

# THE DASTARDLY MR WINKLE MEETS HIS MATCH



# RUFFUS OFFOR

# Introduction

“Thousands of years ago, before the, Buddhist, Muslim, Jewish and Christian beliefs were born. Before the gods of Rome, Egypt and Greece were called forth, before writing, before any of the Earth’s civilisations, even before man was a pack of nomadic hairy tribes, the Green Man over-saw all.

The Green Man breathed life into the Earth. The Green man made all and yet the Green Man was no God. He created life on our planet as part of a science project in his early school years. The Green Man was born into a people who travelled the stars, expanding their knowledge and in so doing, expanded the universal consciousness.

They didn’t hold belief as they had long since advanced beyond it; instead they held knowledge. They held the knowledge that all things were part of the great universal machine and that this machine was just part of a greater network of alternative realities and universes. They knew that they existed inside just one particular universe experiencing itself subjectively. All was joined and all had purpose.

The Green Man wanted to create more life in the cosmos so that he could increase the universe’s experience of itself, or in other words, he wanted to increase the universes productivity, to speed things up a tad. He was a visionary with a mind unlike any other.

For Millennia the simpletons on Earth praised his work.

He was kept alive through the millions of years of his existence by inseminating willing hosts with his soul. For the largest part, these hosts were of his own race. The green man's people had long since been able to surgically remove the soul using interesting looking bits of coiled metal, sticks and phlegm. Each incarnation would receive the teachings of the last and seek to improve on them to help the universe understand itself better. This was his life's work and his life had lasted for age upon age.

He would often pop back to Earth to see how we were doing and frequently marvelled at how far his little science project had gone. On occasion he would manipulate things and creatures, just sort of tweak everything a little so as to speed the evolutionary process.

The reptile era seemed very promising until a huge meteor set the project back a few million years. Clearly the universe had decided that it preferred mammals as the dominant species on the planet, and who was he to argue with the universe?

After the dinosaur's extinction all went relatively well. He spent a few million years away and when he came back, to his great surprise, he found some monkeys, monkeys that used tools and showed great promise. In fact, his experiment went so well after that, that one-day he decided to spend a few incarnations experiencing the planet first hand. With this in mind he randomly picked a willing young woman to receive his seed and artificially inseminated her.

She lived in Nazareth.

Her name was Mary.

The rest, as considered in some circles, is history, or as considered in other circle, myth. All of this was kept extremely secret after the first incarnation (he had a bit of a hard time with torture and being nailed to crosses) save for a select few. The Green Man took the Earthly title of the Sion (which was primarily a nick-name but it just kinda stuck) and those closest to him were known as his Priory.

One day, almost 2 thousand years since the green man had come to Earth, a child was born to some freethinking hippies called the Winkles. They were the type of people who made up their own names. They named their child Shoop (a word they believed should be the singular word for sheep. If there was more than one goose they were geese, so why not one shoop and many sheep. As I said, they were hippies and had messed around with a few too many psychotropic substances).

Something rather upsetting happened in Shoop Winkle's childhood that stayed with him for the rest of his life. It involved a death and a séance and he used it as an excuse to be a destructive, miserable and a sneaky sod ever since, happily annihilating everything even remotely strange that crossed his path.

It seemed to work quite well for him, so he stuck with it.

Shoop Winkle had no knowledge of the Sion and the Priory, which was probably for the best.

At least he'd known nothing... *until now!*

## **-Chapter 1-**

### *The Dark Suspicious Alleyway and the Mysterious Man*

It was a wet and miserable Saturday night, or Sunday morning depending on which way you were coming from. The streets had a fine layer of rain over them making some of the cobbled surfaces quite dangerous to traverse, particularly for the kind of alcohol sodden people that were trying to traverse them. The great British tradition of getting fabulously and unreasonably smashed at the weekend had, yet again, been honoured to its absolute limits.

The accident and emergency rooms were jammed full of drunk and battered people, some injured through mishap, others through the other great British weekend tradition of turning into a mindless scrapper and fighting like a psychiatric patient on amphetamines. The street sweepers were approaching consciousness and were facing the joys of cleaning up after the cities revellers while the early morning taxi drivers were preparing to pick up the bar and club workers, desperately avoiding any job that involved people that could barely walk. This always proved very difficult as those seemed to be the only sorts of people who needed taxis at four o'clock on a Sunday morning.

Bleary-eyed swaggerers swore fruitlessly at kebab shops for not being open and then tried to figure out where the nearest twenty-four hour grease pit was to give them fuel for later regurgitation. All over the city centre was the

debris of the usual weekend excesses. Empty beer cans and bottles, puddles of vomit, sleeping drunks in doorways, people urinating on the sleeping drunks in doorways and drug addled night hawks desperately trying to find parties to go to as the pills that they'd taken were far from wearing off.

Having failed to find anyone to have sex with, a young, barely clad, fully tanked woman was attempting to totter home on her high heels. She was wobbling quite a lot which was the opposite of her intentions. She was trying very hard to appear un-wobbly and failing miserably. The point of appearing un-wobbly was this, she was hoping to - against all reasonable logic – miraculously find a man on the way home to give her what she needed; cheap, meaningless, guilt ridden messy sex.

She didn't really mind what sort of man it was, she wasn't all that fussy really, just a man, but preferably one who was as drunk and horny as her. The hope was that if she appeared un-wobbly enough, then there'd be a slight chance that she'd manage to engage a man in conversation long enough for her to convince him that between her legs would be a very nice place for him to be.

In her thigh high boots, cheekily short skirt and flesh displaying excuse for a top, all massively impractical for the Scottish November chill, she blearily swayed through the streets looking for prospective sex partners.

Her plan to look un-wobbly and sexy appeared comical to the sober eye. For one thing, the crusty dribble at the corner of her mouth was unlikely to attract too many suitors; this mixed with the panda like smudged eye make-up and hair that looked like she'd had a close call with an electricity pylon meant that

she was more likely to repulse than attract. The ill executed stagger did little for her either. She was clearly paralytic yet she still held the belief that there was a man out there somewhere on the filthy morning streets that'd be as desperate as her. She was very good at lying to herself when it came to that sort of thing, as are most people after a fathomless volume of alcohol. Her willing suspension of disbelief was so highly tuned, or hugely warped depending on your angle on the situation, that she believed her meandering walk to be perfectly linear and her odds of scoring near perfect.

The drool on her mouth, which was working it's way down to her chin in a very lumpy fashion, was a by product of the sweaty kebab that she'd managed to swipe from an unconscious person in a doorway. Her dribble had chilly sauce in it, as did her top. Bits of kebab meat and sauce were poking out of her boob tube - which appeared to be dissolving under toxic chilli sauce - and the rest of the putrid kebab, which had managed to make it's way into the girl's digestive system, wasn't enjoying it's current location in the slightest. It was thoroughly unhappy about being in the girl's stomach and her stomach, in return, wasn't enjoying having it there either. The two seemed to have come to the agreement that they just weren't getting on very well and that it would be best for all concerned if the kebab simply upped and left. There was some discussion as to the stomach leaving but they realised that that course of action would mean things getting far too messy and decided against it.

The kebab was coming up and no amount of heavy breathing and suppressive gulping swallows on the girl's behalf was going to stop it.



She couldn't be seen vomiting in an open street, she didn't want to spoil her chances with any stinking drunk men; she had to get somewhere a bit more secret so she dived for the nearest dark and suspicious alleyway to hide her disgrace.

The alleyway sat between a tall 400 year-old stone housing tenement and something that used to be a building but had since partially burnt down so was only a wall with homeless people sleeping behind it. It was ill lit, wreaked of the sort of things that would normally be labelled a biohazard, was alive with rats and seemed to house some sort of maggot farm all the way down one side. The alleyway was very dark and *very* suspicious indeed. In fact it was quite unusually suspicious.

Alleyways in horror films would've been jealous of how deeply and unnervingly suspicious this path between buildings had managed to make itself. It had quite clearly been working very hard indeed at becoming as fantastically, unreasonably, brain buggingly suspicious as it feasibly could and had done a fine job of it.

The girl didn't notice this though, as she'd gone temporarily blind from the stream of water ejecting from her eyes as her stomach contents made a break for freedom. She was too far-gone to comprehend the mind bogglingly intense suspiciousness of the conduit, the only thing she was aware of was her insides trying to get outside and had a vague passing thought about how nice and dark it was. But mostly she was preoccupied with the streams of projectile vomit flying out of her in a fire-hose-like-fashion.

It absent-mindedly occurred to her, briefly and in between gasps for breath, that wondering up dark alleyways is the kind of thing that stupid people in cheap films do just before they get gutted and flayed alive. In the instant that this thought brushed past her pickled brain, she managed to almost instantly discard it with the following reasoning:

- She had had a massive amount to drink.
- People in films don't usually have three-dozen alco-pops and a bucket of sambuca in their system before they get themselves in trouble and people in films die.
- Drunk people are notoriously good at not getting hurt. In fact she had a brother who'd once fallen asleep five stories up on some scaffolding, fallen off the scaffolding, plummeted toward the pavement, bounced off it a few times and only been winded. Drunk people are rubbery and don't get hurt. Of course the brother in question had since been hospitalised for liver damage through alcohol poisoning, but the fall was the thing to be focused on.

So, in conclusion, she was drunk, ergo, she was invincible.

An apposing point of view, and probably the most common, would be that she was being tragically dim-witted.

People in real life only ever wander up dark suspicious alleyways when they are either as hard as nails, looking for a quiet place to do illegal things or seeking pain, or death, or both. Alcohol is no excuse for such moronic behaviour, only a predilection for pain.

The dark suspicious alleyway continued doing its job exceptionally well. It had attained the perfect level of darkness with just enough light to appear good and eerie. Even at the smallest glance it could be deduced that it undoubtedly commanded a mastery for suspicion uncommon to its neighbours. It even came complete with its own shadowy, skulking, dark, pail-faced, red eyed menacing man; an attribute which was hugely uncommon in the suspicious alleyway fraternity.

Of course the stupid, barely clad, vomiting girl had absolutely no comprehension of the trouble she was blindly staggering into. The alleyway was for one purpose only, she just needed to puke and it suited her down to the filth ridden ground.

She managed to blunder half way up the alley before her internal disagreement reached its pinnacle. Chunks of semi digested, hardly chewed, sweaty offal meat, brown lettuce and unreasonably acidic chilli sauce flew hither and thither, adding to the suspicious alley's already pungent odour. This would have pleased the alley very much, had it been capable of feeling pleasure.

It didn't please the menacing man though as, being a vampire, he had unnaturally acute olfactory senses: he could smell flatulence in a hurricane. Foul scents were massively intensified and bothersome to his un-dead nose. This particular vampire was very old indeed, which meant that he had self-control above and beyond your average neck biter. He could block out outstandingly nasty aromas, but sometimes people's fumes took him by surprise and proved to

be a bit too much. Gagging would be the unpleasant side effect. Gagging whilst trying to drink fresh blood wasn't enjoyable.

The un-dead like drinking blood, this is widely known, but what is a little less known is that when the drinking of blood is combined with a rancid pong, it has the effect of making the blood taste as foul as the smell. Vampires have compared the effect to trying to snort petrol while drinking yak urine. The un-dead preferred to prey on the non-stinky, but then, you don't always get what you want.

As I've said, the vampire had been around for a very long time and had developed a way of blotting out the smell of the streets. In past centuries, in his younger years, he hadn't had much call for blotting out unpleasant smells. He had been of wealthy lineage when he was bitten and had consequently used his wealth to hunt all over the world, sticking to the higher levels of society to which he was accustomed. He had hobnobbed with the aristocracy and dined on the choicest of meats before flying off into the night.

The problem with that sort of thing in the present day were a) he didn't have as much money as he used to, and b) The modernisation of the world had erected obstacles that were just too dangerous to traverse. He couldn't get anywhere near them - the sort of people that ate fine cuisine and drank the finest of wines - opulent people with rich blood. The criminal investigation advancements of the previous fifty years or so meant that his prior high society carnage wasn't as easily achievable as once it had been. Every now and then he would find the odd extravagant rich food filled upper class person wondering off

from it's herd and he'd revel in the tastes of days gone by. Sadly, though, these morsels were all too infrequent. Nowadays he mainly feasted on the down and outs and drunks. His last feed had been a month ago. (*Contrary to popular belief, vampires do not need to feed every night. In fact, if they have a good hearty meal, they can go for a month without feeling the least bit hungry.*) He had been forced to feed on a young conservative which, to his mind, was the foulest meat available. Their blood was sort of watery and cold and didn't nourish as well as real humans, which was why his pallor was considerably more pail than usual.

Present times had dictated that beggars couldn't be choosers and if a booze addled vomiting tart was to be his meal of the moment, so be it. He recalled the words of King John I.

Well, whiles I am a beggar, I will rail,  
And say there is no sin, but to be rich;  
And, being rich, my virtue then shall be  
To say there is no vice, but beggary.

He could have gotten away with simply thinking, "the grass is always greener on the other side", but he enjoyed pomp and pretension and mentally patted himself on the back for upping his game a little.

Meanwhile, the girl was busy bouncing off the walls, desperately engaged in not looking too wobbly while hurling violent clouds and streams of vomit

frantically over the alleyway. Every couple of bounces would produce new sprays of intestinal fluid and kebab remnants that would splash on the floor, walls and her tasteless stiletto-ed knee high patent leather boots. This carried on for a while, which felt like a spasm filled eternity for her, but eventually the oral sprays stopped containing food and reduced down to just stomach bile. This is, as most people will know, always a good sign that the heaving is coming to an end but is also the most physically painful part of regurgitation. As the spasms became less and less frequent - yet more and more agonising - and the water that dribbled from her eyes slowed its flow and began to dry up, her wobbling started to become a little more controllable. She managed to traverse a relatively straight line without falling and gave herself an imaginary pat on the back as she gasped for air between dry heaving.

The menacing man kept watch. He floated in the air just above and behind her, waiting for her final gut twisting spasm. Completely unaware that he too was being observed.

There were two other people in the alley, only one of whom had a clear overview of the entire situation and so had a notion as to how many people were engaged in the alleyways activities. The other was a hunter and she'd been tracking the vampire for the last two months, waiting to catch him unawares.

The suspicious alleyway was slightly put out by the extra two people watching the events, as from a suspicious alleyway's point of view, less is most definitely more. The more people you put in a suspicious alleyway the more it

starts turning into a gathering, and gatherings are only suspicious behind closed doors with whispery voices or in ceremonies with rolled up trouser legs and nipples showing.

Alleyways are far happier when events contain smaller numbers of people and as few visible nipples as can be managed.

The girl spewed her last and dropped to her knees wiping the cold clammy sweat from her forehead. After a few gasps mixed with some moans and groans she stumbled to her feet. After the evacuation of food and liquid, she began to feel ever so slightly sobered.

She took a moment to look around at the passage that she'd managed to hobble into. She'd ventured quite deep into it, further than she'd been aware of, it unnerved her a little. It slowly dawned on her that the alleyway she was in was far more suspicious than she had previously realised. It then gradually crept into her mind that being drunk and therefore un-hurttable was probably a tad misguided appraisal of the situation. She felt a bit stupid. She shuddered slightly. The shudder sobered her a little more.

Then something happened that brought her crashing back to the point of near complete sobriety with an almighty thump. A rather sly voice appeared slightly above and behind her saying, "Well hello there!", in an oily tone.

She stood stock still, paralysed with fear until the owner of the voice grabbed her by the hair and whispered slyly in her ear with a slippery voice, "Go on, give me a nice high pitched squeal. The noise excites me."

The alcohol relinquished its grip on the girl and handed all functions over to her almighty terror.

She obliged him his request, letting out a scream that a wild hell-bent banshee would be enormously envious of. He flipped her around expecting his fearsome appearance to strike even further horror into her already fragile mind. He believed himself to be very scary indeed, even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, instead of appearing menacing he looked, well, frankly quite ridiculous. Most of the people he attacked usually quivered hysterically until they saw him. Then they tended to laugh hysterically. The drunken stupid girl was no exception.

The sight of him made her wonder if the events that she was involved in weren't, in fact, some kind of elaborate practical joke. It even occurred to her to look around the immediate area for hidden video cameras and TV crews.

He had a pale blue-ish almost minty complexion which looked like it had been badly slapped on by a carnival face painter – *this is not the vampires usual skin texture and was due to the young conservative he'd eaten recently* - and, at first glance, seemed to stand about seven feet tall. Further inspection revealed him to be more in the region of five foot eight but was floating above the floor to appear just that little bit taller and imposing. What made this even more ridiculous was the fact that he'd made a cape that was two feet too long so as to cover his feet when he was above the ground. He'd actually gone out of his way to try and fool people into believing that he was really tall. He hadn't made the cape very well though, and his feet stuck out of the front and made him look a bit



like he was on stilts. He had prominent neon white odd looking fangs, like he'd just bought them from a joke shop and covered them in tipex, but the thing that confused her most of all and made her suspect a sick prank, was his hair. He had somehow seen fit to go for the business at the front, party at the back ludicrousness of a mullet. The poor sod looked like a cross between a circus performer and a footballer from the eighties. The frilly white shirt didn't help matters either.

His appearance made her giggle slightly. She felt a little drunk again. Then the mixture of fear and the vampire's ridiculous appearance made something short circuit in the girl's brain. She couldn't help it she just had to laugh. It was the kind of laugh that strikes people when they're really not supposed to laugh. A bit like the kind of hysteria that would take a ten-year-old boy, or any male to be fair, when someone farts in a church.

The menacing man was very sensitive about being laughed at when he was trying his absolute best to be menacing and decided to waste no time in exerting his power. He yanked her head viciously to the side saying

"You're going to regret that old girl. This is going to take far longer than it should."

She began to be worried again and yet couldn't stop her hysterics. She was about to die but all she could think was, "What a *Mullet!*"

He snarled, hissed, screwed his face up in a threatening manner and revealed his razor sharp comical teeth just before a fist came out of nowhere and cracked him squarely in the jaw. It struck him with such force that he would've

flown a clean fifteen feet if there hadn't been a wall just five feet away. He bounced off the wall shaking and denting it badly.

The suspicious alleyway didn't enjoy having its walls dented, but then thought "What the hell, it'll make me look more suspicious!" At least it would've thought that if it were able to think, but let's face it, it was an alleyway and alleyways are not known for their mental processes.

The bizarre nature of these events tied with the drink and vomiting were beginning to prey on the stupid girl's sense of reality and normality. After her first mental short-circuit just a few seconds earlier she didn't really think she needed another one, but she had one none the less. She wasn't entirely sure whether she'd gone mad, if she'd fallen while vomiting, cracked her head and was hallucinating, or if she'd had her drink spiked with some sort of LSD derivative. In the end she came to the conclusion that no matter what was going on, she had no ability to control her circumstances and, for the first time in her life, fully understood, although from a bizarre angle, the cliché, "what will be will be". This relaxed her and for the first time in her life she felt a modicum of internal peace. As the menacing man flopped to the floor she found that all she could say was.

"Okay then." In a very, drunk, bemused, almost ethereal yet determined voice. "If that'sh the way it'sh got be!?" and lit a cigarette, not knowing quite what else to do.

If you'd have been there you wouldn't have known if she was asking a question or making a statement because she was, in fact, doing both at the same time; a trick which only the truly and deeply traumatised people are capable of.

She looked around in the direction of the fist that had delivered the devastating blow, absent-mindedly hoping that the fist would belong to someone who'd be willing to sleep with her. The fist was on the end of rather a slender arm, which in turn was attached to a very attractive blonde girl. She wore baggy, well-cut trousers that hung just below her hips showing off the top of some brightly coloured, yet tasteful underpants. Her torso was partially covered with a simple black sleeveless t-shirt and her trousers were hanging on to her frame with the help of an elaborate belt with an engraved brushed gold buckle. The outfit was rounded off with some very stylish, but not too trendy, looking training shoes. This girl liked to look good while she punched people. An admirable trait thought the stupid drunk girl.

"It'd probably be best if you scampered off there girly!" Said the hot girl as the mysterious man started to get to his feet; wiping the dust from his very black clothes.

"Eh?" Said the stupid girl.

"Run away, make a move, shift it, clear off, bolt, in short...run!"

"Oh right, run, um, that might be a bit of a problem. You see, thing ish, I'm absolutely plastered. I tried walking earlier on but I seemed to just wobble an awful lot. So I'm thinking that if I try to run, I may in fact not so much wobble as bounce off of things very hard!" Mused the stupid girl.

"Well, I think as long as there's some sort of forward momentum away from the man who just tried to kill you, things should turn out better than you staying where you are. Sound reasonable?" said the hot girl in a soft calm voice.

“Reasonable, yesh, right, okayyyyy. Forward motion, here we go. You’re very niche you know. Isn’t she niche,” the stupid girl asked the vampire rhetorically, “yeah, really niche, helping me out and that. Cracking lash. If you were a boy I’d be all over you like a rash I would. I’d be limpet girl on you I would. You’re not a boy are you?”

“No, not a boy, off you pop now.”

Both the mysterious man and the hot girl watched, bemused, as the stupid girl tripped up some steps, stopped for a moment, looked back as if to make sure that everything that had just happened had actually happened, waved her arm dismissively and wondered off into the night trying not to look too wobbly in search of a sloppy naked wriggle.

The alleyway would have been happy about the drop in numbers if thinking was something it did.

*Some people would have taken the events of the evening as a sign that they should turn their life around, but as I’ve said, this girl was stupid. She knew of a bar near her flat that opened at five o’clock in the morning. She went there.*

*Ironically she met a very nice man in the bar who’d been working the night shift at a postal sorting office. He was good and sober and took pity on the girl. He refused to have sex with her but took her home and nursed her back to health over the next few days as she was covered in bumps and scrapes. They saw each other a lot over the coming months and eventually married. The girl stopped binge drinking and went back to university with her new found sense of*

*self worth, frequently marvelling at how odd life was and what a quirky sense of humour fate had.*

The hot girl and the mysterious man exchanged tutting looks as the stupid drunk girl blundered away.

“Some people eh?”

“I heartily agree, some people don’t have the slightest idea as to social graces,” replied the mysterious man in a pompously refined yet well greased voice, gave a knowing shrug and a raised an eye-brow. He looked at the girl, “That was an impressive display of stealth and violence old girl. I usually know when someone’s going to hit me before *they* do.”

“It’s the blood-lust,” replied the girl, “Your kind have a sharp dip in their sensory awareness just before their teeth sink in.”

“Impressive. Such knowledge and physical prowess from one so young and, may I say, so blindingly attractive.”

“Very sweet of you to say.” Replied the girl graciously but feeling a little nauseous at the freak’s advances, “But accepting such a compliment makes me feel a little guilty for the damage I’m going to have to do to you.”

“Damage you *have* to do to me?”

“I’m afraid so!”

“Come now young lady, you appear to be quite the intelligent being. You must be aware that any given situation has a number of alternative conclusions.

This doesn't have to end in destruction and death. Anyway, I doubt very much if you realise just how much trouble *you* may be in."

"Sorry buddy, but I really *do* know how much trouble I'm in, or to be more precise, I am fully aware of how much trouble *you* are in."

"Now, just to get this straight, you *do* know that I'm a vampire yes?"

"Yip!"

"Which means that I'm very fast and very strong."

"Yip!"

"And that doesn't bother you at all?"

"Not even slightly"

"My word," exclaimed the mysterious man, with a mixture of genuine surprise and pleasure, "this certainly is turning out to be quite the delicious evening. May I impose upon you a little further and say that I've been looking for a lady of your calibre for quite some time now. Back when I was alive, I was quite the connoisseur of the fairer sex. For three hundred years now I've been searching for a companion with talents that shine as clearly and brightly as yours."

"Well it's nice to feel special!"

"Quite," said the mysterious man ponderingly, "We appear to be getting along famously." He took a moment as they circled each other, looking each other up and down. She just smiled. "How would you feel about, say, the prospect of immortality?" He suggested.

"Immortality? Me? You'd do such a thing?"

“I could be tempted. You’re clearly a lady of high quality. Just think of it, *eternity*, yours and mine to share. We would make a stunning couple.”

“Well I must say that really is very flattering indeed. Thank you for the compliment. I liked the whole “*been searching for you for three hundred years*”, bit, very nice indeed. Thing is though, I just can’t see myself spending eternity with a bloke who would see fit to wear a mullet! I mean really, I know you’ve been around for a while but you can’t seriously think that you look anything less than ridiculous”

“Now that wasn’t very nice was it? Here we are being polite and complimentary and you have to throw in the personal insults. Besides, all the youngsters are wearing these nowadays. I’m led to believe that they are quite fashionable.”

“Maybe, but you still look like a plonker!”

“My opinion of you is sinking old girl. I may withdraw my offer if your courtesy refuses to hold sway.”

“Makes you look a bit like a Spanish hippy!”

“THIS IS A LOVINGLY REALISED WORK OF ART ON MY HEAD AND IF YOU’RE NOT GOING TO FREELY USE MANNERS THEN YOU WILL HAVE TO BE TAUGHT SOME!” Bellowed the man.

“A bit touchy aren’t we?”

“SUCH INSOLENCES MUST BE PUNISHED, PREPARE TO BE DRAINED DRY!” he hissed with a snarl that would’ve made an SAS man stain his underpants.

With this the hot lady and the now slightly less mysterious man with a mullet, both flew into the air with the hot girl attempting to plant a vicious round-house kick on the man's chest. The man's reflexes were better than she was used to and her leg impacted on an arm that felt like an iron girder. She swiftly regained her composure in time to deflect a blindingly swift right hook from the vampire. The move was so fast that it should've been absolutely invisible to the girl but it wasn't, she'd clearly been very well trained. Before the man could come to terms with the fact that the blow had been stopped by her, the girl's right elbow had pushed his pale nose an inch into his face, spreading it wide toward his cheeks making a cloud of blood and watering his eyes. Before he could gather himself she battered him in the solar plexus with the palm of her hand making him plunge back into the dented wall again.

"Good lord, you really are full of sass! Give me your name before I make you un-dead against your will." He insisted as he tried to pull his nose out of the inside of his head.

"The name's Bunty Autumn and, live or die, I promise you this. You'll never wipe this smile off my face." The vampire realised that she hadn't stopped smiling since the moment of his first pummelling.

"What gives you such joy young woman?"

"Oh I'm just a happy kind of gal!"

While the two combatants continued exchanging a few more pleasantries, someone else was listening to them.



On the other side of the dented wall there stood a man. He was tall and weathered with greying hair, a long face with stubby features and freakishly circular ears that stuck out too far. Underneath a battered looking trilby was a very potent grimace. The chasm like lines that the grimace had carved into the man's face told tales of someone more content in misery than rapture and his dark brown-grey suit recounted the same story. He cared little about the two prattling idiots on the other side of the wall and was fast losing his patience with their senseless chatter.

He hated people who talked while they fought. He much preferred it when people just got on with things. He blamed Hollywood. All those glib one liners and bad guys telling the good guys why they were doing what they were doing just before the good guys managed to escape the seemingly inescapable circumstances in which the bad guys had managed to trap them, and then the good guy would foil the bad guy because the bad guy had just told the good guy exactly what he was about to do. He thought it'd be a lot more realistic if someone just fired a smart bomb at them both and shut them up, screw the good guy he was just collateral damage. The man saw the eventuality in his imagination, deciding that the whole scene would go down a lot better if the good guy was played by an actor who was part of one of those trendy religions. The man hated trendy religions, especially ridiculous scientific ones that were created as bets.

As the two combatants chatted away on the other side of the wall, the man got more and more irate as he thought about Hollywood and trendy religions, his anger building.

He was a vulture. He didn't like getting involved in the thick of the fight too much. Not that he wasn't capable, he just didn't see the point if you could be sneakier about it all and just kill them from a distance. This also had the added bonus of near guaranteeing that he didn't get hurt. He didn't like getting hurt. Other people should get hurt, not him. His vulture like nature preferred to let the combatants do all the damage to themselves so he could swoop down and pick at the remnants. The thing with these two was that they were taking too long about the whole thing.

As his irritation rose he slid his fingers into his suit jacket and toyed with the idea of using the metallic pineapple like lump that was perched there. The two on the other side of the wall prattled on. The man decided that if they hadn't finished by the time that his cigarette had burnt down then he was going to have to step in.

Then he thought, "Bugger waiting!"

He popped his be-hatted head over the wall, pulled the pin on the grenade, dropped it directly between the vampires legs and dove for cover behind a steel bin.

The mysterious man continued trying to impress the girl with his oral prowess and the hot girl continued smiling. There was a clunking noise. The hot

girl looked down at the vampires feet, looked confused for a second, looked the vampire in the eye and then started running, never taking the smile off her face.

The vampire looked confused at the girl's actions but then looked down at the object that had fallen between his feet.

His last words as a complete body were, "Oh, Bollocks!"

The explosion sent lots of the mysterious man to lots of different places. As his head travelled skyward into the blackness of the night it uttered the simple phrase, "didn't see that coming!" before it stopped being un-dead, and starting being simply dead.

Bunty Autumn was thrown ten feet into the air by the blast. She landed very hard and broke lots of bones while rupturing several internal organs. She was going to be dead fairly soon, but, true to her word, she never stopped smiling.

The alleyway would've been ecstatic about how suspicious it was becoming had it had the ability.

The man with the grenade grimaced at the scene, but then, he always did that.

The sound of tumbling bricks seemed ridiculous after the deafening blast. As the last of the bricks faltered and scraped and the smoke began to dissipate, the sneaky vulture man with the grenade deemed it safe to venture forth. Clambering over the carnage he wondered through the smoke toward the hot girl

with movements and theatrics that had been long practiced. Every move was designed to induce fear, to intimidate, and he was very good at what he did.

He had long since been aware that theatrics could be a very effective tool when it came to unnerving damaged people. It made them talk easier and he hated having to work too hard for results when he didn't have to. A few bits of smoke and making sure that any source of light came from behind so that he was silhouetted were just a couple of the tricks he employed; but then sometimes, when he felt as though he had a bit of extra energy to be worked off, he did things differently.

He liked torture and was an expert, but only when he could be bothered.

He was a very vicious man and sometimes he liked to indulge his nasty streak. Sometimes he didn't try to intimidate. Sometimes he just felt like being cold blooded and mean. Sometimes he loved to go down the old fashion route and kick the living crap out of someone for information. When he was feeling particularly nasty, he wouldn't even ask them any questions until they were begging for him to. Sometimes he liked to toy with them and get them to tell him things that were completely irrelevant. He once managed to get a man in the Russian armed forces to tell him that he liked to wear nappies and visit brothels where he would spend hour upon hour sucking the nipples of prostitutes.

He wasn't much in the mood for exerting himself tonight though, so he enlisted a few choice dramatic methods.

His lanky imposing height drifted through the fading wisps of smoke at just the right moment to create maximum intimidation. One of his better entrances he

thought. He'd managed a fine combination of subtlety and extreme violence better than he had done for months. He gave himself a mental pat on the back as he swaggered imposingly toward the broken girl.

"Hello Miss Autumn." Said the man menacingly, remembering her name from her far too long conversation with the vampire.

Bunty, against all odds, was smiling.

"Hello, what's your name?" She said in a calm and pleasant voice.

"I'm sorry?" replied the man shaking his head a little, somewhat bemused at the girl's lack of terror.

"I said, what's your name?" her smile was enchanting which made the man a little bit angry as he absolutely despised cute things.

"Yeah, I heard you, it's just, um... You're supposed to be feeling intimidated right now." The man questioned the potency of his entrance for a moment. He looked back at where he'd just come from as if to make sure that the scene was just right. Then he decided that his entrance was fine, it was girl who was wrong and turned his attention back to her.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know." She said sweetly.

"I just pulled off one of the best entrances of my career. I've put in seventy percent less effort before and people have filled their pants with muck." He paused briefly, frowned, stared at her, frowned again, got back to his pausing again for a while, appeared a bit angry and then said, "Well come on then, shit yourself damn-it!"

Bunty looked at him, smiled at him, winced a little bit, as if trying to force something out of her body, and then said, “The problem is, I went before I came out. Also, I think my bum’s broken. In fact, come to think of it, I may well have soiled myself, but I’ve no way of knowing. You see, I’ve lost all feeling from the top of my bum down to my feet. There could be shit everywhere and I wouldn’t have the slightest clue. Weird hey?” said the girl with a genuine laugh under her words. She appeared to be conversing as if with an old friend. The man didn’t like it.

He grimaced, but, as has already been established, this was nothing new.

“You never answered my question.” said Bunty.

“What?” grunted the man angrily.

“What’s your name?” She repeated.

“Um.... well.... I suppose you’re going to die fairly soon anyway, so it can’t do any harm to tell you. My name’s Shoop Winkle.”

“Oh *you’re* Mr Winkle! I’ve heard so much about you, it’s an honour!”

Shoop Winkle looked stunned “What?” he snapped, “how can you possibly have heard of me? Nobody’s heard of me! I’m sometimes unsure that I’ve heard of myself. I keep myself very secret indeed.” Shoop did some more grimacing “Who the hell are you and why have you heard of me?”

“Bunty Autumn!” Said the girl plainly.

“Yeah, I got that part,” he spat at her, “but *who* the hell...” before he could finish his sentence something at the girls waist sparkled and drew his attention.

He glanced down and saw a very impressive looking belt buckle. "What's that?"

He quizzed

"What? Oh this! It's a belt buckle, it stops my belt coming undone, which in turn stops my trousers coming down, which wouldn't be too bad as I've just shaved my shapely legs and I've got a very nice bum, if I could feel it, but walking around with your trousers around your ankles is somewhat of a dent in the dignity, which is why I wear this belt. Do you like it?"

"Don't bullshit me!" Shoop was focused now and wouldn't be sidetracked, "I've seen that symbol somewhere before, I'm sure of it."

Bunty's belt buckle was large, gold, circular and quite ornate. It had meticulously carved eastern patterns around an equilateral triangle. Three letters had been integrated into its design. The inscription P.O.S. stood out in turquoise blue from the gold.

"I just thought it looked nice." Lied Bunty.

"That's a half lie!"

"What do you mean?"

"You do think it looks nice, but that's not why you're wearing it. You're wearing it because you have to. It's some sort of talisman. I've been in this game long enough to know a talisman when I see one. The fact that it looks nice is an added bonus to you, you were covering the complete truth with a partial truth, thereby not telling a whole lie, just a half lie."

"Aren't we just the pessimist!"

"What's that got to do with anything?" His voice rising in annoyance.

“Well you could have said it was a half truth but you didn’t did you. You said half lie so...”

“*What is this symbol?*” persisted Shoop raising his voice ever so slightly and giving it a tinge of threatening authority. He grimacing one of his more potent grimaces.

Bunty was still smiling.

“I’m afraid I’m not at liberty to disclose that information, but thanks for taking an interest. It’s genuinely appreciated.”

“Look, I don’t think you fully appreciate your situation Miss Autumn. You’re lying in the remnants of a dark and suspicious alleyway, bleeding broken and dying.” Shoop had been leaning over her as he said this, but now stood, becoming as tall, menacing and miserable as he knew how. He looked down his nose at her. “Now, I can make it easy on you, I can kill you quickly, it’ll be over before you know it. Or,” Shoop ground his heel into one of her protruding broken bones, “*you can suffer!*” He hissed.

Much to Shoop’s annoyance, Bunty didn’t squeal in agony, just stubbornly kept smiling.

“Oh don’t worry about me, I’m sure I’ll be fine.” She said.

Shoop marvelled at her ability to deny pain but quickly shook off his surprise and continued.

“I’ve seen this symbol somewhere before. Tell me what it is!” insisted Shoop, grinding his heel in again.

“Can’t, sorry!”



Shoop was somewhat perplexed. Usually when he stepped on people's protruding bones they had the tendency to squeal like a live rat in a blender. This did not stop him working however.

"I can keep you alive. No-one's coming for you. I can keep you alive and cause you more pain than you ever thought possible, and that's a promise." He said being more menacing and threatening than he ever knew he could be, and he'd had a lot of practice at that sort of thing.

"Well if it'll make you feel better about everything, just go on ahead, I'm sure I'll be fine, as long as you're happy!"

Shoop didn't quite know what to do. Pain clearly wasn't working and that was all he really knew as an information extraction tool. It just always worked. He concluded that she wasn't quite right in the head, but only after trying to burn, poke, flay and stand on her a bit more.

By the end of it all he just sat down on a step next to her, sweating ever so slightly from his torturing efforts and lit a cigarette. He noticed that the sun was coming up and knew that someone would come along and find them soon. He would've used a truth serum, had he thought to bring one, but he hadn't expected to be questioning any one. He'd been following a vampire when she came along and messed things up.

He rubbed his head and sat for a while, still none-the-wiser as to the origins of the belt buckle.

"Look," said the Bunty, still smiling, "You obviously desperately want to know what this belt buckle is right?"

“Right.”

“And I’m very clearly not going to tell you right?”

“Okay.” Said Shoop suspiciously, wondering where this was going.

“Well, the answer’s simple isn’t it.” It was a statement, not a question.

“Is it?”

“Yes,” Pointed out the dying girl, “all you’ve got to do is take the buckle off me and take it back to your Winkle cave, or wherever it is you go, and research it.”

“I hate work, I was going for the easy option with the pain and suffering, and anyway, how the hell do you know I’ve got the ability to research things? All you’ve seen of me is someone who’s good at pain and blowing things up and telling people what to do, not research.”

“Well, putting aside what I already know about your reputation.”

“*What damn reputation!*” bellowed Shoop. “I’ve spent my whole life being invisible, how the buggery do you presume to know anything about me?”

“As I was saying,” Replied Bunty, ignoring his rant, “putting aside what I already know about you, you’ve managed to take me by surprise and blow me half up. That is a very telling thing in itself”

“Okay?”

“You took *me* by surprise. Someone who managed to take a three hundred year old vampire by surprise, which is no mean task let me tell you. Vampire beats drunk girl, I beat vampire, and you beat me! At the moment you are at the top of the food chain, which means that you are very well informed and

very well practiced. You're very good at what you do. Now," she continued, "You are not a book-worm, that much is obvious, you're the kind of chap who blows people up and stands on their protruding bones. Basically, you're not much of a reader."

"Okay? So what?" enquired Shoop.

"Which means you have back-up. You have people, or a person, to do the book-work for you while you get on with the things you enjoy, namely the leg-work." Bunty guessed rightly.

"Seems reasonable," said Shoop, simultaneously hating and admiring the girl's collectedness under pressure and a great deal of pain.

"Well, if a man like you has back-up, then I'd be willing to lay down money that they've been with you for quite some time as I can't see you being the sort of person that would trust strangers very easily. You hold your trusted close, correct?"

"I don't like you!" replied Shoop.

"I'll take that as a yes."

Shoop decided that a hit of gin from his hip flask would be a good idea.

"Right, you've had your trusted support for a while now, so isn't it likely that if you think you've seen the symbol before then they would have too, and seeing as they're more book-bound than you, it shouldn't take them too long to figure the whole thing out. Well, in theory anyway."

Shoop took a deep swig of gin.

“It’s what you’ve been planning to do all along,” said the girl, “you just thought you could get more information from me than your friends could get from a book because you’ve got a huge ego and you like to think that you’re more effective than he is!” She paused for a moment as her breathing became very laboured. “My advice to you is,” She panted, and with her dying breath and a smile of absolute serenity adorning her bleeding and battered face said,

“Get over yourself!”

She promptly died.

Shoop grimaced... again!

The dark alleyway was reaching new heights of suspiciousness as it now had a dead body in it, and a few bits of vampire. Which would’ve made it very happy indeed had it been able to feel that sort of thing.

Shoop collected the buckle from the body and mooched off into the morning feeling slightly disgruntled. He decided to momentarily stop and torture a street sweeper into telling him what his dirtiest sexual desires were just to make himself feel better. It only took a Chinese burn to get it out of him, but Shoop felt content with the result but was a bit disgusted at the street sweeper’s answer.

It involved hamsters and duct tape.

## **-Chapter 2-**

### *The Sphere Of Influence*

A few hours later, after a few stiff drinks, Shoop walked across a vast concrete courtyard toward an imposing monument to commerce. The building wasn't exactly a skyscraper but was clearly built to pay homage to the great god cash. It was all huge glass walls, shiny metal and staircases. The kind of thing that architects are convinced will be ageless and tasteful but within a week look like something from a cheap science fiction series from the sixties.

The yard had been sparsely and pathetically decorated with a few wretched trees that poked out from gaps in the concrete slabs. They looked naked and alone and very scared indeed. The glass, steel, concrete, and stairway monolith had one of those entrance halls that are designed to make people feel small and insignificant with its sheer height, much akin to the intended effect of churches. It was all designed to make the visitor or worker feel very mortal and very small indeed.

Shoop marched purposefully through the foyer hating every minute of it and making sure that anyone who was entertaining the merest thought of getting in his way was made to feel like their very lives were in danger. He was painfully aware that he just didn't fit in. He liked small dark secret places, not big brash glass places. The erectors of the building knew how Shoop felt, and revelled in it.

Shoop had a secret lair deep beneath the building. The offices had been slapped there a year previously with the agreement that Shoop's underground haven would still be accessible. He didn't like the arrangement at all. It was just one in a long series of compromises that he'd been forced to take by the people that he had given power to. He had once looked down on them from a great height and now it was his turn to feel small. They had risen above him and now sought to tame him. He told himself that he was just biding his time but secretly knew that if his day didn't come very soon indeed, then he would cease to be tamed and become extinct. For the moment though, he still had his refuge.

The office builders liked having their offices above him. They had been manoeuvring for it for ten years. They had bribed people to clear the area of older buildings. Bribed councilmen and women to get the right building agreements and even blackmailed some people into getting out of their way. Finally they had spent years using every diplomatic trick in the book to grind Shoop down and let them build there, promising all kinds of powers and bonuses, in fact anything they could think of to get him to agree without alienating him. They still needed him for their own purposes and so couldn't resort to threats. Actually, needing him was the smaller of the two reasons for not issuing threats; the other was that they were extremely scared of him. They had very little idea as to what Shoop was truly capable of. Sure they had seen him do some pretty horrific things but there was always the very real feeling that he was keeping a lot of his abilities to himself. It was inexplicable but the leaders of the Sphere, in particular the boss, after meeting with Shoop, were always left with the sense

that he hadn't divulged the entirety of his antics. On top of that he was unpredictable, a bit of a loose cannon. One threat aimed at him and you could wake up the next morning with fewer body parts than you'd had the night before, and sometimes even a few extra if Shoop was feeling exceptionally creative.

The moneymen hovering over his head made Shoop miserable, but then he liked being miserable, so everyone was happy, in a manner of speaking.

The moneymen kept their workers going seven days a week, so there were plenty of people around, even on a Sunday morning. Shoop grimaced his way past the front desk, ignoring the security guards senseless pleasantries, made a b-line for the lifts and promptly walked straight past them. He continued on past the franchised coffee house, where he customarily flicked his cigarette butt at the poor soul who was trapped forever-frothing milk and ventured on toward the door of a cleaning cupboard.

The multinational organisation that owned the building had seen fit to put the entrance to Shoop's lair in the back of a bleach stained mop filled cupboard. They reasoned that it was one of the least visited places in the building and therefore perfect for Shoop's desired level of secrecy. Shoop wondered how many people ambled around in the basement store rooms and why the entrance couldn't be put down there but was told that far too much traffic moved through the basements for it to be safe. Shoop suspected that they were winding him up, which of course they were, but they always managed to appear absolutely sincere; in a snide sort of way.

His superiors were very slippery.

He entered the long, dark cleaner's cupboard through the fire exit, went to the rear of it where there was a multitude of cleaning sprays and utensils. There was a file there that seemed oddly out of place among the rags, mops and cleaning fluid. Shoop reached out for it. It was pretty much the only thing in the room that the cleaners were unlikely to touch as it had the words "cleaning schedule" written on it. Upon tapping the file a certain number of times, on specific points in a particular rhythm and levering it toward him, a panel opened on the wall to his left and an ancient and worn stone spiral staircase was revealed. Shoop ventured down.

At the bottom of the stairs was a twelve-inch thick, iron studded solid oak door with a small backlit panel just to the right of it. Shoop took off his right shoe and sock, pressed his heel against the panel. A metallic voice came out of nowhere saying,

*"Processing!"*

Shoop replaced the footwear, lit a cigarette, took a hefty swig of gin and waited. It annoyed him as to how long the process of getting to his sanctuary was. The bigwigs could've made it a lot easier and quicker but didn't. They had long recognised that it was the small touches that ground men down.

Eventually the metallic voice came back, "Print not accepted, please try again, if the print should fail this time you will be asked to try one more time and then you will be decapitated. Thank you for your patience"

Shoop went through the whole sham all over again. The damn thing did it every time. It never opened with the first try, and if you didn't put your sock and



shoe back on it would tell you that processing the request couldn't be taken further until all foot coverings were replaced. The folks up stairs loved to get on Shoop's nerves.

*"Print identified,"* Said the door and made some clicking wheezy noises before clunking open, *"Welcome back Mr Wankel."* At the sound of his name being so mockingly mispronounced he ground his teeth hard and told himself that one day soon he would be back on top and his tormentors would suffer long and hard. There was no basis in fact for this internal statement as he had no idea how he was going to bring the bastards down, but it made him feel better to fantasise about the damage he would love to one day inflict on his overlords.

The door creaked open and he stepped through it onto an iron walkway and surveyed his domain.

He was looking into a vast cavern that stretched back almost a mile. It was a hundred feet wide and just as high with twenty foot long stalactites making the roof of the cave look like the inside of a colossal iron maiden. The cave housed a series of buildings stretching the length and breadth of it in all manner of styles from all manner of ages. The tiny town looked deeply confused about its identity and age. There were Tudor buildings next to Victorian next to nasty post war stippling covered horror shows. Art deco mixed with gothic mixed with medieval. It was quite a strain on the eyes.

The town bustled with activity, which upset Shoop to the brink of violence. This used to be a quiet place. It had been his secret for a very long time. The secret of the underground village had been handed to him with the greatest of

confidence in his ability to keep it very quiet and very secret. He had let it all get out of hand. Part of him would rather destroy the place than let it get any worse.

Shoop had a great deal of affection for the place but hated almost everyone in it. They were all just another reminder as to how commercial the organisation he'd helped to build had become. He took another swig of gin and decided to hit a few people on the way to his rooms. Hitting random folk always made him feel better. He made his way down the swooping iron staircase into the pandemonium of the main street wearing a grimace that grimaced more sharply than his average run-of-the-mill every day grimace.

The streets were teeming with all manner of sharp suits, mail carts and office juniors rushing photocopies and files from one place to another. Two hundred yards into the cave and a man in an Armani suit made the mistake of wandering to within a meter of Shoop. Shoop made him vomit all over himself after thrusting his index and middle fingers into the man's throat. He felt a lot better about everything after that, so his grimace returned to its every-day potency rather than def-con one.

Shoop's most potent grimace could give people nosebleeds at fifty yards.

He wondered up the main street scaring people for a while then headed down a small side street at the end of which was a door set into the cave wall. It was small, circular and after awkwardly pressing his armpit onto the luminous square panel to the side of it a couple of times, taking a hefty swig of gin and lighting a cigarette, the door spoke to him in a metallic voice, mispronouncing his name mockingly, and promptly opened.

This was his last hiding place. It was the only place that the sphere of influence couldn't touch him. Well, the only place that they knew of.

The Sphere of Influence had been born of two men. They'd not always been called the Sphere of Influence; in fact they had started out going by the names of Dave and Mike and were both quite likeable people. Dave and Mike had been best friends since meeting at their local college where they both studied, and excelled at, computing and electrical engineering, back in the days when a computer took up several large rooms and had problems calculating its own mass. They frequently went on trips together and during one particular hiking expedition to the highlands of Scotland they witnessed something strange. They were camped in a glen having a nightcap when a bright light streaked across the sky and landed not half a mile away from where they were with a very loud crash. Upon investigation they appeared to be the only witnesses to the crash landing of a flying saucer. Luckily they were at the beginning of their holiday and took the remaining two weeks moving the object to a nearby remote cottage and began to realise that the technology they'd discovered could, potentially, earn them an awful lot of money.

They both quit their jobs and spent two years in the wilds of the highlands figuring out the wealth of technology, growing long beards, becoming smelly, hunting wild animals, gathering wild shrubs for food and growing their hair.

When, eventually, they descended from their untamed glen they trimmed their beards, cut their hair, mugged a couple of business men for their sharp suits

and went about leaking the technology into society at a rate that wouldn't cause suspicion. They made stupendous amounts of money.

The leaking of their findings took thirty years making them two of the world's richest and most powerful people and over the course of those thirty years they came to realise that their talent for keeping themselves out of the limelight was a very valuable commodity indeed. In fact, secrecy became more important to them than the technology and the money.

They also discovered that the knowledge they had been in possession of was a drug. They loved being ahead of the game more than anything else. More than Aston Martin's, more than the finest accommodations and most sought after wines and whiskies, more than the bevy of scantily clad young maidens that would pop up every time they took out their cheque books. They, like most men, were the victims of the "I know something you don't know" mind-set. The problem was, though, that their knowledge was finite and was sure to end one day. They needed more secrets and more technology.

They scoured the world for anything that would keep them on top: Newer crash sites, freak occurrences, anything that would give them the edge but to no avail. Their beloved drug, secret knowledge, was dying out and there was nothing that they could do about it.

Then, one day while on a trip to a small town in the south east of England called Bury St Edmunds, Mike met an angry looking man in a pub who intrigued him. He didn't intrigue him straight off, at first Mike was downright terrified of the man but he warmed to him after a few choice pints of homemade English bitter.

They got talking and it turned out that the man was a veritable magnet for the strange and unusual and had been since he was a small boy. He could walk down the most populated street in the busiest city and would be witness to the oddest things without even trying. He had once been walking along Oxford Street in London and a Sloth had dropped out of the sky and landed on a man who was walking not three feet in front of him. The man was killed instantly but freakishly the Sloth had survived without a scratch. The angry man had kept it as a pet and called it Gary. After much investigation it was concluded that the origins of the sloth and why it had decided to fall from the sky were beyond comprehension. Or more accurately they were heard saying, "We'll be buggered if we know!"

Mike's chat with the man, after moving on from bitter and loosening themselves up with a frightening amount of hard gin, revealed that the angry man had, in the toilets of the very public house they were in, not an hour earlier, come across and exterminated a werewolf, dropped it out of the toilet window, dragged it to his car and stuffed it in the boot. It was sitting there at that very moment waiting to be prodded and dissected to reveal the mystery of its existence. He also had a demon pig in the back seat, a little green man stuffed into a suitcase and a fairy in the glove box, all of which had been encountered that morning.

Of course Mike thought that his new companion was a raving lunatic but was fast proved wrong when the man showed him the evidence and said that he knew who Mike was and what he'd found in the highlands thirty years ago. The man said that he'd always hunted down the strange and destroyed it but didn't

have any money to keep him going as his part time bar job just didn't pay for trips to Transylvania. He needed a job that paid lots of money and had a healthy expense account. Mike was more than happy to oblige. The man's name was Shoop Winkle and it appeared that he had a remarkable sense for finding the kinds of things that would give Dave and Mike the secrets that they so desperately craved.

They set out for Edinburgh that very hour, after swinging round to pick up Shoop's friend George, and headed for the hidden underground town that Shoop still inhabited. In the beginning the town was empty and they had little or no idea how it had come to be there; but it was the kind of secret that made them all feel very superior indeed.

Dave and Mike's organisation had been reborn from the passionate hatred for all things odd that came from Shoop Winkle. The extra finances that the two men supplied increased Shoop's productivity a thousand fold. He made it his life's work to hunt down and destroy anything that was even vaguely out of the ordinary; but before destruction it went to the underground town for analysis, and to see if any profit could be made from it. They grew to new heights, or plunged new depths depending on your perspective, and all seemed well, until a certain individual caught wind of what was going on and decided that he wanted in.

Dave and Mike mysteriously disappeared shortly after the individual had managed to get Dave to sign a document handing the organisation over after spiking his drink. It was the late eighties and it was all about money and power. The businessman decided to take a heftier interest in the project and began the

process of making the organisation his. The organisation was renamed the Sphere of Influence and it was a very secret, very powerful, very sneaky organisation indeed.

There was little or nothing that Shoop could do against such financial force but more importantly there was little or nothing that he wanted to do against such financial force. He just wanted to get paid for destroying oddities and the Sphere was more than happy to oblige, as long as he didn't look into the disappearance of Dave and Mike. Shoop didn't really care that his original benefactors were gone, he was on a mission to rid the world of weirdness and that was all that mattered to him. He became blinded by the mission and could see little else; which turned out to be an almighty mistake, as the businessman used Shoop's lack of foresight to pull power away from underneath him like a magician whips away a cluttered tablecloth.

The Sphere became the solid backbone of anything that moved the human race forward in any way and the businessman, now only known as The Boss, was the head of the most powerful underground organisation in the world and Shoop was his underdog. Shoop didn't like this and The Boss knew it. Moving the company forward meant cutting loose the old. The Boss was just biding his time until the right man came along to take over Shoop's job, or until he could figure out a way of getting rid of Shoop without getting himself killed. The Boss was, to be perfectly frank, terrified of Shoop. Shoop knew all of this and wasn't going anywhere without an earth shattering fight.

So the stalemate continued, but it was only a matter of time until one of them would gain the ground they needed to finish the other off. To Shoop's frustration, it looked like the Boss was winning.

Shoop stooped through the circular door and into his retreat. It was bland, dank, grey and old. It made Shoop vaguely miserable, which is why he liked it so much.

The grey walls of the main entrance hall were littered with oil representations of the royalty of the British Isles. Kings, Queens and princes stared down from their muddy gold frames and seemed to stare their will for conservatism into Shoop's very bones. He loved that feeling. This was his shrine to all that he believed in: History, monarchy and the leadership of the upper class. It was the very essence of everything normal and non-odd. It had been that way since the dawn of civilisation. New and strange ideas threatened the very fabric of his world and the more keenly he did his job, the more oddities he found that needed to be destroyed in order to sustain the status quo. This was all very ironic because the more keenly he did his job the more the status quo weakened from his findings.

This was a paradox he was all too painfully aware of.

The main focus of the hallway was at its very end. Both the walls leading down to it were littered with portraits, but the end wall only housed one. It was massive. It was a shrine to the one leader Shoop felt embodied the very essence of his beliefs. Queen Elizabeth the first glared down at him from her unnatural



height, through her unnaturally pale face. In Shoop's mind, the virgin queen was a goddess. He had very rude dreams about her.

As was his custom, before heading into the library, he whispered to her, "You want me don't you! I know you do!" through his softest grimace and then turned right down a corridor that lead to the library.

The library wasn't as stark as the rest of the cave-house mainly because of the man who was sitting slumped, face down on the ornate antique writing desk at the far end of the room. He had insisted, from the very outset, that this room would be his and Shoop's hellish love of drabness would not interfere here.

The room was three stories high with bookshelves. It had a large mahogany table in the centre that, if it had been the only thing in there, would have looked pathetically small in comparison to the immensity of the room. It wasn't the only thing in there though; in fact there was so much paraphernalia dotted about the place that the table looked positively colossal. The room was stuffed to the brim with all manner of academic artefacts. Their were dusty antique leather chairs, ink-wells and quills, decanters half full of brandy, globes, charts, eye glasses of varying thickness, compass' and rather peculiarly and inexplicably, a stuffed Yorkshire terrier in a glass case attacking a stuffed bat. All was covered with a thin layer of dust except for a few places where thick, leather bound books had been recently moved and studied.

Shoop crept up to the sleeping man at the desk, licked his own index finger and stuffed it into the man's ear. The man sat bolt upright and squeaked,

“Mother!” while brandishing a deeply concerned expression. He flapped his arms around in a panic for a while and then looked around for a moment with bleary, encrusted eyes. One of the first things he saw through the waking blur was an unfinished glass of brandy on the desk. His saviour perceived, he proceeded to drain the glass post haste, pointed at Shoop while wincing and hissed through clenched teeth,

*“Wanker!”*

“Morning George.” Replied Shoop, grinning through a grimace, which is very hard to do, but Shoop had had a lot of practice.

George had once been the proud owner of a head-top bushel of flame red hair, but now it was a kind of burnt grey. It had been dulled through years of brandy, libraries and smoking pipes. For some reason, probably because he hadn't been outside and seen normal people very much, he had decided that a bowl cut was the hair style for him which made his long, pail, be-speckled face look even longer and more gaunt. The hair sat atop his head like a wild highland bush. It had a mind of its own and George wasn't about to try and convince it that it should be a bit more organised and polite. His full bushy moustache was in complete contradiction to the rest of his face. It was madly redder than his dull redhead top-mop was now, or had ever been and infinitely better groomed. He wore glasses that sank so far into his eye sockets that they looked as though they'd been surgically implanted and could only be removed by tying the rim to a door handle and slamming it very smartly.

Even having been asleep face down on a desk his clothes were in pristine order. His grey blue polka-dot bowtie was geometrically perfect. Shoop harboured suspicions that the tie grew out of George's neck. He also believed that the dark greenie grey cardigan that he religiously wore was in fact his real skin, but he didn't prey on that idea too much as it would mean that George was walking around half naked most of the time; the idea of which made Shoop feel physically ill.

"I've got something for you to take a look at." said Shoop.

"Hang on, let me get a brandy and fill my pipe."

"Mine's a gin and tonic." Replied Shoop

George wobbled off, still half asleep, to fetch the morning booze based sustenance as Shoop slumped into his favourite battered leather armchair.

"How was your night?" Husked George through phlegm filled, nastily rattling coughing fits.

"Followed some people, blew up a vampire, found some stuff."

"Wow, a whole night summed up in less than three seconds. Anything else or are you just going to resort to a 'grunt only' form of communication now?"

"Piss off!" suggested Shoop.

George shuffled over and presented Shoop with his liquid breakfast while scooping some of his own down his neck. He packed his pipe and lit it.

"So," said George pausing to puff on his vanilla shag that permeated a sickly sweet plume, "you found some *stuff* then eh?"

“Here.” Shoop hurled the belt buckle that he’d stolen from the girl he’d half blown up at George. George fumbled trying to catch it and, once he’d finished being clumsy, examined it.

“Hmm, this rings a bell, where did you get it?”

“From a half dead girl.”

“You really are a class act aren’t you, mugging half dead people.”

“She was trying to slay a vampire, and doing a fine job too, which is why I felt the need to half blow her up. If she could kick a three hundred year old vamp’s arse then mine would’ve been a doddle, no matter how good I am.”

“It does look a mite familiar.”

“That’s what I said. Thought you might be able to figure it out.” Said Shoop grudgingly, reminded of his failure to make the girl talk. His eyes were becoming more and more bleary as he sank further into his chair.

George emptied his brandy glass in an attempt to control his rasping throat and to make his brain function at its normal level. Then he refilled his glass just to be sure.

Looking at the buckle he asked “POS? What do you suppose that means?”

“You’re here to answer questions not asked them. I’ve done the legwork you do the brainwork, so get on with it. I’m bloody knackered.”

“I’ll have a dig about, see what I can find. The triangle obviously has dozens of connotations, Masonic, Egyptian, South American, the list goes on, Meanwhile, why don’t you....” George’s voice trailed off as he looked at Shoop.

Shoop was snoring loudly while slowly tipping his unfinished gin onto his groin. George chuckled as he helped the rest of the drink reach its destination by tipping the glass. He headed off into the mass of books and flotsam to figure out why the symbol on the buckle looked so very familiar.

