided to give it a miss. Truth to tell we were both getting a little bored. Everyone we met seemed fascinated with the weaponry on view and mostly seemed to be forgetting that however well-finished, however "sexy", however lethal looking a gun was, it was just a launcher for the bullet. It was the bullet, that uninteresting lump of copper-jacketed lead, that actually did the damage.

But Bill had us paged and of course we had to watch - it was going to be Hank defending his title against Clint from Florida.

As before for the team events, Clint, the small dark Mexican-looking challenger, was driven off to the far edge of the wood and Hank after lots of hand-shaking and back-slapping ("you show 'em, Hank") strode into the woods in front of us.

We were about to rather resignedly enter the hot viewing tent again when there was an irruption of excitement and turning round at the entrance we saw people

looking upwards. A red paraglider had appeared from over the hill about a mile away and was approaching the Meet. It circled high over the wood around me and I heard a buzz of speculation. Someone who was watching through binoculars said:

`Hey, Marv, that guy's got two rifles over his shoulder. Is there anything on the program about this?'

There was some scattered clapping and whistling and the people near to us seemed to think it was a surprise event.

`They're Garands,' said the man with the binoculars. I knew the Garand was the rifle used by all American troops in WW2. The flier was quite low now and no more than 200 yds away and obviously intending to land in the wooded valley.

`Who is he?' asked someone.

`I've never seen the guy before. You know him, Pete?'. He handed over his binoculars. But before Pete could raise the binoculars the unknown stalled his chute and disappeared into the trees. There was a rush into the viewing tent.

The operators who were steering the video cameras looked up at us in surprise as we crowded in. One of them had been following Hank's progress, and on his screen he could be seen pacing along a woodland path, apparently unaware of what lay before him. A dozen voices told the operators of the arrival of the mystery paraglider and after some wildly swinging views, one of the cameras found him.

He was standing up in a small clearing, his paraglider had been unclipped and was a red bundle at his feet. He was too far from the nearest camera to see in any detail and in any case had his back to us. But he could quite clearly be seen to have two rifles slung over one shoulder and some sort of bag around his waist. He was unslinging the rifles and to everyone's surprise reached into the bag at his waist and pulled out two bayonets which he clipped to the rifles. He slung the bayoneted rifles back over his shoulder again and made into the wood, maddeningly away from our camera. There was something faintly familiar about the way he moved.

Some of the audience shouted to the camera operators but they shrugged their shoulders - there was obviously no camera nearer. On the left-hand monitor Hank could still be seen unknowingly striding forwards, map in one hand, gun in the other. He paused a moment to look around then glanced down at his map. Someone who had a walky-talky and was in contact with the other end of the wood informed us that Clint had not yet arrived.

And then on monitor 4 the unknown arrival appeared, walking deliberately into the field of view, still with his back to us, but wearing some sort of tight-fitting hood.

`Who is that guy?' asked someone. `What's he doing there? Tell him to piss off.'

`That's right,' said another voice angrily. `Tell the stupid mother to get the hell out of the way.'

The camera swung to the left and we could see Hank cautiously approaching a big clearing, paint-ball gun at the ready. The unknown was about fifty yards away from our camera and standing behind a bush, back still towards us and apparently hidden from Hank. He waited until Hank was about ten yards away then suddenly took a step to the right, and at that point Hank saw him too. Hank crouched and raised his gun. His lips moved as he saw it was not Clint but a trespasser. Hank made an angry movement of his arm, obviously telling the trespasser to get out of the wood. The trespasser, back to us, remained immobile like a statue. There was dead silence in the tent. I didn't know what to make of it all, and Mike shrugged his shoulders at me. Was it some clever showbiz trick, secretly arranged by the organisers to enliven up an otherwise routine Meet?

Paint-gun in hand Hank approached, still gesturing angrily at the trespasser. Either he was a good actor or he was not in on the trick. But with a quick movement

the trespasser unslung the two rifles. One he kept in his right hand: the other he threw onto the ground between them. He then took a step back and came to the "point" position, right hand on the butt, left hand on the stock, the bayonet pointing up at Hank at an angle of 45 degrees. An unmistakable challenge!

Hank looked around uncertainly, fingering his useless paint-gun. The unknown now started to move around Hank, prodding provocatively at him. And then with a prickling of hair at the back of my neck I suddenly realised why he had looked so familiar from behind. He had a silk-stocking over his head but I was sure it was the man I had last seen in an underground parkgarage in England!

'It's the Brain Drain Killer!' said Mike and I simultaneously in the tense silence. There was a confused babble of voices, some asking what we meant, others who had seen the recent TV cast, incredulous.

Hank discarded his paint-gun, crouched, then suddenly picked up the rifle. He stood up again, holding it confidently, looking across calmly at his aggressive opponent and obviously thinking he'd met a weirdo. He didn't know how right he was.

'You mean it's that Limey Killer that's been in the European news?' asked someone.

'Right,' said Mike. 'He's totalled six fighters at least so far - all specialists - knife-men, swords-men, you name it.'

'Well, it's the end of the line for him now,' said someone in a deep voice. 'Hank was a top-sergeant in the Marines. He's not afraid of no god-damn' Limey psycho.'

I watched the tragedy unfold as Hank's hands slid quickly and competently over the rifle, checking the bayonet was firmly fixed and then tightening the sling. He came up to point and waited ready. He knew he was "on camera" and probably thought he only had to hold off the crazy for a few minutes until the little men in the white coats arrived.

Seeing that Hank was ready to accept combat the Killer took a pace back, held his rifle vertically in what looked like a "present arms" and apparently said something. We saw Hank's lips moving in a probably contemptuous reply. And then the Killer brought down his rifle to "point" again and leapt forwards.

The rest of the action was so short and so fast that most of it could only be seen later in a blurred frame-by-frame play-back of the video-camera recording.

Hank was obviously only trying to defend himself to start with and merely parried the slow jabs. But his opponent clearly wanted Hank to attack and finally provoked him with a lightning quick poke to his left arm. Hank leapt back startled, looking incredulously at his hand and then infuriated, started to attack seriously, agilely moving around, stabbing at his opponent. But his opponent, hardly moving his feet, just played with him, merely blocking and somehow diverting his thrusts. It wasn't until later, when the playback was available, that we could see that the Killer was turning aside Hank's thrusts with his own bayonet point inside the barrel of Hank's rifle! However Hank reacted, and from whatever direction he attacked, the Killer's bayonet point was always there, deflecting the thrust. It was a truly amazing demonstration of speed and co-ordination and the audience watched in stunned silence.

But after thirty seconds the Killer was obviously bored by this. He jabbed once, brushed the fatally slow defence aside and then with a quick leap, thrust his bayonet into Hank's throat.

There was a gasp of horror from the massed audience as Hank dropped his rifle, took a step forward and then fell on his face. The Killer gave another quick "present arms", worked the slide on his rifle and raising it fired a shot in the air. We saw the ejected cartridge jump out and heard the report a second later

through the tent walls. He then dropped his rifle and picked up his bag again.

‘Don't look! Don't look!’ I shouted, trying to force myself through the crowd to the camera operators.

But it was too late. The Killer pulled out a compact power-drill and leaned over Hank's lifeless body. He pressed the drill to the side of Hank's head and after a second removed it. And then, in full view of the camera he crouched forward and applied his mouth to the hole. He remained in this position for a full forty seconds, his throat working. In the tent was absolute chaos. People were shouting, covering their eyes, pushing tissues to their mouths and others were rushing out, hand over mouth, to throw up on the grass outside.

Mike and I knew what to expect and had averted our eyes. I grabbed his arm.

‘We've got him! Get some people with guns!’ I said, feeling stupid as soon as I'd said it: there must have been five hundred people here, all armed to the teeth. But Mike just looked at me strangely and made a gesture of despair.

‘There's plenty of guns - but no ammo. It's not allowed.’

Jesus. It explained why no one was running into the wood. The Killer's single shot had showed that he at least had ammunition.

And a second later we saw the second reason why he had fired. There was a repetitive thumping sound and over the hill appeared the whirling blades of a small helicopter, a short rope ladder hanging beneath it. Being outside we didn't see what the Killer was doing but an instant later the helicopter swooped down and then rose again, this time with a figure clinging to the ladder. With a louder clatter the helicopter climbed and disappeared over the hill, the swinging figure slowly mounting the ladder. A crowd of people crashed into the wood, and two men were urgently talking into their hand radios.

*

Bill and Flo took us silently back to our hotel. It wasn't a day that had done anything for the Special Relationship.

Chapter 17

Because of the pressure of work waiting for us in London, plus the setting up of the new representations, plus the fact that I felt safer in England anyway, we left for London the next day.

On the flight back I eagerly scanned the British news-papers. The hunt for the "Brain Drain" murderer was raging up and down the British Isles, but no more murders had been discovered and so in spite of hundreds of false alarms resulting from the reward (now upped to fifty thousand pounds), the "Brain Drain" murders looked as though they were just going to be another run of mysterious unexplained crimes.

The Killer had long been suspected to be mad, as there was no profit motive in the murders. It was now speculated that the Killer's mental disease had, in the cyclical way of many such diseases, taken a turn for the better and the murderer, Jekyll and Hyde-like, had recovered his sanity and his normal life-style and was walking amongst us undetected. This hypothesis hardly comforted the public, who obviously thought that the disease could at any moment take a turn for the worse, and so the police continued to be plagued with reports of people who had disappeared for a while and then returned to perfectly normal lives. Many single travelling salesmen and single holiday-makers found themselves on their return being interviewed by the police. It was becoming routine for people to tell all their friends before they left on a vacation or a business trip.

There was, inevitably, a story about how the Killer was an Alien from Outer Space. Remembering Max's remark about this I passed the paper smilingly over to Mike. He read it attentively.

`Anything's *possible*,' he said. `But this one's pretty improbable.'

`How can you be so sure?' I asked mildly. `After-all there's millions of stars up there, some of them must have planets and some of the planets ...?'

`Oh, sure. There's probably lots of aliens up there. And Planet Earth has been visible to them for about 4 billion years. But they're a long way off and it's a big deal coming all that way just to visit us, so they'd only come if something interesting is going on. Like intelligent life. But most of the time nothing has been going on here. Man has existed for about ..er.. 600,000 years. Recorded history is about 5000 years and modern history is, say, 300 years. The chance of them guessing right and coming just now is ...' He started scratching figures in the margin of the newspaper, but I got the message.

"Another Brain Drain murder in the US" had only made the Stop Press.

*

On arriving in London I found a message from Max, wanting to see me urgently.

I called him from home but got only a very cautious male voice which wanted to know who I was, what did I want and finally told me Mr Krupka was not at the moment available but if I cared to leave ... Then Max came on the line.

`You were right,' he said grimly, after he had recognised my voice. `I was attacked and if it hadn't been for Mike's warning, you wouldn't be talking to me now. Look, we gotta meet.'

`Yes,' I said. `We're all in danger now. But I've got a mass of work to do here and I must think of some way of protecting ourselves too. What happened?'

There was a pause, with Max speaking to someone in the background. His voice returned:

`How about me and some of the boys coming round to your place? I could clue you up at the same time.'

`OK,' I said, `We're going round to "Safe". See you there.' I hoped the name was auspicious.

`Half an hour,' he said, and hung up.

*

Five minutes early, Max arrived outside "Safe", and I let him in with his daughter, looking pale and scared, and two tough-looking thugs wearing leather jackets who were briefly introduced as Frank and Ted. Frank had something about 2ft long wrapped in a piece of sacking. I didn't ask what it was. Max's craggy face looked even grimmer than usual.

I led him up to my office. Frank and Ted pulled up chairs and sat by the front door.

Mike and Max greeted each other and I took them all into our small conference room. I automatically started thinking of offering them tea or coffee, but refrained. This was not a meeting with a customer. The little red-haired girl sat in the corner, watching us with her big eyes.

I looked curiously at Max. Although dressed in jeans and tweed jacket he was unmistakably the broad-shouldered ex-sergeant in the "Paras". But something had changed: he did not have the same self-confident swagger, the same assurance in his own abilities. He smiled less. No longer was he merely worrying about protecting his own "in-group", his friends and acquaintances in the Martial Arts scene but he had fought with the Killer himself. And although he had survived, he knew he had probably only been saved from death and

an obscene fate by the arrival of the police. He had relearnt something about himself, something that he had not experienced in his adult life and had therefore almost forgotten. He had rediscovered he could be made to feel afraid. And with this realisation had come a deep hatred for the person who had reminded him.

Max started by quickly explaining that a few days ago two men had broken into his flat while he was asleep, but because of Mike's warning he had had Frank sleeping with him and they had balanced some pots and pans around the windows and doors. There had been a brief punch-up in the darkness and the two intruders had left, leaving a commando knife on the floor as a souvenir. He pulled it out of his pocket and put it on the table. It lay there, matt-black and malignant.

`A knife!' said Mike. `They wanted to kill you!' `God! Where was Roz?'

`She'd been sleeping at a friend's house after a birthday party.'

I asked Max some more questions and was told the two intruders had spoken a few words in a Birmingham accent and he had broken the arm of one of them. It was clear that Max had recovered a bit of his self-confidence in this encounter.

Mike then quickly filled in Max with what had happened in the States. I showed the photo of us three that I had found on the body of the younger gangster.

`The Mafia!' said Max, going pale as he saw his photo. `Je-sus!' They both turned to me.

`Listen,' I said. `I tell you truly, I haven't the slightest idea of what is going on. We have a psychopathic Killer and up to the time we went to the States I would have said he was just a "normal" psychopath, who for some reason hates fighters.'

I stood up and went to stand by the flip chart.

`But now it's much bigger than I thought. He's behaving with a deadly mixture of rationality and irrationality. He's crazy but intelligently crazy. He's afraid of discovery, of being recognised, and he may be after us as we are the only ones who have seen him close-up without a mask. He wants to kill us and somehow he's got help, international help.'

`And he's gonna win,' said Max sombrely. `The Mafia must have a million ways of picking us off. I'll have to send Roz off to me Mam in Liverpool.'

`Not if we find him before he finds us,' I said.

`Now just a minute,' said Mike. `The cops know as much as we do, they've seen him and they've even got a video of him now, killing that guy at the gun-show. So why is he trying to silence *us*?

Yes, it was a good question and I didn't know the answer.

`Let's start from the beginning,' I said, picking up a felt-tip pen and going to the flip chart. There was the drawing of a customer's installation on the flip-chart. I tore it off. `What do we know about the Brain Drain murders?' I made a list.

<u>Name</u>	<u>Speciality</u>	<u>How killed</u>
1. Hudson	knife fighter	knife
2. Smith	fencer	sword
3. Patel	Retiarius gladiator	sword
4. Max	Thraex gladiator	attempted killing by fencing
5. Motusi	kendo fighter	knife
6. Hank	shooter	bayonet

`Apart from that, we think he's in his mid-twenties, 5 ft 8 tall, slight build, dark with regular features, impassive expression, and has a light voice. His blood is type A positive, but his DNA is unusual. In the first four murders or attempted murders he

attracted his victims to some lonely spot by pretending he's a woman. And after all the murders he ... well, we all know what he does.'

We looked at the list silently.

'I was re-reading that report I made about your fight,' I continued to Max. 'And it seemed that he was quick and had lots of energy but didn't seem to know much about the Samnes/Thraex type of fighting. Which doesn't make much sense for him to challenge an experienced Thraex.'

'You mean he thought he was fighting Fred, who really *is* an experienced Thraex,' amended Mike.

'Well, OK,' I said. 'But he wasn't doing too well either, until he suddenly changed style and became a fencer.'

'That's right,' said Max. 'Up till then I felt OK and had even pinked him, but when he chucked his shield away and started fencing I couldn't get near him with me macheri.'

'His Thraex dagger,' explained Mike.

'So he's really a fencer,' I said. 'That should narrow the search down a bit.'

'Not necessarily,' said Mike. 'Remember the first victim was Soapy Hudson, the knife-fighter. His arm was slashed around at first but then he was finally stabbed. No fencing technique there.'

'And then number two, Joe Smith in Birmingham,' remembered Max. 'He really *was* a fencer and sure he was finally run through with a sword, but he was chopped up all over first. No special fencing technique there either. Like the Killer just started by slashing and then sort of overwhelmed him. *Then* he stabbed him.'

'But what about number three, your friend Patel Singh?' I asked. I remembered I hadn't been able to do much for his father.

'Yeah,' said Max. 'His arm-guard was covered with slashes but then he was finally stabbed with a sword. I haven't a clue what happened. Except the last bit.'

'Why does he do that, anyway?' I asked. Mike shrugged.

'I've been reading it up in the library and the nearest I can find is that some tribes in Central Africa used to eat the hearts of their beaten enemies. Especially if he had been a good fighter. It wasn't cannibalism, it was to absorb the strength of a respected enemy.'

'But you yourself,' I said to Max, getting back to the subject. 'When he met you he had had experience of knife fighting with number one, fencing with number two and sword-and-shield fighting with number three.'

'That's right,' said Max. 'The knife fighting wouldn't have helped much against me, of course. And the sword-and-shield not too much either, as with Natwah he was fighting a Retiarius. The fencing was bloody effective, though. I nearly cashed in me chips there.'

'But in the US he didn't fight with the Kendo fighter - he just stabbed him, right off,' I reminded them.

Mike banged on the table excitedly. 'But Hank was killed with bayonet fighting - that's almost the same as Kendo fighting! And the last person he fought with was a Kendo fighter.'

'Yes, he killed a Kendo fighter,' I said, 'but he didn't actually fight with him, so he couldn't have learnt anything from him.'

'Unless ...' said Max, standing up suddenly. We looked at him, then he sat down again slowly.

Mike then told me that Max and Peter and many others in the Ancient Martial Arts scene had searched assiduously through their membership files, but apart from discovering that a lot of their members were surprisingly eccentric, (which most

outsiders knew already), nothing was found pointing to the mysterious Killer who had now gone to ground.

'So where did he come from?' asked Mike. He looked at me. 'After all he didn't just drop from the sky. He must have had a mother and father, a childhood, and gone to school. There must be records. If we can find them it's gotta help us to locate him as an adult.'

'That's not easy,' I said from experience. 'It's better to try to find him by what you know about him. How about his interest in Ancient Martial Arts? You say he isn't in any of your Clubs, so where did he get the weapons to fight with, for instance? In fact, where do *you* get these weapons from?'

'Why didn't I think of that?!' said Max, slapping his hand on the table and looking disgusted. He turned to Mike. 'We could visit "AMAction": they must have a list of customers. Would you like to come there with us?' he asked me. 'It's a small company - they've got a shop and demonstration show-room in Denholme Road in North London,' explained Mike. 'I think you'd find it interesting anyway.'

We arranged a visit for the next day.

Chapter 18

The next morning Mike, who had been phoning round, told me what had been happening here during our absence in the US.

What with one thing and another, the strange gene-print of the Killer had never become public. Max had no intention of volunteering information to the police in general, and Seeger in particular. The police in any case had discovered a sample of the Killer's blood on the garage floor and had routinely analysed it, but apart from finding that it was group A, rhesus positive, had looked no further.

And Dr Carstairs, who had made the discovery of the unusual DNA, was unfortunately so badly burnt by an ether explosion in his laboratory that he died in his own hospital without recovering consciousness. The reports and slides he had made were all destroyed in the fire that followed the explosion. There was no evidence of foul-play. Dr Carstairs was notoriously casual with safety precautions and several co-workers had predicted the event which had in fact occurred. I had sent a copy of his report to Seeger but had received no acknowledgement. He had probably just read the first page and as it corresponded to the police analysis put it in the "round file". The copy that Mike had shown me had been filed by Mike under 'Miscellaneous' in the "Safe" office.

'There is one other thing,' said Mike diffidently, handing over a copy of last week's "Daily Telegraph". 'It's on the last page,' he explained.

I started reading.

There had been a spectacularly brutal bank robbery in the outskirts of Paris. A French armoured money-transport firm was delivering money (reputed to be in excess of 6 million francs or one and a quarter million dollars) to the Credit Lyonnais in the Ave. de Paris, at Vincennes. As is usual in France, with bitter experience of terrorist hold-ups, the money was packed in twenty leather transport pouches which were one by one clipped to and then slid along a stretched steel wire connecting the delivery truck to the bank interior. One guard, the driver, remained inside the truck and opened and closed the steel door to the truck's strong-box. He was also in radio contact with the firm's headquarters. The second guard slid the bag along the wire through the opened bank doors, where it was unclipped and passed to the bank's own guards. The third guard would stand outside, pistol in hand, watching the passers-by.

According to an eye-witness, (26-year old rent collector Jean Fratelli), the delivery truck had drawn up in front of the bank, the steel wire unreeled and stretched into the bank's interior. Monsieur Fratelli, in company with two or three other passers-by had stopped outside a Radio-TV shop next to the bank because it was relaying a recording of the exciting France- Germany football match, played at Munich the day before (France 1: Germany 0).

He had noticed the first bag was delivered as usual, but then his attention and apparently the attention of the two outside guards was distracted by the excited voice of the football commentator as the French team approached the German goal for what was to be the only goal of the match. At this point, just as the hatch was opening for the second bag, a figure with some sort of stocking mask over his head had leapt out of the crowd and pulled a two-handed Japanese sword from under his coat. With a quick whirl he had sliced off the head of the first guard, then slashed down at the second guard, almost cutting him in two. He then picked up the belt and still holstered pistol of this last. (It later transpired that the sword blow was so violent that it had sliced the guard from left shoulder to waist, at the same time severing his leather pistol belt!) The attacker leapt on the roof of the truck and sliced off the radio antenna, disappearing then behind the truck.

Apparently he had subsequently partially pulled out one of the money filled bags, to jam the hatch open. The remaining eighteen bags he carried quickly, four at a time, into the boot of a small Honda (registration 89ADAC75) which was parked outside the Radio-TV shop. The third guard, still in the truck, had pushed his pistol through the small steel slot in his door and aimed at the robber who was just closing the Honda's boot. But the robber, who had the blood-stained pistol-belt of the third guard over his shoulder, pulled out the pistol and fired twice from the hip at the truck. The first shot was later measured to be 54mm. above the slot, the second entered the slot, wounding the driver who has since died in hospital. "An incredible shot for someone who had never handled that pistol before," said a police commentator.

The robber slammed the boot closed and leaping into the seat of the Honda drove off in the direction of Porte de Vincennes and disappeared onto the Boulevard Péripherique.

The whole action had lasted no more than 55 seconds.

The Honda was eventually discovered abandoned in a side street near rue d'Indochine in the 19th Arrondissement. The leather bags were empty and there were blood-stains on the rear seat where the sword had lain. The blood-stains corresponded to the blood-groups of the two murdered guards. The money, the sword and the guard's pistol-belt had disappeared. There were no finger-prints.

The proprietor of the Radio-TV shop was arrested as a possible confederate, but was later released when it was found that the football commentary had come from a portable tape-player ("ghetto-blaster") which had been mounted on a window-sill above his entrance door.

The only clue to the identity of the robber was a twenty-three second sequence from the video film of a Canadian tourist who was "taping a typical Parisian street scene" (his own words.)

There had been a leak from police sources that this film had been compared with a film taken of the English "Brain Drain" Killer in America, and that "there were similarities".

I put the paper down and looked into the distance. It certainly sounded like our Killer.

'Sounds like him, doesn't it?' said Mike. 'Except now he's a Samurai sword expert and a crack-shot too.'

`And loaded with money,' I added.

Chapter 19

Mike and I met Max with his daughter, neat in her school uniform, holding his hand outside a small front office, which was all that could be seen of "AMAction Ltd." from the street.

Max had been thinking in the meantime and was in a pessimistic mood.

`The cops are sure to have been here,' he said gloomily.

But surprisingly enough, the police, who had not recovered any of the equipment used by the Killer in any of the murders, had seen no reason to visit "AMAction", and had shown no interest in it, apart from requesting a list of its customers.

The shop was revealed to be unexpectedly long and deep, leading into a courtyard. It was filled with all sorts of historical-looking swords, shields, helmets, leg-guards, breast-plates, bows and arrows, spears, javelins, daggers etc. etc., all apparently well made. I looked at the shiny gleaming razor-edged blades and cringed internally as I imagined the horrendous wounds they were designed to inflict. A gun is bad enough, but at least a bullet "just" makes a small hole. You can survive a shot that doesn't kill you immediately. But a thrust from that 2"-wide sword there would make a terrible wound which even today with rapid medical help would probably prove fatal or at least disabling for life. And in those days, without antiseptics ... most wounds would result in gangrene and a lingering painful death. Edged weapons would certainly be banned today as inhumane, like poison gas, if guns had been invented first.

Max was well-known of course, and made the introductions. Being mid-morning, the shop was empty and the proprietor, Mr Storton, was more than willing to show us around.

`Most of the work is done at our factory in Sheffield,' he said. `Designs are taken from models in museums all over the world, but mostly from the British Museum.' He was a tall angular man of about fifty with a thin bony face. He wore thick glasses and had some sort of speech impediment. But his enthusiasm could not be faulted. There was a model of the Coliseum at Rome on his desk.

`They could seat up to 50 000 people here,' he said, pointing to it with a ball-point pen. `When the "Munera", that's the Games, were on they used to have a full day's program. In the morning they had the "Venationes" where they brought on animals to fight each other. Lions against tigers or elephants against bears, for instance. They used to starve them first, of course. Or perhaps they would be killed by the "Venatores", men armed with spears.

`They brought them all the way from Africa or India just to kill them?' I asked.

`That's right. They used to kill three or four hundred in just a few days,' said Mr Storton, spitting slightly.

`Now the main events, the gladiator fights, were in the afternoon, so to bridge the gap, the lunch-interval, as it were, they used to execute a few criminals.' He swallowed. `And so as not to weary the audience with a quick strangling or decapitation they used to ...'

`Let's move on to the gladiators,' said Max, looking towards his daughter who bored had moved off, but was still within earshot.

`Very well,' said Mr Storton, disappointed. Then brightening: `Things really started in the afternoon - that's what they had all come for, after all. The gladiators marched in, to music of course, and saluted the sponsor, usually a rich noble or even the Emperor. And then the weapons would be given out and tested.'

`Now there were all sorts of contests,' he continued, pointing with his ball-point again to the pictures and weapons hung on the walls around us. `The fighters were criminals, prisoners of war, slaves, or professional gladiators. The crowd liked these best - and they could earn lots of money. And slaves could earn their freedom. But if they lost, it was usually ...' He held his hand out with the thumb pointing down. `And if anyone didn't fight hard enough they had slaves standing behind them who would whip them or prod them with red-hot branding irons.'

Just then the door opened and two boys in school uniform entered and started looking round eagerly. A few minutes later there was the noise of many feet and they were joined by a crowd of well-dressed young men. Yuppy lunch-break time, I guessed.

`Excuse me,' said Mr Storton and hastily shouted to one of his assistants to stand by the door.

`You can't trust any of them,' he said grimly. `Only last week we lost two dimachaeruses.'

`"Dimachaeri" - daggers,' corrected and translated Mike.

While Mr Storton was answering some question from an older man, Max looked bored but Mike led us down the length of the shop into the open-air courtyard to show me a sort of two-wheeled chariot.

`This is a British war-chariot,' he said. `The Romans were very impressed, they called it an "essedum". You had a British queen, Boadicia, who used to fix sword-blades to her wheels.'

There was a big and very imaginative picture of Queen Boadicia charging Roman soldiers who were fleeing in panic from the whirling swords. The red-haired Queen was waving a spear and there were recognisable pieces of Roman soldiers lying in her wake. Rosemunde regarded this picture with evident approval.

`One of the first bloody feminists,' was Max's dry comment.

`Daddy is so old-fashioned,' explained Rosemunde, holding her father's hand and looking up at him fondly. I noticed she had the clear white alabaster skin that often goes with red hair. We transferred our attention to a big catapult.

By this time the shop had gradually emptied and Mr Storton returned to them.

`I see you've seen the war-chariot. The Brits also had big war-dogs too. The Romans thought the British were good fighters but lazy workers. British slaves didn't fetch a very high price in Rome.'

`Like your out-of-work football supporters,' smiled Mike. There was a silence.

`Now let me show you some of the weapons used in the Games. The Romans used to try to spice things up so they set differently armed fighters against each other. Like this net fighter against a conventional soldier called the Murmillo. You see the fish motif on his helmet. The Retiarius, the net-fighter, was supposed to be fishing him, you see. His trident is a harpoon.' He licked his lips. `Or prisoners of war from different countries would fight against each other, armed with their own weapons. See these two - a fairly conventional heavily armed soldier against a man armed only with a dagger and a small shield, Samnes against Thraex.'

I looked across at Max - he had taken the part of a Thraex against the Brain Drain Killer as a Samnes.

Noting our curiosity, Mr Storton turned round and unhooked a shield hanging on the wall.

`Look at that,' he said proudly, handing Max the heavy shield. `A perfect copy of a Samnes's shield: we were able to find a replica in the Museum in Pompeii.'

But Max wasn't listening - his eyes were riveted to the edge of the shield which was scored with a deep scratch. He ran his finger in it.

Watching him, Mr Storton said excusingly:

`Well, we make a lot of our income by lending equipment out, as you know. You must expect a bit of damage now and then. A few scars make it look more authentic,' he said jovially.

Max pulled us to one side and spoke quietly.

`The bloke I fought against had that shield – I made that gash!'

`What!' said Mike and I simultaneously, and stepped forwards to look closer.

Attracted by our interest, Mr Storton was now looking at the shield more carefully, poking his finger into the gash. A piece of the decorative brass fell off. He picked it up.

`But I must say I didn't notice this when it was returned,' he said annoyed. He raised his voice to his assistant.

`Fred! Why wasn't this reported when it was returned?' He held up the piece of brass.

Fred, an old man with a brown crinkled face and wearing a long green jacket looked abashed as he fingered the gash.

`I dunno, guv - it looked OK when he turned it in.'

`Well, I want to know who rented it. There'll be a repair charge.'

Fred opened a big book and ran a grimy finger down the greasy pages.

`It was a Samnes wunnit? Sword, helmet, leg-guards and sword? I remember the sword was a bit bashed-up too, but we sharpened it. Little bandy bald bod he was. Looked like a jockey. Bin 'ere before. Here he is: "Francis Bronson, 16 Tilburn Rd.'

I pulled out my notebook and unobtrusively wrote it down.

I nodded my head towards the exit. Max ostentatiously looked at his watch and loudly discovered we were late for another appointment. He thanked the proprietor, collected Rosemunde, who was standing in the British war-chariot running down Roman soldiers, and we left with nods and smiles, but Mr Storton's attention was focussed on his expensively damaged shield.

We went out and sat in my car. If the name was genuine, we had had an enormous stroke of luck! The two men looked at me expectantly.

I picked up the car phone and dialled Directory Enquiries and read what I had copied down. A short pause and a voice said there was no telephone listed for that address.

`There is no telephone at that address,' I said.

`Well, we weren't going to phone him up anyway,' said Mike.

But I had only rung Directory Enquiries to give myself something to do while I thought. The bald man was almost certainly not the Killer - the other details were too different. But there must be a connection between him and the Killer.

A sudden thought. Fred, the man in the green coat had said the bald man had rented equipment before – did the equipment rented and the time of renting correspond to the murder of Patel? I was annoyed with myself. I should have thought of that on the spot. I had been away from sleuthing too long. I explained to Max who immediately understood, left the car and walked back across the road to "AMAction".

`Queen Boadicia would have to be careful not to run straight at a mass of soldiers,' said Rosemunde suddenly in her high clear voice, looking up at me seriously with her beautiful amber eyes. She had been unusually quiet for the last ten minutes. `Like with our lawn-mower - it would slow her down too much. She'd have to sort of shave them off, a few at a time.'

`Ask your Dad,' grinned Mike.

I continued thinking. The bald man had picked up gladiator equipment for the Killer. How had he received a description of what to rent? How had he delivered the heavy kit to the Killer and how had he received it back to return it to the shop? And why had he bothered to return it anyway? I voiced some of these questions to Mike, who was sitting in the back of the car.

`Well, sure. He wouldn't want to pick up the stuff himself. But he may have returned it because he wanted to rent out more another time.'

I was getting a slight floating feeling. The Killer was making his job of murdering people very difficult.

Max then crossed the street, entered the car and closed the door. He looked at a piece of paper in his hand.

`The bald man hired a Murmillo kit on the 5th of March,' he said. I flipped through the pages of my note- book. The third Brain Drain murder was on the 7th of March - two days later!

`We gotta do some more thinking,' said Max. He was right. My instinct was to turn this over to the police, but Seeger would cock it up again and this time it was our lives - in particular my life - on the line. I had a lot of interesting plans for my future and I didn't want them cut off by an assassin's knife or bullet. The Killer seemed to have contacts with the underworld both here and in the States. We could well be under observation now ...there were ways of bouncing laser beams off windows to hear conversations behind them ... bugs could be hidden in our clothes.

`We're going for a little ride,' I said.

`Oh, goody!' said Rosamunde.

Chapter 20

The little ride turned out to be a long ride and ended with all the men sitting in the bright sunlight on a headland in the bathing costumes we had bought on the way. We had left our clothes in the car and I had jogged my incredulously protesting companions the last half mile along the sands.

If you are going to be paranoid you might as well do it properly.

Rosamunde had been very amused but when she found we had no intention of bathing, but were just going to talk, she had left us and was paddling in some nearby rock-pools, singing to herself. Although she must be getting on for fourteen now, Max treated her like a child and had not thought it worth buying her a bathing-costume. As I watched her slender white figure unselfconsciously jumping from rock to rock I noticed, with rather guilty surprise that Rosamunde was growing up into a beautiful young woman.

`Right,' I said, sitting down in the small fishy-smelling hollow and grinning at my companions. `No one knows better than Mike and I how easy it is to pick up conversations. So keep looking out to sea to avoid lip-readers,' I ducked down out of the cold wind that had risen as a cloud moved across the sun.

`We're all going to have to go through a thorough debugging when we get back. A contract is out for us and ...' I glanced at Mike, `"...these guys are businessmen. If they accept a contract they gotta deliver",' I finished in a Californian accent.

`But why us?' asked Max angrily.

`I don't know,' I answered seriously. `The Killer is obviously afraid of us for some reason.'

`It can't be because we've seen him,' said Max.

`No,' I agreed, `he's on video now for his body movements and the phantom photo in the media looked as much like him as anything does. We must know

something extra or he thinks we're going in the right direction to discover something ...' I fell silent.

'It can't be because of the bald man either,' said Mike. 'We've only just found about him.'

'Whatever,' I said. 'We've just got to try and think what this whole bloody thing is about. We have loads of data but nothing makes sense.'

'Well,' said Max, with a shrug. 'He just wants to kill sport fighters and I'm no expert but a weirdo is a weirdo and so he acts weird.'

'By definition,' I completed. 'Yes, it's an explanation. But isn't there something else that bugs you?' I asked Mike.

'Yeah, well like you said once, he's rational and irrational at the same time. Like what he's doing is completely rational to him and he's going about doing it in a very rational manner.'

'Exactly,' I said. 'We can understand the rational bit but why the hell does he want to kill off *fighters*?'

'And it's not like he's just knocking them off,' said Max, 'he could of knifed Natwah like he did that bloke with the Jap name in America.'

'Motusi,' I supplied.

'That's him,' said Max. 'Why go to all the trouble of killing Natwah in his gladiator uniform?'

'And you're not exaggerating when you say "all the trouble",' I said.

'Think,' I continued. 'To kill yourself a Retiarius in the "proper" way you need first to know that in Ancient Rome the Retiarius fought against a Murmillo gladiator. Not many people outside the AMA scene know that. Then once you've located a Retiarius you've got to lure him away, with his uniform, to some quiet spot to kill him, apparently "properly" again. In other words you have to dress up as a Murmillo. And Murmillo armour is not something which is available over the counter at any good hardware store. There's only one shop in London that rents it and if you don't want to advertise to everyone that you are the Killer, you can't go in and get a fitting and pick it up yourself - you have to get someone to do it for you. Someone who won't put two and two together later when the Brain Drain murder comes out and he realises he has hired the kit for a serial Killer. Then no one seems to have thought about this, but a Retiarius/Murmillo fight must make a hell of a lot of noise - shields clanging, feet stamping and so on. You have to find a place to kill him where the locals aren't going to complain to the police. And lastly, when you've got your Retiarius kitted up, and you're kitted up as a Murmillo, and you're both in a quiet place, you've got to be able to win. How does he do that? And last of all, *why* does he do it?'

Max grunted. 'Like I said, he's an alien. I read a story once where the aliens had different genes, like that doctor bloke was saying. They lived near a sun with a lot more radiation than ours and needed special genes. And the doctor that told us the Killer has special genes is dead now.'

I looked at him with startled surprise. But then reason took over. We had enough problems without bringing aliens into it.

'Mike,' I said. 'Tell him, like you told me, that it can't be an alien.'

He did, even quoting some old philosopher, "Don't multiply your entities unnecessarily".

'Occam was the guy's name,' said Mike. 'And philosophers are always using "Occam's Razor" to cut bits of unnecessary complexity out of arguments.'

'And after he had bayoneted that crack-shot in America, our Killer was a crack-shot too,' said Max. He hadn't been listening to a word.

We chatted a bit more, but clouds were moving over the sun and it was getting cold. I looked at my watch and stood up stiffly. We didn't seem to have got very far with our secret speculations.

Max called across to Rosemunde and we all jogged back across the now cold sands to my car where Max briskly towelled his daughter and we got back into our normal street clothes. He then bought her an enormous ice-cream and we climbed into my car and returned to London, Max sitting in the back with Rosamunde on his knees. Prompted by his disbelieving questions she gave us, between slurps of her ice cream, an imaginative and hilarious account of what the crabs had said to the periwinkles and what the periwinkles had said back. Anyone bugging the car would have doubted our sanity.

There was no doubt that Max was a different person when he was with his daughter.

Chapter 21

Driving against the evening commuter traffic out of London we made good time and pulled up outside "Safe" at 6:15pm. Mike went in and brought out an electronic "sweeper" to check all our clothes and the inside of the car. Clean. I asked Mike to take the car and run Max and his daughter back to his School and take the sweeper with him to check the premises.

*

I went and sat at my desk looking in my notebook at the name and address of the "bald, bandy-legged" man. Our only lead. There was only one thing to do - he must be followed and investigated.