## Chapter 3

### Jill finds out about Bunty

A man walked down a very old stone corridor that had been panelled over with plasterboard. The corridor was in one of the oldest castles in Scotland and he wasn't the type of character you'd expect to find casually ambling through its ghost ridden, history thick air. He wore a long sleeved, baggy hemp shirt with its fastenings unsnapped down to his amply muscled, tanned and subtly hair sprinkled chest. Around his neck were a surplus of ethnic beads and shark teeth and his skin was the colour of maple. His short ruffled hair was bleached blonde by the sun and he was far too attractive for his own good. The rough goat beard he sported only served to accentuate his full sensuous lips, his jeans were worn thin in all the right places to make them look good and his sandals were the kind that would more often be seen on the beaches of Australia than the clammy halls of ancient buildings. Over all, he wasn't the usual upper class, big toothed, tweed-wearing twot you'd bump into in a Scottish castle.

He strode through the halls with the kind of conviction that can be expected of a man who looked as though he said the word "Dude" an awful lot. In other words, not much conviction at all, but he was trying. He even tried furrowing his brow a little to appear more purposeful and serious, but it only served to make him giggle so he reverted back to his usual peaceful visage. Some people, upon seeing his facial expression, would think him gormless with

his soft worry free eyes and permanent saintly smile, but they'd be wrong. This man had wisdom beyond his years.

They say that the wiser a man becomes, he begins to realise just how much he really doesn't know. If that is the case then this chap was beyond the Dali Llama in the wisdom stakes, as he didn't look like he knew a damn thing about anything. He looked very wise indeed.

His sandals padded past tapestries and wall mounted armour. History made him happy so he grinned a bit wider and dawdled on toward the grand hall.

The hall was quite a sight to see. It was a vast circular room fifty feet in diameter with small, plush, curtained alcoves containing equally plush sofas and cushions dotted around the circular ancient stonewall. The wall was littered with a number of standards and flags and armour above which, over looking the hall, was a circular balcony that looked as though it had been designed for spectators. In the centre of the hall was a massive ornately carved and decorated round table with numerous wide, tall and expertly crafted chairs each of which was in direct alignment to the plush alcoves behind them. This was clearly a kingly room. Directly opposite the entrance to the hall, behind the grandest chair of them all was a small anti-chamber that had once housed its king and his chief advisors for more private discussions.

In the largest chair sat a small black woman. She was playing battleships with a man sitting next to her and she was winning. She had a calm and peaceful countenance and wore a long knitted waistcoat under which was a brightly embroidered red, blue, green and purple sari. Her full afro-hair was tied

back with a headscarf of equal lustre and taste and her neck was decorated with a single gold necklace with a large, tasteful, bejewelled representation of Geb, the Egyptian God of the earth, hanging from it.

The man from the corridor entered and strolled around the table, smiling at how old and groovy everything was.

“Hey Jill,” He said

“Hey Steve,” replied the woman, “How’s it going?”

“Good yeah.” He looked around the room a bit more, grinning moronically. Then, as if he’d received a small shock through his brain, he started talking again, “ooh, I forgot, um, sorry to interrupt and everything but, um, I think I’ve got a bit of bad news.”

“Don’t worry about it, why don’t you grab a seat there, I was just telling Bob about the time I had that chat with Moses on top of mount Sinai with a torch and a megaphone.” She said while gesturing to the other man seated next to her at the substantial table.

“Dude, I love that story.” said Steve manoeuvring into a chair next to Jill.

“Yeah me too.” said Bob, a pained expression on his face and his tongue dangling from the corner of his mouth as he considered his next battleships move.

“Anyway, what’s the skinny there Steve?” asked Jill.

“Well, sorry to have to tell you this dude, but, well, um, I just found out that, um, well, Bunty Autumn’s gone and shuffled off her mortal coil. She’s been killed man!”



“Oh man that’s a shame, she was the only one that could really give me a run for my money at battleships, no offence there Bob.”

“None taken,” said Bob in a chirpy voice and with very few boats left on his board, “I know I suck at this, I just play ‘cause I like the sound the ships make when they get hit. Fancy some jenga afterwards? The wood bricks make nice clunky noises when they fall over.”

“Sounds good man. Anyhow, what happened to Bunty Steve?”

“Well dude, I’m sorry to say it man, but, um, it was Shoop Winkle.”

“Blimey, that boy doesn’t half keep himself busy. Didn’t he get rid of a whole band of werewolves just last week?”

“Yip,” Replied Steve, “tracked them for a while, found their little hide-out and fired a surface to surface missile in there.”

“Quite a guy.”

“Yeah, one thing is though.” Steve went on

“Mmhhmm?” questioned Jill.

“Well it seams Bunty’s seal is missing. She wore it on her belt; she thought it looked pretty funky as a buckle. I kept telling her to hide it but she thought it looked good, and you know how she loved to look good.”

“Not wrong there, if I was so inclined I’d have gone for her myself.” Said Jill

“Hhhmm, a nice little package she had going on, she’ll be missed.”

“Yeah but don’t worry, she may be dead but I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

“You know it dude! But I think the point that should be focused on here is that Shoop Winkle may well be in possession of something that’ll make him aware of your existence.”

“*Dude!*” Exclaimed Bob looking up from the game and appearing slightly worried, which was difficult for him as he was generally a very relaxed sort of guy. You could tell by the amount of ethnic beads he wore.

Steve had been carrying a file with a full report on the Bunty’s death and lobbed it over to Jill. It slapped on the table.

“Easy there,” said Jill, “Merlyn gave me this table for my sixteenth birthday back when I was Artorius.”

“Sorry dude. It’s just that Winkle guy gets me a bit jittery you know?”

“Don’t sweat it, it’ll all come good in the end. So, Shoop’s gone be lookin’ us up soon is he?”

“Looks likely.”

“Bummer!”

“Yeah, wadya wanna do?”

“Well, I think someone should get over to Jeeves’ place and get him to safety. Once Shoop tracks Bunty down, Jeeves’ place will be the first place he goes. It might be a good idea to get some removal guys down there and clear out his vault as well. There’s a lot of telling stuff in there.”

“Gotcha, I’ll get some guys onto it.”

“Looks like we might have an eventful few weeks on our hands, if all goes well that is,” Jill turned to Bob, “is everyone ready for the unexpected?”

“With you around baby, we couldn’t be anything else.”

“Cool. Well let’s just roll with the punches and see what treats the universe has in store for us. Would you like a cup of tea Steve, you look parched.”

“Well, I really should get these guys down to Jeeves’ place.”

“Oh come on, stay, we’ve got plenty of time before Mr Winkle gets around to finding Jeeves’ vault. I can tell you that Moses story again.”

“Where are you up to?” enquired Steve getting a little excited.

“She was just about to shine her torch on the bush to catch Moses’ attention.” said Bob.

“Oh all right, carry on with the yarn and I’ll put the kettle on.” Steve wondered over to a small table at the edge of the room on which rested a kettle, a large variety of herbal teas and some very big mugs. “Good thinking with the torch Jill, *the bush burned but didn’t disintegrate*, it’s genius for a last minute improv’.”

“Oh please, you’ll make me blush.” Jill blushed a little under her dark skin then continued with her story, “So, as I was saying, all Moses’ people were getting well out of hand. They’d started off well but I felt that they needed a little nudge in the right direction. So I left a few hints that Moses should be going for a walk up a mountain, grabbed my megaphone and spotlight and waited for him on top of Mount Sinai...”

## Chapter 4

### The Dream and the Priory

Shoop was looking at a room full of what he would call “Hippy crap”. There were tie-dyed batiks on the wall, an old knackered guitar resting precariously on a salvaged armchair, porcelain reconstructions of Jim Morrison and psychedelic posters involving hemp plants. All these were bound together with the sickeningly potent stench of too many cheap incense sticks, a bunch of which were sprouting from a clay model of a dragon like arrows in general Custer’s back. There was so many sticking out of the poor creature that it was almost completely hidden by the mounds of ash.

The room was ill lit with a few candles and had a single ceiling light dangling over a small round table in the middle of the room. The lamp threw a soft, narrow field of light onto the dark red velvet tablecloth. Shoop found himself wondering why they would need a candle on the table as well as light from above, but then, he reasoned, hippies never made much sense at the best of times and he promptly filed it in the “weird things hippies do and shouldn’t be understood!” section of his brain. Three people sat around the table with hands linked, swaying with sickening ethereal conviction.

“Is there anybody there?” asked one of the women at the table vacantly leaking the words into the air, apparently trying to push her voice past the dimensions between life and death. Shoop could tell that the “weird things that

hippies do!” portion of his brain was going to be receiving an awful lot of information over the course of the farce he was watching.

Before long Shoop got bored of watching the hippies and looked around the room a bit.

He was slightly perturbed by how big everything appeared to be. The doors were the height of buildings and the hippies were giants, then it occurred to him that maybe it wasn't that the room and everything in it was very big, but that perhaps he was just very small. He looked down at his hands and saw ten chubby little digits protruding from his normally bony hands. On further inspection of himself he was alarmed to find that he was wearing dungarees and small red patent leather buckled shoes.

All of a sudden he understood what was going on. He was in the dream again. The same dream that had been haunting him for fifty years. Every time he fell asleep it would creep up on him. Every night it would confuse him. Every night he would be bemused by the huge room and the pointless candle on the red velvet table cloth, and every night he, after realising that he was dreaming, would wish that he was his normal size so that he could give the protagonists of the scene a good stiff kicking.

He didn't know exactly how old he was in the dream, maybe four or five years old at the most, but he remembered knowing, even at such a tender age, that hippies were morons, even if they were his parents, and that all they needed was a nice big fat wake-up call. As an adult he'd discovered that a severe pounding usually served amply as a wake up bell on these sorts of people, but he

couldn't affect his will in the dream, he couldn't give them what he thought they deserved. He was too small and powerless, a feeling he absolutely despised

Being in the dream was frustrating for Shoop. He had the mind to do what he wanted to do, but not the body. He had no control over anything other than his own sleeping brain. He was nothing more than a spectator inside the body of the boy and had no control over the wobbly, toddling, angry little creature. He looked on, through the eyes of a child, with a mix of bemusement and pity for all the poor deluded people in the room.

"Is there anybody there?" came the question again.

She repeated the phrase again and again to no avail. No cold winds blew through the room, no furniture flew around, no voices whispered their way through from other realms. It was a shambles.

This went on for a while and the boy Shoop became interested in a small piece of fluff that he'd found on the floor and began tasting it as Shoop the man watched on feeling a little queasy.

"Is there anybody there?" The two people sitting with the woman were beginning to sway a little less and gave each other worried sideways glances. They'd stepped into this situation completely convinced that something would happen. They'd been told that if they had even the smallest of doubts then it wouldn't work. They had been told that doubt tended to block the ether and that if they held any doubt in them, then the spirits wouldn't be able to get through. Of course it was a little difficult *not* to doubt after thirty-seven unsuccessful attempts but then what could you do?

The young couple were determined to find some meaning in the universe, especially since they'd done everything they thought that they should've done to raise a sweet, calm, well centred baby, so it was very disappointing to them to see him slowly grow into a sadistic little cretin. They needed answers.

The boy Shoop didn't care about meaning in the universe, he just cared about the fact that his piece of fluff tasted like courgette. Even at five or so years old, he knew that fluff didn't usually taste like courgette. He'd tasted a lot of fluff in his time and it usually tasted like twiglets, not Courgette.

The other thing that he cared about, when he wasn't wondering about fluff, was his hamster. He loved his hamster more than anything in the world. His hamster made sense to him. His hamster didn't smoke things from large cylindrical pipes like his mum and dad did. His hamster didn't sit around tables for nights on end trying to contact things that couldn't be seen and were most probably not being seen for a damn good reason. The way that Shoop saw it, either these things that couldn't be seen were not being seen because they just weren't there, or they weren't being seen because they thought that his hippy dope-head parents weren't worth the effort.

Shoop believed a little of both.

His hamster didn't try and make him act nice to people all the time and force him to try and see deeper meanings in the universe the way his parents did.

He didn't really get on with his parents. He thought they were a bit unhinged. They appeared to have one foot planted in some sort of imagined other realm where the wise and peaceful were said to hold their souls, and the

other foot shakily wavering in the drug soaked mist of their version of the real world. It just wasn't, to Shoop's mind, the way things were supposed to be. He didn't quite know how he was so sure that life wasn't the way his parents said it was but he was sure none the less. At such a young age he should've been blindly adhering to his parent's word as law, just like any other five year old but he could see through their daft hippy mist. Somehow Shoop had a will strong enough to know that the world with which he was presented was not, as most infants would believe, the absolute truth, but was in fact a stinking rancid pile of nonsensical hippy crap.

Shoop was an exceptionally bright boy and went against everything that his parents wanted him to be from very early on. His parents saw his behaviour as rebellion for rebellions sake, which was something that they could understand because they had rebelled against their oppressive parents, but they didn't know why they, as rebellious people, were being so vehemently rebelled *against*. They were of the opinion that "Surely they were the good guys?" and, as such, shouldn't be experiencing any resistance.

Shoop thought differently than his parents. He didn't think that he was rebelling for the sake of it; in fact rebelling had absolutely nothing to do with it. He behaved the way he did because he thought his parents were pillocks. He thought everything they said and did was a pile of pretentious, self righteous, unrealistic, dribbling psychobabble and was not about to tow their line just because they wanted him to.



For years they tried to lure him into the hippy fold, sometimes even angrily, which was always surprising because it took a hell of a lot for Shoop's parents to lose their tempers. They thought that Shoop's stubborn ability to disbelieve everything that they believed was downright stupidity on his behalf. They believed in freedom and love and above all the right for any man woman or child to be anything that they wanted to be, as long as it agreed with them. They absolutely believed that they were the good guys and that their way was the only way for human kind to be happy and peaceful.

Shoop's parents had believed that they'd found the absolute truth of the universe and couldn't understand why Shoop wouldn't adhere to it. This all seemed very hypocritical to Shoop. They wanted him to be anything his heart desired, as long as he agreed with *them*.

In his early teens Shoop decided that he'd pretend to be a born again Christian for a while, just for a laugh, and every time he was anywhere near his parents he'd try and convert them, saying things like, "But this is the absolute truth of the universe, I can't believe you won't adhere to it!" which annoyed them quite a lot.

Shoop had reached a point in his relationship with his folks where he knew that they weren't going to stop their narcissistic belief that they were amongst the best people that mankind had to offer, due to the fact that they "cared" about the earth, and the environment, and animals, and human rights and hugged trees etc. etc. He realised that they were never going to even try to entertain the prospect that the universe was here before us and would be here long after we

have gone the way of the dodo, and therefore didn't care about us. The way he saw it, it was blatantly egocentric to think that the universe did anything other than *not* give a crap about the Earth and its inhabitants. He thought that the universe was too big to care about one insignificantly small group of people, who lived on an infinitesimally small planet, which circled an offensively insignificant star. Shoop thought he had more in common with the universe than his parents, simply because he shared the universe's ability to not give a crap.

Eventually, after decades of Shoop intentionally winding them up and going against everything that they believed, they stopped calling him and left him alone to do whatever it was he wanted to do; finally realising that the only way to the absolute truth of the universe was to realise that, when push comes to shove, nobody actually knows a damn thing about anything and there really is, unequivocally and absolutely no point to existence at all! This realisation gave them both massive nervous breakdowns and they spent the rest of their lives as vegetables.

Callously, Shoop didn't give a toss.

Back in the dream, tasting the fluff from the carpet had become boring for the young Shoop and there was nothing else in the room that grabbed Shoop's attention, so he resorted to doing impersonations of the weird woman sitting at the table with his parents. He started mumbling in a sort mock wordless whine that got progressively louder every time she would say her line, "Is there anybody there?" His mother shot him a look that didn't so much say "Stop it or else!" but

more “Darling, you are being disrespectful of another human beings deeply held beliefs and that makes me feel sad. I want to share the fact that it makes me feel sad and find out how that makes you feel.”

Shoop gave her a look that said, “Piss off!”

“Is there anybody there?” Said the woman again.

*“Is there anybody there?”* Said the boy Shoop in the most mocking tone he could muster, which was very mocking indeed. As everybody knows, five year olds are very good at mocking people. Shoop could mock the life out of most other five year olds, in fact, if there had been some sort of mocking Olympic event, Shoop would undoubtedly have snagged the gold.

*“Is anybody TTTTHHHHEEEERRRRREEEEE?”* He mocked again.

Suddenly Shoop felt a gust of cold air fly straight through him. Everything in the room began to shake, a cushion jumped off the throw rug on the couch and the clay dragon spat out all of its incense sticks. Everything in the room whirled around in a hurricane of unnatural activity.

Shoop’s hamster cage, which was perching on top of a very high and shoddily built bookcase, decided that it was going to make a break for the door and hurled itself off the shelf.

“BARRY....NOOOOOOOOOOO!” Cried Shoop. Barry was the name of his hamster. It was the name he would’ve liked for himself had he not been named by drug addled hippy morons.

Shoop woke up with a cold damp crotch where his drink had poured onto it and a warm wet finger being squelching into his ear. Without hesitation he reached forward and flicked George with viciously abnormal strength in the left testicle.

George stared into oblivion for a moment as if to decide whether or not he was in pain. He furrowed his brow a little, cocked his head to one side and then the agony hit him. It took hold of all his motor functions and he dropped to the floor squealing like a hen-night at a strip bar.

Shoop raised an eyebrow and frowned at George with not a hint of sympathy. As far as he was concerned George had deserved his punishment.

After a moment or two George attempted to speak. "You were dreaming the dream again." Is what he tried to say, but because of the wincing and gagging it came out a little more like this:

"You were .... *Cough* .... drea ..... *gag* ..... *splutter* ..... dreaming .....*puke* ..... *hack* ..... the drea ..... *boak* .... *Cough* ..... the drea ..... *splutter* ..... *splutter* .... *Gag* .....*puke* ..... *cough* .... *hack* ..... *cough* .... The drea ..... *cough* ..... *gasp* ..... the dream again .... *spew* ..... *splat* .... *gasp*"

Shoop ambled over to the drinks cabinet and poured himself a stiff gin while George tried to compose himself and stop vomiting.

"My dreams are none of your damn business," Shoop hissed over his shoulder. "I thought we'd covered that before."

"Yeah," strained George, the veins on his neck settling down a little but the bright red of his face still glowing, "I get the message."

Shoop swiftly threw the gin down his neck, poured another, slapped some pills into his mouth from a pillbox and washed them down with the second drink. He liked to call it his three course breakfast. The pills were an entire day's sustenance in easy to swallow form. They had been developed by The Sphere Of Influence and had been sold to numerous military and aeronautic agencies around the world. Shoop liked them because it meant he never had to chew again. Shoop didn't like chewing. He much preferred liquid sustenance.

"Was there a reason for waking me?" asked Shoop.

"Well it certainly wasn't to let you prevent me from ever having children that's for sure," George fumbled to his feet clutching his groin, "I've found some information on that belt buckle you brought in."

"Go on." prompted Shoop.

"Well, you were right about it ringing a bell, it did with me too. Do you remember maybe four or five years ago there was that American chap who claimed that Jesus had survived the whole crucifixion thing and spent the rest of his life peacefully meditating and teaching in the east."

"Oh yeah," said Shoop gazing off into the middle distance picturing the memory. "I forgot about him. He won't be having any theories about anything any time soon that's for sure. Not unless he's figured out how to put those little pieces of his brain back where they should be"

"I'd still like to know how you managed to give the poor sod a lobotomy using nothing but a toothpick."

“Well George, I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again, if you ever cross me you’ll get first hand experience.”

“The only reason I hang around here is for your warm, affable company Shoop.” Said George sarcastically, “Anyway,” said George moving things along as the idea of pain was not a welcome subject for him, especially with his groin still aching from Shoop’s heavy flick, “Something about the belt buckle you found put me in mind of him. I don’t know why, I think it was what Americans call a *hunch*. So, I went through the file on him and as I was scanning through it I found some photos.” George paused to take a hit of brandy, “If you remember, you tracked him down to that crypt in India, you know, the one he reckoned was the last resting place of Jesus.”

“Yeah I remember.”

“Well, at the time something about the crypt didn’t seem quite right. I couldn’t figure it out five years ago, so I thought I’d go back to it and study the pictures to see if I could track down what was wrong but the more I looked the less I saw. There was something that was bugging me but I couldn’t pin it down. I’d look for a while, then go back and read through the file to see if I could find anything there; wonder off and try to find the symbol somewhere else etcetera, but I kept drawing a blank. This went on for quite some time when I noticed something. The more I looked the more I found my eye travelling to the same place in the photos. It was so obscure and subtle that I almost completely missed it. It was a small carving in the wood of the wall of the tomb. It’s barely even visible with the photo we had so I zoomed in on it and cleaned it up, here

look.” George handed Shoop an enlargement on a section of the wall in the tomb.

“What am I looking at?”

“There,” George pointed to a specific part of the wall where a barely recognisable ruin of a carving could be seen. The tomb was housed in an ornate carved wooden structure in the centre of an unassuming white stone building. Around the walls of the internal crypt, were carved patterns in the wood that seemed quite uniform, except the one section that George had brought to Shoop’s attention.

“You’re right, it doesn’t quite fit in with the rest of the room but what is it?” asked Shoop.

“Well, at the time we were there I seem to remember thinking that it might be some sort of vandalism. I suppose that’s why I kept looking straight past it.”

George handed Shoop a piece of clear plastic with a scanned printout of Bunty’s belt buckle on it. Shoop placed it over the picture and lined it up with ruined carving. Apart from the letters depicted, Shoop could see that the designs were a near perfect match for each other. The carving had been so degraded over the years that it hadn’t seemed even vaguely similar to the buckle, but when placed, one over the other, the similarity was clear.

“The carving on the wall in the tomb is in Hindi, but basically can be translated to P.O.S.” said George, “It’s very stylised and degraded but the letters can just be made out.”

“Bugger!” Shoop sighed heavily and dropped his shoulders.

“What? I thought this was good news, it’s a lead isn’t it?” said George, a little confused.

“Yes George, it’s a lead, but the thing is it’s a lead that smells a bit like it could be religion based, and you know how I hate getting too involved with that crap. Let the church goers have their fun and the unwavering power of the Pope continue by all means. I mean, as long as they keep it behind closed doors and it doesn’t get in my way it’s fine, I just don’t like it when I have to deal with it. Especially when it’s related to crackpot conspiracy theories about how Jesus *didn’t* actually die the way the churches have been telling us for two thousand years. The church hates it when people tell them they’re wrong and that they’ve based their entire religion on thousands of years of Chinese whispers and power struggles”

“Give me a vampire or an alien to tear to pieces and I’m happy; they’re easy. You can just run in, smack ‘em over the head or blow them up and nobody tends to mind too much, but as soon as you start messing with the church you get all those crazy Vatican bastards coming after you. They are, man for man, *infinitely* nastier than anything I’ve ever faced, even that huge sewer dwelling mutant super villain I came up against in eighty nine, which is odd really, because they’re supposed to be the stronghold of all that’s decent and good in mankind.”

“I think you may be jumping the gun a little bit there Shoop, all we’ve got so far is a loose connection between a girls belt and a two thousand year old crypt, let’s not loose our heads and go getting too excited.” Said George knowing



how worked up Shoop got about religious things and weird things crossing swords, but secretly hoping that it was exactly as Shoop suspected.

Shoop liked it when these things were all nicely compartmentalised and kept away from each other.

For the most part, this is what happened. Vampires couldn't go into churches without wincing with the agony of seeing so many crucifixes and little green men had little or no interest in Buddhist temples, which meant that weird things tended to stay away from religion. Likewise, if you mentioned that you believed in werewolves and leprechauns to the clergy, they tended to send for the men in white coats, which kept religion nicely away from weird things.

This tended to be the trend but every now and then Shoop would dig something up that would bridge the two. These occasions always ended very messily, a few of which he'd just managed to escape from with his life.

The Gentleman that Shoop had met in the crypt in India had been lobotomised for very good reason. He was about to build a bridge between the two worlds of the weird and the religious. Proving that Jesus lived beyond the crucifixion was bad enough, but this fruitcake believed that he'd lived on after his *real* death and was alive and well and still touring the planet. Shoop had stopped the lunacy just in time and his pet hate of the two worlds mingling had been narrowly avoided. He didn't care if Jesus didn't die at the cross, in fact he thought that it was more than vaguely conceivable, but as for managing to stick around the planet for two thousand years, well... that was clearly just plain

lunacy. Shoop had done him a favour by lobotomising him. As far as Shoop was concerned, the little thorn in his side that had been that lunatic man had been plucked out and gotten rid of a good long time ago; yet here they were looking over the file of that particular thorn and contemplating the real possibility of sticking it back in Shoop's side again.

Shoop didn't like things sticking in his side.

"You're right," grunted Shoop trying to calm himself down with some more booze. "But we need to figure out what this all means without them upstairs figuring out what's going on."

"Why not?"

"I don't want them near this one. I'm getting some strange feelings about this and would rather the Boss didn't know about it."

"What sort of strange feelings?"

"The same ones I used to get in the old days and I want to figure out what it all means before the Sphere find out about it."

"Fair enough," said George, doing his utmost not to sound too enthused by what Shoop had just said. Shoop hadn't been able to feel the gut feelings he used to have for many years and the feelings, back in the day, always came before something exceptionally interesting happened. George didn't want to get his hopes up too much though. "Where do we go from here?"

"Well George, I'm going to have a bit more shut-eye and you're going to find out everything you can about this Bunty girl. I want to know who she hangs

out with, where she lives, what she has for breakfast, the lot. I especially want to know if she's connected to any organisations. She was very clued up and I'd be absolutely amazed if she wasn't being taught and trained by someone somewhere."

"I'll get back to the computer then shall I?" said George.

"Yip!" Shoop headed back to his comfy old armchair, "and be nicer about waking me up next time or you'll loose *both* of your bollocks instead of just having one of them flicked!"

Shoop floated back into his dream about hamsters and hippies while George shoved his glasses further up his nose, imbedding them in his eye sockets, and got to work.

Some hours later George was trying to work out how he could wake Shoop up without causing himself injury. There was a good chance that Shoop would lash out at him just to reinforce that he should never try to wake Shoop in a comedy manner ever again.

Shoop was on the armchair grunting and writhing. He was clearly having the dream and it was just a matter of seconds before he screamed out BARRY NOOOOOO at the top of his lungs. George decided it'd be best to go for the friendly approach. He filled a glass with a gin and tonic and started waving it under his nose.

Shoop's grimace was so deeply installed that even when he was asleep it didn't change, even in the face of the grand hamster losing emotions in his

dream. His face had cemented itself into a grumpy scowl years ago and wasn't about to change its habits now. The whiff of gin made Shoop happy in his sleep and his expression twisted into a kind of pained smirk. It was as if his facial muscles had become so accustomed to Shoop forcing his misery on them that any other expression made his muscles contort in manners that no face should ever be capable of. It was the facial equivalent of a paralysed person attempting yoga while having an epileptic fit... on smack!

His brain registered exactly what it was that his nose smelt and his eyes popped open to search for his quarry. He grabbed at the contents of George's hand, threw the drink back and, with a variety of sleepy grunts and moans, went for a refill. "What have you managed to dig up?"

"Well, I've managed to get very little on the girl. All I could find was that she worked in a suburban high school as a guidance councillor. She was very much under the radar so I tried cross-referencing her with all known secret societies and came up blank. Then I cross referenced the names of all the school's employees, just in case, and came up trumps. There's a librarian that works in the school with her by the name of Jeeves and his name lit up like an H-bomb. He's been a member of a number of organisations including the Rosicrucian's, the Templars, the Masons and the Hermetic order of the golden dawn."

"A few heavy weights there!" exclaimed Shoop through a sleep and drink gravelled throat.

“Yeah, but here’s the bad news, I used the Sphere’s computer to find him and it turns out they’ve got him pegged as a member of an organisation called The Priory Of Sion.”

George let this information float in the air in for a moment, letting Shoop grasp the full gravity of it in his own time. He’d long since learned not to make Shoop feel intellectually inferior, it usually ended in physical pain. Shoop had only just woken, and was never very sharp until his gin started kicking in. Finally it hit him, “Priory Of Sion? .....Shit! .....P.O.S..... The letters from the buckle!”

“Exactly!” nodded George and raised his eyebrows in a facial expression the equivalent of a boy talking to a dog that’d just managed to *sit* when it was told for the first time. “Well done, good boy, who’s a clever puppy, yes you are, yeeesss youuuu aarrree!” it seemed to say.

Shoop caught the expression and darted a look of warning in George’s direction. George recoiled instantly.

“How long have they known about this?” Shoop went on. He was visibly disturbed by the news that the Sphere knew about this. This P.O.S. or Priory Of Sion, were already on their books. It was not good news. He had very much wanted to be one step ahead of them and was clearly not happy about the prospect of them being one step ahead of him.

“It seems that they had a Templar in custody who talked in his sleep.” George went on, “He started babbling on about some organisation called the Priory of Sion, they didn’t think much of it at first, they just thought he was

rambling, but then he mentioned a few half garbled names and they started getting suspicious. They woke him up and gave him a dose of truth serum. They managed to get a few names out of him before he realised what he was doing and decided to kill himself by holding his own breath.”

“Doing what?”

“He killed himself by holding his own breath!”

“Bollocks he did, that’s not possible! His body wouldn’t let him do it!”

“Says it right here in the file...look for yourself if you like.”

“Nah, I’ll take your word for it, but really, that’s weird!”

“Indeed.”

“Have they followed up on the lead though, are they trying to find out more about this Priory thing?” quizzed Shoop.

“Luckily they’ve been prioritising the hunt for alien technology recently and put it on a back burner. If they knew what we know now, if they had any inkling that it had anything to do with that crypt in India, then they’d definitely step up an investigation into it.”

Shoop pondered on this for a minute. “That’s a relief,” he said rubbing his chin, “but I’m not going to wait until they figure out that they’ve got something hot sitting on their computer. We’d better move on this right away. I’m getting a funny feeling about it!” He paced for a while and looked off into space while playing with his stubble. Then he stopped. “I’m going upstairs George. I’m going to have to have a nice polite chat with the Boss, distract him, try and put

myself off his radar for a while. Then I'm going to go and see if I can get some information out of this Jeeves fellow out at the school."

"Okay, what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing, just sit tight, I'll get back to you once I've had a chat with Jeeves."

"Wait there a minute," said George, "I'll just go and get you the address for the school and his home address in case you miss him."

Shoop picked up his coat and hat and got ready to head off.

If life had taught Shoop one thing, it was never to get your hopes up, but he felt different with this case.

Shoop had a supernatural ability to attract the unusual and when he was following a good lead something tingled inside him. It was like heartburn but further down toward the pit of his stomach and it didn't so much burn as warm gently and tingle a bit. It had been so long since he'd had a sensation like it that he almost didn't recognise it when it came and as he picked up his hat and jacket, getting ready to leave, he realised that he was onto a good thing.

His senses had been dulling progressively over the last twenty years and he'd begun to believe that he was losing his edge. He did the job that he did for two main reasons; because he couldn't stand anything that was even slightly abnormal being in one piece and because he really liked knowing secrets. At least that was the way that it had started. Somewhere down the line it had all become about the money and not the destructive, angry principals to which he so

adamantly clung. It had started out making sense and had been full of excitement and adventure, but as the years had edged on and his senses dulled a little year by year, he'd been left with a permanent lethargy that always seemed to lie just out of reach of his perception. He hadn't realised how lacklustre he'd become until he started getting some of his old senses back. He hadn't known how sluggish he'd been until that moment, standing there, putting on his hat, realising what the tingle in the pit of his stomach actually *was*, that he felt a little reborn.

His overlords had done a good job of keeping him in the organisation while taking away everything that he was. He'd felt like a shell for so many years. Like an animal that'd been tied up for too long and had lost it's will to be wild.

He kept on working, however, because there was little else he could do. He kept toiling away, hoping beyond hope that something would come along to wake him from his forced slumber and he'd be lead back to his old sense of freedom. He wanted the good old days back. He wanted to be back in charge of his own life. He wanted his self respect and power back. He wanted the power of secrecy and inflicting fear.

It was difficult for Shoop not to get excited about the tingles that were going on in his stomach, but he had to keep his cool. He'd had false alarms before and things had gone a bit pear shaped. He couldn't afford to make a mistake with anything as important as his sixth sense.

But this wasn't like the false alarms.



“NO!” he thought, “I *know* what a false alarm feels like. It feels a lot like Delhi belly. This is different, this is the feeling I used to get when I was a child and a young man.” It was like he was twenty years old again. He could smell the potential in this case as potently as the cigarette smoke crawling up his nose as his cancer stick hung from his lips. It felt like the keepers of his inner caged animal had left the door open by accident. Shoop wasn’t the type of man to ignore an opportunity. He could feel the old venom returning to his fangs.

George came back into the room as Shoop pulled on his raincoat. “Here you go, the schools called Craigmount High and it’s out toward the airport past Corstorphine. He should be there now. I phoned them and they said that he very rarely left the library before 7pm”

“Right!”

“Are you alright Shoop, you look, well, you look... different!”

Shoop paused for a moment looking George dead in the eye. “Now I don’t want you to get too excited, it might be nothing, but, well, It’s the tingle George! I think it’s back!”

“Holy shit!” blurted George completely ignoring his previous attempt at not getting too excited, “are you sure? I mean absolutely? Because you’ve been wrong before!”

“Best not get the hopes up too high is all I’ll say! I’ll head up to the school and see what I can find. But there’s no hiding it, I’ve got a good feeling about this one.” Said Shoop with a positively hellish glint in his beady little eye.

Shoop left George's library with a smirk-ridden grimace on his face. When people get a good feeling inside them they tend to get a bit of a skip in their stride. Shoop was the opposite, his strides tended to appear even more menacing. He seemed larger, more primal and his grimace had a fire inside it that seemed to punch through his face and threaten to burn anyone that looked at it.

He bounded through the small underground town. He was a blue flaming comet. His heat was cold and shadowy yet luminous at the same time. He moved like a whisper. People felt him before they could see him. It was like they could feel his malice at a distance, like a chill wind blowing through all matter.

His old resolve was nudging itself awake and he liked the feeling.

He took out his phone.

"It's me, yeah I know it's been a while. I need you to get as many of the boys together as you can. I need you to check out an address for me, it's important, the sixth sense is back on, and don't let the Sphere know!"

# Chapter 5

## The Boss

Shoop wandered out of the cleaning cupboard, past the coffee house franchise, (flicking his cigarette butt in) and on to the lifts.

His sixth sense was all a tingle; the way he was feeling he could take on the whole organisation and not get a scratch, but he knew better than that. He knew that he had to keep himself under control if the Boss was to be kept out of his investigations. He would have to try and keep his cool long enough to convince the Boss that he wasn't up to anything.

The Boss knew that Shoop had spent the previous evening tailing one of the ancient vampires and would be expecting Shoop to have secured the creature in the basement ready for questioning and experimentation. The fact that he had landed a grenade between the creature's legs was bound to get on the boss's nerves, which meant that there would be one of their usual tense confrontations.

They were never openly aggressive with each other, their face-offs were always subtle and under the surface, each trying to read between the lines to subtly ascertain the truth behind the other's façade, each trying to hide messages in their words and demeanours that would throw the other off the real scent. It was a conversational game of chess; it was two lions walking in circles around each other, both waiting for the other to challenge its authority. Shoop had the upper hand in this regard; his senses were infinitely better than the Bosses at

picking up the whispering undercurrents of a person's true meaning and personality. Even with this, though, a confrontation would be best avoided. Even the smallest of mental skirmishes would make it difficult for Shoop to keep his cool feeling the way he was and it was very important that he held The Boss at arm's length until he could figure out the whole Priory of Sion thing.

He stepped into the lift and rode it to the top of the building slowing his breathing as he went in an attempt to calm himself. As he stepped out he was reminded, yet again, of just how important affluence was to the Sphere Of Influence as his eyes scanned the vast reception hall. There were no offices other than The Bosses on this floor and it seemed like a bit of a waist of space to Shoop. He was in a huge space that was spattered with tasteful minimalist finery and smelt just that little bit *too* clean and fragranced. They'd clearly hired someone to try and recreate some manner of eastern style temple without the slightest idea of what such things actually look like because they'd never gone further than the chip shop on the other side of town. Then he'd chosen to poison the air with the synthesised scent of imagined oriental flowers that ended smelling more like a combination of Old Spice, maple syrup, sweaty legs and chiropodists off-cuts.

It was obvious that nobody came up to the top floor very often. The carpet that spanned the hall was unnecessarily plush, soft and cream coloured. Busy offices didn't have cream coloured carpets, coffee got spilt on such floor coverings, people actually walked on them. Normal busy offices tended to have thin, soul sucking grey floor tiles. The kind that are the colour of pavements and

tend to have chewing gum stuck to them. The carpet in *this* hall would make the average person's mattress seem cheap and nasty.

There was a reception desk against one of the walls. It was made of bamboo and slate, hinting that wealth was akin to the deepest eastern wisdom. The receptionist, seeing Shoop approach, increased her defensive demeanour to a point that would've worried your average battle hardened soldier. It was the human equivalent of a cobra's hood. Shoop barely noticed.

"You can't smoke in here Mr Winkle!" said the cobra woman.

Shoop, without even acknowledging the woman's existence, dropped his cigarette on the plush carpet and drove it into the thick soft pile... a lot!

The woman looked like she might try to object until Shoop locked eyes with her, firing a funky rancid grimace at her that made her lungs temporarily forget what they were usually used for.

She backed down.

In all the years that she'd worked for the Boss and the countless times she'd had to deal with Shoop Winkle, she had never seen such intensity in his eyes before. He seemed taller, younger, more animal like. She had always been so disgusted with him and found him to be the most repulsive sort of person, but the small flash of venom that had darted at her had revealed a torrent of animal nature surging under Shoop's surface. She suddenly felt a bit flushed. Her cobra hood didn't just unfold, it dropped clean off, shrivelled up into raisin sized ball and ate itself just to get away!

"Um, just, ah..." she stuttered, clearly flustered by Shoop's new aura.

“I’ll go in shall I?” Shoop’s gravelled voice punched her in the guts.

“Yes, that’d be fine...yes,” she watched as he walked off and then seriously considered taking a copy of men’s health from the waiting area and heading into the ladies room to relieve the arousal she felt at such fear and intimidation.

Shoop entered The Bosses office. It was a long, dark wood panelled space with a conference table that stretched the length of it. It was lit by brushed metal lamp shades that hung half way down the height of the room which made the ceiling almost invisible and at the far end of the room, the entire wall, which was about 15 feet high and just as wide, was made of glass and offered a superb view of Edinburgh castle. The Boss sat in a chair, much larger than the others that spanned each side of the rectangular conference table, at the far end of the room, silhouetted against the view. He was the master of his realm, perched on his throne.

The Boss liked the effect of being silhouetted against the huge window. He liked the effect it seemed to have on the majority of people that came into his office. It immediately put them at a disadvantage. They would enter and almost instantly start squinting to try and find some sort of features on the darkened figure sitting against the glare of the window. It always made people look a little foolish, which in turn made The Boss feel superior. Shoop, however, was an entirely different matter. He just pulled his hat down in front of his eyes, walked the length of the room, passed The Boss and leant against the window,

effectively reversing the situation, forcing the Boss to swivel his chair around to see Shoop, silhouetted against the window. He did it every time and loved the effect it had on The Boss.

“Must you do that Winkle? It’s bloody bright out there.” Said The Boss.

Shoop said nothing, took out a cigarette and lit it.

“Anyway,” continued The Boss, “how did it go last night? Did you have any luck bringing that vampire in?”

The Boss performed a curious kind of facial sneer as the word vampire left his mouth. He didn’t like the fact that things like vampires were a reality. He’d spend his life trying to accrue a mountainous fortune and for businessmen of his ilk people who believed in vampires had previously been wedged into two neat little categories; lunatics and teenagers. The fact was, though, that vampires *did* exist, and he was one of the people that had been forced believe in them.

It’s difficult not to believe in something that you’ve personally dissected in a lab.

The sneer sat curiously well on his face. It seemed to match the rest of it. He was a scrawny man of considerable height with a moustache that hinted at the appreciation of the way that Hitler had run his country. He wore his hair in a side parting with far too much oily hair cream in it and flashes of grey strands mottled through its slippery fluidity. His skin was oily too, pail and clammy and its greasy sheen made it look as if he perspired constantly. He had cold, grey, dead and angry eyes and facial lines on his long thin severe features that suggested

his soul to be utterly joyless. He was extremely powerful, and like a lot of extremely powerful people, was unreservedly revolting both inside and out.

“Well,” Shoop paused for a moment wondering how he was going to let The Boss down easily. Then he decided against it and said, “Things got a bit violent actually.”

“Jesus Winkle, don’t tell me that he’s in lots of different pieces. I specifically asked you to bring him back in one piece and I’m going to be very upset if he’s in any more bits than that.”

The Boss fired a warning look at him that would’ve made a constipated man runny. Shoop barely registered it, which got on the Bosses nerves a bit.

Shoop had originally intended to play this meeting very carefully and to make sure that The Boss would leave him alone. To do that he was going to have to make The Boss believe that he was ready to play ball and follow the orders of the Sphere of Influence. This all seemed very reasonable and equated to a very well judged course of action. The thing was though, that every time Shoop got near The Boss he wanted to wind him up. It was a compulsion. All he wanted to do with the greasy little twat was to make his life as uncomfortable as possible.

For example, he could’ve quite easily made up some nonsense about the vampire being so ancient and highly tuned that he’d ended up in a difficult position and had to let the creature go in order to preserve the lives of both him and some innocent bystanders. Instead Shoop replied with.

“I blew him up.”



“You blew him up?”

“I blew him up, but if it’s of any consequence, his head remained animated for a good five minutes afterwards. It just lay on the ground blinking and mouthing angry words at me. Quite freakish really.” The smirk that twitched on Shoop’s grimace was almost miss-able, almost, but not quite. The Boss saw it and didn’t like it one little bit.

The Boss sighed heavily while looking down and shaking his head in dismay, “You just can’t do it can you? You are completely incapable of playing along with us. Why, for the love of god, can you not just follow orders and be a team player.”

“*Team player?*” winced Shoop, “Have you been reading your bullshit executive books on buzz-words again. I warned you about that, they’ll rob your soul, but then it might be a little too late for you.”

“Fuck you Winkle!”

“Look, there’s no need to get all testy,” Said Shoop, quite enjoying the fact that he was getting under the Bosses skin. “I just did what I had to do, it was clearly a case of him or me.”

“Oh really?”

“Yes... *really!*”

“That’s funny, because I envisage standing behind a wall and lobbing a grenade over it to be more of a cowards stance on things.” The Boss stabbed his words at Shoop with a content little smirk decorating his pointy, greasy little face. It was clearly his turn to land a few punches in the verbal parry.

*“You better not have just called me a coward!”* Shoop hissed through his teeth, his hatred for the snivelling little bureaucrat coming out in a cloud of venomous spittle. *“And you’d better not have been spying on me!”*

The Boss was as pleased at the reaction as Shoop had been about The Bosses, maybe a little more.

“Oh don’t look so damn surprised Winkle.” Said The Boss calmly, “What the hell did you expect? You’ve gradually become more and more disagreeable and insolent as the years have disintegrated. For the last year I’ve barely been able to get anything productive out of you at all. How long did you expect me to just sit around and take it?” The Boss was looking very pleased with himself indeed as he rose from his chair and slithered over to his drinks cabinet to pour himself a Scotch. He sipped it, leaning against the bar and continued. “And don’t pretend that you haven’t noticed some of my little spies. You put one of them in a coma a few months ago, he woke up and told us that the last thing he remembers is you bouncing him off the front of a double-decker bus.”

Shoop’s anger gave way to sheepishness for a moment as he said, “Well, he was being sloppy. I was trying to teach him a lesson.”

In truth, Shoop had not wanted the man to live after he’d hospitalised him. It would have given away how aware he was of the Sphere Of Influence’s tightening grip on him. With this in mind he hoped to kill the man in hospital, but the security had been far too tight. The only thing that Shoop could do was to sit and wait for the man to wake up and hope he hadn’t remembered anything. Apparently he had been hoping in vain.

“I really don’t think that sloppy surveillance technique deserves bone liquidation.”

“Well, that’s just your opinion now isn’t it, you’ve always been too soft on your operatives!”

“The point is Winkle that you’re becoming a liability. I can’t continue to support you if you keep acting like this. There are dozens of people starting to ask questions about where the money I pay you goes. I needn’t remind you that my support of you needs absolute secrecy and you’re making it very hard. I’m the only one stopping them from finding out about you. There are rules to be followed Winkle, they have to be adhered to for everyone’s sake. The more you play with me the harder it gets to hide you.”

“Oh Jesus not that fucking line again!” Shoop’s patience was running out, “For starters I’d like to say.... SUPPORT?!! You’ve been about as supportive as a marshmallow brassiere on a fat sweaty woman! You’ve had it in for me from day one, and don’t think I don’t know the years you’ve spent plotting against me.” Part of Shoop realised that he shouldn’t be saying the things he was saying. Part of him knew that he was giving away too much information about himself and the contents of his mind, but then there was another part; the part that had kept his mouth shut for decades, that loved the sweet release of giving his arch enemy a good sound bollocking, “I know how much you want me out, I’m not a fucking moron. I know that if you ever find anybody even half as effective as I am, even on a bad day, then I’ll be out of the picture permanently. I’m just trying to have a little fun while I’m here.” This was the single most honest exchange the two men

had ever had. For decades it had been spies, paranoia and guesswork with neither gaining the upper hand. “And as for the fucking *rules*. You can stick those up your arse because *I* invented them. I made your poxy rule book and have been re-writing it for longer that you’ve been sucking air. I gave you your position, your wealth, your power and that scares you doesn’t it. You hate having someone that’s vaguely superior. You want all the power and I’m too much of a terror to you to have me brought down. You don’t want *me*, you just want another fucking puppet, and you always have done.” The rage and relief in Shoop had reached feverish proportions and had The Boss not had another ace up his sleeve, he would have been wetting himself at the sight of Shoop’s clear and acidic hatred.

The voice in Shoop’s mind was still telling him to stop, but the fact of the matter was that once the flood barrier had been breached, the torrent was stopping for nobody.

Shoop’s voice had been raised and full of sharp rattling scorn before, but now, as he bent forward to hold his vicious face inches from his enemy’s, his voice dropped to a guttural, tear gas spreading whisper “Have you got any idea how easy it would be for me to snap you clean in half right now? You’d be dead before you’d even seen me move.”

Although The Boss had backed off and was firmly stuck to the wall of his office, he didn’t appear to be in the least bit fearful. This would normally have confused Shoop a little as the man should’ve been dropping the contents of both

bladder and bowel at that point, but Shoop wasn't worried, because he knew about The Bosses ace.

"Oh really?" Quizzed The Boss. He glanced up at the ceiling and said, "You can come down now boys. Shoop didn't budge an inch.

The lights that hung from the ceiling were low and bright so as to leave a black void in the space between them and the ceiling. Six men dropped down from the shadows dressed completely in black cloth. They had metal claws on their hands and feet that they'd used to attach themselves to the ceiling. The only visible sign of humanity could be seen through small slits in their headgear that revealed their eyes. The men dropped down from the blackness of the top of the room with out making the slightest sound apart from a slight poof as they expertly touched the ground, instantly adopting fighting stances on landing. That is to say, five of them landed perfectly, surrounding Shoop and brandishing a number of different sharp, metal pain educing implements. The sixth man didn't. He dropped from the darkness, hit the large boardroom table with a loud thud, bounced and then just lay there, motionless and apparently unconscious.

The five others and the Boss noticed this and their heads flicked back and forth from one another in perplexion.

Shoop had still not moved an inch.

He grinned through his grimace, raised an eyebrow and glared at The Boss, which is a difficult facial feat to accomplish but extremely effective in the right circumstances.

"Do you really think that I hadn't seen them?" He said.

The look of terror on The Bosses face clearly suggested that he did think that Shoop hadn't seen them.

All of a sudden, the ace up The Bosses sleeve had turned out to be a cardboard Marks and Spencer label and for the first time since they had met, Shoop had the upper hand.

"I could've killed all of them and you wouldn't have known about it." The sweat bubbling up on The Bosses greasy skin said that he believed him, "As it happens," continued Shoop, "That poor chap isn't dead. He'll be awake in a couple of hours with a very nasty headache and over active bowels."

The five remaining ninjas looked around at each other, somewhat disconcerted, their fierceness robbed from them they relaxed their fighting poses and started looking a bit awkward. Nobody in the room seemed to know how Shoop had done what he'd done.

Shoop pierced The Boss with eyes that were directly linked to the revulsion of hell itself. "*Don't... fuck... with... me!*" He hissed.

The Boss promptly fell back into his leather throne and lost control of his bladder. A puddle started forming by his feet.

"I'm leaving now. I'm going to go and get on with my job and you're not going to stop me. Are we clear?"

The Boss nodded through an interesting mix of emotions consisting of fury, embarrassment, loathing, fear with a wee touch of humiliation thrown in for good measure.

As Shoop barged his way through the remaining ninjas, The Boss gathered himself enough to shout after Shoop “One of these days Winkle, ***I will end you!***” The problem was, though, that his fear made the shout sound more like a whimper and robbed it of all of its intended aggression. He sounded like a schoolboy threatening a bully after a beating.

Shoop smiled to himself internally, turned and said with stabbing sarcasm, “I’m shaking in my boots Boss, shaking in my boots.” Shoop could’ve done a lot of damage in the room, he had chosen not to because he was fairly sure that he’d be dead or at least severely beaten before he managed to reach The Boss. He may have made the six ninjas look incompetent, but had it come to a fight, he surely would’ve been damaged, possibly mortally, but with his actions he had injected fear into the veins of everyone in the room. Nobody had wanted to go near Shoop because of the fear of the unknown (that being what Shoop was actually capable of), which made it easier for him just to walk out.

His actions did have a nasty side effect though. After losing his cool he knew he didn’t have long before the Boss had someone aiming a gun at him from some unseen rooftop or passing car. Shoop’s performance in the room, to his mind, had done nothing but make sure that the Boss would try to kill him much sooner than later.

He left the room gently pulling the door closed behind him.

The ninjas stood looking sheepish, which was quite hard to do as they were completely covered in black fabric, but they managed it very well. They

stood looking at The Boss who's frown seemed to weigh more than the rest of his body.

"Prick!" grunted The Boss venomously.

He picked up the phone, pushed some buttons and waited for an answer.

"Hello? Yes it's me, it's as we feared. He'll never come round. He's leaving the building now. Follow him, make sure he doesn't see you and when he gets somewhere quiet, take care of him. Oh, and make sure you take a *lot* of men. He's more dangerous than I'd anticipated."

He hung up the phone, smiled to himself for a moment at the prospect of Shoop's corpse being shown to him and then, remembering that he'd just pissed himself, looked at the five remaining conscious ninjas.

"If any of you breathe a word of this you will be tortured for decades, do I make myself clear?" He said squeakily but with conviction. The ninjas nodded. It was a good job that they'd all worn their head gear as it meant that The Boss couldn't see them all desperately trying not to crack up laughing as they looked at the puddle at The Bosses feet.

The Boss pressed the button on an intercom on his desk.

"Betty! I need a change of clothes immediately!"

"Yes sir, right away sir" crackled the intercom.

He began to take his clothes off as he walked over to the en-suite shower room.

The ninjas, once the Boss had disappeared; took their masks off, had a bit of a laugh at the puddle on the floor and, after some deliberation on how badly



their confrontation with Mr Winkle had gone, decided that they needed to get a hell of a lot better at being ninjas. Within twenty-four hours they were flying to Japan while the sixth member of the group suffered the worst case of diarrhoea he'd ever experienced.

To this day they have no idea how Shoop had managed to knock him out.

# Chapter 6

## Jeeves

Shoop went through the building to the car park, found the executive section, deftly stole one of the executive's Jaguars and pointed it westward out of the city centre.

Earlier, when he'd left George in the underground village, he'd felt elated. He'd been sensing a chance to turn his life around, to make it his own again and had a very potent feeling that he'd just screwed it all up.

Shoop couldn't quite explain his sixth sense, and quite often didn't want to as it meant that people would know more about him than he wanted them to. Mystery is a place where fear grows, and Shoop liked using that place as much as he could.

His sixth sense didn't let him see into the future, it didn't let him see dead people and it didn't let him sense immediate danger. What it *did* do was allow him to pick up the scent of what the future *might* bring. It was as if the molecules in his body could sense a sort of potential in certain courses of action. It pointed him towards weirdness and, more importantly, profit. When his sixth sense kicked in he let it lead him wherever it felt like going. He felt a little like a bloodhound on the trail of a bag of money when the tingle took over and it had never failed, before it plain stopped altogether that is.

It was a strange talent that had stood him in good stead in the past but had been dormant for many years.

The sixth sense was not the only of his talents. He was capable of many abnormal feats but he liked to keep them all to himself, partly because he didn't trust anyone, and partly because he really didn't have a full grip on them himself.

The sixth sense started Shoop on a trail, but these trails could be broken, and Shoop had the horrible feeling that he may just have broken the first trail he'd clearly and acutely sensed in over ten years.

He'd made two unforgivable mistakes. By letting the Boss lure him into an open argument, Shoop had given away some of his most black hearted opinions. Primarily that he believed the Boss to be a snivelling dung weasel. By giving this away he had given away some, if not all, of his bargaining power. As long as he sucked up (which in Shoop's terms was saying "good morning" and not vomiting at the same time), the Boss was oblivious

The other mistake he'd made was to flick a small poison dart at the unseen ninja hanging from the ceiling in The Bosses office. Not only had he poisoned the ninja but he'd done it at such a speed that nobody in the room had noticed him move. He'd also given away his ability to detect even the most skilled of shadowy assassins. The Boss now knew two things about Shoop's abilities that he'd previously been unaware of, that he was potentially had super human speed and that he could sense invisible assassins without raising an eyebrow. All of this meant that The Boss had a much clearer picture of the feats that Shoop was capable of.

It hadn't been particularly hard for Shoop to render the ninja unconscious. He'd been aware of the six invisible ceiling danglers for months now.

The Boss had started bringing them in when he'd decided to become more and more stringent with Shoop. Shoop had noticed them on the first day. He had quite unnaturally good hearing and could hear them breathing as they hung there. His hearing was so freakishly acute that he could tell exactly where each of them were by listening to their near silent panting.

In the many years that he'd been affiliated with The Sphere Of Influence he'd managed to keep the true nature of his faculties fairly well hidden. Even George had holes in his knowledge of Shoop's abilities. The Boss knew that Shoop was dangerous, but had no idea of the full extent of his destructive attributes. At least, he'd had no idea until earlier on.

Shoop cursed himself for making such a fundamentally stupid mistake as letting his abilities be known. He had clearly been drunk on the elation of regaining his sixth sense after it had been missing for so long. In the heat of the moment he'd let himself get carried away. The Boss was sure to step up his surveillance of Shoop. In fact, Shoop had a strong inkling that The Boss would go one step further and do everything he could to have Shoop killed. Upon revealing something of his opinions of the Boss and some of his powers, Shoop had made sure that he was too great a threat to be left unchecked and running free.

Shoop knew that he wouldn't, even with his various abnormal abilities, be able to avoid the Sphere Of Influences assassins forever.

Life had suddenly become a lot more complicated. It flashed into Shoop's mind that the Sphere would go back over the previous night's activities with a

different perspective. He knew that if the roles were reversed he would definitely give his discourse with Bunty Autumn further consideration. He began to fear that they might look a little further into the belt buckle that he'd taken.

Before the meeting in the Bosses office they would've thought that Shoop was just taking a souvenir from the encounter, as he was sometimes prone to do, but now things had a different light on them. Now Shoop was more dangerous and intelligent than they'd thought. Maybe Shoop had a different reason for taking it.

Shoop punched the dashboard and swore maniacally at himself.

How could he have been so stupid?

"Bugger!" he hit the dashboard, "bastard!" and again, "shitting hell!" and again "twating well bugger bastarding well fuck it all!" ending on a crescendo of thumps, punching straight through the lovely walnut panelling of the cars dashboard.

There was nothing for it now. The only way out was forwards, forwards as fast as he could move. His anger having been expressed, he saw that there was no sense in crying over spilt milk. He just had to get on with what he was doing.

Besides, even with all he'd done wrong, he'd still managed to make the Boss piss himself all over his nice, plush, one hundred pound per square inch, fluffy carpet and board room leather throne. That cheered him up substantially.

All Shoop could do was to try and follow the senses that were pulsing through him and hope that it they lead him to his salvation. It had become all or

nothing and the thought started to weigh heavy on him making him a tad gloomy, or was it that he hadn't had a drink for the last twenty minutes.

"Yes," He thought to himself, "That must be it. I must find some gin!" but as he scanned his mind for the nearest off licenses in the area he happened to glance in his rear view mirror and noticed that he was being followed by a great number of Sphere agents. They had been mobilised much quicker than Shoop had anticipated. On the up side though, they appeared to have no idea that their surveillance expertise was galaxies behind his. They were ten year olds with walkie-talkies and tricycles in comparison to Shoop's superbly honed senses. They probably believed that they were doing a good job but Shoop could beat the best in the world at this game and his pursuers were far from being the best.

They were on motorbikes, in fake taxis and a number of other inconspicuous looking vehicles. They appeared to be coming out of every side-street and alleyway that he went past and then slinking into streets further along the road, handing the pursuit over to other agents as they went. The thing that gave them away was the way that the vehicles ducked down side streets and then appeared further on down the road, well, that and the fact that they were barking into CB's the whole time. They were running a tag relay. They weren't going to let Shoop get away easily. At least that's what *they* thought. The sheer number of them was blatant. Shoop almost felt sorry for them.

"Amateurs!" muttered Shoop to himself as he scowled at the various mirrors in his freshly stolen Jaguar.

Shoop had written the training manual for agents in the Sphere and he knew exactly what his pursuers would try and do. One option was to try and back him into a corner. This method had a flaw though; some animals are easy targets when cornered, they get all panicky and wet themselves, much like the Boss had done. Others react in a much more violent and frenzied fashion, there's nothing quite like being backed into a corner to bring out the best in them. Shoop found being backed into a corner an awful lot of fun, he loved it; it was when his talents truly shone. If they tried plan-A, the back him into a corner technique, they would almost definitely all end up a lot less alive than Shoop. But, since he'd just shown a greater level of sneakiness in the Bosses office than had previously been realised, he suspected that they'd have been pre-warned by the Boss. He would've told them that he was too dangerous for cornering; they would more than likely go down another route.

They could go one of two other ways. One was to fake some sort of organised crime style shooting and take him out quite publicly. But public displays were not in the Sphere's best interests, being a sneaky secret type organisation and all.

He suspected that the troupe of Sphere agents wouldn't risk openly spraying him with gun-fire in front of other people causing death and panic in the general populace. They weren't, after all, the armed division of the metropolitan police force. No, the Sphere was happy to keep itself out of the public eye. They would probably wait until he was in a quiet place, or at least vaguely alone before

trying anything. Even then they probably wouldn't have the guts to take him on at close range.

Shoop guessed that they'd use a sniper with a non-lethal weapon from the Sphere's technologically advanced arsenal to knock him out. Then they'd send a bogus ambulance to come and pick him up. Once in the ambulance, the game would be over.

This seemed to be the more likely option by far.

Shoop decided that, despite his need to be urgent with his investigations, the best way out of this situation was to have a bit of fun with them.