This was where the boring part of detective work started. Who should do it? Neither Max nor Mike were suitable for surveillance work, neither from temperament nor appearance. A big blond with an American accent or a big ex-soldier with a Liverpool accent would stick out like a sore-thumb in the East End of London. I flipped through the telephone directory until I found the number I wanted.

I picked up the phone and was about to punch in the number of the Indian Embassy when I remembered. If I was going to ask for help I didn't want anyone to know who it was. I replaced the phone.

About an half an hour later I was in Piccadilly Circus underground tube station, surrounded by phone booths. Finally finding one that was both unoccupied and contained a complete phone, I punched in the number.

'Yes, the Ambassador himself,' I said. 'My name is James Murdock. He will know.'

A familiar deep voice with a cultured accent came on the line.

'Jim! Is it you? Do you have any news?'

'Perhaps,' I answered. 'We have a name and an address of someone who is in contact with the Killer. We need someone who can follow him around and you did say that ...'

'Yes. I meant it then and I still do.' There was a pause and some high-speed Hindi in the background then Sir Gopal's voice came on again.

'Jim, I'm in the middle of a meeting so I'm passing you over to John, he's my personal secretary. He is going to put you in contact with a detective agency we sometimes use. See if they are what you want and keep in contact.' His voice was replaced by a lighter and younger voice.

'Mr Murdock? My name is John Na-ghee. The Ambassador has instructed me to put you in contact with a detective agency. Here is the number.' I wrote it down. 'I

suggest you call it in 15 minutes, asking for Mr Thomas Boucher. That will give me time to call him first and introduce you.' I thanked him and hung up.

It was considerably longer than 15 minutes before I was able to repeat the feat of locating an unoccupied and working phone again, but then I found myself listening to a respectful, slightly West Country voice.

'I am Thomas Boucher, manager and owner of the Argus Detective Agency.' From his voice and neutral tone it was apparent that he didn't know why I was calling.

I introduced myself and as he had heard of "Safe" there was an immediate interest. We arranged that we should meet in a pub in nearby Shaftsbury Avenue.

Mr Boucher arrived half an hour or so later. He was a tall, dark, slim, well-proportioned man in his early thirties, carefully dressed in a neutral grey suit. He had a friendly open face with a boyish smile but I had the impression that that was just part of his professional persona. I sensed immediately that he was not an ex-policeman. I ordered two pints and we sat in a remote corner of the packed pub.

'How did I get into this line?' he said after the introductions and in reply to my unspoken question. 'Well, spy thrillers, I suppose. When I was a little boy I was fascinated by detective thrillers, Sexton Blake, Dixon Hawke and of course Sherlock Holmes.' I smiled politely. It was a better reason than mine - I had become a policeman because my father had been one and his father before him.

'I used to work a bit for the Government. MI5 - internal security. Just contract work, you know, but it worked out quite well. I once had five people working for me, I was learning Russian and everything,' He smiled disarmingly. 'And then in November 1989 the Evil Empire folded up. Just like that! After seventy odd years our most reliable opponent decided their system wasn't working and they would have to change over to ours.'

He was right. It had been completely unexpected and had pulled the rug from under a lot of people, not least those who lived by writing the spy-thrillers that Tom liked so much. It was only politeness that had made the West avert its eyes and courteously refrain from saying, if not shouting, "We told you so!".

I looked at Tom with new respect. If he had worked for MI5 - counter-espionage - he must have been pretty good at his craft. And a pretty tough cookie in spite of his cultured appearance.

'And since then ...?' I asked.

'And since then I've had to change direction. mostly the usual stuff, divorces, industrial counter-espionage, patent right infringement, that sort of thing.'

'Mostly?' I queried.

'Yes,' he said, looking at me steadily. 'Well, there's a bit of the old-style spying still around. Nominal Allies are sometimes curious about each other's internal thoughts ..., you know,' he waved his hand vaguely.

Yes, I thought, spying would always be with us. And not only between Allies. Often one Ally wants to know what one of their own departments was up to, and if they didn't want to listen to a lot of imaginative lies, one way was to hire an outside Agency.

OK, this was all very interesting and even necessary if we were to work together, but we had to move on. I pushed my notebook to one side.

'Well,' I said. 'I have a need for straight detective work. We want a man investigated. Where does he work, what does he do there, salary, life-style ... I'm sure you know what I mean.' Out of my wallet I pulled a sheet of paper on which I had written all the information we had on the bald man.

I then explained the connection between him and the Brain Drain Killer. Tom was gratifyingly excited - and rightly so. If his Agency contributed to the capture of the Killer, its future would be assured.

'Now one thing,' I said. 'It is vitally important that this investigation be kept absolutely secret. Think back to your days when you were following the KGB or whoever. Assume someone is guarding this man.' I flicked the paper with my nail. 'Guarding him and looking for a tail. Someone who is using the latest technology. Be paranoid. Let us help you with any equipment we have.' A thought struck me. 'In fact it would be a good idea for you to come round to "Safe" and to speak to some of our engineers, they can tell you what's new on the market and what we can do about it.'

He made an appointment for the next day and we parted. As he rose to leave I noticed he wore a pair of very serviceable black boots, rather at odds with the rest of his elegant ensemble.

*

The next few days passed calmly - the calm before the storm as it turned out. The bald man was very quickly found to be a casual labourer at one of those start-up companies on the M4, just west of London. "Geng Ltd." was the name, fine chemical products or something.

The bald man, or Fran as he was known there, worked 8:30 to 5:30 on most days as a general dog's-body, driving the company truck to pick up or deliver various things. He was 46 years old, his parents had died when he was very young and he had been brought up in an orphanage. Apart from one conviction for shop lifting in his teens, he was an uninteresting individual with few if any friends. He had no extravagant tastes, no girl friend and lived within his income. His main hobby was watching football matches. It was difficult to think of him as being connected in any way with the colourful world of the Brain Drain Killer, Mafia hit-men and Samurai-sword bank-robbers.

The bandy-legs were caused by a diet deficiency when he was very young - due to his mother's negligence before she died of drink when he was two. There was no trace of a father.

A few days later I was working late at the office when at 8:35pm the phone rang and I heard the West Country voice of Tom Boucher.

Chapter 22

His voice was guarded and there were street noises in the background.

'We're on to something. The target's parked outside the gladiator shop in Denholme Road. You asked me to let you know.'

'Yes, excellent,' I said. It sounded like the bandy-legged man was about to pick up gladiator kit for the Killer! 'How many men have you?'

'Six in three cars. I'm in a car opposite the entrance and the two other cars are at each end of the street.' There was the noise of some static and then I heard Tom's irritated muffled voice say: 'Well, if you can't park, keep going round the bloody block.'

'What do you suggest?' I asked. There were some more hissing and clicking noises.

'Drive to the corner of Bradiston and Saltram,' said Tom. 'There are some parking places available. And then look out for a black Mondeo, registration KIG7ABD. That'll be Jack.'

'I'm on my way,' I said, replacing the phone. I looked around the empty office a moment and then reaching into a bottom drawer pulled out a short cosh and a

rubber-coated flash-light. I pressed the switch to check it was working then slipped them both into my pockets. Mike was at Max's MA school that evening. I hesitated then decided to leave them both alone. Tom and his six men should be enough. I would tell them all about it in the morning.

I put on my dark overcoat and went out into the corridor. Sticking my head into the workshop I told Phil, my chief engineer and also working late, that I was leaving now and would they lock up when they were finished.

It was 8:55pm and a still night as I climbed into the Jaguar, had a quick look at the map and then drove rapidly across London. As predicted by Tom, I found a parking place and the black Mondeo drew up almost immediately. I left my car, locked it and then climbed into the Mondeo's warm interior.

'Jack,' said a shadowy figure behind the wheel. 'And this is Jeff.' We touched hands. 'The target is inside the AMAction shop.'

'Drop me off at Tom's car, then,' I said and Jack, with a glance over his shoulder, pulled out into the traffic.

'It's the blue Fiesta,' he said as I opened the Mondeo's door and climbed out. He drove off quickly, presumably to keep station again. I saw the Fiesta immediately and climbed in.

'He's still inside,' said Tom, who was sitting in the back with a lap-top computer open on his knees.

'This is Reg,' he added, nodding at the shadowy figure of his driver.

I looked through the car windscreen and could see a small bald man standing before the proprietor, Mr Storton, who was waving his arms. The damaged shield lay on the counter before them. The bald man who I now knew as Fran, must then have paid some money because Storton put the shield on the floor and then turned and disappeared. Fran looked round aimlessly then sat down and flipped through some catalogues. Finally Storton reappeared with a sack which he opened in front of Fran and pointed inside. Obviously showing him that everything was in good condition.

He then tied it up and said something to Fran, waving a censorious finger. Fran shrugged uncaringly and made for the shop door. We all ducked down.

A minute later we cautiously raised our heads and I saw Fran opening the doors of a Ford pick-up truck parked down the road. He tossed the sack in, slammed the doors and climbed into the driving seat.

'Gladiator kit for the Killer,' breathed Tom. 'We've got the bugger now!'

The truck pulled out and drove off immediately. I could now see that Tom had the street map of London on his lap-top. He ran his thumb over the track-ball to move the map and then started talking into the radio. Reg started the car and we pulled out too.

We drove through London in the light evening traffic, following the pick-up truck, Reg skilfully keeping at least one car between us.

It was done very well. Tom was in constant touch with his two other cars, guiding them like sheep-dogs. One was ahead of the truck - the other to the right on a parallel road. The City was sliding past and we were in a cosy little world, the only sound being Tom's quiet voice now and then, and the prompt hiss and click of the short confirmations.

'He's heading south,' said Tom, who was able to see the overall direction.

After about 15 minutes of this, the blue Cavalier drove in from the right and replaced us as the following car. We drove out to the right and took the parallel road. I suddenly recognised where we were as we bowled along Piccadilly and the darkness of Green Park loomed up on the right.

`I thought he was going south,' said Tom. `But at Hyde Park Corner he took a left.' The radio clicked.

`He's going into Soho,' said a voice I recognised as Jack's.

We must have tried to follow along a parallel road but in the cramped maze of Soho there were none. This was going to be difficult. The small streets were crowded with pedestrians and cars could only creep along at walking pace. The numerous advertising and street lights reflected off the wind-shield and made viewing difficult. We would have to get out. Tom must have had the same idea. He pressed the switch on his microphone.

`Tad,' he said. `Go round to Soho Square and park. Send Chris down Greek Street on foot. The target's still in his truck going up Frith. We're parking at Bateman and Frith and we'll follow on foot too. He must be planning on delivering around here somewhere.' Tom then screwed an earphone into his ear and clipped a microphone to his lapel. Reg bumped two wheels illegally up on the curb to park and we all climbed out.

Pushing our way through the crowds of strolling tourists we saw the pick-up truck slowly moving up Frith Street, visible because of its height. Then it moved to our side, seemed to bump and took on a slant.

`He's parked on the kerb,' said Tom. He turned his head and spoke rapidly into his lapel microphone: `Chris, take the east side of Frith. Jim and me will stay on the west side.'

The truck had stopped almost directly opposite a pub covered with gaudy Union Jacks - the "British Pub". We saw the bald man climb down from his truck, open the back doors and pull out the sack. Without looking round, he slammed the doors closed and went into the pub.

`Target has gone into the front entrance of the British Pub,' said Tom into his lapel microphone. `Chris, wait outside. Jack, go round to the back. Jim and me are following him in. And Jack, listen,' he said with emphasis, `if he pops out round the back, you stick to him like shit to a blanket. Lose him and I'll have your guts for garters. OK?' The cultured image was slipping. He paused a moment, looking into the distance, apparently hearing acknowledgements in his earphone.

Feeling rather conspicuous in my dark topcoat amongst the torn jeans, tattooed arms and long hair of the drunken youth of all nations, I stepped over out-stretched legs and entered the noisy crowded bar. The target, holding his sack to his chest, was shoving through the crowd, making for a door marked "Toilets".

We pushed our way as quickly as we could past a thumping juke-box, through drunken singers and found ourselves in a short corridor which branched to left and right. The noise level dropped as the door banged closed behind us with the twang of a broken spring. "Gents" it said, to the right, and indeed there were three gentlemen lying stretched out in the corridor, holding bottles. Two were looking vacantly at the ceiling, the third one was snoring.

`Wait here,' said Tom, stepping over one of the reclining bodies. To my left, just outside the "Ladies", a lady was being noisily sick. A few seconds later Tom reappeared, shaking his head.

`He must have gone this way.'

We eagerly went down the other branch of the corridor, noticeably dirtier, which led us round a corner, but pulled up when we saw in the light of a single fly-spotted lamp-bulb hanging from the ceiling that it was almost blocked with old boxes and wooden crates, most of which didn't seem to have been moved in a very long time.

`There's no other way,' said Tom, so we put our hands on a grimy wooden box and pulled. It scraped on the stone floor as it came out, revealing a black hole behind

it. I put my head in, smelling the sour odour of decaying plaster. Giving a resigned sigh and holding my clean overcoat clear, I stepped into what was apparently an extension of the corridor. I then moved to one side to let Tom climb in too. But through the hole I saw Tom suddenly stiffen and heard his earphone hiss.

'What!?' he said, his voice loud in the corridor. 'He's sitting outside in the street!' he relayed to me. 'He's still got his sack with him. How the fuck did he get out? Through the Ladies?' He turned and hastily made his way back up the corridor and out of sight around the corner.

I started to climb back into the corridor and was about to follow him when my eye was caught by a faint wet gleam on the floor on my side of the barrier. An almost empty beer bottle, covered with dust, had been tipped over and what must have been the dregs lay on the floor! I hadn't done that. Someone had been this way, and very recently too! The target? But he was sitting outside. But was he? I remembered once when as a young detective constable we had lost the track of our "target" because a look-alike confederate had led us aside.

I looked back up the corridor, but Tom had gone round the corner and back into the bar, obviously thinking I would be just behind him. In the distance I could hear the faint roar of drunken singing. There was a sudden burst of increased volume as someone momentarily opened the distant bar-door to visit the toilet. Could the target be lying low here somewhere? Waiting for us to follow his look-alike outside and then continue on his path to the Killer? Be as well to check.

I unbuttoned my coat and self-consciously pulled out my cosh and flash-light. I didn't want to be jumped by a lurking deliveryman. The cosh with its wrist-strap sat familiarly in my hand even though I hadn't used it in a long time. I looked down the corridor extension: it was littered with more discarded boxes, orange crates and old newspapers, only dimly lit from the single bulb behind me. A heavy ceramic sink was propped against one wall. Flash-light in hand I stepped forward, my feet crunching on the fallen plaster and clinking on empty tin-cans. There were some concrete steps leading down, their edges chipped. A quick squeaking and red points of light in the darkness ahead.

Had anyone been this way recently? I shone my flash-light around on the ground. Difficult to say. If it hadn't been for that spilt bottle up at the top of the steps behind me I would have returned with Tom to the raucous party in the brightly-lit bar. I stepped down further, pushing aside old cables that were hanging from the rough ceiling. There was a collection of paint tins, a rusty bicycle without wheels, and Formica boards stacked untidily. It became gloomier as the single light behind me slowly receded. There was a damp musty smell and then suddenly I heard a faint rumbling and felt a slight trembling in the soles of my feet. The rumbling increased quickly in volume and as I flashed my beam around I saw the cables swinging gently. The noise increased to a maximum and then disappeared. The Under-ground, of course. That would be the Bakerloo Line, bored deep down below me through the London clay.

I advanced cautiously, hand outstretched and flashing my torch around. The light above the stairs was now more than sixty yards away and practically useless except to serve as a beacon to show the way back. Why was this underground cellar/corridor unused? I thought, faintly surprised. Cleaned up it would make an ideal night-club or disco.

Now some more shallow steps and then the corridor was sealed off with a blank wall made of rough wooden planks nailed together and thick with dust and grime. Well, that was it. There was no one here. It was just a neglected squalid foetid cellar. End of line. I must have knocked over that bottle myself. I flashed around once more

and turned to ascend the steps. Tom would be wondering why I hadn't followed him. But it was at that moment that my light beam touched a dark shadow on the wooden barrier and I saw that a plank near the wall was leaning out. I approached, another rat ran squeaking out of an old rotting mattress, and I saw the plank must have been loosened some time ago.

I pulled my wrist out of the wrist-strap of my cosh and put the cosh under my left armpit. Keeping the flashlight focussed on the barrier, I put my fingers behind the plank, pulled it creakingly aside and had a sudden impression of cold black emptiness in front of my face.

What was all this? A blocked off extension to the cellar? I saw now that the next plank was also loose and by pulling it aside would make a gap big enough for me to pass through. Had our target gone this way? Was he waiting for me on the other side? I stood back a moment, flashed the light around me and looked once more at the glimmer of the distant lamp bulb over the heap of crates at the top of the stairs behind me. I transferred my cosh back to my right hand, wrenched back the second plank and pushing my head in the gap shone my light around inside.

There was a smooth concrete apron stretching away into the distance, covered with small stones and pieces of plaster. My light darting quickly to the left and right showed no one was waiting for me. In front of me my beam disappeared into the cold darkness. I flashed around and upwards - a high vaulted plastered ceiling with brickwork showing where the plaster had fallen off. I stepped in and stood up inside, receiving an impression of vast emptiness and smelling the dry mustiness of air that had been undisturbed for years. There was a distant echo as my foot rattled a stone. And then I suddenly recognised where I was.

I was standing on the platform of a disused Underground station! It must have been one of those closed off due to bomb damage during the air-raids on London in World War II! I looked at the still shiny rails, wondering when they had last carried a train.

I took a few steps down the platform, flashing my light around at the old advertisements peeling off the curved walls. "Black Cat Cigarettes", "Wild Woodbines, 5 for 2d" and one that fixed the date more exactly - a caricature of Adolf Hitler with his overgrown ear coming out of the wall of a pub where two soldiers are talking - "Walls have Ears!"

Could the bald man have come this way? I paused listening. Absolute silence except for my breathing. My flashlight could just reach the brickwork which sealed off one end of the station, about half way along the platform to my left, the twin rails disappearing under the bricks. Following the rails to the right I saw they left the end of the platform and disappeared around the corner, probably to vanish under another brick screen out of view. All this must have been the result of a Luftwaffe bomb during the Blitz of 1942, before I was born. I shivered suddenly.

I shone my light around once more - the platform was completely empty, there was no one here and there had been no one here for many years. My flashlight was growing dim - I hadn't expected to use it for so long. I switched it off as I would need it to find my way out through the gap in the barrier and an intense blackness closed in. With my left hand just brushing the rough surface of the curved wall I started walking back up the platform, my feet scuffing in pieces of fallen plaster. I had been away about half an hour now - Tom would be wondering where the hell I was and why I hadn't followed him.

I counted the paces back and was just about to switch on my flash-light again to start to search for the gap, when at the very edge of my hearing I caught a faint sound - the sealed-in underground station was not totally quiet. I stiffened, not

moving at all and listening intently. There **was** something - it wasn't entirely silent. There was a weak distant rhythmical clanking. From the right? I moved my head but the sound was too faint to localise. Some automatic pump, I supposed, but what could it be pumping? The gleaming unrusted rails showed it was bone dry here. Was the clanking getting louder or was I just hearing it better? There was a slight echo too. And now by moving my head from side to side I could definitely hear it coming from the right.

Leaving my flash-light switched off I strained my eyes in the direction of the distant clanking. Nothing. But was there something, just at the limit of visibility? Yes! There was a faint pulsating glow from around the end of the tunnel. Had it been there all the time and my eyes were just getting used to the Stygian blackness? Light from a ventilation shaft leading to the surface? No. it couldn't be that - it was night outside. The clanking was getting louder and the pulsating glow brighter and brighter. I had a premonition that something was wrong and suddenly wanted to get out of the station! I slid my hands over the rough wooden paling behind me, but I couldn't find the gap. I switched on my flashlight but it was almost dead now - looking into the lens I could just see a dim red glow. I switched it off and pressed myself into the angle of the wall, pulling up my dark coat. What could be coming? Was this disused station home to a gang of hoodlums?

And then around the angle of the tunnel came an extraordinary sight. Two figures were standing on a trolley with a rocking pump-handle between them, and it was this that was making the slow rhythmic clanking noise as they drove the trolley along. The illumination came from two yellowish lights hung on the trolley and the pulsating was due to the see-sawing action of their bodies. I looked in fascination at the two figures. They were both wearing short white tunics which came down to their knees and their heads were covered by some sort of draped hats. As soon as they were level with the far end of the platform they simultaneously stopped pumping and stood motionless as their trolley coasted to a stop about thirty yards away.

One of them climbed onto the platform and the other handed a light up to him, which now I could see was a candle in an old-fashioned sort of coach lamp. Holding it in one hand he reached down with the other to help up his companion. Then they turned and started to slowly pace in step down the platform towards me, the one with the light carrying it waist high, the sound of their feet echoing hollowly. I shrank down into my coat unknowingly afraid. They were big bulky men and their long shadows, cast by the single light left on their trolley behind them, reached out towards me.

When they were about five yards away I suddenly realised I was being stupid to hide from them – they were going to find me in a moment anyway. They were probably only repairmen doing an inspection for subsidence or something. I stood up straight and addressed them authoritatively, but with a trace of self-conscious amusement in my voice:

'Ah, I'm glad you've come,' I said, 'I'm having some difficulty in finding the exit.'

They didn't react at all, they might as well not have heard me, but carried on pacing inexorably towards me. They were almost on me when I pressed the switch on my flash-light, pointing it up into their faces, but the switch clicked uselessly - the battery was quite flat. The one with the light raised it above his head and for the first time I could see that under their cowls were not faces but the white grinning faces of skulls! The hairs rose at the back of my neck and I fought down panic, pushing aside fearful superstitious fears, suddenly realising they must be muggers who sometimes try to terrify their victims before they attack them. I swung back my cosh aiming at their light, determined to defend myself, but they had stopped in unison a scant three feet away. The one with the light said in a deep cultured voice:

`James Murdock, we have come to carry you over.'

Before I could react, the other stretched a hand out and the last thing I felt as my senses left me was a sudden coldness on my face.

Chapter 23

I was lying on my side on a warm and gritty surface. A sharp stone was sticking in my side and I moved slightly to avoid it. The movement brought me instantly awake, quite unlike from a normal sleep. It was like waking up after the anaesthetic of an operation. I suddenly realised it was exactly like waking up from an anaesthetic - I had been drugged!

I opened my eyes but could see nothing but a dim flickering glow on nearby rough masonry. I was facing a wall and behind me was some sort of primitive illumination, a fire or candles. My memory was unimpaired and I could remember back exactly to the point when the cowed man had squirted that anaesthetic spray into my face. How long ago? I moved my hand and immediately felt my wrists were connected in front of me. I was wearing handcuffs!

I moved very cautiously and there was the faint musical tinkle of a chain. By moving my hand down slowly I found a metal band around my left ankle. And another around my right ankle. My feet were chained together too!

I felt suddenly degraded - someone had deprived me of my liberty! I was chained like an animal! Disgust, horror and fear swept over me. I lay there, trembling with unbelieving and impotent rage. I must get out of these shackles, escape into the fresh air and then find who had reduced me to the level of an animal. And when I found him I would smash him! I trembled uncontrollably with fury.

I stretched my stiff limbs out cautiously and without moving my head looked around but I could see nothing more - I was lying on the floor of an underground cellar. Behind me was some source of heat as well as of light. I now could feel it on my back and see its reflection on the rough stones just in front of my nose.

Gradually I calmed down and then I heard another chain rattle. By listening carefully I estimated there were five, perhaps six people in the same underground cell, groaning in their drugged sleep and all fettered. I had merely been the first to wake up.

Cautiously I moved my hand over my body and felt a sensitive point in my left upper arm. I must then have been injected with something, so I could have been out for many hours. I rubbed my hand over my face and felt the stubble of two days. Two days! With air transport I could be anywhere!

Hearing nothing else I turned on my back and then cautiously sat up, the chains between my ankles rattling. I looked round to discover that I was in a small cell about twenty feet square. There was a coke brazier in the middle of the room giving off a slight sulphurous smell, most of its fumes drawn up to a hole in the ceiling above it. By its dim red glow I could see six huddled forms lying on the ground around it.

I stood up shakily and then fell on my hands almost immediately as the chain between my ankles was only two feet long. Climbing unsteadily to my feet again, I found I was still wearing all my clothes, but a clumsy search with my handcuffed hands showed my pockets to be empty. I hobbled slowly across to the cell door and tried it. Locked, of course. It was of metal and fitted flush into the wall. There was no key-hole.

Who were the other prisoners? I hobbled slowly over to the nearest and turned him over. He was a big man. I looked at his bearded face and knew I had never seen him before. The same for the next - a young slim man with a thin, dark face.

He too was lying flat on his back, eyes closed and breathing stertorously. There were four other men lying in the corner, and I had never seen them either. Leaving the young man, I looked around the small cell in the dull-red light of the coke brazier. Apart from the slight hiss and occasional pop from the burning coke and the deep breathing of the six bodies, the cell was silent. Pressing my ear against the door I could hear nothing. I quickly went through the young man's clothing, but like me his pockets were empty. After a moment I searched the other five, with the same result. Seven manacled prisoners in an underground cell! Who were they and why were we all locked up together?

I sat down again. There was nothing to do but wait. Someone had put us here, someone had shackled us, someone didn't want us to escape, so someone had plans for us. I looked round despairingly.

After a while the tall young man groaned and woke up. He looked like a University professor but when he spoke it was in French and his English wasn't good enough to tell me anything. Nor was my school-boy French any use in telling him anything he didn't already know.

One after the other the prisoners woke up but either because they were too stunned or didn't speak English or French, they just sat there, looking dumbly into the fire. I was still trying to communicate with the Frenchman when there were footsteps in the corridor outside, a rattle of keys and with a heart-stopping crash the door swung open outwards revealing, silhouetted against a faint light in the corridor, one of the fattest men I had ever seen!

He stood legs astride in the doorway – the doorway was about three feet wide, but he would never have passed through. Under a short tunic, that because of his immense girth hung down like a curtain around him, he had enormous thick legs, ending in huge sandalled feet.

I stared at him in silent rage. None of the others moved except for the Frenchman, who with clinking chains tried to stand up.

'Out,' said Fatman in a high squeaky voice, emphasising the word with a banana-sized thumb. He moved back out of the doorway and we could see two small braziers filled with red-hot coals apparently floating in the air. I was the first to approach the door and I could now see Fatman had two helpers in the corridor. Each was carrying a yard-long rod, the end of which ended in a small brazier filled with red-hot glowing coals. One of them pushed his towards me and feeling its heat I leapt away, almost falling as the chain grabbed at my ankles.

The others clanked out of the cell behind me but one was not so lucky as I heard a scream of pain. He had been burnt by one of the braziers! I was forced along the narrow corridor by the prisoners behind me, hearing them cursing to keep away from the red-hot braziers, hobbling in small rapid steps, our chains rattling furiously. Fatman strode on ahead uncaringly and there was now another voice behind me screaming in a Geordie accent: 'No! No! Please don't! I can't go any faster!'

It got lighter and lighter until Fatman suddenly stopped and turned to face us. Panting and sweating from our exertions we looked at him. He was shorter than me but must have been at least six feet around the waist. It was almost impossible to estimate his age as he had a beautiful face, like a cherub, with full red Cupid's-bow lips. Only his eyes were completely expressionless as he looked at us, hands on hips, as one would survey a delivery of cattle.

Wordlessly he turned, and there was another muffled scream behind us. I was brutally thrust from behind by one of our party trying to escape the braziers and again we stumbled down the corridor. Now we were passing more doors and were joined by other prisoners who had apparently been waiting in side cells. Those in the front of

each group were stumbling in their chains, looking back over their shoulders and cursing in all languages, but they were all being remorselessly pushed forwards by those behind. The rancid smell of fear was strong. An occasional scream showed that each group also had brazier-carrying guards behind it. It was an extraordinary but ruthlessly efficient way of moving along a crowd of people.

Our numbers must now have increased to about a hundred - cursing, panting, clanking, feet scuffling as we hobbled down the stone corridor. A quick glance around showed the captives to be mostly young men dressed in all sorts of clothes - overalls, smart tailored jeans, suits, several track suits and in one case a cook's white uniform. They were apparently strangers to each other and we had no breath to talk anyway as we were thrust along by multilingual curses from those behind us who were frantically striving to keep ahead of the red-hot coals.

The corridor became gradually wider and lighter until I could see we were in a sort of vault with side rooms and steps at one end leading up into the open. We were thrust forwards and stumbling up the steps I felt cool fresh air on my sweaty face. The steps were big and uneven and because of the leg-irons I could only just get from one step to the other. Some of the captives were on their hands and knees scrambling to get away from the braziers. Over to my right one lost his balance and fell backwards displacing others behind him into a confused heap. There was a chorus of terrified screams as the last row felt the braziers and frenziedly charged, bodily lifting the fallen mass and thrusting them up the steps.

I was in the front row as we staggered out into the open air and quickly spread out around the tunnel mouth. I felt the heat of the sun on my back and holding my linked hands up to protect my eyes from the glare, squinted around to an amazing sight. At first I thought we had come out in the middle of a football stadium, except that we were standing on loose sand instead of grass. Bright yellow sand reflecting up the dazzling light of the sun. But as my eyes gradually became accustomed to the brightness, my field of view slid up over tiers and tiers of seats, up to ruined arcades and then to stone arches on the horizon. I dazedly scanned round. Wherever I looked there were seats looking down at me - all empty. More seats and more seats, thousands and thousands of them reaching up to the sky, and suddenly I realised we were not in a football stadium but in an amphitheatre!

Chapter 24

A Roman amphitheatre measuring about 150 by 100yds, and it had been restored extensively with concrete. The area of sand on which we were standing was oval and surprisingly small - only about 70 by 40 yds. But then I remembered Roman arenas were not used for watching football games: they had been built for a much more sinister purpose.

As my eyes swung over the amphitheatre and the thousands of empty seats, our complaining voices echoed back from a ten foot high stone parapet wall which separated the first row of the steeply rising seats from the sand-covered arena. I felt naked and exposed, as though standing on a stage - which was exactly what I was doing.

It was a warm day and judging by the cold sand and the way the elongated shadows of the distant arches still lay across it, early morning still. Ten guards had followed us up out of the underground passage and were now standing around us, resting their heavy braziers on the sand, the air shimmering above them. They were all big thick-necked brutal-looking men, dark chinned and Latin looking for the most part. They had a casual air and all were incongruously dressed in the white tunics I

had first seen in that sealed-off Underground station. Some guards had leant forwards to light cigarettes from the glowing coke in their braziers, one had peeled a packet of chewing gum, others were chatting amongst themselves and looking at us impersonally. They had the air of having done this many times before.

Now I could see we were not alone. At the far end of the arena there were about twenty figures dressed in white tunics being exercised in swordsmanship. We could hear the faint voice of their instructor as they thrust, parried, thrust again. I had seen the same thing on a smaller scale at Max's school.

Most of the prisoners had dropped exhausted onto the sand. Fatman had gone striding away from us and his enormous white-clad figure could be seen climbing up an aisle by the side of the seats. I wondered how he had scaled the high parapet and then saw that at one point it had crumbled and had fallen down into the arena in a heap of broken masonry.

Where were we? The air was too warm and scented for England - in Italy perhaps? Again the questions crowded in. Why were we here? Why was I here?

Fatman, now just a small white figure on the skyline, was standing on the top row of seats. He raised his hand and I heard the shrill distant blast of a whistle. Our guards picked up their braziers and slowly advanced towards us. Instantly there were urgent warning cries and we all scrambled to our feet, looking over our shoulders as we hobbled hastily away from them. We were being herded towards the fallen barrier about thirty yards away. Arriving there in a huddled-together bunch we were then uncomprehendingly pushed into a line in front of the broken wall, our chains clinking. The guards now lined themselves up in front of us. Again a pause, their braziers resting on the sand, but this time no one was allowed to sit down.

The sun was climbing up in the sky, there was the sweet smell of herbs and it was going to be a beautiful summer day. But over everything hung an dreadful air of menace. Over a hundred men were chained hand and foot and lined up at the foot of a steep wall of broken masonry. I shivered when I remembered those old WW2 photographs of partisans lined up to be shot. But our guards were unarmed except for those terribly effective terror-inducing braziers.

I heard an irregular bumping sound and I saw two men, dressed in the same short white tunics as our guards, coming out of the passage leading down to the vaults from which we had just exited. The bumping noise was made by the iron wheels of a small metal cart as one guard pulled it backwards up the steps. The other guard, a giant blond, had what looked like a big coil of rope over his shoulder. The cart was reversed and pushed towards us and our guards stepped forwards and carefully lowered their braziers into it. In the meantime the blond unrolled his load which I could now see to be a collection of short leather whips. As each guard deposited his brazier he received a whip in return. They cracked them experimentally and looked towards us, joking grimly amongst themselves. Something unpleasant was going to happen and I moved instinctively towards the centre of the group, trying to make myself inconspicuous and put as many of them as possible between myself and the whip-carrying guards.

A shout from the blond guard who had brought the whips, a motion of his hand, and chains tinkling we were spread out into a long line and turned round, facing the fallen stone blocks, fearfully looking over our shoulders. The dark Frenchman, who had been in the same cell as me said something to me quickly in French but noticing my blank look repeated it urgently.

'Rest with me.'

Another distant blast of the whistle from above and immediately a chorus of cracking whips from behind - the guards were advancing on us! With one accord we

started to scramble over the fallen stone blocks in front of us. Hampered by our chains we fell and cursed and fell again. It was extraordinarily difficult to keep my balance - only small steps could be made. Big steps had to be made by jumping with both feet together, and because of the handcuffs the arms couldn't be used to keep a balance. Someone fell heavily on my left and I selfishly moved to the left to keep his fallen body between the nearest whip-cracking guard and myself.

But the fallen man was younger than me and under the spur of the falling lash made a superhuman effort, leaping to his feet and almost knocking me down. Grunting I elbowed him aside and staggered up onto the first row of seats. This was every man for himself.

Ah, that was easier! The seats were at least regular shapes and the Frenchman on my right was making good time too. We were about in the middle of the climbing group. Everyone seemed to have found their own method of climbing over the seats - some of the younger ones were well ahead now, just jumping from seat to seat with bent knees. The guards were slowly advancing behind us, mostly cracking their whips in the air but screams showed they were occasionally lashing a laggard. We were all moving upwards and I had developed a method of sitting on a seat, swinging up my feet then grasping

the edge of the next seat with my chained hands to stand up ready for the next seat. It was very tiring, but I was just about keeping up. The Frenchman was imitating me.

The more athletic members of our group were well ahead, almost half way up.

Through the sweat dripping down my forehead I glanced quickly upwards and could see that Fatman, standing waiting for us between two stone arches, had an arm out, impassively directing the first arrivals through the arch on his right. As the rest of us struggled panting upwards I could see that with a gesture of his arm he was directing the rest sometimes to the right and sometimes to the left, his decision enforced by two whip-carrying guards standing behind him. His choice seemed quite random.

I looked at my French-speaking acquaintance – he was behind and below me and visibly weakening. His pale face looked up at me.

‘No, no! Rest with me!’ he gasped.

I glanced down at the slowly advancing line of guards. One to the right was lashing down at a small thin man who seemed completely exhausted.

‘Come on, come on!’ I said urgently to the Frenchman. I glanced down again and stretched out my hand.

‘Non, non! Idiot!’ he snarled.

The nearest guard was approaching and his whip struck the stone between us. Bloody Frenchman! What was the matter with him? He leapt convulsively as the lash struck his back. The guard was right behind us now and I could see that by waiting for this stupid Frog I had slipped back and was now one of the last of the group.

And then the lash landed across my back! Like a red-hot poker the pain flashed down to my heels and up to my fingertips! I almost lost my hold on the chair above. It had been many years since I had felt such agonising pain and I turned with blind fury to smash the guard, cost what it would. But he had moved to the right and was lashing other slow-moving, exhausted climbers.

The Frenchman was now two seats above me so I turned and continued the climb, my back smarting. From a good position in the middle of the group I had slid back to being amongst the last ten! And all because of that stupid Frenchman!

Now I staggered up over the last seat, and beneath Fatman's disdainfully outstretched arm hobbled off to the left, to join a group of about sixty prisoners,

huddled down panting and drenched in sweat. As I sat down with a groan of relief the Frenchman had the nerve to smile at me! 'Good, good,' he said. The prick.

When the last exhausted prisoner had arrived our group was made to stand up again and we were herded in a single file down the gently inclined row of steps between the seats - one of the aisles that the spectators must have used. Why the *hell* had we been forced to climb over the seats?

Down we filed, shuffling and clanking in our chains over the ramp of fallen masonry, across the now hot sand of the amphitheatre and down out of the bright sunlight back into the coolness of the underground passage. I looked back, but I couldn't see what had happened to the other group, those that had been sent though the right arch. It was a welcome change to be going down rather than climbing upwards.

Something else had also changed. The guards, who until now had regarded the crowd of prisoners as dangerous wild animals, who although shackled were to be kept at a distance and treated cautiously, now had contemptuous smiles on their faces and kept their whips mostly coiled, moving us along with kicks and occasional blows from their whip-handles.

Almost blind from the contrast with the glare outside, we were pushed along and finally arrived at a series of small cells. We were packed four into each cell and as we entered we presented our hands to one of the guards who unlocked and removed our handcuffs. Feeling my hands free for the first time I flexed my arms and looking at the sneering face of the guard suddenly saw red. I pulled back my fist, measuring the distance to his face, but he looked up at me gloatingly, waiting.

'No, no!' said the Frenchman, pulling back my arm. The guard looked disappointed and thrust us both derisively into the cell. The door clanged shut.

Chapter 25

Rubbing my wrists, I sat in one corner. God - what a mess! I was caught up in something completely outside my experience. If it were not for the only too realistic surroundings, I could think I was in a nightmare. My last contact with reality had been in a disused Tube station under Soho in London. Since then I had been kidnapped, drugged and transported with a hundred or so other unfortunates to somewhere in southern Europe. Why? Why?

I had only woken up about two hours ago but in that time I had been driven like an animal through stone passageways and then senselessly abused, forced to climb up over the seats of a Roman amphitheatre. What the hell was going on? Who was in charge? The amphitheatre looked original, it must be well-known and near a big town. Where were the tourists? How was our presence kept secret? How long was the nightmare going to last? Why was no one rescuing us?

God, I was hungry and my bladder was bursting. The Frenchman was apparently in the same condition as he was shouting through the bars at one of the guards. The guard said something back shortly and the Frenchman turned to me and the other two prisoners in our cell, whom I noticed for the first time. One was a bony morose man with a brown face and a thin moustache. I found out later that he was Greek and his name was Dimitrios. The other was a small chubby man called Lan and was Vietnamese. He wore glasses and was continually trembling.

'Soon we will eat,' said the Frenchman.

The Asian looked up as though he understood but the Greek just looked sullenly at the ground. The Frenchman looked at me and put out his hand.

'Bertrand.'

I looked at him sourly. Because of him I had a painful weal across my back. I touched his hand briefly.

`James,' I said, ungraciously. `What is going on?'

But before he could reply, our cell was unlocked and all four of us were urged down the corridor to a primitive toilet, consisting of a series of holes in the stone floor. It stank of urine and human manure. I looked around fastidiously, but Nature's needs were too urgent for hesitation. There was no toilet paper but we were given pieces of sponge which could be washed in a small gully which carried running water past the holes.

Back into the corridor and this time into a room where two guards armed with knives and scissors brutally cut and tore off our clothes throwing them into big baskets. Naked, but still wearing fetters between our ankles we were hosed down with cold water and then each given a coarse linen tunic of the type that seemed to be the uniform here. Wooden bowls were handed out which we dipped into a large bubbling urn containing a sort of barley porridge. The Frenchman examined it incredulously before he hungrily ate it like the rest of us. Not his usual fare, I supposed. Nor mine either, but at least it was filling.

And then we were back in our cell again and finally I was able to take a better look at Bertrand.

He was young, about thirty, with a thin, dark face. About six foot tall and slim, he looked fit. He had a habit of looking into the distance and carefully composing his words before he uttered them. I felt he was like that in French, as well as in the English which he was gradually remembering. He was, or had been, a history teacher at a high school in Paris.

`It is incredible!' he said, waving his thin expressive hands around. I didn't need a French history professor to tell me that, so I just looked at him.

`No, you do not understand,' he said, correctly interpreting my look. `We are here, we are in a reconstruction of Ancient Rome, in a terrible part of Roman life, a part that existed for almost a thousand years.'

I was beginning to have an idea of what he was talking about.

`You mean something to do with gladiator fights?' I said.

`Perfectly,' he replied surprised. `But how did you know of that?'

I shrugged. I told him about my friends in the Ancient Martial Arts scene who simulated gladiator fights in London, and that, combined with the Roman scenery outside ... I omitted the long story about the chase after a bald bandy-legged man who was collecting gladiator armour for a serial killer. He had not heard of the AMA craze in England and looked at it as yet another example of Anglo-Saxon madness.

`Well, here it does not seem to be simulated,' he said grimly. `Everything has been reconstructed exactly as it was in Ancient Rome. The dress, the training of gladiators, the food. Even to the .. er.. le Triage. And they got the right ones too. The idiots!' He waved his hand contemptuously. `But then sportsmen are not known for their academic qualifications, least of all in the Classics. Did you see Sardoux leaping up the steps like a mountain goat? He was the first! And probably the first for the slaughter too. And Berber was just behind him. You would think they were at Rolland Garos!'

`Sardoux, Berber?' I said blankly. `What are you talking about?'

`I see you are not a tennis player,' said Bertrand. `Michael Sardoux is the top French tennis player, number four on the world list. And Jean Berber, his best friend is number five. Some of the others looked like professional sportsmen too. Did you recognise any?'

`Well, yes,' I said, remembering. `I thought I recognised Dai Brynfor.'

`The Rugby player?'

`Yes, but why did we have to climb those seats?'

`Le Triage - how you say? - the Selection. Virgil wrote about how newly captured prisoners were forced to run up a steep hill and only those who arrived first were selected for the Ludi - selected to be trained as gladiators in the gladiator schools.'

`And the others?' I asked uneasily.

`Yes.' He looked evasive. `They were used as slaves.' He paused. `Or for the Venationes,' he said to himself quietly. He wouldn't explain any more but asked me questions about myself. I told him briefly that I was ex-police and then returned to questioning him.

`I was attacked on the beach at Narbonne,' he said. `That is on the coast and about 120km from here. I was just ...'

`From here!' I interrupted. `And where is "here"?'

He looked up at me.

`This is the Roman stadium in Arles,' he said, in evident surprise. He opened his mouth, perhaps to tell me how well-known it was, then must have reflected that maybe not so well known to Scotland Yard detectives, and closed it again.

I shrugged. He was right: I'd never heard of it.

Arles in southern France. He went on to tell me that Arles was a small town of 50 000 inhabitants, on the river Rhone and about thirty kilometers from the Mediterranean.

`And where are all these 50 000 inhabitants?'

He raised his shoulders.

`The arena is in the middle of the town,' he said. `But it could easily have been cordoned off for repairs or something.'

He knew nothing else, so I sat there digesting what he had told me. Some madman had sent us back into Ancient Rome, into a re-creation of a gladiator school. Could this connection between gladiators and madness have anything to do with the Brain Drain Killer? There must be a link somewhere, but I was damned if I could see it. In the meantime I had to survive. I now realised that Bertrand had recognised the Selection for what it was and had deliberately held me back so that I would not be chosen as a gladiator. One up to Bertrand. But was my present fate any better?

We were the rejects, the slaves. The others were to be trained as gladiators.

Chapter 26

We were introduced to our new life almost immediately. Our job was to serve those picked out to be gladiators, as they went through a course of training. Of course, the sportsmen were by no means docile, and as soon as they were released from their chains they attacked and severely injured a guard before they were subdued. As an aftermath two slaves had to tie up a tough-looking blond Norwegian swimmer to a post in the middle of the arena. All the prisoners were then herded out to watch while he was flogged screaming to unconsciousness by two guards, one right-handed; the other left-handed. After that sickening demonstration there were no more revolts.

Bertrand was often absent and when he returned he told of how he had had to give advice to Fatman on the authenticity of the weapons used and the duelling procedures. If he asked any questions about why he was here and how long it would last, he was answered with blows.

`They speak French and most of them come from La Corse, from Corsica. They are animals,' was all he could tell me.

But Dimitrios, Lan and myself had no special knowledge to offer, we were just simple slaves, to fetch and carry for the élite fighters. To clean their kit, to prepare their food, to fix up and repair the man-sized puppets they practised against, to clean out their toilets, to rake the sand after their exercises.

One day we were all driven down underground and a guard was stationed in our cell with us to make sure we were perfectly quiet. Some visitors could be heard moving in the corridor outside, speaking Italian and laughing: I had heard no laughter for three weeks now. It was only the next day when I was raking over the sand after a practice session between two gladiators that I found a discarded 35mm film package and realised that the visitors must have been film makers. Making a film would be an effective excuse for the closing of the Roman arena in Arles to the general public.

We had very little chance to see the gladiators being trained. But we did sometimes see them running around the arena in full armour or, at a distance see them fighting in pairs with wooden weapons. The blond guard or Fatman would walk considerably behind the rows of practising duellers, clip-boards in hand, making notes.

After a while I could see that the gladiators had been split up and were being trained in different specialities. The agile tennis players were being trained as Retiarii or net-throwers, or perhaps Dimachaeri, who fought with a short sword in each hand. The heavier sportsmen, such as Rugby players or shot-putters, were being trained as heavily armoured Thraex, Samnite or Murmillo gladiators.

Bertrand was closer to them than me and said that although he was not allowed to talk to them, most of them were just making the best of it, thinking they had been kidnapped and would soon be released. Being sportsmen, some of them were even enjoying the contests. Winners were rewarded with extra good food, losers nothing and non-triers were whipped. At the end of the second day everyone was trying.

*

In the hours when we were locked in our cell, Bertrand filled the gaps in my knowledge of the "Munera" - the gladiator contests of Ancient Rome. How the Romans had probably inherited the Etruscan custom of making prisoners-of-war fight against each other as a sacrifice to their own fallen troops. And how later on commemorations for the dead were the most usual occasions for the contests.

And then, when the sheer entertainment value of these deadly duels became evident, various sponsors organised them just to increase their personal popularity with the masses, to induce them to vote them into the Senate.

An often cited excuse for the increasing size and brutality of the Games was that they would promote toughness and military training and so counteract the soft Greek culture which was now abroad.

An entrance fee was charged for the Games and they became very well-organised money-spinners with highly-specialised gladiator schools to train the prisoners-of-war or condemned criminals, so they would put up a better performance, a better show. Some gladiators were volunteer slaves (they could earn their freedom), there were also professional gladiators, and sometimes even volunteers from the ruling families.

Other attractions would be the "Venationes" where animals fought against animals. Mastiffs or "war dogs" from Britain against bears or lions, tigers against hippos, etc.

Also in the "Venationes", humans were locked into the arena with wild animals who had been specially trained and then starved. Often the victims were unarmed, as

with the Christian martyrs, but sometimes to prolong their suffering and make their martyrdom more entertaining, they were allowed a simple spear.

And the organisers sought everywhere to find novel animals. One Emperor broke all records in 200 AD with a loathsome slaughter of wild animals, including 300 Mauritanian ostriches, 200 deer and 200 chamois.

But all this was just a hors d'oeuvre for the main part of the Games which were the man-to-man or team-to-team combats to the death. These were orgies of cruelty, with sometimes a thousand fights to the death in one day.

Some of the Romans' most wonderful engineering feats were the construction of enormous stone buildings, like the Coliseum, which could seat 50 000 spectators. Hundreds of arenas for the "Games" were built all over the Roman Empire and the incredible institution lasted around nine hundred years, with countless hundreds of thousands of unknown heroes going to their ghastly deaths with as much courage as they could muster.

On the other hand, the coinage of Imperial Rome, which served to blazon forth the themes of self-praise which the Roman rulers felt did themselves most credit, never showed gladiator-fighting. Animal hunts and combats yes, but man against man never. Even the amazing Coliseum only appears once or twice on very rare coins or medallions.

Towards the end it was just the entertainment value that counted, a distraction for the masses to keep them from thinking of politics. The Romans, sitting on top of the "biggest Empire the world had ever seen" and receiving tribute from the ends of the earth, had nothing better to do than to devise even more degenerate horrors, ever more titillatingly cruel ways of killing men (and women) in their power, just for perverted amusement.

I reflected that the next and as it turned out, the last "biggest Empire the world had ever seen", the British Empire, was run quite differently. Whatever you thought about the Victorians, they didn't organise mass slaughter for their sadistic pleasure.

'And the only surviving remnants of the Munera, the Games, are the bull-fights in Spain,' concluded Bertrand. And boxing competitions, I thought to myself.

'And what about our gladiators?' I asked, after a while.

'They are just living for the present,' said Bertrand. 'They have no idea of what is to be coming,' he added sombrely.

Chapter 27

But the next morning the guards apparently did. There was an undercurrent of excitement running through them and they became noticeably less attentive and so less malicious towards us slaves.

That afternoon we were all locked in our cells.

About an hour later we could hear the clank of many heavily armoured gladiators passing our door and then silence.

By now we were used to this. The gladiator quarters were further along the corridor than us and so they had to pass us on their way to the arena for training sessions.

But today it was somehow different. For one thing the gladiators were not talking to each other as they passed our door. For another, there were no guards around.

'I was right,' muttered Bertrand. 'They have left because they all want to watch.'

All we could do was listen.

After a while we heard something that sounded like trumpets and then a distant roaring sound, like heavy traffic or the sea. More silence and then quick urgent steps

outside in the corridor. A guard unlocked our cell door and with a curt thumb Bertrand and I were directed out of our cell and we hobbled as quickly as we could down the corridor towards the vaulted exit leading to the arena. Again that strange roaring sound, now much louder but quickly suppressed. Bertrand looked dazed and was speaking to himself in French. Something about it not being possible.

We turned the corner in the corridor and there, lying at the bottom of the steps was a Murmillo gladiator! He was still tangled in a net and there was blood spreading out slowly over the cobblestones from two deep gashes in his neck. I looked with horror and pity at him and heard a gasp from Bertrand beside me.

‘Bon Dieu!’ he whispered.

The gladiator tried to sit up and his sword, his *real* sword I noticed, slid to the floor with a clang. He coughed blood and fell back. I put my hand to his neck, but he was dead. Under his fish-motived helmet I thought I recognised him as a Scottish footballer - could the impossible be true? Had he been fighting with real weapons outside and had one of the other gladiators killed him? How could someone have been forced to break the first rule of civilisation, the First Commandment: ‘Thou shalt not kill’?

The guard brusquely motioned us to put the body of the dead Murmillo onto one of a number of stretchers I now noticed leaning folded against the wall. I unfolded one and we lifted his dead body and carried him into a side room which had been set up as a simple first-aid station. Two men, both grey-haired and both wearing doctors' white smocks, were standing by a table. Like us, they had leg-chains. As we arrived they looked sadly at our dead gladiator as though they had seen one before. The guard snarled something at them and then picking up the dead gladiator's sword, motioned us out of the room.

There was a burst of roaring from outside and then I suddenly recognised it for what it was! Incredible though it seemed, there was an enormous crowd just outside - the arena must now be filled with spectators! And as with the exciting noise of a football crowd, I had a sudden wish to be outside too, to see what was happening.

Another bellowing roar from the crowd and the guard looked at us impatiently. Obviously we should be taken back to our cell but he didn't want to waste the time. He looked in another room and returned with a long rattling chain which he used to connect our leg-irons to a wall fitting. Then he disappeared, leaping up the steps two at a time.

We listened in horrified and disbelieving amazement to the roaring of the crowd outside – there must be 10 000 people there - now chanting something in unison like a football crowd! Who were they? Were the inhabitants of Arles and visiting tourists watching people duel to the death? Surely they could see that the duels were real and not simulated? The nearest row of seats was not more than twenty yards away from the fighters. Where were the police?

Another roar from outside, followed by boos. Then silence and a sort of deep sigh. A few minutes later the entrance was darkened by the shape of two guards, dragging the body of another gladiator by his feet. We watched in horror as they pulled him carelessly down the steps and just dropped him. They then turned and sprinted back up the steps, not wishing to miss any of the action. But before they disappeared I saw one was wearing a strange mask.

‘Charon,’ said Bertrand dully. ‘The god who carries the dead over the river Styx.’

I was not interested in Roman mythology. This was the 20th Century, I was an ex-policeman and that was another dead man. Dressed he may be as a Thraex gladiator, he had multiple wounds, and the cause of death was a severed jugular vein. He had been murdered by having his throat cut. We grimly loaded him onto a

stretcher and took him to the threshold of the door of the first-aid station, which was as far as our chain extended. The doctors, who were similarly chained, took the stretcher into their improvised hospital. One doctor took one look at him and covered him with a sheet.

As the hot afternoon wore on, more dead bodies were pulled and dragged down the steps. Mostly they were dead but some were just alive. Although not a follower of sports, I recognised several of them from pictures on the back pages of newspapers, from sports-clips in TV news bulletins. Famous skiers, a Monte Carlo rally driver, a American stunt-pilot, a French Canadian ice-hockey player, a South African Rugby player. There were also several well-built blacks and Asians that I had never seen before. They were dressed in different types of gladiator armour and some wore metal face masks. As we worked, carrying them into the next room the crowd outside kept up a constant clamour - groaning, booing, stamping and sometimes screaming with blood-lust.

During that terrible afternoon we must have carried off at least twenty dead and dying gladiators - professional well-known sportsmen who had been given a short course in gladiator fighting, armed and then set one against the other. Many had whip-marks on their backs but one or two had terrible red inflamed blisters on their calves. Bertrand, who knew all about the customs of the Roman gladiator fights, looked green and said nothing. It slowly began to dawn on me how they had been forced to fight and kill each other.

We were covered with dried and sticky blood and the first-aid station looked like a charnel house. The doctor and his assistant had some simple medical equipment but were not able to do much with the grotesque multiple injuries of the barely living survivors of the vicious duels going on in the arena above, in front of that blood-crazed crowd. Major surgery would not have saved most of them.

It was late evening now, judging by the sun shining obliquely down the steps, and what turned out to be only the first of a series of fights came to an end. There was a flourish of trumpets and the sound of the crowd diminished to an excited buzzing, finally disappearing as the stands emptied.

Then we were treated to an unprecedented spectacle - a procession of the surviving and presumably victorious gladiators. There were about twenty of them, slowly limping down the steps and wearing only their various armour. We found later that weapons were just given to them before a fight and taken from them immediately afterwards. Warily they stood while we and other slaves unbuckled their body armour. Several of them had still-bleeding cuts and slashes. They were bandaged by the doctor and given injections. Speaking to them was forbidden by the guards who stood around watching, talking excitedly and passing money amongst themselves. They had obviously been betting on the results of the murderous duels.

And the work of the slaves was not finished. The bodies of the dead gladiators on their stretchers were carried up the steps again. We heard solemn music outside and Bertrand told me they were being ceremonially buried at the edge of the arena.

Chapter 28

The next morning was a repetition, starting with the clank of the armoured gladiators passing our cell, only half the number of yesterday. Were they going to be forced to fight amongst themselves again? Forced to overcome their compassionate humanity, their comradeship for other sportsmen and to become murderers. And not out of any possibly excusable reason such as survival or protection of their dear

ones, but merely for the sick amusement of others. What vicious madness was this? How was it permitted in the 20th Century?

Again Bertrand and I were taken to our place at the entrance to the arena and again we heard the noise of the impatiently awaiting crowd. In a strange flash-back to a saner world I thought briefly that all those people could not have come on foot. There must be a large transport infra-structure - special trains, day excursions, package tours, a monster parking lot. How could such an incredible event be hidden?

Again only half the gladiators survived, and so it was six survivors that wearily staggered down the steps at the end of the day. Three duels tomorrow and then there would only be one survivor. What would happen to him? What would happen to us? Whoever had reawakened the devils of Roman barbarity in a peaceful sleepy town in the 20th Century would not want any witnesses left alive!

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But the next day there was a change. After a roar of applause and the first corpse had been dragged to the two doctors, one of the guards came down and unlocked the long chain that fastened Bertrand and myself to the wall. He carefully refastened the chain to Bertrand's leg-irons and then curtly thumbed me to follow him up the steps and out into the arena.

Hampered as usual with the leg chains, I was nevertheless consumed with curiosity as I eagerly stumbled up the steps into the glaring sunlight.

At first, crouching with my hands over my eyes to protect them from the dazzle, I could only see the yellow sand outside the steps, stained black with blood from the previous days. The excited muttering of the crowd was all around me. Then appeared the feet of several guards who were talking and gesticulating excitedly towards two gladiators fighting no more than ten yards away, swords clanging on shields. There were individual shouts of encouragement from the crowd on the far side of the amphitheatre. Then one gladiator made a lunge and there was an echoing roar from the spectators but as my eyes adapted I had a sudden feeling of vertigo. There was something wrong!

The hair at the back of neck rose stiffly and in spite of the hot sun I shivered. The spectators' seats visible behind the duelling pair were empty! Mouth open, my eyes swept around with disbelief. There was a sudden vast ballooning roar, but under calm blue sky the rows and rows of seats around the arena were staring at me with vacant eyes. There was not a soul sitting in them! My grasp on reality slipped. Where was the noise coming from? I couldn't believe my eyes and ears - apart from the two scuffling fighters a few yards away, the stadium was completely deserted! Apart from the small group of about twenty guards, there were no spectators!

There was another roar of applause but by using my ears to tell my eyes where to look, I could now see several six foot high grey metal boxes, set on the sand around the edge of the amphitheatre and facing inwards. Loudspeaker enclosures! The crowd noises were recorded, and being played back over loudspeakers! There was one near me and by following the cable with my eyes I could see it entering some sort of electronic control pulpit situated above me, over the entrance to the arena. Two men were sitting at the pulpit - one wearing headphones. Sound engineers! They must be controlling the sounds, matching the crowd noises to the action!

Again questions hammered at me. Why? Why? It was as though a film were being made except that the gladiators out there were not actors or even stunt men. They were real gladiators, and I knew only too well that they were really killing each other! And why have crowd noises anyway? They could easily be

dubbed onto the film afterwards. And in any case I could see no camera crews or cameras. It was a maze of contradictions.

But something was moving at the far end of the amphitheatre! By looking carefully into the glare of the sun I could see that facing the tunnel exit was an elaborate construction, a small number of ornate seats separated from the others by a low wall, like a box at a theatre. I supposed it would be called the "Emperor's Tribune". In it Fatman and his two henchmen in their white tunics were easily recognised but there was also another figure, sitting in front of them, mostly hidden by a white awning, and wearing a purple toga. Over the parapet in front of him there was also draped a purple cloth. The madman there playing at Emperor must be the person responsible for all this!

I had no time for further observations as the guard who had pulled me out cuffed me, gestured to a wheelbarrow and pointed to a heap of sand with a long-handled spade stuck in it. I had to fill the barrow with sand and take it out to the centre of the arena.

There was a storm of derisive boos from the "spectators" - the fight that was going on when I had appeared had just finished. The two gladiators had wounded each other so severely that they were incapable of fighting any more and so they were being carried off on primitive litters.

As they left I pushed my barrow to where the fight had occurred and was appalled at the amount of bright-red blood sprayed over the trampled sand. Avoiding treading into the glistening pools, I dumped my load and another slave raked it out. I went back feeling nauseous and light-headed, filled the barrow again and was about to return when my guard motioned me to stay where I was. Two more gladiators were approaching the centre of the arena and another duel was about to begin!

Christ - I didn't want to watch that!

I had never been interested in boxing, which I consider a stupid and brutalising sport. Much less was I going to look at the spectacle of two civilised decent men being forced to fight each other to the death with 2000 year old weapons. In the course of a case I had once had to watch a suspect in the audience at a heavy-weight boxing match and it had sickened me. Not only the fight but even more the effect it seemed to have on the spectators, even and especially the women.

My eyes slid reluctantly over the new pair. Each wore a helmet and shin-guards and each had been given two short curved knives. So they were going to fight as Dimachaeri. Behind each one stood a guard with a whip and to one side stood the blond guard, holding a clip-board.

God, I pitied them, standing on the hot sand in the middle of the arena, about to be forced to cut at each other with razor-sharp knives. One would kill the other and walk back: the other would be carried back dead or as near to death as made no difference.

I recognised one as a gifted but controversial American tennis player. He had long hair, a girlish face and was much given to contesting line-decisions and using four-letter words on the court.

The other had the brown matt skin and lank black hair of a Mexican or South American. He had a lithe springy step and although he had an impassive flat face, appeared nervous as he handled his two knives, dropping them twice. I had never seen him before.

But both must be experienced fighters to have got this far. They had slight wounds on their arms which had been bandaged and then taped up. The poor bastards were being thrown into the arena to fight again before the wounds from their last fights had healed!

The American must have made a slighting remark as the Mexican's head came up and he spat on the ground. The blond guard snapped something at them and they both turned to face the Tribune, holding up their knives. There was a deep sonorous fanfare over the background noise of the crowd and the fight began.

The guard standing next to me must have temporarily forgotten I was a slave. 'Tennis,' he said making the movement of a forehand, 'contre ...' some word I didn't catch. But then he put his wrists together and I understood "handball". So an American tennis star and a Mexican handball star were going to fight with knives. The guard rocked his hand back and forth to show his doubt as to the outcome. I looked with disgust at his heavy brutal face, alight with perverted anticipation.

The two fighters were now circling each other, both holding their knives underhand and making short stabbing movements. I recalled the American was left handed (like so many top tennis players). But here it was not obvious - maybe he was hiding it at this stage so he could use it as a surprise later.

The Mexican seemed to have the longer reach but appeared to be holding back, probably for the same reason.

Abruptly I closed my eyes. I had felt my pulse rate rising and the beginnings of an odd sick guilty feeling. I had no intention of gloating over the fate of those two brave sportsmen, pulled from home and family and forced to fight to the death for the amusement of the debauched animal over there. I could have nothing in common with him.

The crowd was muttering impatiently and in the blackness of my closed eyes I could hear the metallic clash of knife blades. I put my fingers in my ears but it hardly helped. The noise of the crowd was so loud I could feel it resonating in my guts. And although my eyes were tightly closed I could still in my imagination see those two brave fighters. Guided by the crowd noises I could feel them approaching, slashing and stabbing at each other, one knife to attack: the other to parry, steel blade screeching on steel blade.

A gasp from the crowd and 'Habet!'

God, first blood, one of them had been cut. I turned my back on the arena and crouching pressed my fingers even more firmly into my ears, but could not shut out the sound. There was some impatient shouting and scattered booing. Then over the groundswell of crowd noise I could hear the merciless cracking of whips!

Oh, sweet Jesus! Their naked backs were being whipped to make them run onto the razor sharp knives of their opponent! Shouts of approval followed by a vast booming bellow from the whole mass of spectators, so loud and so sudden that I made the mistake I was to rue for the rest of my life. Overcome by curiosity I turned round and fearfully opened one eye. The American had fallen! But it was as nothing to my wretched fall! As my fingers came from my ears the sound of the spectators crashed in on me and I was suddenly one with them. I willingly let go of all moral sense, I sank in the warm drunken anonymity, I was going to enjoy myself like everyone else and no one could see and condemn me!

The whole place was boiling with ferocious enthusiasm. Nearby the guards were shouting, there was more cracking of whips, the fighters were thrusting at each other but it was nothing to the thrusts I received in my soul. I saw the blood running down their backs and greedily swallowed down the cruelty. Far from turning away I fixed my eyes on it. Without knowing what was happening I drank in madness, I was delighted with the guilty pleasure, drunk with the lust of blood. I looked, shouted, raved with excitement. I was as one with the guards who were madly gesticulating. On that gentle warm afternoon I learnt the filthy fascination of the gladiator contests and why they had lasted for over a thousand years. I was no longer human!

The pretty-boy American was down again! The fool had stepped back suddenly and his sandal had caught in the loose sand. Like a tiger the Mex pounced forwards, knife held out like a sword, but the American, craftily using his better left hand, parried. The Mex was now circling, the sand hissing and spurting from his feet. Pretty-boy had risen to his knees and was turning to follow him. I hoped that tired his legs! But not able to follow he dug both knives in front of him and used them to throw a gout of sand in the eyes of the Mex. The tricky swine! The crowd gasped - that wasn't in the manual. The Mex jumped back, cleared the sand from his face with his elbow and then out-turning the unfair fighter bored in again. This time he was going to murder him, to slash his face open! But dirty-fighter pretty-boy almost fell on his face as he reached out and slashed sideways with his knife at the Mex's right leg. The swine - I almost heard the tendon snap as the knife severed his hamstring. And now the Mex was down on his knees too! And as he had fallen a knife had flown out of his hand!

`Habet!' screamed the crowd again as the Mex collapsed.

Shit - that must be curtains for the Mex. But don't give up, the Yank is tiring too, he's just an effeminate tennis player. You still have one knife – you can still carve him up!

`Don't back away! Keep at him!' I shouted. Then I groaned as he tried to recover his fallen knife with his outstretched left hand and the Yank slashed out again ripping into his forearm, the blade leaving a red line.

`Habet!' shrieked the morons in the crowd.

The Mex flinched back again - he was going to lose!

`The whip - thrash the coward!' I screamed, capering and waving my fists. The guards moved in raising their whips. Good - this fight was getting boring, they both needed stirring up.

But before they could give them the lash the Mex did it, and lost all my sympathy. Just the sort of dirty underhand trick you'd expect of a Dago – instead of fighting like a man, he pulled his arm back and threw his knife! In a glittering arc it flew forwards and buried itself point-first in the American's stomach! The white man lurched to his feet, hand on the knife hilt, his face contorted and turned to the Dago, who was watching, a sneer on his flat face.

`Go, go!' you can still get him, I shrieked, this time to the American. `Give him the whip!' I pleaded.

But it was too late, the white man stupidly tugged at the knife and as the blood pumped out, fell down twitching in the sand. The whip cracked down repeatedly on his back, but it was too late. He was dead. The fight had only lasted five minutes! The crowd was booing with disappointment and shouting `lugula! lugula!' (kill him), over and over again.

There was a sudden expectant silence and all eyes swivelled across to look at the Emperor's Tribune. He would be furious at the quick end to the fight, how would he punish the cheating Dago? Something slow and agonising I hoped, to make up for the fun time we had lost.

Finally in a deathly silence the Emperor in his impressive purple toga slowly stretched out his hand. And the thumb was up! Missio! The Dago would be spared! There was a gasp from the crowd, some rebellious shouts, which were then drowned in a united full-throated cry. The Emperor approved!

The guards near me groaned but I shouted:

`The tricky bastard should be crucified!' I turned to the guards. `Are you just going to let the shit get away with it? Why don't you ...?' But one of them just kicked me into silence.

The Games were over for the day - that was the last duel, signalled by solemn notes on a deep-toned brass instrument. The body of the American was loaded onto a litter as was the crippled Mexican, the milk-sop whimpering like a child. He wouldn't have got off so easily if I had been in charge! The litters were dragged off followed by the rustle of thousands of feet as the crowd stood up and with a diminishing hum of excited chatter slowly filed out of the stands. The guards were exchanging money and talking animatedly. My guard came over and thumbed me towards the tunnel entrance.

'Tomorrow? Tomorrow also? I asked him. 'Tomorrow OK?' I asked him pleadingly. He just looked at me contemptuously and I only avoided a kick by agilely hopping down the steps. But I didn't mind. I wanted to see the Games again on the morrow. I would find a way.

Chapter 29

In the evening, locked up in our cell, I couldn't keep still. I was foaming over with excitement. I tried to explain to Bertrand the intoxication of the Games and wanted to give him a blow-by-blow account of the duel. How the tough guy had turned out to be the coward in the end, and worse, had cut short the fun. But he just looked at me steadily, a strange mixture of pity and loathing - as though I had caught leprosy or something.

But I was riding high.

'I'll try to get you in tomorrow,' I promised.

He blanched and made the gesture of pushing me away.

'Yes,' I said. 'I know how you feel - I felt the same at first. But it gets hold of you and then it's sensational! You'll get a tremendous charge!'

'No, no, never!' he kept repeating and finally turned his head to the wall.

Stupid namby-pamby Frog. No wonder the Huns just walked over them in 1940. Too bloody intellectual - what they needed was some red blood. I thought of the arena and the knife hilt sticking out of that wimpy tennis player's stomach. Had the Emperor been right to pardon the slimy Mexican? I could hardly sleep. I kept seeing that fight - mentally playing it over and over again. I could barely wait for the morning.

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Next morning Bertrand was avoiding me. The hell with him. I had eyes only for the guard who had let me out yesterday. But when we took up our position at the foot of the steps, he was not in sight. As I heard the first blasts on the trumpets outside and the anticipatory buzz of the crowd, I felt like a child barred from entering the circus. I thought of the hot sand of the arena, the dancing shadows of the fighters, and almost wept with frustration.

But after a few minutes another guard, with a piece of paper in his hand, descended and looked at Bertrand and me.

'Which is Murdoch?' he said in an American accent.

This could mean anything. Apprehensively I said that was my name.

He thumbed me to follow him and with a mixture of excitement and nervousness I followed him into the bright sunlight. To my surprise he walked around the edge of the arena and away from the heap of sand I had been digging into yesterday. Leg-chain rattling, I hobbled after him, trying to get a view of the fight that had just started between two Samnites armed with heavy swords and shields.

The guard stopped and pointed to a speaker. I didn't understand what he meant until I suddenly realised that there was something wrong with it. There was no sound coming from it - it was dead. Stepping behind it I saw a long thick black rubber cable

snaking up over the ten foot high parapet and then over the seats to the distant sound control pulpit with its two attentive engineers.

My guard thumped me on the shoulder to bring my attention back to the loudspeaker.

'Fix it,' he said, and then turned to watch the fighters.

I impatiently crouched down behind the big enclosure and looked at the cable which disappeared into the base of the enclosure through a rubber-lined hole. My technical knowledge is just about sufficient to change a household fuse. They must have thought that being the managing director of an electronics company meant that I was a technical wizard. Christ, I knew sod-all about loudspeakers. Try anything. I just wanted to get the bloody thing repaired so I could get back to watching the next fight.

Through my red-misted eyes I saw there was a sort of panel covering part of the back of the enclosure and held on by thumb-screws. I savagely wrenched at them and tearing the panel off impatiently, looked inside. Some aluminium boxes which I would never dare to open. Ah, good, there it was, that must be it! Out of the thick cable came several wires and one of them ended in an American three-pin power plug. It had fallen out of its socket. Some clumsy fool must have tripped over the big cable and pulled it out. Right. All I had to do was push it back in and get back to the duel which I could just see out of the corner of my eye.

But there was something else! Clipped to the inside wall of the enclosure was a small plastic box and through its transparent lid I could see small shiny objects - it was a general-purpose tool-kit. A distant voice was shouting at me - it was so realistic I almost turned round. I could not hear the words but it was urgently shouting something over and over again.

'The box! The box!'

The voice was familiar, I shivered and my hand of its own volition reached out to the box. Unclipped it fell to the bottom of the enclosure and with the shock the flimsy lid sprang off and several tools fell out.

And one was a small hack-saw!

I stared at it - a douche of icy cold water was pouring over me and yet my tunic was soaked in sweat. The blood was singing in my ears. Part of me knew I had to do something, and yet if I did, it meant leaving the drunken delights of the Games. The deep primitive fulfilment of letting myself go, of relaxing and throwing off the artificial bonds of civilisation. Satisfaction, deeper than sexual relief, such as I had never experienced before in my whole life.

But there was another world outside of me as I gradually recognised that it was my voice that was shouting at me!

I cautiously peered around the enclosure at my guard but he was intently watching the fighters. I impulsively reached in to the enclosure and thrust the hacksaw into the front of my tunic!

I replaced the tool-kit lid and pushed it back into its clip then pressed the power-plug into its socket. Immediately the speaker came alive with the anticipatory muttering of the crowd. The red haze rose again, sucking me back down again to that insidiously delightful, simple, totally satisfying world. Fighting for reason I shook my head and thrust my hand into my tunic to grasp the sharp points of the blade that meant freedom, real freedom. I pressed them, the pain bringing me slowly back to sanity. I pushed the rear panel on and left it - I had not the control over my fingers to tighten the fixing screws. I stood up, looking round for my guard. But he had walked back to the group by the entrance to the arena, about twenty yards away, and was arguing fiercely with one of the other guards.

Keeping my eyes carefully away from the deadly hypnotic figures of the fighters and - but surely I could just watch this one fight? I might never get another chance! I teetered on the edge of the red sucking mouth of delight again but almost in spite of myself the faint tug of reason pulled me back to grey sanity. Sickened and dizzy I clutched the hacksaw blade again as though its sharp edge was my passport to reality, to a cold rational sanity that I knew I must get back to.

Drained of emotion I sank down again onto the sand, moving so I was hidden from the group of guards but just able to keep an eye on the guard who had led me here. I looked around tiredly. I was out of sight of both the Tribune and the sound engineers. Carefully I felt for the hacksaw and drew it out sweating. I clasped my hands around it secretively, knowing I would certainly be publicly flogged to death if it was found on me. It was a small cheap tool but the bite of its firm purposeful edges somehow stabilised me.

I brought up my legs and looked carefully for the first time at my leg-irons. The links were 5mm chrome steel, as were the leg-bands. I tried the saw against one of the links but it just skittered off. The saw was useless! I might as well enjoy the intoxication... no! no! Desperately I wedged a link firmly and tried again, but it was pointless. The steel was much too hard and its shiny surface was not even scratched.

I sat there, almost crying with frustration as I fought for my soul, fought against the almost irresistible tug of the perverse, helped only by the veneer of a scant few thousand years of civilisation and a stupid little toy saw, this pathetic little reminder of Man's tool-making destiny.

The berserk blood-lust of the crowd boiled around me again with hot waves of wonderful guilt-free joy. My body craved to be allowed to sink down again into the hot morass, to the delight of not having to think, to be carried along effortlessly on a warm wave of feeling.

I drew my arm back to throw the useless stupid little toy imitation of a saw up onto the seats. The world teetered and swung, the blade again biting into my fingers, making them sting with the sharp pain of its fine needle-like teeth.

Reluctantly I forced myself to examine my shackles again. The leg bands were hinged at the back, but everything was of the same shiny hard steel as the chain links. And then I noticed that the leg bands did not close perfectly tightly. There was a 1mm gap, and in this gap I could see the tongue of the lock. It was of a dull metal and at least wasn't chromed. A file would never get in to reach it, but a thin hacksaw blade might!

A quick look around the enclosure again – nothing had changed. Hardly breathing I slid the blade, slippery with my blood, into the gap between the two halves of the leg-band and started sawing. Immediately I knew it was going to work! The metal was softer and I could feel it drag on the saw blade. Furthermore the blade was guided by the edges of the bands, so I just had to saw the blade backwards and forwards. The tongue of the lock was about an inch long and about an eighth of an inch thick.

Back and forth, back and forth, bright filings falling on my ankle. I had a cramp once in my bent up leg and had to pause a moment to stretch it but after a quarter of an hour of sawing I was almost through. Should I cut the rest and try to escape now, or wait until later? I sank down again, moving so I was hidden from the group of guards, but just able to keep my eye on the guard who had led me here.

Now or later? I looked across at the fighters, one seemed to be winning, raining clanging blows on the other who was hardly able to keep up his shield, the "crowd"

was screaming hysterically, the guards were totally absorbed, waving their arms wildly and shouting. If I tried now I would only have the one chance. The big problem was get up the parapet to the seats above me. If I could only climb on top of the six foot high speaker, it was only another four feet to the top of the parapet. Perhaps there was a way!

I moved to the back of the enclosure and grasping the thick loud-speaker cable, pulled it down. To start with it was disappointingly loose and several feet of cable fell down on the sand around me. But I reasoned it must go round the seats to the sound-control pulpit – it was rubber-coated, it must snag on something somewhere, so I carried on slowly pulling. Then it stopped and held! I pulled on it as hard as I could, eyes on the sound engineers. They didn't move - intent on their job. So there were enough bends around the seats to hold the cable. This was it then - now or never!

I sat down again and bent my knee. A few quick but careful strokes of the hacksaw, the right leg-band fell open and off my leg with a slight clatter and I was free! I carefully stood up, feeling the unaccustomed lightness of my right leg. My left leg, on the contrary was now twice as heavy, having to carry all the weight. I had no time to saw it off now - I had enough mobility for what I had in mind, so I just wrapped the chain round my left leg so it would not drag and thrust the saw back into my tunic. Another look around the enclosure. The action was building up to some sort of climax as I tugged on the thick cable and leaning out on it "walked" up the wall, keeping the loud-speaker between myself and the Tribune until I was level with the top of it.