He decided that he would use "the boy who cried wolf" technique to grind them down a little so that he could make his escape.

He weaved in and out of Edinburgh streets for a while then started occasionally heading toward isolated areas. This would put them a little on edge as they'd see a possible opening for their attack. At the last minute he'd turn in a different direction effectively heading back to heavily populated areas. He also decided that he'd randomly stop next to quiet little shops, service stations, public toilets, in fact anywhere that they thought he might get out of the car. He'd take off his seat belt, open the door, close the door, put his seat belt back on and drive away. This put the snipers, who were following in a series of white vans with false plumbing company logos on the side, on edge.

During this game Shoop *did* manage to stop at an off licence and top up his depleted alcohol to blood ratio and grab a few spare bottles of gin for the road.



It was a tense game, and a fine line for him to be treading. If he played the game for too long, they'd know that he'd spotted them. If he actually got out of the car in a quiet enough place, then they'd be on him in an instant. Once or twice he popped his head out of the car and then drew it back in just in time to miss a concentrated sonic pulse from one of the snipers. One of the pulses sent a bystander spinning into a butchers truck where he lay for twenty minute before being found, freezing cold and with a newly developed phobia of pig's hooves.

The more he drove around, the more they had to change vehicles and personnel to try and appear inconspicuous. It pleased Shoop greatly that he was tying up so much of the Sphere's time and resources.

After an hour or so, Shoop decided that the game should stop. The men had been effectively messed with and they were beginning to get a little bit complacent. Appearing more obvious in their pursuit and driving with less care. He headed west again and took off toward Slateford Road. He knew a petrol station there that would be able to help him out.

The problem with escaping from the Sphere Of Influence was that they didn't just follow you with nasty angry looking people with all manner of interesting and colourful weaponry and gadgets. The Sphere also followed you with satellite surveillance, which was a little trickier to get rid of.

Shoop had been around when the Sphere had taken satellite technology on board. In fact he'd helped Mike and Dave, the Sphere founders, to upgrade the technology behind it.

They'd made leaps and bounds with technology in many far-reaching areas of science, but there were still a few odds and ends that they couldn't quite come to grips with. They'd done their best to try and fathom the vast array of gadgetry that they'd found in the spacecraft in the glen but much of it proved to be simply baffling. Shoop, upon his first meeting with both of them in the underground village, had supplied them with a very cooperative little green man to decipher the bits and pieces that they couldn't figure out. It was the very same little green man that had been in a suitcase in Shoop's car outside the pub in Bury-Saint-Edmunds when Mike first met Shoop.

They'd been rich and powerful before, but the little green man had helped to launch their organisation into orbit, literally.

The little green man, in turn, was allowed to build a small messaging device using a speak and spell, an umbrella and some coat hangers and was picked up by his mum and dad in a big ball of light and metal in the middle of some remote woods.

The mass of vehicles continued to appear and disappear behind him.

He drove on, happily meandering his way to his destination while listening to Led Zeppelin at an unreasonable volume.

The Jaguar he drove handled exceptionally well. He himself owned a jaguar that he'd managed to pick up cheap from a police auction. It was nowhere near as swanky as the one he was driving now though.

Shoop liked Jaguars. He liked Bentley's, Rolls Royce and old minis. He liked the royal family and British rock bands. Well, not all British rock bands, he didn't like Queen because of Freddy Mercury and the fact that he was gay. He wasn't homophobic, he just disliked sexual people and most of the gay people he'd met had been very sexual. Ergo, he didn't like gays. He didn't like Bill Clinton for the same reason and Madonna positively terrified him.

He liked all things innately British and normal and yet he was anything but. His hippy parents had been from America and Germany and his abilities were about as normal as beef flavoured custard. At the core of him, Shoop hated everything that he was and fought against himself with the vigour of Hitler denying that he was half Jewish (which he was).

A little while later he reached the petrol station at Slateford road. As he pulled in a number of his pursuers trundled past it, glancing at him out of the corner of their eyes. A man on a motorcycle stopped just outside the petrol station and pretended to check the air in his tires.

With perfect timing it began to rain very heavily. The rain blocked the view of Shoop slightly as a van pulled up on the other side of the road. No doubt it housed a sniper or two. The rain both worked in Shoop's favour and put him in slightly more jeopardy. If the snipers couldn't see him very well, then neither could the general public, which meant that they were in a better position to stun and abduct him at close range without anyone really noticing. Before they had

time to arrange themselves into a decent position to shoot him however, he ducked down in his car as if he were picking something up from the floor.

A minute passed and the man checking his bike tyres started to wonder what Shoop was doing. Two minutes went by and he stopped pretending to check his bike, glancing around with concern as the rain bounced off his helmet. At three minutes, looking across the road at the men in the white van and shrugging, he toyed with the idea of looking in the window of the car. At four he was wondering if Shoop had had some sort of serious heart palpitation. In the end he started wheeling his bike into the petrol station forecourt and headed for the air pump via Shoop's car. At five minutes and twenty three seconds he was telling his associates that Shoop was nowhere to be seen and that there was a big hole in the bottom of the nice flash Jaguar. His whereabouts were a complete mystery. Even the satellite surveillance hadn't seen him run out of the petrol station. They would've used infra-red had they thought they'd needed to, but there was no sign that it was necessary.

Shoop had quite simply vanished without a trace.

There is a network of tunnels under the majority of cities in the world. How they got there and who dug them is, for the most part, completely unknown. Some of the tunnels are more baffling than others. The tunnels in Edinburgh were very confusing indeed. They were known to be extremely old. The technology needed to burrow these tunnels was far more advanced than any technology that was around at the time of the tunnels construction. In fact, there

was no way in which they could be created even now. When the tunnels under Edinburgh had been completed, the people living above them had had very pronounced eyebrows and hunted with sharp sticks while clad in animal fur. The tunnels were an enigma.

Another of their mysteries was that there seemed to be no reason why, exactly, cities were built on top of them. The people who built cities didn't even know that they were there, and yet, the whole world over, cities were built above them. It was as if whoever had built the tunnels had planned out our cities for us before we even knew what a city was. Before we even knew what a damn mud-hut was. It was thought that some sort of mystical energy was coursing through them and that humans were instinctively attracted to them. Also, nobody knew why, without the people on the surface knowing the location and lay-out of these tunnels, railways were laid down directly over them either.

Very few people knew of these tunnels and those who did were absolutely baffled by them.

The petrol station that Shoop had stopped in was right next to a railway. He'd stopped his car directly over a secret hatchway that entered a very narrow, very cramped, chimney like tubular hole that lead down to the underground tunnel network. He'd used a tiny laser pen to knock the bottom out of the nice shiny Jaguar and engaged the tunnel entrance. The heavy rain had hidden his exit very neatly.

He didn't like to use the tunnels in full view of so many people but the way he saw it, he didn't have much choice in the matter. The investigation into

Bunty's belt buckle was one that *had* to continue. His future and his life depended on him following it through and finding a way out of the predicament he was in.

He had no fear of the Sphere following him as the entrance was completely invisible to the naked eye. The only way into them is to know which of the cobbles on the ground to push. Once pushed with exactly the right pressure and in the right sequence the cobbles would fold in on themselves and reveal the entrance for a short time. After that time had elapsed the cobbles would reconstruct themselves into the petrol station floor. It was one of many entrances. Shoop was one of the very few who knew about the secret entrances as he'd commissioned them from various different contractors several years earlier. Different contractors all built small parts of the entrances to ensure that not one of them knew the whole picture.

The Sphere had no idea.

Shoop liked to have as many secrets as possible. It put him one step ahead of everyone else and his secrets always came in handy when he was in tight spots.

It was a long climb down but by the time the man with the motorbike was radioing his colleagues, Shoop had reached the bottom.

The tunnel that he'd dropped down into was perfectly cylindrical and stretched off around a long sweeping corner. Most tunnels are damp, mouldy unwelcoming places, but this one was bright and clean. Because nobody ever went into the tunnels, there was no-one to mess them up. The materials that had

been used to build it were quite odd looking. The walls looked like a cross between concrete and polished steel. It had a strange dull sheen to it that was unlike any other substance that Shoop knew of. On top of its clean, dull shine the tunnel also appeared to have no joins in it whatsoever. It was almost as if the builders of tunnel had put the mass of all the earth and rock through a tremendous amount of pressure and pushed it outwards, condensing it into an incredibly hard, almost impenetrable substance which made up the walls of the tunnel. Much like coal is condensed into diamond.

Shoop had placed a number of electric scooters at the various different entrances throughout the tunnel networks. They were kept in large metal cabinets against the side of the tunnel. Shoop opened the cabinet, took a scooter down and zipped off through the network of tunnels in the direction of the school that Jeeves worked at.

Although railways were built directly on top of the tunnels, there were more tunnels than there were railways and Shoop took off down a side tunnel, heading north-west.

After losing the Sphere so successfully, he began to relax a little and noticed that his sixth sense was buzzing quite strongly again. It appeared that he was definitely on the right track.

He exited behind a church just off Craigs Road, five minutes walk from Craigmount high school where Jeeves was the librarian. He left the tunnel, sat down for a quick cigarette and was on his way.

Shoop had had dealings in the school many years before. The last time he'd visited he had caused the main building's slow subsidence, he'd unwittingly caused under ground flooding which softened the foundations and it slowly started sliding down the hill that it was perched on. The old building had been torn down and a new one built, which meant that Shoop didn't know his way around this one.

He set about trying to find the whereabouts of the library by successfully bribing a particularly rough looking thirteen year old named Conrad with some cigarettes. He waited for the end of the schooling day and ventured into the building to find his prey.

Jeeves was a tall, heavy set but slim man with glasses, a thick moustache and a great love for mud coloured waistcoats with matching ties. He wore chinos and ill-fitting tweed jackets with leather patches on the elbows to prevent scuffing. He had just managed to get rid of the last of his students and was busy cataloguing and bar-coding a box of second hand books from a school charity event. The books were all dog-eared with broken spines, much like the majority of other books in the library. After the school was built, the new computers purchased and every other department had managed to suck the school funds dry, there had not been much money left for books, which struck Jeeves as odd as schools primary resource was the written word.

His library was stark and cold. It was lit by over-head strip lighting, the kind that induces migraine and seemed to be sucked into the grey abyss of the



carpeted floor tiles. The bookshelves were made of thin, dark grey metal and seemed to stay upright by the sheer will of Jeeves alone.

His library was empty of people and, due to it being late in the year, all was dark and quiet outside the windows. Jeeves liked this time of day in the winter. With it being so dark outside he felt like there was nothing in the world but him and his books. He thoroughly enjoyed enclosed isolation and stayed late often to take advantage of the peace.

He turned off the main lights and worked using a series of desk lamps.

After a while he finished bar-coding the books and began trying to repair the more ramshackle ones. He was tentatively applying cello-tape to a copy of *Catcher in the Rye* when he suddenly became aware of a looming presence behind him. He stopped working, put down the book and without turning round said, "You got here sooner than I'd anticipated Mr Winkle."

Shoop was a little put out by this. He liked being secret and was bothered by the fact that both he and Bunty Autumn seemed to have full knowledge of his existence.

"You are going to have to tell me," said Shoop, "just how it is that you buggers all seem to know who I am." His eyes bored into the back of Jeeves' head, but Jeeves refused to turn around. "Even the most powerful; intelligence agencies in the world wouldn't begin to have the slightest inkling of who I am and what I do, yet you lot appear to think of me as a celebrity. I'm as fictional as Bigfoot to the entire world, and yet I'm a penguin in the zoo to you. Why is that?"

"This bothers you a bit doesn't it, I can tell." Said Jeeves.

“No shit Sherlock!”

“Well, all I can say, Mr Winkle, is that your puzzle of how the world works may well be missing some of its pieces.”

“Eh?”

“Exactly!”

“What do you mean *Exactly*? That doesn’t make any sense!” Shoop shook his head as if to clear away the cobwebs that Jeeves was knitting in his mind, “none of this is important, it’s beside the point, the point is, I suppose you know why I’m here as you seem to be so damn clever!”

“I’ve got a fair idea.” said Jeeves calmly.

“Then why the hell are you still here?”

“I don’t follow you.”

“Well, the thing is, I’m planning on asking you some questions and if you don’t answer them to my satisfaction, then I’ll have to employ a few more severe methods. If you knew that this was the case, why are you still here?”

“As I said Mr Winkle, you got here quicker than I’d expected.”

Shoop felt a bit stupid.

“Bugger the chit-chat,” He said angrily, “I’m just going to get on with it.”

“If you wish.”

Shoop placed a chloroform soaked cloth over Jeeves’ nose and mouth from behind. Jeeves, apparently prepared for whatever might follow, breathed calmly and deeply and nestled into a very deep and relaxing sleep.

Luckily the library was directly above the main boiler rooms and storage basement area of the school. Shoop was tall and scrawny but held in his frame freakish strength. He had no problems in slinging Jeeves' ample frame over his shoulder like an empty sack and hoofing him downstairs, but not before turning all the desk lamps and computers off and locking the library. The things that Shoop had to do were better done in dark private places without windows.

Once in the boiler room he tied the unconscious Jeeves to a chair and waited for him to wake up. Before this happened, however, he was briefly interrupted by a couple of students that'd come looking for Mr Jeeves. Shoop suspected that they were a part of the same organisation that Bunty and Jeeves were in. One of the two was a heavy set young man who delighted in cracking bad jokes in the face of danger and he took a good couple of cracks to the skull before Shoop could render him unconscious.

The other one was a bit more difficult to deal with. She was a small redheaded girl and a proficient witch, but even witches pass out if you hit them hard enough. It was proving quite difficult to hit her though. She had managed to summon a small whirlwind that picked Shoop up and whipped him around the room. Shoop wrestled to get a billy club out of his pocket, once he'd grabbed it he lobbed it directly at the girls' temple. She hit the floor, bouncing her head off the hard concrete and the whirlwind stopped. Shoop landed deftly on his feet.

He tied and gagged them both. It occurred to him that he could use them to make Jeeves talk. If Jeeves cared even slightly about them, then hurting them

would force Jeeves to tell Shoop everything that he wanted to know. It didn't work though.

As Shoop pushed a long, very hot needle like object through the girls' collar bone, all Jeeves said was, "Oh don't worry about her, I'm sure she'll be fine, but if it makes you feel better to do what you're doing, then I think you should go right on ahead." while the girl silently grinned and nodded in agreement.

Shoop was getting very fed up with the amount of people that weren't reacting properly to pain.

Shoop turned his attentions to Jeeves and, hours later, no matter how much Shoop hurt him, Jeeves still stubbornly refused to answer any questions. All he did was suggest that Shoop start drinking more herbal tea while wearing a pleasant smile. Luckily Shoop had anticipated that something like this might happen and had remembered to bring some Truth serum. Jeeves took far more than the average person could take before opening up but once Shoop had given him a large enough dose for it to work, the answers started coming thick and fast.

The problem was, though, that the dose that had been administered had been large enough to make Jeeves' liver collapse and he died before Shoop could get all the information that he needed. He tried the serum on the two students but before they could tell him anything useful, the witch temporarily glued their mouths shut with a spell.

He spent a bit of time kicking them around to satisfy his sadistic needs, wiped their memories clean with a handy little gadget that he always carried with

him (it looked a bit like a drill and hurt massively) and left them stunned and confused outside the library.

He walked down the road and once he was satisfied with the distance between him and the scene of the crime, took out his phone and dialled.

“Yeah it’s me again, did you manage to get the boys together?”

The voice on the other end of the phone replied, “Yeah, we’re on our way to the address we got from you now. ETA fifteen minutes.”

“Good, listen, don’t do anything until I get there, and don’t let anyone see you approach the cottage. Use your night vision glasses and turn off the headlights in the van while running it on silent. I’ve just been chatting with the owner of the cottage and it looks like there will be people there. I don’t want them to see you, the only reason they should know you’re there is if they try to leave. Do NOT let them leave. Am I clear.”

“Affirmative!”

“Good, I’m just getting myself some transport,” Shoop had stopped walking and was standing at the gate to a driveway that housed a Jaguar E-type. “I’ll be with you in about forty-five minutes.”

Shoop hung up and dialled another number.

“George, it’s me, switch to secure line.”

“Done.” Said George.

“Right, we’re going to have our work cut out for us here and we’re going to have to move fast.”

“I take it that you managed to get a bit of information then?”

“Yip, Jeeves was looking after Bunty Autumn. He was her guardian of sorts and he was the source of information behind all her fieldwork. In short, he was her handler. They operated out of the basement in his cottage. By the sounds of things he has a fairly vast vault down there that has more information on the P.O.S. than anywhere else for hundreds of miles. He was a kind of caretaker for the Priory Of Sion museum.”

“Was?” Asked George.

“Eh?”

“You said he was a caretaker for the museum....past tense!”

“Oh, yeah, well, he had a bad reaction to the truth serum. He died before I could get much more information out of him.”

“Jesus Shoop, you really must stop killing people that might be useful!”

“Piss off George, you’re not my mother, anyway, it was an accident, and by the sounds of it all the information that we could ever need will be at his house. I’m heading there now but I’m expecting resistance. I’ve called all of the independents in and they’ll meet me there.”

“What, ALL the independents?”

“Yep!”

“Are you sure you need them *all*?”

“This is big George, I can feel it in my bones. I didn’t want to get the hopes up earlier but I’m fairly sure now. The sixth sense is well and truly back.”

“It’s about bloody time!” said George gleefully.

“That’s what I thought. Now get your arse out of your hovel and meet us at Jeeves’ house. I’ve got a feeling we’ll need you for some organising.”

“What, leave my rooms?” George sounded at lot less gleeful at this prospect.

“Just shift yourself, The Boss’ll be down there soon questioning you soon anyway, its not safe, time is very much a factor on this one, and be absolutely sure that you’re not followed, use the tunnels if you have to. In fact, it might be better if you got out of Edinburgh that way rather that on the roads. Now move your arse!”

Shoop hung up, walked up the driveway he’d been waiting at, stole the Jaguar E-type and headed south.

## Chapter 7

### The Independents and the Vault

Jeeves' house was out of town tucked neatly in a valley between some of the Pentland hills just south of Edinburgh. It took Shoop an hour or so to work his way there, slightly longer than he'd anticipated, after making sure that the Sphere hadn't managed to pick up his trail and follow him.

There was a narrow dirt track road that ran between the hills and down a valley toward a small wooded area that housed Jeeves' cottage.

Shoop turned off his headlights as soon as he saw the lights of the house through trees in the distance. He didn't need night vision glasses, his vision was super human and, once his eyes had adapted to switching off the headlights, he could see quite adequately. It wasn't long before he came across the group of men that he'd asked to meet him there and a surly bunch they were too.

They were sitting in a home made, four wheel drive, monster of a vehicle nestled in a small valley two hundred yards from the cottage. It looked like the bastard son of a jeep and a Sherman tank but was missing none of the creature comforts. It came complete with leather interior, DVD player and a mini bar that was being joyfully utilised.

Shoop turned off his engine and rolled the stolen car to within 10 meters of the make-shift tank. He took great pleasure in sneaking up on them and appearing suddenly at the driver's side window, like a spiritual apparition made solid he appeared as if out of thin air. The drinking hoard in the car was shaken



briefly at seeing him appear so abruptly. They were exceptionally well trained in numerous different fields including espionage and martial arts and were infrequently caught by surprise, but were visibly shaken by Shoop's ghost-like misery stricken visage coming out of nowhere and staring at them through partially misted windows.

The Independents had all been mercenaries at one time or another and had been involved in some of the bloodiest combat situations of the previous twenty years. Shoop called them the Independents because they had no solid ties to any group or organisation. They only bowed to the highest bidder and not for anything as impractical as belief or honour. Having such men on board meant that Shoop could exact any given operation under the radar of the Sphere of Influence. They worked for the biggest pay packet and, invariably, Shoop supplied them with more money than anyone else did. Shoop's consistent ability to supply them with that which they craved, i.e. loads of cash and interestingly bizarre combat situations, meant that they would hurriedly and enthusiastically answer his call, no matter what.

This made for another contradiction in Shoop's life. The independents were fiercely detached from the numerous battling secret organisations of the world; and yet were pathetically loyal to Shoop, or more accurately, they were pathetically loyal to Shoop's wallet and its seemingly bottomless capacity. They loved his affluence yet hated him at the same time. This was a mental state that Shoop liked to encourage in his men. It meant that nobody had any

misconceptions about anything; nobody had any ideas of false friendship and emotional loyalty. He hated misconceptions as they tended to lead to false loyalty. Loyalty could *a/ways* be bought and that was the way that Shoop liked it. Bought loyalty had the bonus of being a lot more honest than personal loyalty. It meant that he didn't have to pretend that he liked them and they didn't have to pretend that they liked him. As long as the money kept coming everyone was happy.

Shoop had a very large supply of money, which meant that he could keep the people in his personal service free of the Sphere and its influence.

There were four of them and Shoop had only worked with all of them at the same time twice before. Calling them altogether usually meant that something big was going down and that the money was going to match the size of the mission. Whenever Shoop called any of them, they always jumped at the chance, but when they knew that all four of them were being called in they got a little more enthusiastic than normal.

The first of the four was called Jim.

Jim had a slight frame and sharp facial features that looked as though they wanted to be softer. By this I mean that he had the potential in him to be a kind and merciful man but life had dictated another course for him. In different circumstances he could have been a well-rounded, sensitive person and this impression lay under the veneer of his severe face. His potential for kindness was the true base of his nature, but he had turned into something much more vicious and mean. He had had his innocence taken from him far too early. He'd

had a rude awakening to the harshness of the world at a very young age. The effect of which had been to make him cynical and bitter before his time. He hated anyone that showed any kind of weakness or sensitivity as a result. He despised people who had the freedom to remain positive and upbeat. He was very angry at the world because it had robbed him of his ability to be a nice guy. He thoroughly enjoyed making the world, and everyone in it, feel bad about this whenever he could.

He had thick dread-locked hair that he wore in a kind of pineapple sprig of an arrangement on top of his head. He had a long pointed face housing a long, sharp down turned nose and a permanently knitted brow under which hid two bright beady little eyes. His mouth was small and tight. A thin black beard went along the line of his jaw looking like someone had drawn it on with a marker pen, which gave him a slightly comical look. This was no accident though, as, the way he saw it, the funnier a person looks, the more people underestimate them. His look had been carefully designed to confuse, it had helped him to get the upper hand on more than one occasion.

The largeness of his hair made his neck seem ludicrous and thin, but his wire-like muscles were tight and powerful. He was small but had terrifying strength and speed for his size. This matched with the venomous anger that pulsed through him so consistently made him a force to be reckoned with. The acute training he'd received from the foreign legion, a Japanese ninjistu master and his better than average intelligence made him a down-right hazard.

Carl's story of innocence lost was quite similar to Jim's with the one exception that instead of getting all angry and bitter about the real horrors of the world he embraced them with vigour. His real name was Stephen Adams. He had been a left wing hippy who, upon rebelling too frequently against his parents, had been shipped off to the navy to teach him some discipline. He'd taken to it like a chimp to a tree.

He too was slight of stature but had softer, yet well weathered features that gathered into a stubby scowl. He had unruly short-ish hair and a permanent covering of lazy stubble on his chin. It never grew into a beard, just always looked a bit shaggy. It was almost as if he'd found a razor that left precisely half a centimetre of growth on his beard at all times.

Carl, upon joining the navy, found that he really liked the life. He liked the discipline, the exercise and above all, the ability to shoot big guns and sneak up on people in scuba gear. He fast realised that he'd been a bit of a misguided pillock when he'd been a hippy.

He quickly applied to the commandoes. He was so enthusiastic about his new career that he volunteered for any mission there was going, no matter how dangerous or insane. He didn't care, he just loved running around, being sneaky and shooting things.

His gung-ho attitude got him noticed by a scientist who was working for the British government trying to improve the effectiveness of British troops. Carl was made aware of a new project involving experimental cranial implants to

bolster strength and aggression in combat situations. He still had the scar on the side of his head from the operation.

The experiment had *not* gone well. Carl turned psychotic. His new strength and aggression made it possible for him to wipe out thirteen crack security troupes (predominantly from the SAS) before being restrained and locked away. He'd spend three years strapped down in a mental hospital before he escaped. The hospital gave him tranquilisers to keep him dormant and under control but one day Carl decided that he wasn't going to swallow them and hid them at the back of his mouth between his teeth and cheek. Not taking the drugs brought on a very powerful fit of aggression, he snapped his leather bindings and threw his bed clean threw the iron bars in the window in his room.

Since then he'd managed to control his implant with the use of massive amounts of cannabis. It was the only thing that worked. When he wasn't chewing on a lump of hashish, he was puffing on massive pure marijuana conical joints. It kept him reasonably under control. The strength was still there and even with his sedation he was still one of the most dangerous people on the planet.

It didn't take him long to find buyers for his unique talents. He changed his name, got a new identity and spent the next ten years inducing pain and misery around the world with unnatural glee.

Dr Komodo was a very imposing looking character. He was very tall, very black and very scary. The scariness didn't come from daunting size, it wasn't

that he had a mass of muscles that could crush the skull of a hyena, no, his unnerving intimidating stature was due to the size of his head. He had a thin sinewy yet muscular neck that's sole task seemed to be the rather strenuous task of holding his massive cranium on his shoulders. His brain-power was extremely daunting. He had an unshakable stare that screamed intelligence of stupendous proportions. His mind held huge amounts of information and was completely void of emotional entanglements. Most of his body was designed to support his towering intellect rather than get involved in affairs of the heart. In fact *his* heart was a tiny shrivelled, prune like organ of very little merit. It made his eyes cold and dead. He was a biological robot designed to house a massive brain and that was all.

He was logical and lethal. His amazing astuteness had been powerfully and intensely directed at the practices of logic and organisational strategy. He could plan his way out of any situation and was blessed with frightening physical strength and speed.

He had been the student of a Cambodian street fighter who taught him that martial arts were a bit flowery. He believed in the lack of martial ceremony and replaced it with knocking massive lumps out of people as quickly as possible.

He was also deadly with a knife, either in hand-to-hand combat or as a projectile. He could throw a butter knife through a caravan and kill someone on the other side of it.

Lastly, there was Yan.

Yan was the most intimidating of the lot. He was Six Feet eight and seemed barely alive. He never appeared to move. Even when he was moving quickly he looked as if he were just floating along without making use of his limbs. His arms barely ever left his sides and his looming static frame gave him the look of an ancient unmovable pillar.

He had a pale marble like complexion and a hard unchanging face. He was completely bald with no eyebrows but still managed an eternal frown, underneath which was the source of his real power.

Nobody had ever managed to ascertain how exactly he did it, but when his eyes fixed on people, they could hear his voice in their heads. His entire appearance was hard cold and dead, but his eyes were life itself. They had universes swimming around in them. Life and death were dished out by his hypnotic stare. If the eyes are the windows to the soul, his were the mirrors of the gods.

The effort of sustaining the power hiding in his cornea resulted in constant beads of sweat rolling off his bald head. The perspiration made him look like a man who'd just finished a five-mile sprint in a desert.

He was tall, brooding, silent, terrifying and stealth-like. He had once been hired to assassinate a man who frequented a museum in Rome. He stood in the museum impersonating a statue perfectly. Every time someone became curious about the strange, sweating marble-like creation, he would catch their eye for a few seconds and they would become immediately disinterested.

After three hours the man he'd been waiting for turned up. Yan locked eyes with him for one full minute, stepped off the pedestal he'd been on and walked out of the building without anybody ever remembering him being there. The man that held his gaze waited for five minutes, started crying, walked out of the museum, found the nearest high bridge and promptly threw himself off.

Yan was a very handy person to have around.

All of the independents were very handy people to have around

All of the independents were secretly terrified of Shoop. His abilities eclipsed all of theirs by quite a stretch.

"Evening boys!" said Shoop once the driver, Carl, had wound down his window. All of them nodded at him in acknowledgement. "Anything been happening?" He gestured to the lights flashing between the trees not fifty feet away.

"There's a removal van down the side of the cottage but there's been no activity. Looks like whoever's in there is packing things up to be moved," Said Carl through a thick sweet plume of cannabis smoke.

"So when do we get the full story on what's going on here?" asked Jim.

"And how much are we getting paid?" ventured Dr Komodo.

"I'm not a hundred percent sure of what we're dealing with here, but it's big, and the rewards will match the size of it."

"I think we might need a little more to go on than that!" said Dr Komodo through his permanently scowling face.



“All you need to know right now is that the people in that building know that I’m on my way to get them. They think they’ve got time though. I’ve worked quicker than they’ve anticipated. The owner of the house was still sitting at work when I found him and he wasn’t in any hurry to get back here. He was supposed to be organising the men inside with there clearing of out of the place and they’ll probably wait for him before putting anything in the van. Needless to say he won’t be making it.”

“There’s a vault under the house that has some very valuable things in it. The men are trying to empty it before I get down there but, like I said, I move quicker than they’d expected. We don’t have all the time in the world though, they’ll probably get reinforcements before long and I want to be finished before that happens.”

“So the plan is,’ ventured Dr Komodo, ‘to get in there, disable the men without destroying any of the valuables and make off with the loot as quickly as possible.”

“Hit the nail on the head as usual!”

“What do we know about the structure and lay out of the building?” asked Jim, tying up his dread-locks ready for action.

“There’s a back and front entrance to the building but only one way in or out of the vault. My guess would be alarms on the front and back doors with a guard at the entrance to the vault as they’ll want to have as much man-power as possible packing things up in the cellars, not keeping watch.”

“Right!” said Dr Komodo assertively, “looks like you’ll need to be going in the front Yan, and you around the back Jim, Once the main guard is out of the way through your interesting eye work,” he gestured toward Yan sitting like a sweaty slab of concrete, “we can group up and get the drop on the men down stairs.”

“We’ll need to wait for George before we move. We need to know which things to take and which things to leave and George’s got a well trained eye for that sort of thing.” said Shoop.

“Can you tell us anything at all about what it is we’re looking for?” asked Jim.

“It’ll all become apparent as we go along. All I know is that my sixth sense is tingling more than it has done in at least five years, and the more I follow this case, the more it tingles.”

The fact that Shoop’s sixth sense had been acting with renewed vigour silenced any more questions. Each of the independents had had experience of the sixth sense, and they’d all come out of those situations a good deal better off than they’d been before. Secretly, each of them had believed that Shoop had lost his abilities for good and were strongly considering ignoring his requests for aid. The news that his old talents were picking up again had a very positive effect on them. They could smell the money when Shoop picked up his game.

Shoop was suddenly distracted by a far off screeching noise. It sounded like someone had recorded the sound of a cat having its tail stamped on and was playing it on a constant loop. He recognised it as the sound of a moped. He

looked up the winding road that ran through the glen and saw a single light careering along the track. He took out his phone and dialled.

“George! Turn that damn moped off now! You’re giving us away you twat!”  
Shoop hung up.

A couple of second later the noise stopped and the light went out.

“Pillock!” grunted Shoop under his breath.

The front and back entrances had been fitted with trip wires, just as Shoop had predicted, but on top of that, a good portion of the surrounding area of the house had been booby trapped with flares and tiny explosives that weren’t big enough to kill but would cause a nasty headache. The men inside were clearly anxious to know if they were receiving any visitors but weren’t overly keen on hurting anyone.

One by one Yan and Jim’s nimble fingers disabled the trip wires, the years of experience in such things serving them both well. They made their way to the main building, Yan to the front and Jim to the back. Shoop and the rest of them waited, nestled in a group of trees across the road from the house. Yan and Jim’s progress was slow but steady as they worked their way toward the cottage lit only by the high full moon, disabling traps as they went.

It had taken Shoop many years to find these men and was subsequently more than confident in their ability to do their job without incident. He leant against a tree, perfectly relaxed with his hip flask in hand, watching them as they

meandered through the cottage grounds; his exceptional eye-sight allowing him to watch their every step.

Before long, Yan and Jim had made it into the cottage and a man staggered out of the house, fumbled his way past all the booby traps and headed for Edinburgh, all the time sobbing like an exhausted infant with a scuffed knee. Shoop presumed that it was a guard who'd been watching the entrance to the underground vaults. Yan's eyes had obviously lost none of their potency since the last time Shoop had seen him.

“Right, that's our queue. Let's get moving.” Ordered Shoop.

George, Dr Komodo, Carl and Shoop clambered out of their wooded ditch and matched Yan's path to the front door, avoiding any left over booby traps as they went. The cottage itself was at least three hundred years old by Shoop's estimation, it'd been constructed with randomly shaped masonry and looked a little thrown together, still, it had been built to last. It looked like it would live on 'til the end of time.

They tentatively advanced through the small entranceway and were greeted by a living room with a low ceiling and packed to bursting with all manner of antiques and leather bound books. Ancient framed pictures blanketed any available space on the wall that wasn't taken up by candle-holders, shelves, mirrors and a myriad of other stuff of ages. Regardless of it's clutter, the room seemed very well ordered and immaculately clean. There was a fireplace to their left as they entered the room; the tiny hole was a relief to the eyes from the cluttered walls.

They filed through the room to a hallway with George at the rear. Only George gave the room anything other than a glancing interest. His eyes scanned every item in the room longingly as his mouth stood open. The place reminded him of his underground library. George hadn't been out of his sanctuary for more than an hour at a time over the past five years. Since Shoop's senses had faltered there had been little call for him to do anything other than indulge himself in research. He'd turned into a squinty-eyed little ginger mole and he liked it in his elaborate hole. He missed it. He wasn't used to sneaking around into places that might involve violence. He felt very uncomfortable.

They passed the kitchen and the back door that Jim had entered. Jim and Yan were standing at the mouth of an opening that revealed an old, ornately carved wooden staircase descending into an ill lit area below. Shoop nudged past his hired henchman and climbed down into the gloom gesturing for the others to follow but for Jim to keep watch outside.

They crept silently down the stairs and into an arched stone passage lit by flaming torches on the wall.

"This is all a bit Indiana Jones isn't it?" asked George, sweating a bit from all the excitement.

"Shut up!" hissed Shoop in a low stabbing voice through clenched teeth.

The light in the passage was stark and poor. Shoop could see the end of the passage twenty feet ahead where it abruptly widened and heightened as it turned into the main chamber of the vaults. It looked to be very long and Shoop

could see that the walls inside the main chamber were lined with dozens of anti-chambers.

The passage they were in was about five feet tall and three feet wide. It felt like it had been made for dwarves. The main chamber, however, had been built for giants. It was massive and housed two stories of anti-chambers.

George realised just how difficult the task of sifting through all of the information hidden in the vaults was going to be. There was no way that they were going to find out all that that needed to know in one night. They were going to have to take weeks with this stuff, possibly even months, which meant getting everything out and away from the small cottage to a place where no-one could find them.

It was going to be a long night.

They all crouched down and waited in the shadows of the passage. There were signs of recent activity in the main chamber. Boxes and crates sat in the middle of it in various different stages of packed completion. Most of them were empty though, which suggested that the men packing up the vault hadn't managed to get too far with the daunting mass of objects that they had to pack away. From an alcove close to the passageway they were hiding in, stepped a man carrying a tray with five mugs on it.

"TEA UP!" Shouted the man.

"Jesus!" thought Shoop to himself, "They won't keep watch outside, or pack very quickly, but they will find time to have a cup of tea. Bloody amateurs! This is going to be a piece of piss."

From various different alcoves along the length of the main cavern emerged four other men. Oddly, none of them looked like they were in much of a rush. Shoop decided that, whoever these men were, the people who were in charge of them couldn't have the slightest idea that Shoop had managed to work as quickly as he had. It was the only explanation for the men's lack of haste and blatantly casual demeanour. It occurred to him, though, that if they were members of the Priory Of Sion, an organisation that had apparently kept itself secret for thousands of years, then they would've been a lot more professional and effective. He began to smell a trap. Everything was just getting that little bit too easy.

"Yan, I don't like this, it's all going a little bit too smoothly," He whispered, "get back outside and keep watch.

"You smelling a trap?" Asked Dr Komodo.

"Could be! I don't want to take any chances."

Yan said nothing, but looked at Shoop and the word "Okay" appeared in his head as if he'd thought it himself but with a deep Russian sounding voice. Yan had a freakish knack of putting his words into other people's heads. He was about to leave when George whispered.

"What is your sixth sense telling you?"

The question halted Shoop dead. He paused for a moment, puzzling around inside his own mind wearing a strange confused and surprised kind of frown. It hadn't occurred to him to listen to his sixth sense. He'd been so long without it that he was working purely on his base skills without thinking that there

might be an alternative. He tuned back into his senses again to see what they had to say about everything. He was instantly aware of a shift in his perception and revelled in the sensation of being privy to knowledge that no one else had. His senses were nice and calm; no alarms went off in his head. It appeared that there wasn't a trap waiting for them and that everything was going perfectly. It was a situation that Shoop was unfamiliar with and it didn't sit well with him but after a few minutes of silence and everybody waiting for him to reply, he could say nothing other than.

"Everything's fine." He said it with a confusion that sat uncomfortably with the others.

"Are you sure?" asked Yan, sending the question into Shoop's mind with a heavily accented Russian drawl.

"Yeah, it's odd, I can't explain it but, yeah, everything's fine. There's no trap, in fact I fully believe that we're all going to get out of here without a scratch. No, I don't believe we will. I *know* that we will."

"Are you alright?" George was starting to get a little worried about him. As he looked at Shoop he saw him visibly relax. His shoulders un-tensed and his permanent grimace seemed a little less severe, although still quite unnerving. Shoop shook himself and looked like he was waking up from a daydream. He turned to Yan.

"I still want you upstairs. All may be well but there's no point in being under cautious. Dr Komodo, Carl and me can handle those five in there, George, you keep your head down."



Everyone nodded in agreement, apart from Yan, who just made everyone think that he'd nodded. He slid up the stairs and vanished while not looking like he'd moved a muscle.

"Carl, up here with me!" demanded Shoop.

"What's the plan?"

"You're going in first, get your guns ready, if any of them make a move, perforate them, but don't hit anything that might be of value in the room and if you have to shoot, try to keep at least one of them alive. Understood?"

"No problem," Carl let a sadistic grin crawl over his features, ignited an unreasonably large marijuana joint and whipped his cannons out from under his crumpled denim jacket.

The men were all sitting on boxes and sipping their brew while engaged in polite conversation about the mixing of various herbal teas.

"This is new isn't it? I can't remember having this combination before." said one of the men. "It's ginseng, vanilla, ginger and blackcurrant isn't it?"

"Cranberry, not blackcurrant."

"Oh that's it, that's where that slightly sharp fruity tang is coming from. I couldn't figure it out, it's very tasty, well done."

"Thank you, would anyone like a rice cake with organic humus? I've got carrot sticks too."

This wasn't the usual fare of workmen. 'Where are the bacon rolls, crisps and cans of acidic fizzy drinks?' Shoop thought to himself as they all enthusiastically, but politely, tucked into the low fat organic snacks.

"Mmmm, delicious." Said one of the men.

One of them got to his feet, tea in hand, munching on a rice cake and gazed down the length of the main chamber at the huge amount of anti-chambers that were full to the brim with ancient artefacts, books, maps, charts and rolled up parchment.

"How the hell does Jeeves keep track of all this stuff?"

"He has a system," piped up one of the others through a mouthful of humus laden carrot, "he has an inventory of it all and keeps it in a filing cabinet in that first alcove over there. It'll come in handy, it'll mean that we can get the most important stuff out first and then come back for the rest. By then the other guys should be here, and Jeeves too." He stopped for a moment and sniffed the air with a questioning expression on his face, "can anyone smell anything funny?"

They all sniffed the air, sensing a strange sweet and pungent reek, finding the source of it they slowly turned round to look at the entrance to the cave as a voice came out of it, "Thanks for the information!" said Carl stepping into the light of the main cavern, brandishing two very large hand guns with a joint dangling from his mouth that was the source of the odour.

The men froze, momentarily surprised that both their trip wires and the guard posted at the entrance to the stairway had failed to warn them of an alien presence.

“Now,” said Carl coolly but with a sharp edge of malice, “if anyone moves, they die!” He was surrounded by a thick plume of sweet smelling pot smoke and glowered at them through squinted eyes.

“Um?” said one of the men, “could I just put my mug down, please. It’s very hot and it’s burning through my hand cream. I wouldn’t want to get dry hands now would I?”

At first Carl thought he was being a smart-arse but when the others nodded sympathetically at the threat of dry hands it became clear that he was being perfectly serious. “Who the hell are these people?” he thought.

In answer to the man’s question Carl let a shot off and the mug exploded in a cloud of steaming hot tea.

“Any one else got a stupid question?”

“I didn’t think it was *that* stupid,” said the man holding nothing but the handle of his mug. Carl walked over to him and thunked him in the temple with the heavy metal handle of his gun. He dropped like a cheap hooker with a hand full of fifties.

“Anyone else?” they all shook their heads as Shoop, George and Dr Komodo emerged from the tunnel. They were an imposing looking lot. Well, excluding George of course.

“So, the inventory’s in there is it?” Shoop gestured to the alcove, “and we can be expecting company yes?”

The men looked sheepish and felt a little stupid at having given away too much information.

“There’re only two more things I need to know. How long until your back-up arrives? And where’s the drinks cabinet?”

“Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer a nice cup of herbal tea, I blended it myself, it’s very tasty.”

Shoop walked over to the man and raised his knee as hard as he could, sending the man’s genitalia up into his body. He went bright pink and slowly slipped to the floor, his legs failing to keep him upright.

“HOW LONG!” roared Shoop directly in the man’s ear. The man just squeaked.

“Anybody else?” Shoop looked around the remaining standing men, “I can make life very difficult for you. What I just did to this poor sod is a fleck of snow on the top of the tip of an iceberg compared to what I’ll do to you if you don’t give me an answer!”

They all said in unison, “If it’ll make you feel better, you just go ahead, I’m sure we’ll be just fine.”

Shoop’s face dropped. He didn’t have time for this. If they were anything like Bunty, Jeeves and his two pupils, they wouldn’t give anything away, even under extreme torture. Shoop had used all of his truth serum on Jeeves back at the school, which ousted that option.

“Sod it!” Shoop gestured to his thugs, “tie them up and stick them over in that corner. Feel free to go over and smack them about when ever you feel like it.”

The men were tied and lightly beaten. All they said was “You should try some of that tea, it’s very relaxing, maybe it’ll help unblock your chakras a bit. They look a bit clogged up at the moment.”

After that Shoop soon gagged them, wrapping duct tape around their heads, mummifying them from the mouth down to the nape of their necks.

“Right George, take charge of the packing, I want anything they’ve got on the Priory Of Sion and any related organisations. If you spy anything else you fancy help yourself but make sure we’ve got enough room for all the important stuff.’

They set about their work while Shoop had a dig around for a drinks cabinet. He hadn’t had a drink for hours and he was beginning to sober up. That just simply wouldn’t do.

# Chapter 8

## The Boss Gets Annoyed

It was dark in The Boss's office. He liked it that way. He liked sitting in the shadows with his fingers knitted together dreaming up dastardly plots and thinking of new and interesting ways of making the people of the world a little more compliant and controllable.

The Boss had had a hand in the majority of initiatives that lowered the thinking power of the average person. His influence spread over the entire western world and had been worming his way into the east with greater and greater gusto. He spread like a cancer over the world, all in secrecy, always under the surface with his underhand manoeuvring. He had most politicians under his control, along with giants of the media world. There was very little on the planet that had not been influenced by him. His every move was designed to stupefy the populace and bring them under control. He had dreamed up Reality TV, poor children's entertainment, tabloid newspapers, the legalisation of hardcore porn in many countries, the unprecedented spread of gambling, lobotomised education systems, the lot. He even had a big hand in making sure that George W Bush had made it into the Whitehouse, arguably the single most moronic president in American history.

He loved power, but he loved the chase of acquiring it more. He always made sure that there was some kind of challenge that would tax him.

Surprisingly, he had little desire to be *absolutely* powerful; that was the job of another man. If the entire world danced to his tune, where would he go from there? The answer; nowhere! Life seemed a bit dull when there was nobody to scheme against. That was part of the reason why he hadn't killed Shoop years ago, that and the fact that he was extremely useful and that The Boss was secretly terrified of the man.

The Boss had dispatched Dave and Mike, the founders of the Sphere Of Influence, many years ago and had come to realise that the lack of an adversary was somewhat boring. He considered getting rid of Mr Winkle, but things were much more interesting with him around. The Boss would do infinite things to get on Mr Winkles nerves and vice versa but neither of them would show their distain for the other too openly. Neither of them wanted to give an inch of ground, neither could afford to let the other know what he was truly capable of. At least, it had been that way until Shoop had stepped into The Bosses office earlier that day. After the events of that meeting, everything was different. He could not allow Shoop to live after his little display and yet he found himself saddened by the necessity to have Shoop destroyed. Winkle had been one of his favourite amusements for decades. He had lived with the masked conflict for so long that he was going miss it when it was gone. Yes, he'd definitely miss Mr Winkle when he was dead.

He liked the sneakiness, the conniving, the planning to bring him down, the thrust and parry of mind games and strategy.

Shoop had been an excellent opponent. He had been extremely mysterious and could play the strategy game as well as The Boss could. The Boss didn't know the full extent of Shoop's powers, which had kept him curious about the man; it had kept him interested in the vicious little cretin for so many years, but when Shoop had made his move earlier in the day, The Boss finally knew that he was facing someone who had the capacity to bring him down and he couldn't afford to have someone like that running loose.

He loved to play games, but only if he was assured victory. He absolutely needed to be the smartest man in a fight and always had.

Thirty years ago The Boss had been called Trevor Brinkley. He had been the top of his year in Cambridge, was a world class chess player, had never been beaten at risk and was a grand master in an organisation that he'd founded called the Masters of Eberron. It was a dungeons and dragons collective from his university years. He had a fine brain on him but he wasn't the best-liked person in his youth. In fact, that could well be considered one of the largest understatements of the last hundred years. He wasn't *only* disliked; he was feared and hated as well.

His parents had been decent hard working people. They had two boys, of which Trevor was the youngest. By the age of five the entire family was terrified of him. He was small for his age and skinny, he always had been, but he had darker talents than the obviousness of brute strength to instil fear in people. Being big and strong only scared people to a certain point, Trevor was capable of



much more. He had an acute talent for utterly destroying anyone who crossed him, not physically but mentally. It was a talent that was evident from the most tender of ages.

When he was three he accidentally threw his Frisbee into old man Hooper's garden. Old man Hooper didn't like children very much and no imploring, even from Trevor's parents, could make Mr Hooper return Trevor's precious disk; probably because he'd taken great pleasure in watching it melt into nothing on his bon-fire.

Trevor tried sneaking into the old man's garden late at night to get it back, not knowing of its destruction. Engineering a covert Frisbee saving operation is no easy task for a three year old toddler at the best of times, let alone in the pitch black of a cloudy night but he tried none the less. He found the melted remains of his toy on the bonfire and vowed that he would have his revenge.

A year later old man Hooper was jailed for interfering with small boys, namely Trevor.

It was all completely fictitious of course but Trevor had done his work well and the poor old man spent the remainder of his life suffering in jail; being beaten and abused in despicable and unnatural ways simply because Trevor wanted his Frisbee back. The boy's malice was horrific.

His abilities were far beyond his years. He was disgustingly malicious and vile and a fine actor. He had managed to convince his parents, his brother, the police, the world at large (including a number of news papers and TV reporters) and even a gaggle of child psychologists that Mr Hooper, in truth a kind yet

eccentric old man, had been guilty of unheard of behaviour. Such a lie enforced with such expertise from a child so young spoke volumes about the kind of man he would grow up to be.

When the poor soul, Mr Hooper, had been sent to jail the whole family breathed a sigh of relief. They believed that their tormentor had received justice. In truth, their torment had just begun.

Trevor's parents came into his room one day to talk to him about possibly seeing someone who could help him deal with the awful things that Mr Hooper had done. Trevor looked at them from under a sneering smile and simply said that there was no need for him to see anyone, as Mr Hooper was innocent. The parents were aghast at this revelation and when they started to become angry, he coolly suggested that if ever any one outside of the room were to hear about his confession, he would come after *them* next.

The child's stare was so chilling that they had no choice but to believe him.

The child's words and manner were an H-bomb and it was to be the bomb that broke them. They were completely emotionally shattered. They were mortified and horrified to their very cores. How could they, decent god fearing, hard working people have managed to give birth to pure evil. It just didn't make sense. It just wasn't right or fair.

For months they cried themselves to sleep over the anguish of it all. They were well aware that they had no way out. They wouldn't be able to convince the police and the child psychologists that they'd been wrong all along and, even if they could, how could they live with themselves if they set their five-year-old son

on a course of life that would see him shift in and out of various hateful institutions. They were backed into a corner and their life became one long painful chore.

Trevor had played his game very well, diabolical as it was.

His teenage years saw him grow worse. He was stingy, selfish, cruel and bitter. Both of his parents, shattered by their sons evil tendencies, turned to drink and were chronic alcoholics by the time he was twelve, mostly through fear of him, and he administered frequent beatings to them while they were laid out, dead drunk in their room. He was too skinny and gangly to beat them while they were awake so he did it when they were comatose. When they woke, covered in bruises and sometimes bleeding he made them believe that they'd beaten each other in their drunken stupors. He tortured them in so many cruel and inhuman ways that neither of them held out much hope of living for very long. In fact, they both spent many hours quietly praying for the sweet release of death, for freedom from their devil child.

Their lives played heavy on them. Eventually they simply gave up the will to live.

They were dead by the time he was eighteen, which was just as he'd planned. His parents had been very wealthy and Trevor planned on using his inheritance to see him through university and start him on the road as a successful businessman. He wanted power. He wanted it so badly that the need for it oozed from his pores. He stank of vile ambition.

He had no contesters for the will as his older brother had run away at age sixteen. Nobody quite knew why he'd gone, as the family kept their dirty little secret, namely Trevor's evil nature, hidden as best they could. The truth was that His brother, Ben, had feared for his life for many years. As soon as he was old enough to be employed, he left the cursed house and his poor suffering parents to their fates. He simply vanished one night and was never seen again.

Trevor sometimes wondered where he was, whether or not he was planning revenge somewhere out there. He truly hoped so. Trevor loved adversaries. He had engaged many private detectives to hunt his brother down, but he was too well hidden. There was not the slightest clue as to where in the world he was.

Trevor sailed through university, terrifying people as he went, and one day, years later, while sitting in a little pub in Bury St Edmunds, overheard a strange conversation.

A clean, wealthy looking man was talking to a strange looking individual wearing a trilby and an old fashioned brown suit. He looked like a detective in a film from the thirties. Like Humphrey Bogart in the Maltese falcon but younger, more bitter and with far more life etched on his features, if that can be imagined. He had young skin, but the deep chasm-like lines of a man who'd spent several lifetimes being pissed off with everything.

Trevor over heard some ridiculous notions of little green men, werewolves and sloth's that fell from the sky in busy London streets. Ridiculous as they were,

they seemed to be intriguing the wealthy looking gentleman, which made Trevor curious.

Trevor followed them unseen to the car park and saw that it was all true as the man in the trilby showed the businessman what he had in his car. Among other things there was a werewolf in the boot, a little green man in a suitcase and even a fairy in the glove box.

Trevor hated anything that was even remotely strange. Strange things were wild cards and had the threat of irrational behaviour behind them. Strange and irrational things were not predictable and were seldom brought under control and Trevor thrived on controlling his environment and the people in it. Even with this distaste for the strange though, he felt oddly compelled to follow them as they drove away. For the first time in his life he went with the spur of the moment and despised every last gut wrenchingly unpredictable second of it.

He lost them on the road to the Lake District. He didn't know how the driver of the car, the man in the trilby hat, had managed it. One minute they were there, the next they weren't. They had been on a vast motorway with no exits in sight and very few cars to hide behind, but gone they were.

He became obsessed. He couldn't forget about the strange things he had seen in the man's car. If there were things out there that defied explanation, then he had to find out what they were and have power over them. "Just imagine the possibilities", he thought to himself, the secrets to be had, the powers to enforce, the adversaries to be destroyed, the power, **the power**. He couldn't let his mind rest until he found his quarry. It was what he'd spent his whole life waiting for.

He could feel it in his bones. He tingled with excitement every time he thought of it. His bones felt like they were rattling when the possibilities flowed through his mind. The tingle felt like a sixth sense that he couldn't hold down, it was a compulsion, like running from the sound of gunfire.

But he'd lost them. He'd lost his chance.

Then one day, as he was working at tearing down an old family company and building his first office complex over its still warm corpse, some builders found something. There was a graveyard under the foundations of his new building. A man came to investigate it. He said he was from the government. It was the same man he'd managed to lose so many years ago; the very same man that kept werewolves in the boot of his car and little green men in his suitcase.

Trevor couldn't believe his luck. For years he'd hired dozens of men to try and track down the man in the trilby and his business-man associate but to no avail, and now, suddenly and without warning, there he was, wearing the same dirty brown suit, battered hat and sporting the same startlingly weather-beaten features. Trevor's bones rattled like they had done that first time in Bury St Edmunds. Since then he'd wondered if the tingling sensation had just been a figment of his imagination but was now proved wrong. He felt the clattering of his sixth sense quite distinctly.

He wasn't going to let him get away this time.

Trevor weaselled his way into the man's confidence and the rest was history. Some time later the man, Shoop Winkle, was working for Trevor. After

he managed to learn everything of value from the businessman, he made him disappear, conveniently and without trace, along with his associate Dave.

Trevor had sent Shoop out of the country on a mission as his plans to take over the organisation came to fruition. When Mr Winkle returned, The Boss managed to convince him that Mike's and Dave's disappearance had been nothing other than a freak fishing accident.

Trevor took over the business, gave it the secret name of The Sphere Of Influence, took it underground and Shoop was happy to let him do it.

But the end was near for Shoop now. He had made The Boss feel fear and nobody, **nobody**, made The Boss feel fear without paying for it.

It was time for Shoop to die.

The Boss sat in the dark, knitting his fingers together and plotting as the door opened. A man tentatively stepped into the room and peered into the bleakness.

"Hello? Boss?" said the silhouetted figure.

"Is he dead?" the man gave a start as The Boss spoke from the shadows.

"Um, well, the thing is, well, he got away!"

"Shit!" hissed The Boss under his breath. The man waited in the doorway to be dismissed. The Boss opened a drawer in his desk and pulled something out. He shot the bearer of bad tidings with a taser gun, just for the hell of it.

## Chapter 9

### Big Men Hugging

Shoop was sitting in the clutter stuffed living room of Jeeves' country cottage with his feet up while squinting with distaste as he tried to gulp down a bottle of 1787 Chateau Lafitte. According to the Guinness book of world records he was idly flipping through, it was the single most expensive wine in the world.

Shoop preferred gin.

George rushed into the room and blurted out, "Looks like we've found something!"

"Is it gin?" Asked Shoop dryly, making revolted smacking noises with his tongue and swirling the wine around his glass.

"No Shoop, it's not gin. What's the matter, the wine not doing the job for you?"

Shoop glowered at the glass in his hand, "I think it's gone off, besides, it's bloody French isn't it, I feel violated, nothing good ever came out of *that* bloody country."

"The battery is a French invention you know." ventured George.

"Piss off George, when I want your opinion, I'll give it to you."

"Right, sorry, anyway, I think you should come and have a look at something."



“Give me a minute.” Shoop walked over to the front door and stuck his head out, “Everything alright out there?” he shouted.

“Fine! Could do with a beer though.” Jim’s voice floated down from the roof where he was keeping watch.

‘Here, try this,’ Shoop corked the wine and hurled it at Jim, ‘Tastes like piss to me!’ he said. Jim deftly snatched the bottle out of the air, uncorked it and took a huge gulp without thinking, ‘I’ve got to go down stairs for a bit, let me know if you see anything.’

“No problem.”

Shoop went back inside and followed George down to the vaults. George led him to the alcove where the files were being kept.

“What’ve you got for me George?”

“Well, Jeeves’ filing system wasn’t quite as straight forward as we’d hoped it would be. It was full of codes and ciphers, bloody nightmare it was. The removal men weren’t much help, when we tried asking them questions they just grinned and told us that we should be drinking more tea. Very odd behaviour.”

“Is there a point coming any time soon?”

“Sorry, yeah, luckily Dr Komodo has a special talent for code breaking and mystical filing systems. He cracked it and we started packing up the important bits and pieces.”

“Five percent rise for you on this one Komodo.”

“Cheers boss.” If Dr Komodo was happy about the pay rise, he didn’t show it in his features. He held fast to his hard scrunched up scowl.

“Talk me through what you’ve found, but not too in-depth, we haven’t got all night” continued Shoop.

“I thought we were okay for time for the minute?”

“I can’t believe that we’ll be as lucky as we have been for long. Sooner or later some one’s going to turn up and I’d rather not be here when they do.”

“Well,” interjected Dr Komodo, “to start with, it looks like this Priory Of Sion thing has been going for around two thousand years.”

“Blimey!” remarked Shoop.

“Quite. There are papers here that suggest that it existed before that too, but we’ll need more time for digging on that.”

“That worries me.”

“How do you mean?” asked George.

“Well,” Shoop went on, “if this organisation has existed beneath the radar for two thousand years, possibly more, then why the hell are we here looking through it’s supposedly more precious artefacts. I mean, where’s the security, how could they afford to let us in?” The others looked a little worried. “They know who I am, both Bunty and Jeeves had heard of me before, so they know what kind of operator I am. It just doesn’t make sense that they’d so easily let me just walk into their history, pick it up and walk off with it now does it? I mean, if they’re a several millennia old secret worldwide organisation, why are they being so damn slack?”

They all pondered for a moment.

“Maybe they’re getting complacent,” ventured George, “I mean, The Sphere Of Influence know about them as well now. It could be that they just started messing up all of a sudden. They could be in decline.”

“Doesn’t seem very likely though does it.” Said Shoop.

‘I don’t suppose it matters anyway. We’re here now and it appears that we don’t have any choice but to follow through on what we’ve started.’

‘Maybe, but I still don’t like it. It’s all just a little bit too easy, but like you say, we’re here now.’

“There’s more,” said Dr Komodo.

“It’ll have to wait!” interrupted Jim from the entrance to the passageway, “we’ve got company.”

“How many?” asked Shoop. Through years of doing what he did, he instantly prepared himself for conflict, checking his guns like a machine. He loved conflict. Conflict made everything better.

“At least six, could be more, they’re in a sizeable mini van.”

“George, Komodo, stay here and get as much of this shit as you can into boxes, I want us out of here as soon as is humanly possible. Jim, Yan, Carl, you’re with me!”

They sped up the stairs and went to greet their guests.

The mini van pulled up ten yards from the front of the house and six dauntingly large men got out. They all looked very well built. Not one of them was under six feet tall and three feet wide at the shoulders. They were laughing

and joking as if they didn't have a care in the world. It was obvious that they didn't expect to find Shoop, reclining on an old rocking chair at the front door, his feet resting high on the door frame. He appeared to be on his own. What the men didn't know was that there were a number of guns trained on them, waiting for the slightest hint of action.

It took them a moment to notice him as they walked up the gravel path and when they did, no fear crossed their faces, just curiosity.

"Hello!" Said the foremost of the men.

"Good evening gentlemen." replied Shoop with seemingly unjustified confidence.

"Um," pondered the man, "I don't think we've met before, my names Quentin, and you are?"

"Me? Well, let's just say that I'm your guardian angel for the evening."

The men stopped walking, ten feet shy of where Shoop was reclining.

"I'm sorry? You're our what?" said the man with an amused look on his face, looking around at his colleagues. They too looked entertained.

"I said; I'm your guardian angel for the evening. I've been put here to make sure you don't make a terrible mistake."

The men all tossed sideways glances at each other as if to silently confer. Quentin shrugged in way that was unmistakable. It was international sign language for; what the hell, let's listen to him, it might be a laugh. "And what mistake might that be." said Quentin smiling pleasantly.

“It would be a big mistake to come any further. There are people who want to hurt you and they don’t want you to move. I fear it is my duty to deliver this information, as your guardian angel that is.”

“Okay?” said Quentin looking slightly puzzled and a little less jovial. “And what are we supposed to do, stand here all night?”

“You’re supposed to turn around, get back in your van and drive back to wherever it was that you came from very slowly indeed.”

“Um, I’m not sure that we can do that.”

“Be careful what you say there Quentin, you only get one warning and then things start getting messy.”

Quentin considered his guardian angels words for a moment and then said, “How messy are we talking here, messy as in the aftermath of a new years eve party, or messy as in the aftermath of a dinner party?”

“Messy as in the after math of a crowd of rabid German Sheppards in a flock of sheep messy.”

“Oh...’ Quentin looked a little taken aback at this, ‘I see.’ He rubbed his chin for a while and then said, ‘Will you just give us a moment to confer?’

“Don’t be long about it, I’m a busy little guardian angel and have a lot to do tonight.”

The men huddled together for a moment and started murmuring. None of them appeared to have any sort of opinion on the matter one way or the other. They didn’t seem to be able to make up their minds. Quentin gave another “What the hell” shrug and turned back to Shoop.

“The problem here is this. I’ve been told to come here and do something. I would very much like to do this thing because the man who asked me to do it is a very nice man. In fact, I see him as a sort of father figure really, and not doing what I’m supposed to do would mean that I’d let him down. I would hate to do something that would make him uneasy because, as I’ve said, I feel a certain kinship with him. A certain respect and admiration for the man oozes out of me, and I’m not alone with these feelings am I boys?” Quentin turned to the rest of them who nodded whole heartedly at his question.

Shoop was a little confused. At first he thought Quentin was trying to wind Shoop up, stall for time so that they could manoeuvre themselves into a fighting position or something of that sort, but as it turned out he appeared to be being deadly serious. He sounded a bit like he was in a group therapy session and expected his words to be heard and applauded. He sounded like a damn hippy, and Shoop had very little love for hippies.

He had prepared himself for a confrontation. He’d expected the men to be the muscle, the security, the bad news that he’d been waiting for to quell the feeling that everything was going just that little bit too smoothly, but instead the men were fast revealing themselves to be nothing more than a gathering of wet girls blouses.

Shoop’s patience was running out, but still the man rambled on.

“Obviously in the grand scheme of things, letting one person down doesn’t really make much of a difference, but if you let one down, it becomes easier to let another down, and it’s a slippery slope from there isn’t it lads?” the men all

nodded and smiled as if Quentin had just spoken the words of the gospel. One of them even said, "Right on brother!" like an over enthusiastic rally participant at a political demonstration.

Quentin twittered on uncontrollably about how he felt about one thing; how the universe worked in regards to the thing that he'd just mentioned; how it was bad form for Shoop to be pretending to be an angel when he clearly wasn't; how the world would be a nicer place if... and mankind would do a lot better for itself if... etc etc.

Shoop couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. It was his sheer disbelief that allowed Quentin to prattle on for so long. Surely he couldn't really think that this was the right time to be discussing the way the universe worked and how it was his responsibility to stand up and fight for the spiritual evolution of mankind. Shoop had the feeling that he'd walked into some sort of surrealist comedy sketch.

He looked around at Jim, Carl and Yan who had hidden themselves in various strategic spots. They simply shrugged in disbelief. Carl mouthed the words "can I shoot them now.... PPLLEEAASSEE!" Shoop gave this serious consideration for a moment as Quentin prattled on but then shook his head, much to the disappointment of the others.

Shoop gathered himself and decided that it was time to a stop to Quentin's sermon.

"....and so, because I have these almost father son like connections to this man, and because of the importance of being true to oneself in order for the

human race to evolve, I would feel that turning around and walking away would be a crass and irresponsible act, “ he glanced round at his listeners who were enraptured by his speech. “And so I would ask you, for the sake of mankind, to maybe give us another option. There must be a solution to this stalemate.”

He appeared to have finished. The other men were hypnotised by him, but eventually started coming around and clapping, saying things like “wow, it was really brave of you to open up like that, “ and “ I feel the same way about you man!”. One of them actually started crying. The last straw was them all participating in a group hug.

Shoop decided that they needed to be brought back to reality with a hard thump.

“Okay, after hearing what you’ve said I’m going to respond.” He stood up, whipped out two revolvers from inside his jacket and said, “You’ve only two choices; you can fuck off or you can die!”

The men looked at Shoop, looked at each other and then looked at their leader.

“Huddle,” said Quentin.

The men huddled together and mumbled away in quieted voice. Shoop was finding it all far too tedious. They clearly weren’t taking him seriously, so he shot one of them in the knee. The injured man dropped to the ground without uttering a single yelp. He just sat there looking at his leg, apparently fascinated by the abundant flow of blood.



“Now,” said Shoop, “will you kindly FUCK OFF!!” the volume of Shoop’s voice rattled the men. This was behaviour that they weren’t used to. All the shouting and threats were apparently out-with the realms of their experience.

They decided to leave.

“Well, it was nice talking to you anyway, maybe you should drink herbal tea, it unblocks the chakras you know, and yours seem a bit clogged.” Said Quentin

Shoop pointed a gun at his face.

“Right you are!” said Quentin. He climbed into the drivers seat as the others piled the injured man into the back of the mini van. Within a minute they were driving away, very slowly as Shoop had asked.

“Wet bastards!” marvelled Shoop shaking his head in disbelief, “Let’s get a drink!” he suggested, to which his men answered enthusiastically in the affirmative.

After a stiff drink, they managed to find some whisky hidden behind some books, a bit of shaking of their heads in befuddlement and some frowning, Shoop and his cronies made their way back down to the vaults under the cottage leaving Yan on the roof to keep watch. As they entered, George and Dr Komodo were frantically scrambling to get as much of the contents of the vast cellars into boxes as was possible. They didn’t stop working as they saw Shoop and company enter the chasm.

“How’d it go?” panted George as he flung an armful of ancient looking books into a crate.

“Um, I’m not really sure.” Said Shoop ponderously, still clearly bewildered at the group of men.

“What do you mean, you’re not sure. Are they gone?” George kept moving frantically.

Shoop slumped onto a crate and thought for a moment, “Yeah their gone, but it was all a bit, well, weird.”

“So what happened?” George was intrigued now and stopped rushing around, as did Dr Komodo.

“Well, their was six of them, they were very big, they talked nonsense at me for a while, I told them to leave, they talked some more, they had a group hug, I told them to fuck off, they talked a bit more, mostly about their responsibility to human evolution, I shot one in the leg, they said I should drink more herbal tea and then they drove off.”

Shoop’s bemusement passed onto George as he said, “Eh?”

“I said; they talked nonsense at me for a while, I told them to leave, they talked some more, they had a group hug, I told them to fuck off, they talked a bit more, mostly about their responsibility to human evolution, I shot one in the leg, they said I should drink more herbal tea and then they drove off.”

“They had a group hug?”

“They had a group hug!” said Shoop with a disgusted look on his face.

“They actually had a group hug?”

“They actually had a group hug?” Shoop gagged a little.

“I didn’t think people really did that, not real people anyway, it usually only happens in bad films that woman who like pink things enjoy. That’s revolting. I’m surprised you managed restrain yourself and only shoot one of them.”

“The thought did cross my mind to do a lot more than that!”

“Who were they?”

“To be honest, I didn’t think to ask. I was too distracted by the talking and hugging.”

George’s eyes darted around inside his head as if trying to make sense of what he had heard. They searched the ether for some sort of frame of reference for such behaviour but couldn’t find any. Eventually he gave up the search and simply said with a deeply furrowed brow crushing the lenses of his thick glasses, “Weird!”

“Yeah! I know!”

“Well.....um.....what so we do now?”

“I say we get the hell out of here as quickly as we can before more people turn up and hug at us. It was very disturbing.”

“Right! Gotcha!” George shook his head as if to dislodge the image in his mind, it still held on however, “they....I mean, six very large fully grown men and they actually...they actually *hugged?*”

“Yip, the main one’s name was Quentin!”

“Quentin? Nobody’s called Quentin, not anyone with a chin anyway. Jesus!” he shook his head again, “That’s it, I agree, let’s get the buggery out of here.”

Everybody pitched in to help pack up the remaining artefacts and books except Shoop, who went upstairs and finished off the whisky with his feet up.

An hour and a half later the removal truck that had been parked by the side of the cottage was full and they were on their way to Shoop’s hideout in the highlands to take stock, each one of them trying desperately to forget the image of the hugging men.

# Chapter 10

## Jill looses Her Squash Partner

The six men in the van were as good as their word and drove very slowly all the way back to their base. Their base was in Fife, the region to the north of Edinburgh. The drive would've taken them a good hour and a half to complete if they hadn't been moving at snail pace. They managed to pull up to their destination, a country house just to the north of a town called Glenrothes, four hours after leaving Jeeves' house in the Pentlands.

Some of the men tried to convince Quentin that he should be driving a bit faster as the man with the bullet hole in his leg was slowly bleeding to death. They were doing their best to try and stem the flow, but he was in desperate need of medical attention and he could get it at the base if only Quentin would get a move on. Quentin said that he'd gone back on an agreement once that day and he wasn't going to do it again. He then went on to say that the slippery slope of failing the human race was far more important a concern. They all nodded in agreement, even the man with the bloody hole in his leg. Quentin did, however, call ahead and inform his superiors of every thing that had happened. They said that they'd have medical care waiting for the injured man.

Quentin's stubbornness didn't kill the man, which was nice, but what it had done was to give Shoop Winkle a very good head start before anybody could think about tracking him. Shoop and his gang were safe on their way to a hideout in the highlands by the time people had been dispatched to recover the

body of Jeeves and to untie the men in the vault of Jeeves' house. There was no hope of Quentin's superiors having the slightest chance of following them and finding out where they were. This wasn't too much of a concern though as the person at the top of the organisation, the woman known as the Sion, as she had a peculiar way of knowing things that other people didn't. She knew precisely where Shoop and his men were.

When the news came through, Jill was overseeing a game of twister in a study of the ancient Scottish castle further north and west of the house in Fife. The room they were in was all tapestries, ornate bookshelves and an antique desk. The game was proving very comical as the participants were all getting tangled up in their plethora of ethnic neck beads. Mike was having problems getting his right hand onto a red dot on the game sheet while trying to disentangle his Native American Heshe necklace from a dumpy looking aboriginal girl from Northern Australia called Gemma's dread-locked hair.

The air was thick with hysterical laughter; the giggle fit was making it very difficult for the players to keep levitated on their teetering limbs.

After a few minutes of chuckle addled writhing on Mike's behalf, all four of the protagonists flopped to the floor and lay in a titter-some tangled mess.

It was somewhat of an odd sight to see, especially given it's setting in the plush, antique ridden, book smothered room of one of the oldest clan castles in Scotland. The sight made the man entering the room laugh even harder than the tangled lump of limbs were.

It took him a good fifteen minutes to compose himself after the fit of giggles, during which he started hyperventilating and gasping into a brown paper bag, tears of joy streaming down his face.

They all started to settle down a little. Jill went to put the kettle on. The gasping man eventually got around to telling the rest of them why he'd entered the room in the first place.

"So, Paul, what can I do for you?" asked Jill.

"Well," Paul sipped his herbal tea and nearly choke as he forgot the age old proverb *never giggle and drink tea at the same time*. He coughed a little said, still smiling at the recent hilarity, "Um, see, the thing is, and I hate to break up all the fun with this, but I've got some bad news."

Bad news doesn't tend to look right coming from a man who's giggling, but this didn't seem to bother the Sion and the others.

"Thing is," continued Paul, finally getting a grip on his laughing fit, "Well, you know how we sent some people to help pack-up Jeeves' vault, well, the second load of people, that were coming from Fife, bumped into Shoop Winkle at the front door. They thought about maybe trying to get past him, but things got a bit emotional. Winkle threatened them, they had a bit of a group hug and then Shoop shot one of them in the leg. He's alright and all, but it seems that Mr Winkle has made off with almost the entire museum that Jeeves had stored down there."

"Oh dear," said Jill half-heartedly, still enjoying the memory of the giggles they'd just had, "at least they got a hug out of it, I really like hugs!"

“Yeah, me too man,” said Gemma.

“Do you fancy one now?” said Jill

“Yeah!” spurted the girl enthusiastically.

They locked in each others arms, engaging in a long and deeply felt embrace. Jill told Paul to carry on with his story. Other people around the room decided that they would like a hug too and before long, everyone was clinging onto to someone or other.

“Thing is, “ said Paul over Mikes broad shoulders, “that after we found out about it, we sent some people to check on Jeeves in the school. I’m sorry to have to say it but, it looks like he’s been poisoned. Looks like a massive overdose of that truth serum that Winkle uses.”

“Oh now that is a pain, Jeeves was my squash partner, anybody else want to take his game off him?” everybody looked at the floor knowing that Jill was a fierce squash player. “Fair enough.” Said Jill and as an afterthought, “If Mr Winkle keeps going on like this I’ll have nobody left to play with, but I suppose it’s all worth it, and I’m sure Jeeves will be fine.”

“Yeah,” said Mike despite the fact the Jeeves was dead. He relinquished the nice warm hug he was engaged in with Paul and stood for a moment, enjoying the potent sense of satisfaction that the hug had given.

“It looks like Shoop and his men have vanished. There was no sign of them anywhere.”

“Oh I wouldn’t worry about that, he’ll pop up again. He’s quite tenacious like that, and besides, I shouldn’t be surprised if he hasn’t just wondered up to his



*secret* hide-out in the highlands. It's the only place I know of where the Sphere Of Influence won't be able to track him."

Shoop would've been greatly dismayed to have heard Jill mention the secret hide-out. The point of secret hideouts was that nobody knew about them, they were supposed to remain *secret*. Shoop's hide-out had only been known to four people. Him, George, Dave and Mike, in actual fact it had been known to a great many other people. Shoop had had to hire workmen to help built it but made sure they would never say anything to anyone about it by cutting out their tongues. They were paid massive amounts of compensation and never had to work again, but it didn't really make up for not being able to talk. He also informed them that if any of them even thought about trying to let anyone know about the place, then he'd know about it. He would then hunt them down, torture them, kill them, bring them back to life again, torture them some more and then mince them in front of their families before doing the same to them. Shoop felt confident that none of them had communicated the location of the bunker to anyone.

Despite Jill knowing about the facility, none of the workmen had communicated anything to anyone. For some reason, Jill just knew things. None of her followers had any idea how she managed to just *know* these things and didn't much care to find out either, they just really liked being around the woman. She made them giggle; she made them feel as if the horrors of the world were all part of a grand design. There were no answers in Jill's world, neither were there

any questions, life just *was*. It made everyone that came into contact with her happier, whether they wanted to feel that way or not.

Nobody asked her how she knew what she knew, they just had faith in everything that she was. They didn't have to try and have faith in her; it wasn't a hard-acquired commodity. Anyone who spent time with her just felt it. Nobody really knew why they felt so relaxed and happy around her, they just did.

"I suppose it's a silly question, but did they get away with the map?" asked Jill nonchalantly.

"I'm afraid so man."

"Bummer," said Jill without an ounce of real concern, "I suppose that means he'll be finding me before long, never mind, I'm sure it'll all workout okay. We should try and get hold of Ben though, I think he'll want to be in on whatever happens."

"Yeah!" said everyone in the room in unison.

There was a brief silence. Then Mike piped up, as if something had suddenly occurred to him.

"I forgot to tell everyone, I just went into town and bought the new Lord Of the Rings trivial pursuit game, anyone fancy it?"

The room suddenly took on a glowing air of glee as everyone got very excited about the prospect.

Mike ran off to get the game board.

# Chapter 11

## Cabin Fever

It took Shoop and the rest of them six hours to travel to the hideout. Conscious that they needed to stay under the radar of the Sphere Of Influence, they went the long way around. They took the country roads across to the west coast, almost to Glasgow, and then headed north. By the time they reached their destination the sun was creeping it's way into the winter morning sky. They arrived just in time, as they drove up the glen a blizzard started. If they'd waited another hour the road would have been completely blocked off. It added to Shoop's sense of security. If they couldn't get out, then the chances of anyone getting in would be minimal. Not that anyone would find them anyway.

They pulled into the secret bunker.

"I need all of this inside before anyone has a break. Take it down to the hanger, that should be big enough to house it all." Commanded Shoop.

"You could help us you know!" said Dr Komodo through his scowl, though bleary eyed from the journey.

"You just lost that extra five percent I was going to give you dip-shit!"

"Bollocks!" cursed Komodo under his breath.

After that, no-one complained as Shoop went inside for a drink and some sleep.

Shoop's hide-out was very secret indeed. It had been built on the very site of the crash landed UFO that his mentors had found so many years ago. As I've said, apart from the tongue-less workmen, only four people knew of the place until then Mike and Dave went missing. For a while Shoop worried that they had told The Boss before their disappearance, but he had used it enough times since then to know that it wasn't a concern. Shoop wasn't happy about showing the independents where it was, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

Still, he did feel that too many of his secrets were being revealed. There was a quiet concern in the back of his mind. He'd given away too much to The Boss; on top of that Bunty Autumn and Mr Jeeves had known about his existence when they shouldn't have done. Now the independents were privy to one of his most closely guarded secrets. He knew that if he ever fell foul of any of them, or his ability to pay them massive amounts of money for their services was compromised, then they'd turn on him faster than a tabloid on a celebrity. It was an uncomfortably precarious position to be in but he didn't see that he had any choice in the matter.

He was on the run from the Sphere Of Influence and had a strong feeling that the strange hugging men, Mr Jeeves and Bunty were all part of the Priory Of Sion, which meant they'd be looking for him too. He needed allies, and these men were the closest he could get to any. He saw difficult and dangerous times ahead and he needed a few handy guns by his side.

He also had to move a hell of a lot of crap from Jeeves' vault and he didn't fancy doing it himself.

He also sensed very lucrative times ahead, he didn't know why he felt that way he just simply knew that if he made it through to the end of this mission that they'd all be a lot better off than they ever had been; this meant that he could rely on the band of misfits without too much anxiety. Still, there was a dark cloud on the horizon. Danger was imminent.

Shoop had helped to finish off the building of the bunker with his bare hands in the early years of his helping Dave and Mike, which was unusual for him as he far preferred idleness to activity, especially when he could get someone else to do it for him. It was a characterless, charm-less underground series of grey rooms and extensive corridors. The road that led to it was little more than a dirt track and it ended at the side of the mountain that, fifty years earlier, had seen an alien space-craft smash into the side of it. The bunker lay under the mountain and the entrance of it was two massive vegetation covered sliding doors. Every time Shoop went there, great pains were taken to ensure that the opening of the doors was never seen.

Before entering it, the surrounding area had to be scanned for life and a telescope scrambler engaged so that it couldn't be seen, either by earth bound visual aids, or satellites. This nifty little gadget projected a hologram and had been developed from the technology salvaged from the crashed craft.

The bunker was pretty much the same as any other, from an interior design point of view, that being that it had no interior design in it at all. It was concrete, pipes and cables with heavy metal doors and felt a bit like the guts of a power station. It served its purpose well, however. It hadn't once been

compromised and was one of the few places in the world that Shoop felt safe. He was confident that he and his team could take all the time that they needed to sift through the sheer mass of information and artefacts that they'd stolen. Even his paranoia about how easy everything was going was beginning to subside. He could relax a little, which was handy as he believed that life was destined to get a lot more complicated and dangerous in the months to come.

Shoop had found that, invariably, if things go well for a while, the universe had a tendency to make sure that luck flipped over and he had to pay his dues in sweat and blood. Shoop hadn't paid his dues to the universal machine for some time now and wasn't looking forward to the bill coming in.

The information that they'd managed to find while at Jeeves' house had proved to be not just the tip of the iceberg, but a penguin perched on top of a thick layer of snow on top of said icy mass.

Shoop and his team stayed in the bunker for weeks while George and Dr Komodo raked through Jeeves' mountain of stuff. They were feverishly trying to find out exactly what they were looking for, as that seemed to be a point that nobody seemed to be too clear on. They just knew that Shoop's sixth sense was rarely wrong.

Because of the heat that they'd brought on themselves, both from the Sphere Of Influence and the Priory Of Sion, none of them could afford to be seen outside of the bunker. They simply couldn't risk being found.

After a few weeks Shoop wandered into the hanger where Jeeves' things had been stored, to speak to George and try and find out how much longer they were all to be trapped in the bunker. The room was awash with papers, books and all manner of odd looking relics. George was nowhere to be seen.

"George?" yelled Shoop as he trekked through the hanger and its heaped contents.

"George!"

"Hello? Oh, hi Shoop." George's head popped out from behind a pile of books with a big smile on his face. He hadn't had to do this much research ever before and was clearly in hog's heaven.

"How's it going?" asked Shoop.

"Well, it's been a bit of a hard slog," he said, appearing not to mind in the slightest, "but we're getting there. I think we may have figured out what it is that we're looking for, well, sort of."

"Look George, I know you're enjoying yourself in here, but you have to get a sodding move on with this shit! The boys are going mental with cabin fever. Yan stared at Carl the other day. None of us knew what Yan had done until we found Carl fourteen hours later, super-glued to the underside of his own bed. Yan seemed to find it all very amusing. It took us an hour to cut him off. His skins healing fairly quickly, but if his supply of weed runs out I don't want to think about what he's going to do to Yan."

"These things take time Shoop, you're all going to have to be patient."  
Said George.

“Bollocks to that, give me what you’ve got and I’ll see if I can do anything. There must be something we can do to keep the boys busy.”

“Okay, okay, look, sit down there for a minute.”

Shoop planted himself down on a pile of flattened cardboard boxes while George went off in search of something. He came back brandishing some papers.

“Well, we’ve spent a lot of time trying to separate the valuable from the not so valuable, which meant trying to figure out which information was worth money to somebody and which information was just interesting.. Problem with that was, it’s all worth massive amounts of cash to someone or other. The illuminati alone would buy us a country just for that pile over there.”

“I’m not sure, but I think we’re looking for something that’s bigger than money George. My senses wouldn’t be as intense as they are for some thousand year old design for a food blender.” said Shoop looking at a piece of parchment with a diagram of a mill with a whisk attached to it. “Wow, he said, you really *do* have a lot of crap to sort through.”

“You don’t have the slightest idea Shoop.”

“Anyway, thousand year old blenders aside, as I said, we’re looking for something bigger and more important than cash, my sixth sense has never lied to me. There has to be something in this room that’ll allow me to finish The Boss off and sit pretty for the rest of my life. I want nothing short of total freedom and vindication.”



“Well, there’s one thing that I’ve been looking at. You remember how I said that I’d found out that the Priory Of Sion could be two thousand years old.”

“What about it?”

“Well, I’ve been digging into that while Komodo has been looking for cash generating papers and the likes. I did my best to trace the origins of the POS with the use of a number of documents without much success. It’s history is scattered all over a thousand different books and scrolls, all I could find out was it’s rough age, and some references to an earlier organisation that pre-dated it. It was all very vague. I was at the point of giving up when Dr Komodo found a map yesterday. Wait there and I’ll get it.”

George disappeared again. He could be heard rummaging around and swearing for a while until he found what he was looking for.

“Aha! Got it!” he staggered back into view, stumbling over some debris. He was holding a parchment encased in a simple wood and glass frame. He handed it to Shoop “Be very careful with that.”

Shoop gave him a look that screamed, “What sort of a bloody idiot to you take me for?”

“Right, anyway, we puzzled over this for a while not quite knowing what it was. It’s deeply coded. The more it didn’t make sense, the more determined we became, we were up all night staring at the damn thing. We eventually managed to make a little sense out of it. This writing here is a mish-mash of different languages, some dead, some ancient, some modern. It’s also slathered with

codes and ciphers, the likes of which neither of us has ever seen. Komodo managed to come up with what we think is the code-breaker though.”

“Good work Komodo!” yelled Shoop into the room, hoping that the man buried under papers would hear him. A muffled voice said something that sounded a bit like.

“What?”

“It looks a bit like a family tree on acid, with some steroids thrown in for good measure.” said Shoop eye-balling the parchment quizzically.

“Yeah, but when you start using the code-breaker it starts looking a bit different. It starts looking a lot more like a map. You won’t be able to see it, it’s like one of those magic eye pictures, you have to get the knack of it before the full picture reveals itself.” George went on.

“It starts here in the middle and jumps from location to location all over the world, from what I can make out anyway. I’m going to need to work on it a lot more before definite answers can be given.”

“Interestingly enough it starts in India, in Srinagar Kashmir, in the very town where the crypt that housed the POS symbol that we found on Bunty Autumn’s belt buckle is.”

“Oh no, this is Jesus related isn’t it!” said Shoop.

“Well,” mused George, “the man that you lobotomised in that crypt strongly believed that Jesus had survived the crucifixion and fled to the east. He thought that Jesus had died, some sixty after the supposed crucifixion, in India.”

“Shit, I hate the religious ones. There’re too many people to piss off when it comes to messing with churches.”

“The thing is that, as I’ve said before, the Priory Of Sion seems to have appeared around about the same time as Jesus’ supposed real death; in fact, the very same year if this map is to be believed. By the looks of things, using the map and cross referencing it with a number of other documents, the evidence suggests that Jesus died on the twelfth of September in ninety three AD. The POS emerged slowly over the coming months.”

“Bollocks.” said Shoop under his breath, “I bet we get those mad catholic knight orders after us again. We barely got away last time, those people are brutal.”

“That’s not all, there’s reference here to an organisation called the Order Of The Green Man.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?” asked Shoop.

“It looks like they’ve been around for a lot longer than the POS. There’s photos somewhere in this mess that have paintings of the green man encased in the same triangular design that was on Bunty’s belt. So basically, we’re talking about the possibility that this organisation could’ve been around since mankind was painting pictures on cave walls.”

“Is this the same green man from Celtic myth?” enquired Shoop.

“The very same, but it’s bigger than the Celts alone. Every culture, every religion has had a version of him since man-kind crawled out of the primordial ooze. From the books and articles strewn about in here we’ve managed to

ascertain that there was never a time when the Order Of The Green Man didn't exist. He's been nestled under the fabric of mankind's subconscious forever, sometimes in plain view. The only reason we're even vaguely aware of him is because of this map. Without it he would've stayed invisible. Once we got an inkling of the codes and ciphers, we began to see that he runs through absolutely everything in this room. Every single item holds a little of his past. We are basically sitting in the middle of a huge book. This stuff must have taken centuries, possibly millennia to put together and we haven't even scraped the surface of it all."

"Looks like my sixth sense may have been right then!" said Shoop. "So what does it all mean?"

"To be honest, we're not really sure. We've got a bit of the picture, but we still don't really know much. I didn't want to come to you until we had something really solid to go on. It's all very much in the early stages; we could be here for months, possibly years. With every little piece of the puzzle that we find, the picture gets ever bigger and bigger. It's quite frustrating really. But I suppose if we were going to get you lot moving, we could start with the map."

"What do you mean?"

"As I've said, the map shows something jumping about all over the world. It's not all completely clear yet, but it appears that the POS have been guarding and moving something called *the vessel* from location to location for two thousand years."

“The Vessel?...” Shoop pondered for a moment, trying to make his brain complete a connection somewhere deep inside it. Then it came to him in a flash, “Shit George, we’re not talking about the Grail quest here are we?”

“It certainly seems like a plausible enough hypothesis.”

“Oh for Christ’s sake, this is all getting just a tad too bloody far fetched!”

“Shoop, we’re sitting near a crash site for a UFO, following a lead that we got after you blew up a vampire with a grenade. Far fetched is something I’d have thought you’d be used to by now.”

“Smart arse!” spat Shoop.

“As I was saying,” continued George, “and stay with me here because you may like this bit, we’ve broken the code enough to know that this Vessel thingy has been dragged all over the world by the POS, there’s quite a lot of holes in it’s journey, but the places that we know it’s been have changed permanently after it’s visit.”

“What do you mean?” asked Shoop.

“Well, we found somewhere that was a pitiful down-trodden hovel of a place. It had been run by barbarians and Saracens for centuries, and not the good types of barbarians and Saracens either, the warmongers and pirates. It was dark and corrupt. Then the Vessel gets there in the eleventh century and things take a turn for the better. The place became affluent, even enlightened. It was an extreme change in very little time and the place has never been the same since. It lost a lot of its enlightenment, but it’s affluence stayed put. We know it now as Monte-Carlo.”

“Blimey!” said Shoop

“Quite, and it’s the same for a number of other places too. We’ve still got a lot of locations to figure out though. We seem to have reached a brick wall, the code changes after a while and we can’t follow it.”

“This might interest you as well,” George went on, “another location that housed the Vessel was the south west of England around 455AD, which is pretty much exactly the same time as King Arthur, or Ambrosius Artorius as he was known, is supposed to have come into power, which ties in with the Grail quest theory, but as I’ve said, the work we have yet to do is immense.”

“Maybe we should just stick to the Priory Of Sion for now. It seems to me that we should be trying to find out as much as we can about *them*, but most importantly, how do we get our hands on this Vessel thing? Sounds like it could make life a lot more enjoyable for us.”

“The last place I believe it to be shown is in Singapore, but until we find the cipher for the new codes I can’t be sure of where it went after that.”

“When was it in Singapore?” asked Shoop.

“Around the late eighteen hundreds.”

“Right, that’s it, if it was there only a few hundred years ago there might be traces of it. I can’t have the boys sitting around idle any more, they’ll kill each other. Me and the boys are going to Singapore to do a bit of field work.”

“Sounds sensible I suppose, the code that Dr Komodo and I are trying to crack may take us months.” Said George

“I’m going to have to take Komodo with me, you’ll be on your own, but before we go, you’re going to have to knock up a bunch of fake passports and visa’s for us all.”

“Right you are, but I’ll need someone here with me as security.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get to it, maybe I’ll get you a bodyguard or something, but only if and when you need to get out of this bunker. You’ll be safe here until then.”

Shoop breathed in deeply as if trying to subdue some inner turmoil. His mouth was down-turned and his nostrils flared, after a moment he spoke. “My senses are on over-drive, I’ll have to try and keep them under control, but it feels like I’ve just made the right decision.”

Shoop left George alone to start work on the counterfeit documentation while he told the independents to get ready to leave the bunker. His sixth sense vibrating like workman with a pneumatic drill.

# Chapter 12

## Shoop TV

Jill was lying on her back in two inches of snow making snow angels. Mike lightly crunched his way through the undisturbed blanket of white in his sandals, loving the feel of the chill on his toes. He was smiling, but then he always was. Jill looked ecstatic lying there, moving her arms and legs up and down and letting the snowflakes melt on her forehead as they floated down from the thick clouds overhead. She noticed Mike.

“Look,” she said, “I’m being ironic.”

“I don’t get it!” said Mike.

“I’m making an angel!” she squealed with laughter.

“Jill, you’re terrible!” said Mike suppressing an outright laughing fit by clamping his hand over his mouth.

“I know, but I made you laugh.”

They both laughed at the irony of the creator of the Earth pretending to be god’s workman. For a bit of a giggle, Mike pretended to be God for a while and ordered Jill around and gave her some Hail Mary’s to do. Mike ordered Jill to create something new. They had just managed to create a new species of winter flower that blossomed pinks and purples, which looked fabulous against the white landscape when Mike remembered what he’d come to see her about in the first place.

“Oh, I came down to tell you something, Ben’s here.”



“Oh good, how’s he doing.”

“Good yeah, he’s quite excited about what’s going on. It seems that Shoop is operating outside of the Sphere’s influence. He’s out on his own and is trying to hide from the Sphere as Ben’s brother, the Boss, wants Shoop dead.” said Mike, starting to feel the chill of the snow on his feet.

“Yeah I know, the map should point them in the direction of Singapore first, the first level of codes that run through the map should be easier than the second, and if I’m not mistaken, holding up in that bunker will prove to be a little difficult for that lot. I reckon that they’ll be moving within the next few days, Shoop will want to get his men out of the bunker as soon as he can and will want something more interesting to do than stare at concrete walls.”

Mike started to shiver a little.

“Come on, lets go and see Ben, we’ll get you out of the cold for a little while.” Said Jill.

They trudged through the snow happily. They were in a small courtyard that was surrounded on three sides by the castle walls; the fourth housed a low turreted stone barrier and dropped off on the other side down a steep hill into the landscaped gardens bellow. The gardens had been sparse because of the winter weather but were now pockmarked with the brand new winter blossom they’d just invented. Before they walked through the door into the building they stopped, turned back and took in the majesty of the gardens stretching out toward Loch Dunvegan and the barren moor land hills beyond.

“I never quite get used to it all you know, but then I don’t think I’d want to.”  
said Jill wistfully.

“I can imagine,” said Mike, “you must have put a lot of work in!”

“No not really, I had a lot of time to do it all in. Nice though isn’t it.”

“My favourite’s the grand canyon man, just stupendously big.” Said Mike

“Yeah, I like that one too, but not as much as Africa, but then that’s where  
it all started. Anyway, shall we?”

“Why not.”

The tiny little black woman took hold of Mike’s big strong arm and they  
ventured inside to meet Ben and have a nice hot cup of tea.

They walked through ancient corridors and stairways and made their way  
up to the main study where Jill liked to spend most of her time when she wasn’t  
playing squash or making snow angels.

They turned the corner into the study and found Ben sitting there. Jill ran  
up and gave him a huge hug while Mike put the kettle on.

“So good to see you again, “ said Jill, “How are things in Fife?”

“Good yeah, we had a bit of trouble recently as you probably know but  
other than that fine and dandy.”

“Oh yeah, how is Willie and his gun-shot wound?”

“Nicely healing, nothing to be worried about there. He’s met a girl too,  
nice lass, she’s a nurse that lives near the house, she took pity on him and  
they’ve been inseparable since.”

“Oh that is nice, just like Willie though, he always had a talent for making a bad situation into a good one.’

“Yeah,” said Ben with a little chuckle remembering the time that Willie had inadvertently been confronted by some football hooligans, only to have them take him on a pub crawl and had managed to rustle up VIP tickets to a big match for him and his new found friends. Willie, during the course of it all, had talked to the men in such a way that they all saw the error of their violent ways. Shortly after the encounter the hooligans had set up an initiative that taught underprivileged kids football skills in a local community centre.

“So,” said Ben, “my brothers’ acting up again is he?”

Ben had had a difficult childhood. He had been the victim of a very vicious brother who’d mentally tortured and sometimes physically beaten the entire family in their sleep. He also managed to have their neighbour, old man Hooper, jailed for interfering with young boys. Ben had run away as soon as he was legally allowed to work. He didn’t want to leave his parents with his younger brother but they had insisted over the course of a number of years and he’d eventually given in. His parents were well off and they gave Ben half of their wealth and sent him off into the world with a new identity to make his mark. It was a sad parting. He knew that his parents wouldn’t be able to last much longer in the company of his evil sibling but his parents had reasoned that it was Ben’s job to go out into the world and do good. It would put balance back into the universe if the brothers developed into total polar opposites. Ben had always wanted to go to Africa and do charity work. By the time he was twenty-three he’d

spend all his time making the world a better place but had run out of money. He was sleeping on the streets, homeless, destitute and miserable. Then he met a tiny little black lady called Jill.

Jill had been looking for him for many years but, even with her uncanny gift for knowing things, had been denied her quarry for a long time. She had known of Ben and his brother, now known simply as the Boss, since their conception. Her friends didn't know why, and she never said, but she'd shown a great deal of interest in them from day one.

Once she'd found him, she happily invited him into her fold and he accepted. He had been doing well ever since.

“I'm afraid you're brother may find out who and where I am before long.”  
Said Jill

Ben was struck dumb. A look of absolute terror slashed its way across his face. He couldn't believe what he was hearing. Trevor, The Boss, had been the only thing in the world that Ben was scared of. He couldn't bear for him to have anything to do with Jill; it was just inconceivable. If the Boss found out about the Priory Of Sion and it's work, it'd all come to a crashing halt. They would be demolished and demonised. The Boss would make sure that every government; every religious organisation and every hate group in the world would find out about the Sion and label them evil. They would be hunted down and destroyed, the only way to survive would be to vanish and change, to go underground and find a new name for itself. Even then the Boss would probably find them. For

some reason Jill wanted to make sure that the organisation was constantly traceable, albeit through a series of complex clues and ciphered maps. She never explained why, and nobody ever questioned, but there were clues, codes and signs all over the world that pointed straight at her. Only the initiated could read the signs and trace them but anyone who learned of these things and took the time to investigate thoroughly enough would be able to pick up the trail.

“How could this happen, has he got the map?” Ben was standing now, gesturing wildly with tears of pure fear trickling down his cheeks, “what are we going to do, he’ll find you, he’ll destroy you, there’ll be nowhere for us to go!”

Jill sat silently and Mike followed her lead. She waited for Ben’s panic to subside a little before she locked eyes with him. The kindness, humility and eternal patience of her expression instantly calmed Ben, but he remained fearful.

“What are we going to do? How did this happen? I thought you’d been careful, you never really said that you had, but I thought you’d know that you had to be. You *have* to be careful Jill.” He looked at her. Her eyes calmed him a little more. Then she spoke.

“I’m sure it’ll all turn out fine.” was all she said, it didn’t instantly do its job. Ben still looked quite distressed and the answer didn’t seem to appease him. Jill let it slide into his mind though and waited, gazing into him. Eventually, through the depth of ages in her eyes he believed her.

Mike brought the tea over and, after a few sips and some more calming gazes aimed at Ben, she began telling him about Mr Winkle, of how he had found the vault, how he’d taken the map and how he was under the radar of the Sphere

Of Influence, but not under Jill's. She also said that if Shoop managed to find her, then the Sphere wouldn't be far behind him.

"I've been around for quite a long time Ben, I know what I'm doing, whether destruction or salvation await, I'm sure it's all going to be quite alright."

The ages that sat on Jill put things in perspective, her voice seemed to resonate with the wisdom of far off times and places, it had a billion years of calm floating inside it. It brought Ben down from his panic almost completely.

Before long Mike was telling Ben about the snow angel, the fun they'd had playing twister and many other things. It loosened Ben up quite nicely. He even started making jokes.

All of a sudden Ben stopped dead in realisation with a look that screamed EUREKA stamped on his face.

"What is it?" asked Mike.

"Oh... hang on, just thought of something... oh that's good!" said Ben to himself and started sniggering. "That's great." A huge smile took his mouth all the way up to either ear. He got up and rubbed his chin as he looked off into the ether of his imagination and paced up and down the room. He was visibly excited and his enthusiasm proved to be contagious, before long they were all bouncing up and down, clapping their hands like schoolgirls at the prospect of a boy band concert.

"What is it man?" asked Mike again.

"Yeah, come on man, don't keep us hanging like this spit it out." Said Jill.

“Well, the thought occurs that we should maybe have a little fun while we can,” said Ben.

“Ooh, fun is good, I like fun, fun tends to be funny, and I like funny things!” said Jill clasping her hands together in anticipation.

“I thought, if Mr Winkle has a good chance of finding you, and if you’re not *that* bothered whether he does or not, well, I thought, maybe we could distract him a little.”

“How do you mean?” asked Mike.

“We could feed him clues!” Ben waited for the full impact of his statement to dig in. Jill started smiling a little broader. “We could lead him to different places. We could send him in lots of different directions. Mess with him a little. Send him to places that he’ll hate.”

“Oh that’s good,” Jill was lost in her own imagination now. She was seeing him in all manner of unnecessarily beautiful places. She new that he loved misery and the thought of seeing him traipse through some of the politest, friendliest, places in the world filled her with joy. Then a thought occurred to her.

“Hang on a minute, wouldn’t it be a lot more fun if we could see him wondering around these places?” she said.

“Oh Jill!” said Mike cupping his hands over his mouth in realisation. He clearly knew what Jill was about to suggest.

“We could use those little hover cameras we’ve got, you know, those tiny little ones that follow people around.” Said Jill.

“Where the hell did you get something like that?” asked Ben.

“Well,” said Jill coyly, “the Sphere is good for some things.”

They all burst out laughing. Then, mid giggle, something occurred to Mike.

“We could have, like, a weekly thing here, we’d, like, invite loads of people around man. We could have it in the big hall. We could get a big projection telly and watch the week’s mishaps! It’ll be so even cooler than the time we got those pictures of the pope picking his nose.”

“Excellent,” enthused Ben, “We could have a big buffet, and maybe a disco afterwards. “

“Oh I’m soooo into this man!” said Jill, the smile on her face almost touching the walls at either side of the immense study. “If we’re going to do this, we’ll have to move quickly. It won’t be long before Shoop and his men head off for Singapore, we’ll have to arrange some fake clues for him there.”

“I’ll get some people onto it right away, I’ll get some guys to plant a few choice clues about the place, but, like, we’ll need to know where we’re sending him man.” Said Mike.

“How about Australia.” Said Ben, “I hear he doesn’t like people who don’t like the Queen.”

“Nice one!” said Jill. “I’ll start arranging the caterers and the disco stuff if you get going with the invitations Ben.”

“No problem.”

They all bounced on their way, happy that they’d managed to turn fear into fun without too much bother. Before Ben left the room Jill piped up.



“Ben! You like squash don’t you, fancy a game later?”

“Try and stop me!” Replied Ben enthusiastically.

Jill gave a quiet little smile. She loved it when things sorted themselves out.

# Chapter 13

## Justin Pain

Shoop ordered all of his independents to split up and make their way to Singapore by their own means. They would all leave at staggered intervals, not knowing the routes that the others were taking. If the Sphere Of Influence managed to grab one of them, they would be able to honestly deny the whereabouts of the others. When they reached Singapore they were to wait to hear from Shoop. Shoop had given each of them a tiny tracking device that was carefully injected under their skin.

The challenge was to somehow make it to Singapore without rousing the Sphere's suspicions, which was no easy task. The Sphere would be watching all exit points from the country. Slipping past them would be a bit like trying to squeeze an elephant through a sieve, difficult, but not impossible, you just needed to find a really big blender.

Disguises were needed, fake papers, finger print covers, retinal alteration and even skin alteration to the bottoms of their feet. Even with all of these precautions, the task was a daunting one, but Shoop felt sure that if any group of people were able to foil The Boss, it was the independents.

There was some discussion as to them making their way over land from mainland Europe, but the journey would've been far too treacherous and time consuming. They decided that flight was the only option given the distance, and

the clock they were working against. They all made their way to various different airports.

Two of the men went by boat to other countries: Yan rowed his way to the south of Ireland from the west coast of the Highlands, an enviable accomplishment by any human being but one that was quite routine for him, Carl stowed away on a freighter bound for Norway, Shoop posed as an old man in a wheel chair and booked himself onto the Hull to Rotterdam ferry, Dr Komodo hid in a van going through the channel tunnel, and Jim managed to get to Europe via a Spanish fishing boat that'd managed to get a bit lost and had landed in Cornwall.

It all took more time than Shoop would've liked, but was all quite necessary.

George stayed in the bunker and set about trying to decipher the second level of codes that wound their way through the map from Jeeves' basement. He had a long hard job ahead of him.

A week later, all of the independents were holed up in various hotels in Singapore wearing a myriad of different disguises when they received the summons from Shoop. Each of them were instructed to meet him in a bar called the Kazbar on Church Street at eleven pm on the day of receiving the message.

The Kazbar was a Turkish themed bar, complete with shisha, beaded curtains and comfortable, plush, cushion stuffed alcoves that also had the added bonus of giving them a certain amount of privacy. Even with their disguises on they were an odd looking bunch and the cover of the alcoves would suit them

perfectly. Sitting in an enclosed space with slight masking offered by a beaded curtain made Shoop feel considerably more comfortable.

By the time everyone had turned up, Shoop's blood to gin ratio was in a much more pleasant place.

Jim was the last to arrive.

"Sorry I'm late, I thought I had someone following me, I had to do a few manoeuvres to make sure." He ordered a tiger beer from the waitress.

"Right," said Shoop, "now that everyone's here and got a drink let's get down to business." we know that this Vessel thing that we are trying to get our hands on was here between fifteen eleven, and eighteen seventy five. I know that's a fairly vast time span but it's all we've got to go on for now. I've spoken to George and he hasn't had too many breakthroughs with the map but he'll let us know if he digs anything up that'll help us narrow things down a bit."

"What we're going to do is this. We're going to start by spreading out all over the city to study buildings that appeared during that time."

Carl made a little grunting noise of disapproval. He didn't like Singapore, and he didn't like studying. He preferred blowing things up and shooting things. Shoop gave him sharp look and Carl sank back into his seat and sipped on a Jack Daniels.

"If there are clues to the vessel," continued Shoop, "George feels sure that they'll be something to do with the masonry of the buildings or their geography, where the buildings are placed etc, due to the Prior's close ties to the freemasons. It'll all take a little longer than is really comfortable but I've made

things a bit quicker by giving everyone their own areas of the city to look into.” Carl hadn’t quite finished with his grumbling and spoke up again.

“Surely there’s a quicker way of doing this!”

“You’ll do as you’re damn well told as long as I’m paying your wages you pillock!” hissed Shoop. He was on edge. He didn’t like the position he was in with the Sphere and liked the fact that they were vulnerable to detection even less. He knew that they’d had little choice but still hated the way things had turned out.

“I’m a hired mercenary, not a bloody historian!” spat Carl under his breath.

“*Look!*” Shoop’s voice snapped put viciously and put chills through everyone there. He was in absolutely no mood to be engaging in petty squabbles, “What we’re trying to do here is uncover something that has the potential to be one of the most important discoveries since the dawn of man! It could very well make sure that none of us has to do anything that we don’t want to for the rest of our lives. We will be citizens of the world and will be able to go anywhere and do anything we damn well please. I’m talking about complete uninterrupted freedom until the day we die.”

He let the idea hang in the air for a moment before continuing, “Because this thing is so big, there happens to be a lot of danger. The stakes are high and the punishment for failing is even higher, which means that I will have absolutely *no* back-chat! If you want out of this then get up and leave now, but be warned, you are at this moment in the inner circle of one of the most powerful secrets of

all time, which means that the only way that you'll stay alive is to stay exactly where you are."

"Are you threatening us?!" said Carl, visibly angry, but secretly terrified. He knew that if Shoop wanted him dead then it wouldn't take much to make it so. He had to appear affronted, however, as he had a hard-arse image to keep up. It was a difficult balance to keep but a balance that every one of the independents was very good at.

"I'm telling you how it is!" said Shoop, "If you leave now, the Sphere will find you eventually. I know you're all highly trained, but the Bosses talons span the entire world, they have resources that you couldn't begin to imagine, there will be nowhere on earth that you can hide, and when they catch you, they'll get what they can out of you and then kill you, and don't for a second think that you will be able to withstand their tortures, because I invented most of them and you won't. You'll talk. Then you'll die." He paused.

The men may have been good at hiding their fear, but Shoop could smell it on them like cheap aftershave. They knew he was telling the truth.

None of the men cared too much about dying, dying was always a big part of what they did, what they were truly unnerved by was the torture. They'd all known Shoop long enough to see how he got information out of people in the field and had heard tell of how he did it back in his base. He'd managed to get fully grown mountain trolls to cry like a boarding school children receiving their first anal crumpeting. They new what Shoop could do, and so, knew what the Sphere could do.

“I am the only one on this planet that can keep you all alive and in one piece. *IS THAT CLEAR?!*”

Carl looked sheepish. The electronic chip inside his skull was playing up and making him more tetchy than he usually was. He was clearly suffering from marijuana withdrawal.

“And you!” snapped Shoop motioning to Carl, “for god’s sake find something that’ll keep that chip in your brain under control or things will get messy! Am I understood?” said Shoop.

Carl hadn’t felt fear very often in his adult life and he didn’t like it, but Shoop’s tirade had hit home, he knew he had to keep a lid on his volatile urges.

“Alright, alright,” said Carl, visibly agitated, “don’t get your knickers in a twist.”

“Are we all absolutely clear on how important this is?” asked Shoop, scanning the rest of the group.

Determined nods spread through the throng except for Yan who just made the word yes appear in Shoop’s mind.

“Good! Dissention in the ranks will *not* be tolerated, that said, let’s get on with it.” Shoop started passing out envelopes from a bag that’d been resting against a table leg.

“Each one of these has an untraceable phone in it, a map of your area and your sleeping arrangements. You’ll be staying in dodgy areas to protect your identities, if there’s one thing that the criminal class all over the world knows, its “don’t grass!”. People won’t come looking for you where I’ve put you but

disguises still need to be used and they'd better be good. I want to be able to walk past you in the street and not know who you are, not like Amsterdam, I'm looking at you Komodo!"

"What?" Dr Komodo looked affronted.

"Transvestites draw attention! You blew that operation. I don't care what you do in your own time but I'll be bugged if I let a bloke in a dress spoil this one." Said Shoop causing a few sniggers around the alcove.

"I thought I'd be inconspicuous!"

"All I'm saying," replied Shoop "is that if you're going to dress as a woman, wear something that'll hide an erection!" There was open laughter from the others, apart from Yan, who made everyone believe that he was laughing without moving a muscle. He just sat there and perspired a bit.

"HEY! I *thought* it was a woman dressed as a man!"

"Komodo, A: You're a sick pervert, and B: I don't want to know, just be invisible, not a show girl!"

The laughter continued for a while and then died out.

"Right, get moving, one at a time and in different directions. I want five minute gaps between each departure."

Some time later they were all on their way. Yan was the last to leave and as Shoop's eyes followed him out of the open fronted bar he caught, out of the corner of his eye, a man sitting on the patio outside. The man watched the last independent leave and then went back to reading his newspaper. Shoop didn't know how many people sat reading papers on a Thursday night at half past



midnight, but he was willing to bet large sums of money that it wasn't too many. Still, to be sure, Shoop waited. He watched the man like a hawk. He suspected that, sooner or later, the man would turn around and casually glance in Shoop's direction to see what he was doing.

Sure enough, after a few minutes, the man tried to nonchalantly swing his eyes around to where Shoop was sitting. Shoop glared at him. Seeing that he'd been compromised the man dropped the paper on the table and shot off like a dictator at the sight of American troops.

Shoop was up and after him in a flash. He threw some money at the bar as he sprinted out of the building and pursued the man onto a busy street.

Shoop was tall and despite his gangly appearance had unnatural power in his limbs but wasn't so good at traversing crowds. The man he was chasing was considerably smaller than him and was having little problem weaving in and out of the throng. Shoop managed to keep pace with the darting man but knew that if the pursuit didn't change to more suitable terrain, he would firstly lose him, and secondly draw far too much attention to himself. His rule of remaining supremely inconspicuous was in danger of being breached. He was a lofty lanky westerner pelting down a busy Singaporean street, trying desperately not to trip over its vertically challenged populace.

Luckily, the man he was trying to catch was too dim to realise his advantage and ran up an empty side street where Shoop managed to gain on him. Unfortunately, however, there was a group of teenagers in the alley

admiring each other's mopeds. The man clubbed one of them and took off with his bike.

Shoop had neglected to bring any poison darts with him, for which he cursed himself, and so couldn't fell the man. He was too close to the busy street and didn't want to use his guns. He stole another of the youth's mopeds and gave chase.

They turned into a busy street, Shoop hating how exposed he was and started darting in and out of the traffic. His long legs almost reached up to his chin on the two-wheeled hair dryer as he scurried around the thick traffic. He couldn't let the man go though. There was too much at stake. The man could only be from the Sphere; Shoop couldn't imagine that the P.O.S. were watching him. Shoop had to catch the man and find out how much the Sphere knew about his movements.

They both had equally shoddy transport and it quickly became apparent to Shoop that the only hope he had was to depend on the man's panic and stupidity, a tactic that seemed assured by the frantic look on the man's face. Every now and then the man would flick his head back to see how close Shoop was. For a moment Shoop thought he recognised him, which added to his suspicions that he was from the Sphere.

They meandered their way through the street trying not to bump into things and heading toward China-town. This was a good omen. China-town was full of little narrow streets and would turn the pursuit in Shoop's favour.

It seemed that the escapee was heading somewhere specific. He'd realised that Shoop wasn't going to give up and, Shoop guessed, was heading somewhere that he could be sure of back-up. Through experience, Shoop had noticed that when someone is scared and on the run, and they didn't have much of an escape plan, they tended to head toward territory that housed people that would stick up for them. Shoop was clearly not going to catch the man on the pitiful excuse for a motorised bicycle that he was perched on, and so mentally prepared himself for a confrontation with the man's associates.

They flew, or rather; they camply minced through the city on their ridiculous machines without either of them gaining an advantage. Shoop's slight anxiety about being noticed began to dissipate as they ventured further from the busier parts of the city and into abandoned streets.

They passed the main entrance to China-town and continued their chase through a series of labyrinthine back streets, Shoop matching the man turn for turn, now more relaxed and sitting back, navigating his pitiful little machine with one hand while he sipped gin with the other, just waiting for them to stop and the foot chase to continue. The man appeared to be as good at evading people as horoscope enthusiasts are at grasping reality, which lead Shoop to believe that he would be depending greatly on the aptitude of his back-up to save his skin.

They continued to spin around the back streets for a while until his quarry stopped his moped and jumped off, throwing it to the floor and sprinted through a doorway which had four very large, rippling mounds of muscled humanity standing outside it, presumably guarding it. They were alerted to Shoop before

the man bolted inside and were, within seconds, snapped up to attention and glowering in Shoop's direction.

Shoop liked his chances.

He was happily nestled in a back street and the four men seemed to be all that he had to contend with. As he glanced around and could see no snipers on rooftops, which lead him to believe that the building he wanted to go into was the only one that was inhabited by the gang.

*The Sphere of influence routinely engaged the services of local gangs all around the world. They approached them, trained them and brought them into the fold. It seemed that this had been happening with increasing regularity over the last few years. Shoop could tell that this was a recent acquisition, which meant that they weren't too well trained. The problem was, though, that by simply appearing in this area of town, his presence in Singapore would almost certainly be fed back to the Sphere if he didn't put this gang out of action.*

Shoop prepared himself. If the man got away, then Shoop may not be able to beat the Sphere to his goal. They would tighten the net around him and any hope of finding what he was after would be very slim. That meant that it would be up to George to find the Vessel from a bunker in Scotland, and that was a prospect that didn't sit well with Shoop. He just couldn't see it happening.

He couldn't let the man get away, which meant incapacitating everyone inside and outside the building.

He clambered off the moped, dropped it to the ground a small distance from the building, lit a cigarette and took another swig of gin from his hip flask. The unwelcoming party at the door looked on, scowling.

Shoop walked up to ten feet from them, all the time scanning the area for unseen threats. It looked as though these were the only four for the time being. He half expected for more people to come out of the doorway, but it didn't happen. Whoever was inside must have had confidence in the doormen's ability to deal with just one man.

That was the first mistake they made.

It was a scene from an old western as Shoop stood in front of his opponents, stock-still, cigarette hanging out of his mouth as they fanned out across the street. Shutters closed noisily. Some old men that had been playing chess further up the street bustled to get inside before the tension exploded. Doors were bolted, everything went deathly silent. The very air sensed that there was trouble coming and tried to make a run for it. Air doesn't have legs though, so it stayed where it was.

Everything was still; even the one cloud that hung in the sky stopped itself from moving through the hot, sticky Singaporean atmosphere and waited for the danger to pass.

*Shoop was un-phased by the scene. He'd been in far worse situation and wasn't in the least bit worried. Once you've gone head to head with fifteen rabid Bigfoot, which he had, most other dangerous situations are mild by comparison.*

*The most worrying situation he'd ever been in was outside a nightclub in Glasgow when he'd met a group of Rangers football hooligans. He'd barely got away with his life. The rabid Bigfoot were kittens in comparison; the four chunky henchmen in front of him were a walk in the park.*

"Afternoon gentlemen!" said Shoop. The men said nothing, they just stared, trying to intimidate Shoop and failing pathetically. "I think I should warn you!"

"About what?" said one of the larger men with a sneer.

"I just thought that I should let you know that I've come up against bigger, uglier, harder things in greater numbers than you, and come out without a scratch. I just thought that it'd be fair to let you know before we start." His hat had been casting a shadow over his eyes up until that point. He tipped it back, giving each of them a soul-shattering grimace.

The men didn't move but instantly lost ninety percent of their threatening demeanour. One of them even stepped back.

"I'm giving you all a chance," said Shoop through his vicious features, "I'm going through that door! You cannot stop me! Back away now! This is the only warbnig you will receive!"

The men were clearly worried. They looked at each other. They all saw that each of them had big guns in their hands and even bigger muscles. Then they looked at Shoop, tall scrawny and apparently unarmed.

The air in the small side street thickened as the tension mounted. The prospect of death solidified around the men but they were too dumb to notice. In their opinions, big beats scrawny every time, especially when the big are packing semi-automatic weapons and the scrawny only appeared to be packing an unfounded amount of confidence.

They glanced at each other one more time. The decision was made.

They raised their arms slowly against the hellish air and tried to take aim.

Everything happened in slow motion against the denseness of the atmosphere. Shoop saw their decision to fire before they'd even moved their limbs, two guns flew out of his jacket with blinding speed as his hands worked them free faster than the eye could see. They were pointed at the men before their guns had managed to reach waist height. With two deafening cracks two of the men were struck dead before they could take aim. The two remaining men dived for the floor as the bullets flew, they fired randomly, hoping to catch Shoop as he dived for safety, but Shoop didn't dive. He'd learned long ago that standing rooted to the spot and keeping his cool tended to have things end more favourably for him.

The two diving men received small hunks of metal between the eyes before they hit the floor.

And just like that, it was over. Four shots.....done!

Shoop's slight frame was bounding over the bodies and was in the door in a flash, he had to catch the man on the moped. With any luck he'd be cowering

inside behind yet more henchmen. If he was out of luck, then the man would've taken the time that it'd taken Shoop to deal with the men outside to take off across the roof-tops and get clean away.

Shoop entered the building tentatively but speedily and was faced with a dark stairway that reached up into an even darker room. He paused for a moment, took a deep breath with his cigarette still hanging out of his mouth and re-holstered his guns inside his jacket.

Whatever was waiting for him at the top of the stairs was drenched in darkness; he had the perfect weapon for ill lit places.

He slowed his heart-beat, which wasn't really very quick, but you can never be too relaxed when going into a potential battle, unless your so relaxed that you're asleep, then things tend to get a bit messy. Shoop started climbing the stairs.

He heard some rustling and shifting from the room at the top of the staircase as he climbed. There was more than one person up there which could only mean one thing. They were better trained than the men at the door.

Badly trained men would've rushed down to help the men outside, filing down the thin stairway and allowing themselves to be picked off one by one. This probably meant that as soon as Shoop got to the top of the stairs a cloud of bullets would turn him to vapour.

Shoop stopped, sat down and finished his cigarette. This did two things. It made whoever was waiting at the top a lot more nervous than they already were, and it meant that he could finish his smoke in relative peace. He was



pretty sure that they wouldn't come down the stairs, not now, not after they'd waited as long as they had.

He smoked his fill and then set about his business.

"I've killed the men outside." Yelled Shoop into the darkness, "I don't know how many of you there are up there, but know this; if you don't hand over the man I've been following immediately, then you will be either blind or dead within the next five minutes!"