Now this was the dangerous part, where I would be exposed to everyone's eyes if they cared to glance my way. I knew nothing attracted attention as well as quick movements so it was very slowly that I moved to sit on top of the speaker enclosure then slowly and carefully got my legs under me and used the enclosure as a step to take me up the remaining four feet over the parapet. Panting and sweating I slid gradually over it and then down between the parapet and the front of the first row seats. I had made it, but had anyone noticed? They could well be waiting for the fight to finish before someone leisurely came to collect me and lead me to my punishment.

A sudden idea. I pulled up all the loose cable so that things down there at least looked as they did before my climb. And then my heart skipped a beat! I noticed that the cable led straight along the back of the first row of seats directly and unhindered to the sound pulpit. The only reason my climbing up the cable had not tugged it out of the pulpit and given the alarm was because the cable had had to go around a single broken piece of masonry which had snagged it! I carefully freed the cable in case anyone wanted to follow me. I must now get away from here quickly.

But which way to go? Anti-clockwise I would come under the eyes of the sound engineers - clockwise I would be seen by those in the Tribune. Jesus - I wanted to move away from here but I had to force myself to think first! I must go up. The plan must be to climb high enough so I could get to the back row of seats without attracting the attention of those in the Tribune, the sound engineers or just anyone who might glance this way. And quickly. My guard would come back soon and not finding me would trigger a frantic search. We were a small enclosed mad community here, and every effort would be made to make sure no one escaped. I must try to hide for long enough to convince everyone that I had escaped and then pick the best time to really escape - like night-time.

But where to hide? The best place to hide is the most unlikely. Again I scanned around the 150 by 100 yard stadium with its sea of empty seats. And stopped. That was it! It would be difficult and dangerous to get there, but not impossible. I looked

around again, estimating angles, times and distances. My life would depend on doing this right.

Then at last I started crawling as rapidly as I could between the front row of seats and the two foot high top of the parapet. It was hot sweaty work and my knees were soon scuffed and bleeding. When the crowd noise dropped I had to hold the loose chain in one hand to stop it rattling against the stonework. Now I was half way between the sound engineers and the Tribune and hidden from both, provided I kept below the level of the seats. I would go up on my back.

Yes, that was good. I could move up quickly, catching occasional glimpses of the Tribune to my right, between the seats. There was one dangerous point where the seats had fallen into a heap of rubble, but by keeping really flat I crossed it without any cry of pursuit. I was about five rows above the Tribune.

Now to the right. Still OK, an almost undamaged row of seats to hide behind. And I was just two rows above and directly behind the Emperor's Tribune! So close I could hear Fatman's high voice, although I couldn't hear what he was saying. I pulled up my left leg and slowly and carefully sawed off the remaining leg band then cautiously stretched out my legs. God, that was wonderful! Freedom after eight weeks of bondage! I put the hacksaw back and quietly folded up the heavy leg-irons. They could be used as a weapon.

Chapter 30

Judging by the length of shadows cast by the bright sunlight, it was now mid-morning and I settled down to watch through a gap in the seat in front of me. In particular to see what was going to happen when my disappearance was discovered.

Subconsciously I had heard the artificial crowd noises rise to a crescendo and finally drop to the usual "rest" mutter, so the fight below me must have finished. Indeed, far below I could see two slaves raking over the sand. They disappeared back into the tunnel and for a moment the arena was empty. In the crystal-clear Mediterranean light I could see one sound engineer had removed his earphones and was talking to the other who had lit a cigarette.

There was some activity below. Three slaves, followed by a guard, were hobbling out of the tunnel. Then four more, followed by a big group of slaves. Every one, slaves and guards, were being led out to witness this, the final duel of the Games. They were all being moved into a half circle facing the Emperor's Tribune. Sixty slaves, chained, clad in dirty tunics and blinking in the sunlight. Then the two doctors in blood-stained smocks and five or six other people I had not seen before.

But there was something wrong. The big blond guard was walking hurriedly along the line of slaves, holding his clip-board and obviously checking that everyone was present. And by the tenseness of his demeanour and the agitation of the other guards it was evident that one was missing!

Blondie was shouting at the guards and finally one was pushed forwards. It was the American who had pulled me out to repair the broken speaker! He pointed to the enclosure I had repaired and he and Blondie walked rapidly over to it. They both looked around it and the blond guard pulled on the cable. As expected loops of loose cable fell around them and then there was a sudden shout of protest from the sound engineers. The two guards walked back and Blondie snapped some words up at the two engineers who shrugged - visibly denying that they had seen anything.

Angrily the giant blond surveyed the tiers of seats then shouted at the guards and watched as they shepherded all the slaves back down into the tunnel and

presumably back into their cells, so all the guards could be used to search for the missing slave.

Impatiently he paced up and down until the guards returned and then with wide arm movements dispatched ten of them to climb up the fallen masonry and search the rest of the stadium. This was it! I crouched down. From now on I must keep out of sight - above all fighting the almost irresistible temptation to peep out and see how the search was going.

I lay out as flat as I could under the seats and then picking up handfuls of fine-blown dust and pieces of stone, scattered them over my recumbent form. I might have to lay motionless for hours - my only information was going to be the noise of the "crowd". At the moment it was just a "waiting" buzz.

Absolutely nothing happened for about an hour. The guards were being very thorough, looking behind each seat and I tried to work out in my imagination how long ten guards would need to search the entire stadium. The shadow of the sun slowly moved around and I started to sweat, from tense nervousness as much as the heat. A small puff of wind raised a cloud of dust and I almost sneezed. There were no flies, thank God, but several small animals scuttled over my legs. I once heard voices nearby, including the high voice of Fatman, and I cringed down, expecting at any moment to hear a shout of triumph. But then they faded. I hoped the guards would be too intimidated to search close to the Emperor, with its implication of stupidity that he had not noticed the intruder.

Another half hour passed, the sun's shadow continued to move and all I heard was the sighing of the wind and the distant muttering of the "crowd". But suddenly the noise of the crowd increased and there was the strident menacing fanfare that heralded the start of a new duel!

Excellent! So they had abandoned the search for me and were going on to the next duel. At last I would be able to sit up and see what was going on. There was a cheer from the crowd signalling the entry of a new pair of gladiators into the arena and I was just about to sit up, stretch my cramped limbs and brush the dust from my face when I remembered how in the police it was standard procedure to conduct a search in two stages. The first stage would be the obvious rowdy search. If the searchers had no success they would take their noisy leave. But they would leave some of the team concealed in case there *were* hidiers who would incautiously reveal themselves once they thought the search had moved on.

So I froze again and was rewarded by hearing the crowd sounds suddenly switch off in mid-cheer. There were some loud near-by voices which then faded. Cautiously stretching up I could see two guards making their way back along the steps, down the fallen masonry and back to the group by the tunnel. At the same time I could see the blond guard lowering a pair of binoculars. The tricky bastards, I had been right! All clear for the moment. But they would know I could not leave the stadium.

The blond guard was now jogging in a straight line across to the Tribune below me and on his arrival Fatman leaned over the parapet to give him some instructions, emphasising them with a chop of his enormous hand. Blondie nodded and doubled back. What was going to happen now? Looking at the sun I guessed it must be nearing noon. At least nine hours before darkness and the time when I could even begin to think of escaping.

I expected the slaves would be brought out again, but no. Only guards were visible standing outside the tunnel entrance.

Then that strident ominous fanfare again, but this time for real, followed as it was by the sonorous proclamation "Ave, Caesar, Morituri te salutant", echoing around the arena. A swelling roar of applause and then the "spectators" settled down to an

expectant hum. There was no doubt that the two sound engineers had equipment of the highest quality and they used it with artistry and imagination.

Two gladiators entered the arena and stood facing the Emperor's Tribune. These were the last surviving gladiators out of more than forty!

One was an enormous 6ft 2 black South African footballer who in a month had completely reverted to his ancestral Zulu background, the dominant tribe before the whites arrived in South Africa with their firearms. He had developed into a deadly fighting machine with twenty bloody victories to his `credit'.

The other gladiator was another South African, blond and Boer, his ancestors the tough Protestant Dutch settlers who had first colonised South Africa. He was not quite as tall as the Zulu but was somewhat broader of shoulder. A member of the famous international "Springbok" Rugby team, he too had developed into a killer, with nineteen victories behind him.

The Zulu was about 28 years old, the Boer looked two years older.

Obviously this final duel was going to be spiced with racial hatred. Black for white, oppressed for oppressor. But for the moment they stood side by side, dressed only in boxer shorts, their oiled bodies gleaming in the midday sun, standing barefoot on the freshly-raked sand that had absorbed so much blood in the last three days, facing the purple-draped Emperor's Tribune.

Looking down at the Tribune just below me, I could see the enigmatic figure I had come to think of as "The Emperor", Fatman and the two guards. Apart from the two sound engineers sitting at their small pulpit above the tunnel exit, the tiers and tiers of seats were empty under the hot mid-day sun.

I heard Fatman's high voice and by cautiously peering through a broken gap between two seats, I saw he was leaning forwards and talking to the two guards. They stood up, left the Tribune and started to walk around the circumference of the stadium between the seats in opposite directions. Curiously I watched them, both walking away from me. Looking across to the other side of the arena I saw their paths would converge above the sound engineers.

Meanwhile the two gladiators stood motionless, the main body of guards outside the tunnel entrance was moving nervously and the "crowd" was becoming impatient. The two guards had converged about five seat-rows above the sound-control desk and were now slowly stepping down. The two engineers, watching the scene before them, were intent on matching sounds to what they saw, and were unaware of their approach. The crowd background noise was rising, angrily impatient at the delay, with the occasional shout riding over it when abruptly everything cut off and there was complete silence. I saw the two guards had reached the sound pulpit and were leaning over it. There was a sudden loud hissing and a shrill voice in Italian, followed by a click and complete silence again. The two guards were now descending the steps towards the arena, pushing the loudly protesting engineers in front of them. One still had his headphones on, the wire hanging loose, the connector torn off. I could clearly hear their little high-pitched whining voices as they were led to the parapet and forced over the ten foot drop onto the sand. One hung from his hands, looking down terrified until a guard dislodged him by stamping on his hands. He fell heavily beside his companion and they both crouched at the bottom of the ledge, looking around shocked. They limped over to the group of guards lined up behind the two still immobile gladiators.

I looked at the scene below. There was some movement in the Tribune, now occupied only by the Emperor and Fatman. Fatman bent down and picked up a short metal ladder that had been hidden behind the seats. He leaned out, resting one end

on the purple cloth of the Tribune, the other on the sand below. Someone was going to enter the arena from the Emperor's Tribune. It could only be the Emperor himself!

Fatman stood to one side, deferentially holding the purple-edged canopy aside, and for the first time I saw the Emperor stand up. He stepped over the edge of the parapet and facing forwards, slowly climbed down the ladder into the arena. He stepped off the ladder and stood erect and motionless on the sand, his purple toga fluttering in the slight breeze. A minute later he was joined by Fatman, who had a small leather case under his arm. They paused a further moment then started pacing slowly, arrogantly stiff-legged and in strict step towards the gladiators waiting for them in front of the half-circle of guards. In the complete silence all eyes followed the slow pacing figures and I had a blinding shock which almost made me cry out. I had seen that walk, that way of moving before. I suddenly recognised the gait of the Emperor!

The Emperor was the Brain Drain Killer!

Chapter 31

Facts were tumbling around in my head, arranging and rearranging themselves. Everything that had happened to me in the last three months must be reinterpreted. But I had no time for any of that - I had to see what was going to happen now! Whatever the whole crazy murderous enterprise was about, it was now approaching its climax.

The pair stopped three paces in front of the two gladiators. Fatman unzipped his bag and tipped it open. Three long-bladed knives fell out onto the sand, the sun catching one in a lethal glitter. He then bent forwards, awkwardly because of his enormous girth, picked up the knives and slowly put them back in the bag, closed it and inverted it twice. He opened it again and shook out one knife towards the Zulu and one towards the Boer. They bent down, quickly picked up their knives and after stepping back from each other examined them closely. Some ritual to make sure the duel would be fair, I supposed.

So after all the complicated combinations of differently armed fighters, the slaughter and the mutilation, where more than forty brave men, top sportsmen from all over the world had been tortured to make them murder each other, the final duel was to be a simple knife fight! A knife fight between two fighters who had each survived three days of savage duels with the best that Planet Earth could offer.

Fatman left the Emperor, or the Brain Drain Killer as I now knew him to be, and went to stand by the side of the guards. There was another petrified tableau, the guards unmoving and in absolute silence under the almost vertical sun, no one knowing the next move.

This was obviously the finale. The Killer had brought sportsmen at untold expense from all over the planet and had forced them to be trained in a school that was as near to a "Ludus", a Roman gladiator school, as historical records could support. Then they had been pitted against each other, cruelly forced to fight using the old Roman gladiator weapons and rules, winner fight winner in a merciless knock-out competition until just these two giants were left. The winner would be the "Victor Munerum", the Victor of the Games. And what then would happen to him? What was the point of it all?

And why were the two gladiators just looking uncertainly at the person who they must know was the source of their enslavement, their degradation? They were both armed, each of them was twice as strong as the "Emperor", and the guards were now at least ten yards away. A quick thrust and it would be all over. An ideal time for a

gladiators' revolt - a permanent danger even in Ancient Rome. But the guards were in no way anxious - the Emperor was in charge. He was the master.

And indeed he was the master. Young though he appeared, he stood there upright and seemed to radiate a power that dominated the whole stadium. It crossed no one's mind to do anything but wait patiently for his next command.

When was the fight to start? The Killer was just looking at them impassively with his immobile "tailor's dummy" face. Then he reached up to undo a clasp at his shoulder, threw open his purple toga and let it fall to the ground.

And he, like the gladiators, was also wearing boxer shorts! So I was for the first time able to examine the body of the Killer, to compare it with what I had already seen in that many-times rerun film taken in New Jersey.

He was shorter and indeed younger than the tough experienced gladiators facing him. About 5ft 9 and no more than 22 or 23. His pallid skin contrasted sharply with the bronzed Afrikaner and the black Zulu. It was amazing that there was so much dignity, so much power emanating from him, in spite of his youth. He had obviously gone intensively into body-building but the muscles were built on an only average bone structure. The characteristic that mostly distinguished him from the two overpoweringly vital gladiators was a sort of nervous immobility. Whereas they moved with a self-confident litheness, his movements were jerky, rather like a character in an old black and white news-reel. He appeared to move suddenly from one position to the other without going through the intermediate positions.

Another tableau - a triangle formed by the Killer facing the two gladiators, all dressed the same, all facing inwards. Without moving his feet the Killer bent down and picked up the third knife. Was that the signal for the final duel to begin? No - the Killer seemed to be saying something to himself. And suddenly he held his knife vertically in front of him, in what with a sword would be the `salute' position.

As though this were a signal, a bizarre sound started to emerge from the loudspeakers set around the arena. Softly at first. A stiff military-type drumbeat roll from a snare-drum but superimposed over it a strange hair-raising constantly rising howling tone. The note rose, yet didn't rise. It was exciting, desperately lonely and totally alien as it echoed around the empty stadium.

Ignoring the sound, the two gladiators briefly imitated the salute and then turned to face each other, crouched in the wide-spaced legs and arms stance of the knife-fighter. At last the tension broke as they advanced crabwise towards each other.

But no! The Killer had also assumed the knife-fighter stance and was advancing towards the two gladiators, stabbing his knife out at them alternately in unmistakable challenge! I gasped when I realised what he meant. He was going to fight them both at once!

I had seen the Killer in action before and I knew he was fast, very fast. But this was suicide. Two fighters are much more than twice as dangerous as one fighter alone. They can attack from both sides, one can distract him while the other kills him. And they would kill him as quickly as they could, without the slightest compunction. The gladiator school had turned them into killing-machines that once switched on, could not be switched off until they were victorious or dead. The mystical power of the Emperor would have no effect on machines.

I had no idea what madness drove the Killer but this was incompetent madness. What on earth was he trying to prove?!

The two gladiators straightened up and looked at each other startled. They too were going to have to make a complete readjustment - they would now fight as allies instead of enemies. I could see the hate-filled rictus fade from their faces as they tried to work out the implications.

Having made his intention clear the Killer impassively watched the gladiators, as heads together they quickly improvised a plan. Finally the Boer nodded and they stood apart, turned, and began to slowly advance on the Killer, one on each side. Maybe they thought that individually they could nail the Killer, but they were taking no chances. My eyes smarted as I watched the final drama unfold. I didn't want to miss an instant and had to almost force my burning eyes to blink to moisten them in that hot dry crystal-clear air. The strange music grew louder, the drum-beat quicker as the two gladiators approached the Killer, knives extended towards him, the Boer to the Killer's left front: the Zulu from the Killer's right rear. The Zulu was directing the attack with small movements of his out-stretched left hand.

But the Killer merely stood there, looking between them, his knife loosely held and pointing towards the ground. He must now only be able to see them with peripheral vision. The black was making slow up and down movements with his left hand and the Boer circled the Killer deliberately, anti-clockwise, until they were now both behind him. But in a move that was too fast for me to follow, the Killer leapt up and turned 180 degrees in mid-air, the sand spurting from beneath his feet. The two South Afrikaaners paused, then continued to circle, this time clock-wise.

And suddenly the music stopped in mid-beat.

The Zulu's left hand was steady as he alone menacingly slid sideways until he was behind the Killer again. I could see the lips of the Boer moving and in the dead silence could faintly hear his voice - he was steadily counting numbers in some guttural language - probably South Afrikaans. Like a line-up in American football. A simultaneous attack would occur when the pre-arranged number was reached.

And then the Killer slightly moved. He opened his hand and dropped his knife! It was amazing - he had deliberately and contemptuously dropped his knife! He now stood unarmed, hands by his side, looking ahead.

The numbers were continuing - the Boer must be up to twenty at least, when there was a blur of explosive action that would have required a camera turning at hundreds of frames per second to resolve. As near as my straining eyes could see, the Zulu had leapt forwards aiming low, whereas the Boer had leapt forwards aiming high.

The Killer waited until the two knives were no more than a foot from his body then jumped back and at the same time reached out and grasped the wrists of the hands holding the knives. Using their forward momentum he guided and assisted them onwards so that the knives, instead of meeting in his body, sank into the bodies of his attackers - black killed white and white killed black! From where I was I could hear the thump as the two knives were driven home.

Another tableau - this time of the three men in a small compact group. The two attackers were frozen in death, the small form of the Killer, arms crossed in front of himself, still had a hand on each wrist. He stepped back abruptly and his two erstwhile attackers, still mutually joined by their knives, slowly toppled over and fell limply to the sand at his feet. The Killer stood there looking at the huge interlocked immobile bodies lying in front of him, both their grimacing faces rigid in surprised death. There was no cheering from the guards, just an eerie silence.

The pause dragged on and the line of guards moved restlessly but Fatman held out his arm and they froze to stillness again. However even Fatman himself appeared uncertain as to what to do. The Killer stood there immobile as though savouring the moment. It was undoubtedly the finale, the culmination of a long string of complex interlocking activities that he had carefully planned - training himself by selective murders in England and the US, contacting and recruiting a gang of thugs,

kidnapping sportsmen from all over the world and financing everything by amazingly brutal and spectacular bank robberies in France.

But what now? Was he just going to pay them off, don normal street clothes and return to everyday life - whatever the normal everyday life of a serial Killer was? As I stared, hardly breathing, eyes glued to the scene below, I could sense tension but not see the cause. Then I became aware of a faint clacking sound at the edge of my hearing. Tearing my eyes reluctantly away from the tableau below I shot a brief glance upwards and to the right, where against the blue sky I could see the dark shape of a helicopter.

It approached rapidly and I saw immediately that it was not a normal police helicopter of the type that patrols crowded motorways. This was a big two-rotor load-carrying job and was making directly for the amphitheatre. Remembering what had occurred in the US, I guessed it was there to carry off the Killer, Fatman, Blondie and the rest of the guards, their enigmatic purpose fulfilled. The fantastic events that were about to unroll would show that I was only partly right.

The big helicopter was now hovering over the exact centre of the arena, about twenty feet up and casting a big black shadow. It was making a tremendous noise with the whining of its turbine and the clattering of its rotors blatting off and being concentrated by the stone tiers of seats. The down-blast from its rotors was kicking up clouds of yellow sand.

Below, no one moved. I would have guessed the helicopter's arrival was as much a surprise to the guards as to me.

The whine of the turbine slid flute-like down the scale and the bulky black shape sank, rocked momentarily on its wheels and finally settled heavily in the sand. The rotors span round slower and slower and finally coasted to a stop.

I looked from the stationary helicopter to the Killer. He stooped down and quickly picked up the knife he had previously held and so contemptuously dropped. He thrust it up suddenly into the air and his steely self-control snapped. He capered around in a strange jerky dance, uttering a mad-sounding barking sound, which changed to something shouted over and over again: "I can! I can! I have the right!" His high-pitched voice was clearly audible from where I was crouched.

And then as suddenly as his self-control had snapped it was reimposed and the ultimate act in the incredible drama started to unfold as the strange music emerged from the speakers anew - the hypnotic drum beat and the strange rising-yet-not-rising howl. The Killer turned towards the helicopter and began to walk towards it in a stiff-legged jubilant gait in time to the music. He was no more than ten yards from it when, as though on a prearranged signal, all its doors burst open simultaneously and out leapt about ten enormous dogs! They tumbled out, rolling onto the sand, barking and snapping at each other and then scrambled to their feet glaring around wildly, clearly stunned for a moment by their sudden liberty and the bright sunlight. Although they were massive Alsations and Dobermans I could see that they were thin, the bones of their rib-cages showing through their shaggy pelts. They had been deliberately starved and were now ravenous for meat - any meat!

The Killer, knife in hand, had halted and was motionlessly watching. The guards outside the tunnel entrance would have done well to imitate him. Instead there was a flurry of panic-stricken movements at the unexpected appearance of a pack of ravenous dogs right in front of their eyes. They suddenly realised they were unarmed except for their whips and instinctively turned to flee to safety down the tunnel. Too late!

Two of the dogs, attracted by their movement, gave short yelps as a signal to the others and began to lope towards the tunnel entrance. As one, the dogs pricked up their ears, spun round and began to race after their leaders. Tails-up the savage pack poured silently over the sand in a menacing arrowhead, pointing directly at the panic-stricken guards.

The gladiator contest at Arles was going to end with a "Venetiones"!

But one dog at the rear of the pack froze and raised its blunt muzzle questingly. It must have got a whiff of the peculiar feral odour exuded by the Killer. Hackles rising and teeth bared the huge mastiff twisted round and ignoring the rest of the pack made directly for the stationary figure. Starting with a loping run it increased speed as it approached until when it was about two yards away it gathered its powerful legs under its haunches and launched itself in a leap at the Killer's throat. It was what the "London Times" would no doubt have called a 'most ill-advised move.' For the Killer, at what must have been the very last moment, stretched out his knife carrying arm and sank on one knee. The blade entered the body of the dog at the base of its outstretched throat and sliced down the whole of the front of its body as its weight carried it over the kneeling figure.

Blood spurted and loops of white intestines fell out as the enormous dog thumped down and slid forwards in the loose sand. It tried to struggle to its feet and turned to snap at its own dragging intestines, but the blood pumping out of its neck artery drained it and after a few spasmodic convulsions it collapsed lifeless.

Meanwhile the rest of the dogs had reached the tunnel entrance. Most of the guards had disappeared inside and had reappeared with swords and shields, all of different types, obviously anything they could lay their hands on. They were shouting at each other and trying to block the tunnel entrance with interlocked shields, but it was hopeless. Through each gap the intelligent dogs poured, attacking the guards from all sides. I could see their mouths opening but could hear nothing over the triumphant drum-beat and the banshee howl bellowing from the speakers.

The Killer stepped over the body of the dead mastiff and entered the helicopter. Turning round he stood motionlessly in the hatchway, watching.

Some of the dogs were wounded by the desperately wielded sword-blades, but the guards were no swordsmen, nor were they anything like as fit as the sportsmen who they had enslaved. Blondie and Fatman lasted the longest, fighting back to back, but the dogs, hearkening back to some race-memory of hunting deer, combined and soon pulled them down too. In a short time all that remained of the guards were corpses scattered over the sand with individual dogs chewing sideways at them. Three dogs were fighting over Fatman's corpse, pulling it in three different directions. It was a scene out of hell.

There was a sudden puff of blue smoke from the helicopter's exhaust and its drooping blades began to turn. Faster and faster, the blades straightening until gradually the ungainly machine lumbered into the air, sand boiling away from its down-draught, its sound masked by the throbbing drum music, now accelerating to the frantic 'pas de charge.'

And as it rose I had my last view of the Brain Drain Killer, a small figure still standing in the hatchway and calmly looking down on the ghastly carnage he had created.

It was in fact the last anyone ever saw of the Killer, as such.

*

The helicopter dwindled to small spot in the sky and finally disappeared. The music abruptly switched off and all I could hear were the snarls and growls from the feeding dogs below.

I rose cautiously from my hiding place, but I was really quite safe. Not for nothing was there a ten foot high parapet separating the spectators from the arena. I slowly climbed up between the rest of the seats, shocked and sickened, wondering how many such spectacles had occurred before them in the far distant past. At the top of the amphitheatre there was a high wall pierced by the tall arches that I had seen so often from below. I stepped up to the nearest.

I was about hundred feet above the ground, looking out over a small town. In front and below me were red-tiled roof-tops, church steeples, cars glinting in the slanting evening sunlight and I heard the subdued roar of evening traffic. Turning round, far below me, was the tiny oval of the arena, filled with dogs feeding on human bodies. Before me the evening rush-hour in a small provincial French town: behind me the barbarity that was Rome. Two scenes spanning more than twenty-five centuries and yet occurring simultaneously.

Chapter 32

The rest is anti-climax. By taking off my tunic and waving it, I managed to attract the attention of someone who informed the police and I was finally able to descend to civilisation on a fire-escape ladder. Clad in my grimy rancid tunic, unshaven and with shaggy, roughly-cut hair, it was difficult at first to convince the irritated policemen that I was anything but an eccentric English clochard - a beggar.

But I finally persuaded them of my credibility and was passed rapidly up the hierarchy of the Arles police. Incredulous at first - the stadium had apparently been closed for repairs for six months and an Italian film company were in the meantime using it to remake "Spartacus - The Revolt of the Gladiators" (after the huge success of the recent remake of "Quo Vadis"). The area surrounding the stadium had been fenced off, some scaffolding had been erected and famous Italian actors had been seen and interviewed in Arles.

When the police broke into the stadium they were attacked by the dogs and had immediately shot them with their pistols. The actual opening of the stadium was done without the benefit of the unbelieving local press. But when the half-wild erstwhile slaves started arriving at the local hospital (they had been safely locked in their cells but may well have died of starvation if I had not escaped and brought the police) and body-bags containing the half-gnawed bodies of the guards started to appear at the local mortuary, all hell broke loose.

In company with Bertrand and the other ex-slaves I spent a week in a hospital in Arles, mostly eating, having medical and psychological check-ups, resting and being interviewed by the sympathetic French police. Physically I was in not too bad a shape, although I had lost a lot of weight. But like the other survivors from those horrific days I was deeply shocked at how quickly we had sunk to the level of beasts, how painfully thin was the veneer of civilisation. This didn't prevent us from feeling a fierce pleasure in the fate of the guards, and I had to relate it several times.

The scenes shown on TV, the interviews with the survivors, the disinterment of many famous sports figures from the shallow graves at the side of the arena and their re-burial in their homelands almost completely monopolised the world's media for more than a month, with some new and incredible disclosure almost every day.

But after everything had been sifted and analysed, there was still no trace of the Brain Drain Killer. The big Sikorsky helicopter was found crashed in a remote ravine in the Massif Centrale in the middle of France and the two pilots in it had had their throats cut. The Killer had presumably left by parachute.

Most of the guards had been traced back to a small remote village in Corsica, notorious at the end of the 19th Century as the hide-out of a gang of particularly cruel kidnappers. Blondie was never traced but Fatman, who had been brought up in an Italian circus, had spent most of his life in Peru as the enforcer for an international mining syndicate who were taking over the peasants' lands.

In spite of the most energetic world-wide search, no further trace was found of the Killer. He had done everything important himself, had had no confidants and his only employees had been kept loyal and silent by generous payments or the threat of severe punishments.

Bertrand would not speak to me and avoided me. I knew why and was ashamed. He was a gentle liberal academic, not the sort of person I have a great deal of time for, but he had shown he had more steel in his convictions than I in mine. He had resisted the insidious pull of the Games, and I had not.

Part 2 - Mode P

Chapter 33

I was flown anonymously back to London and gradually picked up the threads of my old life. Everyone wanted to talk to me about my experiences at Arles, but after I had made a full report to a for once attentive Detective Inspector Seeger, I just had one white-hot burning wish and that was to find the Killer.

There were endless articles in the media and medical journals, but as there had been no Brain Drain murders for six months, the world gradually began to forget him. Max and his AMA friends at the "Dorchester" had assiduously checked and rechecked their files, but had found nothing.

In truth, the Brain Drain Killer was no more, but little did we know then that an even greater danger was waiting in the wings.

So life returned to normal for me in my small circle. Mike and Phil, the Chief Engineer, had kept "Safe" operating in my absence. Max's Martial Arts School was profiting by the publicity given to gladiators, gladiator schools, gladiator weapons etc. and even the most unsuitable people were presenting themselves for a course in some Ancient Martial Art.

But when I finally sat down at my desk at "Safe" I found I was a different man. I had learnt something about myself at Arles when I fell into that pit of blood-lust. I was slightly roused from my gloom by reading the following translation of a piece written by a Roman philosopher. It describes with hair-raising accuracy my own experience:

It remained for Augustine, writing in his "*Confessions*" in AD400, to depict in final and unforgettable terms the dreadful fascination which gladiatorial bestialities exerted upon a previously innocent spectator, his young friend Alypus:

"He had gone to Rome before me in order to study law, and in Rome he had been quite swept away, incredibly and with a most incredible passion, by the gladiatorial shows. He was opposed to such things and detested them; but he happened to meet some of his friends and fellow pupils on their way back from dinner, and they, in spite of his protests and his vigorous resistance, used a friendly kind of violence and forced him to go along with them to the amphitheatre on a day when one those cruel and bloody shows was being presented. As he went, he said to

them: 'You can drag my body there, but don't imagine that you can make me turn my eyes or give my mind to the show. Though there, I shall not be there, and so I shall have the better both of you and the show.'

After hearing this his friends were all the keener to bring him along with them. No doubt they wanted to see whether he could actually do this or not. So they came to the arena and took the seats which they could find. The whole place was seething with savage enthusiasm, but he shut the doors of his eyes and forbade his soul to go out into a scene of such evil. If

only he could have blocked his ears too! For in the course of the fight some man fell; there was a great roar from the whole mass of spectators which fell upon his ears; he was overcome with curiosity and opened his eyes, feeling perfectly prepared to treat whatever he might see with scorn and rise above it.

But he then received in his soul a worse wound than that man, whom he had wanted to see, had received in his body. His own fall was far more wretched than that of the gladiator which had caused all that shouting which had entered his ears and unlocked his eyes and made an opening for the thrust which was to overthrow his soul - a soul that had been reckless rather than strong and was all the weaker because it had trusted in itself where it ought to have trusted in You. He saw the blood and he gulped down the savagery. Far from turning away, he fixed his eyes on it. Without knowing what was happening, he drank in madness, he was delighted with the guilty content, drunk with the lust of blood. He was no longer the man who had come there but was one of the crowd to which he had come, a true companion of those who had brought him.

There is no more to be said. He looked, he shouted, he raved with excitement. He took away with him a madness which would goad him to come back again, and he would not only come with those who had first got him there; he would go ahead of them and drag others with him ..."

It was a slight consolation that I was not the first to fall into the trap. But like an alcoholic who now knew his weakness, I resolved to avoid the temptation - it would never happen to me again.

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But if I was anxious to uncover the Killer before my horrendous experiences in France, I absolutely craved to find him now. He had enslaved me, abused me and subjected me to degrading experiences that I knew I would remember for the rest of my life, reliving them in the small hours of the morning, sweating with shame and humiliation. Catching him was the only way I could assuage this lust.

The police and various journalists had questioned me endlessly to try and find who and where was the Brain Drain Killer, but I could only repeat what I have written above.

However, when they had gone I often went over the events again in my mind, trying to dredge up something that would reveal a clue as to his identity. For at the time I was sure that he had merely hidden himself for a while and his disease would recur, causing another outbreak of bank hold-ups and of even more elaborate murders. I had visited Sir Gopal Singh, the Indian Ambassador, to tell him personally of my experiences and bring him up to date. He had agreed to continue with the financing of my search. But what could I do?

Mike had told me that Tom Boucher had tried to call me several times but I had not been available. Good. I wanted to see him too, and find out what had happened while I was down in that unused Tube station.

Thinking back, it was now obvious that the Killer had side-stepped our security precautions and laid a trap for me. Even more reason not to relax security now I was back. I called Tom and suggested we meet at the "first" pub we had met at. There was a surprised pause, then agreement.

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His tall slim figure walked into the pub and there was a cautious look on his open face - I supposed he was feeling guilty because he had not returned quickly enough to save me from the Killer's collection service in that Tube station. I put him at ease.

'I was only in there for a few minutes,' I said. 'The Killer must have thought I was getting too close to him and as he wanted some bodies for the gladiator school in France he solved two problems at once. He must have distracted you with the bald man. What happened up there anyway?'

'Yes,' said Tom. 'It's good of you to take it like that. When I got outside I found that's exactly what had happened. There was indeed a bald man but it wasn't *our* bald man.' He looked at my blank face.

'Remember that only you, Tad, Jack and myself had actually seen the real bald man. When Chris saw a bald man outside that pub he just naturally assumed it was ours, especially as he had a sack.'

'And?'

'Well, he was a Swedish student and said someone had given him the sack to guard and then instructed the waiter to supply him with beer. The sack just had old newspapers in it.'

He paused to take a pull at his drink.

'I went back to look for you but although I found the closed-off Tube station, it was empty. I brought the boys in and we combed that pub from top to bottom, but of course we didn't find you.'

'Did you ever find the real bald man?'

'No. We think he slipped out through the window in the Ladies' toilet, as we haven't seen him since. We checked out his lodging but he had pulled out from there the day before.'

Damn - a complicated story, but if it meant anything it meant another lead had dried up.

I then filled in Tom about what had happened to me since those two men had kidnapped me. He had heard all about the gladiator school in Arles from the TV of course, but my experiences, particularly the last scenes, had not been revealed to the public. I had just been "the escaped English prisoner who wished to remain anonymous." He listened to me intently, asking brief questions when I became too excited.

'Yes, I did wonder if the escaped prisoner was you,' he said at the end.

I wiped my forehead and finished my beer, coming with a bump back into the present. A thought occurred to me:

'I seem to remember that the bald man worked at a small pharmaceutical company ...'

'Geng Ltd.' supplied Tom. 'Yes we checked, but he had quit there too.' He seemed about to say something, then changed his mind.

'Anything else?' I asked curiously.

'Well, only that "Geng" is no longer a small company. They have received a big contract. They have hired more workers and rented bigger premises.'

I digested this. Our bald man had worked there as a casual labourer and had no friends. But he had had fatal knowledge of the killer for which he had probably paid

for with his life. Forget him. We didn't have unlimited resources - we couldn't chase after every hare. I waved my hand impatiently.

'OK,' I said dismissively. 'Forget him and let's get back to some old-fashioned detective work. We know a lot more about the Killer now. We have a list of places where he was and when he was there. We have a description of him. I want to find who his parents are, where he was brought up, where he went to school. We are looking for someone who is aged 21 to 23, probably disappeared from home about three years ago and is interested in fight sports.'

'Well,' said Tom doubtfully, 'that means data-bank search. With the new Freedom of Information Act we can access a lot of databanks now. Police, records of births, marriages and deaths at Somerset House, County Councils. It's not really our line, but I'm told it can take a long time. One problem is that each institution has their data in a different format.'

I copied down a few telephone numbers from him and then we talked of security. He wrote down the names of various pubs, each with a number by it and then made a copy. He gave one list to me and kept the other for himself.

'If we need to meet you just give me a number on the list,' he said. It seemed simple and practical. And then as I couldn't think of anything else for him to do for me at the moment, I thanked him and we parted.

Chapter 34

I returned to "Safe" and called a meeting between Mike and Phil, my technical man. I put it to them first as a hypothetical problem. I wanted to find someone and wanted them to help me. To encourage them I went on to say that it seemed a fairly easy problem to solve - after all in the police we used a computer to spin through our records in no time, looking for all sorts of combinations of characteristics, height, weight, colouring, age, previous convictions etc. etc. and the list of candidate names would be spat out almost before the operator had finished typing in the last data.

Phil grimaced. 'That's because you had both your data-base and your computer in Scotland Yard,' he explained. 'The computer could work on it immediately. But the data you want now is spread out in data-bases all over the Kingdom. You will have to get it into our computer here by having it sent to you over a phone line and that's slow.'

He looked at my face and seeing I wasn't going to appreciate a lot of meaningless figures, paused, looked at the ceiling and finally said:

'It's going to take about twenty times longer.'

'But can't we go directly into Somerset House for instance, where all the births and deaths in Great Britain are registered, and do a search on a terminal there?' I asked.

'I don't know - very likely. But you will want to correlate the data you get there with data from another data-bases and that will slow ... who's this bloke you're trying to find anyway?'

Mike looked across at me. He knew what it was all about. I couldn't keep it hypothetical: I would have to tell Phil.

'The Brain Drain Killer,' I said.

'Jesus!' said Phil. He stood up then slowly sat down. 'But I thought he was...' He collected himself. 'How can the three of us succeed when thousands of police have failed?' he said finally.

'They may have thousands,' I agreed, 'but they've also got thousands of other people to look for. They probably don't have more than three or four searchers on this

job - if they haven't already consigned it to the "Unsolved Crimes" file. But in a search like this a lot depends on what you ask the computer. I've actually *seen* the Killer and maybe something will occur to me that won't occur to any of the police searchers.'

'OK,' said Phil, with a shrug.