The inhabitants thought that Shoop's threat was completely empty, which was why they all started laughing, which was a very stupid thing to do as it gave away their numbers, and by the sounds of things, there was at least thirty of them.

"Just thought I'd give you fair warning!"

Shoop dug into his pocket and retrieved a small pen-like cylinder of shiny metal. He pressed a button on the side and the top of it clicked open revealing something that looked a little like a tiny flash bulb. He counted to three, lobbed it into the room at the top of the stairs, pulled his hat down over his head and held his eyes tight shut. All the men in the room watched as the little shiny thing came sailing in a long arch in toward them, all of them curious as to why Shoop would throw a pen at them.

The flash that came would've put the sun to shame.

Shoop waited for the screams of agony to start before he sprinted up the few remaining stairs between him and the room. He was greeted with a truly

horrific sight. There were twenty-three men all cradling their faces in their hands as blood leaked from their eyes, their corneas literally cooked.

Three men had had the presence of mind to dive for cover, but Shoop had no problem incapacitating them amongst the screams and pandemonium by winging them with his gun.

Scanning the chaos it fast became apparent that the man he was after wasn't in the room. At the far end of the room was a ladder leading to a skylight that hung open. Shoop crossed the room, knocking the poor anguished men off their feet as he sped. He was on the roof in seconds, his fear of loosing the man spurring him on.

He was in luck; his quarry had waited for Shoop's threat to the dark room before making a run for it. He was close enough for Shoop to give chase. He sprang over the ramshackle rooftops, swiftly gaining ground. As he gained on him, the man became more panicked, he stumbled a couple of times as he saw the seemingly unstoppable man pelt towards him. Terror gripped him.

Shoop got close enough to use his gun. He dropped him with one clean shot that entered the back of his knee and burst out of his knee-cap in a cloud of blood and bone. He hit the floor like a damp rag and Shoop was on him, stifling his screams before they could even get passed his tonsils.

"Hello!" said Shoop after the man stopped trying to scream. The man was quivering with the pain and beads of cold sweat flooded his forehead and stung his eyes.

“You didn’t think that you actually stood a chance did you? I mean, your surveillance was diabolical, you’d have been as well wearing a big neon arrow on your head.” Shoop hissed menacingly in his ear.

The man made pained, grunting noises underneath Shoop’s hand while he held his shattered knee.

Shoop shifted his pose slightly, letting the moonlight glance off his face, allowing the man to see the side of Shoop’s scrunched up fearful face. The man quivered at the sight.

The quiver gave Shoop a mild feeling of relief. His last few attempts at scaring and threatening people hadn’t gone according to plan. Bunt, Jeeves and the men at Jeeves’ house had found Shoop about as scary as a telly-tubby. He was beginning to believe that he’d lost his touch; it was good to know that he could still be supremely terrifying.

The moon was high in a cloudless Singaporean sky and the night was hot and muggy. The man was clammy with sweat, but cold with fear and shock, and the buzz that Shoop got out of feeling the chill in the man made him decide to enjoy what he was about to do as much as time would allow. He didn’t know if an alarm had been tripped in the building, but he wasn’t going to take any chances. He needed to get as much information out of the man as possible, which would take thirty seconds, and then he’d spend the other four and a half minutes making him hurt.

“Now, let’s get down to business shall we, you’re not going to scream if I take my hand away are you?” The man shook his head furiously; Shoop took his

hand away and knelt down next to him. He looked at the man quizzically, “Don’t I know you?”

“I don’t know,” said the man, his voice laced with terror, “maybe I’ve just got one of those faces.”

“No, I’ve definitely seen you before!”

“No you haven’t!” the man was feverish now.

“Don’t fuck with me!” Hissed Shoop, the man squealed and flinched as if he’d been struck.

Then it dawned on him, “You were part of that clean up crew in Montreal five years ago weren’t you!”

The man’s bowels gave way.

*Shoop recalled a case where some French Canadians had dabbled in a bit of devil worship. They’d managed to get their hands on an ancient text that was said to release a demon that would do their bidding. Somehow they had managed to work the incantations and a nine foot tall, blue quadruped with teeth the size of a human leg had popped through from another dimension. Shoop had been tracing the text that the unwitting coven had been using. He found them in a warehouse in an old industrial section in the south of the city.*

*Suffice to say that the big blue thing didn’t do their bidding.*

*When Shoop found them two weeks after the summoning, they were liberally scattered around the warehouse in lots of little pieces. The big blue thing had proved to be territorial and, luckily, hadn’t ventured out of its confines. Well,*

*that and the fact that it was too damn big to fit through the door. It hadn't had to go and look for food either as the rancid remains of the fourteen coven members had been sufficient feeding for two weeks.*

*Shoop walked in on the beast as it was gnawing at its last human leg.*

*He'd managed to trap it with a makeshift net made from barbed wire that was attached to a generator.*

*He called in a crew to clean up the mess and to take the blue beast back to the Sphere Of Influence headquarters in Edinburgh.*

*The man he was about to torture had lead the crew. He had patronised Shoop so Shoop had beaten him around a bit to teach him a lesson. The man had been new to the Sphere at the time, and was very ambitious. He'd wanted to rise through the ranks and take over Shoop's position. Shoop made him realise that it wouldn't be as easy as he'd previously thought.*

“Justin!” said Shoop in triumph, “Justin Stain! That's your name isn't it? Now I know why you're so shit scared of me. I used to call you Justin Pain!”

A damp patch appeared on Justin's crotch.

“Oh I'm going to enjoy this!” sneered Shoop raking out a small surgery kit from his jacket pocket.

Half way through his fun, Shoop thought he saw a small metal object floating in the air overhead and in front of him. It vanished, however, before Shoop could fix his eyes on it.

He thought he'd imagined it and went back to work.

# Chapter 14

## Carl gives the game away

The independents were spread out through the city, which suited them as they all preferred to operate on their own. Being cooped up in the bunker in Scotland had done none of them any good. They had been caged animals there and the new freedom they had was most welcome. Still the news that they were all unwittingly part of something that they couldn't get out of without dying was not good news. The mental cage they found themselves in may have given them more room to move physically, but it was a cage none-the-less.

Yan, Dr Komodo and Jim had less of a problem with their new cage than Carl.

Carl was a creature of the now. He lived moment-to-moment, smoking weed and doing violence at the bidding of the great god cash. To be stuck in a situation, not doing enough violence and not seeing the immediate returns for his services didn't sit well with him. He was getting frustrated and angry. Even the sweet smoke he craved was having problems keeping his sporadically violent ways under control. It didn't help that finding marijuana in Singapore was harder than climbing a greased pole and a lot more dangerous.

Singapore is called "A Fine City" by some. This is because you can be fined for doing almost everything. It is quite possibly one of the cleanest, safest, non-violent cities on the planet, which all looks very nice but can be a little unnerving. This is primarily because of the stupendously harsh punishments that

are dished out for breaking Singapore's stringent laws. Very few people dare to breach the confines of the justice system and drug crimes receive some of the more severe punishments. To paint a clearer picture of the laws, there was a time, very recently in fact, when you could be fined for carrying chewing gum as it was seen as *potential* litter. Not actual litter... potential litter.

All in all, Carl wasn't really enjoying himself very much. He was far more used to anarchically dangerous countries where they'd exchange a pretty girl for a kilo of heroin and a heard of cattle.

The rest of the independents, however, were blessed with the wisdom of thought that reached beyond the present. If Shoop said that they would end up more comfortable and rich beyond imagining at the end of it all, then that was good enough for them. They all secretly prayed for early retirement among scores of half naked beauties on some paradise island. If this new course of events was going to get them what they wanted, great!

Carl, however, yearned for nothing other than dirty scrapping action. Later, Shoop would curse himself for getting Carl involved.

As the rest of the independents researched their given areas and Shoop did his best to stay out of sight, Carl half heartedly wandered around all the nineteenth century buildings that he could find in his area, taking snapshots like some bedazzled tourist.

After a day he got bored and decided that he would get drunk on Jack Daniels.



He found the least savoury bar that he could, plonked himself in a dark corner and started knocking back drink after drink. He used the booze to subsidise his depleting supply of weed.

It proved to be an unwise decision.

As any committed drinker knows, Jack Daniels is the alcoholic equivalent of the devil sitting on the shoulder of an old cartoon character. Jack sits there whispering evil, yet fun, things into your ear and makes you do bad things. Jack is hardy, Jack is strong, but Jack isn't very clever, or more accurately, listening to Jack too much makes the listener less clever.

The waitress brought yet another straight Jack on the rocks over to Carl in his dark little corner.

"There you go." She said.

She was pretty, so Carl gave her a huge tip.

"Oh, thanks, thanks very much." She said, "A bit of advice though!"

"What's that then?"

"I wouldn't let Jack sit on your shoulder for too long, he'll sell your soul!"

"My soul was bought for peanuts years ago," replied Carl, scowling as his eyes drifted into the past where all his pain lived. He ventured off for a moment and the girl got the very real impression that he was not a man to be trifled with. She saw violence, pain and loss in that momentary flash. It scared her. It only lasted the briefest of moments however, and Carl tuned himself back in before he started wallowing in self pity.

He saw the girls anguish at his remark and expression; he managed to grumble “but thanks for the advice,” in a photocopy of sincerity.

She half smiled politely and walked away, tray in hand and very little desire to serve the man again, despite the tip.

Carl was in disguise, just as Shoop had instructed. Even with his unwillingness to participate in his current mission, he’d done very well with his costume. He had considered dressing as a tourist. It was the easy option and would’ve kept him insignificant, if it wasn’t for his harsh demeanour. Carl dressing like a tourist would be like a clown in a business suit. The face and the outfit just wouldn’t match. He’d needed something that worked with his dejected, miserable and possibly violent aura, but didn’t scream criminal, so, he ended up in the garb of a ship worker.

He was head to toe in grime and oil. It hid him perfectly, and suited the kind of drinking establishments that he preferred.

There he sat, silent, angry and getting angrier with every sip of bourbon. He didn’t think that it mattered though as he wasn’t due to meet Shoop and the other independents until the next evening. One nights drinking wasn’t going to spoil anything, and he felt that he deserved a night off.

Carl’s reasoning wasn’t very acute.

After seven hours of bar hopping and an unreasonable amount of hard booze, he started feeling the need for some female companionship. His vision was getting a little blurry. He tried with a waitress to no avail and then turned his eyes on the rest of the room.

He started scanning the bar to see if there were any likely candidates loitering in the thick smoke. He picked out three girls and went about making eye contact with each in turn. After glaring at them all for a while, he was politely asked to leave by the management, as he was scaring people.

He destroyed the bar in a wild flourish of unheralded violence and then did as he'd been asked and left the bar.

After that, he didn't much like his chances of getting laid. He found an off license, it was shut so he broke into it, grabbed a few bottles of Jack and some cigarettes and headed back to the docks to drink until his liver imploded.

Shoop was concerned. He'd done well in getting information out of Justin. He'd managed to ascertain that Justin hadn't been posted to Singapore for very long and that it was pure chance that made him see Shoop walk into the Kazbar. He hadn't contacted the Sphere Of Influence about it, wanting to find out what Shoop was doing before hand. He hadn't known that Shoop was on the run and so he didn't feel the need to alert head quarters in Edinburgh.

Shoop marvelled at the Sphere's lack of communication. It was almost unbelievable that Justin hadn't known that Shoop was wanted. Shoop had thought that the first thing The Boss would've done would be to spread the word around the globe that Shoop was to be apprehended at all costs. It's what Shoop would've done. He didn't quite understand the Bosses motives, but it seemed, for the moment, that he'd got lucky.

The destruction of the gang in the building in China-town, however, was more than probably going to attract Sphere attention. He had some time though. None of the men in the building had been initiated into the Sphere Of Influence properly. They were, as Shoop had suspected, being recruited, and Jason was the operative sent to run them until they were ready to join the fold. This meant that none of the men would have any idea of how to contact headquarters. They would go through Jason stain and him alone.

Jason wouldn't be alerting the Sphere as Shoop had put him in a coma.

Shoop reckoned he had a day, probably two, before the Sphere found out about the gang and what had happened to Jason. It would make him suspect Shoop. When that happened, Shoop's pace would have to pick up considerably, as would his need for caution. If this thing was going to be tracked through to the end, Shoop was going to have to be a damn sight more careful. He cursed his bad luck at being spotted, but was fairly happy with the result. Things could have been a lot worse.

He was meeting the independents the next evening, they would be able to take whatever information they'd gathered and vanish for a while. They could withdraw from view and figure out their next move. With any luck, George would have something for them, something that would help them out. They would all be out of the city before sunrise the day after tomorrow.

None of this concerned him too much.

The thing that was bothering him was the tiny computer that he was holding in his hand. It was no bigger than a cigarette packet in surface area, and

half a centimetre thick. It looked flimsy but was made with indestructible components. It was tiny but was capable of storing libraries worth of data and was quicker than some of the technology that NASA tended to use. It was just another handy little toy that he'd taken from the Sphere labs.

On the screen was a map of Singapore. He'd been tracking the independents. All of them had been busy researching their given areas of the city and popping in and out of various reference libraries, until Carl had stopped in a bar. Shoop had been concerned about Carl ever since he'd had his little outburst in the Kazbar. It looked like his worries were proving to pan out. He didn't want to jump the gun though, so he let Carl drink a little before he started getting really tense.

He watched him for a couple of hours. It appeared that he'd given up his research and started a pub crawl. Shoop decided that he'd risk breaking the contact ban to call Carl and give him a bollocking.

There was no answer.

He tried again, no answer.

He gave Carl a little more time and then decided that he would have to risk going out in public. He was going to find Carl and knock him around for a while.

He left the relative safety of his hideout and headed for to an area near the port. He hated being outside. He was disguised well, but still. He had been seen by Justin and he'd only met him once. The lines, crevasses and grimace on Shoop's face meant that, even with the fake beard, dyed hair and glasses, he

was quite distinctive. There was nothing that he could do about it, save wear a rubber mask, which would've been silly.

He followed Carl's tracer for a while but it faltered slightly on the screen. Shoop was losing his signal for some reason. It flickered on and off, on and off, and then cut out completely. Shoop picked up his pace, desperate to catch Carl before he left the area he'd last traced him to.

Shoop made it to the bar that Carl had just been in. The state of the place made it clear to Shoop that the tracing device had been damaged during a massive bout of ultra-violent vandalism.

Shoop fumed but walked past the bar, not wanting to be associated with the fray of police, ambulance's and fire engines. It looked like Carl could be anywhere.

It didn't look good.

Shoop's only recourse was to listen in on the police radio channels and hope against hope that Carl would get picked up and that Shoop could rescue him before he got anywhere near a police station. He didn't like the odds.

He was going to have to call the other independents and get them to meet him. They were going to have to cut things short and head out of the city.

Shoop cursed himself for involving Carl and made a promise to himself that if he ever caught up with the swine that he'd do extremely violent and unnatural things to him for a very long time, but for the moment, he had to concentrate on getting out of Singapore before Interpol, and therefore the Sphere, caught wind of Carl and his antics.

Shoop picked up his phone and told everyone the bad news.

Carl could handle his drink. The chip on his head gave him a superhuman tolerance of all poisons. He had a liver that most alcoholics would kill for, but he'd drunk down more than his resilient system could handle. Close to three full bottles of bourbon had invaded his system in a little less than four hours. He hadn't been as drunk since he'd raided his parents drinks cabinet, poured a little of every spirit into a pint glass and downed it in one when he was twelve years old. He'd been trying to impress his friends. The drinking didn't impress them as much as the greenish colour of his face and the violent fits of projectile vomiting. That really impressed them.

He'd been sitting on the edge of one of the many docks with his feet dangling over the edge. He'd lost a shoe to the water. His clothes were ripped and torn and had a few scrapes and bruises. He looked very unsavoury. He threw down the remnants of his bottle of Jack, stood up and shakily searched for something for him to break it against.

The destruction of the bar had done a little to purge his need for violence but there were still traces of it. He felt the need for a little wanton destruction. Smashing his bottle seemed like a good start.

He swaggered along a street hunting for something acceptable to bounce the glass vessel off. There were some empty warehouses that he could've bothered for a moment, but he much preferred moving targets, there were simply more fun, and, as luck would have it, there was something moving his way. He

saw, through blurred and doubled vision, some head lights coming toward him. He hid behind a massive bin and waited.

The bottle shattered on the windscreen of the police car with frightening force, flying right through the car to the back seat, taking out the metal grate between the front and back. The policemen leapt from their car abruptly and drew their weapons.

The drunken sailor that had thrown the bottle was meandering toward them with unnatural speed. It's hard to meander at speed, but he managed it and the visual effect was quite distressing.

The policemen yelled for him to stop, he drew a gun instead.

It took nine bullets to stop him and the police were careful to avoid all major organs, they perforated his limbs and shoulders.

Carl fought them with his bare hands while he was on the floor until the blood loss rendered him unconscious.

It took the detectives a little while. But they managed to match Carl's hospitalised face to an Interpol wanted persons site on the Internet.

In Edinburgh, the Bosses phone rang



# Chapter 15

## Worries laid to rest, for now

It was Thursday night, which meant only one thing. It was Shoop TV night.

Shoop TV had been running in the castle for three weeks now and was already turning into a major event. Members of the Priory Of Sion made there way to the Isle of Skye and the Dunvegan castle where The Sion had set up her home for the last hundred years. There were musicians, DJ's, acrobats, comedians and a hotchpotch of other entertainers attending every week to keep everyone happy. These people would perform both before and after Shoop TV was projected onto a huge screen in the main hall.

It was the biggest thing to happen to the organisation since Houdini had visited and imprisoned himself in a cage at the bottom of the loch with concrete shoes on and escaped. In fact, it was bigger, much bigger.

The local caterers had been stretched to the limit. They'd had to order in masses of supplies from the mainland, predominantly herbal tea, to deal with the weekly influx of revellers.

Tents were thrown up all around the castle grounds, despite the snow, and every inch of the castle was made into either a bed or a tea station.

Jill was ecstatic. She hadn't had as much fun since the first ever Independence Day that she'd spent in Washington. Now that was a party. She knew and loved all of the people that came to visit her and was challenged to all

sorts of amusing games. Speed puzzle making, chess, and she was even beaten at Jenga for the first time in her life, a feat that was a marvel to behold. The party after that was monumental. In fact, one of the artists who'd started to attend the event regularly made a one off Jenga trophy for the occasion; a full-scale league was set up.

In the main hall, everyone sat around the huge round table and stared transfixed at the huge screen that delivered Shoop's antics every week. The members had loved the attempts of Shoop's crew to disguise themselves. The disguises were marvellous, a great many of the watchers had trouble figuring out who was who. They had marvelled at Yan's rowboat journey to Ireland, had cringed at Shoop's brutality in Singapore when he'd finally caught Jason Stain and laughed heartily when Dr Komodo's transvestite tendencies had been revealed.

It was truly a time to be remembered and Mike documented it all meticulously in his journal for future posterity.

True, many of the events involved pain, torture and sometimes death, but every time something nasty happened, Jill would lead the throng in a chant of "Never mind, I'm sure they'll all be just fine!" which made everyone feel better about it all almost instantly. They all knew that the universe wasn't a very simple machine, that death wasn't really all that bad and that pain was good. It gave the universe experience, much like joy did.

That particular Thursday afternoon had been a happy bustle of activity, setting up stages, the huge drop down projection screen, putting the last editing touches to the latest edition of Shoop TV and getting all the refreshments ready.

That night they had quite a few things to look forward to. The post Shoop TV show disco was to have one of London's top Funk and soul DJ's providing the music, and the pre Shoop TV show was the Cirque De Soleil, the largest and best acrobatic organisation in the world. They always put on a gob-smacking spectacle. It looked like it'd be one of the best nights on record.

Jill was standing, sipping a nice hot cup of tea, over looking the hustle and bustle from the huge circular balcony over-looking the main hall. There were some people gleefully spreading a gigantic tablecloth over the round table that Merlyn had given her, giggling with anticipation and recounting the previous weeks amusements. She was smiling contently, marvelling at how simple and yet how great life was on Earth. Life here was great, even when it was troubled it was still awe inspiring and fantastic. The feelings of awe and contentment dripped over her existence like a slow flowing warm tropical stream.

Shoop TV was a massive operation. They had to set up convincing clues all over the world that would lead Shoop and his independents wherever Jill's whim took them. She'd had to commission teams to operate and maintain all the tiny darting and hovering cameras that followed them around the world. The pictures were beamed back to an editing suite that had been set up in the castle where they would be cut together to produce the maximum amount of

entertainment for the watchers. Sometimes the films ran for twenty minutes, sometimes hours, but no-one ever got bored. It was always a riveting show.

The tall, looming, athletic beach-bum physique of Mike entered the room and stepped onto the huge circular balcony. He was smiling broadly and fingering the ethnic beads that sat loosely around his ample neck. His mind was clearly miles away. He was completely lost in his own happy little thoughts. He walked up to where Jill was standing and surveying the activities below. He stood next to her for a while, not saying anything, staring off into the distance and smiling. Jill waited for him to come round. He often did this, wandered off into his mind with his body taking him wherever a previous thought had told it to go. His mind would let his body to its work while it went for a wee amble through the ether. It was one of the things that Jill liked most about him. She loved the quirkiness of it.

She stood patiently, looking down at the bustle and silently loving Mike's peculiarities. Ben came to join them.

Finally, after ten or fifteen minutes, Mike ventured back from his mental ether and noticed Jill leaning against the ornate masonry at the edge of the circular balcony.

"Oh!" He said, surprised, "hey Jill man! How's it going?"

"Good yeah, just basking in the bustle you know." She replied.

"Yeah I get ya."

"How you doing?" She asked

“Oh yeah.....pretty great man....yeah!” he nodded merrily, “I just found out about this monkey, somewhere in Borneo I think, it was seen in the wild making a bridge out of a felled tree to cross a river. In the wild man! Monkeys are getting smarter all the time; I love that sort of stuff. I think I’ll get myself a monkey, I love monkey’s, they’re very cool, them and penguins. Penguins are just so damn funny, one of the funniest animals on the planet. Yeah, I think I’ll get me a monkey and a penguin, and maybe a duck billed platypus. We could all go surfing together, that’d be cool.” Mike looked off into the distance of his imagination and chuckled, but then suddenly came floating back down to earth as if remembering something.

“OOOH!” He exclaimed, “I was looking for you,” he said as the mission he’d sent his body on earlier connected with his brain, “I had something to tell you. Now what was it?” He tapped his forehead as if to jog the information out of his wayward brain, then it came to him, “Ooh, that was it, in fact, there was a few things, um, the first thing was that all the clues are set up for Shoop to lead him to Barcelona.” He furrowed his brow, thinking, trying to force out the rest of the information. “Yip, that was it, the Cirque De Soliel are here, they’ve been set up with accommodation and refreshments. Last time I saw them they were practicing some very unnatural acrobatic positions, should be a good show, um” He tapped his head again, “Oh yeah, I’ve found out that if you take the main body of a suit of armour, breath deeply into it and speed in a deep voice, you can pull off the best impersonation of Darth Vader that I’ve ever heard outside of the film!” He grinned widely while bouncing on the balls of his feet excitedly.

“Really?” asked Jill, genuinely intrigued.

“Yeah man, it’s great! I had some of the guys rolling around the floor laughing at it. I did him in a Cornish accent, it was sooooo funny! I’ll have to show you later.”

“Definitely, in fact, here’s a thought, we could work out some sort of stage show with it. Have you in the background doing the voice and some other folk acting out a scene from the film, but in Cornish accents!” Jill was getting into the idea more and more with every word that sprung from her mouth.

“Oh man yeah!” There are levels of excitement that would kill some people, Mike reached these levels and then danced past them. He started talking faster than a caffeine junky after an over dose of amphetamines. In fact his next sentence came out as one long word, “There’stheselightsabersyoucangetfromtheinternetthatglowinthedark andmakethepropernoisesandeverything!”

They talked for a while, excitedly figuring out exactly which scene they should do, or if they should just make one up about farmers in space. Ben joined in and, after figuring out what they were talking about through the excitement, decided that he absolutely *had* to play Luke Skywalker.

This went on for a good twenty minutes until the conversation started calming down a little.

“I’ve been thinking.” Said Ben

“Oh yeah, what’s on your mind?” said Jill, still grinning from the prospect of the millennium falcon being turned into a combine harvester.

“Well, it’s this Shoop Winkle character. He’s, well, he’s not a very nice man is he, and I’m a bit worried that he’ll cause you harm, I couldn’t stand seeing you hurt.”

“Oh don’t worry about me,” said Jill, “I’ll be just fine and dandy. Anything he manages to do to me can’t be worse than anything I’ve ever been through before, believe me.”

“Yeah, I know that, it’s just, I know that you’ve been around forever, but, well, I’ve only ever known you as Jill, the way you are now and I can’t help wanting you to stay the person that I know. You saved me. You took me from the depths of despair and gave me perspective. I suppose I’m just scared of loosing my perspective, to going back to being that lost little street dweller that you found all those years ago.” He looked genuinely worried and a little sad.

“Look at me.” Said Jill in a voice as soft as a swimming pool full of cushions and rang with the wisdom of ages past.

Ben looked at her, reluctantly at first, but when he did he became mesmerised with calm. Her eyes looked deep into him and massaged his soul. He felt his concern soften with the tranquil light that spilled from her eyes in a gentle flow. He felt himself calming. Once he was suitably relaxed, Jill continued.

“I don’t want you to worry, but..” at this Ben realised that he wasn’t going to worry, no matter what she was about to say, “This is what’s going to happen. Shoop *is* going to find me. I will probably be killed and Shoop will probably walk away. The Sphere of Influence will probably find out about me and seek to

harness my powers, which is, quite frankly, a laughable thing for them to attempt! At the end of the day, none of it will matter. There are greater things afoot and deeper things to consider. The thing is though, you'll eventually come to realise, deep down inside, that there IS no end to it all. Everything carries on and nothing can put a stop to the whirl of the spiralling universe and it's alternates. Greater wills, greater powers, greater ethereal and monumentally massive energies move ever onwards, inwards and around us; things that I don't even fully understand. I suppose what I'm trying to say is this; in the end, there is no end, a contradiction I know, but an essential truth. So chill out man, there's nothing we can do but enjoy it all and as I always say. I'm sure everything will be fine."

When ordinary people say things like "I'm sure everything will be fine." It tends to sound a little peace-meal. It sounds like something that's said to fend off impending panic, but no-one's ever really completely sure that everything will be okay but when Jill said it, it meant more. She WAS sure, and because she was sure things tended to turn out fine. She was the master of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Ben looked at her. She was calm, eternal, bemused yet still sure and wise. They started to smile. Ben's fears dripped from him like water from an ice-cube in the desert, but nothing would truly rid him of the fear of his brother. He feared less having known Jill than he ever knew to be possible, but his brother always lurked somewhere in the darkest corners of his mind. His fear of him would never end. At least that was what *he* thought, Jill knew differently, but these were things to be pondered on later. A bridge to be crossed as they came to it, for the moment, everything was just peachy.



Before long they were all laughing again. Mike and Ben spent a bit of time having light-sabre fights with big bits of cardboard tubing that they'd found before they all wandered off to get ready for the evenings entertainments.

Shoop TV was exceptional, as usual, Cirque De Soleil were breath-taking and the DJ had them all bouncing into the early hours of the morning. Some even stayed up to watch the sun spatter it's red rays over the snow covered vista and gaped in amazement at the sight. All cares were laid aside in one of the best Shoop TV nights any of them had had so far.

## Chapter 16

### The hunting of Shoop Winkle

The Boss put down his phone and grinned a vicious grin. It had been well over a month since Shoop had vanished in the courtyard of a petrol station on Slateford Road. He didn't know if Shoop had involved the independents in whatever it was he was up to, but he'd just received news that made it a distinct possibility.

The independents were sometimes difficult to track down on an average day, since Shoop's disappearance it seemed they too had vanished too. This didn't mean that they were with Shoop; it just made it very likely. The news he'd just received, that Interpol in Singapore had picked up Carl, made The Boss think that Shoop wasn't far away from him. For a start, he'd had an electronic tracker under his skin. It was damaged, but it had gone missing from the Sphere labs just before Shoop had vanished.

He still had no idea as to Shoop's true intentions. He thought that he'd just wandered off to hide in the wilds for the rest of his life. The suspicion was that he was just trying to avoid being assassinated. Despite the Sphere's wide reaching influence, there were still places in the world where Shoop could hide. It was feasible that The Boss may never have heard from him ever again. This would have concerned the Boss as he hated having loose ends hiding in dark places.

Shoop could've made himself invisible in many places in the world. Singapore wasn't one of them.

"Why has he gone to Singapore?" thought the Boss to himself, "He could've disappeared into the wilds of a South American jungle never to be seen again. He could've vanished off the face of the planet; I don't doubt that he has the ability. What's he up to? No matter. I know where he is now and before long I'll know what's on his mind and I'll be able to give him a terrible death."

He tried to contact Justin Stain at the house in China-town, but got no reply, which was very odd. Mr Stain was extremely keen; he wanted desperately to do well in the Sphere and would drop everything for a call from the Boss.

"No matter," thought the Boss, "there are others who can be roused."

Shoop was powerful. The Boss hadn't known just how powerful until he'd defeated the ninjas in his office. He had a better idea of his abilities now, but not a complete picture of them. This made the Boss cautious. From now on he would do everything he could not to underestimate his opponent again.

This wasn't as easy as it sounded. There was no one in the world that matched Shoop's talents. The Boss could still quite easily be underestimating Mr Winkle without knowing it. It was a tricky business to fathom. Shoop Winkle's talents had no conceivable ceiling to them. It was like a blind rat trying to estimate the size of the labyrinth he was in.

He realised that there was only one thing to do; he had to call in the absolute best and hope that they could bring him down. It wasn't much, but it was all he had.

The Boss wasn't happy about the level of uncertainty that he was feeling. He was used to absolute control, nothing unpredictable or uncontrollable. With Shoop working for the Sphere he could maintain a level of authority over him. With Shoop A.W.O.L. the Bosses control was unacceptably compromised. It gave him a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach but there was a bright side. At least, now, he had a lead to follow. He could still bring the situation back into his control. He could *manage* it. Hope was not lost.

He opened a drawer in the huge boardroom table in his office and pressed his thumb against a glass panel at the side of it. It read his finger print and a section of the wall off to his left popped open with hydraulic hissing and slid to the side revealing the inside of a safe. He got up, walked over to it and retrieved a small black address book. The book was a directory of the most dangerous and effective people in the world. He'd recently crossed out the six ninjas he'd hired to ambush Shoop and down graded them to his little blue book, which was one lower than his little red book but one higher than his little yellow book. He never, ever told anyone what his little pink book was for and I don't think it would be wise for me to divulge its purpose to you. It made me vomit for three hours and I'm still in therapy from the shock.

The independents were in his little black book, as was Shoop, but there were more. Many more. The independents represented some of the less malicious names in the book, not that they weren't cruel, it was just that they did what they did because they'd been forced into it. They did it for the money. There were other names in it that did what they did for the love of the work, for

the love of malice and cruelty. They were intrinsically evil and had not learnt the ability to be brutal as they'd been born with it. These were the names that he needed. These were the kind of men and women that owned the necessary unhindered evil required to carry out the tasks he needed to assign.

He took out a note-pad and made a list of the best candidates. Three names struck him as perfect for the hunting of Shoop Winkle and his men.

There was Cat.

Cat had spent most of her youth emotionally torturing anyone that crossed her path and in very devious ways. She brought people close to her, became their friends, got to know them, earned their trust and then dismantled them from the inside just for the pure love of the game. Her love and need for lies and deceit was never quenched. Scores of people through the years had fallen in despair, even death at her hand without even knowing that she was the deviser of their doom. In fact, as people's lives fell apart around her they suspected so little of her involvement that that actually went to her for help and advice. She was a natural at deception, the queen of misdirection and manipulation. Years passed and she soon became an expert at undercover work and a killer of the highest order. She was subtle, quiet and evil to the core, sometimes taking perverse pleasure in the destruction of a human life. She loved to kill those who trusted her and she liked to do it slowly.

She was of Greek origin and had once been tall, dark skinned hook nosed, thin lipped and shallow chinned, but she'd been altered by the Sphere and was now blonde and luscious. She'd grown up with a cruel family in the ghetto's of

Melbourne Australia and had no perception of the word truth. To her it was a vague mist like substance that could be danced naked in. You could shift it with concentrated will and twist it when the need arose. Truth, to her, was a plaything to be warped, burned, wrung out, ripped apart and drowned.

She'd spent the majority of her mid twenties waving her thick webs of deceit without much care for turning her talents to financial gain. She just did it for the love of messing people up. Then, one day, she met an operative from MI6. She was completely unaware that he was involved with the intelligence agency, to her he was just a man in a bar who could be potentially victimised. She got talking to him and fast became aware that he was going to be a very tough nut to crack. Him being tough was the equivalent of waving a big red flag at a field full of particularly big and nasty bulls. She kept on at him, slowly but coolly weeding her way closer to him. She managed to get his number and slowly crawled into his life, befriending him inch by ever so tentative inch, being cautious, never giving her true intentions away.

He'd told her that he was an investment banker of some notoriety and for the first time in her malicious cold hearted career she pondered on the idea of getting a bit of money out of her efforts, so she set about grinding him down. When people were weak and affluent they could easily be asked for money.

"It's terrible, my boyfriend was sleeping with my best friend and they've kicked me out of my flat, I've nowhere to go, but there's this huge apartment that's just become available in Kensington, it comes complete with maids and

everything, which I need as I'm so weak from the pain of being so horribly treated by everyone I ever cared about. Thank god I've got you!"

Things like that are easily swallowed when you're already mentally worn down.

MI6 agents are among the toughest, sneakiest, most well trained humans on the planet. Within six months, Cat had cleaned out his bank account and given him a nervous breakdown. She was ruthless.

To avoid spending the rest of her life in a deep dark prison, she made a deal with the MI6 to become an operative for life.

*The man she'd tortured was never the same again. He tried to get back to work after his breakdown, but once you've been shown the weakest side of yourself, you're never the same. He'd lost his edge, so he did an evening course in jewellery design and manufacture, met a very nice lady there and they both moved to Cornwall to live in peace and make one of the UK's most desired jewellery ranges, sought by the rich and famous from all over the world. They had lots of children and died old and content, lying together in the same bed with all their family perched around them telling them how much they loved them. Both of their last breaths were taken in unison, tears of loss and joy spilling on the old wooden boards of the country cottage. In short, Cat did him a bit of a favour really!*

Cat, meanwhile, was trapped in the MI6. There was no way out. She learnt everything that there was to know about covert operations, military strategy

and assassination. Despite her cage she was, for a while, on cloud nine. She learned new ways to mess with people, more evil ways and even invented a few new ones, she realised that no matter how much she was enjoying herself, she was imprisoned. She hated being answerable to others and being ordered around. So she targeted the Prime minister, blackmailed him and got out of the MI6. She was a free agent again, but now she was infinitely more dangerous. A few words from her could topple men's will.

She freelanced for dozens of organisations all over the world, she was her own boss and she fast became a legend. She loved doing jobs for the Sphere as they always had the nastiest sneakiest jobs. They gave her good beefy substance filled missions that never failed to tickle her.

She was a shadow, a ghost, a killer and was devilishly fiendish. She existed solely to make the world a more unsettling place to be. She spent any free time she had dreaming up schemes to cause universal discord, destruction and even death. One of her favourite achievements was quietly engineering the LA riots. She'd talked the policemen into beating Rodney King and had stood on the verge videoing the whole thing. A few choice words in the judge's ear, spreading some hateful words around the black communities and bang, she'd almost destroyed a whole city. She was very proud of that one. She was pure evil.

Her name brought a wide smile to the Bosses face. If there was a weak link anywhere in the group, she'd find it and take advantage of it. If not, she was still a highly trained killer.



Before they could be destroyed, they had to be found. The Boss had to find someone that could trace their every move without being noticed. That wasn't going to be easy as Shoop could smell a tail like flatulence in a lift. A name sprung to mind, or rather, a title. The man had no name that anyone was aware of, he was simply known as the Satellite. He was so named for his ability to track people, seemingly from the stratosphere. He was never seen, never sensed, always out-with the realms of physical perception. Nobody knew how he did it, nobody knew who'd taught him his craft, but he was stealth personified. Just like Cat, he'd been born a natural sneak.

He liked to tell stories of how his mother hadn't noticed him sneaking out of the womb. He liked to say that he crept through the birth canal, fed on his mother's breast milk, slunk through to his newly prepared bedroom, clambered into his previously unused cot and went to sleep. All this without his mother waking up. She woke the next morning, in her own bed, a lot wetter, a lot lighter, with sore nipple and no idea what had happened.

Of course these were very tall tales but seeing him in action, or not *seeing* him in action as was usually the case, made the stories almost believable. The Satellite always swore that the birth story was true.

The man was mist when he decided to be. He was from Japan and had shamed his master's ninjitsu talents by the time he was 6 years old. He'd travelled to the jungles of the world to fine tune his tracking abilities, stealing as he went to fund his obsession with sneakiness. It was said that he could track a speck of dust in a tornado; he could pickpocket presidents and befuddle satellite

surveillance. If anyone could track Shoop, he could. He could follow footprints on a busy concrete paved city street, he was a human bloodhound, he was the Satellite.

Lastly there was Tim. Tim had a small sounding name but the stature of atlas. He was downright huge. He was a tank of a man and stood six feet eleven inches tall with the build of a large bull on steroids. He boasted a gigantic barrelled chest, arms like swollen concrete pillars and legs as wide as an ancient oak tree. He was, quite frankly, terrifying to behold with a pronounced forehead that eclipsed the dark slits of his beady eyes. He didn't have a nose so much as a series of distorted lumps that sat far too close to his eyes. There was a vast space between his nose and his permanently down-turned, thin lipped mouth. His mouth looked ridiculous, hovering as it did in the vastness of his square, breezeblock-like jaw. He looked like he could bring down a skyscraper simply by strolling clean through it.

His looks were deceiving though. To look at he was naught but brainless cast iron muscle, but he also wielded a fabulous intellect. He carefully considered every move he made, its effects, its consequences but above all, its ability to do harm. He was a smart bomb. The kind of missile that tracks its target down to its favourite restaurant, asks the waiter where he's sitting, walks over to him, introduces himself and promptly explodes. Unlike a smart-bomb though, Tim always survived the blast.

Along with these attributes he was freakishly nimble. He defied natural law. Common sense would suggest that a man of his size would be slow, but he

could punch out the passenger window of a car travelling at 180 miles per hour without getting the slightest of scratches.

Happy with his choices and happy that each of them joyfully accepted the mission of destroying Shoop, possibly the most dangerous man in the world, the Boss set his pieces in motion. His team were machines and once given a mission they would never back down.

The Boss had them all on a super sonic jet and in Singapore the morning before Shoop was due to meet the Independents in a bar to figure out the best route out of the city.

# Chapter 17

## George and the Map

It hadn't been easy for George. He missed his library in the underground town in Edinburgh. He felt safe there. It was his haven and he hadn't ventured beyond its doors for prolonged periods of time for years. He was a mole and he loved his hole. The bunker that he currently inhabited was featureless, bland, grey and cold. His library was warm, dark wood, Persian rugs and comfy leather chairs. He missed his books and artefacts, his shelves, his globes, and his stuffed animals in glass cases. He used to talk to them; they were his companions when Shoop wasn't around.

He did his best to busy himself, but he was becoming more and more tired of the bleakness of the bunker. It was as if his skin was absorbing the grey of the walls and sucking it into his core. So it made him happy when he managed to make some sense of the coding in the second level of the map that he had retrieved from Jeeves' cellars so many weeks ago.

To the naked eye, the map looked like a cross between a sudoku puzzle, an ordnance survey map, a diagram of an autopsy and a surrealist painting gone wrong, if such a thing could be imagined. It was also overlaid with symbols and phrases in a multitude of different ancient languages, some of which were no longer used.

He was glad that the bunker had a medical bay in it. There were lots of different kinds painkillers, which came in handy as, over the weeks, staring at the

map for days on end had given him headaches akin to having dozens of knitting needles pushed slowly into his cranium.

George always dressed neatly, even if his unruly greying ginger bowl-cut tended to do whatever it felt like, but over the weeks he'd been letting himself go. The permanent greyness had sapped his will to groom. His shirt was un-tucked in places as well as being very wrinkled and grubby looking. He rarely tied his shoe laces, he just didn't see the point any more, they would only come undone again, his bowtie looked like it had been tied by a three year old and his normally always impeccable favourite cardigan had strangely coloured food, drink, and phlegm splatters all over it. His hands were ink stained and his unruly hair had turned chaotic, almost medusa-like, writhing around in fits of ginger snake-ish madness. Even his well-trimmed bushy fire coloured moustache had taken on a life of its own. It looked like it was branching out as it was joined by patches of straggly facial hair that sprouted in random places around his chin and neck. His moustache was breeding, and its children were very ill behaved.

In short, George was a mess, but he'd broken the second level of the map's code. True, there looked like there was at least two more levels to the damn thing, but the level he'd just broken into suggested that he would have to venture *outside*. Apparently, the third code level involved visiting a number of graveyards around Scotland. He simply couldn't get any further without leaving the secret bunker. The moment that this information hit him gave him a series of mixed emotions.

Firstly joy hit him, “Finally,” he thought, “I can get out of here, find a little fresh air, walk on something other than cold hard concrete, possibly even converse with other human beings.” He’d been in the bunker for so long, that every day was beginning to feel like a month. Father time moved slowly there. He’d clearly seen fit to choose the bunker as the place that he liked to smoke weed in and he moved as quickly as a tractor with two flat tires, and a broken engine, and nobody driving it, stuck at the bottom of a river. Lets just say time was very slow. For a moment George wondered if he could remember how exactly speech worked, so he talked to a filing cabinet for a while for practice.

Secondly, shortly after talking to the cabinet, fear hit him. If he went outside, he was in danger of being discovered by the Sphere of Influence. Having worked with them for so long, he knew the kind of atrocities that they were capable of. He knew that he wouldn’t be able to withstand their information extraction techniques for long. He was surprisingly sturdy and stubborn, but the thing was, he didn’t like pain. He was scared of it and the thought of it made him ill. He’d had a few very nasty run-ins with pain and so had learnt that staying away from it was usually the best course of action. Shoop had given him a cyanide pill in case of capture but he had good reason for not using it. He wasn’t ready to die just yet. He had plans, things he needed to do before he was sent from this Earth, and finding the source of the map, and therefore the vessel was one of them.

He knew that, eventually, he’d tell the Sphere everything that they needed to know and Shoop, George’s best chance of finding the vessel and the source of

the Priory Of Sion, would be gone. They would catch Shoop and kill him, not that this worried him too much, but over the years, even with their tentatively turmoil ridden relationship, he'd rather that Shoop didn't die. He didn't really like him but didn't hate him either. He was the closest thing to a friend that he'd had for as long as he could remember and he could remember a long way back.

Something had to be done. George needed to talk to Shoop.

Luckily, or wisely depending no how you want to look at it, Shoop had held back certain technologies from the Sphere, one little piece of wizardry being microscopic wormhole technology. It worked on the principal that every atom in the universe has a twin. A device had been developed, in conjunction with a helpful little green man that could find an atom's twin and connect to it via a tiny wormhole. The aliens had used this technology in communications devices. It had a vast array of other possibilities and the aliens also used it as a way to learn everything that they could ever want to know from the universe, but mostly used it to look at porn.

The communications devices had the added bonus of being completely untraceable. The phones that Shoop and his team used all encompassed this technology, only George and Shoop knew about it.

George felt quite safe calling Shoop on his "secure" phone without the sphere ever being able to catch the signal.

"Shoop? It's George, I've managed to break through the next level of coding in the map and think I know what to do next but it involves a few practical problems that need your attention."

“Okay, tell me all about it and I’ll see what I can do.”

George went on to explain the situation, how he was going to have to leave the bunker but was worried that he’d get picked up by the Sphere. After that, Shoop told George all about *his* problems in Singapore. The house in China-town, Carl going mental and getting caught and that they’d need to get out of the city very quickly.

Once their stories had been exchanged, Shoop told George about a room in the bunker that housed a collection of disguises. The first place that George had to go was deep in enemy territory. He had to go to Greyfriar’s graveyard in Edinburgh, less than half a mile away from the Sphere’s head quarters. In fact, there were sandwich shops there that were frequented by Sphere staff, and bars that were very enthusiastically utilised. He would need a bodyguard.

Not following the lead that the map had unearthed was not an option. If Shoop’s investigations in Singapore failed then George was the only hope of getting the Sphere off their backs. George HAD to go to Edinburgh no matter what and would need some protection.

George complained and whined for a while but Shoop soon shut him up saying that their current position had only two foreseeable outcomes. Success or death.

“I’ll stay in contact with you,” said Shoop, “But it may be difficult for a while. If we don’t get out of Singapore without being noticed, then we might as well just top ourselves right now! I’m waiting for the boys. Should be on our way out of here within the next few hours, but if the boys haven’t dug up any information on



where the vessel went after here, we'll need to disappear and leave you to finish the investigation from your end. There are places we can hide. High, remote places and jungles, but if we don't get this figured out, we'll either have to die, or spent the rest of our lives in loin cloths swinging from trees and I can't see you lasting too long in the wild."

The thought sent shivers up George's spine.

"I'll get onto Chuntley," continued Shoop, "she's the best woman for the job. She'll meet you outside Fettes College in Edinburgh at 8am two days from now. Now get going with that disguise and head down there. There should be a van in the main entrance that'll get you there."

"I hate this Shoop, I'm not a field worker, I'm a bookworm, I don't like it outside, it's full of people and things that might hurt me and I'm almost out of brandy!"

"Stop bloody whining and get on with it you frilly pair of ballerina pants!" Shoop hung up.

"Bugger!" Said George. He slumped in a chair. Suddenly the dingy concrete bunker was beginning to look infinitely more appealing. He longingly glanced around at the wealth of flotsam and jetsam that they'd stolen from Jeeves' basement. He hadn't even begun to sift through the mass of wonderment. He wished he could stay and spend the rest of his days going through it all with a fine-toothed comb. He was sure that he would make it all homely again, given time. But time he didn't have.

His mind ambled away into the murk of the past.

When George had first met Shoop they'd both been twelve years old. At the time, George spent his days building models of ancient cities, reading reference books on myths, ancient civilisations and the occult. He enjoyed his past-times but secretly yearned for more. He had a deep seeded need to know more, to see more, to find something, but he couldn't put his finger on what and where it was.

Some desires he did know. He dreamed of vast cavernous reference libraries and finding secrets that eluded the most learned of scholars. He had the intellect for it too. He had nurtured his mind from a very early age and, by the time he met Shoop, would've put many a genius to shame. He loved information. He loved knowing things and finding things out. He loved unconventional theories and conspiracies and his hunger was never satisfied.

One of his favourite pastimes as a child was to sit, late at night, in graveyards, reading books of secret societies, UFO stories, the battles of Alexander the great, the crusades in the holy land, accounts of ancient Greece and Rome, anything that would expand his understanding of the way the world moved. He made rubbings of old tombstones and collected them, deciphering their hidden symbols and connecting the secret dots of the ages.

One night, while making a rubbing of an old Templar grave stone after having snuck out of his orphanage, he heard a strange rumbling growl coming from the dark eastern corner of the graveyard. He looked up, trying not to move the piece of paper he was making the rubbing with. He couldn't see anything but

then it was a dark corner. There could've been a twelve-foot tall werewolf hiding in the shadows and he would've been none the wiser.

Directly behind him, from the western corner of the graveyard, he heard footsteps, light crunching plods on gravel, slowly getting louder, working their way towards him. Still holding his precious rubbing in place on the gravestone he swung round to look in the direction of the footsteps, slightly concerned that he shouldn't be taking his eyes off the dark eastern corner but risking it anyway. He saw a boy, roughly his own age by his stature but older somehow. The boy was wearing a dirty brown suit and a battered trilby on his head. By his side, swinging gently with every light considered step he saw a crossbow. He looked older because of the lines of his face. The boy grimaced with unnatural intensity and the facial offence of his expression had etched itself on his face, leaving shallow crevices on features that should've been young and sprightly.

George heard another guttural growl from the opposite corner and he sensed movement, he span round again and out of the darkness that could've hidden a twelve foot tall were wolf, lunged a twelve foot tall were wolf, moving with gut wrenching speed in his direction. George's heart went into spasm like an epileptic in a disco. His head flicked back to the grimacing boy to see if he was, as he should be, running like a mad man in the other direction. He wasn't. This struck George as slightly odd. If he hadn't been so paralysed with fear and hadn't been so concerned with his grave rubbing, he would've been half way around the globe by now, his manic feet parting oceans like Moses. The grimacing boy was calm, collected and still slowly plodding in George's direction,

not the slightest flicker of emotional change visible in any part of his demeanour. He slowly, lazily almost, raised the arm that held the crossbow.

A flash of silver whizzed past Georges eyes and imbedded itself in the werewolf's chest just as its claws were inches from his tender frame. The creature thudded to the floor instantly, dead before it landed.

The grimacing boy ambled forward with consistent, steady, unflinching steps until he reached the animal's corpse. He bent down and retrieved the silver crossbow bolt from the beast. There was a series of spurts of dark liquid as the werewolf's heart pumped the last of its lifeblood into the air. It slowed after a while and became a trickle. The boy wiped the bolt clean with the animal's hide, pulled the string of the bow back into readiness with astonishing ease and loaded the silver arrow into his weapon. It seemed as if he anticipated more trouble before long and didn't want to get caught unawares.

He looked at George, emotionless; he had cold dead eyes and an aura that screamed "predator!".

"What's that?" he asked with a lifeless monotone voice. He pointed at the piece of paper that George was still holding in place on the grave stone of the Knight Templar.

"Um....." said George, his complexion grey with fear and astonishment. It'd all happened so fast, but yet had lasted an age, like time had slowed down in the face of this undaunted young man.

“Its um....” George slowly entered the conversation and the realms of normality, such as it was, and managed to say, “...its paper!” and then looked a little confused at the obviousness of the answer.

“I can see that dip-shit! What are you doing with it?”

The question made more sense now. They talked for a while, or more accurately George talked for a while, and before long the boy, who said his name was Shoop Winkle, which George found hard to believe, had been taught a great deal of the secret going’s on of the world, its secret societies, its weird and wonderful tales and their roots in truth, its occultism and its oddness. George didn’t really want to share as much information as he had but his new friend didn’t really talk so the silences had to be filled somehow, and anyway, the boy had just saved his life, surely that demanded some repayment.

It did, but not the way that George had anticipated.

“I could use someone like you!” said Shoop after listening to George prattle on for twenty minutes non stop, “I do a lot of this sort of thing, but sometimes find myself needing to know more about what I’m doing, you know, the technicalities of it all. It sounds like you already know quite a lot.”

The rest, as they say, is history. George had spent the rest of his life helping Shoop hunt down the weird and the strange, but after that night, very rarely ventured outside. He didn’t want his mission to find out the world’s greatest secrets to be spoiled by some wayward claw or bloodthirsty screeching harpy. He didn’t have to risk his own flesh, Shoop could do that instead as he was much better at it. He had everything he ever needed to find the secrets that

he craved. Years later, he'd managed, with Shoop's help, to track down two individuals that'd found a crashed alien spacecraft in the highlands. They weren't easily tracked down but the dividends that Shoop and George had reaped were more than worth the effort. The vessel that they were hunting was the very pinnacle of George's life-long search for the ultimate secrets.

Back in the highland bunker, slumped miserably in a chair, the dishevelled George half wished that he hadn't broken out of his orphanage that fateful night. In hindsight, the gravestone he was making a rubbing of wasn't really that impressive anyway and hadn't yielded any new signs or symbols. There was no way, however, of knowing that he would land in the predicament that he currently found himself.

He shook his head as if to clear away the cobwebs of disgruntlement from the inside of his skull, trying to remove as much doubt as he could. He thought back to the night that he'd been in the graveyard. He'd had some gumption back then. He'd had a bit of gusto. He tried to call the feeling back. He pictured himself dangling from the third story window of his orphanage from a rope made of bed sheets (he'd seen it on an old black and white TV show. The rope made him feel a bit like Zorro) and running off into the night. It made the old need for knowledge creep up his spine; it lit up sparks his brain. He thought about how much he'd learned since those days. How close he was to his ultimate goal. How far he'd come. Even if he had used Shoop to do the legwork, it didn't matter. He was so close now. Shoop's sixth sense had told him as much.

He thought on, trying to batter the fear of the outside world into submission. It took him a while but he got there eventually. Slowly, over the course of an hour or so, he felt his slump straighten, his resolve grow and his will to see the whole thing through become a pillar of strength. He hadn't lived this long just to give up now. Just because he was a little cowardly, small and weak, didn't mean that he had to give up his search just yet.

He felt his need for a clean shirt come back to him. He suddenly realised that he wanted to tie his bowtie properly and wash his cardigan, possibly even try and tame the wild ginger bowl-cut hissing on top of his head. The medusa would be controlled!

He got up, straightened himself out a little, doing his best to remove the worse of the stains on his cardigan with spit and a hanky and went in search of the room that Shoop had mentioned, the one with all the disguises in it.

Shoop's direction to the room had been pretty clear and he found the room quickly, which was a bit of a surprise as every door looked the same as the last, much like pop music in the mind of a seventy year old.

The thick metal door cracked open as if it hadn't been used for years, which of course it hadn't. He heaved at it and stepped into the room, fully expecting to find a room full of clothing rails stuffed with various costumes, wigs, fake beards and prosthetic noses. In truth, he was quite looking forward to playing with them all for a while and picking out the best ones. He fancied playing the expert in disguise for a while, changing his façade every few days to keep his enemies on their feet. The romance of it all appealed to him slightly,

he'd be like Sherlock Holmes, bursting into a room full of familiar faces and having none of them recognise him. He stepped inside the room, slightly excited and full of ridiculous notions of walking into the Sphere headquarters dressed as a beggar.

He was confronted with a room full of rubber bands on hooks.

The room was twelve feet long and maybe eight feet wide. It had a dark grey painted floor with white walls and ceiling. He thought that maybe there would be a secret door in there somewhere but there was nothing remarkable about it at all.

He stopped for moment, looked around, huffed and puffed for a while and then saw fit to wear the facial equivalent of a question mark until his forehead started hurting.

He walked out of the room, confused, then back in, huffed a bit more, puffed a bit more, furrowed his brow a smidge and then walked out again.

He went over the instructions that Shoop had given him to make sure that he'd come the right way, pointing his index fingers in different directions as he went along the corridors in his mind.

"Yip!" he said out loud with finality, he'd definitely got the right room. The directions must've been flawed. He went back in the room to check and make sure that he hadn't missed a huge pile of pirate costumes and police uniforms in a corner somewhere. He hadn't

But he *had* missed something.

There was a mirror on the wall.



Why would there be a mirror on the wall? But then, why would there be racks of rubber bands on hooks? None of it made sense.

Then he noticed that the rubber bands all had lettering on them, indented into the side. He looked at one. It said "Butcher". He put it back on its hook and took down another one. "Priest". He put that one back. He started scanning a mass of them.

"Business man"

"Clown"

"Cossack"

"Geisha"

"Acrobat"

"Super hero"

"Student"

"Hippy"

"Nazi"

"Prince Harry"

"Lunatic"

He stopped looking and frowned for a while, rubbing his chin and becoming momentarily distracted at the wild growth that he found there, he told himself that he should have a shave later.

Eventually he took another band down from its hook to inspect it a little closer. It said "Body builder" along the side. He turned it around in his hands examining it carefully. It looked like nothing more than a flesh coloured elastic

band, the kind that you'd find in any average, every day post-office. The only difference was the markings down the side and they were a little thicker and smoother than normal bands. He pondered on it. Then he pondered on it a little more. Nothing occurred to him. It seemed to be a puzzle that had no conclusion.

After a while he decided that it looked vaguely wrist sized.

He had nothing else to go on so he slipped it over his right hand and down onto his bony arm. It felt slippery and smooth. It felt the way a snake's skin looks. As it settled on his arm it made a strange noise, like something small and electrical charging up. It was a whistling whining noise that worked its way up to a pitch higher than human hearing and then it started tightening around his wrist, not uncomfortably though, it was, actually, quite a comfortable experience. It wasn't so much that it squeezed him; it was more like it joined with him, hugging his skinny arm. It was soft and pleasantly warm but, as far as he could tell, did nothing else.

He looked himself up and down, half expecting to be magically transformed. There was no alteration that was immediately obvious. He let out a sigh of frustration, frowning and sucking his tight glasses into his eye sockets with the movement.

"How the hell am I going to avoid death and blood with just a rubber band on my arm for Christ's sake!" he huffed to himself angrily under his breath.

He glanced around the room, eyes darting in frustration, which was when he saw it. The mirror.

In the mirror was a huge, muscle bound, rippling god of a man wearing nothing but a tiny pair of swimming trunks, clearly displaying an even tinier groinal package.

George swung round feeling his pulse race. "Shit!" He thought to himself, "I've been found!" but once he'd turned, he found that he was alone. He turned back to the mirror and the muscle man turned with him.

George waved his arms tentatively. The man matched his movements. He grinned, the man did the same. He tried bouncing up and down, the body builder did the same, his chest muscles jiggling like a strippers breasts with the motion. He tried looking away and then turning back sharply to try and catch the imitator out, but, to his absolute glee, the man followed the turn precisely.

George started getting quite excited. The rubber band on his arm had clearly changed his appearance to everyone in the outside world but not to him, *internally*. He was *inside* the disguise.

He poned around for a while, being huge and egotistical. Pulling various poses that he'd seen real body builders do on the TV, flexing here, straining there, it was all quite comical at first.

Some time passed and George started feeling a little uncomfortable with his new reflection. He was not a muscle man by nature; in fact he regarded such animals as cretins and morons. He felt a little sick, emotionally soiled and dirty. He didn't like what he was seeing; he felt panic well up in his thin frame. He pulled the band from his wrist and threw it to the floor, stamping on it and spitting at it in disgust.

Happily, when he looked in the mirror again, he was back to his usual, if not slightly murkier self. He was happy with who he was. He'd never wanted to be in anything else other than the body he inhabited. If he ever died and came back, he'd want to be as close to the picture in the mirror as he could be, his body reflected who he was on the inside and he liked it.

He became a little worried, "what if I can't find anything that suits me?" he thought, "I'll never be able to convince anyone that I'm a business man, or even a bus driver, I just won't act like one. People will figure me out in an instant."

He scanned the rubber bands, desperately looking for indented letters that would look good on him. Then he saw it, high up on the left hand side of one of the walls.

"Librarian."

He grasped at it greedily, slipped it on his arm, waited for the strange electrical noise and the tightening on his wrist and turned, thoroughly expecting to be completely satisfied with the result. He was, and wasn't!

When he looked in the mirror he saw himself looking back, only cleaner and better presented. The reflection looked like he normally did. Clean, no stubble, nice ironed shirt, well tied bowtie and impeccable cardigan. He cursed Shoop's twisted sense of humour, took the band off and threw it over his shoulder. The band flew across the room and knocked another one from its perch. He went over to pick them up and thought, "What the hell....I might as well try it now its down." He pulled it over his hand without reading it.

It was perfect

He was confronted with a nervous looking, skinny little man. He was wearing a lab coat with a neat row of pens arranged in the top pocket, thick checked brown trousers that didn't quite reach his brown scuffed shoes, wild grey hair and thick spectacles.

Looking at the reflection, he ran his fingers through his own hair. It was a very odd sensation. He could feel both his hair and the costumes at the same time. It felt like the touch version of circular breathing, blowing out and sucking in at the same time. His own hair shifted with the movements, as did the reflections and he could feel all the sensations of both sets. He could feel both sets of finger tips moving both sets of hair down to both sets of roots. In every sense it felt like his soul inhabited two bodies at the same time. He started to feel very uncomfortable. He was emotionally buzzing. It started to feel like his whole being was shaking violently, like he'd just decided to lick a live electric fence. The inside of his brain seemed to be reverberating, sending violently loud humming noises to his ears, shocking the bones that controlled his balance. He found it difficult to stand; the world was on a huge slant.

He promptly vomited.

He wasn't going to give up though, which wasn't like him, normally he would have sprinted like a road runner at any sign of discomfort or danger, but for some reason he felt compelled to stick-out the nausea. Maybe it was something that the costume did. Maybe the band made people want to get through the sickness, maybe he knew that he couldn't take the thing off as it would mean

ultimate failure for the mission, and they were so close to the secrets of the vessel.

Whatever it was, he just wouldn't take the disguise off.

After some time, and a few more stomach spasms, things started calming down a bit. The shaking and buzzing stopped and the feeling of being inside two bodies at the same time became less violently disagreeable. It would still take a bit of getting used to, the humming in his brain was still there, but he increasingly felt that he could deal with the discomfort more and more.

He was sweating. He was wet and cold. He decided that he needed to move around to try and warm up and get used to the humming in his mind. He left the disguise room, slamming the hefty metal door shut behind him, and, in a daze, started roaming the labyrinthine bunker. He hadn't been out of his research room very often over the weeks, only to eat or go to the toilet. He hadn't realised just how vast the place actually was.

His walking warmed him and the sweat began to dry up. The feeling of wearing the disguise gradually became less and less unnerving. After an hour or so it actually started feeling quite comfortable, like wearing a fresh clean shirt and cardigan. It made him remember how grubby he'd become and decided that heading back to his research room would be the best plan. Not only did he do all of his work there, but he slept there too. Spare clean clothes draped over various piles of books and papers. They'd be dusty, but a quick shake, a little starch and some ironing would make them feel as good as new.

He deemed the disguise comfortable enough to take off for a while. He hoped he didn't have to go through the whole vomiting thing again, but somehow doubted it. He popped the disguise in his pocket next to a few others that he'd picked up from the room just in case.

As he set off to find his way back to his room he found that he'd wandered further than he'd intended. He was lost.

The problem was that there were very few identifiable landmarks in the bunker. In fact the only one that came to mind was the main door, which would be hiding behind one of the many smaller doors. The concrete corridors looked very much like all of the others. They were wide, grey, had doors along them with pipes and cables over head. You could walk down fifty different corridors in the place and swear that you'd only been down the same one over and over again.

He walked almost randomly, zigzagging his way through the deep bunker, trusting mostly to luck as a sense of direction was nigh on impossible in the maze of concrete. He tried numerous doors in search of familiar rooms. It took hours.

Most of the rooms held surprises. There was a room that housed medieval torture equipment, a room full of a tangle of metal coat hangers and one with only a small clay figure of a gnome.

The gnome was sitting smack-bang in the middle of the room. It confused George somewhat so he stared at it. He saw, at the back of the room a small pile of bones, some looked animal, some looked human. He stepped into the room with a curious look on his face, head cocked to one side. No sooner had

he stepped over the threshold of the room than the gnome sprung to life with frightening speed. It darted up from its sitting position, where it had seemed to be content fishing for non-existent fish, and flew at George letting off a piercing shriek. It brandished vicious fangs and whipped its fishing rod with pant wetting ferocity over its head.

George stumbled out of the room, kicking the door shut as he fell backwards over the threshold. He heard the gnome smash against the metal door. Then, curious of all, he heard it speak after it had battered itself into a thousand pieces.

“Bugger!” it said in a thick Devon accent, “Oi ‘ate it when that ‘appens!”

George swung the heavy lever of the door, sealing it shut before anything weirder happened. He walked on.

He was a little more reluctant to try doors after the gnome incident but there was no other way of checking to see where he was, so he timidly poked his nose into each room with only the slightest of cracks between the doors and their frames. One of the rooms made him swing the door wide open in loving amazement.

The room was gigantic and looked like some sort of car park. There was a vast collection of all manner of automobiles stretching as far as the he could see. Every make of car under the sun was there and there was a petrol pump by the door. He roamed through the car’s, stroking them. Apparently none of them had ever been used. On further inspection he began to pick up a common theme. Not one of the cars was over thirty years old. There were plenty from before that,



but none from after. There were Jaguars, Ford Capri's, Morris Minor's, Porsche's, Ferrari's, Rolls Royce, Bubble cars all laid bare, all in pristine condition. None of them had dustsheets, but then, there was nothing around that would cause dust. The room had been perfectly airtight until George had walked in.

One of the cars caught George's eye.

"Ooooh, now that's the one for me!" He sighed under his breath.

It was a dark green mini estate with wood panelling along the back.

George's dream car!

He'd been fantasising about owning one of these for years but because he seldom ventured beyond the walls of his library he'd never had the occasion to buy one. He pushed it over to the petrol pump, filled it and sank into the drivers seat with a deep sigh of pleasure. The key was in the ignition. He stroked it lovingly, anticipating the engine popping into life with near orgasmic joy.

He grasped the key and tenderly eased the choke out, just a touch; he turned the key and melted with absolute pleasure.

"It's alive." He sighed, rolling his eyes back into his head with a grin that was wide enough to touch either side of the car.

The corridors in the bunker were more than wide enough to allow the car's width to manoeuvre through them. In fact, they could've taken three cars side by side. The drive made George's hunt for his room a lot more pleasurable and infinitely quicker.

He found his lair, cleaned up, packed some nicely starched shirts, bowties, trousers and underpants (even with the disguise on, he wanted to feel presentable), threw some sustenance in the passenger seat, and headed south for Edinburgh.

## Chapter 18

### Getting Out Of Singapore

Shoop was worried. For years he'd kept a great many things secret. He liked secrets. He liked to keep them; it was in his nature and giving them away felt painful. His abnormal abilities like super acute hearing, stealth, unnatural strength and speed had been attributes that he'd enjoyed keeping close. Only George had had even an iota of an idea as to the true extent of Shoop's abilities and even he was missing a large part of the puzzle that was *Shoop Winkle*. The last few months had seen him give away more and more of his secrets and he didn't like it, he didn't like it one little bit.

The reason his life had become so difficult was because he'd shown a portion of his powers to the Boss, he'd only given him a hint of his capabilities and because of it he was a fugitive. He'd been forced to use the underground tunnel system entrance in full daylight, in view of a number of sphere agents. It was unlikely that they'd seen him at the time but they were sure to have video taped it and would be trawling through the footage, looking for some clue as to where he had gone. They may never figure out the way of getting into the underground tunnel but that didn't matter. The thing was, through Shoop's sloppiness, they'd gained another clue. They knew a little more about him. This didn't sit well with him in the slightest.

On top of all that he'd been forced to give away another secret, this time, he'd had to tell George about his disguise room, the room that contained a

thousand different disguises. They worked by projecting a thin film of hard light over the body. The Hard light, as apposed to regular soft light, had the advantage that if anybody touched you while you were wearing the disguise, they would feel the disguise and not you, they wouldn't get through the layer of hard light to the real person underneath with the exception of very fast, very small objects, such as bullets or knives. They were quite handy in a fistfight though, as they absorbed a great deal of the impact of a punch. Only Dave and Mike had known about those nifty little toys. Dave and Mike knowing about the room didn't really worry Shoop any more as they were both very probably dead and unlikely to be blabbing to anyone about it any time soon. He hadn't told the independents about the small wristbands that turned you into different people because he didn't think that they needed them. They were quite adept at disguise and wouldn't need any help in disappearing. They were naturals, professionals.

George, on the other hand, was a snivelling, cowardly little weasel and needed all the help he could get.

Shoop kept a few elastic band disguises on him most of the time as he never liked taking off his hat. There are only so many disguises that could be adorned while wearing *that* hat. He also didn't like wearing anything other than the clothes he's been living in for years. So the disguise options were limited to basically looking just like himself, but sometimes with a fake beard on. But he hated fake beards.

The elastic bands came in very handy for him.

Until a few hours ago Shoop had another a secret, other than the disguise room, that had remained hidden in the bunker and was untouchable by the enemy.

George and his wealth of research material was a little known jewel in Shoop's crown. Very few people knew of him and those who did thought him little more than a tea boy. As far as most people knew, Shoop was the brains *and* the brawn behind the operation.

Now he too was abroad and exposed, well, in a manner of speaking, which made Shoop's uneasiness increase. All of his chess pieces were out in the open now; any one of them could be taken out of the game at the slightest mishap. The game was getting riskier with every move. Things were tightening up and Shoop's senses sharpened to match the game's intensity.

He was heading to the meeting place to get the remaining independents out of Singapore, whether their investigations had been satisfactorily completed or not, which was another thing that Shoop wasn't very happy about.

Earlier he'd watched in horror as Carl's transmitter flickered back into life and told Shoop where he was. He was in hospital. That could mean only one thing; somehow, he'd been caught after he'd destroyed the bar. Someone had managed to hospitalise one of the most dangerous men on the planet. All that Shoop could think was that the daft sod must've been mind buggingly drunk by the time they'd found him.

If he'd been caught, then it was a near certainty that Interpol would've been informed. That would mean that the Boss would probably know where

Shoop and his cronies were. Time was getting tight, the Boss would almost certainly have despatched some of his men to find them and bring them down. He would find out that Justin Stain was in hospital before long, and Stain would be able to tell The Boss that Shoop had been at the house in China town. The trail wouldn't be too hard to follow after that.

As he approached the bar where he was to meet the independents he saw a woman leaving that he thought he recognised. Shoop ducked down a small alley and she didn't see him, apparently lost in her own thoughts. He couldn't place her but the suspicion of recognition was enough for him to avoid her eyes. He was fairly sure that he hadn't recognised her from the Sphere, however, and pushed it to the back of his mind.

Cat, the satellite and Tim – the team that'd been sent to hunt Shoop down – hadn't taken long to find out that Justin Stain was in hospital. They could learn nothing, however, as he was drugged up to the eye-balls and incapable of speech, due to the injuries he'd sustained at Shoop's hand, and Carl was in a coma. Their trail had gone dead. The only thing for them to do was to separate.

The satellite went to the house in China town, if any manner of trail was to be found, he'd find it.

Tim went to the bar that Carl had trashed to ask questions. He had false Interpol I.D. and was sure to dig up some small piece of information.

Cat decided that she'd do a tour of as many bars as she could. She knew about Mr Winkle's deep love of gin and guessed that, if the group were going to

meet, it would be close to some alcohol. She also knew that Shoop tended to drink nothing but her Majesty's own Gordon's gin, so she managed to get a list from a Gordon's distributor of all the bars in the city that served it. It was a long shot but there was little else that she could do.

Jim was early for the meeting and took a seat at the bar to wait for the rest of them. The seeds of doubt were beginning to crawl into his mind, looking for a place to bury themselves and grow. The news that Carl had flown off the handle was daunting. It was a bad omen. Jim suspected that they probably had the Sphere Of Influence on their trail by now and Jim didn't like that prospect one little bit. He was used to being on the right side of the Sphere, the only agency that he'd ever truly had the remotest fear of, and was feeling distinctly anxious at being at the barrel end of their gun. He knew, through personal experience, that no one ever lasted very long once the Boss had decided that they were to be killed.

It was, however, good to be working with Shoop again, especially since his sixth sense had come back. It'd been far too long since they'd had anything truly juicy to work on and part of him loved the re-born thrill of the chase, the feeling that they were heading toward something great.

Jim was sensitive, underneath the ruthless killer part of him anyway, and he could feel Shoop's sixth sense spilling out of him. He walked differently, sounded more menacing and determined. Jim always got the impression that grand things were afoot when the sixth sense was pouring over everything, but it was even more so this time. He was positively drenched in the stuff. The

missions they were on had a more potent feeling than any other he could remember, and it was this feeling that kept the seeds of doubt from taking hold and growing their roots.

He was looking forward to seeing Shoop again. Being around the thick potent aura of high possibility would almost certainly cast all doubt from his mind.

Cat had used to look a lot different. She even sounded different. She had recently gone through some major surgery. She'd screwed far too many people over with her old face and work was getting a little thin on the ground. The Boss had given her a new face, body and even a new voice, as the old one was a bit shrill and squeaky. A new paper based identity had been created for her as well. She'd been issued with new papers and a new name but she still went by the name of Cat when she was with others from the Sphere.

She had once been tall, dark skinned with shallow brown eyes and almost fuzzy red/brown hair. Now she was three inches shorter, blonde and green eyed with fair skin. Her Greek hooked nose had been replaced with a cute little button and her thin cruel mouth was now luscious and full. Before, she'd barely had a chin, but now it was perfect, making her face wonderfully oval.

She walked into the eleventh bar of the evening, male eyes flowing over every inch of her body. She scanned the bar nonchalantly and saw him. She couldn't believe her luck. There, sitting at the bar was a face that she knew. A face that she'd almost destroyed in her youth. He was heavily disguised with a prosthetic nose and chin, but she knew how to see through such tricks. She



waited for a while to see if his companions would turn up, but after a short time her mischievous and cruel nature took hold.

She walked over to him, sat on the stool next to his and ordered a drink. She was wearing a red Chinese dress with a slit down the right leg, which revealed a muscular yet femininely shapely thigh as she crossed her legs, the man couldn't help but notice her, she was stunning.

"Hello." She said in a smooth flawless Southern American accent.

The man glanced at her and nodded, clearly not wanting to be disturbed but visually softening as his eyes locked with hers.

"Wonderful," she thought to herself, "he doesn't know who I am, I've got him!"

This was the first real chance she'd had to test out her new face and body. She was very pleased to see it all working wonders on one of the most dangerous men on the planet.

"What's your name?" She purred

"Um, Jim.....it's Jim!"

Some time later she left, just as Shoop was reaching the front door. She'd managed to do some excellent work on Jim and her elation blinkered her, making her blind to Shoop's presence. She was very pleased with herself indeed. She walked along the quayside where the bar sat to put a bit of distance between her and Jim. She didn't want to call in her teammates within earshot of the street that could well be where Jim was meeting his comrades.

At a safe distance she took out her phone and called Tim and The Satellite.

Within five minutes of Shoop reaching the bar, all of the other independents, minus Carl of course, were gathered in a dark corner. Shoop explained everything that had happened. He told them about Carl showing up in the hospital and that the Sphere would almost certainly know where they were.

'We need to get out as soon as possible.'

'What about our research?' Asked Jim, 'I've been working bloody hard on this stuff, and what if we've missed something, we'll have gone through all of this for nothing and the Sphere'll still track us down and slaughter us all.'

'Not without a fight they won't!' grunted Dr Komodo angrily, 'and anyway, what's got you so shaken up, I thought you had a set of balls on you, what's with all the doom and gloom?'

'I'm just not used to being on the wrong side on the Boss that's all!' Spat Jim.

'You can walk away now if you want to,' hissed Shoop, 'or you could grow a fucking backbone and see this thing through. If you *do* leave now, the Sphere will be on your back before the night is over, you'll be dead within the week, but not before they've had a lot of fun with you.'

'You're just saying that 'cos you need us. I bet they don't even know that me and the boys here are even involved.' Said Jim, stepping on very shaky ground.

Shoop glowered right through him. Jim felt Shoop's eyes burn through his brain and out of the back of his skull. Jim was scared, very scared, but he did his best to hide it.

'Know this,' Shoop's voice was holding back it's full force but a hint of it's molten evil bubbled under the surface, he was a coiled spring with a bucket of hot magma sitting on top of it. There was clearly more venom waiting behind his clenched teeth. It was like a tiger hiding in long grass waiting to pounce on some poor unsuspecting wilder beast, but he dared not act. He couldn't afford a big scene. Luckily, the venom in his spitting rasping vocal chords did enough to convince Jim that he meant business, 'I know things that even the Boss doesn't know. I have secrets and powers that would shake your soul back down to hell. He wants me because if he doesn't kill me, he knows I'll kill him. He knows that I'm more than capable. So dealing with you would be as easy as falling off a log, while drunk, after having my legs cut off!'

'You have crossed the Boss by joining me, so he will want to kill you too. He knows this because of Carl. He knew which men I preferred to work with and you will all have been noted as missing. It won't have taken The Boss longer than a split second to work out that you have taken my side.'

'We didn't though, you just called us in, we had no idea of what we were getting into.' Jim's defeatism fought through the wall that was Shoop's resolve. Shoop turned and shook his head, clenching his teeth, his lips curling back over them. Unseen to Jim he had reached into a hidden compartment in his trouser

leg and withdrew a throwing knife. He was coiled like a spring; Jim wouldn't even know what had hit him. He could clearly no longer be trusted and had to die.

Before he let the knife fly, however, he felt Yan's giant stone-like hand rest on his shoulder.

'Give me a minute with him.' The voice appeared in Shoop's head like he'd thought it himself. Shoop gave Yan a small nod, his face still contorted with fury, like his face was being pulled in on itself.

Yan stared at Jim, 'No, you don't,' said Jim, 'You'll not get me that way.'

'Coward!' grunted Dr Komodo.

'Look at him or die you snivelling piece of pig arse!' Shoop's voice was a battering ram. He looked at Yan.

For a full two minutes the air filled with a silent battle, but it was a battle that Jim couldn't win. Yan sat, stern, unmoving, unshakable, resolute and slowly broke down Jim's doubts. He hammered at them, shaking him loose of fear that had encased him. Jim resisted, he didn't know why, he just did it, maybe it was something that the hot girl at the bar had said. The doubt was so comfortable, it was easy to feel doubt, to bend down and shrink into the arms of the woman in the red dress, to let her convince him that it would all be fine if he just let go and gave himself up. He'd only spent the briefest time with her, but had the impression that life didn't have to be like this. It could be calm. Life could change; he just had to want it to. 'I don't know what's on your mind,' she'd said, 'but believe me, face the people that you've wronged and they WILL take you back.' He believed her. He didn't know why, she was clearly completely ignorant

of his condition, but when her words trickled into the air like an intoxicating plume he couldn't help but believe every word of it.

His battle with Yan went on, he felt the woman's grip on him weaken. Yan's rationality and force of will began to win him over. The sheer power of the man's will was something to be envied. Jim started wishing that he could be as sure as the marble man in front of him. Then he remembered that he was, he had been. His will was strong. He'd just strayed. He too could be strong and he resolved to be so. 'No more doubt!' he said to himself, 'No more doubt!' and Yan released him

'He'll be okay now.' said Yan's voice in Shoop's head.

'You back with us?' asked Shoop.

'Yeah, sorry about that, don't know what got into me.'

'Keep it in check! I will *not* hesitate next time. You will be dead before you know what's happened.' Shoop was still very angry.

'Not a problem!' Jim nodded his head assuredly, just as the woman in red flashed briefly through his mind, her smell, her thigh, her voice, all flicked into his brain for the briefest of moments. It was like a couple of film frames that'd been spliced into the movie of his mental vision. They weren't there for long, but they had done their work. They had planted the seeds of doubt. She'd be back.

Jim decided to fight on, his years of combat and training had given him the will to fight. He was not a coward. He would not lie down and die just yet.

Shoop saw the change in him, his stature seemed to grow, his shoulders un-slumped themselves, he looked as if a weight was slowly being lifted from

him. Shoop remained concerned though, it was far too early in the game to be getting jittery but he didn't hover around the subject for too long, there were more pressing matters to be addressed.

'George has broken the second layer of code on the map.' Said Shoop, 'He's making progress, worst case scenario; we go into hiding and wait for him to find this vessel thing, but right now, I believe its about time we were somewhere else. I managed to hire us a sea-plane and a pilot, it's waiting just out of town in a small bay. We'll head to Pankor and go through all of the research when we get there. So get your damn drinks down you and let's piss the Boss off a bit by vanishing again.'

They all threw their drinks down and headed out of the bar. They didn't separate, there was no time to hatch any plans for meeting up later. It was a straightforward dash out of town. There was a car park nearby; they could steal a car there and head out of town. They headed for the car park, urgency foremost on their minds, scanning the faces along the quayside for threats.

Then Shoop felt it, a churning in his stomach like falling.

They'd been found.

His gut told him to shift to the side and as he did an almost imperceptible projectile whizzed past and hit a waiter in a restaurant ahead of him. The waiter dropped to the ground as if all his bones had suddenly vanished. He spun round to see the threat, but knew it before he'd looked, 'Tim!' he said under his breath.

'MOVE IT!' yelled Shoop.

All three of them were instantly on the move, quick as leopards. Jim saw someone he recognised just before he ran and in the blink of an eye, had reached into his coat, retrieved a throwing star, hurled it and slashed the man's neck open. He'd caught the side of his neck. It wasn't a fatal slice, but it would stop him in his tracks.

The Satellite saw the throwing star just in time to shift a little to the side, it still hit him but didn't imbed itself in his windpipe, which was clearly where it had been aimed. He dropped to his knees; bleeding and gurgling as he went down, scanning to make sure that no other projectiles were coming his way. He went to order Tim to crush the bastards, but Tim was already thundering out a pursuit.

Screams exploded all over the promenade as people saw the blood spill on the ground. Cat shot out of nowhere and spirited the Satellite away as Tim chased the men toward the car park.

Tim hurled poison darts at his foes, one hit Jim in the arm. Yan caught him as he flew forward, unconscious. He flung the dead weight of Jim over his shoulder and sped on.

Shoop knew that the three of them could take Tim down, but one of them would probably be killed before they stopped him. They'd already lost Carl and Shoop wasn't going to risk losing anyone else. His gut told him that there would be worse violence to come and he needed all the people he had.

Tim was huge, but quick, and with Yan burdened with the weight of Jim he started to gain ground on them. All he needed was one of them, then he would be able to find out what they were doing, what their plans were and it looked like

he'd get the man he needed. All he needed to do was to keep firing the darts at Yan. He was a split second away from imbedding a dart in Yan's neck when there was a deafening crack and everything went black. He woke up in the water. He'd been thrown across the wide walkway and into the river. It took him a moment to gather his bearings and to check for injuries. He wasn't hurt, just stunned. Shoop had dropped a mini grenade and sent Tim flying. There had been too many people around for him to use a full sized explosive device.

Tim slapped the surface of the water angrily and clambered up the high wall back to the pavement, his massive hands biting chunks out of it as he went. There was no sign of his quarry.

He stood there, wet, angry and dejected. He looked back to see if The Satellite was alive. He was. His neck had been speedily patched up by but he'd been weakened slightly from the blood loss. He'd had worse though and Tim knew that the chase wasn't over yet.

'We're not beaten!' gurgled The Satellite, blood visible between his teeth as he sneered, 'I've got their scent, follow me!'

They sped off in pursuit as fast as they could, wondering if they hadn't underestimated their prey.

'Is he alive?' asked Shoop as Yan bundled Jim into the back of a Mercedes.

Yan felt his pulse and nodded.



‘Just as I thought,’ said Shoop, ‘they want us alive to find out what we’re up to. That means they didn’t get any information out of Carl in the hospital.’ He slunk into the drivers seat, disabled the alarm, hot-wired it, and they were away.

‘It won’t be long before they get him to talk though,’ said Dr Komodo from the passenger seat as the wheels of the car peeled and sent them flying out of the car park, ‘if he’s alive, he’ll talk eventually!’

‘I wouldn’t underestimate him, Carl’s hardier than you think. He might have been stupid enough to get caught but even with truth serum, he’ll hold out. I’ll put money down that he knows how badly he’s fucked up. I reckon he’ll want to do everything he can to give us a head start. He may be a daft prick, but he’s also a stubborn sod!’ Shoop wished that he believed his own words, the odds of Carl holding out weren’t good. He had to say what he’d said though. He couldn’t have any more doubt poisoning their effectiveness.

The car screeched out of the car park and headed east out of the city.

‘Quick! Hail a cab! There they go!’ squealed Cat seeing the Mercedes bound out of the underground car park and fly away from them. It was quite a way off and she was sure that they wouldn’t have seen her. She didn’t want to be seen, her ways were sneaky, she would work at them from the inside not the outside, that was what the other two were for.

Tim decided that a cab wouldn’t do the trick. Tim was too big to fit into an average taxi, the driver would undoubtedly drive too slowly and most of the cabs in the city had restrictions on their speed. He stepped out in front an approaching

van, stopping it with a signal from his huge hand. The driver thought that, even if he'd hit the colossus in front of him the van would've stopped anyway with more damage done to it than to the gigantic human in the middle of the road. He looked like he could stop a freight train by letting it hit him in the chest.

Tim reached in and pulled the driver out through the side window, which had been closed. He flung the driver away like an elephant tossing a small child.

They all piled into the van and started after Shoop and his crew. They were quite far ahead and the Mercedes was much quicker than the van. They doggedly gave chase none the less. Luckily, the road out of town was relatively straight and they could see them clearly, hurtling away off in the distance.

The Mercedes turned left down a dirt track and headed toward a secluded bay. By the time that the van reached the Mercedes Shoop and his men were skating along on the top of the water in a sea-plane. Tim darted out of the van, dipped his hand in his pocket, pulled out a tracking device and hurled it at the plane.

It missed by mere inches as the plane rose into the air, Shoop brandishing an obscene hand gesture out of the cock-pit window.

'BASTARDS!!!!' bellowed Tim, frightening a local man nearby. Tim pummelled the poor sod into the ground to relieve a little frustration.

He walked back to the van grunting angrily, seething, hands dripping with blood. Cat was grinning.

Tim stopped, seeing her expression, 'What are you so bloody happy about?'

'Oh nothing.' She said, 'I just wouldn't be surprised if we catch up with those four before long.'

'What's that supposed to mean?' Asked the Satellite, grasping his bloodied neck.

'Never mind,' Cat made a dismissive hand gesture, apparently waving the matter away, 'I think we should go and see if our friend Carl is awake yet.'

Carl was awake. Carl was also nowhere to be found. There was just a trail of beaten policemen in the hospital. Apparently he'd been shot nine times and only woken up with a bit of a hang-over.

'Bugger!' said Cat.

## Chapter 19

### A Cold Window and a Warm Hand

The hall erupted.

Cheers and whistles leaped up and filled the air as the credits rolled up the huge projection screen hanging on the vast wall. All agreed, Shoop TV night was sensational, the best idea that anybody had had in years. Not only had there been incredible daring chases, battles with police, intrigue and mayhem, but they'd been treated to a new character. A strange little man in a lab-coat had emerged from the secret bunker in Scotland and made for Edinburgh, white knuckles on the wheel, staring intently at the road, determination tattooed on his face. He appeared to be out on very serious business.

Ben, Mike and the editing crew for the program stood on the make-shift stage taking bows as the crowd erupted. They even had to come back for an encore. Then a hugely prominent, international rock band took to the stage and bounced the old stone castle off its foundations. They'd just played a stadium gig in Glasgow the night before and had taken the opportunity of being in the neighbourhood, well relatively speaking, to join in on the Shoop TV festivities. Their manager was an old Knight Templar and had served in many nasty conflicts with the weird and wonderful creepy things of the world. He had the

scars to prove it too. He'd heard about the event and was desperate to get in on it.

The entire band were made honorary Sion members and were sworn in accordingly. They received their Priory seals with much reverence. Actually, they received their Sion seals with a little too much reverence, so Jill took the piss out of them a little bit as she didn't believe that there were many things in the world that should be taken *that* seriously. 'Maybe tea,' she said 'Tea is important. Always tea with reverence, but only a little reverence, not too much! Reverence is all well and good, but too much of it'll give you cancer!'

The band laughed, started drinking herbal tea and then gave up drugs. Well, for a couple of days anyway. They used the following logic to start up again.

'Jill said that too much reverence gives you cancer. When we're off drugs we're all serious and spiky, which is sort of like being too reverent..... anyone for a spliff?'

'YEAH!!' cried the rest of the band cheerfully.

They worried a little that Jill would be disappointed with them. They didn't want Jill to be disappointed with them as they were very impressed with her and found her to be a "deeply groovy lady!" They needn't have concerned themselves. Jill didn't get disappointed very easily. The last time that she'd felt even slightly put out was when a huge meteor had plopped out of the sky and destroyed the entire dinosaur population. But that had only really bothered her

slightly. She didn't dwell on it, she just started again. It gave her a chance to iron out some of the mistakes of the first time around.

Of course Jill hadn't been a *She* then, she'd been an *it*. The race of beings that she'd been born to were hermaphrodites, both sexes in one. They chose when they were going to get pregnant and just went ahead and did it. It saved a lot of hassle when it came to unwanted pregnancies and the like. This also meant that you didn't get too many fourteen year olds bumping into you in shopping malls pushing scores of prams containing babies eating cheesy wotsits with pierced ears. In her native society wishing pregnancy upon someone was seen as a blessing and the sentiment was frequently used between parting friends. Instead of *goodbye* or *see ya later* people on her home world tending to say *go screw yourself*.

The evening had been a grand success. Better even than the previous weeks with the Cirque de Soleil.

The party continued long into the night, the morning and the next day. In fact, that particular Thursday didn't end until Sunday afternoon. Such was the fuel that Shoop's antics had instilled. Jill half hoped that next Thursday wouldn't get any more exiting as Thursday could end up being a day that lasted a whole week, which would've been a shame as Jill was particularly fond of Tuesdays and didn't want to miss them.

She slept like the dead on Sunday night and didn't surface again until Tuesday morning, happy that she hadn't missed the whole day, feeling new and

refreshed. Actually, Jill didn't really need sleep, it wasn't natural to her alien roots. She had never needed to sleep before, but she found it strangely pleasing. She really enjoyed a good nap. Wandering around in her subconscious was a marvellous past time, an experience that was completely unfathomable to any human as her subconscious pretty much spanned the entirety of the universe and even crossed over into some parallel ones. Her dreams were as epic as a million galaxies and, as Jill liked to put it, "A bloody good laugh!"

She woke, washed, dressed, made herself a good hot really big mug of one of Mike's particularly delicious tea concoctions and went for an amble around the castle grounds. The snow still lay thick all around. It was cold but Jill felt warm inside and out.

'Hey Ben!' she said as she approached the only person conscious enough to venture into the gardens, 'how's it going?'

Ben looked like his brain was a thousand miles away. He was staring vacantly over the scene with a slight smile tickling his face. He was clearly in a state of awe.

'Oh!.....hey Jill!' he said as he snapped out of his dream-like state, 'I'm good yeah.....really good!.... Would you look at this.' He gestured with his hand out over the rolling white country, 'I mean.....wow! You know?'

Both of their eyes draped over the undulating miniature hills of the garden, here and there patches of green could be seen through the white where evergreen trees refused to shed their leaves and the ground was dotted with

dozens of the small purple winter flower that Jill and Mike had invented the week before. They looked out over the grand loch, the brutal mountains beyond it and the clear blue winter sky. It was breath taking.

'Yeah, its good isn't it.' said Jill, cupping her mug of tea with hands and giving it a good slurp.

'How'd you do it? I mean... look at it!' his hands raised to encompass the vista like a spokes model presenting a shiny new car. His gesture felt a little inadequate for the scene, '*How did you do this?*' his voice was awe smattered.

'Well I can't really take all the credit for it. What I contributed was barely ten percent of the work, the universe did the rest.' Said Jill.

'But still, you must be proud.' He looked at her, 'you MUST be!'

'I enjoy it.' She said, 'its pretty. But I don't like the term "I". The physical conduit that represents my existence on this plain of reality just channelled and amplified the events that lead to what we see. I was just being practical really.'

'Jill?'

'Yes Ben?'

'Shut up! You're spoiling it for me.'

Jill gave a little chuckle and playfully slapped Ben on the arm, 'Good point,' she said, 'but you *did* ask!'

'Yeah, I suppose I did.'

They both stood for a while, silently letting the pleasure of their vision soak into their acceptance.

The process went something like this;



'BLOODY HELL, WOULD YOU JUST LOOK AT THIS!' joyful yelps inside the mind, then, 'bloody hell, would you just look at this.' as the view slowly soaked into the brain. Then, 'There's no way I could ever be happier.' Then a bit more soaking in of the scene and then, 'well, I could be a little bit happier, if I had a brand new huge mug of tea I could be happier.' Then, 'bloody hell its cold out here, sod this, I'm going back inside!'

It was all said in complete silence but they both appeared to reach the same decision at the same time. They caught the last thought together, turned and walked back to the relative warmth of the castle. I say "relative" warmth, as castles are never really particularly warm, even on scorching summer days. The plus side of this being that they *do* act as a nice place to cool down when the temperature rose. The irony is, however, that a scorching summer day on the Isle of Skye is the equivalent of a snowy winters day in the Australian desert, it just didn't happen.

They went up to Jill's study where a log fire was burning and put the kettle on. Ben's mind wandered as he warmed his hands on the hot cup of tea. His face slowly morphed into a look of concern as he became more and more lost in his thoughts.

Jill had been standing at the window admiring the view. She felt Ben's increase in discomfort and realised that he was turning in on himself. The room seemed just that little bit darker as she turned to look at him, the light from the snow blinding her for a moment as she tried to adjust her eyes to the dark room.

'A penny for them!' said Jill softly.

'Sorry?' blurted Ben, as if he'd just been woken from a nightmare. His head snapped up as the sound of Jill's voice poured warmly into his ears.

'Your thoughts.' Said Jill, 'a penny for your thoughts.'

'Oh,' said Ben shaking his mind clear of whatever it was that had held his attention so ardently. Jill could see, though, that the thought hadn't completely given up its grasp. 'Sorry, I was miles away!'

'Clearly.' said Jill, 'What's up? Or should I just guess. I'm pretty good at guessing you know.'

'Oh its nothing,' said Ben, quite unconvincingly.

'It's your brother isn't it?'

'Well, yes and no!'

'How do you mean?' asked Jill.

'Well, um, it's just, 'Ben's thoughts trailed off again for a moment, trying to form themselves into a solid response. He pieced the puzzle of his concern together in his mind and continued.

'See, um, I'm not worried about him finding us and doing nasty things. I've accepted that and am fairly cool with it all, no, it's just that, well, I'm worried about how I'll react when I our paths cross.'

'How do you know that your paths *will* cross?' asked Jill knowingly.

'I don't know, it just sort of feels, well, inevitable. I'll not be able to rest knowing that he's out there spreading his black soul over everything that he touches. I won't be able to live the rest of my life knowing that he's out there

wantonly destroying people's lives, like he did to my next-door neighbour and my parents. The pain that he's caused shouldn't be endured by anyone, and now his influence is so vast.' His brow was furrowed with worry, clearly he felt partially responsible for what his brother had done. He blamed himself for not being able to do anything to prevent it.

'It's really very daunting,' he continued after a pause and some very heavy sighs, 'and something in my gut tells me that only I can stop him. I don't know how, I just know that it has to happen.'

Jill smiled at him, 'You're certainly a fighter by nature, that much is for sure.'

'Oh,' said Ben with a self-deprecating exhalation mixed with an amused, yet embarrassed smile. He waved the remark away with his hand, 'I don't know about that, I don't know that I wouldn't have been another thieving junky on the streets if you hadn't found me.'

'Don't kid yourself,' said Jill assertively, 'You would've fought on regardless. I'm a pretty good judge of people. Ask yourself this, would I have taken you in had your worth been anything other than very apparent?'

'Okay,' said Ben smirking, 'We're both just plain fab!' He joked

Jill saw the uncomfortable nature of the joke. She saw that he didn't mean it and that he wanted to get off the subject. She didn't want to push him so she said

'Yeah, I'll go along with that!' and the mood instantly lightened a little. Some of the weight seemed to slip off Ben's shoulders.

'But that's all beside the point,' said Ben, returning to his original concerns.

'And the point is?'

'How am I going to react when I see him again? How's he going to react when he sees me? I've got the feeling that there'll be a god-awful fight, and, when I think about it late at night and staring at the ceiling in my room, I can't see how either of us could let the other live past the confrontation. I hate the thought, it makes me sick to my stomach but one of us is going to have to kill the other one!' Ben hung his head, almost sobbing, tears welling in his eyes, despair dripping out of him, soaking the very room, making it feel even darker, colder, more damp, but Jill wasn't affected by the drenching. She stood by the window, dry as a bone, a beacon of light.

'Drink your tea Ben, it'll clear your chakras.' She said, which forced a reluctant chuckle from Ben. She was an expert at diverting people. She stood for a moment in silence, letting Ben's mind do what it needed to do. He needed to despair right now, but she nudged it every now and then with a flippant word, just to make sure that his misery didn't take hold and drown the poor man.

Jill sipped her tea and turned back to look out of the window, letting her eyes feast on the immense setting.

'It really is quite special out there isn't it? I mean, our bodies are nothing but the tiniest of tiny blinks compared to the enormity of activity that's been going on out there for millennia.' She put her palm on the window, it was freezing after the heat of the mug of tea and she relished the contrast. She breathed in deeply,

closing her eyes, smiling, soaking in the sensation and letting it flood her. The euphoria made her laugh out loud.

After a moment she opened her eyes and turned her head, catching Ben's eyes with a soft blanket of larger perspective. She beamed her mind at him, gently, soothingly stroking him with it.

Ben felt his palm flash from hot to cold and felt all of the pleasure of the moment that she was experiencing. He let out a little laugh, his heart bursting with the glee of it.

Then, as quickly as the moment had come, it passed away and Ben was changed. The moment had been a microcosm, it made him see the bigger picture, the pointlessness of his grief, the wonderment of pain and suffering, hot and cold, death and life. The moment had been the universe in the palm of their hands and they let it go gladly.

Ben saw it now. It wasn't that he was scared of how he or his brother, the Boss, would react. It wasn't that he was scared of killing or being killed, no, the whole problem was simply the fact that he was feeling fear. Jill hadn't been scared of how her little science experiment would work out, if she had been, she would be seeing the world a lot differently than she did now. Instead of seeing breathtaking mountains outside the window, she would have been reminded of millennia of death and destruction, meteors, comets, dinosaurs, volcanoes and all manner of fire and death. Her hand on the window would've been shocking, uncomfortable, cold and unpleasant. In fact, if Jill had been scared, the world probably never would have happened in the first place.

He understood, in that briefest of brief moments, *he got it!*

It wasn't *what* he was scared of; it was simply the fact that he was scared. The fear had been eating at him, it was stealing his strength and making him shrink into himself, turning him into the very thing he feared. "Fear of a thing only brings that thing closer to you." Mike had once said to Ben. Now Ben understood that statement

He had been narrowing his perspective, blinkering himself with his own feelings and creating his own doom.

It all hit him in a split second and he reeled from the shock of such sudden awareness.

'SHIT!' he bellowed out loud, a smile stretching wide across his face, 'Wow! That was a close one man! I almost lost it there! Whoa!'

'You would've made it back,' said Jill, impressed at Ben's rapid ability to spring back into his true self, 'I just slipped in a little catalyst there, thought it'd speed things up a bit.'

Jill was being modest and Ben knew it. He would probably have come back from his despair in his own good time, but he had a feeling that it'd be at the moment of death. As his light blinked out he would realise where he'd gone wrong and his last words would probably have been along the lines of, 'bloody hell, aren't I just the daftest pillock that I ever knew!'

'Cheers man!' beamed Ben, happy to not be trudging down the road to his own demise.

'No problem.' Jill waved the event off with a light flick of her tiny bangle covered wrist.

They sat silent for a while, grinning to themselves and giggling stupidly whenever they caught each other's eye. The room seemed brighter, less damp, warmer and the thrill of things to come was very real and very wonderful.

## Chapter 20

### Gin and Shanty Towns

The plain chugged away grudgingly southwest in the direction of a small Indonesian island that Shoop knew would hide them well. They had been flying all night and the first light of day was springing up over the eastern horizon.

Turbulence kicked the little five-seated seaplane in the ribs every now and then, shunting Shoop and his crew in different directions. Jim, still unconscious, flopped around like a rag doll, bumping into Dr Komodo who would, in turn, thump him back in the other direction. In the end he got so sick of it that, finding a toolbox under his seat and removing some duct tape, stuck Jim to the side of the plane, using several rolls. The sight of Jim's mummified body raised a chuckle from the pilot.

They had time to go over some of their research as they flew, Shoop left it to Dr Komodo, but nothing jumped out at him as being immediately obvious. They were looking for some clue, some sign, anything that would point them in the direction of the vessel. It had been in Singapore somewhere in the late eighteen hundreds, that they knew, beyond that, they had no idea.

Shoop had managed to convince the independents that they stood an outside chance of tracking the damn thing down but secretly had his doubts. He played his cards very close to his chest. He was in conflict. His sixth sense was buzzing like an angry wasp in a cigar tube but his common sense was screaming at him that their hunt was futile and that all hope rested with George in Scotland.



He did his absolute best to ignore the split in his mind and just get on with the job, but it was becoming increasingly more difficult. One thing he couldn't afford to do was to let his doubt leak out and poison the already fragile fellowship of the independents. He'd barely been able to contain himself during Jim's little rebellion in the bar. Jim had no idea how close he'd come to being killed. Another mistake like that could throw the whole ordeal into disarray.

A small piece of good news came to them mid-flight. It was just what they needed. Shoop had idly picked up his tiny computer and glanced at it to find that Carl had escaped the hospital in Singapore. He'd headed north and appeared to be making his way to the border of Malaysia. Border crossings could be tricky, but he had no fear for Carl in that respect, plus, he would be fuelled on by the need for marijuana and they'd have plenty in Malaysia, even if you could get the death penalty for it. It grew wild in some of the bordering regions. Carl knew this because he'd started planting seeds there years ago. Shoop held out hope that Carl would yet redeem his idiocy in Singapore and avoid Tim and the Satellite, along with whoever else was hunting them.

Even with this good news, though, the doubt he felt was still quite potent. He had to bury it, hide it, keep focused and trust to his instincts. They'd seldom been wrong before and he hoped against hope that they wouldn't let him down this time. It was the single most important mission of his life and he was feeling the strain.

The words he'd spoken to George bounced around inside his mind, "success or death" the only two foreseeable outcomes that Shoop could see. It was a harrowing thought.

He sat next to the pilot at the front of the plane, running everything through his mind in a staunch silence as the sparse clouds edged past the windows, his face unmoved, his body made of stone, his eyes un-flickering. His grimace was deep, but then that was nothing new.

Dr Komodo, Yan and the mummified Jim were silent as the grave. Which wasn't surprising from Jim as his mouth was taped shut and he was unconscious.

Dr Komodo was scanning the surprising wealth of information that they'd managed to gather in such a short time. There were historical records on births, deaths and christenings along with the rise and fall and rise again of the Singaporean wealth. He had thousands of photos to go through and hundred of documents. It wasn't going to be easy. He couldn't help but be a little dismayed that Carl's research had gone missing; there could have been vital clues in it that might've tied some thread of evidence together. Their success may well have been halted by Carl's foolish reactionism.

If there had been some marijuana around and the experimental chip in Carl's head had been pacified, then their situation would be infinitely more comfortable as the Satellite and Tim wouldn't have been alerted to their presence in Singapore. But then, Carl found himself reasoning, there's no use crying over spilt milk. His mind was attempting to do the same thing as Shoop's, to get on with the job in hand and to push some doubt far off into the back of his brain. Not

all the way, as worry can make a man sharp, but not allowing it to creep too far forward for it to take control. It was a delicate balance.

Jim was dreaming of the blonde lady in the red Chinese dress. The shapely thigh, the restrained bosom desperate to be freed, the full cushioned lips, green eyes and voice like warm cream liqueur. Strangely, in the dream, a dark cloud hovered almost imperceptibly over head. It was reaching out to him, trying to pour its misery down on him. The dichotomy of desire and doubt battling inside him as he slept, just as Shoop, Dr Komodo and Carl fought with their hopes and doubts.

Yan, on the other hand, sat rock still. Blank. Thought not an option. He was a machine. He was a cyborg set on its unshakeable course. His thoughts, if there were any, as mysterious and unfathomable as condoms to Catholic priests.

They bumped their way through the tropical warm air, buzzing through patches of cloud and stretches of night sky, each of them lost in themselves, churning through whatever thoughts they may or may not have been having.

As the sun came up they started their descent, slowly circling an island, apparently aiming for the smallest airfield ever conceived. It was tarmac and sturdy, but relied very much on good piloting and very sharp brakes.

This worried Shoop somewhat as they were in a seaplane. The pilot was clearly either drunk, stupid, stoned or a frightening combination of all three.

Shoop hated hiring unknowns at the last minute, it meant he had to work that little bit harder to make things go smoothly. He'd already had to tell the pilot

to dip back below radar range and to try and stay under the cover of clouds as much as possible. He'd had to keep on his back pretty much the whole way.

'What the hell are you doing?' barked Shoop.

The pilot looked like a man who'd taken a damn fine thrashing from life and had taken to drink and drugs to dull the stinging bruises. His hair was long, greying at the temples and was unkempt, almost to the point of being dreadlocked. It stuck to his clammy tanned face, partially shielding his glazed eyes and harsh weathered features. Shoop's voice apparently pulled him out of some far off daydream. The far away grin on his face stuck to him as his mind travelled back to the reality of the cockpit.

'Huh?' he said sleepily as he turned to look at Shoop, 'Oh, sorry mate, I was miles away. What's up, do I need to hide under another cloud again?' He spoke with the lilting upward inflex of a beached out Australian, his soft tones floating through the air, barely audible over the noise of the rushing wind and the engines.

'No I don't want you to go under another cloud.... You're aiming at land you dozy pillock!'

'Is that wrong?' replied the pilot, eyes half closed in a stupor.

'YES its wrong you Muppet!' Shoop's words stabbed at the pilot's ears with threatening venom. 'We're in a bloody seaplane you *freak!*'

'Eh?' the pilot looked around the cockpit, confused, then looked out of the window and saw the floats that stuck out from under the main fuselage. 'Oh shit yeah, sorry mate, thought I was in me old flyer there fer a sec!' his drawling

Aussie intonation slipping out of his mouth like a drunk falling out of pub at closing time.

Shoop broke his nose.

The pilot woke up a bit from the shock.

'Jeez mate!' Shoop marvelled at the Australian tendency to refer to people as "mate" even after breaking their noses, 'what the bloody hell'd'ya do that for?'

Blood spilled from his face. He tried to catch it with his hand and stem the flow.

Shoop brought his face close to the pilot's with death in his eyes. He stared at the man who, at the sight of Shoop's gritty malevolence, became very shaken and started turning white, even through his deeply tanned skin.

'Keep your fucking hands on the wheel and your eyes on the job,' hissed Shoop, 'or you'll get infinitely worse than that!'

The pilot looked over his shoulder nervously in search of some support. He didn't get any. All he received was stony stares from Yan and Dr Komodo. Jim didn't do anything as he was still asleep and taped to the inside of the plane.

Knowing that he had nowhere to turn and believing thoroughly that Shoop wouldn't hesitate to cause him a world of pain, the pilot snapped out of his permanent dream-like state and decided to concentrate on the job at hand. Terrified, he clasped the controls, wide awake now, knuckles white with strain, blood flowing out of his nose and ruining his favourite hemp shirt. He altered course, swinging the plane away from the runway and heading for a small bay just along the coast, just as Shoop instructed.

Shoop, seeing that the dopey pillock sitting next to him didn't need any more convincing, sat back and relaxed a little.

The shanty town rose over the small bay like a junk yard. Corrugated iron and drift wood shacks spattered the lush crawling jungle hillside. Heaven and hell crammed together, each ignoring the other with equal fervour.

The landing hadn't been the best but at least they weren't sitting in a ball of flame slowly sinking into melting tarmac. The pilot was still shivering from his harsh awakening into Shoop's world. He was pail with fright and blood loss. All he wanted to do was to get the shady characters out of his "bird" and find somewhere to lie down.

*Some time later, after having flown the seaplane to a tiny and remote paradise island, the pilot realised that he'd been doing the wrong things with his life. He'd had a bit of a hard time of it and blamed some of his shortcomings on that, but mostly he fast became aware that this excuse only worked to a certain point. He realised that his life was dissapointing because he'd acted like a moron for most of it. Most of his pain had been subconsciously self-inflicted. The brief glimpse of Shoop's world and the depths of hell that he saw in Shoop's face for those brief, yet eternal minutes had made him see, if only for an instant, what real anguish was.*

*He gave up hallucinogens, met a nice young native girl on the island and spent the rest of his life farming, producing babies with his wonderful new wife*

*and reading philosophy. Later, he would become the most prolific philosopher since Socrates and the whole world knew his name. People made pilgrimages to find him on his tiny island and partook of his wisdom, yet he still marvelled at what a quirky sense of humour fate had, giggling at it on his death bed.*

The landing had woken Jim up. He thought that he was paralysed for a moment. It took him a few minutes to figure out why it was, exactly, that he couldn't move his arms, legs, head or body. He was disoriented from the drugged dart he'd caught in the neck and panic took him, but once he'd calmed down a little he realised that he'd been taped to the side of a seaplane. Which made him panic a little bit more.

Dr Komodo giggled to himself a little as he watched Jim attempt to thrash his way out of his mummification.

'Take the tape off him!' commanded Shoop, 'and see if you can take some of that daft facial hair away with it!' Shoop gave an evil grin.

The only thing visible of Jim was his eyes, that could be seen through two strips of tape. They darted around in panic at the suggestion that he would lose some of his beloved beard, ridiculous and pencil line thin as it was, he still loved it.

'Don't even think about complaining!' sneered Shoop, 'you brought this on yourself. Don't think for a minute that any of us have forgotten your lack of spine back in the bar!' Shoop was deathly serious.

Jim's panicked eyes calmed as he accepted the fact that he'd have to atone for his behaviour. He'd dropped the ball and he knew it.

The duct tape took off his eyebrows and a large section of his beard. The prosthetic nose and chin that he'd used as a disguise in Singapore were torn from him too, leaving patches of his face red and swollen. He looked ridiculous. Even Yan gave a little smirk at the sight, something that the others hadn't known him capable of.

They all clambered out of the rickety aircraft, bounded onto a jetty that was little more than some precariously organised planks and set off into the shantytown. They plodded up through the sewage sodden filth that made up a small street leading up from the jetty, walking past a number of make-shift hovel-like abodes as they went where squinting suspicious eyes peered out at them from ramshackle doorways and windows. They were all slight tiny people, lucky if the tallest among them stood over five foot five and were ill accustomed to the sight of westerners, especially westerners of such odd appearance. All they knew was poverty and rags.

One of the shacks had a couple of battered signs outside it, one looked like a cola brand sign from the fifties and the other was green and had the word "Gordon's" written on it in white lettering. It was a name Shoop was overjoyed to see. As far as his constant state of rancid misery could be overjoyed.

'Nice!' said Shoop clapping his hands together and rubbing them. He'd run out of gin and felt good knowing that he could drink its harshness even in this, one of the remotest corners of the globe.



The sun was crawling higher into the sky as the pilot made his getaway from the small bay. The day promised to be a hot one and still Shoop's hat never left his head, he just tilted it back a little.

The owner of the dishevelled bar had to be woken before they could get a drink. He complained for a while, until Yan looked at him for a moment, all ill temper fell from his features after that and for the rest of the day the booze came easily. Shoop threw a bundle of cash at the barman, ensuring that they'd be kept happy, just to make sure.

Their presence attracted some attention and by mid morning a crowd had gathered outside the bar. Shoop walked outside, pulled out one of his guns, grimaced at the throng and motioned for them to leave. They scattered like wildebeest fleeing a pouncing lioness.

'We'll be safe here for a while,' thought Shoop, the pressures of the Sphere easing in his mind. The pilot had risen above radar level a couple of times, and could feasibly have been seen from an overhead satellite, but they had gone through enough cloud to ensure that they wouldn't have been able to track them completely. Even if they had a small idea as to which direction they were heading, there were hundreds of islands in the area, all with the potential for hiding. It would be days, probably weeks before they would be found and all they needed was a day or two. They could be off the island and heading in any direction before the Sphere found sign of them.

The pilot had been a bit of a worry. He may have taken it upon himself to tell authorities of his brief travels with the group. A small glance from Yan had

seen to that. He would never be able to talk to anyone, ever, about Shoop and his men again.

They could relax a little.

The makeshift bar was much like the rest of the buildings in the village, it was all salvaged wood and metal sheets. The table they sat at was nothing more than stacked crates and the chairs were small section of tree stump. Against all odds, however, there was electricity. The bar housed the only generator in the village, which meant that they had ice for their drinks, this was a blessing as the day grew gradually hotter and hotter. There was a faltering fan on the driftwood bar that fought against the odds to produce the merest hint of cool air but ended up just pushing all the hot air around a bit.

They were sticky, hot, uncomfortable and dirty, but at least they had booze. Booze made everything better. After a few hours of recuperation they turned their attentions to the research material that they'd gathered in Singapore.

They'd put it off long enough. It was time to find their fate, either they were going into hiding in some wild jungle or distant mountain, or they'd be given a clue that'd allow them to fight on.

'What've we got then?' Shoop directed the question at Dr Komodo who'd been studying the evidence as they flew, over night, to the island.

'I wish I had better news,' said Komodo, 'but I can't find anything in here that'll open up our search. I've put all the information onto your computer, pictures, scans of documents, the lot, and I've been staring at it for hours and can't see a damn thing. No hint, nothing. The only thing I can think of is that I'm

missing something, maybe Carl had something, or maybe I've been looking at it for so long that I'm staring right through what I'm supposed to be finding.'

'Give it here!' said Shoop.

Komodo tossed the computer over to Shoop, who walked over to the other end of the shack to pour his attention over it. The small screen lit up with photos of buildings. He scrutinised each of them individually with a furrowed brow and pursed lips. Something tingled in his belly. His sixth sense was trying to tell him something. He stared on, through the hundreds of photos that'd been taken.

Dr Komodo was right, nothing was immediately apparent but Shoop wasn't one to give up easily. George had taught him a thing or two about clue hunting, he would possibly have a different angle on it than Komodo. He continued staring intently at the wealth of photos, his sixth sense buzzing, telling him that the clue had to be somewhere on a building. Something important was in the pictures but he didn't know what it was, he was a blind man waving his arms around in search of a wall but he knew it was only a matter of time, perseverance and lateral thinking.

He went through every technique that he'd learned through his years of investigations, the way that buildings were constructed, secret geometrical messages, the materials used, the architectural shapes, anything that would give him a hint. His search yielded nothing, which was when the lateral thinking came into play. He'd gone through a world of complexity in his mind and found nothing, which made him think that maybe the problem wasn't complex. Maybe it was on the surface rather than under it.

Then he saw it.

On the front of several buildings were Latin inscriptions. The buildings were all churches. There were sentences in Latin on the front of each of them, but with a select few, three in total, some of the words had been carved slightly bigger than the others. There was one word per church that stood out which had a small symbol next to it. Shoop recognised it as the triangle from the Priory Of Sion seal, he didn't know any Latin, however, so he wrote the words on a piece of paper and headed back to the group.

He'd been sitting in his corner for more than four hours, straining over the computer and its images while the men all sat nervously waiting for a sign. They were all on tenterhooks, drinking nervously, sweating in the heat of the day, unaware of their fate. When Shoop got up and walked over to them with a piece of paper in his hand, they all sat forward on the edge of their chairs in anticipation, apart from Yan, who just nudged forward half a millimetre or so, a slight motion, but one that was very apparent. The air seemed to shift in the whole room as he moved.

'I think I've found something,' said Shoop handing the paper to Jim, 'You know Latin right?' Jim nodded, 'well see if you can make any sense of that.'

Jim flattened the paper out and began to read the words, struggling to make the words fit together in some sort of coherent way. Shoop ordered another round of drinks as Jim poured his attention over the puzzle.

The air was thick with silence. Even Yan seemed a little agitated. It was nothing in his demeanour; it was just that the atmosphere seemed to wobble

around him, like heat rising from a desert road. They were all waiting for a thread of hope in the uncertainty that encased them all. They all suddenly felt the importance of the moment. If this thread of a clue didn't yield anything then they would all become both redundant and hunted. It would be up to George to solve their mystery for them and none of them liked the idea of that, not one little bit.

They were all secretly touched by doubt and none of them relished the idea of entrusting their fates to a small ginger librarian on the other side of the planet.

They drank quickly and nervously as the barman prepared more, the flow of booze was consistent. The barman hadn't worked this hard in his life.

For Jim, there was nothing else in the universe other than the scrawled Latin text in front of him. The world fell away; there was nothing but his intense, blinkered concentration.

An eternity passed with every second.

'I've got it!' said Jim triumphantly, 'piece of piss!' The two minutes that'd passed had felt like an age upon an age to the uncertain company. Were they going on? Or were they going into hiding?

'Australia,' said Jim, 'the vessel went to Australia!'

Sighs of relief wafted through the group, they hadn't wanted to show their doubts, but with this new destination, it didn't matter any more. They had a trail to follow. After the mess that Carl made in Singapore, they'd been given another chance. The Sphere didn't know where they were or where they were going and

the trail of the vessel was hot again. They all visibly slumped with relieve, even the wavering air around Yan calmed and faded.

The relief washed over Shoop, but then he realised something, 'Oh, bloody hell!' he said.

The others looked confused.

'What is it?' Said Dr Komodo.

'I HATE Australia!' He'd never forgiven them for wanting to give up the Queen and the royal family.

Australia's feelings toward Shoop were very mutual.

# Chapter 21

## Latin Can Be Fun

Ben was excited and was thoroughly enjoying himself. He was bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet, waiting for Mike to deliver the punch line to Jill impatiently.

It'd been Ben's idea to send Shoop to Australia. He knew how much Shoop resented the Australians for trying to get rid of the monarchy and so take itself out of the common wealth. In the end the Australians had voted to keep the Queen as monarch, but the taste of rebellion was still bitter in Shoop's mouth. The idea of Mr Winkle being forced to spend time there amused Ben's sense of mischief. He knew it'd tickle Jill too. It'd make for another fine Shoop TV night.

'So,' said Mike, 'what we did is, we found these three churches that had the words that we needed written on them in Latin, we got our guys to carve tiny little triangles, like the one on the seals we've got, next to the words and then made the selected words just that little bit bigger than the others.' He fondled the ethnic beads around his neck excitedly, shifting from foot to foot, barely able to contain his enthusiasm. The fact that Jill was sitting, leaning forward, grinning broadly, eyes wide and clasping her hands together in anticipation only increased the air of exhilaration in the room.

'Here are the words,' said Mike with unconvincing calm, 'novus universitas carcer... which basically means...'

'The new world prison!' interrupted Jill, unclasping her hands and clapping them together playfully in full realisation, 'so they'll think of a prison land from the eighteen hundreds and go off to Australia! That's great man ..... oh that's really good .....well done boys!'

Ben and Mike were bouncing up and down gleefully like five year olds that'd just won a game of pass the parcel and been rewarded with a games console.

'Any plans as to where they'll go next?' asked Jill.

'Oh we've got dozens of places worked out,' said Ben, 'and they're going to really hate most of them, they're all nice happy sunny places, well one of them isn't sunny, but it's nice and happy.'

'Where's that?'

'We were going to try and send them to Lapland at one point, but we're not sure how to pull it off.' Said Mike.

'Oh you're just mean!' exclaimed Jill smiling broadly, 'Mr Winkle meets Santa Clause, that's fabulous!'