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I decided we would use the conference room as our base for the search, and we spent the rest of the afternoon installing two PC's and two telephone lines, one with a modem so we could transfer data by telephone line from any other data-banks we found. The big table came in useful for telephone directories and reference books. When everything seemed to be working I gave them some data to start off with:

Age 21-23
Colouring "fair" (Caucasian)
Height 5ft.8 to 5ft.10
Well developed muscular structure
Blood group A positive, unusual gene-print
Unusual body odour

'It's pretty thin,' said Phil.

I mentally agreed and left them to it. I had to get back to "Safe". It was September, there was traditionally a dip in the burglary statistics (the nights were still short and everyone was back from their holidays guarding their homes). I wanted to use the quiet time to get our filing system sorted out and hire a few people - "Safe" was growing.

When I got back to them I learnt that there were about nine hundred-thousand people born every year in Great Britain or 2.7 million in the three years I had specified. The Killer was male so we were able to reduce this to one out of 1.35 million. Great.

Phil had had the idea that as the Killer had been to the US he must have a passport and so they were able to reduce this to 1 in 135 000 (only 10% of males have a passport). In fact the passport records turned out to be most useful as they contain height information and so we were able to further reduce the number of candidates to 27 421.

But the biggest step in reducing the list of candidates was through Mike's US Embassy contacts and in particular the Visa department. Finding out those who had visited the US in the last year and were also on our list brought the number dramatically down to 5 542. We had a little party when we had worked that out – we really seemed to be getting ahead.

'How about France?' Phil had asked, remembering the robberies in Paris.

'No help,' I answered. 'No visa required for France and they keep no record of visitors from the UK.'

Then I had what I thought was a bright idea - filter out those who came from remote parts of the British Isles; it was unlikely the Killer was born in the Orkney Islands, for instance. But this didn't help much. Most came from urban England and only 527 could be eliminated.

I looked at these 5015 names, 83 pages, males all from 21 to 23 years old, between 5ft 8 and 5ft 10, who had visited the US in the last year. Another idea, this time from the very co-operative US visa department, found us the names of those who had given addresses in New Jersey when they visited the US. This brought the number down to 2181. Further information on their professions didn't help as we

didn't know the profession the Killer had given. However, 2181 was not bad after 1.35 million, but still an impossibly big number for us to investigate individually.

I poured over these 36 pages of names - one of them was our Killer I was sure, but I couldn't see how we could reduce it further. If we could only find if one of them was interested in Martial Arts ...

We compared them with the list of Martial Arts Club members from Max, some names were the same of course and we checked them out very cautiously, as you may imagine. But it turned out they were really either the wrong age or looked nothing like the Killer. I formed the conviction that the Killer was fascinated by the AMA scene, especially its members, but had never been one himself. Every time I had come on him he had had a too unorthodox style of fighting.

Police files were no good as he had no police record and we had no fingerprints. Sure we had his gene print but it was too new to be on any data bank and so was useless. We had now got the number down to 2172. One had been killed in a road accident and we had actually investigated a few in the London area without results. The only solution now seemed to grind through these 2172 candidates. Then pressure of work at "Safe" obliged us to put the whole project on ice.

A break-through occurred a month later in a very strange fashion - through a series of unlikely coincidences.

Chapter 35

Mike was in permanent contact with Max because of the lessons he was taking at Max's school and they were friends too, after Max's brush with the Killer. Mike rather embarrassedly told me that Max was convinced that the Killer was a Mutant - he had recently read a story about someone who had been brought up near a nuclear waste dump and had developed a very "redundant" DNA code. And not only that. In the story the Mutant could do something else, something Max thought the Brain Drain Killer could do also. To check if this was not just fantasy, Max had phoned around and found a man who worked in a genetic research laboratory in the south of England. Max wanted me to see this man.

Max was very insistent and wouldn't just tell me what he had found - I must see it for myself. And so one evening I arranged to go round to his School, pick him up and we would go on to see this chap together. Mike was otherwise engaged and so I drove to Max's School alone.

I was met at the door by Rosemunde, at 14 rapidly growing into a self-possessed teenager. She had had her dark red hair cut differently and was wearing a trim cream coloured dress. She was amusedly conscious of the effect she made as she showed me into the apartment she shared with her father and then politely invited me to sit down.

I greeted her, calling her Rosemunde - "Roz" seemed somehow out of place.

'My father said he may be a few minutes late and would I apologise to Uncle Jim for his tardy arrival.' I smiled involuntarily at her obviously prepared speech. Instantly the sophisticated young lady vanished.

'That's right, isn't it?' she asked anxiously.

'Yes, that's fine,' I assured her. The young woman returned instantly.

'Would you care for some coffee?' I accepted, although I rarely drink coffee in the evening. Rosemunde was carefully pouring out the coffee when the radio, which had been softly playing a pop-music program in the background, paused and began something in march rhythm - a sharp contrast and also somehow ... But Rosemunde

put down the coffee pot with a clatter, and moving quickly across the room turned the radio off with a wristy snap.

'I hate that music!' she said, fuming. She calmed down then completed pouring out the coffee, offered me a cup and handed me a plate of biscuits.

Now we had to make gracious conversation. After some polite enquiries about my work she told me about her grandmother in Liverpool and how she had got Rosemunde to draw a long line on a piece of paper. She disappeared a moment into her bedroom and returned with a long strip of paper which I could see were several exercise-book pages glued together.

'It's my "Lifeline",' she said proudly, unfolding it on the table. 'This is where I was born,' she said pointing to the left, 'and this is where I'm eighty.' She grinned impishly and looking at her it seemed a long time away.

'And here I am now.' The line was thick up to age 14 and was annotated with lots of information about her short past life, when she had come to England, her first school, her second school. I looked ahead interestedly along the faint extension.

'This is where I go to University and this is where I leave. Grandma says I should get married here.' She pointed to Age 24, 'and have children immediately. A boy then a girl is best, says Grandma. Do you think 24 is old enough to get married?' I looked into those disconcertingly beautiful amber eyes.

'Well, the French say a girl is "on the shelf" if she isn't married by age 25,' I told her. She brushed back her hair from her forehead. She would have no problem in finding a husband whatever her age.

It seemed very business-like. I looked uneasily towards Age 38 and wondered what I should be writing on my Timeline. Maybe I should visit Grandma too.

Further speculation was stopped by the arrival of Max. He excused his lateness and looked approvingly at his daughter and her Timeline.

'She's OK, me Mam,' he said. 'Helped me a lot with Roz and wanted to take care of her. But I think she's better off with me here.' He looked at his watch.

'You coming, Roz?'

For answer Rosemunde folded up the paper carefully, entered her bedroom and returned, slipping on her school overcoat.

A taxi took us to a pub on the New Kent Road in East London near the Elephant and Castle. The barman looked as though he was going to say children were not allowed and Rosemunde stiff-backed was already staring at him defiantly, but he took a look at Max's broad shoulders and decided it would be permitted this once.

Already sitting in an alcove was the man we had come to see. Max introduced me to Dr Balon, a grey-haired man about 60 years old of sharp movements and an impatient manner.

'I first read of Dr Balon in a science mag...,' started Max.

'"Astounding Science Fiction"', completed Balon with a bitter smile. 'I have not the slightest idea how they heard of my work.' He had a slight Scottish accent.

'That's it,' said Max. 'And it was dead interesting. I thought you oughta speak to him yourself.' He disappeared towards the bar. Balon looked at me appraisingly.

'Mr Krupka is referring to an article that appeared in a popular science magazine last month. It was inspired by a paper I tried to have published in "Nature", but the referees refused it as too controversial.' Max returned with three beers and a Cola for Rosemunde.

'In what way was it controversial?' I asked after a pause. I was apparently being left to conduct the interview alone. Balon looked at me sharply.

'The title of the paper was "Memory transfer through ingestion",' he said expressionlessly.

"Ingestion" - I knew that meant eating. "Memory transfer by eating". Had Max brought me to see a nut-case? But Balon looked rational enough and seemed to know all about having papers published by "Nature", the highly reputable scientific research journal, and how new papers were submitted to experts in the field, the "referees", who were usually University professors.

Rosemunde had left us and sipping her Cola was wandering around the almost empty pub, looking at the wall decorations - old native spears, horse brasses and brown varnished paintings of historical colonial battles.

Balon looked at his hands and then pushing his drink to one side started:

`Do you know anything about the structure of the human brain?' he asked, looking at me without any obvious signs of hope.

`Assume nothing,' I replied shortly.

`Very well. Your brain is mostly made up of billions of cells called "neurons". They are joined together in very complicated ways and when you think about something, nerve impulses like electric currents flow through these neurons. When you're born most of them are not connected but as you grow up you gradually connect them up yourself. Connecting them up is called "learning".

I'd heard something similar from Mike. Over Max's shoulder I could see Rosemunde had been inevitably attracted to the flickering lights of a large garish fruit-machine standing in one corner and was carefully reading the instructions.

`And connecting them up isn't easy,' said Max. `It's why I have my blokes go over some movement again and again until they can do it without working it out each time.'

`Exactly,' said Balon. `The connections between the neurons you need for some action become stronger each time you do that action. The connection is called a "neural network", by the way.'

Rosemunde was smiling beguilingly at an old man who was showing her how to use the fruit-machine. Finally the man put in a coin.

`All your knowledge, everything you know and everything you can do is stored in the form of neural networks,' finished Dr Balon.

`And that's controversial?' I asked.

`No. Everyone accepts that now. They can even program computers to behave like neural networks.' He rubbed the side of his face. `What I wanted to do was a sort of extension of that. The problem is that if we want to learn to do something, we have to do just that. We have to form the appropriate neural networks in our brain by doing the action - like saying the multiplication table over and over and over again. Normal or "digital" computers work quite differently. If you want a computer to translate from Hindustani to Spanish you just load in the appropriate program - in a fraction of a second.'

Yes, it's a pity our brains weren't like that, I thought.

There were three thumps and a tinkle from the fruit machine as the man won three coins. I could see Rosemunde's eyes glisten as he picked them up and transferred them to his pocket. She put in a coin of her own and after weakly attempting to pull the handle looked up at the man appealingly. Smiling he pulled it down for her and she pressed the "stop" buttons. Nothing. She pouted.

`Tell him about the worms,' said Max. I was glad Max had said that because I was wondering what this was all about.

For answer Balon lifted an old briefcase off the seat beside him and opening the flap pulled out some papers.

`The common or garden earth worm is blind and lives underground in a system of burrows. Its very simple brain is specialised in the task of finding its way around in

these burrows. Research groups before me have found that it is possible to train these worms to learn a maze.'

He turned the top sheet towards me and I could see a photograph of a small wooden rectangular maze with a worm in it.

'We can give an "uneducated" worm a small electric shock to make it move forwards and more small electric shocks if it goes the wrong way. When it gets to the middle of the maze we let it rest and eat some food. Then we put it in again. As you may imagine, it gets through the maze with fewer mistakes each time. And here ...' He pulled out another sheet of paper, 'you can see that the average worm needs about eight to nine tries before it can traverse the maze without getting any shocks; before it becomes an "educated" worm.'

Fascinating. I glanced unobtrusively at my watch.

Rosemunde put her last coin into the machine and the man pulled again for her. Again she jabbed at the stop buttons. Still nothing. Rosemunde looked about to cry but said something, motioning to her father. With an indulgent smile the man dug in his pocket and handed her a coin. She inserted it and then looked up at him entreatingly. He pulled the arm but this time, under her admiring eyes prepared to push the buttons for her.

'Eight to nine tries to educate it,' I repeated.

'Exactly,' said Balon. 'Now here's a very interesting fact. Earthworms are omnivorous. They feed on decaying organic matter. He looked at me intently. *Any* decaying organic matter.'

They were both looking at me expectantly. I thought back over what Balon had said but couldn't see the next step.

'So?'

'So they chop up an educated worm and feed it to an uneducated worm,' said Max impatiently. (No wonder Scotland Yard took so long to solve some cases.)

Jesus!

'So the uneducated worms eat the educated worms and become educated worms,' I said unbelievably.

Dr Balon bridled. 'It's not quite that simple,' he said. 'But I have found that the worms that have ingested the educated worms learn to solve the maze quicker - on the average after only five to six tries. Some of the neural networks must be destroyed during digestion.'

'Five to six instead of eight to nine,' I said. 'On the average, er ... how often, I mean ...'

'It's statistically significant, if that's what you're asking. And yes, we've tried it with dozens of worms.'

So that's what he meant by "Memory transfer through Ingestion". Interesting.

'Well, you'd better keep your results secret or you'll have no professors left - their students will have eaten them all,' I said jovially. 'I can see why "Nature" didn't want to publish it: the referees are all professors.' I chuckled.

'And that's just the sort of trivial remark I should have expected from a policeman,' snapped Balon, pushing the papers back into his briefcase and standing up.

Max was making irritable motions with his hand. It wasn't such a bad joke as that and then ... Pow! I sat up suddenly.

'You mean ...?! The Brain Drain Killer!!'

Max slapped me on the back.

'There yer go!' he said. 'I told you he'd get it!' he said to Balon who mollified sat down. There was a sudden crash from the fruit-machine, followed by a continuous

thumping and tinkling sound. We all turned round to see Rosemunde delightedly holding out the front of her skirt to collect a silver shower of coins. After the last coin had fallen into it she walked carefully over to our table and tipped her clinking haul of about a hundred coins onto it. Her father looked round and then absently swept them into Balon's brief-case.

Could it be true? The Killer drained the brains of his victims to learn from them? In spite of my jocular remarks, I didn't think it was possible with human beings.

I drained my glass and stood up, followed by the others. There was a lot to do. I'd got to get back to the data search. Maybe the Killer was a mutant. In spite of the warm pub, I shivered.

As we made for the door, Rosemunde tugged at her father's hand.

'What?' he said. 'Yeah, sure.' He opened the brief case and gave her a coin which she prettily returned to the man by the fruit-machine, still holding the handle down and with his mouth open.

'He lent it me,' she said in explanation.

The barman opened the flap in the bar and stood there, his face working. He appeared to want to say something but couldn't think what. My mind was full of other things but as we left I had the impression that the law on minors would be more rigorously enforced in the future. Especially minors who won the jack-pot.

Chapter 36

First thing next day I got the team to put another input into our search - "anyone born where radioactivity was above normal" and gave some examples as near nuclear power stations or nuclear waste disposal sites.

While they were doing that I returned to my office and got out that well-thumbed list of murders committed by the Killer and looked at it again. I added some more entries so now it looked:

<u>Name</u>	<u>Speciality</u>	<u>How killed</u>
1. Hudson	knife fighter	knife
2. Smith	fencer	sword
3. Patel	Retiarius gladiator	sword
4. Max	Thraex gladiator	attempted killing by fencing
5. Motusi	kendo fighter	knife
6. Hank	Shooter	bayonet
7. French guard 1	?	Samurai sword
8. French guard 2	?	shot
9. Boer and Zulu	knife fighters	by "quickness"

I then looked at the list trying to interpret it in the light of the Dr Balon's "Memory Transfer through Ingestion" theory. It sort of fitted, some parts better than others. For instance he had killed the fencer Smith and then almost succeeded in killing Max by using his sword as a fencer would. Then he had killed the Kendo fighter Motusi and afterwards killed Hank with bayonet fighting. And bayonet fighting was very similar to Kendo. Then after "ingesting" Hank he had expertly shot French Guard 2.

Of course my list may not be complete, there could be other murders I hadn't heard of. And even under laboratory conditions the transfer of memory wasn't perfect: it just speeded things up. And that was for a pretty simple brain in a lowly life form ... H'm.

Nevertheless, it was convincing enough to adopt as a working hypothesis.

But assuming the Killer was a mutated human being, whose mutation enabled him to learn by "ingestion", I still had to explain his ferocious aggression. Why did he just attack "fighters"? If it was "power" he was after why didn't he ingest the brains of scientists or financial wizards? But it was only fighting ability he wanted. I would never forget that last scene in the Roman arena at Arles where his normal steely self-control had snapped and he had shouted "I have the right! I have the right!" just after he had killed those two top fighters.

The right to what?

I gave it up and wandered into the conference room to see how the search was progressing. Phil was leafing through a telephone directory and Mike was tapping at one of the PC's.

'Any luck?' I asked loudly. Loudly, because they had a radio on, playing pop music. One of the main differences between me and the "Young of Today" is their liking, almost need, for what someone called "aural wallpaper".

'Nothing really,' said Mike, brushing his blond hair back and looking up, 'Max's friends at that dude club in the Hotel Dorchester have been helping us. We thought we had something - one guy's mother had worked all her life in a hospital as an X-ray operator and another's father had been at the first atomic bomb test at Alamogordo in the New Mexican desert.' He shrugged. 'Both false alarms.'

But suddenly I found I was trembling! A shiver ran down my back and arms. I was back in that Roman arena! I could smell the dry heat and see the fantastic final scene below me in the crystal clear air! What was the matter with me? Was it a throwback - a strange mental trick? No, now I could hear it - it was the sound coming from the radio! It was more complex than that I had heard at Arles, there was a sort of atonal melody and a bass component now, but the drum rhythm and the steady background howl were unchanged.

I swung to look at my two helpers but they were unconcernedly continuing with their tasks.

'What's that music? Where's it come from?' I shouted, stuttering and stumbling over the words. I cleared my throat and repeated my question.

Both of them looked up at me in alarm. Phil stretched out an arm and turned the volume down. He looked across at Mike.

'It's new group.' He made a wry face. 'It's not my favourite style.'

'And the leader of this group?'

'I don't know that they've got a leader, as such,' answered Phil. 'I only know the name of the group.'

'Which is?'

'Yes,' he said. 'It's an odd one. They are called "Slak". Just that - "Slak".'

Chapter 37

'What else do you know about Slak?' I asked intently. Phil looked at me and shrugged.

'Not much. Pop music's not my scene. I just know it's a new group with a new sound. It's not even in the charts.'

Mike nodded in agreement. 'Except ...'

'Except what?'

'Well, I used to be interested in pop, still am I guess, but somehow this group's different. None of the reporters in the "Melody Maker" or the fan mags seem to know anything about them. It's as though they were avoiding publicity.'

`Unusual in a pop group,' commented Phil in a massive understatement.

I took a deep breath, put my hands in my pockets to hide their trembling and told them to carry on with their general search for the rest of the day but if nothing new came up I needed them to get back to "Safe". The quiet season was ending.

But not for me. That music was a link – the Killer was still around. And I may well be the only person who knew it. Everyone else who had heard it at Arles was dead. If nothing else it meant we must intensify our security precautions. I went back to my office and had a very unusual mid-morning drink. When I felt better I returned to the searchers.

`When you've finished, leave all the stuff here,' I said, waving my hand around the conference room, `we may come up with more ideas later.'

They had done very well in getting the number of candidates down to 2172. But now I was sure this group Slak were connected with the Killer somehow. It was too much of a coincidence. And if I was right the dangerous part started now. I needed professionals to carry on the search.

*

So I arranged to meet Tom Boucher again. I showed him the list of suspects, and told him my suspicions regarding the Slak pop group. I felt it was a little too early to tell him about a mutant who ate his victims to learn their skills, so omitted this strand of an already over-complicated plot.

`You want me to find out all about Slak?'

`That's it. Who's in it, where and when they were born, background, who's the top man ... the lot.'

*

To my surprise I had a call from Tom the next morning. We were now being "secure" so he just gave me a number which corresponded to the pub where we were to meet.

`I've got something, but I don't know if it's any use to you,' he started. `This music by the Slak group is not completely new. The son of one of my men works in a recording studio and he remembers that some group called ...' he unfolded a piece of paper ... `called the "Goslings" went there for a recording session about five years ago. They taped a track that sounded a bit like Slak does but they didn't put it on their CD as no one seemed to like it except their leader.'

`And his name?' I asked breathlessly. It was difficult to imagine the Killer as a pop musician but there *must* be a link-up somewhere

`Yes, his name was Ed Bailey, I've got his address and phone number. He's changed groups several times since and he's given up trying to be a pop star. But he's well known as a musician and his present group now do more serious work - like backing for TV and films. And no, he can't be the Killer. He's about 28, tall and dark.'

`It's our first opening,' I said copying the name and address down.

Chapter 38

I called Mike and we arranged to meet at the exit of Brixton tube station. The address Tom had given was a not very salubrious part of London and I didn't want my Jaguar to get scratched, if nothing worse.

*

`Yeah, it must be four-five years ago now but I remember him alright. Jeremy something his name was. When he first came he was very quiet, you know, Mummy's boy, wet. But he could play keyboard alright.'

Mike and I were sitting on stools in a small room surrounded by amplifiers, chrome-plated stands and drums. Opposite us was Ed Bailey, a tall man of about 28 with a dark ravaged face and a pony-tail. He had a gaudily coloured guitar in his lap and cables snaked all over the floor.

`Yes, he wasn't too bad on keyboard,' continued Ed reflectively. `He read music, which was more that most of us could and he composed some pieces for us. Gentle stuff, you know, derivative Garfunkle. And then his Ma bought him a guitar and he wanted to stand up front. But he was useless.'

He twisted a knob on his guitar.

`Useless,' he repeated. `Sure, he could plunk out the odd chord but as far as a melody was concerned he was all fingers and thumbs. We used to let him have a bash at it now and then, providing he stuck to the keyboard for the rest of the evening. But as he got older his whole character changed.'

`In what way?' I asked.

`He became more assertive, more aggressive. One of the lads told me he had taken up body-building. And his music style changed too and it was that that turned off the other blokes. The problem was he wanted to be lead guitar playing his own weird stuff and there was no way.

`This music of his. What did it sound like?' asked Mike.

`Funny you ask. There's a new group playing something like it. Kinda tricky to play and ...'

`And the name of this group?' I broke in.

`"Slick" or "Slog" - something like that. But they're wasting their time with it too. The rhythm is all wrong for dancing. No one dances polkas anymore. And like I said, it's kinda tricky to play and that's what really bugged him - you know, not being able to play his own stuff.'

Mike and I exchanged glances.

`But you could play it,' suggested Mike. He'd got a tape recorder in his pocket.

`Yeah, sure, I could play it but it was too far out. It was sorta like Indian music but with more aggro, if you see what I mean. With a 2/4 beat, like a march. We made a CD and I would've put on a track, just as a flyer, but the rest of the group were against it. Except for Jeremy, of course. Uncanny it was.' He grimaced in recollection.

`And so one day, at rehearsal, he'd got some more of this stuff written down and played it to us on the keyboard. No one wanted it and Clag, who was our bass guitar, stuck his fingers in his ears and that set him off. He'd become an aggressive little sod and we had a real punch-up. He said we were a lot of milk-sops and didn't have the right to survive.'

He smiled mockingly at the memory. `Didn't have the right to survive". I tell you he'd become a real nutter. He jumped up and threw our amplifier onto the floor, punched our drummer and kicked over his kit. We tried to grab him but he went berserk and there was drums and pieces of amplifier and speakers all over the floor. Jeez, I've never seen such a bloody shambles! We rushed him, but by the time we'd climbed over all the wreckage he'd pissed off. If we could find him again we'd make him pay for the new amp we had to buy. Cost us fifteen hundred quid. But in the end we were real glad to see him go. Good riddance.'

`We're looking for him too,' I said. `But this music he wanted you to play. Can you remember how it sounded? Can you play it?'

`I c'n try.' He fingered his guitar and leant across to fiddle with the amplifier. I looked across at Mike and he pressed a button on his tape recorder.

Ed played a few bars and that was it! Keening, atonal, sad and yet somehow provocative. It was even more like the sound I had heard at Arles than the Slak music.

`It's got something,' he admitted. `But it wasn't us.' He paused, biting his lip and looking into the distance.

`Dulson. That was his name. Jeremy Dulson. A real weirdo.'

`Do you know where he lived?' He shook his head.

`He came here on a bus. Couldn'ta been far.' He shook his head. `Jeremy Dulson. Outa sight.'

*

We left and out in the street Mike turned to me exultantly:

`We've got him! Jeremy Dulson - lives around here somewhere! I must call Phil to see if he's on the list.'

He pulled out his phone and was soon talking into it. `He's gonna call us back,' he said after a moment, snapping it shut. We went and sat to wait in a small cafe.

We sat sipping our terrible cups of coffee and looking into the distance. What did we really have? The name of a young musician who composed the strange music that I had heard at Arles, and was now played by this Slak group. Did Jeremy write for Slak now? Mike was tapping the phone impatiently on the table. Suddenly it beeped. He already had it open.

`Great!' He pulled out a ball-point and wrote an address on the table napkin in front of him. `What?' he said. He looked up at me.

`It's him! Jeremy Dulson visited the States for a week on the 15 March. That's the same time we were there. He gave his address as a hotel in Pennsylvania, that's near enough New Jersey, and he's now 22 and 5ft 10! It's gotta be him! But there's a problem. His mother reported him missing more than three years ago!'

I made up my mind quickly. `We'll visit her anyway.'

Mike snapped the phone shut and made to put it away but I reached out my hand for it then punched in Tom's number. I was transferred around a few times by his secretary but finally located him.

I pulled out my London A-Z street plan and located the address Phil had given. We could walk there. But not now.

`We've got another address,' I said when Tom finally came on the line, and read it off the table napkin. `I'm going to visit it with Mike but I'd like some back-up, just in case. Could you have a couple of blokes outside, front and back at say 5:30pm?'

He agreed. I snapped the phone shut and handed it back to Mike.

`I want to call in at the office first.' I looked at him. `We will be going in as visitors from the County Council. Do you have anything less ... transatlantic to wear?'

He looked down at his plaid trousers and lumber-jack shirt with raised eyebrows.

`Transatlantic?' he said in surprise. `I guess so. A tie also?'

`A tie also,' I agreed.

We arranged to meet at the end of Horsford Road and went our different ways.

*

I met Mike as arranged, but almost didn't recognise him in a dark suit with a neat blue tie. We walked briskly down the road and out of the corner of my eye I noticed Tom's man Tad sitting in a parked car, a file open on his knees - a salesman making out the day's visit reports. I knocked on the door of the small suburban terrace house and a plump blond lady of about 45 answered. Dressed in a loose flowered kimono she looked at us uncertainly.

`Mrs Dulson?' I asked.

`You are from the Council about Jeremy?' she asked.

`We have come about the disappearance of your son,' I answered ambiguously. `May we come in a moment?'

`Yes, I suppose so,' she said, opening the door and stepping aside.

We entered and there was a faint smell of some sort of herbs mixed with that of curry. We were led into the front room and sank into big soft bean-bag chairs. There was a low table in front of us and in the corner a small electronic "home organ". On the walls were odd pastel coloured abstracts of mystical Indian guru figures in silver and red.

`After all this time we think we may have found a trace of your son, but to be able to follow it up we are in need of more information,' I said, pulling out my notebook. `I would like to ask you a few questions about him, if I may.'

Mrs Dulson twined her hands nervously in the loose folds of her kimono.

`Of course,' she said. `Anything I can do to get him back. I think he needs ...' She faltered to a stop.

`You are his mother: you know him better than any other living person,' I began.

`What was he like?'

Mr Dulson looked into the distance.

`He was a nice little boy. Always quiet and obedient - never gave a moment's trouble until ... Not even when he was cutting his teeth. His face used to go quite red but never a peep from him. The other ladies used to think I gave him aspirin but I never did - he didn't need it.' She dabbed her eyes.

`What sort of toys did he like? Did he have any hobbies?'

`Well, no, not really. I wouldn't let him have any guns, of course. Just his drawings I suppose. But they were very strange, you know. It was rather frightening to see a little boy doing them so ... so intently, you know, so I stopped him doing them. And of course as he was so obedient he did so right away.' She looked around the room.

And he used to play on my organ here - and only 5 years old! He could hardly reach the keyboard. I had to sit him on a cushion. I tried to teach him nursery rhymes and he did learn some to please me, but he didn't really like them. He was more interested in making his strange noises. The neighbours used to complain. So when I went out shopping I always had to pull the plug out so he couldn't play. Always the same sort of strange noises!

`Do you have any of his childhood drawings, Mrs Dulson?' I asked.

`Oh, I don't think so. It was a long time ago and I threw them all away.'

`Then perhaps we could just peep into his room a minute, before we go?'

`Yes, I suppose so, but you mustn't mind, it can't be very clean now. He would never let me clean it, he always wanted to do it himself. And as he hasn't been back for almost three years ...' She stifled a sob.

We followed her up the narrow creaking stairs to a small room leading off the landing.

`He slept here all his life until he left,' she said, carefully opening the door. `I left it exactly as it was so he'd always have it to come back to.'

We looked in. There was a small bed in one corner under the window, a wardrobe, a bookcase, a chair and a big wooden chest.

`That was his toy-box,' she said. `Would you like a cup of tea?'

`Yes please. Do you think we could go in for a moment?' I asked.

`Yes, I suppose so,' she said, looking in nervously. `He didn't like any one except himself to go in his room. But I suppose it's alright. Anything that will help bring my Jeremy back. I'll bring the tea up.' She descended the stairs and I heard the rattle of cups.

Mike sat on the bed and I sat on the small chair. The overwhelming impression was of order and neatness. I stood up and out of curiosity measured the distance between the wardrobe and the wall. It was the same, to within a millimetre, as that between the wardrobe and the bed. The walls were distempered a reddish orange and the only picture on the wall was that of a large purplish circle with irregular black spots on it. It reminded me vaguely of something.

There was the thin whistle of a kettle downstairs as I stood up and opened the wardrobe to find some rather conservative clothes and an old school uniform jacket. Behind the clothes was a spring contraption of a type that I remembered from my youth - a "muscle developer". I remembered the advertisement that went with it. A thin young man sitting on the beach with a girl and two men playing beach-ball are kicking sand into their faces. The girl argues with the young man and finally goes off with the two footballers. The young man buys the muscle-developer and returns a few days later with bulging biceps. He knocks the two bullies flat and walks off with the young girl hanging on his arm and looking at him adoringly. I replaced the device in the wardrobe.

The bookcase was almost empty. There were some very clean school books and on another shelf some worn paper-backs - lurid war-stories mostly.

In the meantime Mike had been investigating the toy-box, pulling out jig-saw puzzles and a toy train, all in pristine condition. Then a wooden sword and some running shoes.

'Ah,' he said, opening out some carefully folded pieces of paper. 'Looky here.'

He opened them and they must have been some of the drawings he had done as a child. And they were odd. The top one would have been the first as it was drawn in a very shaky childish hand. It was divided into two. The top half was just an ochre brown and the bottom half a livid purple. They were all similar, getting firmer as he grew older. Some had black V-shapes on the brown: in the later drawings these became modified to long elongated "Y" shapes, and the purple became more like a big pool. But the colours remained remarkably consistent. They had a sort of hopeless desolation about them and were like nothing I had ever seen before. They were totally un-childlike.

With a rattle of cups Mrs Dulson arrived at the door with a tray.

'Oh, I see you've found some of those nasty drawings,' she said. 'I thought I'd thrown them all away - they give me the creeps.' She put the tray down and reached out her hand for them.

'Please,' I said. 'May we have one? They may be useful.'

'You can keep them all,' she said with an elaborate shudder. 'I never want to see one again. I can't imagine how he ever came to draw them. He was such a nice little boy,' she repeated, looking around and finally rather nervously sitting down on the bed.

We sat and drank the weak tea politely but there was nothing else to see in that tidy, scrupulously neat room. However now Mrs Dulson had started talking, she became garrulous. I opened my notebook.

'When he got older, about 11 or 12, I let him play on the organ again. He took lessons and became quite good - I suppose he must have inherited it from me,' she smiled modestly.

'What sort of music did he play?' asked Mike.

'Oh, mostly the nicer pop music. Simon and Garfunkle and the Beatles, you know. I would never let him play that nasty "Heavy Metal" stuff.' She took another sip at her cup.

`And when he was 17 I bought him an electric guitar for his birthday,' she continued. `Some of his friends had them already and they wanted to form a group.' She smiled at us deprecatingly.

`I don't think he was ever a very good player, but he used to write some of their tunes: I went to hear them once and they were quite good. A bit too modern for me, but then my parents didn't much care for my music either.' She smiled weakly again.

`They used to play regularly at local dances, you know, but one day, it must have been just before he left, he came home in a terrible pet. He wouldn't do anything but play on his guitar into the earphones. But he couldn't do what he wanted and got in such a paddy he threw the guitar across the room.'

`What sort of work did he do?' I asked, after I had written a while. She looked slightly embarrassed.

`"Kwikmove", it's a furniture removal service. I never knew why he went to work there. The proprietor is a nice man but some of the movers ...He could have got a much nicer job if he's wanted to. He had the qualifications.' She paused.

`Well, about three years ago ...'

`How old was he then?'

`Just gone 18. And as I was saying, about three years ago he started to get moody and didn't want to talk. He used to leave the house after tea and I thought he'd finally found a girl. But no. He went out wearing just his working clothes and when he came home he would go straight to bed without saying a word. I found out later that he just used to go on long walks on his own.' She took a genteel sip of her tea, then continued.

`Mr Bailey, the gentleman opposite, told me once he saw Jeremy walking alone along the Embankment. He said "hallo" to him, but Jeremy walked right past, not even noticing him.'

`And how was he before he left for the last time?'

Mrs Dulson dabbed her eyes again.

`That was the worst. He seemed to get more and more bad-tempered - no, that's not the word - more impatient like, and sometimes he would go out for a whole day. Once his boss rang up to ask if he was ill and I had to say he had the 'flu. The boss didn't seem to worry - he seemed glad in a way, and I didn't find out why until later. Although I should have known.' She put her cup down and paused dramatically.

`What should you have known, Mrs Dulson?' I asked patiently.

`Well, he would sometimes come home with his coat torn and a bandage, you know an Elastoplast, on his hand. And once he had a black eye! He said he had walked into a door, but I was worried. I knew he had been fighting. And then one day, I thought he'd gone to work as usual but he hadn't - he'd just left. Without a word.'

`Didn't he take anything with him, clothes and so on?' I asked.

`No, he left almost everything. Even his guitar. Of course he had some money in a Post Office account, but that wouldn't have lasted long.' She looked around the small room.

`All he took were some of his books,' she said.

`What sort of books?' I asked. There was a lot of empty space in the book-case.

`Oh, some old history books,' she replied vaguely. `Roman and Greek stuff. He just left, without saying goodbye or anything. And after all I'd done for him' She choked.

The next question was going to be a bit tricky. She must have answered it to the County Council already.

`Do you have anything new on the father?' I asked casually, head bent over my notebook. There was a silence and I looked up.

`I already told the Council that Jeremy's father was an Argentinean diplomat and had to go back because of that stupid war, before we could get married.' She was staring at me with a mixture of suspicion and defiance.

I flipped back some pages of my note-book and pretended to read them.

`Ah yes, of course. But to return to Jeremy. Do you have any photographs of him? I asked. She relaxed.

`Yes, I've got an album downstairs. Do you want to see it?' We did indeed.

She left and returned a minute later, panting slightly from the stairs. We looked eagerly at the photos, all in small plastic holders, but there was nothing special. Just a serious-faced little boy, gradually getting older. After age eighteen the holders were empty.

`Do you have any older than these?' I asked, looking at the empty holders.

For some reason, she choked again.

`No,' she said. `There were lots more. But he pulled them out before he left. How could he be so cruel?' Now these are all I have left of him.' She closed the album and hugged it to her ample bosom, sobbing.

I sympathetically touched her heaving shoulders and after another glance around that sterile little room we excused ourselves.

Chapter 39

Night had fallen and as we walked through the crowds of pedestrians on their way home, I had the feeling that we were approaching something strange and menacing, something completely outside my experience. Roman history and weird marching music. Those were the links that joined the Killer to Jeremy. But what to do now?

Had I anything for the police? I thought of the reception I would get if I told Det. Insp. Seeger of the similarities between Slak's music that I had heard at Arles and that played by Ed. And then the 2000 odd people who resembled Jeremy and had visited the States. These were tenuous links. And as for the "Learning by Ingestion" ... forget it. We were still on our own.

`Well, he's our Killer alright,' said Mike almost to himself. `Jeremy Dulson. Unknown father - I don't believe anything about that Argentinean diplomat - the father could be anyone. Jeremy was a kinda quiet obedient little boy, Mom an ageing Hippy. He's interested in music and history and then grows up, becomes aggressive and leaves home.' He waved his hands. `He starts killing fighters, and eats er.. ingests their brains to improve his technique. He gets better and better and then running out of tough enough competition starts training top sportsmen to fight. He selects the best by making them fight each other like gladiators.'

Mike was connecting together lots of only hazily related information, but he could well be right.

`But why did he shout "I can! I have the right!" after he killed the two winning gladiators?' I asked, suddenly seeing again the jerking figure in the crystal-clear light of the arena in Arles.

Mike shrugged. `Who knows how a crazy thinks? Mebbe he thinks he's tops now, he's above the law.'

Weak, I thought. There must be something deeper.

`There's more to it than that,' I said. `He's got a plan. I'm sure of it, and now he's got money and a big organisation behind him. He's going somewhere; we must find out where.'

`And how are you going to do that?' asked Mike.

`This group Slak is the key. There's some connection between them and Jeremy the Killer. We must investigate this group and I have a feeling we must do it quickly.'

*

On the way back to "Safe" I phoned Tom to call off his watch-dogs and meet us there. As an afterthought I called Max too.

When we arrived back, Max and Tom were already present. I brought them up to date and then Mike took his tape recorder out and played Jeremy's music back to us. Max shrugged, completely unaffected.

`Rock 'n Roll and Country 'n Western's more my style,' he said.

I pulled out Jeremy's drawings and smoothed them flat on the table. We looked at them, listening to Ed's music. There was an eerie similarity, partly due to the colours, but also

`They're upside down,' said Max suddenly and turned the pictures around. `Look, this is the ground, these are sort of towers. And this ..' he pointed to the purple swollen sky. `This is the sun.'

I felt the skin prickling on the back of my head as we looked at strange alien-looking artefacts on a desolate landscape silhouetted against a swollen purple sun and listened to the weirdly provocative spectral music. Like the wind wailing across a doomed planet in some far-distant galaxy. The music stopped.

`...it's got something, but it's not us,' said Ed's prosaic voice at the end of the recording. `Dulson. That was his name. Jeremy Dulson. A real weirdo.'

Mike switched off the recorder and they watched in silence as I put the pictures back in the filing cabinet. I turned to Tom.

`Perhaps you could now bring us up to date from your side?'