She sat back, beaming with pride at her boys and clearly enjoying the level of ridicule that they'd managed to inject into the proceedings.

'I wonder how long we can keep this up for?' she thought out loud.



## Chapter 22

### Carl's Escape

Carl was very tired. He'd managed to make it as far as the Malaysia/Thailand border and immediately set about trying to find some gainful mercenary employment. It hadn't taken long before he was killing for cash and living the life of a mini guerrilla general. The people who had employed him soon recognised his exceptional talents and had given him a platoon to administer and fight with. It'd been a long few weeks and he'd decided that he needed a bit of a rest.

The Malay/Thai border was rife with violence and unrest, which suited him down to the ground. It was pretty much the only atmosphere in which he felt at home. The flying bullets, the gung-ho maddened slaughter, the screams and the terror, 'great!' he thought to himself. He'd taken up with a group who operated under the guise of religious insurgents but were, in fact, not much more than hoodlums and pillagers. They gave him food, water, nice new military clothing, money and he got to keep anything that he managed to pilfer. He was a pig in a pen. Happy as a clown.

His gunshot wounds still hurt a bit but pain drove him on, kept him moving, kept him sharp and alert. He was in his element. He'd had a good hard days fighting and was resting in a remote village hut, soaking up his aches and pains happily with the aid of some fresh opium. The drug gave his pains a warmth that

he found deeply satisfying. Every bruise, cut, scrape and graze felt like the hot Mediterranean sun was bathing it with gentle rays, toasty, soothing, heavenly. He basked in pain as pleasure and pleasure as pain, a starving man at a banquet for kings, he lapped it all up.

As he lay in his warm ache soaked utopia, flat on his back on a hard floor with his pack for a pillow, puffing on his opium bong, his mind ambled lazily back to Singapore.

The last thing that he remembered was wanting sex. He remembered trying to glance seductively at some ladies in a bar but with hindsight realised that he may have looked a lot more like a dirty slavering pervert than the sex god that Jack Daniels had convinced him he was. Vague mental pictures came to him. Violence, a car, smashing glass, gunshots and then blackness.

He'd woken in a pristine white room, handcuffs restricting his movement and someone had seen fit to install a small roadwork crew in his head. All of the crew appeared to be using pneumatic drills to dig up the more useful parts in the tarmac road of his mind, which was odd, as any time that Carl had ever seen a road work team they were usually nowhere near their pneumatic drills but were having a bit of a sit down and a cup of tea instead. His skull throbbed mercilessly with the constant barrage of internal noise.

The experimental chip inside his brain was working well though. It increased the production of a certain chemical, which had a name so long and

complicated that Carl had never seen fit to remember it. It had the practical upshot of making him mind bogglingly sturdy and increased his bodies healing abilities by twenty times its natural rate. His gunshot wounds were already half way to being fully healed. When his body was in crisis the chip worked over time and had things fixed very quickly. He was still in pain but not nearly as much as he should have been, taking into account the extent of his injuries. Any normal man would've been in a coma for a few years; or more plausibly, they'd be dead. He'd only been shot a few days ago and was ready to get up and take some more of the same.

He was also blessed with very small hands and freakishly chunky wrists, so with a little bit of wriggling and pulling he'd managed to free his hands from the manacles that attached him to the metal hospital bed. Once freed, he yanked out an interesting array of tubes that stuck out of numerous different parts of his body and carefully turned off any equipment that looked like it might raise an alarm.

He stumbled off the bed and spent some time drinking water from a washbasin in the corner. The liquid invigorated him, he could feel his strength returning with every gulp and the thumping pain began to subside a little. His mind began to clear and he started pondering his options for escape. He had no idea how much time he had before someone came to check on him so he had to move quickly. He did a few swift sit-ups, press-ups and jumping jacks to reacquaint his muscles with movement and he was just about ready to go. There was still pain but he used an old meditative trick he'd learnt in India to block the pain off. With enough concentration he managed to file the pain away from his

mind. He knew that 75% of pain was mental, so forcing it to stay in his body and not creep into his thoughts eased things up considerably.

He took some deep breaths and drank a little more water. He was ready.

The first thing he had to do was find some clothes. He had no doubt that his own clothing would have been densely bloodied judging by the amount of gunshot wounds that riddled his arms and legs. They would have been cut from his unconscious body. He held out no hope of finding them, which meant that clothes had to come from elsewhere. There was bound to be a guard.

He peered cautiously out of the small window in the door to his room, flashing his eyes at the corridor outside for little more than a split second taking in every detail of the scene outside his door. His intelligence training in the military had given him an exceptional talent for memory recall and the chip in his brain only increased the ability. He could flick through a phone book in less than a minute and remember every name, address and phone number with frightening accuracy. There was a guard, as he had predicted, opposite his door, sitting, slumped in a small chair and reading a magazine that appeared to be some sort of soft porn. This was good; it meant that he was both negligent and deeply distracted.

Carl walked over to a drip trolley that had been supplying Carl with a clear thick liquid, wheeled it over to the door and threw it to the ground with a clatter. There was a fumbling noise from outside, the squeak of shoes on the plastic tiling and a loud thud as the guard stumbled through the door, his soft porn flapping around his legs as he clumsily rushed to see what the crash had been.

'This is too easy!' thought Carl.

He was about to pounce on the man and render him unconscious but as luck would have it, the porn loving guard did all the work for him. He was in such a rush to get in the room and had been so absorbed in his magazine that, upon fumbling through the door, tripped on the drip cart that Carl had thrown down, fell forward with frightening speed and cracked his head off the side of the bed. He flopped to the floor with a dull thud, the various tools of his trade that dangled from his utility belt clattering and knocking against each other.

'Pillock!' thought Carl shaking his head in disgust at the man's incompetence.

He dragged the dozing lump out of view, stuffing him under the bed after removing his nightstick from his belt. Carl was fairly sure that there would be other guards on the floor that would have seen or heard the racket and waited for them behind the door. Sure enough he heard feet pelting up the corridor outside and the door swung open as two men bounded into the room. Carl had little problem clouting them both on the head and dropping them to the floor. The whole thing was over in seconds but he had to act fast. There would be other men stationed around the building.

He swiftly stripped one of them of his uniform, put it on with lightening speed and darted out of the door. He pulled the cap down low so as to hide his features. He confidently strode down the corridor and set about trying to find a way out of the hospital. He encountered eight other guards but none of them

proved to be anything more than flies to be swatted in the face of his unnatural stealth and strength.

Panic ensued. Doctors, nurses, patients and visitors all ran to avoid the violence being done. The pandemonium served him well, he liked panic, it was a very effective cloak sometimes. He even fired his newly acquired gun at some strip lights, shattering them in a firework display of electrical sparks, just to increase the level of chaos. In the midst of it all, he scanned a number of rooms, choosing one that housed a man who appeared to be of similar stature to him. The guards wouldn't take very long to figure out that Carl was dressed as one of their own so he needed a swift change of disguise. The man in the room was silenced with a quick crack to the side of the head and Carl had a new set of clothes. He got changed and slipped the gun and nightstick into the waistband of his new trousers. Luckily the man supplied a baseball cap, handy for avoiding other people's looks, and a very full wallet.

He bolted down a corridor toward a fire exit, leaped down the stairs and was calmly walking down a busy street within three minutes. Before the credit cards in the wallet could be reported stolen, he'd bought a full complement of survival supplies from an army and navy store, a motorbike (he'd had to bribe the salesman quite extensively to ignore the fact that he looked nothing like the person on the driving license), a hearty meal, a bottle of bourbon, two hundred cigarettes and was making for the border.

He felt the locator that Shoop had injected into him flicker to life briefly as he made his getaway. He hoped that Shoop had seen the signal on his

computer, if he had then it'd mean that he would know that Carl was safely out of the clutches of the Sphere of Influence, well, for the time being anyway. It would be a weight of his mind. Carl felt a little bad about his getting caught, but not so much that he was going to pummel himself with guilt.

He had no way of getting in touch with his comrades, which disheartened him somewhat. He knew that he wouldn't be free until Shoop had finished his mission, and even if he did, Carl knew that he'd have to find Shoop before he could ever know if he was truly out of danger. In the meantime, he had to keep busy and stay underground.

'First things first though.' He thought as he rode his nice shiny new motorcycle North to the border, 'Time I got my hands on some weed!' He headed for his little marijuana garden that was tucked away in the hills. The lack of smoke had done bad things to him. He could feel his uncontrollable rage creeping up inside him. The chip in his skull was very hard to resist once it went into full swing. For the moment he was safe though as it was busy trying to fix his battered body. He just hoped he could get to the garden before he did anything else stupid. Once he got to the garden there was a little known path that lead down into Malaysia from there. Nobody knew about it apart from him and a few country dwellers so there was little chance of any official entanglements.

Before the week was out he was fighting with the insurgents in the jungle, sweating, clambering through the thick bush, bruised, aching, killing, wonderful. He was as happy as a filth monger in a brothel.

He idly inhaled opium fumes, flat on his back, grinning contently, making all of the aches and pains warm and fuzzy and yet somewhere, far through the intoxicating mist in his cranium, he wondered what he'd do next. He couldn't stay with the insurgents as, if he stayed in one area too long, the Sphere were bound to catch up with him. Their agents were many and widespread.

'Oh well,' he sighed lethargically, 'I'll worry about that later.' and he sank back into his deep deep stone.



## Chapter 23

### What It Takes To Be Evil

The Boss was deep in the underground town beneath his offices. He was hunting for clues, or more accurately, he was watching while a gaggle of his lackeys hunted for clues.

Nine of his men had died trying to gain access to Shoop's lair and the Boss was not best pleased with the turn of events. Apparently Shoop had rigged the main door to an electricity supply, put an explosive device just past the entrance, rigged the main hallway with lasers that diced three people in a one-er and had installed a wrecking ball to the ceiling of the library. It swung down out of the blackness and swept up two men. It was riddled with big metal spikes and the men were dangling from it, gore dripping from them as the Boss looked on.

He was distinctly put out!

'This is absolutely intolerable!' he fumed, 'what the hell do I have to do to get things done right for Christ's sake!'

One of the dangling men on the wrecking ball, the one who was still alive, squeaked out a strained response, 'Sorry Boss, won't happen again..... AAARRRRGGGHHH!' Two men on a stepladder yanked him off the spikes. He passed out from the pain.

*Later, the impaled man realised that he may have made a colossally misguided career choice, quit the Sphere of influence after months of recovery in the hospital and opened a small teashop in one of the more liberal parts of Edinburgh. After working with a very nice gay man for a few months he discovered that the reason he'd been so angry all his life was because he'd denied the fact that he'd always fancied boys. He and his new partner and work colleague went on to open a chain of gay friendly teashops, cafes and restaurants throughout the UK and lived very happily ever after, donating large chunks of their yearly earnings to various charities.*

*They bought a dachshund, named him spike after the wrecking ball that had brought them together, and spent a lot of time marvelling at what a quirky sense of humour fate had.*

The signal went up that it was safe to enter Shoop's rooms and scores of men poured into the library. The desperate search began with fervour matched with an equal amount of care. Nothing was taken for granted as being safe and for every book that was taken down from a shelf, a small sigh of relief could be heard. The room was full of a tepid mixture of dread and reprieve. They felt like bomb technicians in a room full of plastic explosive and any given book could be the trigger to set the whole damn thing off. Luckily though there were no fatalities, just a few minor maimings.

The Boss sank into a regal looking leather chair and began to relax a little, occasionally piping up to bark orders at his second in command, Peter. It was

Peter's job to interpret the orders and delegate to the troops. He did it all with a certain vicious flare and without mercy or remorse for the injured. The man was a weasel, which was part of the reason why the Boss had taken him on.

One of the conditions that The Boss had adhered to when his offices had been built over the underground town was that nobody from the Sphere of influence was to enter Shoop's private rooms. The boss had agreed but not without protest. It bothered him that he could have alien and inaccessible territory right under his own nose, it tugged at the jumper of his control, fraying its ends and unravelling its tight knitting. He was glad to have broken down that particular wall but was on edge at the feeling of not being safe in his own territory. The whole library pulsed with tension, worried eyes darted around looking for hidden booby traps, moist sweaty browed men carried out their orders carefully, handling their environment with kid gloves.

The Boss remained in his leather throne sipping a brandy from George's supply to calm his nerves.

A few hour passed by and the air started to thin a little, feeling a tad less oppressive. The Boss deemed it safe to start walking around the room and its book lined anti-chambers, assessing the work being done and occasionally spitting orders at his minions like the general of an invading army organising the pillage of a town. The looting, however, was proving to be somewhat fruitless. There were thousands of books, files and artefacts but none of them yielded anything more than intriguing oddities. It seemed that there was nothing to be found that would reveal Shoop's current plans.

Shoop and George had been very careful. The main part of the library housed information that would've turned the pallor of the average person to a clammy grey but none of it was new to the Boss or his minions. Tales of horrors and wonders from every corner of the globe were the stock and trade of the Sphere of Influence. There were very few snippets of information and freakish tales that they didn't already know about.

George and Shoop had taken great care to ensure that any invader would find nothing that they didn't want them to know about. No amount of probing could unearth anything but the relatively run of the mill, well, run of the mill for anyone in the "business" anyway. Behind the walls of the lair, however, was a completely different story. There was no device that Shoop knew of that would see through the thick lead lined stone walls. Shoop had set up all manner of technical doo-dads to ensure that nobody would see the true treasures of the caves. Decades of information, research, artefacts, files and the more valuable books were only accessible through a tiny hatchway that could only be opened by the initiated.

The library was rectangular with the main entrance at one end, eight deep antechambers along each side and another at the far end, behind George's desk, that housed his bed, sparse wardrobe and amenities. The wall behind George's poky little bed was made up of a collection of muddled stone, not unlike any wall in the old-town part of Edinburgh and didn't look out of place in the dingy alcove that was George's living quarters. The wall housed a number of stones that, just

like the floor in the service station where Shoop had escaped the Sphere, when certain of the stones were pressed in the correct order and with the right amount of pressure, would slide in on themselves and reveal a man sized entrance to a cave beyond. The cave lead to the mysterious underground tunnel system that had aided both Shoop's and George's escape. The cave itself had been turned into a vault, the contents of which would have had the Boss pulsate with orgasmic glee.

The chances of the Boss finding the cave were very slim. There was more chance of God having a bit of a sledging outing in Hedes.

The Boss got bored of walking around and slumped back into the leather throne feeling distinctly annoyed. Things were not going as planned. After a while Peter joined him, leaving the labourers to do their jobs.

'It doesn't look good boss.' Said Peter.

'Hmm!' grunted the Boss nodding dejectedly, clearly disgruntled by the whole affair. He had hoped against hope that some sliver of a lead would reveal itself. Shoop was gone... again. The Boss' team had lost them in Singapore, the only hope had been that Carl would be able to give them some answers but he'd miraculously recovered from his shooting and bolted before anyone could stop him. Raiding Shoop's lair was bringing the Boss closer to the end of his list of possible courses of action. His options were running out. Defeat was looking more and more likely but he still had a couple of aces up his sleeve. The

hypnotic power of Cat could still turn things around. If her words had wormed their way into Jim's mind effectively, which was very likely, then there was still a chance that things could turn around, and then there was The Boss' superior. The man that only *he* knew about who sat in the shadows and moved his people in ways that couldn't be seen or known by any other than the Boss himself. He referred to him simply as Sir. He knew very little of him, just that he wielded exceptional power, more even than the Boss could ever hope to muster in his lifetime. He had never seen him, never met him and was only contacted by him via a small communication device that had been built into his ear. The Boss knew little of his motives. He only knew that there was a secret battle going on, somewhere below even his vision and when it was over, The Boss would be more powerful than he had previously imagined possible. There was the distinct chance that this man knew more of the movements of Shoop and his cohorts than he let on. The Boss didn't ask questions though, he just did his job and waited for the day to come when his shadowy superior came forward and revealed himself. Once revealed, The Boss could see about usurping him.

'There's still the matter of that aeroplane that darted into radar range just outside Singapore.' Said Peter.

'I've got someone looking into that but it's a long shot,' grunted the Boss, wincing as he sipped on his brandy, 'I hate waiting, I should never have let Shoop live so long damn it!'

Peter tried to repress the urge to say "I told you so" but the sentiment was clearly visible on his smug, traitorous features.

The Boss saw the look, 'don't give me that shit Peter! I had my reasons.' Peter feigned a surprised reaction at the Bosses words but then realised that denying his thoughts was futile and shrugged, 'You don't need to know everything Peter,' The Boss' pale clammy face contorted in anger, Peter felt a very distinct pang of fear, 'Some of the knowledge that I'm privy to would make you want to slit your own throat in terror, so don't for a second think that you're wiser than me in these matters!' The Boss spat as he spoke, anger at Peter's insubordination spattering the air. Peter forced himself to remember his place and bowed his head. He had witnessed just how horrific The Boss' wrath could be and in no hurry to endure it.

'I'm sorry sir, please forgive my ignorance, I do but serve.' He said.

'That's more like it.' The Boss' features softened a little but he remained fearsome, 'You've got a lot of potential Peter but cross me and you'll spend the rest of your days in a thick cloud of pained screams!'

'I seek only to learn from you sir.' Peter's ambitions bubbled under the surface of every word and The Boss picked up every traitorous tone. He let it slide though. Peter was his one and only protégé, there was no one else who had appeared capable enough to carry on The Boss' work once he'd usurped his dark superior, the man he called "Sir". The Boss had invested a lot of time in Peter and wasn't ready to write his efforts off just yet. He knew a threat when he saw one and Peter was definitely capable of mutiny, ironically, his sneakiness was part of what made him such a qualified heir to the throne. The trick was to

dangle the carrot of more power just beyond Peter's sight. The hunger for *more* would prevent him from making any rebellious moves.

Peter was hungry for power. He was young and ambitious but most dangerous of all was his lack of patience. He wanted the world and wanted it now. If the Boss made the slightest mistake then Peter would turn it to his advantage in the blink of an eye.

The search for a lead continued well into the night, every minute that was spent trying to find Shoop took the Boss further from his goals. He sat despondent, impotent and angry. Fuming away in the face of all the wasted time but still not ready to give up as he had nothing better to do. Better to be seen to be active than idle.

A noise came from the hallway. Dull thumps, indiscernible raised voices and muffled scrambling. Peter and the Boss turned their attention to the entrance of the library, faces curled up in quizzing curiosity, ready to flee if a serious threat emerged. Anything was possible within those walls, even with the hordes of Sphere agents surrounding them. Of course, they could have fled to safer ground hours ago, but The Boss insisted on handling the search personally.

The ruckus crept closer, getting louder as it approached, some agents stopped their work in the library and instinctively moved toward the door, stepping between whatever the noise was and The Boss. A voice became audible.



'Must..... mumble ..... see him!'

There were more fumbling and scrambling noises and then a man, retched, bandaged, broken and exhausted sprawled through the door and flopped at the feet of the Sphere agents. A mass of guns instantly trained themselves on his head and vital organs but the Boss recognised the man through his bandages and the multitude of bruises that made his skin look less fleshy but more purple and yellow, he looked like he'd gone over Niagara Falls in a sack of hammers.

'Stain? Justin Stain is that you?'

The man attempted to drag himself up off the floor without much success; he'd clearly used every ounce of his strength in him to battle his way into the library past the guards at the entrance.

'He's not a threat you morons!' bellowed the Boss as some of his less intelligent men went to strong arm him out of the building, 'bring him here, fetch him a drink, something strong!'

The goons plopped him on a couch, he was not looking very good at all.

He'd woken up in a hospital amongst pandemonium. His memory was hazy at best and couldn't remember what had happened to him to get him where he was. He couldn't even remember much of who he was and trying to figure out what to do didn't prove easy. He did have the urge to leave though. The sense of impending doom was very real and bothered him immensely. He decided that

getting dressed and trying to get outside would be a good place to start. He appeared to be sharing a room with an unconscious man so he stole his clothes, which proved to be a good deal too small for him, and headed out into the screams and panicked bustle of the corridor limping horribly and wincing with pain as he discovered that he'd been shot in the knee. The knee had been put in a cast. He heard gunfire come from somewhere on his floor and there were several policemen laying around, unconscious and bleeding as people clambered over them, occasionally trampling them in a desperate bid for freedom. Lights were flickering on and off giving the scene a distinctly horrific feel.

Downstairs, Carl was leaving the building after creating chaos and headed for the nearest motorbike dealership.

Justin was dazed and bruised. The bruises were so deep that they hadn't begun to show yet. Whatever had happened to him hadn't been easy to endure and was quite glad that he couldn't remember it. Every bone in his body squealed in pain with every shaky step that he took. His memory was rattled and twisted but he momentarily gained the where-with-all to salvage some morphine from an upturned trolley for his pain. He stumbled around in a morphine soaked stupor, desperately trying to escape the surreal hell that seemed to be unfolding about him.

He managed to reach the outside, which was when things took a turn for the worse. He was memoryless, penniless and homeless in the streets of a city that didn't tolerate public displays poverty. He hadn't the slightest idea of where

to go, what to do or how to salvage his wrecked mind. He was sure to be picked up by some sort of authority sooner or later and had a gut feeling that he didn't want that to happen. He couldn't explain it; he just didn't think that it would be wise. His gut was all he had to go on. Of course if he'd ignored his gut then he would've been in Edinburgh a lot sooner, would've been cleaned up, fed and taken care of, but then, there's no use crying over spilt milk now is there.

He later figured out that his fear of being caught was a hangover from running from Shoop Winkle. The last thing that he'd experienced was a good stiff kicking from him, followed by an unreasonable amount of torture and pain. His subconscious, understandably, didn't want anything like that happening again, which was why he couldn't bare to be caught by anyone. He didn't know this as he scrambled through the streets of Singapore scaring people with his appearance however; it just came automatically.

He spent a week hiding in dark and nasty places, scrambling in bins for food in the moist heat, dirty, sweating and stealing whenever he could, his mind in tiny pieces, his body aching and stinging. Then one day he ventured into an area that sparked a shred of a memory. It was a painful memory and it filled him with the urge to run, to get away from the place but he forced himself to stay and try to grapple the memory back into coherence. The memories were painful. Pictures flashed in his mind; a pursuit, hiding in a dark room, scrambling over rooftops, a man in a grey/brown suit and hat, pain, screams, more pain and then oblivion. The pictures were mere snippets but he knew that he had little desire to recall the entire experience.

He ventured into a building that seemed familiar. It was dark, fetid and smelt like violence. Blood stained the floor and had gone rotten. Rats darted out of view as he fell into the room, happy to have found sanctuary, no matter how dingy and derelict the place was.

A memory stabbed at his mind's eye. He remembered hiding money under a floorboard. He found the piece of flooring that danced around his brain and ripped it up with a crowbar that happened to be lying behind a makeshift barricade of tables and chairs, the money was still there. The sheer ecstasy that engulfed him couldn't be described. He could eat, clean himself up a bit, there was even enough there for him to put himself up in a hotel for a couple of nights. The wad was so big that when he entered a hotel he could wave it in the faces of anyone who tried to kick him out to convince them that he wasn't the vagrant that he appeared to be, just a bit roughed up. He'd won a momentary reprieve.

Under the floorboards he also found a passport. It had a picture of a person in it that looked a bit like him but without the thick caking of dirt and bruises that had covered him over the past week, it appeared that his name was Justin Stain. The taunting name of Justin Pain came back to him and made him wince; the gunshot wound in his leg ached at the recollection.

Other words came to him, sparked by vaguely familiar surroundings; "Boss", "Edinburgh". The word Edinburgh felt safe. He didn't know what the word meant but it definitely felt like something that should be explored. The word Boss felt a little less safe but still felt better than anything that he'd been experiencing since his memory problems had started in the hospital.

After getting to a hotel, convincing them that he wasn't a tramp, cleaning himself up and buying new clothes, he bought himself a dictionary to find the definition of some of the words that had popped into his mind. The word boss didn't do much other than tell him that he had a superior. The word Edinburgh was a bit more useful. He found that it was a city in a country that he couldn't remember called Scotland. If nothing else, at least he had some sort of destination to head for. Maybe more would come to him as he made his way there.

Not wanting to risk travel on an airline, they felt a little too exposed and his fear of capture was still very potent, he managed to get passage on a cargo freighter heading for Dover in the south of England. The long journey began to clear his mind. He had time to rest and gather himself but, due to his sleeping rough for a week, his wounds started to bother him. Some of his cuts had turned bad and his knee was a point of burning hell. A fever crept up on him. He started waking in the night in his featureless metal cabin, shaking violently, disoriented, his forehead leaking boiling saline solution onto his cold and clammy skin. He endured horrific hallucinations. The man in the grey/brown suit filled his tiny cabin, the dirty fabric of his clothes made up the walls, his vicious grimacing face appeared in front of him, misty yet solid, following his line of vision so that everywhere he looked the enforcer of his torment filled his eyes and mind. It was cold, hard and full of malice. His wounds burned at the sight of him.

Outside his cabin storms started battering the ship. Inside his cabin the storms pummelled his nerves to breaking point, throwing sickness into the pot

along with his physical pain, fever and madness. Death would've been a welcome break. The ship's doctor did the best he could but he was a booze hound and could barely see straight. He did little but ply Justin with cheap nasty vodka, dehydrating him even further and increasing his agonies.

By some unforeseen miracle his fever broke and he started entering the realms of coherent reality. By the time they reached Dover he could stand upright and hobble along on his decimated leg. Before he left the ship he raided the doctor's medical bay while he was passed out nursing a bottle of vodka, and stole a hefty supply of morphine to quell the burning agony in his limbs and body. He was still feverish when he stole a car in Dover but the hallucinations had mercifully subsided and the fever was considerably milder than on his nightmare cruise. He bought a road map of Britain in a service station and headed north. His memories seeping back into his mind gently as he went.

The Boss, he had to find the man called The Boss and tell him something very important. If only he could remember what it was.

'So Mr Stain,' scowled the Boss, 'why aren't you in Singapore?' he asked as a henchman brought Justin a large glass of brandy.

Justin recounted his tale to the Boss as Peter listened in. The Sphere agents all went back to work.

Once he'd finished the Boss started quizzing him 'Have you managed to remember what it was that you had to tell me?'

'It was Mr Winkle sir, I remembered while I was throwing up in a service station just outside Knutsford,' his speech was slurred and his voice was pure gravel,' he attacked us. I didn't know that he was AWOL sir, but I remember him taking his hat off for a moment while he was torturing me, I remember now, at least I think I do, it's all so jumbled, in my beaten delirious state, and I don't know how, maybe it was the training, but I managed to put one of those miniscule tracking devices in his hat, you know, the ones that change colour when they attach to something so that they can't be seen. The chameleon tracker... yes... that's the one!'

The Bosses eyes went wide with excitement for a second and then squinted, he wanted to play his cards close to his chest and didn't want to show how near orgasmic he was about the revelation. He sat up a little, fighting to control himself.

'Now Mr Stain, I want you to think very carefully about this, I know your tired, I know you've been through a lot but this is something that you have to be very sure of. What frequency did the device use?'

'Um...' Justin's eyes were near closing. He had the look of a man that could die if he strained his mind too much. One thought was all there was between him and oblivion but the Boss couldn't afford to let this lead go, 'I.... um..... I'm sorry sir, its just, well, I'm so very tired sir, everything hurts, I can't remember.'

'Damn it man!' hissed the Boss through clenched teeth, '*think!*'

'It might come back sir, can't remember, its all so vague, can't think, sorry sir, so tired, so much pain, haven't slept right for weeks.... Sorry sir!' His speech was guttural and raw; he could barely string sentences together.

'Christ!' muttered the Boss under his breath and shaking his head slightly as it dipped down. He sat up after a moment turning his head away, accepting the situation and trying to figure out what to do next. They all sat silent as The Boss thought, the clamor of activity continuing around them but with less fervour. The Sphere agents were trying to appear nonchalant while they listened in to the revelations. The brandy warmed him slightly but didn't help his state of alertness.

Peter looked over at Justin; he was a human train wreck. His leg looked like it was going to drop off. It was obviously gangrenous. The smell said as much. He stank, his face swollen and looked like there were a number of ill-tended fractures around his face and skull. He was sweating a thick salty liquid, was pale, panting desperately like a geriatric after a fun run. Peter saw no threat there.

Peter spent most of his life assessing the possibility of threats to him from others; he didn't trust his own mother. In fact, he wasn't even sure if he trusted himself.

The Boss' face changed slightly. It was barely visible but Peter recognised the odd barely perceptible twitch in his left eyebrow. It meant that the Boss had a plan. It meant that he'd devised a way to turn the situation to his advantage. Peter loved watching while the Boss birthed a new and twisted plan from the rubble of a dire situation. He loved watching the way his spiteful brain



turned the world upside down and forged it into to something more agreeable to him. He made the world do what he wanted it to.

The Boss turned to Justin, 'You're a damn clod Stain!' Justin looked more that a little dumbstruck by this, 'you're a fool and an imbecile!'

'But sir I.... I don't.... I didn't....'

'What bloody use are you? Eh?'

'But....' Justin looked down at his body to make sure that the gangrenous cuts and bruises weren't just a figment of his imagination, '.....I don't....'

'Shut up!' ordered the Boss

'What's he doing?' thought Peter to himself excitedly. He watched the exchange eagerly. He loved seeing the Boss work in these sort of situations. He loved trying to second-guess what he was up to. Most of the time he could guess, but this one had him stumped. He barely repressed a grin.

'A tracking device of that calibre is of absolutely no bloody use without the frequency, you may as well have dropped a peanut into his hat you moron! You'd have saved yourself and the rest of us a whole pile of trouble if you'd just died on that bloody rooftop in Singapore!'

Peter couldn't hide it anymore. He smiled widely in anticipation, with each new plot that The Boss hatched, Peter learned just that little bit more. Soon he'd have enough knowledge to topple The Boss from power and have the Sphere of Influence at his beck and call. He was enjoying watching Stain suffer too. They had crossed swords before and there was no love loss between them. Last time

they'd met they'd almost killed each other. Peter was enjoying every moment of the man's torment with gusto.

'And yet,' continued The Boss, 'You have shown a certain degree of competency, but I can't let your failure go unpunished.'

If it was possible for Justin's will to live sink further, it would have done, but it wasn't, so it didn't.

'Here comes the punch line.' Thought Peter enthusiastically, smiling widely and staring menacingly at Justin.

The Boss tossed Justin a small revolver. He fumbled with it for a moment and let it fall on his lap. He stared at it and his heart sank. 'So this is it,' he thought, 'this is how I'm to be rewarded for my pains. I've to end it all by my own hand.' He knew that he wouldn't be able to point it at The Boss and fire before the Sphere agents gunned him down. He only had one choice left, to stand against his executioner or to just lie down and die. He wasn't the sort to just lie down and die without a fight.

'Am I to shoot myself then?' he asked, just to be sure.

'No,' said the Boss, 'I want you to kill Peter!'

Peter took a moment to register what had just been said. He was still grinning and rubbing his hands together, waiting for Justin to put a bullet in his own head. The words filtered through into his realisation but he still didn't understand the full gravity of the situation. He had been waiting for the Boss to

deliver a punch line and when it came, he found that he didn't quite understand the joke.

'I don't get it.' He said, still smiling and looking at The Boss as if he was going to explain the joke.

The Boss looked at Justin. Justin understood completely as soon as the words had slipped casually from the Bosses mouth. Even in his battered and exhausted state, he understood what was happening.

The Boss was replacing Peter.

The final realisation hit Peter like a cold wet fish slapping him in the face. 'What?.. Hey, wait a minute, that can't be right!' he said, as if he were watching a play and the actors had messed up their lines.

Justin felt something strange well up inside, a feeling he hadn't felt or could remember feeling for far too long.

He was happy.

Without any hesitation he grabbed the gun from his lap, swung it round and spattered Peter's head across the room.

He slumped back, gleeful as Peter's lifeless body slumped back into its chair.

'Welcome aboard son.' Said the Boss with a smirk of victory. 'Now lets get you cleaned up and rested. It looks like you'll have to loose your leg, but we'll get you a shiny new bionic one as a replacement. We want you in top form if your

going to remember what frequency that tracking device operates on now aren't we.'

'Thank you sir.' Justin's pleasure washed over him like a flood, rendering him deeply unconscious. He slept the fathomless dreamless sleep of a man who'd found his place in the world.

## Chapter 24

### George and the Chavs

It'd been a while since George had met his new bodyguard and he was finding it all just a little bit tedious. Not that he didn't appreciate the way that she'd stopped a group of five people from beating him to within an inch of his life and, quite probably, beyond. No, he *did* appreciate that, the thing that was getting on his nerves was the way that she saw fit to give rambling self-commentary of everything that she did and thought. She was driving him to distraction.

He'd followed Shoop's instructions and gone to meet his new protector but things had got a little sticky.

The sun was edging its way into the sky and there was a thick condensed mist lying on the ground. It only reached up to George's chest and made the world look half drowned in milk. As he waited his mind wandered back to a vision of Elizabeth Taylor submerged in Asses milk in a movie. He clung to the image for a while and when he came round he blushed a little, even though there was no one around, to find a semi-erection in his trousers. He desperately tried to think of un-sexy things; potatoes, really fat naked women, really fat naked men, Margaret Thatcher shaving her legs but was disturbed to find that picturing Baroness Thatcher scratching at her hairy chicken legs with a triple bladed,

moisture bringing lady razor only made matters worse. The little general was at full attention!

'Damn it!' he said out loud, trying to push his protruding phallus back in with his hands, wincing and crumpling his body with the effort, 'I had no idea I felt that way about Thatcher and shaving!' he thought to himself and made a mental note to try thinking about it again later when he was somewhere more private.

Suddenly, some moronic laughter drifted into his ears from the near distance, it seemed to be heading his way. His phallus flopped like a fat man from a diving board.

He was meeting his bodyguard outside Fettes College, one of the UK's most prestigious schools, the halls of the damn thing gaggled with princes and the offspring of oil barons and millionaires. The main building looked like a fictitious castle from a Disney cartoon, only it was made of stone, not plastic.

George waited outside the main gates that looked out over a large grassed area that constituted a public park, the milky mist hiding the green grass. Through the mist George could make out some shadowy figures moving in his direction.

Although the school and the park were in a fairly well to do area on the outskirts of the city, it shared a boarder with one of Edinburgh's less savoury suburbs. The inhabitants of said suburb sometimes wandered into the park in the more unsociable hours of the day to drink cheap and nasty cider out of huge plastic bottles and partake in some of the not so legal intoxicants. They wore the

uniform of the Chav and weren't pleasant people to bump into at any time of the day. The early hours found them at their most dangerous and intoxicated.

For those without prior knowledge of the creature known as the "Chav", here is a definition as noted in a well-respected encyclopaedia:

"CHAV: A slang term which has been in wide use throughout the United Kingdom since 2004. It refers to a sub cultural stereotype of a person with fashions such as flashy "bling" jewellery and counterfeit designer clothes or sportswear, of uneducated, uncultured, impoverished background, a tendency to congregate around places such as fast food outlets, bus stops or other shopping areas, and a culture of anti-social behaviour."

Certain Chavs are more dangerous than others. The sort of Chav that is still drunk from the night before at 8.30 in the morning and, as a result, hasn't got any cash, is very dangerous indeed. One Chav on his own could possibly be managed, but there appeared to be five of them staggering out of the milky mist, heading straight for George.

'Oh Jesus!' said George, 'this is the last bloody thing I need!'

He scanned around looking for a place to hide before they caught sight of him. He started heading back to his car, it was only twenty feet away, if he could only make it there and duck down behind it before....

'HERE.....PAL!' It was the fighting call of the lesser-spotted Scottish Chavite and struck fear into all those who heard it. He'd been spotted!

'Shit!' muttered George under his breath. There was nothing he could do now, they had him in there wavering, alcohol and drug soaked sights and weren't about to let him get away until they were satisfied. Hot blood shot around nervously under George's pasty skin and his hard light disguise.

The Chavs all dressed in the standard cheap, carrier bag like tracksuits with the bottom of the trouser legs tucked into their dirtied white socks. They had imitation Burberry baseball caps and scarves, presumably bought from the back of one truck or another, and the standard gold sovereign rings. To those who know the sight, there are few things more terrifying and visually repugnant. To be prey to these reprobates is a deeply felt fear of anyone with even the slightest modicum of taste. Their appearance gives them the advantage of never being caught for their crimes, as they all look exactly the same, repulsively ridiculous clothes, skinny scrapping physiques, low foreheads and freakishly nasal voices that spit threats at every turn.

It's widely regarded that you can rarely tell if a Chav is saying hello as politely as he can or threatening to kill you.

If George decided to run they'd give chase and he was no match for a gaggle of youths that were highly trained in pursuing terrified people. Chavs are dim but incredibly swift, be it running after people or running away from police or security guards in low quality super markets. The blood and adrenaline from the chase would demand violence. Running would surely lead to his doom. He would have to take his chances and hope that they were the lesser-known sort of



Chav; the friendly Chav. 'Stranger things have happened!' Thought George and froze on the spot, waiting for them to reach him.

'Here Pal! Y'awright Pal-eh?' slurred the Chav leader.

'Waz wi' the getup man?' Asked another of the pack. George realised that he was still wearing a disguise. The elastic band on his arm projected the image of a lab technician, complete with white coat and an array of different coloured ballpoint pens in the chest pocket. The vision of a man of science to these cretins was much akin to the sight of a transvestite black man to a right wing white supremacist; a red flag to a bull.

'I'm doomed!' Thought George gloomily

Hyena like laughter spattered out of the staggering morons. The leader appeared to be the one who was administering the remnants of their cheap cider. He had a huge plastic bottle dangling from his digits in a blue carrier bag; another bottle was being enthusiastically slurped on by one of his clan. They wore the Chav clan tartan of Burberry, which was ironic, as Scottish Chavs invariably hated anything even vaguely English but had chosen the only English tartan in existence. George momentarily wondered if the troop knew of this irony but then realised that it was unlikely that they'd ever ventured to use the word irony, let alone know how it made fools of them all.

'Geez 'at!' Ordered the blue bag wielding Chav, gesturing for his companion to hand him the open bottle of cider. He took a massive swig and then hurled it back at his friend.

'Wit ye up tae?' Slurred the leader of the McBurberrys.

George didn't quite understand the dialect; it sounded vaguely Russian or German but he strongly suspected that it'd be some form of English that he hadn't encountered before.

'Am talking tea you pal! Ya deef or som-et'

The gaggle of dim-witted Neanderthals spread out as they got closer, circling George like predators trying to decide whether or not they were hungry. Was the kill worth the effort? They only needed the slightest of excuses to move on their prey.

'I'm sorry, I didn't quite understand, what was that?' Said George in what, now more than ever before in his life, sounded a lot like an upper middle class English accent. He started sweating nervously.

The Chavs had their excuse.

At the sound of George's voice their eyes lit up, lips began to sneer in gleeful hatred and there were a number of happy sideways glances.

'You English or som-et?' Sneered the leader of the pack through yellow stained and partially blackened teeth and vicious wide eyes. He adopted the traditional Chav fighting stance; shoulders back, neck forward, his whole demeanour screamed dim-witted male bravado. George could smell the filth-smattered testosterone in the air. It was pungent.

'mon-nen ya bam!' said the Chav leader. George didn't know what he'd said but he took it as some sort of invitation to "come and have a go if you think

you're hard enough". Which was daft because George clearly wasn't "hard enough" to fight his way out of a long queue. 'English Basart! 'Mon-nen! Hea a fockin' go likes!'

It was clear now, from the near indecipherable grunts and body language, that George surmised correctly. The rancid youth clearly was trying to engage him in some sort of pugilism. This wasn't George's sort of thing at all. Scrapping had, historically, been something that other people engaged in.

'No I'm fine thanks.' He said sheepishly.

Being polite to an angry Chav is like throwing petrol on a fire to put it out.

'Ye English eh?... Ye English?...' The leader shoved George's shoulder with frightening speed and accuracy for a man who'd been up all night drinking and consuming untold quantities of illegal substances. The shove prompted some of the other circling hyenas to push him around a bit.

'Wit ye dein here eh? How're ye no where ye fockin' belong big-man? Wi' they other poofs doon sooth eh? EH?' The sharpness of the Chavs last word visibly shook George.

'Look,' he said, 'I don't want any trouble, I'm just waiting for someone.' The hyenas kept circling while the leader faced George, scowling, greasy badly dyed hair poking out from under his imitation Burberry cap, a nasty gold and diamante ear-ring that'd made his lobe turn green, a face like a bulldog pissing on a stinging nettle.

'A dinea gee a shite wit ye want man, trouble's foond you ya prick!

George understood those words. The Chav had made them very clear as he put down his blue carrier bag and retrieved a Stanley knife from his tracksuit pocket. The rest of the Chavs took up formation behind their leader, waiting to step in if needed or to take the occasional pot-shot to assuage their need for carnage.

Violence was imminent.

George let out a sort of squirty bubbling noise from his rump and felt something warm trickle down the inside of his thigh. Laughter wracked the hyenas.

'Fockin' hell man, he's filled 'is keks!' one of them squeaked through fits of mirth.

'Fockin' English shite-bag man, cut im ya raj, fockin' dice the basat! But watch ye dinea get shite oan yer blade man!' More laughter.

George braced himself for the attack; there was nothing that he could do and he knew it. He started babbling in fear.

The head Chav came at George like a cobra strike, he barely saw it coming. The knife sliced through his chest underneath the mirage of his disguise. The disguise was made of hard light, but could only be penetrated by swift movements. The visual effect of the cut and the disguise was distinctly odd. As far as the Chavs could see, the man that was standing in front of them wasn't even remotely damaged, and yet blood still spurted out of him in a thick jet.

The Chavs stood back in confusion as George reeled back from the blow, screwing his face up in pain. He fell on his backside, blood oozing from a wound that didn't appear to be there at all.

'What the fuck?' Quizzed the leader, wondering if the previous evenings cocktail of drink and drugs had altered his perceptions to the point of hallucination. For a moment doubt pulsed through his mind.

'Did one e yooz basats slip me a fockin' "A" tab 'r som'n?'

("A" tab: slang for small rectangular piece of paper that has been dipped in liquid hallucinogen, usually made from lysergic acid. Also known as LSD, Acid, and a trip.)

The leader decided that hallucination or not, the Englishman in front of him was the cause of his bewilderment. He stopped to think about things for a moment, which angered him even more as thinking wasn't something that he liked to do and was definitely not on his internal "to do" list.

'Fuck it!' He said and sprang at George again, Stanley knife aimed directly at his throat.

A large stone flew at the Chav leader out of nowhere. It cracked into his jaw and he was knocked sideways, bouncing off the ground like a hurled pebble skimming over a frozen lake.

George tried to stem the bleeding with his hands as the rest of the hyenas span round to see where the projectile had come from.

The milky mist revealed a small, curly haired be speckled woman. She had dark hair, a slight figure and was dressed in a heavy jacket, kinny black jeans and army boots. She was tossing a dense stone in the air and catching it as she walked into view. She couldn't have been any more than twenty-three years old and looked a bit like a hippy that'd defected to the dark-side. She was pretty, but her face was veiled under thick black eye make-up and lipstick. The scowl on her face suggested that she was no stranger to violence. She seemed cool, calm and collected, that was, until she started rambling in a posh English accent.

(Posh; somebody from the upper classes. A popular etymology states the expression originated from the phrase "Port Out, Starboard Home", which, before air-conditioning, were allegedly the most desirable cabin locations on ships traveling to and from British colonies in the Far East because they were shaded from the sun in both directions.)

'Good evening gentlemen, I really didn't think that one would succeed in projecting the previous projectile with such accuracy. One had to stand at quite a distance to avoid the eventuality of being regarded by your grubby little peepers. I had no intensions of being spied, as it would've spoiled the rather marvellous surprise of that chap being bashed cleanly on the jaw. Of course if one had been less accurate then things would've taken a different turn; I would've had to approach you and challenged you personally, but seeing as though that fine gentleman,' she motioned to George, 'would've shuffled off his mortal coil by then, one wouldn't have had much call to become involved in the filth that is your

lives now would one. Which was why the throw was so damnably important. If I'd missed, well, I suppose I would've just ventured home and drawn myself a lovely bath with some of those exquisite baths salts from Harrods. I won't buy any others you know, there's just no substitute, but as luck, or skill would have it, I didn't miss. Which is a fortuitous eventuality for this poor creature but not a shining bastion of golden luck for the lump of human excreta that forms the vile lucidity of you and your friends.'

The Chavs weren't quite sure what was going on. The barrage of long words and talk of Harrods bath salts had caught them distinctly off balance, not to mention the large rock that had made a visible dent in the jaw-line of their leader, which was quickly becoming a swollen lump. The cider distributing pile on the floor groaned, spat out some blood onto the gravel, clicked his jaw back into place and got to his feet, scanning for the Stanley knife that'd flown from his hand.

'Whey the fuck are you 'an wit the fuck business is this o' yours!' He demanded.

'Here's what's going to happen,' said the tiny girl, 'One will give you a choice. You can leave right now, so saving me from dirtying my hands on the grub that makes up your pitiful selves, or you can stay and one will be forced, wholly against one's will you understand, to inflict a rather dazzling array of physical injuries upon each of your persons.'

'Aye away an' shite man!' Spat one of the hyena Chavs.

'In that case,' she said, 'one will be forced to execute a succession of actions thusly. One will perform what is known as a knife-hand stroke directed at your larynx while performing a sidekick aimed directly at the bridge of your friend's nose. These two movements will be performed simultaneously whilst air born. Upon landing one will violently rotate at a low centre of gravity with ones leg extended, sweeping the legs out from underneath the rest of you foul smelling worthless collections of boil-puss. As you hit the ground one will have risen to ones feet and will busy oneself by leaping vertically and with a little forward momentum, coming down directly, heel first, onto the repositories of your so called "family jewels"; withered and sweaty as they are. One will then take great pleasure in reducing the rest of your testicles into a smooth mayonnaise kind of substance, while giving you a stern talking to on the finer points of good manners and why it isn't polite to use such foul and uninventive language in front of a lady such as oneself... Ready?... Okay then!... Here we go!'

The hyena's laughed; then one of them was knife handed in the throat, another was kicked in the face, three of them were swept to the ground and then they all had their testicle battered to a pulp. Casually the girl walked between them, stamping violently on each of their family jewel purses while lecturing the writhing lumps of pain on the finer points of good manners. She gave them all the phone number of a charity for Eunuchs that she always carried with her and then tended to the blood soaked George.

'George I presume?' Asked the girl.



'Please, I need medical attention!' Growled George through the wild yelping that was coming from the felled Chavs.

'One can't see that as a problem. May one introduce oneself,' she extended a hand, presumably for George to kiss in greeting, 'Lady McChuntlington Smithe-Smithe, the first Smithe is from mater and the second from pater. I've not the slightest idea why they saw fit to hyphenate two of the same name, but there you have it. You may call one Chunt, the rest of one's friends do.'

'Please help me!' Squeaked George.

'Yes of course, one was forgetting oneself, dire need for action is needed, that much can be seen. One happens to be extremely well versed in the application of medicinal expertise.' She looked around; there was quite a lot of blood but no visible cuts. George noticed her confusion.

'I'll explain later, just get me out of here.'

'Right you are!'

George lay on the back seat of the girl's car feeling drained and retched. The bleeding had slowed but he was still tainting the fabric of the car with his blood. He drifted in and out of consciousness and every time he woke, all he could hear was the dry drawl of his saviour's voice.

'Its terrible, whenever one attempts to change gear in this ridiculous machine one is greeted with the same grinding wail, listen, one is about to modify

the engine and engage the third of the gears,' George heard a metallic grinding noise, 'If one had not the knowledge that such things are quiet impossible, one would believe that this collection of metal and plastic had the ability to focus its disdain directly at me. Every time I alternate from one transmission setting to another the damn thing howls at me like the hound of the Baskervilles across a misty moor. Observe, I am approaching the point at which a further advancement in the gears will become necessary; here it comes,' CCCRRNNCCHH, said the car.

'It's these automotive hunks from the continent that cause the problems. A nice Bentley would be practically incapable of emitting such a foul and irritating mechanical utterance...'

Apparently the woman didn't have an editing system between her brain and her mouth and every word that articulated itself in her mind spilled out of her in a constant stream that seemed to be drilling straight into George's central nervous system.

'Um... I don't mean to interrupt... actually I do mean to interrupt... but, well, you see I happen to be slowly sliding toward death right now and would greatly appreciate it if you would please just shut the hell up! I'm not feeling very well, what with the massive blood loss and everything and would appreciate a little silence. Not that I'm not grateful or anything you understand.'

'Charming!' She said, mildly putout but appreciating George's situation. She mumbled away to herself instead, clearly unable to stop spewing drivel. It

was a compromise and George was in absolutely no shape to be arguing with her.

They headed northwest out of town in the direction of a small suburb called Crammond village. It had been an old fishing town before Edinburgh had grown too big and swallowed it whole.

Along the banks of the river Almond, which flowed into Crammond and the sea, there were sparse and very expensive looking houses barely visible, poking out from in between ancient trees. Lady McChuntlington Smithe-Smithe lived in a particularly remote little mansion away from the encroaching city. Chunt mumbled something about how hard it was to find decent property in secluded, yet central areas. George couldn't have cared less.

The woman helped George into the house and fetched a well-stocked first aid kit that looked a lot like a cake trolley in a hotel from the thirties. It was stuffed with all manner of anaesthetic, surgical instruments and wound dressings.

'One used to operate as a triage doctor in the field before one realised that one preferred dismantling people rather than putting them back together. One feels one must comment though; one's bedside manner was somewhat of a legend among the other doctors and the wounded. It was nothing short of exemplary. One is forever receiving all manner of communication from prior patients, post cards, parcels; in fact, just the other day while one was...'

'For the love of god woman! Would you please just shut up and get on with it!'

'I'll take that rudeness just this once young man, but only because you're almost dead!'

In truth, Chunt had never received as much as a phone call from her old patients, which was mostly because she hadn't worked as a doctor at all. She'd hung around outside of war hospitals stealing things from dead people and had managed to pick up a more than fair amount of knowledge of the medical arts in the process. Any money that her family had had was long gone. Her father was indeed a lord, and her mother a lady before they died in a tragic camel riding incident in Syria, but they'd put all of their money into a crackpot scheme for eternally renewable energy that'd been quashed by the American government in the 1980's. Everything that she had was due to her talents as a bodyguard, a thief and a compulsive liar.

Chunt mumbled on as she worked, preparing the trolley as George slipped his disguise off his wrist and popped it in his pocket.

'Jesus!' She said, as she turned round and saw the transformation from grey haired scientist to ginger haired librarian. She jumped back in surprise.

'I'll explain later!' said George. He was pale and drawn from his ordeal and promptly passed out.

## Chapter 25

# The Aboriginal and the Lobotomising Of a Six-Foot Mouse

Some weeks later Shoop had come to the conclusion that, without a shadow of a doubt, someone, somewhere out there in the big wide world was taking the piss! It was the only explanation for the frankly distasteful sequence of events that had lead him to where he now stood. The view in front of him confirmed a suspicion that had been growing in his mind as he and the independents trudged their way around the globe, hopping from one continent to another, battling Sphere agents at every border.

He was looking at a fifty-foot tall plastic castle and there were children running to and fro as their parents desperately tried to convince themselves that they were having a good time.

Something was definitely very wrong and Shoop fully intended to find out who had been messing him around so flamboyantly.

They'd taken a small, rickety, noisy boat (or as Jim called it, "a plank with an engine") from Pankor, giving a local man far too much money for it in their desperation for transport, and headed east to the next island. There they managed to get their hands on a larger, but still decidedly rickety boat that

seemingly had a better chance of getting them where they wanted to go. Australia was a long way away and finding an aeroplane for hire was proving difficult. Well, it was actually proving relatively easy but the fact that all of the aircraft looked like they'd been patched together from the carcasses of dozens of ancient flying life hazzards, corrugated iron and super glue didn't fill them all with very much confidence in their ability to be able to remain airborne. They were a long way from the affluence of Singapore and its happy supply of non-dangerous aircraft.

They continued to island hop for a week or so, taking short breaks along the way to spend a little time in relative civilisation; relative to the squalor and shifting uncomfortable rolling of the boat that is.

Eventually they reached a port that had a vast cruise ship docked in it. The ship was full of aging American tourists and was considerably more comfortable than their ready to sink little barge. They decided that they'd stow away in a huge crate of bananas and, if they were discovered, try to convince the captain that they should be allowed to stay onboard.

Yan had harboured the desire to perform in a mariachi band since he was a child and was a dab hand on the guitar.

They were found and brought before the angry captain but after looking at him for a few minutes, Yan had convinced him that they were a wandering mariachi band and would make a welcome addition to the onboard entertainment. It worried the others a little that they'd never picked up a musical instrument in their lives and would quickly be found out as fakes but Yan had

another ace up his sleeve. He sat them all down one by one and stared at them, filling their minds with everything that they needed to know of the art of the Mariachi. The information trickled into their brains as Yan reprogrammed them.

It was a feat that Yan had never attempted before and it was proving to be quite difficult. He'd made plenty of people do plenty of things that they wouldn't usually do but these things were rather straightforward. Getting people to kill themselves was easy as most people knew how to do it anyway, it was just a matter of placing the desire to want to do something that people already knew how to do. Getting people to perform complex tasks that they'd never even contemplated before was a much more intense procedure. It took hours. They were still being programmed as they were called to the stage. Yan was just finishing the programming of Dr Komodo as the curtain went up on their very first performance. Much to their surprise they all knew exactly which song to start with, how to play and all of the harmonies to Yan's lead vocal. They went down a storm in their sombreros and ornately embroidered Mariachi uniforms and were forced into three encores.

It amazed Shoop, Dr Komodo and Jim that Yan could actually sing. Not only sing, but sing frighteningly well. For a man that hadn't said a word for almost thirty years it sounded a little odd. They'd expected just to play a few guitar tunes and get the hell out of there, but when Yan started singing the crowd went ballistic, which was also very odd. Have you ever seen a vast room full of OAP's throwing their underpants at a freakishly tall, sweating, bald, terrifying Russian as he smoothly tickles the ears of every person in the room with his silky

tones? It's a very odd experience. Even the men threw their boxer shorts, which only added to the freakishness of the scene.

They spent a few weeks onboard, playing their gigs and singing around tables in a variety of the many dining rooms. Yan was in heaven. Shoop actually thought he saw him smile at one point but then convinced himself that it must've just been a trick of the light or something. He didn't like the idea that Yan was capable of anything other than abject misery; it rearranged the way he thought of the world and he preferred not to have his world changed in too drastic a manner. It made him feel a bit sick, or was it the incessant Mexican music that was eternally flying around the inside of his mind. Whatever it was, he couldn't wait to get off the ship. It reeked of mothballs and overpowering perfume and aftershave. He hadn't smelt so much Old Spice in his life.

The others felt the same. They were in a floating retirement home and they wanted to get off but Yan kept dragging them out to play their guitars and woo the throng of Wrinkle ridden panty chuckers.

Heaven for Yan, hell for the rest.

Eventually, they reached Darwin in the north of Australia and disembarked, narrowly escaping a group of desperately upset old women and a man that had a son in the music industry and wanted to get them a record deal.

As had been the case in many of the borders that they'd had to cross, they met a number of Sphere agents on the way in and only just managed to escape with their lives. Shoop was beginning to despise the crossings. Every time they'd



crossed a border or landed on an island somewhere they were attacked by Sphere agents, which meant that The Boss would have a better idea of where they were and he'd send more of his little bloodhounds to every border and landing point around the world.

Shoop and the independents had all been on the run for so long that they were beginning to forget what it was like to be able to stay still. Shoop's life of relative comfort in Edinburgh was almost completely forgotten. The path he was on was a rough one and was showing little or no sign of ending any time soon.

Life on the run was his only choice until he found what he was looking for and the hunt was not going as well as he would've liked.

He usually depended on a wealth of clues and questioning to lead him to the end of his missions but had been forced to rely on little more than his senses this time. The sixth sense had been gone for so long that he'd forgotten how to trust it. He'd learned that cold hard facts and answers from tortured people were far more reliable than his flaky senses. For years the tingling that pointed him in the right direction had been absent, it was like an old friend had deserted him when he needed him most and had turned up out of the blue asking for Shoop to take him down the pub and buy him a drink to catch up on old times. Shoop hadn't quite forgiven his sixth sense for bugging off without warning; it never even sent a post card damn-it!

They managed to get their hands on a cheap camper van, using some of their mariachi earnings, and set out for Melbourne. The plan was to get to Hobart in Tasmania. Hobart, in centuries past, had taken in many of the ships heading for mainland Australia. The ships would stop in Hobart to pick up supplies before heading northwest to Melbourne. There would be ships manifests available for the time that the vessel was supposed to have reached Australia in Melbourne, but the more complete ones would be in Hobart. Many people didn't move on from Hobart, leaving their ships there and wandering off into the Tasmanian wilds to set up farms.

The plan was to find manifests and find out where the item called the vessel from the map they'd retrieved from Jeeves' vaults had gone. It wasn't a very good plan as far as plans go. In fact it was damn awful. There was little or no chance of them finding anything. For a start, they didn't even know exactly what this vessel thing was. There were some clues to suggest that it might have been a person but there was nothing concrete. For all they knew it might be some sort ornate vase, or a cup of some sort and the odds of finding a mug on a ship's manifest were less than slim, they were non-existent. They were looking for a piece of hay in a warehouse full of needles and morale was slipping lower with every mile that went by. When they had been on the rickety boats they were distracted by trying to stay afloat and didn't really think about where they were going and why, and when they were on the cruise ship they had their work to keep them busy, as rancid as it was for some of them but now they had nothing

but desert, vast expanses of nothingness and the oblivion of their own thoughts to keep them going.

Their tinny rust bucket slogged on through the days of endless nothingness, heading for a place that held no clear hope of them finding anything other than another mass of Sphere agents. Every time they'd encountered them they'd become more numerous with more weapons. They hadn't been as much of a threat as the three mercenaries, Cat, The Satellite and Tim in Singapore but still represented a clear danger to their mission.

The dust bowl they edged through gave them time to think, to reflect, which was exactly what they didn't need.

It gave Shoop time to worry about the point of it all, the reason why they were trapped on this seemingly aimless course and why he didn't just vanish into some wild jungle never to return; it gave the questions in Dr Komodo's mind time to claw their way to the front, why were they on this wild goose chase? Why was he being so damn loyal to a man that didn't seem to know why and where they were going, who was showing clear signs of doubt, it gave Jim time for the woman in the red dress to speak to him at length inside his mind, to tempt him, to spread doubt like a plague.

Yan didn't question anything; he just sat back and dreamed of mariachi glory.

Tempers became frayed; they were all decidedly edgy and the immensity of the baron landscape was doing little to bring their minds under control. It was

a constant battle to keep sane and focused on the task that they had to perform. It didn't help that the mission they were supposed to be completing was as vague as a scientologist's sense of reality.

They all felt like they were chess pieces in someone else's game and the players weren't known to them. It was very frustrating. They were wound up tighter than an obsessive compulsive without cleaning equipment.

It was all looking hopeless; until Shoop was attacked by his sixth sense, his bones rattling around inside his body. The onslaught was so sudden and so intense that he winced and gritted his teeth against the discomfort.

'Pull over!' he demanded, doubling over as his bones felt like they were trying to make a break for freedom. 'Pull the bloody van over! NOW!'