He opened his briefcase and cleared his throat.

`We've been on this case for a week now,' he began rather apologetically, `but we've not discovered much. The radio stations that play the Slak music treat them as commercials because that's how the Slak organisation pay for them. It's very expensive but there seems no shortage of money at Slak.'

`And how do the radio stations receive the music?' asked Max. `CDs, I suppose,' he answered himself.

`No,' replied Tom, looking at him. `In a very unusual way. My contact says the music arrives over the telephone, over a modem, like E-mail. They have been sent a plug-in card for a PC and a floppy containing some software which allows the computer to convert it into high quality sound.

And the payments for the "commercials" are made in cash, directly into the station's bank account,' he added. `None of the stations understand it, but it isn't illegal and it's very profitable for them.'

`Can't we do a phone trace?' I asked. `It must still take a few minutes to send in a piece of music.'

`Well maybe *you* could with your police contacts, but we...' . The phone rang and Mike picked it up.

`It's for you,' he said holding out the receiver to Tom, `... but we would need a Magistrate's Order,' completed Tom, taking the phone from Mike.

`Yes?' he said, putting it to his ear.

I was about to say something when:

`What?!' said Tom. `Say that again!' We could hear an excited tinny voice at the other end of the line and Tom pulled a pencil out of his top pocket and scribbled something on the pad in front of him. `Is there any more info?' There was some more chatter and then Tom said: `Stay near this line, I'll get back to you later.' He put the phone down slowly and looked at us.

`There's been another Brain Drain murder.'

Chapter 40

There was a stunned silence and then a babble of voices and questions, everyone speaking together.

`Bloody hell! He's started again!'

`No, it wasn't a fighter this time, it was a musician.'

`A musician?!'

Tom was waving the pad at me.

`What sort of musician? What's his name?' I took the pad and read it out incredulously.

`It's Ed Bailey!'

`What?!' said Mike.

`You know him?' asked Max.

`Sure we know him, he's ...'

Gradually calm returned.

`Ed Bailey is the guitar player who knew Jeremy,' I explained to Max and Tom.

`It's the name of the person Mike and I went round to see this afternoon. It's him that played the music.' I motioned to Mike's tape recorder lying on the table. `And now he's dead.'

`So he was killed to silence him,' said Max. `And as he wasn't killed in time, we're next on the list. He's right behind us now.' He stood up. `I'll get some of the boys round and ...'

`And was his head er ... drained?' broke in Mike.

`Yes,' said Tom, swallowing.

`So it may have been for his knowledge, and not to silence him,' I said.

`What knowledge?' asked Max. I looked at Mike.

`Do you remember Ed saying that Jeremy was angry because he couldn't play his own music?' I said.

`Yes, that's right,' said Mike. His eyes widened. `You don't mean ...'

`Yes,' I replied. `If that man with the worms is right - he can now.'

*

`Yuk,' said Mike, with a shiver.

There was a shocked silence and again I had the feeling that the Killer had deliberately taken another step towards his mysterious goal. Ed had been a talented musician who had been killed for a purpose and the only obvious purpose, in the strange fantastic world of "Learning by Ingestion", was so the Killer, who we had now identified as the adult Jeremy, could become a skilful guitarist.

`He's a crack shot, an expert bayonet and knife fighter, a fencer and now a composer of unusual pop music, probably for this group Slak,' summarised Mike. `And as he can also now play his own music, he may well *be* Slak.'

`Exactly,' I said, looking at Tom. `Which is why we *must* find this Slak group.'

`OK, OK,' snapped the usually calm Tom. `I've got the message. Martial arts and martial music. Find Slak and we find the Killer. We're working on it.' He handed out

pieces of paper. 'And let's not forget security. Here's another numbered list of pubs in case we have to arrange covert meetings.'

Chapter 41

But as time passed and nothing happened, our precautions seemed pointless. We had several more meetings and carefully checked each other for "tails". We continuously electronically scanned the premises of "Safe", Tom's office, Max's school, our cars and even our clothes for bugs - but nothing. I would have sworn that we were not under surveillance. No one was interested in us or our doings.

And in the meantime the strange music of Slak was heard more and more. As I said, the commercial radio stations at first merely broadcast it because it was paid for as advertisements. But soon the music became so popular that they were playing the recordings for nothing. I couldn't help wondering if Jeremy was playing it himself now.

Gradually the music was achieving cult status - it was so different from anything else. Because of its military beat it became known as "Mil-rock" and was heard everywhere - amazing in view of its anonymous source. The group "Slak" was never seen and there were no words to the music. CD's appeared but there were only simple severe designs on the covers - no pictures of the artists. The very tunes were merely named "Slak-1", "Slak-2", etc.

On reflection, the music somehow uniquely described what we knew of Jeremy the Killer. Its brassy martial sound was the defiance of someone desperately lonely, someone who killed and killed again to show his superiority, to show the world that he was alone out of choice. Once or twice I took his strange paintings out of the filing cabinet and looked at them as I listened to his music. They fitted the music exactly, like a hand in a glove, and made me feel lonely and angry too. As it always took a long time before I could rationalise myself out of this mood, I gave up looking at them.

And then a strange sort of dance made its appearance in the discos, a type of group or team dance - like the Madison of the sixties - but with stiff military steps and swinging arm gestures. It was amazing to watch the intent faces of young children of all ethnic groups moving with formal high-stepping precision as they stamped and wheeled through the complex patterns of Mil-rock. "Dancing" it may have been called, but to me it looked more like marching and counter-marching.

Many other rock/pop groups tried to imitate the Mil-rock music but it somehow didn't gel. It just didn't go with their long hair, torn jeans and sexually permissive persona.

And it was to the young that the music appealed - age 12 to 15 - and surprisingly to girls as well as boys. But apparently it had a quite different effect on them - it certainly didn't seem to make them feel angry and lonely. In fact it was difficult to find out exactly what it was that attracted them to it. Some said that in a society loaded by the advertising media with instant gratification, self-indulgence and sex it gave the young a way to meet each other as people and not as sex-objects. I remembered seeing an interview outside a school where five very attractive 14 and 15-year old girls were saying that sure, they liked boys very much and liked talking and playing games with them. But one of them, obviously already a woman behind her school uniform and differently dressed could easily be a media produced fantasy-object for older men, was especially indignant at the advice of her elder sister who had resignedly told her that the only way to success with boys was to offer sex.

'No way!' she had said emphatically, and her companions had all agreed. 'I'm going to be a virgin when I get married.'

A good-looking 15-year old boy had also been interviewed and had grimaced when the interviewer had asked about girl friends.

`No, I don't really like them. I'd rather go to a football match. But all me mates go on about what they do with 'em and so if you don't try, they make you feel you're a queer.'

There were many learned discussions and talk shows on the TV about it, but the speakers, whatever they said, came over as internally baffled. None of the usual gurus, with their bow ties, glib speech and mannered gestures seemed even remotely competent to talk about the phenomenon. Historical film clips of the rapt faces of Young Communists or the Hitler Youth were often shown and quoted as examples of how youth around puberty wanted leadership, needed to be in a group, welcomed authority. Sports, healthy living and self-discipline were part of the Slak ethos and the only remotely credible speakers were sportsmen, incoherent though they usually were.

Some said that as there had been no wars for so long, the national martial spirit was rising again, with none of the usual criticism from those who had known what war really meant. Mil-rock was censured as being "militaristic" but that word had fallen out of use and lost some of its negative meaning. And the arguments all failed anyway because Mil-rock and its young supporters were obviously not militaristic neither against each other, against any racial group or least of all against another country.

I personally thought that it was one of the periodic swings of fashion and that the young had as usual found a way to rebel against society; to annoy their parents. And parents certainly professed ironic amazement at seeing their children washing themselves, dressing neatly, doing their exercises, insisting on healthy food and practising the intricate steps of Mil-rock. In some way the children's' almost puritanical behaviour was a reproach to their parents, subtly exasperated by having to approve.

Chapter 42

About six months after the murder of Ed and the appearance of Mil-rock, I received a hushed call from Tom. He wouldn't say anything on the phone but gave me the number of a pub to meet at, like in the old days.

`I've lost the list,' I said, a little irritably. Surely we didn't need to do this security thing after being ignored for six months?

`OK. At the pub where we first met then,' he said, and rang off before I could object any more.

*

He was sitting in a corner alcove, with his back to the wall, and only glanced at me momentarily as I entered and slumped into a chair opposite.

`We've found where the Slak organisation is,' he said quietly, continually and nervously scanning the almost empty pub over my shoulder. Immediately I sprung to attention! This was indeed much more important than what had become the usual weekly status reports.

`Where?'

`They have rented office space in the Bremner Road in Knightsbridge. It's a very exclusive area, opposite the Royal Albert Hall and on the fringe of Hyde Park. They've taken over the whole block and paid cash for a year in advance. We've only had them under observation for two days but in that time no one has been seen to go in or out.' He was hardly moving his lips.

`So how do you know it's them, then?'

`We're not dead sure,' he said, his eyes still moving, `but that's where the phone calls to the radio stations originate. Furthermore the whole renting deal was done by phone with cash transfer into the account of the office leasing company. The leasing agents never saw anyone. They think they're terrorists or IRA bomb-makers and wanted to alert the police, but I persuaded them to hold off.'

`It sounds right,' I admitted.

I thought awhile. We must never lose sight of the fact that our only interest in the group Slak was if Jeremy was connected with it in some way.

`If you could only catch sight of Jeremy there we'd be home and dry. We know how he looks. Do you need any help? You know we can supply you with surveillance cameras.'

`Yes, good,' he said and we made arrangements for him to visit "Safe" and select what he wanted.

`You've done a great job,' I said sincerely. I didn't enquire by what illegal methods they had traced the phone calls to that office block.

*

I left the pub riding on a cloud of hopeful excitement. I felt it in my bones that Jeremy (what an inappropriate name for a serial killer!) was in that office block. The long patient search was coming to an end, the net was closing!

My uncomplicated mood of elation lasted until I reached the corner where I knew I would find a taxi to take me home. Opposite the taxi-stand was a corner newsagent and outside was a flysheet for the "Melody Maker" pop magazine. Its entire front cover was screaming "SLAK APPEARS!"

I entered and hastily buying a copy tore it open. Flipping through advertisements and other trivia I came to the centrefold and there there was a full spread of pictures labelled `Slak at Last!'. They were of excellent quality and of a young man in various poses holding a guitar. About 23, he had an unusual face, unusual especially for this magazine - otherwise filled with unshaven loose-lipped long-haired degenerates with knowing street-wise eyes.

At first glance, Slak was like an old-fashioned hero, the sort seen fifty years ago in boys' magazines. The intrepid aviator, the hero of the North-west Frontier. A young subaltern in some crack Victorian cavalry regiment.

He was certainly very handsome, almost feminine, with a classic profile, straight nose, deep-set grey eyes, and a clear complexion. A friendly mouth with thin upper and full lower lip. Clean-shaven and with neat but rather long dark hair that fell slightly over one eye.

And apart from age and perhaps physique, totally unlike Jeremy.

Who was this person? There were six photographs of him and they each projected the same strange ambiguous personality. It was as though the mouth would break at any moment into a boyish grin, but a second look at the magnetic authoritarian eyes showed this to be impossible.

Out of curiosity I put my hand over the eyes and looked at the quirky humorous mouth, and then covered the mouth and looked at the staring cruel eyes. There were two completely different personalities in the same face.

Even the writer of the titles had been so overawed by the pictures that he had forgone his usual knowing sexual innuendoes and had merely respectfully described what we could see anyway. A footnote explained that the pictures had arrived at the offices of "Melody Maker" in some mysterious "electronic" way.

Holding the magazine, I walked back to the pub I had just left, hoping Tom had not yet left, but he had. So it was only at one remove that I had the pleasure of

showing him something first, by leaving a message for him at his office suggesting he examine the February edition of "Melody Maker".

*

In the taxi back to "Safe" I looked at the photos of Slak again. There was no resemblance at all between the blank expressionless face of the Killer as I remembered it and the face of Slak. I tried to imagine if one could be turned into the other with cosmetic surgery, and failed. The very shapes of the faces were different.

I snapped the magazine shut and transferred my thoughts to what I'd just found out. Acting on an impulse I leant forwards and asked the cab-driver to make a diversion to go past the Albert Hall.

'Diversion? The Albert Hall?' said my driver, stretching up to look in the mirror at his barmy passenger.

'That's on the other side of the river, mate. Take 'arf an hour at least.'

'And see if you can find Bremner Road,' I added.

He shrugged and leaning out of the window did a rapid U-turn.

'And up yours too,' he muttered in reply to the chorus of protesting horns and squealing brakes.

Bremner Road turned out to be very short and Tom could only have meant the modern three-story "Albion House" on the corner with Queen's Gate Road. The windows were blank, the car park was empty and there was a chain across its entrance.

'No number, I just wanted to see the road,' I said in reply to the cabby. 'Go round the block.' It was indeed a very up-market location, no more than a hundred yards from the domed Albert Hall, giving a concert that night by Simon Rattle and the Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, I noticed. There was a long line of students queued up at the booking office windows.

I had seen enough. I decided I wanted to see Max now. Again the cabby craned up to look in his mirror at the eccentric passenger who had changed his destination yet again.

'Are you an American?' said the cabby suddenly.

'How did you know?' I asked in a mock surprised voice.

'It's your white mac innit,' he answered. 'You speak English very well though,' he added judiciously.

From there on he insisted in pointing out every damn sight of London and I soon regretted my stupid joke.

*

Arriving at Max's school, I paid off my chatty driver and shook his hand - I seemed to have been with him all the after-noon - and entered the School, empty at this time of day. I made my way to Max's office. It was empty too, but outside in the main exercise room was Rosemunde, home from school and still in her neat navy-blue school uniform.

With set face she was long-leggedly pacing up and down, turning, marking time and then moving off again to some internal beat. She suddenly caught sight of me and stopped, blushing and embarrassed. She walked across and gave me the usual hug and peck.

'That's Mil-rock, isn't it?' I asked. 'I thought you didn't like it.'

'Did I say that?' she said. 'Well, perhaps I did. But it sort of grows on you. Any anyway it's better than the usual sloppy pop-music.' She caught sight of the magazine under my arm.

'Is that the new "Melody Maker"?' she asked.

I handed it to her and she immediately opened it.

`There's supposed to be a picture of Slak in it,' she said flipping through the pages and eagerly looking from left to right. And then she got to the centre-fold and froze, her eyes going from one picture to the next.

`Grosser Gott,' she said to herself quietly.

I watched her awhile. `Are you all right Roz?' I asked. No answer. `Rosamunde!' I repeated loudly. `Are you all right?'

She looked up at me, her face was slightly pink and there was something hidden in those beautiful amber eyes.

`Yes, I'm alright, Uncle Jim,' she said and surprisingly reached out and held my hand.

`Is your Dad around?' I asked, disconcerted.

`I'll tell him you're here,' she said quietly, and disappeared after handing me back the magazine.

A few minutes Max appeared in the doorway.

`You OK Roz?' he said looking back over his shoulder. There was some muffled reply. He shrugged and turned to me.

We moved into Max's office and a few minutes later heard the wheels of a taxi outside and Mike appeared. He sat down and I quickly explained to them that I had just heard from Tom that the Slak group had rented office space in Bremner Road in Knightsbridge, opposite the Royal Albert Hall and that they must have installed their own recording studio there too and were sending their music out over a phone line.

`They are apparently all living in,' I added, `as no visitors have been seen to come or go. They are registered as a cultural music-making foundation.'

Max made an obscene noise with his lips.

`Well that's it then,' he said. `Jeremy Dulson's the Killer. Let's grab him - what d'you call it Citizen's Arrest? - and then claim the reward.'

`There you go,' said Mike approvingly.'

`"Grab him?!", I said, looking at Mike. `Grab him from where?' The young are so impulsive.

`From this Albion building. He's there, writing and probably now playing music for them.' He looked at my unresponsive face. `OK, then,' he conceded, `if you want to be fussy, let the cops grab him.'

`We have no evidence that will stand up in a court of law,' I said. `Tom's lot couldn't positively identify Jeremy, he's never been seen properly except by us and his face is so neutral he could be anyone. And in any case, he may now have had cosmetic surgery.'

Before their sceptical eyes I rather dramatically flipped open the "Melody Maker".

`They are telling the world this is Slak, their lead man,' I said.

Heads down they studied the pictures.

`He sure as hell doesn't look like the man I fought in that garage,' said Max.

`We could check it if we could get a blood sample from this guy,' said Mike. But he didn't sound very hopeful.

`And anyway,' added Max, who had been thinking, `If this bloke is Jeremy and the Killer, there are warrants out for his arrest for murder in England, the States and France. Is it likely he's hiding in an office block in Knightsbridge writing and playing music for a pop group?'

There was a gloomy silence.

`There's only one thing to do,' I said. `We've got to get into that office block in Bremner Road.'

The atmosphere immediately brightened and they both looked at me in surprised admiration. `Max,' I continued, `you're the military man.'

`Right,' said Max briskly, looking into the distance and obviously remembering similar operations in his military past. `First we need a layout of the rooms, then we need to check the positioning of any alarms.'

`I can get the building floor plans from the Borough Surveyor's office,' I said. `Go on.'

`We can do a radio and infra-red scan for a lot of the alarms,' said Mike.

`Great,' said Max, pacing up and down. `Then we need to know how many people are inside and where they are. You can bore holes through walls and ceilings,' he poked imaginary holes with his fingers, `and there's also a sort of hand-held microwave reflector thing that we used to detect movement on the other side of doors or partitions.'

`Can you see Phil about that?' I asked Mike.

`And lastly to get in quickly you're going to need some plastic. About a hundred grams, but it depends on the thickness of the wall.

`Plastic?' I asked, surprised.

`That's it. You put it against the wall in a square pattern,' he traced an area with his hands, `and detonate it all at once.' He snapped his fingers. `Semtex is best but there's probably other types too. It's best to have two teams hitting at the same time. The first team armed with ... ' I hastily held up my hand.

`Jesus Max!' I said. `This isn't a hostage rescue operation - there's no way I can get explosives. We've got to think of another way.'

There was a disappointed pause. `So when do we do it?' he asked finally.

`Soon,' was all I could say. `I'd like you to start thinking about it and make preparations right away. Could you call us a taxi?'

Just as Mike and myself were putting our coats on, there was a tap on the door. It was Rosemunde, still in her school uniform.

`Daddy, can I have the "Melody Maker" if you are finished with it?' she asked. Max looked across at me. I shrugged.

`Yes, OK. But keep it around. We may want to look at it again,' he said. She scooped it off the table and after a peck and hug of Mike and myself she left.

A few minutes later our taxi arrived.

Chapter 43

Once the decision had been made, there was a period of preparation before we could actually enter. The area around Bremner Road was quite busy but we couldn't have Tom's team permanently on duty. So Phil helped Tom with the loan of several of our surveillance cameras which he astutely installed in several locations so "Albion House" could be observed from all sides by day and by night. We were very proud of them, mainly because Phil had cleverly incorporated several ideas I had brought in from my police experience.

The problem with any surveillance is that ideally you should only take pictures when there is anything worth taking, and then you should record in as much detail as possible. And so our cameras had "movement detectors" built in so that they would only record pictures when something changed. Phil had designed them such that only movement in some small critical area of the picture would switch on the recorder. We would make this at the edge of a door or the curtain of a window, for example. And as we wanted to know as soon as possible if anything interesting was happening, each camera had a small micro-power radio transmitter which would tell a nearby receiver if something had moved. This receiver would then dial the customer. He could then rush out and nab the robber red-handed or if that failed, identify him

from the video recording. In our case the receiver would dial Tom's office and he had it patched in to his net of radio-telephones so if anything interesting happened it would not go unnoticed.

We waited patiently but after three days an exasperated call from Tom showed that nothing had been caught in our hi-tec net.

'Either they're stocked up with food as for a siege, or there's some other entrance that we're not seeing,' said Tom. 'We've had IR detectors scanning the building and everything is negative. The phone activity, in and out, has ceased and we can detect no radio transmissions.'

'So it's empty,' I said. There was a considering pause.

'Yes,' he said finally. '"Albion House" appears to be unoccupied.'

'We're going in anyway,' I decided. 'If they're not there then the longer we wait the colder the scent will be. When can we do it?'

There was a silence and I heard the hiss and click of a radio in the background.

'Tonight is OK,' said Tom. 'There's a concert at the Albert Hall across the street starting at 8pm and finishing at 11pm. Sunset is 9:30 so 10:30pm would be a good time. Empty streets for our entry and full streets for if we need to get out quickly.'

I called Max and Mike and Phil and we arranged to meet at Tom's office that afternoon.

Chapter 44

Tom had an office in a high block looking down towards Tower Bridge. I was very impressed: I had never realised what a successful Agency he had. After we had all admired the view, Tom spread out photos, plans and a small model on his desk-top and we got down to work.

Although the Slak group had taken a lease on the whole of Albion House, comprising three floors, the only sign of life had been on the top floor. Tom had drawn circles showing the alarms that had been detected, an arrow showing a window we could enter and the stairs we could take to reach the top floor. With all this excellent groundwork I began to see why Tom's Agency could afford such luxurious headquarters.

The model especially pleased Max.

'Of course we should really practise on a life-size model,' he said. 'When I was with the SAS in Hereford we could assemble partitions in any layout you liked in about half an hour.' Tom looked interested and I felt he was filing that idea away for use one day.

'So how are we going in?' asked Mike.

I told them of my idea and it obviously pleased the younger men more than Tom.

'In quick,' said Max approvingly.

'And away quick,' said Mike. 'Important if anything goes wrong.'

'And no parking problems,' said Max again. They both laughed.

'It's going to make a hell of a lot of noise,' said Tom disapprovingly. His method was much more stealthy but carried the risk of being detected on the way in.

'Not if we do it properly,' I said. 'Now I will be going in with Max. Tom will arrange his men to keep a lookout and help us get out if we meet any resistance.'

'I think you should have a bloke around the back to make a distraction if that happens,' said Max.

'A distraction? What sort of distraction?' asked Tom annoyed. The silent surgical incision he had planned was turning into a cavalry charge.

`Well, have a bloke throw firecrackers through the window, you know, those thunderflashes,' answered Max. `Stun grenades would be best, of course, but you probably couldn't get them in time,' he added regretfully.

I liked the idea. The noise they made would all be inside the building.

`But only if we call for it,' I insisted.

`Now what about communications?' asked Tom. Max looked at him.

`What's wrong with our usual walky-talkies? Or even the usual cell-phones?' he asked.

`They can be picked up,' answered Phil. `If these people have any sort of defence posture they will have a radio scanner permanently looking out for unusual or nearby transmissions. Mr Murdock and I think we should use the taxi radio band and use coded messages.'

We talked a bit more then made arrangements to meet outside the Albert Hall ticket-office at 9:45pm.

Mike reluctantly had to leave us as he had to go with his father to some US Embassy shindig outside London.

Chapter 45

It was a dark warm night when Phil and I met Max in his pick-up truck at the corner of Kensington Gore and Queen's Gate Rd. As it approached I saw it was carrying a steel girder, sticking six feet out of the back, over the tailgate. A piece of cloth was tied to the end to warn the drivers of other cars. A small red-headed figure was sitting in the passenger seat.

`This no place for Rosemunde,' I said immediately as we climbed into the cab.

`She'll be all right,' said Max. `I'll drop her off at the Albert Hall and we can pick her up from the foyer afterwards. I don't like leaving her in the School when it's empty,' he confided. He thinks it's safer to bring her on a break-in, I thought incredulously.

Rosemunde smiled at me brightly.

We drove the short distance to the big domed shape of the Albert Hall and there met Tom and Chris. Phil handed out the walky-talkies that he had hastily modified that afternoon for a taxi-band frequency and Chris slapped his pockets to show he had the fireworks. Max gave his daughter some money so she could buy something at the buffet in the Albert Hall foyer.

`We shouldn't be more than half an hour,' he said to her. She gave him a hug and skipped up the steps into the entrance.

As we drove off we could hear the muffled strains of music from the entrance to the Albert Hall and it was quite dark, the lights at the high windows having been extinguished when the concert started.

We dropped Chris off at the corner of Bremner Road.

"Remember, you only use them if we call you or there's an emergency," were my last words to him.

Max then drove up to the entrance to the Albion House car-park ("Unauthorised cars will be removed at owner's expense"). I stepped out, unhooked the chain and he slowly drove in, his lights off, then stopped. I climbed back into the cab.

Looking through the rear-view window I could see our target, the ornamental but heavily-built doors to Albion House. Max was also looking at them through his rear-view mirror as he slowly drove across the empty carpark, swinging slightly to the right and left to line up the truck. Now we were facing directly away from the doors and about thirty yards away. He switched off the engine and I stepped out.

I brought the speaker of my radio up to my ear and switched on, volume at minimum. In the distance two taxis were arguing with their dispatcher about something. I waited until it had finished and pressed the "Transmit" button three times. Immediately Chris's voice said: 'I have a fare for Liverpool Street.' So he was in position round the back and had nothing to report. 'Number four - I'll take the Liverpool Street,' said Tom's voice a second later. Everything clear.

Right, this was it. I looked at the dark building looming above us and just at that very moment a window on the top floor suddenly flared in a sharp white rectangle then disappeared, to be replaced by a pulsating orange-yellow glare. Bloody hell! Someone must have seen us! I leapt into the cab.

'They've just lit a fire on the top floor!' I shouted. 'Let's get in and see what we can save.'

As I slammed the door Max started the engine and slipped into reverse. I turned round, looking out of the rear window and firmly grasped the back of my seat. I was going to have to direct him for the last few feet.

'Go,' I said and Max let in the clutch. The engine note rose and we started to move.

'Left a bit - hold it. Left a bit more. Steady.'

With the girder sticking out in front of me like a lance I felt like a knight galloping towards battle, but instead of my charger's galloping hooves was the note of the engine now rising to a scream and I had to hang onto the seat as we accelerated backwards rapidly under the high gearing. 'Ten, five, two ...' I shouted, bracing myself. I had no time for more. The doors were approaching more and more rapidly, they filled the rear window, the girder like a long finger pointing directly at their centre. We stopped with a crash and I was thrown forwards, the back of the seat thumping my chest. The end of the girder had struck fairly over the lock, its concentrated weight splintering the doors and throwing them back wide open. It then leapt off the truck and carried on and bounced with a sonorous clang into the marbled foyer of Albion House. We pulled our seat backs down and climbed over them into the rear of the truck. The entrance to Albion House was now filled with the rear of Max's truck.

We scrambled over the tailgate and into the building. I flashed my torch ahead and it was lucky I did as there was an empty packing case at the foot of the big stairs. We skirted it and silent on rubber soles ran up five flights of polished wooden steps. Now up the sixth flight leading to the occupied third floor. Max crouched panting to the left of the door, I crouched to the right then reached forward and turned the handle. The door swung open - unlocked. We dashed into what must be the reception area of the third floor. Our torches swung wildly round over some stylised leather and chrome chairs and a receptionist's desk. There were no magazines on the table and no chair behind the receptionist's desk. Unused.

Max crashed open the door to a short corridor leading to several more doors. Flames were pouring out of an office in the middle. Max bounded forward and slammed its door closed. Safe for a moment. Hoping there were no more incendiary bombs we ran swiftly down the softly carpeted corridor flashing our lights into the remaining offices to left and right. I noticed two had computers on their desks. But it was in the end room - bigger and obviously intended for conferencing - that we found the music studio we had hoped for!

I shone my light around seeing it gleam off the black and white notes of keyboards, their cables writhing off to various midi and synthesiser boxes. I felt a sudden surge of satisfaction. Up until now we weren't really sure - but this was it, this was where the Slak recordings had been made! I found myself shivering and suddenly I realised I

had all the confirmation I needed - that faint bitter-sweet smell that surrounded the Killer still hung in the air.

'He's been here alright. I can smell his stink,' said Max savagely in confirmation. He picked up the guitar and raised it to his nose, smelling the neck. With an expression of disgust he violently threw it to the ground and kicked it, then wiped his hands on the sides of his jeans.

I raised my camera and took several pictures from different angles while Max went and explored the offices.

'Empty,' he said. But the pieces of paper lying in the corridor told me we were close on their heels. I pulled out the radio, pressed the "Transmit" key three times again then turned the volume up and put it quietly hissing in the middle of the corridor.

The door to the burning office was holding but we could see yellow light under it and feel the heat of the fire through the door. There was a deep roaring sound and crackling sound from the other side. It would only be a few minutes before it burnt through.

'Max,' I said pulling out a plastic bag from my pocket, 'go through these offices and collect any pieces of paper you can find, any floppy disks, tape, contents of waste-paper baskets, you know.'

I cocked my camera again and took photos at random around the offices and in the corridor. I was just wondering if we should try to carry one of the computers with us in case there was anything on its hard disk when the radio suddenly came alive.

'Anyone for a fare for Baker Street? I repeat Baker Street.' It was Tom's insistent voice.

Christ! "Baker Street" was our top priority signal - "Exit quickly now"!

I dashed out into the corridor to meet Max holding up an empty plastic bag.

'Nix,' he said.

I scooped up the radio, still urgently repeating "Fare for Baker Street", pressed "Transmit" three times and dropped it into my pocket. The door to the burning office abruptly charred and with a sudden roar a yellow flame licked out through a red-rimmed hole. Shielding our faces we ran past it to the end of the corridor, through the reception area and paused panting at the top of the stairwell to look down and listen. Silence – just the street lights making calm futuristic shadows of the banisters on the walls. Why the "Exit" signal? Had someone else seen the fire or was there another reason?

We silently ran down the three flights of stairs to the first floor and waited listening again. We were just about to run down the last flight, leading to the entrance foyer and front door, when we heard the sounds of a window breaking and falling glass. Almost immediately there was a series of deafening reports which reverberated up the stairwell and made my head ring. Then a distant shout. Chris had seen something around the back - something sufficiently urgent to make him throw in his firecrackers! Christ, but their detonations were head-splitting noisy in the quiet building!

We dashed down the remaining flight of stairs to the entrance foyer and avoiding the girder lying at an angle on the marble floor, stepped up onto the back of the truck. Where was Max? I looked back into the shadows, hearing the "hoo hars" of police sirens in the distance. There was a strong smell of gunpowder but Max was nowhere to be seen.

'Max!' I said sharply. Then I saw his light flashing in a corner. He had a door open.

`I've found the way they've been getting in and out,' he said, `I'm going after them.'

`How do you know?' I asked.

`I can smell the bugger!' he said.

Damn. If he had found something I wanted to see it too. I made a quick decision.

`You're on your own then. I've got to get away with the truck.'

`Don't forget Roz,' he said as he disappeared.

There was another fusillade of reports from the rear, a door banged and smoke started to drift into the foyer. I turned, climbed over the driver's seat, pulled it back upright and felt for the ignition. The truck started immediately and I drove slowly away into the dark car-park. Something was being dragged along behind clattering, but with a sudden clang it stopped.

There was no traffic as I drove carefully out into Bremner Road, fumbled over the dash for the lights and turned left. There were at least two police sirens now, getting menacingly louder, and in the rear-view mirror I could see a flashing blue light. I drifted slowly past groups of stationary pedestrians, their faces white in the street lights and all staring at something behind me. I wondered how I was going to park in front of the Albert Hall and was considering reversing back into the "reserved for fire-brigade" slot when the passenger door opened and a small slim figure climbed in, holding an ice-cream.

`Where's my Dad?' asked Rosemunde immediately.

`He's OK, he said he wanted to look at something and I was to take you home.'

`All right,' she said, settling back into the passenger seat and looking curiously out of the wind-screen.

`I came out early because it was boring inside and I heard someone was letting off fireworks.' She pointed with her ice-cream. `Oh, look! That building's on fire!' she said excitedly.

Two fire engines and another police car raced past with flashing red and blue lights.

`I bet that's my Dad,' she said.

`He'll be OK,' I repeated absently. Damn. The police had erected a barrier at the junction with Queen's Gate Road and were stopping all cars.

`Daddy's always doing interesting things,' she said, licking her cone and looking at the flames appreciatively.

I spun the truck round and headed for the Kensington Gore, but as we approached I could see another line of stopped cars and two more flashing blue lights. I thought of ditching the truck and scarpering but there were other cars behind me now. The Rolls and Daimlers of departing concert-goers. This truck stuck out like a sore thumb and the police were looking into every car. In front of us a Ford Escort had been pulled over and a sergeant in a white traffic vest was flashing a light in the trunk. Shit.

Even before I was at the checkpoint, the sergeant had seen me and was motioning the Escort away and signalling for me to take its place. Two other constables were closing in too. The sergeant opened the door.

`Out,' he said curtly, not even asking to see my driving license. But there was a shout from the constable on the passenger's side.

`What?' said the sergeant, shining his light behind me onto Rosemunde. She sat there, holding her hand up to her mouth, his light gleaming on her red hair and big frightened amber eyes. He snorted something, slammed the door shut and impatiently waved us on. We turned into the Kensington Gore and turned east, making good time in the sparse traffic.

`Do think I should have cried too?' asked Rosemunde, after a while.

I looked aside at her.

`It wasn't necessary. Only if he'd made us get out.'

`Yes, I suppose so,' she said, consideringly.

As I drove her back home I pondered on the contribution a mother made to a child's upbringing.

Chapter 46

It wasn't until midnight that I got Rosemunde home. We had to go through two other barriers, both manned by soldiers. Toy soldiers. They must have just been going on duty guarding Buckingham Palace for they were in red-coats and tall bearskin busbies, although their rifles looked modern enough. But the image of a young girl, who had now fallen asleep on my shoulder, always got us through.

On arrival Rosemunde woke up, told me I did interesting things too and disappeared into her bedroom. She reappeared a few minutes later in a pink dressing-gown, gave me a sleepy goodnight kiss smelling of tooth-paste, said again what an interesting evening it had been and disappeared. I was so tired I fell asleep in an armchair waiting for Max.

I woke up with a start when he arrived about half an hour later with Tom.

`Where's Roz?' he said immediately.

`She's asleep in bed,' I replied yawning, and he relaxed. Tom flopped down in a chair and Max disappeared into Rosemunde's bedroom.

`So what happened?' I asked. Tom looked at me and drew breath to reply when Max reappeared.

`I'll make a brew,' he said and disappeared into the kitchen.

`I made a few calls,' started Tom, `but it's all very confused. As I said, the office was rented and paid for with cash. I managed to persuade the leasing agents to say nothing but their bank must have reported it. So the Metropolitan police started a simple surveillance. But whoever was in the office must have noticed the surveillance and decided to move out. A bit paranoid, I would have said ...'

`Well, he did have a guilty conscience,' I said.

`Twelve murders that we know of and a series of bank stick-ups,' added Max, entering with three steaming mugs of tea.

`Yes, perhaps,' said Tom. `So they set an incendiary device to cover their tracks and were in the process of taking their departure when you broke in the front-door with your truck. This made them speed up their departure, through what Max tells me was the passage to an underground parking garage that Albion House shares with some other office, whose name eludes me at the moment. Just milk,' he said to Max.

`So we just missed them,' I said.

`So it seems. Well, the watching Mets outside radioed back that someone had smashed their way in through the front door, and their chief reported upwards. The police were and are still are, totally confused. They thought you may have been Customs and Excise, Narcotics, Vice, Inland Revenue, MI-5, ... anyone. They were all telephoning around when someone thought it sounded like the SAS, so they called Hereford to check. Hereford said no it wasn't them but they could have a ten-man team there in an hour.

The two coppers watching round the back, who were young and probably bored, then decided to break in through a window and find out what was going on. But as soon as they had entered, someone in the garden outside started throwing in what they thought were hand-grenades. They leapt out of the window again and are now

both in hospital - one concussed and the other with a broken collar-bone.' He paused to sip his tea.

'In the meantime the fire had been reported and the fire-brigade arrived. Actually five fire engines arrived, partly because the fire was near a famous monument and partly because there was nothing else going on that night. On account of the explosions, the fire, the suspicion that terrorists may be involved as calls had been made to SAS Headquarters at Hereford, two busloads of police in riot gear arrived and sealed off the area as far south as Cromwell Road.'

'Yes, we saw them,' I said.

'How did you get through?' asked Max, interested. 'My pick-up must have looked as guilty as hell.'

'I had Rosemunde with me,' I explained. 'She just made eyes at the sergeant and he let us through without question.' He grinned into his cup.

'So all was in such confusion,' continued Tom, 'with all the public-service radio channels jammed up, that a police helicopter with a loud-hailer shouting down at the firemen and policemen below was the only way of finally restoring some semblance of order. And at that moment the concert ended. The Albert Hall opened all its doors and five thousand spectators poured out onto the street.'

'I've never seen anything like it,' said Max.

'The Coldstream Guards were just about to go on duty in full ceremonial gear but were quickly issued with live ammunition and ordered to set up check-points along the river,' said Tom. 'And I'm told the Home Secretary was hauled out of an important debate in the House.'

On an impulse Max reached forward and switched on the TV. Just hissing lines. He moved around, but at 1am everything was off until we suddenly hit Channel 4 and it all leapt off the screen.

We were in the middle of a high-tension panic. A wild-eyed reporter was shouting into his microphone:

'... the suspected terrorists' bomb-making factory has caught fire and the fire-brigades at incredible personal risk to themselves are attempting to contain the conflagration. The police have surrounded the building to prevent the escape of ... ' his face jerked off screen and we saw fully-kitted firemen pulling on hoses, policemen with walky-talkies up to their ears, red and blue flashing lights everywhere, the hoo-har of police cars still arriving and the clatter of helicopter blades. The echoing Voice of God from the hovering helicopter was shouting down something about "Zulu control, Zulu control. All police units retire to the Hyde Park-Queens Gate line". The reporter returned in mid sentence but was interrupted by a fireman, his mackintosh slippy and wet reflecting the lights as though he was bathed in flickering liquid fire, who was saying something to him in a slow but incomprehensible Scottish accent. Every now and then elegantly-clad concert-goers would peep over the shoulder of the hysterically gobbling reporter to smile and wave at the camera. We watched fascinated as the camera jerkily panned round up at the yellow flames pouring from the roof of Albion House, at jets of water scintillating in the swinging searchlights, over a mangrove-swamp of tangled fire-hoses, and finally at a mixed group of firemen, police wearing flak-jackets and two red-coated soldiers with their busbies under their arms and rifles over their shoulders. They were leaning against the counter of an Army mobile canteen, chatting to each other and drinking tea.

Chapter 47

The next morning at "Safe", Mike returned from his trip to the South of England with his father, complaining of the difficulty of driving through London and how only their CD plates had got them through the numerous police check-points. I had told him of our entrance into Albion House and he was very envious. He didn't immediately connect this exploit with the traffic conditions in London and I didn't enlighten him.

But I did tell him about the recording studio we had discovered and the bitter-sweet smell.

`So all we know is that the Mil-rock tapes were made there and probably by the Killer,' he summarised.

`That's about it,' I agreed, gloomily.

`Then who's Pretty Boy?' he said, pointing to the open copy of the "Melody Maker" on my desk. `It's not Jeremy.'

`Some front man for the group?' I suggested.

`Where there any signs of him or others?' he asked.

`None that I could see, but we didn't have much time because of the speed the fire was spreading,' I said, then suddenly remembered. `I took some photos though - maybe there's something there.' I picked up the phone to the photo shop where I had dropped the roll and they said they had developed the films - they had all come out and they were just drying them.

`Good,' I said. `Then make blowups of all the prints - something like A4.' I replaced the phone.

When they appeared I flipped through them eagerly but they were disappointing. I could see the make of the musical instruments in the studio and I supposed we could trace where they had been bought or rented. But that really wasn't much use. We wanted to know where the Killer was now. He would hardly go back to the same shop to buy replacement equipment. Angrily I tossed them on my desk. It looked like we had wasted an evening and lost the scent.

`What are these books in the bookshelf?' asked Mike, who had picked up the prints.

`Computer manuals, I suppose,' I answered impatiently. Slak was a pop-group and they would have to reappear some-where but I had this strange feeling of urgency. We shouldn't just be waiting.

`I don't think so,' he said, looking through a lens, `"Embryonic something" and "Allele-specific blah-blah". Left from the previous occupier, I guess,' he added, dropping the photo.

`Unlikely,' I said, taking the print and lens from his hands. `Everything would have been cleared out for a new tenant.' I looked at the titles of the books and carefully wrote down on my note-pad: "Embryonic Stem Cells" and "Allele-specific Ologonucleotide Probes". There was another one, not a book but a catalogue. I didn't need to carefully write it down, although its name was also complicated, "Ackles and Pollock".

The chemical/medical titles meant nothing to me but I had heard of Ackles and Pollock.

`Aren't they one of our customers?' I asked.

Mike pecked at his PC a moment.

`They're a manufacturing company in the Midlands - in Birmingham. Yes. They bought one of our "Protec" systems.'

`"Manufacturing"?' I asked. `what do they manufacture?' Mike tapped on his computer again. `All I have here is "agricultural machinery",' he said.

Of course. Our job was to protect our customer's facilities from break-ins, we weren't too interested in what they made or supplied. Now why was a copy of their catalogue in a rock-band's recording studio? Intrigued, I looked up Ackles and Pollock in the "Manufacturing Engineers Master". Here it was: "Design and construction of pesticide dispersal systems. Crop-spraying – standard and specials. 128 employees. Customers mostly in the Developing World". I picked up the phone and dialled the number given. A very cut-glass Home Counties voice connected me to Mr Hawkins, chief of Works Security. I hadn't spoken to him before, so introduced myself as the Director of "Safe", the company that had supplied their burglar alarm system.

'Oh, aye, we're dead chuffed with it. A bit pricey, y'know, but works a treat.' He had a rough Yorkshire accent. 'What we like is that it's dead easy to operate and to train the new lads on.' And then, assuming I was prospecting for further sales he continued. 'I suppose you're wondering if we're in the market for any more. Well, not at the moment, but if you could send us your latest catalogue ...' I interrupted him.

'No, not this time Mr Hawkins. That's not the reason I'm calling, although I'm pleased your Protec System is working as it should. I was wondering if you could give me the name of someone in Sales.'

'Sales?' he said. 'You want to buy some of our equipment? To get rid of bugs in your computers?' he added laughing heartily. The famous North Country humour.

'That's right.'

'Well, Fred Stones's the man you want,' he said, becoming serious, and probably wiping his eyes. 'I'll see if he's in.' There were some clicks and a pause. For me a necessary pause as I suddenly wondered what I was going to ask: "'Well, I'm the Managing Director of an electronics company and the other night myself and a friend, who incidentally has a Ancient Martial Arts school, broke into an office block in Central London, thinking the Brain Drain Killer was there. Well, there were some pretty convincing traces, you'll be pleased to hear, but the reason I called you is because we also found one of your catalogues and were wondering ...'" No, no.

The phone suddenly came alive with a cultured voice.

'Frederick Stone here. What can I do for you, Mr Murdock?'

I introduced myself again and then in a slightly embarrassed voice:

'Mr Stone,' I began 'you are in Sales too and you know how you sometimes have to follow up the oddest leads to locate customers. Well, we have come across a trace of one of your customers which points to a small company based in London.'

'I know what you mean,' said Mr Stone sympathetically, 'but we sell almost all our equipment to London - to agencies and consulates based in London, you know.'

'Yes, I understand. Well, this one may be different from the others - ("Different?" - different in what way? - why the hell did Slak need agricultural crop sprayers? An inspiration...) - they are almost certainly paying cash.'

'Well, that's certainly different!' He sounded amused. 'Our invoices are usually paid by International Aid Vouchers and that six months after delivery. But hold the line.' There was the click of computer keys.

'Yes,' he sounded surprised, 'there is a special order in house at the moment. It's some sort of vertical disperser - I suppose it's for use in one of the London parks.' There was some laughter in the background.

'And the customer?' I asked. There was another pause.

'It's not a company. What?' he said to someone in the background. 'Yes, it has to be delivered to an address in London, an address that will be sent to us when we have finished the job. It's very unusual, but they paid up front. Is that any help?'

I made a quick decision.

`You've had our Protec system installed for six months now and we would like to give it a quick check. Would you mind if the engineer I send up could also look at this vertical disperser?'

He agreed and I told him Phil would be up the next day.

Chapter 48

`Yeah, the "Protec"'s OK,' said Phil on his return. `But this thing they're making. It looks something like this.' He pulled forwards a piece of paper and quickly sketched a box on wheels with a long cylinder sticking out of its top. He then turned the drawing sideways and put some dimensions on it.

`This cylinder is six feet long and a foot diameter with a domed top.' His spatulate fingers continued drawing. `There's a tube down the middle of the cylinder and whatever it distributes is blown out of the top.' He drew a small cloud emerging from the cylinder.

`They have installed one of their standard blowers in the base here, with batteries, and the whole shebang is mounted on four big rubber-tyred wheels.' He completed the drawing. I looked at it uncomprehendingly.

`But what does it disperse?' I asked. `What does it blow out? There must be some sort of hopper which they fill with the seeds or the insecticide.'

`You're right,' answered Phil. `The stuff they have to disperse comes in a metal cylinder which they connect on here.' He drew a small arrow pointing to the top of the box.

`So they connect it on, switch on the blower, and the contents are blown out in a cloud at the top,' I summarised.

`That's about it,' agreed Phil. `They've received a few dummy cylinders filled with compressed air and talc, just to check it works.' Again we looked at it, trying to think of something to say.

`It's a weird thing,' said Phil finally. `It's like nothing else they've made. The workers call it "The Prick".' I could see why.

`And these cylinders, did you manage to see where they came from?' I asked. He shrugged.

`They're simple cylinders, about 2ft long by 4ins diameter, with a threaded tube and a tap at one end. They just received them "special delivery" with no sender's name.'

The purpose of the "Prick" seemed completely opaque. Was it wheeled onto the stage as a sort of sex symbol? I tried to imagine it amongst all the laser beams and carbon dioxide clouds at a pop concert. But the key to its use was surely what it dispersed.

`Did you see ... was there any name on the cylinders?' I asked. He thought a while.

`Yes,' he said finally. `There was some name pressed into the wheel of the valve - "Geng" or "Gong", something like that. It was hardly visible.'

Mike looked up sharply.

`"Geng". Wasn't that the name of the company that bald guy worked for? You remember, the guy we followed into Soho thinking he was going to deliver a gladiator kit to the Brain Drain Killer?'

I remembered - would I ever forget!

`"Geng",' I said musingly. `We never followed up that lead. They're in South London.' Without a word Mike lifted down the "Manufacturing Master" again and began leafing through it.

`Ackles and Pollock must have made tests,' I said suddenly to Phil. `Did they see how it worked? I mean how it sprayed out the powder?'

`Yes, they thought it would spray out all over the workshops so they tried it outside in the car park. The powder was blown up in a plume twenty foot high above the end of the tube and then drifted away. The car owners down-wind were pissed off as it rained a few minutes later and the talc stuck to their cars.'

`Here it is,' said Mike. `Geng plc." 165 employees, Managing Director and proprietor Dr Hendley- Jones late of Microbiology Unit University College London, blah, blah ... Pharmaceutical products.'

`"Microbiology", that means genetic engineering, doesn't it?' asked Phil.

`Right,' said Mike, still holding the book open. `Geng" is an abbreviation of "Genetic Engineering".'

We sat looking at each other.

`So Slak are buying a device to disperse some pharmaceutical product - probably during one of their concerts, whenever they start giving them.'

`Wow!' said Mike. `I bet it's some sort of ... afro ...what's that stuff that makes people sexy?'

`Aphrodisiac,' supplied Phil. `To turn the audience on? But that can't be legal! Can it?'

Questions, questions. The data we had sort of hung together. The disperser had been ordered and paid for with money up front - usually a suspicious sign. Then the product that was to go into the disperser was probably manufactured by Geng plc. (or at least their name was on the sample containers so far delivered). And by a coincidence Geng was where the bald-headed man had worked. But what pharmaceutical product was to be dispersed? We would have to find out from Geng.

`I don't know,' I said, in answer to Phil's question. `I would have said not, but you can get away with lots of things once. We must find out what Geng are making, that's the key to the whole riddle.'

`A break-in,' said Mike with satisfaction. `Can I come this time?'

`God no,' I said. `This one must be done subtly.' I thought a moment.

`Do you have any more friends at Chelmsford University? You know, in the department of that doctor who analysed the Killer's genes and then blew himself up? Someone who has contacts with Geng. Could they find anything about this product Geng are making and delivering up North?'

Mike looked up in his address book. `Yes,' he said, `there's a Dr Peterson. I'll give him a call.'

*

Now we had no proof acceptable in any court of law that Jeremy=Killer=music writer for the Slak group. But the special music and the characteristic smell were enough for me - and Max had recognised the smell too. But we had no proof that I could present to the police in view of the way we had obtained it. We could only wait. The Slak group had to reappear somewhere.

And inevitably it did. In fact, our break-in only caused a delay of a week before the next "Slak-track" appeared and went to the top of the Hit Parade. Slak-5 it was called and only differed from the other four in the brutality of its beat and the strange wailing sound in the background.

And for the first time the Slak group appeared in public! Obviously a pre-view, it was at a large working-mans' club in Newcastle and they appeared suddenly on stage, after the interval at 10:30pm. Factually they played their five hits, one after the other, unsmilingly and in a rather low-key way, virtually ignoring the audience. Pretty Boy played lead guitar standing up in front of the group and there was also a bass

guitar and a keyboard. But the most unusual was the rhythm section, provided by two old-fashioned military-style drummers who stood erect at the rear of the group and played in synchronism. They, like the rest of the group were dressed in neat tight-fitting red cover-alls with white facings. The other five musicians could not be identified but were certainly not local men. There was apparently also an older man of about 45, with thinning blond hair and the erect carriage of ex-military. He was conjectured to be their business manager.

The audience, of mixed ages and sex, were expecting their own local group to reappear after the interval. The older members had booed the Slak group, when they appeared in their stead, but the younger members were delighted and had rushed onto the floor to do Mil-rock dances. This music, perhaps heard for the first time by the older members of the audience, had infuriated them and they had finally stormed the stage and wrecked the group's instruments. A local reporter was there with a camera and the photos of the near-riot had made the first editions of the papers, the TV news and probably the fortune of the reporter.

I looked carefully at the faces of all the musicians, mostly in undignified poses as they fled out through the back of the stage, but none of them even faintly resembled the Killer.

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`This is them!' said Mike, flourishing the "Sun" under my nose when I arrived at the office the next morning. I had seen the same photos in the "Telegraph" and had heard an interview of the young reporter on the car radio on the way in.

`We gotta do something! One of these guys is the Killer, and we are the only ones who know it. If he isn't grabbed he's gonna kill someone else!'

That was one, but only one reason why I wanted him too. The other was the darker one of bitter revenge for my humiliation. And I didn't just want the Killer to be put away for life (translation - 15 years maximum and released after 7 years for good behaviour and a favourable psychiatrist's report). I wanted him dead.

Chapter 49

It turned out that that was the first of several appearances of Slak around the country: Bristol, Brighton, Edinburgh, Liverpool, Birmingham. They were always unannounced and arrived towards the end of a regular advertised concert. At every pop-concert it was now possible to see a sizeable section of the younger members of the audience expectantly wearing the same tight-fitting red-purple uniform with white facings that the Slak musicians wore. They would listen and dance to the other groups in the usual way but there was always an undercurrent of hope that the next group to appear would be heralded by the characteristic drum-roll signalling the arrival of Slak. Then all the red-clad youngsters would stand up, stiffly silent. And as soon as the music began they would start their Mil-rock strutting. If Slak didn't appear there was a perceptible air of disappointment.

The Slak group, judging from what could be seen of their stage performances, had grown to nine - the one we called Pretty Boy was the tenth as lead guitar. The numbers of drummers had increased to six and the bass guitar had been replaced by a bass drum. Two boys and two girls would perform Mil-rock dances behind the group but in front of the drummers, in the same way as the dancers who used to sway and posture behind a "normal" rock group. There were also a number of tough young men who just stood immobile, arms folded, at the foot of the stage, looking out at the audience, as though they were police. In the popular Press they were called the "Redshirts". But there were never any disturbances at Slak performances.

For transport, the Slak "circus" travelled around in two large purple-red busses with darkened windows. They would arrive at the last moment at a concert, unpack quickly, perform, repack quickly and disappear. An enterprising reporter tried to follow them once but his car was immobilised - his tyres were torn to shreds by nails left in the road. Others found themselves involved in car accidents. Where the Slak group was actually based was a mystery and became part of their inscrutable image.

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The date for the delivery of the "dispenser" from Ackles and Pollock approached and was now only three days away. As the frequency of the Slak appearances increased, so did the hysterical enthusiasm of their young audiences.

And then two pieces of news. The first was that Slak were finally going to give their own concert and the second was that it was to be in the Albert Hall on Saturday, September the 3rd.!

Of course the Albert Hall was booked for months in advance but the London Philharmonic had apparently agreed to cancel one evening's engagement to allow Slak to perform. The rumour was that the Albert Hall administration had only permitted this because a large sum of money had been transferred into the "Musicians' Union" bank account.

In the meantime, Dr Peterson from Chelmsford University called Mike but only to tell him that he was unable to get any information at all from Geng. There was indeed a secret project on, a contract to produce some "genetic" material for the US Government. A "product to cure cancer". There was a security team continually on duty and the Director and Head of Research were permanently "not available".

Of course, life in the world and in particular that in London went on as normal. There were the usual scandals amongst TV personalities and the Royal Family. A prominent government minister was sacked for suspected "insider dealing". The quality of London tap water failed to meet EEC standards of purity and was blamed on the ageing Victorian pipe system. The Pound took another beating on the Stock Exchange. However, there were no more Brain Drain murders.

But amongst the youth, enthusiasm for Slak rose to a pitch equal to and then exceeding the Beatlemania of the sixties. Slak clubs (or "Slak-Socs") were appearing, where young people could play games, learn about health and nutrition and of course practise their energetic group dances. Outside the clubs they were to be seen everywhere in Mil-rock dress and the music was heard about one in five on the pop music hit-parades. The Brigade of Guards had recorded Slak-5. Pompously impressive it completely missed the emotion of the original - the bitter aggressive loneliness.

"Safe" was booming. We were selling abroad now, mostly to Europe and the States. We were importing equipment too from our American partners and I was very busy organizing sales trips, training application engineers.

But behind it all I was convinced something was brewing, that the Killer's plan was remorselessly moving forwards to its next stage. Everything pointed to the Slak concert as being a big event - something much more important than a rock-concert. The delivery of the A&P "dispenser" had been moved up to Friday the 2nd of September, to an address still unknown. Our surveillance of "Geng" showed that the tension was slackening there. Less lights were seen burning in the factory at night, security was being wound down, the workers said overtime was finishing. It was obvious the secret project, whatever it was, had come to an end. But the Director and Head of Research were still "not available".

There was almost no open publicity for the Slak concert and it was apparently very difficult to get tickets. They could only be purchased in person at the ticket

offices at the Albert Hall and they were only being sold to young people who presented themselves in Mil-rock uniform. There were angry scenes when older people who had queued for hours were turned away. The cost of the tickets was ridiculously cheap for a concert in the Albert Hall.

And then Mr Hawkins of A&P called me to say their disperser had been picked up by an unmarked van. The drivers, when questioned about their destination, knew only that they were going to London and would receive detailed delivery instructions on the way.

Thursday came and went. Tom's men reported delivery vans arriving at the Albert Hall and various pieces of equipment being transported in. The usual lasers, mounting brackets, loud-speakers and amplifiers but also a large crate which could be the disperser.

There were apparently lots of muscular serious-faced young men around and Tom's observers were not able to get closer. But then one of them saw the A&P logo on some packing paper from the crate and so we knew "the Prick" - the disperser - had arrived. So we were right - the customer *had* been Slak! And then in confirmation the two red Slak coaches arrived and parked outside the stage door.

I thought of those young people, children almost, all avidly buying tickets to the Albert Hall, where they would be alone for 2-3 hours with a strange rock group who had specially constructed - yes, I put the two words together - a "genetic material disperser". And the Killer was there somewhere - the whole enterprise was stamped with his ruthless emotionless persona. I felt it in my bones. But what could I do? I decided to call a meeting of Tom, Mike and Max the next day.

Chapter 50

For the record, we met on Saturday, the day of the concert, at 5:30pm at Tom's Agency. It turned out to be our last meeting. I remember I was unsure of myself, very nervous and in a bad temper. I was urgently required at "Safe" but I knew something was going to happen that evening.

I opened the meeting:

'I can't prove it, but I'm sure the Brain Drain Killer is somehow connected with this weird Slak group who have ordered some unknown "genetic material" and a squirter which they now have in the Albert Hall. Like the damned Pied Piper of Hamelin, Slak have attracted about five thousand youngsters and are going to spray them with this stuff tonight.'

I looked around at the other three. Tom was uncomfortable. He was the nearest to me professionally. Sure, he would like to capture the Killer, there was a big reward still out and it would be a tremendous boost for his Agency. But he also knew how difficult it would be to prove a crime was about to happen, and to convince the authorities to step in and prevent it. Especially a crime that had never been committed before.

The police would be in the same position. They were there to enforce the law - if there was no law it was a brave or reckless policeman who made one and moved against Civil Rights, Ethnic Rights ... I knew from bitter personal experience that you could nail a particularly vicious band of extortioners, but if you didn't do it according to the law, the law would disown you. The end never justified the means.

Max looked very fit. His school was booming and he was putting money aside. I looked with satisfaction at his rugged figure. But his face still had that faint shadow on it which was the result of his almost fatal encounter with the Killer. Max knew he was

not a whole man. Max was on my side - he would only recover his honour when the Killer was dead.

Mike was as bright as a new pin and had helped collect the evidence that connected the Killer to the Slak group. He had also experienced the Killer's vindictiveness when he was captured by the Mafia for a short time and had also seen the Killer in action at that Gun Fair. But he was an American citizen and the son of an American diplomat. He could not get mixed up with a hunt for a British criminal in England.

'What can we do?' I said finally. Max and Mike spoke simultaneously. I nodded at Mike.

'Break-in,' he said. 'Break-in and steal that genetic material. Get it analysed.' Yes, that would stop whatever was planned for this evening and at the same time we would perhaps find what Slak was up to. But we wouldn't be able to get it analysed today.

After a pause Max nodded. I knew that he was only agreeing because it was as good a reason as any to get onto the Slak group and find the Killer.

'Very well,' I said, mentally deciding that Max and myself would again do the break-in.

'It's not going to be as easy as it was last time,' warned Tom. 'They've got those Redshirts all around them now. And we've noticed one or two older men. They look real bruisers.'

'Where are the Slak group anyway?' asked Mike. 'Their busses are outside the Albert Hall but they're empty apart from a coupla guards.'

'The whole circus, including the group, is inside the Hall,' answered Tom. 'They're setting the stage for the performance tonight.'

'Tom,' I said. 'Tell me about this concert. What time does it start, for instance?'

'Well, that's one of the few things we know,' he answered, making a slight gesture of despair. He looked down at the sheet of paper on his desk. 'Doors open at 7pm and the concert starts at 7:30pm. They will play Slak-1 to -5 and we are going to hear Slak-6 for the first time. Live. The concert is scheduled to finish at 10pm.'

'10pm! That's early isn't it?' exclaimed Mike in surprise.

'It's all a part of their slightly prudish Victorian image,' replied Tom. '"Get the youngsters to bed early".'

We exchanged glances - this Boy Scout image for a rock-group was surely the oddest thing about Slak.

'OK,' I said. 'And now let's have a look at the inside of the Albert Hall.' Tom folded out a large seating plan.

'The Royal Albert Hall, built in 1871, holds 5080 people,' he began. 'The arena seats are removable and the main work by the Slak helpers has been that of moving them into the cellar. Here are the Slak coaches, parked outside the stage doors. The dressing rooms are off this corridor, under the stage.'

'So how are we gonna get in?' asked Max. 'The place is swarming with these Redshirts and there are a lot of cops standing around outside too.'

I had some ideas but I didn't want to reveal them yet.

'And what are you going to do when you get in?' asked Tom. He apparently thought I would get in somehow. It was a good question.

'Like I said - sabotage this "dispenser" thing - get hold of the genetic material,' said Mike.

'Screw the Prick!' said Max forcefully. Then realising what he had said, made an irritated gesture. 'You know what I mean. The key man here ...' He stabbed his finger down on the seating plan '... is the Killer. Get him and we can forget everything else.'

It was an idea which charmed by its simplicity, but which was the Killer? Tom spread out a row of glossies on his table top.

'Here is the Slak group as our cameras caught them. Most of them, including "Pretty Boy", only appeared once as they went from their coach into the Hall. The exception is this person. We looked again at the face and close-cropped hair of the older man. 'He's been in and out several times and we've found his name is Debry. He's French and is their business manager.'

I re-examined all the photos desperately. Not one of them looked even remotely like the Killer.

'He'll be there tonight,' said Max with certainty. 'Either he's there already or he'll arrive at the last moment.'

'OK,' I said. 'But grab him?' I hated to even hint this, but Max had tried to "grab him" once before in that underground garage and even with our help had barely escaped with his life. And since then the Killer had vastly improved his fighting ability. In that Roman arena at Arles I had seen him take on and kill two of the best the world had to offer. What chance did Max and I have now? But that was only part of the problem.

'Before you even start to try to overcome him, you've got to FIND him,' said Tom, waving his hand impatiently over the glossies.

'Find him?' said Max, contemptuously. 'That's the easiest part.' He put his hand up to his nose. 'I'll smell him.'

*

Yes. I'd forgotten that. But the main problem still remained. How to overpower him when we found him? Sure, I wasn't fettered like I was at Arles, nor was he surrounded by tough guards and we could probably brush aside the Redshirts who were just teenagers, but the Killer didn't need any guards now. He was unbeatable on his own.

I thought of hi-tech weaponry. Gas, poisons, night-sights, remote controlled bombs - we had none. Max's underworld contacts could probably rustle up some pistols or sawn-off shotguns, but the Killer had at least two pistols from his robberies in France. And knew how to use them - as well as Hank, who had been the US East Coast Champion, I reminded myself.

Could we trap him in a room? Lock him in his dressing room? Electrify his guitar if and when he appeared? My brain was becoming overloaded and spewing out garbage. Returning to earth, I reminded myself that the Killer we were looking for was Jeremy, a not very bright intellect who had become an incredibly good fighter. We would just have to bash on in and try to think of something on the spot.

And I also reminded myself that only our small group knew of the connection between the Killer and the Slak group and if anything happened to us ...

'Before you try to enter, it might be a good idea to record everything you know,' said Tom, echoing my thoughts. Like a man carefully disarming a new type of bomb describes over a field telephone everything he is doing. To help the man disarming the next one - in case the first man is not around to describe personally what mistake he made.

'OK,' I said. 'This is what we're going to do...'

Chapter 51

At 7pm on that fateful Saturday evening, my black Jaguar, driven by Mike, pulled up outside the entrance to the Royal Albert Hall. Those doors would not be opened

for another half hour, but already thousands of youths, more than half girls it seemed, were standing in quiet orderly lines, mostly wearing Mil-rock uniforms.

Max and I, soberly dressed, stepped out of the Jaguar and walked in step to the entrance door at the head of the line. The doors were already open but entry was blocked by a velvet covered chain. The head of the queue moved respectfully aside as we approached. But not the two beefy young "Redshirts" who appeared from inside the foyer as Max unhooked the chain.

'Ere,' said the biggest. 'We're not open until 7:30 and you'll have to take your place in the ...' He faltered to a stop as we just looked at him. The younger took a step forward aggressively but after a look at Max's impassive face and broad shoulders, stopped uncertainly.

'Detective Inspector Murdock,' I said, holding up my old warrant card. 'Your chief is expecting us.' There was a clink as Max turned round and refastened the chain behind us.

'You want to see Mr Bright?' asked the elder slyly.

'You know who we want to see, sonny,' I said shortly. The younger put a radio up to his ear and pressed a switch.

'Two policemen at the main entrance for the Captain,' he said, looking into the distance. The speaker crackled. 'Inspector Murdock, plain clothes.' His eyes shifted back to us. 'There's someone coming for you,' he said reluctantly.

Without waiting we walked past them into the foyer where several young people were behind the bar, laying out soft drinks. As we paused a moment I noticed a thick-set man to the right of the bar was speaking into a phone and staring at us. Ignoring him we crossed the foyer and stood at the main doors, looking down into the vast empty auditorium.

I had never seen inside the Albert Hall before and it was incredibly plush, with high red-velvet balconies rising on all sides and elaborate velvet curtained boxes. But in front of the stage was a large area with young people clearing away the last of the seats that had been mounted there. Odd mushroom-shaped objects hung down from the ornate roof - something to do with improving the sound quality, I supposed.

The semi-circular stage was at the far end, closed now with purple-red curtains. Someone was tapping a microphone, making a "poc-poc" sound that resonated around the auditorium. An athletic clean-cut young Indian in red Mil-rock uniform the same colour as the curtains came bounding up the centre aisle towards us.

'Inspector Murdock?' he asked. I nodded. 'Come with me please.' We followed him across the empty echoing auditorium, down to the stage where an equally eager young black respectfully conducted us to stairs leading down under the stage and into a long corridor.

Here the decor was markedly less plush than upstairs. Pipes hanging on struts from the ceiling, felt floor-covering, fluorescent lights. Boys and girls in red Mil-rock uniforms were passing us on urgent missions in both directions. Some posters advertising a long-past ballet were stuck with peeling scotch-tape to the wall and there was a smell as of an old gym, with grease paint overtones. We walked past several closed doors then stopped before one with a notice pinned to it saying "Admin.". Our guide tapped deferentially on it, showed us in and left.

We were in a small room that had been set up as a temporary office. Facing us was a desk with a briefcase open on it. By its side were several opened packing cases. Behind it stood the man I knew as Mr Debry.

Now I could see him closer. He was aged about forty-five, 5ft 9 tall, fair complexion and with a small neat moustache. Dressed in a tight-fitting double-breasted grey suit, he had an arrogant authoritative air and his pale blue eyes

seemed to be looking at something behind me - something far more interesting than me. I resisted the temptation to turn around to see what he was looking at.

`Mr Debry,' I began.

`Captain Debreu,' he corrected, with a slight French accent. The pompous fool. "Captain" was the very lowest rank a retired Army officer could retain when he returned to civilian life. And in the British Army it was a rank he would have reached when he was twenty-five.

`Very well, Captain Debreu. As the phone call stated, we are here pursuant of Section 23 of the Civil Disobedience Act of 1947.'

`Disobedience Act!' he said, his pale blue eyes angrily focussing down to me. `I received no phone call and there will be no Civil Disobedience here tonight. On the contrary ...' I held up my hand and looked across at Max.

`John was to make it, sir,' he said. `It must have slipped his memory on account of his wife's illness.' I clicked my tongue in annoyance and turned back to Debreu.

`I'm sorry you weren't warned, sir,' I said apologetically, `so perhaps I should explain that the provisions of the 1947 Act require the presence of a middle-rank police officer at any public gathering in excess of a thousand persons.'

Debreu looked puzzled and annoyed.

`There was no talk of that at our previous concerts,' he snapped,

`The Act only applies to Metropolitan London,' I improvised. He looked aside, tapping his hand on the desk.

`Very well. We always want to cooperate with the authorities. What is it you want?'

`Well, sir, first we would like to examine a device which we are reliably informed you wish to use during the performance tonight.'

Debreu looked surprised. `You must mean the ..? but how did you know ...?' He looked strangely apprehensive, then said: `It's quite harmless, it's just a background effect, a different way of distributing carbon dioxide fog.'

`We'd like to see it, sir,' said Max.

Debreu hesitated, then glanced quickly down at his watch. `Very well, come with me.' We followed him out of his office, along the corridor, past several dressing rooms, until we came to a big steel door set in the wall. A freight elevator. He pushed the CALL button.

`The disperser is now hung above the stage and will be lowered during the performance,' he explained curtly.

The elevator arrived with a muted crash and the door slid open. We climbed in and I looked around. Empty apart from an old newspaper in one corner and a crushed beer can. I guessed the elevator was mainly used to carry up workmen so they could work on the lighting and scenery hoists above the stage. It was certainly big enough to carry the disperser. Debreu thumbed the "UP" button and we stood impassively during the creaky thirty second journey upwards.

The elevator stopped with a thump and the door slid open. We stepped out onto an open-work metal platform surrounded by wooden rails and suspended above and running the length of the stage. The stage, far below, was empty and dimly illuminated, the back filled with amplifiers in black cases, cables linking them to loud speakers and microphones on stands. It was warm and the air smelled of dust. Debreu gave a start beside me.

`We are fifty feet above the stage and there you can see the fog disperser,' he said nervously, looking along the platform. `It is suspended on the rope going over pulleys up there and will be lowered onto the stage when required. And now ...' He put his arm out as though to usher us back into the elevator.

At the far end of the platform there was a figure working on the disperser, which been pulled to one side and tied to the platform rail by a piece of rope. The workman was sitting astride it, his back towards us, and was doing something to a flexible pipe. We heard his tools clinking on the metal.

`So this is it,' I said, pushing Debreu's arm aside and walking over to the disperser. Debreu made a sudden movement as though to prevent me, then relaxed. The disperser looked unmistakably phallic.

`Yes,' said Debreu, `you can see where the carbon-dioxide cylinders are to be fitted.'

`It's a bit suggestive, isn't it, sir?' said Max, mock dubiously.

`It's quite harmless,' snapped Debreu. `And now we must leave to allow the stage-hands to prepare for the performance,' he said, ushering us away.

I took a last look round, puzzled. Debreu was mighty anxious to get us back into the elevator. As far I could see, once the carbon-dioxide cylinders were fitted to the disperser, no one else need come up here. Furthermore, everything seemed in place on the stage below. And then Max and I simultaneously smelt it. Max flinched and had a knife out instantly.

`You there,' I said to the workman. `Let me see you.'

`Debreu, I already told you no one was to come up here.' The quiet voice came from the workman. Spoken in a slight Cockney accent the words had the effect on Debreu as of a judge pronouncing a death sentence.

`I thought you would be finished and anyway they are police officers, sir - I could not prevent them.' Debreu was breathing hard and sweating. Holding a small hammer the figure turned round and in the faint light we saw the handsome smiling face of Slak.

`I warned you,' he said, `you should have known they are impostors,' continued the quiet voice.' The hot feral smell was very strong now.

Debreu moved convulsively by my side but it was too late. Slak raised the hammer he was holding and threw it with a quick flick of the wrist. I felt the wind of it as it whirred viciously past my head and struck Debreu on the forehead with a sickening thud. He fell back without a sound and Slak minutely changed his position, moving his legs under him. He was going to jump onto the platform!

`Cut!' I shouted urgently to Max, pointing to the rope holding the disperser to the platform. Max leapt forwards and with a quick slash severed it. The disperser swung away and down. The figure on it made a spasmodic movement to spring onto the platform but his thrust only pushed the disperser more rapidly away and he barely succeeded in retaining his balance. The disperser swung away and down and hung there, about fifteen foot distant, oscillating gently.

Shuddering and sweating with the reaction of what we had so impulsively done, I looked down at him as one regards a poisonous agile reptile, safely behind glass in a zoo. Max's breath was rasping beside me and the wooden rail was rough under my clenched fingers. I could hardly believe it, it was an amazing stroke of luck - we had him! After so much time, effort and suffering we had found and actually captured the Brain Drain Killer! He was too far away from the platform to jump on to it, the stage was fifty feet below and the rope pulleys were hidden in the galleys far above us. We had him!

Unmoving he sat astride the slightly swinging disperser, looking up at us. The friendly grimace suddenly changed to a conspiratorial grin, and then just as quickly to a lop-sided smile.

`Somehow you have changed,' I said, looking down at him and choking with disgust, `but you are the Brain-Brain Killer.' My voice changed as I intoned the ritual

formula: 'I arrest you for the murder of Natwah Singh and many others, whose names will be determined at your trial. I warn you that anything you say will be taken down and may be used in evidence against you.'

'Can that really be him?' asked Max softly, leaning on the banister and looking down at our captive.

'The music and the smell - it must be him. And no, I don't know how he's changed his appearance. We'll let the forensic scientists sort it out.'

'He would have sprayed a drug over children,' said Max, barely controlling his anger and loathing.

For an instant the foolish grin disappeared and his features hardened into something different, almost defensive.

'It is not a drug - it is me,' said the quiet voice contemptuously. 'It is my seed.' Immediately the words had been uttered I sensed he regretted them.

My God - so that was it! The secret was out!

Again the expressions appeared and disappeared on his handsome face like stick-ons. They were totally at odds with his words and appeared not under his control.

'And the children? What would have happened to them?' The best time to interrogate a prisoner is immediately after his capture.

'The females will become mothers.' An engaging grin followed by a horrible whimsical smile.

'You would have infected young children.'

'For you it is infection, for me it is Procreation. My world is dead - I have fought for and won the Right to Procreate on this planet. I have proved I am the dominant life-form. You yourself was my Witness. Evolution now gives me the Right to Procreate.' An arrogant stare then sudden blankness followed by an impish grin.

Jesus! Had I really been deliberately spared at Arles just so I could spread the news of his victory? My mind slid away from that one.

I looked at him - he didn't show any of the resignation expected of a prisoner. My first duty was to let them know outside what had happened. I pulled out my phone and keyed in Tom's number, but all I heard was hissing. Damn! The Hall must screen radio waves.

'Jeez, just look at his face,' breathed Max.

Brain Drain Killer/Jeremy/Slak, was looking around with quick darting movements like an insect. A friendly smile followed by a dimpled rueful grin chased themselves alternately across his countenance. I was about to ask Max to take the elevator down and let Tom know what we had done when the Killer suddenly leapt upwards, grasping the rope bearing the disperser. With simian agility, and supported only by his fingertips, he inched his way rapidly along to the pulley. After a quick glance down he released his fingers and dropped through the air for ten feet before grabbing the vertical rope hanging down to the stage. We watched in frozen horror as he slid down the rope at palm-burning speed, landed lightly and spider-like ran swiftly for the back of the stage.

With the same thought in our minds Max and I turned and raced along the platform to the elevator, our feet clanging on the metal. As we approached, the CALL light came on and the door started to close! Max leapt the last few feet and in fact just managed to reach the door, but it thumped closed as he touched it. Slak had called the elevator from below!

'Bugger it! Bugger it!' snarled Max, kicking the elevator door in frustration. I held my hand out and put my ear to the door. Was Slak going to come up here for us? But there was only silence. He obviously had no time for us now: he had probably just

blocked the mechanism somehow. He had neatly turned the tables and we were now the prisoners!

Chapter 52

We looked around, trying to find another way down but there was none. We ran from one end of the platform to the other, but we were well and truly trapped. The disperser swung gently and mockingly, well out of reach. We were prisoners! And in a short time the concert would begin. We would have a grandstand view of Slak fitting the cylinder containing the spores to the disperser and then opening the valve!

I tried my telephone again, but it was no use. The Victorians had built the Albert Hall well, with a cast-iron frame and lead-covered roof. In here we were totally screened. If we wanted to make the shocking news about Slak known outside, we would have to take it out personally.

Max bent over the recumbent form of Captain Debreu and put his hand to the neck. After a moment he looked up at me and shook his head. We straightened the body on the platform and I automatically picked up the hammer by its head and carefully laid it besides him, ready for finger-printing. Another murder, deliberate and unnecessary, this time before two witnesses.

And now below us the noise level suddenly increased. Excited cries and the rush of many young feet. The door to the auditorium had been opened and the audience was entering, the first to arrive dashing for the coveted places near the stage. The noise built up and then there was a blare of sound below us. The musicians had arrived on stage and were tuning their instruments, tapping on their drums and tightening them.

I looked around desperately - we must get out of here and let the police know what was going on. Slak wouldn't be able to hide from them now and a few medical and psychological tests would immediately reveal him to be an Alien and the Brain Drain Killer.

But once he had spread his spores he probably wouldn't care!

I suddenly realised that Slak could not let us live now - Max had unwittingly provoked him and he had stupidly and indiscreetly defended himself. His whole plan required secrecy. His spores must be allowed time to germinate in the young female bodies. If we were permitted to let the medical authorities know what had been done to the children, the spores could be removed or at least the pregnancies terminated. And so we must be killed to preserve the secret!

Below us the musicians were suddenly still and the drummers, looking sideways at each other, shuffled into a rigid line at the back of the stage.

And then a crackling hiss as all the flood-lamps hung below us came on.

With a roar of applause the curtains swished back and in a moment of relative quiet I heard a voice booming out over the auditorium, announcing the first Slak concert and how a special surprise had been prepared for the first performance of "Slak-6", which was going to be the Grande Finale. To a roll of drums the group went into their first number, without Slak.

God it was hot up here, above the floods! The heat from the lamps rose up in a furnace-hot blast. And not only the heat. There was a lot of reflected back-light and the whole platform and the roof above us was bathed in a white glare. We looked around urgently but the platform was fixed to the roof of the building by cast-iron girders. These could be easily climbed, but what then? The part of the roof above the stage was quite featureless - there was no way down. The platform we were on must

have once been connected to the stage by a staircase, when the Hall had first been built more than a hundred years ago. This had been replaced by the freight elevator.

Max was looking around this elevator. It was of ancient construction and had been built into the rear wall of the stage. He motioned to me.

'If we could get the door open we could perhaps climb down the well,' he shouted into my ear.

We looked closely at the door, it was firmly shut but there was a hole in the frame to one side with a big screw-head recessed in it. There should be a way of opening the door for maintenance and that must be it. But how to turn it? Max went back up the platform to the tool-box that Slak had left. Eagerly we opened it but although there was a long screw-driver, it was too small to turn the screw we wanted. I rummaged around impatiently looking for something to fit and for a moment thought a big file would do the job but unfortunately it was too thick to fit in the slot of the screw-head.

Max pulled out a coin but although it would have fitted the slot it was too wide to reach down to the screw-head. Damn. Everything we had was just wrong. Max kicked the elevator door in frustration. I held the file up and gestured to Max.

'Suppose we filed your coin into a flat tongue - it would then reach in,' I shouted into his ear, over the din from below. But how to hold the coin while he filed it? We looked in the toolbox but it was too much to expect to find a vice. The nearest was an adjustable wrench. I put it on the coin, tightened it as much as possible and rested the whole thing on the wooden rail.

Max started to file and it seemed to work, the hardened cupro-nickel disappearing in a bright powder. But after about ten minutes filing the vibration must have loosened the jaws of the wrench as the file whisked out the coin which fell down to the stage far below. No one noticed it.

There was a short vitriolic pause and Max dug another coin out of his pocket. This time I made Max stop every minute so I could re-tighten the wrench, but the job had become more difficult as in the meantime the file had slid onto my finger, cutting it, and the whole wrench was slippery with my blood. I was also soaked in sweat from the heat of the lamps and deafened by the clangour from below. But finally we were ready for the first try.

Carefully holding the filed coin Max moved over to the elevator again.

Below us the first three numbers had finished. In the sudden silence there was a booming voice announcing something and onto the stage strode Slak. From above I could only see the top of his head and red-covered shoulders. I realised that this must be the first time most of them had ever seen him in the flesh and the effect was amazing. There was a profound gasp from the audience and then a dead silence, broken by a deep moan and some choking sobs. Slak raised his right hand straight up into the air and the audience squealed and then chanted "Mil-mil-mil-rock!" over and over again. He lowered his hand and with a roll of drums the group went into "Slak-4".

Max pushed the filed coin into the hole but it was still too big. Shit. Urgently but carefully back to the filing.

The group below continued playing, now with the Killer up front, and we could hear the enthusiastic audience stamping in unison and chanting "Mil-Mil-Mil-rock!" as they performed their drill-like dance routines. They were having a great time with Slak-4 when I saw the rope to the dispenser move and knew someone was checking that the line was free, ready for its descent during "Slak-6" - the final piece.

A few minutes more filing, this time carefully rubbing the coin against the file, and at last it entered the hole. Holding the coin in the wrench again I turned it. Ah! The

screw turned to the left with a "click" and the door fell loosely open. Max pushed it aside and we were able to look down into the dark oily-smelling elevator shaft. The reflected glare from the floodlights showed a row of metal loop hand-holds on the shaft wall leading down-wards, and far below us the top of the elevator.

At that moment there was a sudden pause in the throbbing music from below. How many was that? Five - that was the end of "Slak-4". In the ringing silence Max's voice sounded clear but distant in my numbed ears.

'That's our way,' he said, putting one foot on the first rung. I hesitated, only partly from weariness. He looked up at me. 'What's keeping you?'

I put my head close to his ear.

'I'm just getting our priorities in order,' I answered. The music would start up again in a minute and it was important to decide what we were trying to do. 'We want to stop him spraying the kids, but if we can't, then we must get the news out so they can be treated. We might not have much time to think when we get down there.'

'You think he's waiting for us?' he asked.

'Slak is on stage now,' I said, pointing down, 'but he must have someone guarding the elevator below. He's got to silence us. He wants to do it himself to make absolutely sure - but anyone else will do.' Max paused and looked considerably down the shaft.

'There's usually an inspection door in the roof of an elevator,' he said. He put the screw-driver from the tool-box in his pocket and started to climb down the shaft, hand over hand. I followed and soon we were at the bottom of the shaft, looking at the top of the elevator. At that moment the music started up again, its sound echoing hollowly down the elevator shaft. That was "Slak-5". We had about fifteen minutes before the last piece, where Slak turned on the disperser!

There was enough reflected light to see there was indeed an inspection hatch in the top of the elevator - about a yard square and big enough for a man. It was closed but there was a crack of light around it.

'I've gotta see if anyone's in it waiting for us,' he whispered. 'But if I step on it he'll hear me.' Or feel the elevator move, I added to myself. 'Hold my arm,' he added, stretching it out to me. I crept down a few steps, Max grasped my hand and leant out.

I had one hand on a hand-hold, which I suddenly realised was very thin, and the other holding Max's left hand. He was heavy and the thin loop cut into my hand.

'Jesus, hurry up!' I whispered urgently. Max moved slightly, turned, shortened his arm and with a mighty effort I pulled him up the rest of the way. I felt like I had been on the rack, with my arms almost pulled out of their sockets. I hoped we would not have to do that again.

'There's no one in the elevator but the door's open,' he said. 'That's all I can see.'

I thought back and seemed to remember that there was a storage room or something on the other side of the corridor, just opposite the elevator. It would be the ideal place for watchers to wait in. Anyone climbing down into the illuminated elevator from the inspection hatch would be immediately visible. And then what would they do? The watchers would be armed - knives at least, silenced guns more likely. Yes, it would have to be a set-up like that - Slak would never have left to perform on the stage if he thought we could possibly escape. Our only chance to save those children would be if we could surprise the watchers. If we could only "unblock" the elevator somehow ... Rubbing the palm of my hand and sucking my cut finger, I explained my idea to Max. He looked at me in the gloom.

'We'll have to move like the hammers of hell,' he commented, 'and how would we unblock ..? There's no one in the elevator, lemme have another shufti.' This time

he carefully stepped on the elevator and kneeling down applied his eye to the crack again, moving to follow it all round the inspection door. Finally he cautiously climbed back onto the rungs.

`There's a lever-switch mounted near the "UP - DOWN" buttons...'

`That's it!' I said, remembering. `Emergency stop". That's how the elevator has been immobilised. Which way is it?'

`Pointing up.' Good. That must be the "OFF" position. Now if we could only push it down with something.

`I could use a piece of that rail around the platform,' said Max, making to climb up the shaft.

`Great. And while you're up there, press on the CALL button,' I said. He nodded and climbed back up the shaft.

He reappeared about three minutes later, carrying a six-foot long wooden pole which he had resourcefully jammed into his shirt front so he could climb down with both hands. He hoisted it out and handed it to me.

`Did you remember to press the CALL button?' I whispered anxiously. He grinned, his teeth white in the gloom, and tapped me on the shoulder as though comforting a nervous old lady.

We now cautiously stepped onto the elevator roof and Max knelt down again. I passed him the screw-driver and he gently prised the hatch up about half an inch. No reaction from below. We exchanged glances - this was it.

`Do like me,' he said and started to take deep rhythmic breaths, his chest swelling under his shirt. He probably had some fancy Japanese "martial arts" name for it, but I called it hyperventilation. I imitated him. After two minutes he pulled the hatch up and back and I handed him the section of rail and steadied it as he smoothly but rapidly lowered it, pushing the switch "ON".

`Up!' he said and I whisked it out of sight as Max lowered the hatch. If my calculations were right, the observers would suddenly see the elevator door begin to close in front of them.

This was confirmed when we heard a shout from below. There was a whine from the motors at the top of the shaft and the elevator began to ascend creakily, obeying the CALL from above. Now time was of the essence!

Max slammed the hatch fully open and climbed down, swinging for an instant from his hands. Almost instantly the elevator ground to a stop, bouncing slightly up and down. Max had toed the emergency stop switch up to "OFF" again. I was about to follow him when in an afterthought I pushed the rail down before me.

`Yes!' said Max grasping it in his big hands as I landed beside him. The elevator could not have risen more than three or four feet before he had stopped it again. But hopefully the watchers below would think we had somehow manipulated the switching circuitry and the elevator was still rising up to the platform to collect us.

But this was a critical point. How sophisticated was the elevator control mechanism? I pressed the "DOWN" button and Max pushed the big emergency stop lever down again to "ON". Would the simple brain of the elevator carry out its last order and carry us right up to the top or would it obey my over-ride command? There was a pause and some clucking below as the relays mulled over this unheard of situation. I kept my thumb firmly on the "DOWN" button. There was a final "click" and with a sigh of relief we felt the floor sinking beneath our feet!

And now the dangerous part! Max motioned me to stand to one side of the door and he, grasping the section of rail, stood at the other.

'Shout when we go out,' said Max, taking in a last deep breath. With luck the watchers would be surprised and off balance to see the elevator door reopen, with us in it, only ten seconds after it had closed.

The elevator stopped with a thud and its door started to grind open. I put both hands to it and pulled. It slid back rapidly but then jammed half open. Shit! But there was enough room for Max to leap out with an shrill ear-piercing "Kai!" and ram the end of the rail in the stomach of one of the three open-mouthed figures who were waiting for us. And they weren't Redshirts! They were thick-set toughs who looked like the type of men who had served as guards at Arles! I dodged out of the door too and screaming at the top of my voice viciously kicked the knee of another – some slight revenge for Arles. He collapsed, but behind him was number three who had a pistol by his side! Max swung his rail like a quarter-staff at number three who leapt back just in time. On the back-hand Max cracked my opponent on the side of the head who staggered and fell against number one. But number three was recovering from his surprise and was raising his pistol. And it had a bulbous silencer on the muzzle!

Max threw his rail like a spear at the gunman, striking his forearm. The pistol coughed and I leapt as I felt as though my side had been touched with a red-hot iron. But I could still run. Number three was jerking around, trying for a shot and cursing at numbers one and two who were staggering in front of him and blocking his aim.

There was no way we could get past number three now so we would have to go left. We thumped down the empty corridor, curving slightly round to the left. We had wanted to go right, leading to the auditorium, but number three with his pistol was blocking the way. There was another cough behind us, the howl of a ricochet, and chips flew from the wall above Max's head. Down some steps and we were in a big cellar packed with folded seats. I looked round wildly. There must be another exit where the chairs were carried down. Yes! Straight ahead I could see a ramp leading upwards to a wide door – but behind and around the corner I could hear shouts and pounding feet. They would be here before we could get through that door!

With the same idea in our minds Max and I turned aside and started tugging at the columns of high stacked chairs. They crashed and clattered down on the concrete floor and we leapt back just in time to avoid being crushed. For an instant they were more dangerous than the pursuing gunman. A quick tug at another row and in the spectacular crash we turned and fled up the narrow passage to the door. Behind us there were frustrated shouts and the echoing bang of a pistol. Number three must have unscrewed his silencer so he could shoot more accurately.

Up the ramp, we pushed the doors open and found ourselves in the middle of the auditorium and about half way to the stage - a glaring bright rectangle in front of us. Absolute quiet. Brilliantly illuminated, Slak and all the musicians were standing looking upwards, and before us rank on rank of young people watched spellbound, panting after their dancing but now in a sort of petrified hysteria.

Chapter 53

Everything was still - even the spotlights had stopped circling. There was a slight tremor to the curtain on the right - the disperser was about to be lowered!

Behind us the double doors suddenly opened with a muffled thump and numbers two and three appeared. They saw us immediately. But apparently no one else noticed them apart from us: the enormous audience's attention was entirely riveted to the brightly illuminated stage. Number three put his pistol away and number two was

talking into a phone, looking towards the back of the auditorium. I saw one of a group of men standing by the entrance raise his hand in acknowledgement. And they weren't Redshirts; they were more toughs!

Number two and three started to make their way directly towards us; the others were moving around the rear row of seats, blocking off the exits.

If we waited here for them it would soon be over. We had wanted to make for the stage to stop Slak, now we had to make for the stage as it was the only safe direction to take. By some trick of air currents I caught a faint whiff of Slak's body-odour. I looked at Max's set face in the reflected glow from the stage and a slight flicker passed over it.

Could we force our way through the massed lines of the audience? In their impassive ranks they looked like nothing so much as one of those old film clips of a Nazi Nürnberg Rally. And what would we do at the stage when we arrived? Would we be able to stop Slak opening the valve on the cylinder? There were at least twenty Redshirts standing around it. Teenagers, but enough to stop us. At the moment they too were looking at the stage but when the final dance began they would probably turn and face the audience as usual. The "Slak-6" dance when the disperser spewed out its spores.

I put my hand to my side, it was stinging, my clothing was wet with blood and I began to have a desperate sinking feeling of hopelessness. Two against so many, and one of them the most efficiently brutal fighting machine the world had seen. All Slak had to do was turn a valve and in five minutes about three thousand young girls would be infected. And no one here knew what was going to happen except Max and myself! And we wouldn't live to pass on the knowledge. All the pregnancies would come to term, however long that took, and the world would be confronted with an invasion of three thousand fighting machines who would then secretly produce their own spores. Humanity as we knew it would be gradually displaced in the same way Cro-Magnon Man had displaced Neanderthal Man.

Slak now had the huge audience in the palm of his hand, absolutely silent, tense and expectant. Everywhere I looked I saw wide staring eyes, the girls with slightly open mouths and swollen lips.

Well, not completely silent. There was some sort of disturbance over there, down to the right not far from the stage. But then even that subsided.

We'd got to get down to the stage and stop the cylinder being opened! The best way was to go around, through the militarily straight rows of the audience as far as possible and then strike for the stage. I glanced over my shoulder at our pursuers. The two who had followed us from the elevator were making directly for us: the others were now in position, blocking off all the exits. They wouldn't dare use their guns, silenced or not in this crowd, but two quick knife-thrusts would be just as effective.

I kept behind Max as he easily moved between the silent standing figures, who without taking their eyes from the stage unheedingly allowed us to pass behind them. We were now a lot nearer the stage and I looked at Max. He could no longer smell the Killer but one eye-lid was trembling. What would he do? Fight or flee? I clapped him encouragingly on the back.

'You've just got to distract him long enough for me to get to that cylinder,' I whispered. He nodded and gulped, the muscles in his throat moving.

We started thrusting our way between the crowd, now making directly for the stage. To start with it was not too difficult, the youngsters flaccidly allowing themselves to be pushed aside, but as we approached the crowd got thicker and thicker and we had to push more and more vigorously.

There was some announcement from the stage and with a loud drum-roll the music started again and the audience began to jerk in unison. This was it, the finale - Slak-6!

The drummers' arms were going up and down in precise rhythm and the thunder of their drums beat down on us. Slak, in front of the line of drums was coned by a spotlight, his face rapt. Guitar diagonally across his chest, his knees were rising and falling in time to the march music, like a guardsman marking time. More spotlights were circling over the packed audience as arms linked they made two steps to the right, stamp, stamp, two steps to the left, stamp, stamp. We were trapped in the moving mass, buffeted on all sides by the totally absorbed dancers.

There was some disturbance off to the right again and I rammed my way between the lines aiming in that direction to see if I could use it to penetrate better. Max bombed straight on and disappeared. As I approached, I could see the slight disturbance was for some reason developing into a near riot with arms waving and two boys struggling on the floor.

It all surrounded one small figure who apparently didn't want to link arms and was violently resisting. It was a small female figure that was causing the brawl. Unlike most of the others she was wearing jeans and a white shirt and her mouth was open, but any sounds she was making were drowned by the thunder of the drums beating down from the stage. She was waving her arms and her hair was standing out as though electrified. The light from the stage glinted red off her hair and I suddenly recognised her. It was Rosemunde! Rosemunde! What the hell was she doing here?!

I was bigger and stronger than the children and teenagers, but it was still an effort to thrust my way towards her. As I approached I saw that those around her had lost their trance-like look and were pushing at her angrily. I finally forced myself up to her and bending down wrapped my arms around her jerking figure, feeling as though I had picked up a small savage animal. She wriggled and fought against my constraining arms, kicking and spitting like a wildcat.

'Rosemunde!' I shouted into the little fury's ear. 'Rosemunde, it's me, Jim!' She stiffened, her head swung round and her wild amber eyes focussed on me. She stared at me and then suddenly her body lost its rigidity. On an inspiration I tapped my shoulders and leaned forwards. She understood instantly and scrambled up onto them. No one resisted me carrying her off -there were in fact several gestures of "take her and good riddance".

I stood up, feeling my side ache and almost immediately her thighs pressed against my ears. She was shouting something and leaning forwards pointing. Over the heads of the dancers she had seen her father and was urging me onwards to help him. I paused a moment. Jesus - what should I do? I imagined that if Max knew his daughter was here he would just want her out of the Hall as quickly as possible. But another quick glance showed number three was only ten yards away and making directly for me. The other must have gone after Max. Nothing had changed, I still had to get to the stage. Through the deafening music I could see the disperser slowly descending, the lighting making it look obscenely realistic - an erect penis with the two wheels suggesting testicles. I wondered how many of the youngsters knew what it meant.

And anyway Max was committed now - how could I help him? He had arrived in a storm of confusion at the foot of the stage and was engaged in a battle with the Redshirts. Top-heavy with Rosamunde on my shoulders and beginning to feel weak from the loss of blood from my side, I waded through the crowd aiming directly at the front of the stage but finally ground to a halt. I could feel Rosemunde's excited movements on my shoulders but I couldn't get through the tightly jammed dancers.

The side of the stage was nearer, to my right. Perhaps if I got on it I could make a distraction so Max could climb onto it too. Then with both of us on the stage, one of us could perhaps get to the cylinder.

I gratefully had the hard edge of the stage under my hands, then felt suddenly lighter as Rosemunde eagerly climbed off onto it and I wearily hoisted myself up after her. I was hidden from the Slak musicians by a rack of speakers but the noise here was deafening, stunning, and I began to feel light-headed and disorientated. The throbbing martial beat of the drums was producing a visceral vibration, a resonance that was making my head feel as though it would implode.

I must get away from the noise or go mad! I crawled forwards between racks of equipment and over cables, then dizzily stood up, finding myself at the rear of the stage, behind the musicians. Behind the speakers it was slightly less noisy. In the intense glare of the foot-lights I could see that the disperser had reached the stage and was now standing on its four wheels. The rope had been cast off and Slak had slung his guitar, still on its strap, around his body so the neck stuck out down under his right arm. There was a small cylinder fixed to the back of the disperser. About 2ft long and 4 inches diameter - the same dimensions of the test cylinder Phil had seen! That must be the spore container! It was now apparent that when he was above the stage Slak had not had time to connect it to the disperser - the flexible tube was hanging loose - but it could not take but a moment to connect. And then the valve on the cylinder would be opened and the spores would be blown out over the auditorium, over the thousands of receptive young females!

Beyond Slak I could see Max, and he was not winning. Four or five Redshirts were reeling around holding their heads but about seven husky young men now had his body in the air and lining up to carry his violently struggling body out of the Hall.

Slak had turned to the disperser and his hands were trembling as he twisted the end of the flexible tube over the nozzle at the end of the cylinder. There was a sheen of sweat on his forehead as he worked. But now it was fixed. He swung his guitar back to the normal position, looked back over his shoulder at his drummers and gave them a sign.

And then, with a dramatic gesture, he held his right arm straight up and the band stopped playing. Around me there was a sudden ringing silence, through which I could now hear the stamping feet of the audience, who surprised were still dancing and chanting. Immobile, hand on the valve, ignoring the fracas at his feet, Slak faced the audience and waited as gradually the dancers faltered to a stop. A complete expectant silence descended over the whole of the vast Hall and I could hear a deep humming coming from the body of the disperser. The blower had been switched on ready!

This was it - the culmination of his life! His moment of Procreation, of copulation. How Slak had come into existence I did not know, but human he was not. The human drummers, drumsticks raised in a level line, with no idea of what they were helping him to do, waited for his signal to continue. And at that moment I realised I had under my hand a lever of power!

Just in front of me on the top of an amplifier was the remote microphone that had been used by the announcer. I seized it and pressed the hand-switch. There was immediately a deafening howl. God, I was too close to the loudspeakers! Clutching my aching side with one hand I stepped away and behind the hanging curtain to the left of the stage. Hidden there I tapped the wire mesh and heard a series of crashes echoing back one after the other from the auditorium. I raised the micro-phone to my lips.

`Slak,' I said, my voice booming out, so loud I was startled. `Slak. You have fought and defeated many of our good fighters and now you think you have the right to sow this fertile planet with your seed.'

There was a muttering from the stage and someone shouted: `Switch that fucking thing off!'

Through a gap in the curtains I could see that Slak had frozen, one hand on the valve, the other on the neck of his guitar.

`But Slak has not won by fair means,' I continued, looking at his immobile figure. I had his complete attention.

`No. Slak won by cheating. Slak won by copying the abilities of our best fighters, copying and remembering them, until no normal fighter could beat him. But there is a fair fighter in front of Slak now - and Slak is afraid to fight him. Look how Slak the coward has ordered his bully-boys to carry him away.'

Slak now looked down at the struggling group at the foot of the stage, seeing it probably for the first time. At this point the curtain hiding me was pulled away, the microphone was wrenched from my hands and I was knocked to the ground by number two and three who must have followed me onto the stage. They brought back their boots to kick me insensible but there was a sudden crashing chord from Slak's guitar and he held his right arm out horizontally. My assailants froze and from my recumbent position I saw Max had been released and his rugged figure was climbing up onto the stage.

He had a cut on his arm and one shirt-sleeve was hanging loose, but otherwise appeared uninjured. He tore it off impatiently then rose to his feet and stood erect on the stage in front of Slak, looking him in the eyes from about three feet. I could see him shaking and he did not attack Slak. His lips trembled and his hands fluttered as he breathed in Slak's powerful feral body odour, the odour which he associated with shame, defeat and degradation. Fight or flee, the classical dilemma, what would he do?

Only he and I knew what the Killer was about to do. But was that sufficient motive for Max to give his life to stop him? He could easily rationalise that after the concert someone would realise what had happened to the children and would examine them. Or that I, whose voice he had heard and had therefore apparently escaped, would tell the authorities.

Never have I admired a man more as I saw him clasp his hands firmly to his side to still their twitching, take a step backwards and stiffly bow in the formal Karate challenge to combat.

Slak looked at him silently, his face for once immobile, and then obviously remembering my words accusing him of cowardice, pulled his guitar strap over his head and propped the guitar against the disperser, his eyes never leaving Max's face.

In spite of my challenging words and Max's stiff aggressive stance, the atmosphere in the Hall and on the stage was still relaxed. Max and I were the only two people in the whole Hall who knew that Slak, the pop musician who was standing up there, was actually the Brain Drain Killer of last year. There was an interested buzz and some cheers from the massed audience as Slak, now with a fixed smile on his face, imitated the bow and brought his hands up as Max had.

But Max, trembling and sweating, was still not attacking.

`Oh God, Max, attack! attack!', I said to myself despairingly. I heard one of my assailants make some contemptuous remark and cautiously moved my feet, hoping I could surprise them by suddenly rising and making a rush over to the disperser. But the other assailant removed his eyes from the stage only long enough to fetch me an

agonising kick on the shin and I collapsed, my head spinning with the pain. Through a red haze I could see that the movement had attracted Max's attention and must have reminded him what he was there for. It had stiffened his resolve and he began to make ritualistic gestures of attack.

They circled around, Slak imitating Max, but always keeping himself in front of the disperser. After the first cautious circle the band, who must have thought this was an unadvertised publicity stunt, began to improvise some accompanying music. One grinning drummer started tapping, and a keyboard player made a few chords in time with the sliding feet of the fighters.

Max more seriously was now making some formal feint attacks against Slak, trying to distract him, hoping I could get to the disperser, but while one part of my brain could follow all this, the other part was hampered and clogged so everything seemed to be moving with nightmare slowness. I was weak with loss of blood.

I saw Max deliver a quick slash, followed by two kicks. One kick landed on Slak's knee - Slak didn't seem to be reacting as quickly as he had at Arles, and he looked slightly confused. Perhaps because all his combats so far had been with weapons of one sort or another. Unarmed combat was new to him. But he was learning, learning with his customary rapidity.

Now he was not merely defending, but was counter-attacking, unskilfully but rapidly, feet sliding on the wooden boards of the stage. The audience was excited and restive, not knowing what was going on. There were isolated shouts and boos. The sounds from the musicians, who were closer and could now see that this was a serious fight, had become more and more uncertain and finally tapered off to nothing.

Max was fighting automatically with his usual skill, but was becoming visibly slower. Fighting the toughs in the corridor below and the Redshirts above had taken the edge off his reaction time. He was still striking Slak and mostly avoiding Slak's blows but then one caught him above the eye and blood appeared. He sank momentarily stunned on a knee and I heard a grunt of satisfaction from one of the two men standing over me. Seeing the blood, there was a gasp from the audience who were gradually realising that this was not part of the show, but a real challenge to their hero.

I moved myself slowly, hoping my guards were now distracted by the fight, thinking I could perhaps just throw myself at the disperser, but there was no strength in my legs. It was useless. With a sick sleepiness I looked helplessly at Max, watching as the tragedy unfolded in front of my eyes.

But at that very moment there was a hoarse cry of pain from the rear of the stage and I looked back to see one of the attendants holding his hands up to his face. And then Rosemunde, like an eel dodging and evading the outstretched grasping hands of another attendant, rushed forwards onto the stage and before anyone could stop her had wrapped herself around one of Slak's legs and was savagely biting it!

Slak looked down at her stunned. Max, mouth open, looked unbelievably at the small figure of his daughter and his face went red then white. She shouldn't be here! She also would get infected with Slak's filth! Slak shook his leg and Rosemunde was thrown across the stage, her red hair flying. But she was apparently unhurt as she spun round and crouched, teeth bared and every muscle tensed like a wild cat. She was only prevented from leaping forwards again by Max holding out his hand to her.

And then Max seemed to swell up with a frenzy of superhuman rage and fury! There was a dead silence from the audience as with a snarl he sprang at Slak in a whirl-wind of stabs, slashes, punches and kicks. Fear forgotten, he just wanted to destroy the obscenity that was going to pollute his daughter! Holding nothing back, this was an all-or-nothing charge and Slak, forced on the defence, slowly retreated

before its ferocity. It is possible that even then he would have recovered the initiative but bewildered by the totally self-sacrificing intensity of Max's attack he made a fatal mistake. Feet rasping on the boards, arms in a blur of defensive movements, he slowly retreated back towards the disperser containing his seed. Protecting himself as best he could with his right arm, he made a quick movement with his left hand to turn the valve on the cylinder.

It was exactly this move which opened up his defence to Max! A closed fist swung to the side of his head, a stab to the solar plexus and as Slak sagged forwards, Max joined his hands and raising them above his head, delivered a tremendous two-handed chop to the back of Slak's unprotected neck.

In the intense silence Slak took an uncertain pace forwards and then collapsed on his face in the middle of the stage, with a thump which caused a cloud of dust to rise, twinkling in the footlights.

But he wasn't finished! Slowly he straightened his arms, lifting his chest off the stage, one knee bent ready to thrust himself upright and in another moment I knew he would be up and fighting again. However Max had his right foot back ready waiting, watching and carefully measuring distances. The audience seemed to be holding its breath. And when Slak had risen to precisely the right height Max leapt towards him and swung his boot forwards in a tremendous kick, his whole body behind it, catching Slak exactly under his momentarily unprotected chin. With a sharp snapping sound that echoed around the auditorium Slak's head jerked back, he rose upright, tottered, and then fell flat on his back. Max was immediately standing over him, foot raised ready to stamp on Slak's head at the slightest movement, as on a deadly insect. But Slak moved no more. There was a wailing sound from the crowd, quickly stilled as Max slowly lowered his foot and Rosemunde ran over to him. She kicked the prostrate body of Slak then grasped her father's hand.

I moved myself weakly, expecting another blow, but my two assailants had faded. By pulling on the curtain I managed to rise upright and painfully hobbled forwards. Under the eyes of father and daughter, I made sure the valve on the cylinder was tight and then slowly unscrewed it from the flexible tube.

In a dead silence broken only by the humming from the now useless blower, I slowly walked across the brilliantly illuminated stage to where Max was holding Rosemunde. There was a gasp of horror from the audience and I looked down at the recumbent figure of Slak. It was writhing uncontrollably, hideously weird smiles and grimaces chasing themselves across his face.

Rosemunde tugged at her Father's hand and they stepped back, looking down in loathing. Slak's heels drummed on the stage, and one open hand slapped it. Then he lay still, flat on his back, but I could see he was not dead; his chest was still moving. For another few seconds he continued breathing, his eyes open, looking upwards. Then they slowly closed and his chest stopped moving. His body lost its stiffness and seemed to relax, to fall in on itself. There was a pause and then under the eyes of five thousand frightened children the thing that was Slak began to slowly disintegrate! Dark patches appeared on his red uniform. There was a faint hissing sound and steam rose as the patches increased in size and began to glisten in the spotlights. At the same time his body seemed to shrink inside his clothes, to liquefy. His upward gazing eyes discoloured, turned slowly to liquid and dripped out, the skin on his face and hands slowly became red and peeled off, liquefying and exposing the sinews and the white bones. The audience were shrieking and pressing away from the stage as a sickening smell of decay drifted over the footlights. Rosemunde turned to her father and hid her face against his chest. Warily I sat down and watched. Max released himself from Rosemunde and grabbing a curtain pulled it across the stage.

In spite of my pain and weariness I felt a fierce sense of exultation, a wonderful feeling of relief and revenge as I watched the body decompose. My relief should have been that a dangerous Killer had been stopped, that mankind had been saved from some extra-terrestrial infection. But all I felt at that moment was that a load of shame had been lifted from my soul. I knew I would finally be free from the degrading nightmares that every now and then reminded me of those perverting and humiliating months at Arles when I had been treated as a slave. Sweet relief washed over me and the last thing I remembered was a hand on my forehead. It was Rosemunde kneeling beside me and saying something urgently to her father. I blacked out.

Epilogue

'We will probably never know where it came from,' said Dr Peterson. 'He certainly wasn't a mutated human, there are far too many differences. Probably he drifted in from space.'

To celebrate the clearing up of the Brain Drain Case (as Mike called it), I had arranged a small party at my new house and invited all those who had helped or suffered in its solution. Phil, Tom, and Dr Peterson from Chelmsford University Microbiological Unit. Dr Peterson had worked with Dr Carstairs, the ill-fated scientist who had taught us about redundancy in the genetic code.

And of course the heroes of the evening - Max with his daughter. Rosemunde had rather shame-facedly admitted she had been persuaded by school-friends to go to the concert, but once there had hated it. Max had a Band-Aid on his forehead and his right foot was in plaster. Some small bone in it had broken when he had kicked the Killer. Rosemunde helped him to sit down and took his crutch.

'Wasn't there a British scientist who figured life on Earth originally came in from space anyway?' asked Mike. 'Fred Hoyle, wasn't it?' Mike had just come from some diplomatic reception organised by his father and looked very handsome in evening dress.

'Sir Fred Hoyle,' corrected Dr Peterson gently. 'Yes, he observed that often identical strains of 'flu appear simultaneously and then spread out from widely spaced parts of the earth - like from some village in Nepal and from a small town in Nebraska. You can trace them back, you know,' he added in parenthesis.

'So spores are flooding in all the time,' said Phil. 'The whole damn thing could happen again!'

'No, we don't think so,' said Dr Peterson. 'Sir Fred was an astronomer.' He paused. ('And should have stuck to looking at stars', hung unsaid in the air). 'There are simpler explanations for the effect he was not the first to notice.'

'But you just said Jeremy drifted in from space,' pointed out Tom. Tom and Max were very pleased with the publicity their various enterprises had received and had also been awarded part of the reward money. The rest had greatly helped "Safe" over a cash-flow problem – always a difficulty with a growing business.

'There has been a lot of speculation, you must have read some of it yourself,' said Peterson. He looked uncomfortable. He didn't like speculation. He took a deep breath.

'The hypothesis that fits most of the facts is that Jeremy came from a planet whose sun was in the pre-nova stage and emitting lots of radiation. This would account for the large amount of redundancy in his DNA. It would protect his race from more mutations than could be absorbed by cultural evolution. But as nova approached, which we know it does at an accelerating speed, the radiation would increase and evolution would move into the fast lane. Genetic evolution of the

redundancy "counter-measures" would be too slow and so many mutants would appear. This would produce a very unstable society unless some way was found of removing mutants that were too far from the norm. But how to do this? It is thought that Jeremy's planet was inhabited with an aggressive martial society. So what better than having each new mutation accepted only if it could fight for its "Right to Procreate"?

`Jeez, a society based on trial by combat!' said Mike.

`There are plenty of examples in our own history,' said Dr Peterson.

`But after a while there would be so many mutants the whole planet would be one big punch-up,' said Max `and it wouldn't solve anything anyway if their sun was going nova,' he added. Rosemunde was now protectively sitting close to her father, dressed like him in ironed jeans and a stiffly starched white shirt that showed off her slim figure and glossy red hair. At fifteen years old, her timeline seemed to be well on schedule.

`Exactly,' said Peterson, `the scientists on Jeremy's planet must have realised that nova was in any case going to snuff out their life-form and so they must have prepared millions of hardened capsules containing their genetic material and launched them into space. They would drift until one found a planet supporting a sufficiently similar life form, then grafted itself on.'

`But why didn't Jeremy's spore just reproduce itself here when it landed?' asked Mike. `I mean if Jeremy had just kept a low profile he could have had progeny all over the place and we wouldn't have noticed until it was too late. Instead of that ...'

`....he started picking fights with everyone in sight until he was convinced he was the tops and had the "Right to procreate",' finished Peterson. `I don't know, I suppose you just have to behave the way you are programmed and perhaps Jeremy's DNA was produced just before his sun went nova and everyone was fighting. He was just doing what he was programmed to do. Like spiders of the same species always produce exactly the same web.'

`Including that weird music and his pictures?' I asked.

`That is even more speculative,' replied Peterson distastefully. `Some people think it is some sort of race memory - pictures of what his planet looked like just before the final catastrophe.'

I had Jeremy's pictures on the table in front of us and it was easy to imagine them showing a sky filled with an evil-looking swollen purple sun, boiling with blue streaks and mottled with black spots. A sun about to explode in a sudden flash 200 billion times brighter than normal. A flash brighter than the combined output of all the stars in its galaxy. A flash that would instantly vaporise all its planets and then be visible for a few weeks across the entire universe.

Peterson continued:

`Apparently the incoming spore first infected Jeremy's mother who went to term, giving birth to a normal looking boy. Programming began to take over at adolescence, pushing him into the "Combat" mode – making him more and more aggressive. He was instantly attracted to the Ancient Martial Arts - the life of a gladiator in Ancient Rome must have struck a chord. First he sought out and challenged the most competent fighters he could find on Earth. When he had beaten them his rigid sense of honour made him look further so he captured and trained some of our best sportsmen as fighters too. He selected the best by making them fight amongst themselves and then fought the survivors. When he had beaten them too, he knew he had "The Right to Procreate".'

`So why didn't he start "procreating" right away?' asked Tom. `Right after he left Arles? He could have had his seed produced - he apparently had enough cash. And

he must have been physically attractive enough. Roman writings tell us girls found gladiators very attractive.'

'Like bullfighters today,' I added.

Dr Peterson shrugged, obviously feeling himself on even shakier ground when it came to talking about sexual attraction.

'He must have thought he had better opportunities as a pop-star. They are the sex-symbols of our time.'

'With the added advantage of contact with lots of kids,' said Mike, casually nodding his head towards Rosemunde. She sat up straight and glared back at him. Feeling the heat of the glare he looked across at her in surprise, doing a double-take and probably noticing for the first time that she was growing up rapidly.

'And it would have been very effective,' continued Peterson. 'If he had been allowed to start infecting our children, we could have had millions of Brain-Drain Killers on our hands in twenty years or so - would we have survived that?'

'So Jeremy went in to the "Combat" mode and became the Brain Drain Killer, and when he felt he had the "Right to Procreate" turned himself into a pop-star sex-symbol and switched into the "Procreate" mode,' summarised Tom. 'He changed his body completely. How did he do that?'

'How does a grub turn itself into a butterfly?' answered Dr Peterson rhetorically. 'They both have exactly the same genetic make-up.'

'We only found out the connection because the type of music each form liked was the same' I said.

'And they both had the same stink,' added Max.

We all sat silently - it had been a very near thing.

I had a sudden thought. All those exercises looked very similar to the exercises prescribed for pregnant mothers. The diet too. I looked at Rosemunde and at Max's grim face, and decided not to voice my thoughts that the whole 'Slak-Soc' culture had probably been to prepare female children as surrogate mothers.

'And when he finally lost?' I asked. It would have been a terrible shock.

'Hara-kiri,' 'Self destruct,' said Max and Phil together.

'He must have been programmed like the beings on his planet,' said Max. 'Lose, and you're out.'

'"The race must be kept pure",' added Tom.

Thinking it over later I often asked myself how Max had finally managed to beat the Killer. I came to the conclusion that it was probably a fortunate combination of a number of factors:

- the Killer must have thought he had beaten the best that Earth had to offer and had "won". He had probably relaxed a bit because he thought Earth had conceded defeat.

- he had never fought "bare-handed" before, especially with Max who must have been incredibly motivated when he saw his daughter about to be virtually raped.

- in his "Procreate" or "sex-symbol" shape he was perhaps not such a viciously competent fighter as he was in his "Combat" form.

- and finally, the Killer in any form probably didn't know how to handle an attack by a female – a small female at that. She must have appeared as Earth's secret weapon.

Earth's secret weapon was now sitting quietly by her father, her beautiful amber eyes focussed speculatively on Mike in his evening dress. I wondered what lay along their respective time-lines and felt a slight stab of envy.

The End