Jim, who'd been driving and caught in a daydream, came around as Shoop yelled. He'd been a thousand miles away inside his own mind, naked and stroking the woman in the red dress' muscular and sensual thighs. Shoop's pain brought him crashing back to the dusty hell of reality with a heavy thud. He slammed the brakes down hard, which would've been unnerving had they been travelling in something that was capable of speeds above 45mph, but they weren't, so they just got a little bit of a shunting.

The van came to a stop and Shoop fumbled for the door handle, senses overpowered with the thumping inside his bones and skull. He staggered out of the van and faltered onto the vacant highway, swaying this way and that as he tried to get the sensations under control. Eventually he stopped on the opposite

side of the road, his throbbing under control, and stood staring into the wilderness.

The Independents remained in the van, passing each other quizzical glances.

'Maybe we should just leave him' said Jim half joking, half serious. Instantly Dr Komodo's doubts melted away. He had been unsure about their course but when faced with the decision to up and leave the mission his choice became clear. He was with Shoop all the way and part of him thanked Jim for making his mind up for him, the other half of him hated himself for ever entertaining the mildest thought of mutiny. He put all the anger at himself in a glare that went straight through Jim, cutting him as it went. Yan's frozen stare did much the same.

'Alright! Alright! I was only joking!' said Jim.

'Thin ice Jim,' Hissed Komodo threateningly, 'Very thin ice! Just watch yourself!'

Jim kept quiet, realising that his darker intentions had been recognised for what they were. The woman in the red dress inside his mind chastised him for acting too soon, telling him that the right time would come, 'just be patient my darling!'

Shoop stood, his sixth sense gyrating like a male stripper on speed but the discomfort had become controllable. He stood stock still suddenly aware that he was supposed to be waiting for something, looking for something. He didn't

know what it was but knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was there. He took a drink from his hipflask and lit a cigarette and waited.

'What's going on?' called Jim.

'Be quiet!' barked Shoop.

Time crawled by and Shoop remained, rooted to the spot like a petrified tree, staring off into the distance while Yan, Jim and Dr Komodo lounged around, enjoying the chance to stretch their legs and playing a game called "shoot the lizard with a crossbow".

A full packet of cigarettes later, as the sun crawled to its pinnacle in the sky, Shoop piped up.

'Some one's coming!' The others stopped shooting lizards and crossed the road to where Shoop was planted to see what was going on.

'Where?' asked Jim.

'Over there.' Shoop nodded at the horizon and they all squinted in the direction that he'd indicated, all of them except Yan that is, who's eyes never did anything other than glower, wide open like a fish, never blinking. Their eyes darted along the horizon.

'I can't see anything!' said Jim.

'You will in a minute!'

The heat of the day bounced off the landscape and warped the wilderness. They remained standing, static as a moron's opinion for a while, the heat playing games with their vision.

'Is that a giraffe over there?' said Jim.

'Don't be so bloody daft!' spat Shoop.

They stood in silence for a while, the independents desperately trying to find anything out of the ordinary in the desolate expanse and not doing very well.

Suddenly Shoop piped up.

'He's here!' said Shoop, much to the amazement of his comrades who were still unable to see anyone.

'Where?' asked Komodo pulling out a gun in alarm, Jim followed suit while Yan thought about composing a new Mexican song.

'You won't need those.' Said Shoop, motioning toward their exposed weaponry, 'put them away, NOW!'

They obeyed the order.

Then, to a small collection of rocks not fifteen feet away from them, he said, 'You can come out now!'

Jim and Komodo were visually unnerved as an aborigine stepped out from the cover of the rocks, they couldn't understand how the man had managed to get so close without any of them seeing the slightest bit of movement in the desert except for Shoop. It occurred to them that they were nothing more than

workhorses in a greater plan. Even Jim noticed a stab of doubt in his desire for mutiny. 'Shoop knows more than I realise!' came the epiphany and the voice of the woman in the red dress was pushed back a little. He felt the slight relief, like a weight being lifted, but the woman in red hung on to his mind.

'Jesus,' said Komodo, 'Where the bloody hell did he come from!'

The man was as black as a pessimist's bad mood. He wore a pair of frayed denim shorts and nothing else, standing on toughened bare feet; the skin on the bottom of them as thick, hard and pliable as old leather. His face was shallowly lined, soft and blunt yet gristly and tough as rhino hide. His eyes emotionless yet warm and deep; dark like a lake at night, carrying an air of peace that spewed from his hard years of desert living. The wisdom seeped from him in rivulets like steam from a hot pool in winter.

He carried a simple yet very tall spear, using it as a walking stick

He made them all feel distinctly uncomfortable.

He walked casually over to Shoop from his previous apparent invisibility and stood in front of him, calmly locking eyes with him; a feat that very few people would be able to pull off without feeling utter dread, but he remained unshaken by Shoop's horror inducing grimaces. They stood for a while staring at each other, the others couldn't believe what they were seeing. There wasn't one of them who would have dreamt of trying to stare at Shoop for an extended period of time, it was something that was quite simply unthinkable and yet here



was a man, calm as Christmas, gazing into his eyes like some tame and fearless wild animal. Not a sliver of concern crossed his face.

Shoop blew smoke in the man's face. He didn't flinch. His expression was almost ethereal in its lack of reaction.

They stood looking at each other for a while until Shoop said, 'Have you got something you want to tell me?'

The independents had no idea how Shoop had come to that conclusion. All they'd seen was a crazy old black fella appear out of the wilds and do some staring. Clearly they were all out of their depth and they felt it very distinctly. Shoop and the man were on a different plain of realisation from them and all they could do was watch and wait. Something was happening with Shoop's sixth sense and they dared not interrupt it for fear of reprisals from their leader.

'The ancestors said to tell the miserable white fella something,' said the man, 'they said to tell 'im "She's gone to Nazca!"

'Is that all?' asked Jim, 'I mean... it just seems that we might need a little bit more information than that!' he looked disgruntled. The man's gaze slowly slipped over to Jim.

'Don't know anything else mate!'

'Who are the ancestors?' asked Komodo.

'Not for you to know!' said the man bluntly but with a calmness that ended any further questions. 'I've done me job, I'm off!' He turned and started trudging off into the desert.

'Oi!' Yelled Jim after him but the man ignored him and marched on doggedly. 'Get back here, we're not finished with you!' He drew his gun and started moving after him. Shoop's arm swung out and restrained him.

'Leave it!'

'But...'

'I said leave it,' Shoop nodded to the open desert and said, 'He's not the only one out there!' Shoop's eyes could see what the others weren't able to, dozens of shadowy figures hiding in the rocks, waiting to slaughter the stupid white fellas if they made a wrong move. He didn't feel the need to do anything else though as the words from the aborigine had set off a new tingling in his bones. It was as if his sixth sense had been redirected by the words; Nazca was the next destination. He knew it like he knew he had legs. It was fact. He didn't quite know what they would find there though, Nazca was a remote area in Peru that housed little more than a series of puzzling images etched on the barren plain.

'So what?' said Jim, 'We've got guns, they've got sticks, it'll take five minutes to bat whoever it is out there into submission!'

'Are you questioning me again?' spat Shoop through clenched teeth and down-turned mouth.

'It's just that...'

'*Shut up!*' The poison in Shoop's words was palpable. It was enough to halt any further rebellion. In fact, had a normal man heard it, it would've been

enough to make him cry like a smacked child. 'We're going to Peru!' said Shoop.

Doubt still pulsed through Jim's mind though; the woman in the red dress drilled through his brain saying things like "your time will come, be patient." and, "This is a wild goose chase! Come and find me, you know how!" He clutched a piece of paper in his pocket that he hadn't been aware he was keeping. The paper felt precious to him but he didn't know why until the woman in his mind said "it's a number, its how you'll find me, I can take you away from all this, I can make you safe, I can make you feel good! You know I'm telling the truth!"

As he'd been travelling around inside his own mind he had completely forgotten about the others. Apparently, he'd seemed so distant that it'd been enough to cause concern in Shoop and the independents. As Jim came back down to Earth he looked up and saw them all scowling at him with murder in their eyes. They knew that something was wrong. Jim forced the voice into the back of his mind and gated all his doubts in a safe place, they would come out again later but he needed to hide them for the moment. He realised that if he didn't pull himself together that he would never make it out of the desert alive. That couldn't happen, he needed to see *her* at least one more time before he died, to rest his eyes on hers and touch her. The need consumed him.

He pushed it all back.

'Alright... fine... Peru it is then,' he said after he'd forced his true will back inside himself. The others remained suspicious but didn't move on him, that was Shoop's decision and it looked like it was a decision he wasn't quite ready to

make. For some reason he still felt that Jim had a bigger part to play in this than just being a henchman 'Peru it is then.' Said Jim. He managed some joviality in his voice and then added as an after thought 'What's in Peru?'

'Nazca you moron!' said Komodo, 'It was home to an ancient civilisation. It doesn't quite make sense though,' he said turning to Shoop, 'the Nazca civilisation was long dead before the vessel appeared in Europe. They disappeared between 200bc and 600ad, I don't see how or why it would've been taken there. Its nothing but a flat desert plain with some drawings on it.'

'Maybe, but we're still going, just trust me, it's the right place to go.' Said Shoop.

'She?' said Shoop under his breath.

'What was that?' said Jim.

'She! The Aborigine said that "SHE" went to Nazca. That means that we're more than likely looking for a person.'

'Unless he got confused, I mean, he was a strange man from the outback who said he talked to "The Ancestors". He can't be quite right in the head anyway can he?' said Komodo.

'We'll see!' said Shoop and motioned for them to get back into the van. Just before they pulled away from the meeting spot Shoop thought he saw a tiny flash of silver in the air, just like the one he thought he'd seen in Singapore when he was torturing Justin Stain. It was so far off in the corner of his eye though, that when he spun around to try and find the thing he couldn't. It made him think

that maybe he'd imagined it but the pragmatist in him denied this thought and insisted that he keep his eyes good and peeled from now on, just in case something was going on that he didn't know about. It was too much of a coincidence that he'd seen the tiny spark of metal twice.

They drove off along the desolate road, no longer heading for Tasmania, they had to find a way to cross the Pacific and make their way to Peru.

The dichotomy that Shoop had been battling raised its ugly head again, woken by the combination of blind faith in his sixth sense and the questionable metal object in the sky. He'd spent years learning to forget about his sixth sense and trying to hone his other sense to compensate. It had made him practical, efficient and cold. This resurrected sense was confusing him and dulling his ability to think clearly but at the same time seemed to be taking them exactly where they needed to go. He couldn't stay his course now, but the lack of control that he was experiencing at the hands of his sixth sense was beginning to unnerve him; but then what choice did he have? None! Onward or downward, survival or death; it was that simple.

In the meantime, he couldn't afford to let his doubts leak into the group; it would fuel Jim's already dangerously energetic internal fire.

Shoop was walking a tight rope and he knew it.

The Australian borders were still very tight. A small gunfight had found them as they were leaving Melbourne on a stolen fishing trawler. Shoop and his

men had managed to silence the attacking Sphere agents before they could call for help and the battle made them all feel a lot better. A bit of violence always cleared out the cobwebs of the mind. They made their way to New Zealand where some more fighting broke out, more intense this time and much more satisfactory, making them all forget the desolation of the Australian desert and the things that it did to their minds.

Peru, again, was difficult to get into but after a small slaughter they were in, once in, things got a lot easier. All Shoop had to do was follow his sixth sense wherever it wanted to lead him. He became more relaxed about his dichotomy but still couldn't escape the fact that he'd seen the little flying piece of metal in the skies above Singapore and the Australian desert. He stayed vigilant but saw no further sign of the phenomenon.

They all started to relax a little as they got used to the ebb and flow of their life on the run, hunting down a thing or a person of unknown origin that *might* be able to make them free of their pursuers. The uncertainty was so real that they just came to terms with it and rested on the shoulders of the current that dragged them from country to country. Even the woman in the red dress stopped bothering Jim as much, but she would still whisper to him, making promises late at night.

They found an easily translatable inscription on a huge rock on the Nazca plateau that lead them to Newfoundland off the eastern coast of Canada. After that there was Moscow, Rome, Gibraltar and a string of other destinations. They simply followed their course, completely aware that they had no other choice and

accepting their roles in the plan that seemed so much bigger than them. They moved around, pieces on a chess board, someone unseen moving them in directions they didn't question, trapped on their desolate and hopeless course. They accepted their fate; all except Jim who's plans to leave them became more and more acute as they went.

They still had one hope left though; they had George; if George could crack the map, things would change. They'd be able to stop running and go straight to the thing that they'd been hunting for for so long, they could go straight to the elusive vessel and have done with the whole thing.

By the time they reached Lapland, Shoop had very strong suspicions that someone was having a laugh with them and was visibly permanently pissed off! They found some longitudes and latitudes carved into the side of a reindeer hut that lead them to where they now stood.

A man in a huge mouse suit walked past Shoop being jolly and animated. Shoop flung a toothpick through the huge cartoon mouse headgear and straight into his brain, instantly lobotomising him. The man in the mouse suit instantly dropped to the floor, removed the head mask, crossed his legs and started sucking his thumb while crying like a baby. There were children all around and they ran screaming in terror as they saw their hero being reduced to a dribbling simpleton. Shoop allowed himself a sliver of a smirk at the scene as Yan, Jim and Dr Komodo stared in disbelief at the huge plastic castle in the near distance.

They were in Florida and Shoop wished that he'd brought some kind of small nuclear device to put an end to all the joviality that so offended his senses. The land of happiness made him feel distinctly nauseous!



## Chapter 26

### Skulls and Crossbones

George's chest had healed up quite well. No matter how tiresome his new companion, the woman known as Chunt had proved to be, she was obviously adept at the patching up of war wounds. On top of that she had proved to be a more than effective bodyguard. Her success in that regard seemed to be in her ceaseless ability to be underestimated. Due to her size and appearance nobody really saw her as much of a threat and didn't take much notice of her, not until it was too late that is, and they were lying in crumpled messes on the floor grasping the place where their testicles used to be. Because of her competence, George had learned to blot out her incessant babbling; it was all white noise to him after a few weeks, which allowed him to get on with his job without wanting to kill her.

He'd spent a couple of weeks recovering in Chunt's house being fed cucumber sandwiches, Pimms cocktails and caviar. His blood thickened and the long deep cut on his chest scabbed over nicely leaving a neat, straight scar stretching from his left shoulder, down to the ribs on his right side. George hadn't had a scar before. It made him feel a bit manlier.

By the time Shoop and the Independents were in Australia, George was on his feet again and ready to start trying to dig Shoop out of the whole he was in by investigating the map. He started with a graveyard that had been indicated after breaking through the second level of coding on the map. It appeared that

once he'd made sense of the first site, a second would be indicted, then another and another until the trail lead straight to the location of the vessel.

The first graveyard was in Edinburgh, Greyfriar's Kirk in the old town and its myriad of symbols proved to be much more difficult to crack than George had previously suspected. The grounds of the church were chock full of ornate blackened stone crypts and gravestones, each with its own plethora of imagery and symbolism to be puzzled over. The graveyard, as far as George could tell, worked the same way that the map did. At first it looked like just a graveyard but upon deeper analysis a pattern would reveal itself, working like a magic eye picture, at first it would look like a busy collection of nonsense but if stared at and studied enough, would open up and show him a bigger picture.

His pulse raced as they made their way up Candlemaker Row to the entrance of the famed burial site of Greyfriar's Bobby, the insanely loyal mutt-terrier who, as legend would have it, sat next to the grave of his dead master until he too went the way of the dodo.

One of the most prominent symbols in the graveyard was that of the skull and cross-bones. The symbol adorns almost every tomb. It has become the symbol of death in modern times and is commonly seen on the side of poison bottles in cartoons and also conjures images of pirates on the high seas. The symbols real origins are lesser known.

The Knights Templar, as some conjecture states, recovered the bones of Jesus Christ in the Holy land during the crusades. The skull and cross bones

were, supposedly, a depiction of the thighbones and skull of the famous religious, political activist.

This speculation is way off the mark though.

It was actually a design created by a Knight Templar called Marylyn Chauvette. Marylyn wasn't a particularly happy or well-liked Knight. He'd managed to get into the order after his brother, Jean Chauvette, had put in a good word for him with the head honcho of the time, Hugues De Payens. Hugues De Payens liked Jean but was reluctant to let Marylyn on board as he thought he was a bit grumpy and had a bit of a girly name, but came round after Jean brewed him up a particularly rare and tasty batch of herbal tea.

Marylyn had always wanted to ride around on a horse and buckle some swashes and was very grateful to his brother but he soon found that being a templar was about more than just hacking people up and being celibate. For a start the celibacy thing was just something they told the church, they actually liked a good dirty wriggle now and then which shocked Marylyn as he was looking to be a very serious and pious young chap. Although the Templar's were all highly trained in the martial arts and were considered to be among some of the holiest people on the planet, they didn't really go in for seriousness and piety too much and were surprisingly up-beat and chirpy fellows.

All of the atrocities during the crusades were perpetrated by non Templars, they were committed by strings of nobles keen to make names for themselves on the battlefields of the anarchic middle east, trying desperately to carve their names in the ever shifting bloody sands of the holy land.

The Templars, under the influence of the Sion, had a much more relaxed view of everything. The healthy sense of perspective handed down to them by the Sion meant that nothing really got them down very easily, that was until Marylyn came along anyway. He was an enigma. He was small and angry and was largely considered in the years to come as the inventor of the Gothic movement. He wore a lot of black clothing, rode around on a horse as black as the middle bit in a black hole and clad his entourage and armies in similarly colored garb. He was pale and pasty and was happiest brooding alone in his tent while writing dark and miserable poetry about how nobody understood him and how painful it was to be unlike the other Knights. He strummed a small harp and sang songs that sapped the will to live from anyone who heard them.

Generally, he was a bit of a drag.

One of his other pastimes was embroidery, which also set him apart as embroidery was for girls. He decided to keep one of his favourite nasty little pictures as his standard and flew his flag high and proud while riding into battle. It was the skull and crossbones, white on a black background. The sight of the standard and the black army with their pale white leader put the fear of god into his enemies. This had the interesting effect of him not having to get into too many fights as his enemies would see how scary his flag was and run away, for the most part anyway. Only the most ferocious and bloodthirsty opponents would stand and fight.

Marylyn was very well trained, which, matched with his natural in built misery and distain for the human race, gave him a hard edge in battle, despite

his slight size and he never lost a battle. Even with his track record in war he was still regarded as a bit of a damp squib among his peers. They liked to tease him. It wasn't that they didn't like him exactly, just as they didn't really dislike any other human, it was just that he couldn't take a joke.

The Templars continually teased each other, not so much out of disrespect but more out of affection. If a Templar was ever nice and polite to anyone, it was a clear sign that they didn't really hold much fondness for that person, much like modern soldiers will give each other amusing nicknames and jokily cast aspersions over each other's sexual preferences.

Marylyn was cursed with a particularly girly name, which kept the jokes and jibes coming thick and fast and made him more angry, which made his brother regret ever putting a good word in for the miserable little git in the first place.

The Templars had a problem with non-jovial folk.

Marylyn died after a battle of titanic proportions. He had faced off an army twenty times the size of his own and through much cunning and hard fighting had won the day, receiving a mortal injury in the process. Few remained alive after the carnage but Marylyn emerged, with very few of his company, limping from the dust and blood of the battle victorious calling for his brother.

Jean Chauvette made it to Marylyn's bedside just as he was breathing his last in a tent on the edge of the red soaked desert.

Something had happened to him on that final battlefield. As he fought through his injuries he began to calm, sensing that the end was near. He started to see the comedy in it all, he saw how ridiculous the world of men and their antics truly was. And so, through his final breath with, for the first time in his life, an honestly jovial smile adorning his face, Marylyn spoke his last word.

'Not bad for a girl eh Jean!?'

He coughed and was gone, death fixing the smile to his face as he laughed his first and last ever laugh.

The Templars were so impressed with him that they adopted the skull and crossbones as one of their symbols in loving memory of a top quality joke in the face of death.

The symbol is still used today. The irony of such a grim standard causing such mirth and celebration never failed to tickle Jill and make her giggle whenever she thought about it.

The graveyard at Greyfriar's Kirk is riddled with depictions of the skull and crossbones. Each one is surrounded by a number of other symbols whose precise geometric carvings hold a language that can only be read by the initiated. George was not one of the initiates, which meant that he had a long hard job ahead of him.

The entrance to the graveyard was tucked in between two rows of old, uneven, eternal looking terraced buildings. Like most of Edinburgh's old town architecture the buildings were simple and quaintly wonky yet pleasing to the eye

in a strangely dour sort of way. History oozed from every stone and every inch of mortar like sweat.

They entered the graveyard through a simple gated metal arch and were greeted by the rusty orange of the rendering on the small but impressive church. The graves were numerous and very old but, despite their slight blackening from the smog of centuries past, were in good readable order which made George's task a little bit quicker. Even with this, though, the task would be dangerously lengthy never the less.

Deciphering symbols on gravestones was one of George's favourite pastimes; one which he hadn't indulged in for almost twenty years. He felt like a boozehound in a locked brewery. His elation wasn't enough to dispel his concerns though. The area was teeming with Sphere agents.

The Sphere Of Influence head quarters and the underground village were just around the corner and a large percentage of the Sphere workers frequented a number of eateries, bars and sandwich sellers that surrounded the entrance to the churchyard. He was aware of a number of them who actually sat in the grounds of the church to eat there lunch and read Sphere related paperwork. If just one of them caught wind of what he was up to then he'd be caught, interrogated, tortured and possibly dead before he could get a chance to weasel his way out of it.

He did have an ace up his sleeve in the eventuality of being caught however, but it wasn't an ace that he was overly keen on taking out of its nice

warm sleeve-like home. It was a secret he'd kept for a very long time and didn't relish the idea of exposing it.

His pulse was running high, even with Chunt at hand to protect him his chances of survival without exposing himself reduced with every minute that passed. He knew that his disguise wouldn't be recognised but this was little comfort next to the knowledge that he looked very conspicuous and suspect indeed. There weren't too many men in white lab coats wandering around the graveyard and George found himself wishing that he'd thought his choice of disguise through a little better back at the highland bunker.

'No use crying over spilt milk!' He thought to himself and went about his work as quickly as he could as Chunt sat close by keeping watch.

After a few hours and having gained access to some of the underground crypts, Chunt had a thought; one so simple that George kicked himself for not having thought of it earlier.

'Okay,' she said, 'as one is lead to believe, the situation is rather perilous and in real danger of causing both of our person's to be freed of our mortal coil, correct?'

'I do wish you'd use less words!'

'I'll accept that to be an answer in the affirmative!'

'If you must!' grunted George.

'Right, so, to continue,' she continued, 'the more time that is spent by us in this rather ornate and charming little home of the dead, the more chance there is



of us being discovered and changed from our current status into rather unattractive, small and slimy red lumps, yes?’

‘Sounds about right... I think!’

‘And all that you have to do in this resting place for the bones of people centuries past, is to draw all of these elaborate little symbols as accurately as you can, take down their location within these enchanting grounds around this quirky little church and analyse all of the collected data in order to ascertain where exactly it is that we need to be going next to find this intriguingly mysterious archaic object that appears to be so important to both you and your employer Mr Winkle?’

‘How did you manage to say all of that without breathing? I mean... shouldn’t you be going blue around about now?’

‘One has many talents George, excessively long sentences is but one of them!’

‘Is there a point coming up any time soon?’ asked George sharply while trying to draw the precise geometric relationship between the carving of a cherub and a bony foot on one of the crypts.

Chunt took out a small metal object from her pocket, ‘I have become aware that you’re particularly fond of note books and writing things down, which I fear may be to the detriment of efficiency; even though the drawings that you’re producing are really rather lovely, I wonder if I might venture to suggest an alternative?’

George simply gave off a low grunt, 'one will presume that you are, in fact, answering in the affirmative.'

'Are you capable, at least once,' spat George, his face reddening underneath the hard light disguise, 'of just getting to the bloody point!?'

'One thought that perhaps it might be prudent to use some manner of electronic image capturing device, such as,' she held up the small metal object, 'a camera.'

George was struck dumb.

He had, for more years than he cared to remember, exercised his little grey cells to the point of Olympian stature. His brain was among one of the finest on the planet and yet he'd managed to completely ignore the blatantly obvious choice of using a camera rather than spend hours drawing neat little pictures. Not only that but he'd had his idiotic mistake pointed to him by someone that he regarded as a distinct intellectual inferior. He felt extremely sheepish and daft and scanned his brain for some sort of put down that would serve to make him feel a bit better and make Chunt feel small.

He couldn't find one.

'Give me that!' His voice was a mix of pronounced anger and manifest embarrassment as he snatched the camera from her and started snapping away at the contents of the catacomb.

Chunt sat down and chuckled quietly to herself. She loved it when people underestimated her.

It wasn't long before George was done. He had spend a little time taking measurements with a laser measure and making the odd note but in the end, an exercise that would've taken several days ended up taking mere hours. George would never admit it to Chunt but she'd saved them an awful lot of time and probably stopped them from being discovered by the Sphere of influence. They were already getting funny looks from some of the people sitting eating their lunches in the church grounds. If they'd stayed there even an hour longer, George thought, they would have been captured and the ace up his sleeve would have had to have been played. The secret that he'd kept for eons would have been out.

Secretly, somewhere inside him he thanked Chunt. She was quite some distance away from being a confidant but had done well enough to edge her way marginally into his trust. This worried George a little as through experience he'd learned that trust tended to be a word that most people used just before they screwed you over. Despite this though, he still cautiously let her creep a little into his faith.

'She may prove herself to be of more use than just a body guard.' he thought to himself as they headed for the graveyard gates, 'I may be able to consider her for deeper involvement.'

Things were looking good. Chunt had moved the operation along nicely and it looked as though they would get out of Edinburgh without being caught by the Sphere, which was exactly the point at which the Sphere decided to turn up.

Just as they reached the main gates he saw three very large men in black suits and black ties move into the gate opening and block it. His heart fluttered in panic and he felt the blood rush around his body like a rabid dog in a hen house.

'Bollocks.' He said with laboured breath, fear in his voice.

Chunt had seen them from across the graveyard. She had seen them too late though and there wasn't much she could do other than head for the main gates and hope that an opportunity would present itself for her to do them some damage. She'd also seen the sniper hovering in the darkness of a room in a building off to her right. There were two men in the graveyard that, upon seeing the men in black suits, put down the newspapers they had been pretending to read and cut off escape from the rear. Outside the gates Chunt could see at least seven people out on the main street who clearly did not belong there and as the men in black moved forward, they abandoned their surveillance posts and closed in on her and George. There were at least two other snipers in buildings on the other side of the gate.

All-in-all, it looked a bit like they were well and truly up the creek, not only without a paddle, but they'd forgotten their boat and couldn't swim either.

'Bollocks bollocks bollocks!' hissed George, 'this can't be allowed to happen damn it! I've worked too bloody hard for too bloody long to have this bunch of...'

'Calm down!' Chunt's voice was authoritative but level and cut through George's mild hysteria like lightening through a turbulent sky, 'We're not done yet.'

George, though a little calmer was still very much on edge, 'Look, I know that you can handle yourself but these are Sphere agents, they train very hard indeed to be as vicious as is humanly possible. You could take one of them, maybe, but three? I'm afraid you may be getting your hopes up.' George had clearly not seen the myriad of other agents surrounding them and looking down on them from various windows.

'One hates to exacerbate your grim mood George, but there aren't three of them, there are at least eleven more that I can perceive at this present juncture.'

'Bollocks! Bollocks! bollocks!' said George again.

'Calm yourself,' again Chunt's voice cut through George's inability to keep his cool. 'As one said, we're not quite finished yet. Just keep calm and I'll see what I can do for us.'

The agents closed their trap. As they reached the gate that sat in a shallow alley between two buildings they cut them off from the rear and blocked their way out onto the main street.

'Good evening gentlemen!' said Chunt, 'May we be of assistance in some way.'

'You're coming with us.'

'We'd be glad to, would you mind showing us some credentials *officer?*'

'No officers here madam, and there's not likely to be so I wouldn't look for any help if I were you.' The man's voice was deep and grim. His stature was stupidly grand, like he'd been fed steroids since conception.

'What is it exactly that you think we've done, we were just having a look around, it's a public place, you've no right!'

'You've aroused the suspicions of some people that you shouldn't have. You are coming with us and that's the end of it!' His gravely voice had a finality in it that couldn't be ignored.

'I'm sure that we can come to some sort of arrangement my good man, would you like a cigarette?' Chunt reached into her pocket, the man's reaction was swift and automatic. His hand whipped into his jacket retrieving a semi-automatic weapon, cocked and loaded with lightening speed.

'Easy there girly!' he grunted. Chunt froze with her hand half out of her pocket.

'Let's not be hasty!' she said holding her other hand up in surrender, 'I'm just getting my cigarettes.'

'Take it slow, very slow!' said the man.

Chunt's hand trailed out of her pocket at a snails pace revealing exactly what she said it would, 'would you like one?' she asked the head Sphere agent pointing a cigarette at him.

'No!' his face was dropped into outright hatred. 'You *will* stop playing games and you *will* follow me. NOW! And don't try anything, you won't last a split second.'

'I believe you.' She said as George looked on helplessly.

She conceded to the man but had done exactly what she needed to do. She now had a measure of the agent's speed. He was quick. Very quick, as were his colleagues who'd dug inside their jackets for their guns too. There would be no point in trying to take them on hand to hand or with obvious weapons, but she was still hopeful that they could make a run for it. The only element that she couldn't figure out how to get around was the escape itself. If there were more men than she'd seen beyond the gates then they'd be in real trouble.

The men behind them closed in and dug guns into their backs. The men in black in front of them turned and lead the way back to the main street. A car sped down the street screeching to a halt at the pavement twenty yards from them. Chunt took out a cigarette and lit it.

'I can get us away from them but we need somewhere to run to.' Chunt whispered. George noticed that her excessive use of long words and mammoth sentences had subdued, 'and it'd be better if it was as close as possible.'

'shut up!' hissed one of the men behind them. George looked at her and nodded his head confirming that he'd get them out of the streets if she got them away from the gunmen.

Chunt pulled tentatively on her cigarette, exhaling a dense cloud. When they were ten yards away from the car she coughed harshly, bending double as she fought her rebelling lungs. Her eyes streaming she stood upright again. 'Dear me, I don't think I'm in the mood for this.' She flicked the butt over the heads of the agents and it landed on the roof of the waiting black Mercedes.

'Now that wasn't very clever.' Grunted the head agent turning and heading toward Chunt, his fists at the ready. He'd clearly decided to teach her that he was the man in charge and wasn't about to suffer fools gladly. Especially fools who put burn marks on his nice car.

'Possibly more clever than you know.' She said smiling.

The agent pondered this for a moment, a little confused; then realisation dawned on him. His eyes widened and he spun back round to look at the cigarette. 'GET THAT THING OF THE CAR!' he bellowed as the butt started fizzing. Chunt grabbed George and forced him to the ground as the car disappeared in a violent explosion. From where he was on the floor George saw three men punctured by flying metal before thick cloud of smoke covered the area. The noise was horrific, like standing next to a speaker at a death metal concert and the instant chaos was like someone had opened a door to hell and let Mephistopheles' rabid hordes loose.

As the explosion came to the end of its fury Chunt grabbed George up off the ground and pulled him into the smoke.

'Hold your breath and cover your mouth!' she yelled. He didn't waste any time in doing what he was told.

Inside the cloud they could hear unearthly screams coming from every direction, the smell of fuel and burnt flesh filled the air and the sound of chunks of flesh falling around them sent George into a panic. They were in a whirlwind of



metal, fire and flesh and the insanity of it all grabbed George by the stomach and swung him round. Chunt's voice came out the black madness.

'Take this! Put it on!'

She thrust the jacket of one of the fallen agents into his hands. Giving him something else to think about other than the horror around him calmed him a little. He put the jacket on as Chunt yelled in his ear, 'which way?'

'Don't know, can't see, can't see!'

'Down the street or up it?'

'Down!'

They were off. The smoke had covered this much of their escape and was spreading fast in the direction that they wanted to go. The snipers wouldn't be able to see them through the thick black blanket and when they emerged, they would be neatly covered in the black jackets of the Sphere agents. Through the pandemonium George's opinion of Chunt jumped up yet another notch.

They ran out from inside the cloud of death, the smoke clinging to them as they ran, coughing and gasping. Hellish yelps and screams punctured the air behind them, a man who's face had been largely removed by a piece of shrapnel lay slumped against a wall as they emerged from the belly of the explosion. A sniper saw them, saw the black suit jackets and went back to scanning the rest of the carnage. By the time he noticed that something had been wrong with their outfits, the shock of grey hair from George's hard light disguise, the slight female figure of Chunt, they had disappeared down the street.

George led them down a side alley halfway down the old town street that lead to a filth ridden stairway leading down to another road. They were almost at the bottom of the stairs when they heard sounds of pursuit. George tried a door but it was locked.

'Bollocks! We need to be in there!' he yelled in a high-pitched panicky squeal.

Chunt flew into the air without hesitation, spinning and landing a wood splintering kick on the sturdy lock. The door flew open and they were inside.

'Well done,' said George, 'but now they're going to know we came this way.'

Chunt looked around. There was a plank of wood lying on the floor not far from them, she dived for it, grabbed it, swung it round and jammed the door firmly shut. Seconds later the handle rattled.

'This one's locked,' a voice came from inches away on the other side of the door, 'go on to the next one.' then the sound of a dozen feet and silence.

'It won't be long until they figure out where we went,' said Chunt, 'I hope you've got something up your sleeve, and a bloody big raise in pay if we live through the day!' She turned to see George taking off down a dark corridor strewn with rubbish. It smelled like a toilet. 'Hey! Wait for me!' She bolted after him.

'In answer to your questions, yes I do have something up my sleeve and as for the pay rise, I think I might be able to do a little better than that, but I have to show you something first.'

'Okay?' Said Chunt almost tripping over the filth and rubble that covered the floor of the near pitch-black corridor.

'I don't suppose you'd have a torch would you?' Said George as he reached the entrance to a stairway. It lead into total blackness. Chunt reached into her pocket and pulled out a tiny little black cylinder no bigger than a wood screw. 'Better than nothing I suppose.'

'Don't judge a book by its cover!' Said Chunt.

George turned the torch on, squinting at how powerful it was. 'Blimey!'

'That's exactly what I said the first time I saw it old chap!'

George pointed the beam down the stairs and Chunt got a better look at where they were. The walls were old stone, hundreds of years old and the place looked like it hadn't had a human foot tread it for the same amount of time. The walls crept up and converged making an arched ceiling from which stalactites hung, dripping unknown rancid liquids onto the rubble, dust and mud soaked stairs. Chunt squinted down to the distance where the torch couldn't reach.

'How far does this go?'

'Quite a way!' said George.

'Is that... I think I can see... a hand, yeah, I think that's a hand down there.'

'If that's all we see we'll be lucky!' sighed George.

'What is this place?'

'You'll find out soon but for now I think we should get a move on.' Said George and as if the Sphere agents had heard him, there was a banging at the entrance to the corridor. They were trying to break in. George took off down the stairs as cautiously as he could but still slipping on the grime. Chunt followed.

They descended for a while, passing the hand that Chunt had seen. It was covered in thick fur and had course sharp fingernails on it. It stuck out of the muddy corner of a step like some buried creature under them was grasping for air.

'What the hell did that belong to?' asked Chunt, 'I mean, one has been privy to a number of romantic encounters with some rather bushy individuals, mostly of the Mediterranean persuasion, but one can quite honestly pronounce to never having witnessed any individual with a pelt of such dense proportion on any of the gentlemen that I have previously encountered.'

George noticed that Chunt's desire to fill the air with streams of long sentences had returned. 'She only does it when she's relaxed!' he thought. 'That's interesting,' and saved the nugget of information in his mind for later reference without saying anything to her.

'It was a werewolf's hand!' Said George attempting to test his theory.

'What?' She said, voice level but a distinct lack of words in her reply.

'All will become clear in time.' Said George. They heard a dull crash from somewhere behind them. 'They're coming, I hope we have enough time.'

'For what?'

'You'll see.'

Some time later the long straight stairway turned into a long winding stairway and more unsavoury things could be seen strewn about in the darkness. A hairy leg here, pieces of torso there, a head, all of which seemed to have come from half man, half wolf creatures. The head disturbed Chunt the most. It had clearly been there for quite some time and was partially eaten away and maggot ridden. Its nose wasn't long enough to be a wolf's and wasn't short enough to be a man's, it sat somewhere between the two. Its dead, yellow eyes glared up at her as if asking for help, its mouth open and wincing in a final death grimace, flesh dangling off its bones in places. Chunt had witnessed her fair share of death before but this was like nothing she'd ever seen. She almost felt sorry for the poor things.

George caught the expression on her face as she looked at it. 'Looks sad doesn't it!' He said. Chunt nodded.

'Don't be fooled, he only looks like that because he's pissed off that he lost whatever fight he was having. Werewolves hate losing, its why they're so dangerous. They're the spoiled little bastards of the underworld, always throwing tantrums and playing up. They'd be fine if they just stopped being such spoil

sports and got on with things. They're the sorts of folk that if they played football they'd hog the ball! Better off where he is I say.'

'The underworld? There's more of this sort of thing?'

'You'll see, now move it, I think they're gaining on us. One question though, were did you get that nifty little exploding cigarette?'

'Oh, one's father was a top ranking agent in MI6 and used to invent all manner of interesting little gadgets at home in his spare time. One has a multitude of weird and wonderful paraphernalia at the house.'

The clatter of feet slipping on grime and running after them was getting louder, every now and then it would stop for a moment while one of their pursuers slipped and fell and tried to pick himself back up. The sights of the random pieces of werewolf did nothing to perturb the Sphere agents who'd seen far worse in their line of work.

'George I don't quite understand,' said Chunt as they climbed deeper and deeper, as if they were going into the very belly of the planet, 'The sight of a bunch of dismantled were wolves doesn't phase you, but you were near wetting yourself back at the graveyard.'

'I'm used to seeing the aftermath of things, the bits and pieces that are left over, I very rarely see how they managed to get themselves into lots of bits and pieces and I didn't nearly wet myself,' he corrected her, 'I just don't like loud noises, now will you shut up and get a move on, we're almost there.'

They clambered down the last few yards of spiral steps, hopping over body parts as they went. George slipped on part of a leg but Chunt caught him.

'Damn that Winkle, I've asked him a thousand times to clear up after himself and he never bloody well does. What if the authorities got in here and saw this!'

'Mr Winkle did this?' asked Chunt.

'It used to be a werewolf den. Shoop found it and now all of its inhabitants are in small pieces, but we haven't got time for that, I'll explain it all later.'

They ran down a corridor and stepped into a high domed hall with a huge stack of bodies off to their right. The smell was dumbfounding and Chunt didn't waist any time in vomiting violently at the olfactory assault. George ran over to a wall on the far side of the hall while she heaved. Chunt regained her senses and forced herself to acclimatise to the reek and staggered after him.

George felt around the wall, sliding his hands over the slimy surface as if looking for something.

'What are you trying to... ' Chunt was cut off.

'Ah here we are.' Said George and pressed one of the stones in the wall. There was a series of clicks and whirs as if some ancient machinery was straining to bring itself to life, then quite quickly and suddenly, dozens of small tubular metallic object emerged from the wall and trained themselves on Chunt.

'Those are high powered lasers.' Said George, 'and this is where you have to make a choice. It's a big one and you'll have to do it quickly. The choice

is to enter my service and never question but one of my actions or orders or, I can cut you to ribbons right now.'

Chunt face dropped. 'After all I've done for you, you sneaky little f... '

'Lets not get emotional Miss Chuntley Smitheington. If you remember correctly there are a large number of very angry and violent men tearing their way down the steps toward us this very second so our time is short. I am safe, you are not so I'll make this brief.

'I have the ability to show you things that you never believed possible. If you choose to come with me you will be privy to the world's darkest and deepest secrets; secrets even Mr Winkle isn't aware of. You will, in effect, learn how and why this planet,' George paused for a moment to give his next word a little more weight, 'Exists! But you must follow me unquestioningly and you must decide right this minute.'

'So you're saying that its death or servitude!' Chunt scowled at George with helpless venom.

'Essentially... yes, but the servitude comes with remarkable benefits. You have impressed me a lot in our time together and I would prefer to have you on my side rather than in a small lump of diced human meat on the floor of this hall.'

'How can you know that I won't just kill you at the first opportunity?' There were audible footfalls in the stairway above them. The Sphere were getting closer.



'You'll find that that particular task won't be as easy as you anticipate, and I believe that what lies on the other side of this wall may give you a small taster of the kind of secrets I'm talking about. I rather think that it'll convince you. Now; decide or die.'

'Okay, okay,' her face showed her to be dejected and beaten, 'I'll be your lucky,' there was a palpable sense of resentment in her voice as she glanced behind her at the increasing noise of the approach of the Sphere agents, 'just get on with it will you!'

'Swear to me!'

'Alright I swear, Jesus! Just get a move on will you!'

'*MEAN IT!*' George's voice held a weight that Chunt had not heard in it before, it was almost terrifying. She mustered every ounce of gravitas that she could, every morsel of sincerity and said.

'I give my word, as my father's daughter, that I will serve you as best I can and as long as I breathe!'

'Good enough.' Said George, the grave resolution waning from his voice and features. He pressed a number of stones on the wall in a very particular order and with just the right amount of pressure and the wall folded in on itself revealing a passage that was just big enough to crawl through.

'Follow me!' said George and took off through the opening. Chunt did as she was told, bullets bounced off the wall behind her as she scrambled through

the passage. The Sphere had found them. She dived for cover but, before she did, saw a swell of men charging toward the hole in the wall behind her.

The hall filled with agents, it burst at the seams with them. One of them waited at the entrance to the small passage until someone handed him a torch. He pointed it along the long darkness where he'd seen Chunt vanish just a few moments before, checked it for threats and dived in. The passage was big enough to hold the length of three agents and just as the first of them poked his head out through the other side George tapped a stone on the wall and the whole thing filled in with stones with merciless weight and purpose. The agents in the hole were popped like acne. George and Chunt stood back as the men were liquidised and spat out by the closure of the hole.

On the other side of the wall a metal blast door crashed down behind the last agent entering the hall and the small cylindrical objects that protruded from the walls let a barrage of intense lines of lasers fly through the throng cutting them into bloody ribbons. None survived the slaughter.

'Pity,' said George, 'I hate to waist trained men like that but I don't see that we had much choice really.'

Chunt was no stranger to violence but the sight of seeing a man squeezed out of a wall with such grotesque force had made her feel a little queasy. She gagged a few times as George took off the wristband that emitted the hard light disguise he'd been wearing for weeks now. He rubbed his wrist like a prisoner released from handcuffs and rustled his wild ginger/grey mop into its usual anarchic position.

'Well,' said George, 'that was quite close now wasn't it?' he wiped some of the liquidised man off his shoe against the stone wall, 'I suppose we ought to get moving really.'

Chunt breathed heavily and tried not to vomit, swallowing hard as the saliva gushed into her mouth.

George noticed her discomfort and said, 'It might help if you stopped looking at that pile of goo that used to be a man. It might stop you wanting to heave.' Said George.

'Right...' said Chunt gulping and gasping, but unable to look away, 'yeah... look away from the puddle of blood and bone.' Her eyes were wide, she was a rabbit in headlights.

Eventually she tore herself away from the horrific gristly splat on the floor and turned around. What she saw upon turning stopped her breath.

'Jesus!' she coughed as she looked down the seemingly endless tunnel in front of her. It was like nothing she'd ever seen before.

Usually tunnels were dark unclean, damp unwelcoming places but this was bright and spotlessly clean. It was perfectly cylindrical and swept off to a vanishing point in the distance, its walls looked like a cross between concrete, polished steel and mother of pearl. It gave off a strange dull sheen the likes of which she had no reference for and, staring at it a little longer, she noticed that the entire length of it appeared to have no joins at all. It was one solid length of endless cylinder that stood twenty feet high and wide.

'Welcome to the rest of your life young lady!' said George.

Chunt's stomach could take no more and she puked on George's shoes.

## Chapter 27

### Counting chickens

George and Chunt belted along the tunnel on electric scooters, headed for Chunt's retreat on the outskirts of Edinburgh and set about deciphering the information that they had so narrowly escaped with from Greyfriar's Kirk. It was a strange time for Chunt. She had to get used to a lot of things, being subservient was not something that she liked. That and the fact that she'd just bolted down a mysterious, millions of year old tunnel of unknown origins, seen various different parts of werewolves in a dark winding stairway, walls had fallen away and reconstructed at her companions will and apparently all of this was just the start of a much bigger picture. Her senses were buzzing and more than once she doubted her sanity.

'I feel like I'm delusional and I'm not here at all. I suspect that I might be in some psychiatric ward somewhere plugged into some sort of machine that's feeding me hallucinogens.'

'You'll get used to it.' Said George.

They managed to break the codes and figurative languages hidden in Greyfriar's many gravestones and crypts and made their way to the next graveyard to investigate, and the next and the next, picking up small pieces of the puzzle all the way. For weeks they traipsed around Scotland but before they could do any of that they had to acquire disguises. The Sphere would

undoubtedly be looking for them after the carnage in Edinburgh and capture was inconceivable. So much depended on their investigations that George felt that he had little choice but to show Chunt the secret bunker hidden in the highlands.

It took George a while to find the disguise room again but they both left looking very much like other people. George, having learnt from the conspicuousness of his previous hard light covering and went for something a tad more normal. Anyone seeing him and Chunt would just see a withered old man and his granddaughter and not give them a second thought. Chunt went for a raven haired, frumpy, bookworm teenager; a visage that would guarantee little or no attention.

They traipsed from town to town over the weeks while George slowly revealed the mass of knowledge that Chunt could never have accepted as fact. Werewolves were just the start; vampires, vicious gnomes, little green men, leprechauns and everything in between were paraded through her mind in a whirl of confusion and she did her best to keep her mind from bending and twisting into a mass of sludge.

'How is it that I've never seen any of this. How is it that these things aren't common knowledge if they're so prolific?'

'Well that's where organisations like the Sphere of Influence and the Priory of Sion come in! We in the Sphere have been cataloguing and learning from such 'other worldly' nonsense for quite some time. We've only just found out that the Priory of Sion have been around for millennia before us, presumably doing the same thing. It looks like they've been fighting these things for thousands of

years behind the scenes and trying to keep a cap on it all, but there's more to it than that and I hope that the time is short at hand when I'll be able to reveal all the knowledge. For now, you'll have to make do with what I can give you and hope that this mission is successful. If it is; then you shall know more than you dreamed possible.'

'And if its not?' asked Chunt.

'Well, we'll just have to start again and hope that that works won't we! If we're still alive that is.'

'Sometimes I think I'd have been better off letting you dice me with laser's in that underground hall.'

'I still can if you like.'

'No thanks, I think I'll just see where this all goes.' Said Chunt with a more than pungent scowl of disapproval, but secretly, she wasn't entirely sure whether George was serious or not

Chunt's love of long sentences had vanished. She barely said a word any more that showed George just how tense she actually was. She was out of her depth and was having real problems keeping her head above water. For the most part she sat and listened to George, watched his work and tried to soak in the horrific volume of seaming nonsense that came her way. She'd been used to being the top of her field. No one she'd ever guarded had suffered terminal injury. She was among the best bodyguards in the world but one of the lesser known. She commanded whopping fees but never did anything too high profile.

She specialised in obscure businessmen and underground organised crime bosses. She was a shadow for the most part and so were her clients.

This helped her a little with the wealth of secrets as she'd always been very comfortable with the lesser-known sections of society but she was still a fish out of water, gills flapping violently while her fins tried to grab a hold of evolution and make her into an amphibian. It was a desperate battle for sanity but one that, slowly, she began to win. She reminded herself though that each battle was part of a larger war and that she should prepare herself to be shaken back into doubt and shock with every minute that passed. She mentally crawled inside herself, gritted her teeth and tried as hard as she could to roll with the punches.

For weeks they travelled and by the time they reached Uig on the North of the Isle of Skye, Shoop and his independents were in Florida.

George and Chunt hiked up to the side of a large hill on the side of which, half way up on a small plateau was the tiny graveyard that served the dead of the small port town.

One glance was all it took.

They walked up a steep grass incline overlooking the grey skied windswept bay and came to a rise. At the top of the rise George caught sight of the graveyard and stopped in his tracks, face wide and aghast. Chunt kept walking for a little way, not noticing that her companion had halted. She looked back after a while to see George standing, his eyes wild and scanning the fenced in gravestones, darting around it wildly and a smile creeping its way slowly



across his mouth. He whipped his shoulder bag round to his front and dug frantically in it searching for something. He pulled out a small notebook and started flicking through its pages, his eyes going from it to the graveyard and then back again, fingers tracing the words and drawings. He began pacing from side to side, looking at the book, looking at the graveyard, half excited, half filled with trepidation, his every move saying "It couldn't be that simple, there has to be a catch here somewhere, it just couldn't be that simple."

'Are you alright? What is it?' asked Chunt.

'Ssh!' was George's response.

Chunt stood there watching for a while as George extended his observations from the graveyard to the surrounding area. His eyes flitted to the book, to the graveyard, to the surrounding hills and mountains, to the bay and then back to the book again.

Finally he said, 'My god! It *is* that simple. That's brilliant, how did I not see this, oh she *is* a tricky little monkey!'

'What's going on George?'

'What?' Chunt's words had pulled George from a deep reverie, 'Oh! Sorry... forgot you were there for a minute,' his voice was jovial and excited but held an undertone of deviousness. His tone was a schoolboy smuggling salt out of the kitchen to pour on a poor unsuspecting slug that he'd just seen in the garden. 'Its not just the graveyards you see, its everything but you can't see it without the graveyards, they had to be there but when you see the bigger picture

they seem redundant, miniscule in comparison, complex next to the absolute simplicity of the map. It was all there all along but you can't see it without the whole. She is a tricky little monkey that one!

'Um... George, are you okay?... its just that you're sounding a little bit like your brain has just broken and haphazard words are leaking from the shattered pieces.' Said Chunt.

'Don't you understand? No, you couldn't, there's no way you could.' George's eyes darted around the area again, a mischievous smile pointing out from underneath his hard light disguise, 'she has been pointing us at her all along but we couldn't see it. You have to understand the language. She had a language set into the very land itself.'

'Any chance you could simplify this for me?' said Chunt absolutely baffled.

'In short my dear, we have her! We've done it. I can figure out where she is.'

'She?' quizzed Chunt.

'Yes, she! The vessel is a she. At least she is this time. She was a he last time.' Said George.

'I think I'll just stop trying to understand if that's okay with you George.' Said Chunt and pulled out a hip flask full of sixteen-year-old Talisker whisky. She'd found over the last weeks that it was one of the few things that stopped her mind from dribbling out of her nostrils from all of the ridiculous revelations and

challenging information that had been building up inside her. She took a healthy swig, breathing deeply, letting the peaty liquid do its job.

‘We have to get back to the hotel. If all goes well, we’ll have her before long.’ He said to Chunt, and then under his breath, out into the ether hoping that it would be heard by the vessel, known to her friends as Jill he said, ‘I’ve got you now you bitch!’

Shoop sat giggling to himself as the man in the mouse suit was carried off by security guards and stuffed into an ambulance. No one could explain the toothpick protruding from his forehead and nobody really wanted to take it out in case they broke something else inside the man’s brain.

The doors slammed on the ambulance and it drove off, taking Shoop’s joviality with it. He was sitting on the edge of a wall that surrounded a fountain. Not the nice ornate and tasteful sorts of fountains you’d find in Rome or anything, it was the sort of fountain that would be considered tasteful by the sort of people that find fake tanned orange tinted skin classy.

The independents were sitting close by, not quite knowing what to do with themselves as Shoop sat and assessed their situation.

Their trek around the world had been a farce. He knew that now. He had been so absolutely convinced that his sixth sense was taking them in the right direction. It had been buzzing more and more the further they went and had been his only hope of success. Being where they were now he was pretty much

convinced that somebody, somewhere was taking the piss. He was sure that they were being lead on a wild goose chase by forces unknown to him and his hope of completing his search had fizzled away to nothing.

It was all over.

He had no choice but to tell his companions that their only option was to find a nice remote jungle somewhere and go and live in the trees for the rest of their days. He held out little or no hope that George would be successful. If the forces that had been playing with him were as powerful as he suspected them to be then they were probably playing with George too. His salvation was nowhere to be seen. The Boss had won. Shoop had lost. There was no two ways about it.

Then his phone rang, the phone that could not be traced. It was George.

'I've found her!' said George excitedly.

At these words Shoop's entire body went into a wild spasm. His sixth sense went into overdrive, his bones rattled with such violent force that he dropped the phone and went down onto his knees wincing from the discomfort. It felt like his skeleton was being shaken by a vindictive electrical charge, like it was burning, turning to liquid inside him. The pain was unbearable, like nothing else he'd ever felt, and he'd felt a lot of pain in his life.

There was a buzzing in his ears that grew gradually into a deafening brutal dull throb. Sweat poured from his body like it was being pushed out of him by the

sensation. His lips cracked as he reeled from the pain and his eyeballs felt like they were making a break for freedom.

‘Shoop! Shoop?’ The phone on the floor pulled him out of the ferocious onslaught for a moment and he tried to gather himself enough to pick it up. It slipped from his hand at first as the salty liquid of his sweat ran from his palms. The Independents looked on confused and alarmed as Shoop felt like he was being put through a mincer.

Eventually he pulled himself together enough to pick up the phone.

‘Found who?’ He rasped through teeth so tightly clenched that they felt as though they’d shatter at any moment.

‘The vessel, it’s a she!’ said George.

‘Where?’ was all he could manage to say.

‘She’s in Scotland, on the Isle of Skye in a place called Dunvegan castle.’

‘I’m coming, get back to the bunker. Stay there. I don’t want you getting caught at the last hurdle. I don’t want anyone else finding out do you hear me? Get back to the bunker and wait for me there.’ His words were strained and his voice was shaky. It was everything he could do to stay conscious and speak at the same time. It took all of his efforts.

‘What? NO! I’m going to the castle damn it! bollocks to you! I’ve worked too hard, you’ve no idea what I’ve been through you belligerent bastard...’

'I don't have time for this George, if you go there I'll kill you my damn self! Get to the damn bunker or I'll shred you, do you get me?!' His words were pure venom and George knew that Shoop meant what he said.

Shoop hung up the phone.

Somewhere on another continent George swore loudly but obeyed Shoop's command.

Shoop dropped to the floor shaking and sweating wildly, the independents rushed to try and help him, to lift him to his feet. He was attracting attention and they needed to get away from where they were.

*'GET YOUR DAMN HANDS OFF ME!!'* There was something in his voice that none of them had heard before. They had all been unnerved by Shoop's voice and command at some point or another but this was different. Something was radiating from him, something harsh, something terrible, something unseen, violent and hate filled, more so than he was already, which had been unimaginable a few minutes earlier. It was beyond all reason or explanation and spread from him like a wave of hellish unseen evil as he battled to control it. His bones shook like a paint tin in a mixer, Heat spewed from his insides in merciless rivulets. All the liquid in his body was dry and smoke started to seep from him. The area around him cleared. Even people who couldn't see him sensed the hell that burned close by and were overtaken with a sense of panic. They ran and didn't even know why.

Shoop shakily grappled for his hipflask of gin and drained it dry in one greedy gulp. The heat subsided a little. The rattling of his bones calmed slightly and the buzz in his ears turned itself down a few decibels. He managed to get to his feet and he heard the screams of frightened children in the near distance.

He turned to the Independents, 'We've got her!' The smile that crawled across his grimaced features made them feel fear that they never thought possible.

Shoop caught a glimpse of something flashing in the sky just off to his right, the same flash that he'd seen for the first time as he'd tortured Justin Stain in Singapore and a dozen times since.

He moved so fast that the Independents didn't even see him. He was invisible to the naked eye. One second he was standing in front of them leering down at them, hell in his eyes and the next he'd drawn a gun and fired a shot into the air. The speed and violence of the manoeuvre shocked them all into taking a sharp step back, the only thing stopping them from running was the years of training and action in the field but even then each of them wished they could've been anywhere else on Earth at that moment.

The shot he'd fired, much to their surprise, hit something and it fell out of the air and clattered to the floor. Shoop walked over to it.

'Yan! Pick that up, we're leaving!' said Shoop.

'What is it?' asked Jim.

'Looks like some sort of camera, but its tiny, no bigger than my finger nail, how the hell did you hit it?' asked Komodo.

'I don't know.' Said Shoop, 'But that doesn't matter now. I know where the vessel is. George found it!' The Independents still kept their distance, the hell that Shoop emitted had calmed but was still quite palpable.

'How do you know for sure?' Asked Jim.

'Did you just see what happened to me?' Shoop snapped impatiently at him, 'just try telling me that my sixth sense didn't do that because what George told me was right!'

'Where is it?' asked Komodo.

'Where is she!' corrected Shoop.

'What?'

'It's a she. The vessel is a person and she's on the Isle of Skye in Dunvegan castle.' Said Shoop.

Some security guards and police were heading toward them, guns raised.

'Looks like you attracted a bit of attention there Shoop!' said Jim grabbing for some throwing stars from under his coat. Shoop stared at them and fear pulsed through them with horrific force. With one look at them they started stumbling over each other, dropping their guns amid cries of 'sweet Jesus what is that?' and 'God help me, please God help me!' Tears sprang from their eyes and they trampled each other in a desperate bid to escape.



'Lets go!' Shoop's voice was guttural and rancid. 'I've got you now bitch!' he said as he led his companions out of the theme park, his grimace could have killed if he'd let it.

On a dock not far away from the theme park just before a stolen boat headed out across the Atlantic, in a small run down café, Jim made a phone call unknown to Shoop and the Independents.

'Play it again.' Said Jill sitting in the editing suit in Dunvegan castle.

She was watching a screen with Mike. Mike rewound the digital image and pressed play. They saw a particularly distasteful fountain in a sunny place. Shoop Winkle was sitting on the edge of it while the other Independents stood around looking a bit worried and a man in a mouse suit was dragged away into an ambulance. Shoop's phone rang and he picked it up. Within seconds he'd gone into some sort of a spasm, sweat spewed from him and people ran in fear. Even the camera that had taken the pictures began to shake as Shoop fell to the ground and dropped the phone. He gained some composure, picked up the phone, spoke into it for a while and then hung up. He shouted at the men trying to help him and then smoke started leaking from inside his clothes from his skin. Then the picture went dead.

'I don't get it,' said Mike, 'those cameras could fly through the sun man, they never break down. What are we gonna do for Shoop TV this week?'

Jill gently put her hand on Mike's shoulder and smiled at him.

'Its time for everyone to leave for Iceland Mike, he's coming!'

'You mean... god do you mean that...'

'Yes Mike, it's the end of season one of Shoop TV I'm afraid!'

'Oh man, I was really enjoying that!' said Mike slumping his shoulders.

'Don't worry man, there might be a season two, but you're gonna have to wait for a while.' Jill patted Mike on the back and went to tell everyone the news.

## Chapter 28

### Ecstasy In A Jacuzzi

Justin Stain had been very well looked after over the last few months. He had received the best medical attention for his plethora of injuries, infections and sicknesses, had been given ornately luxurious rooms in the upper level of the Sphere head quarters and his every whim had been tended to without the slightest hesitation.

He was lounging back in a bath the size of a stadium while sipping the finest champagne from a pint glass and nibbling on twiglets from a crystal bowl - not quite high class but he remembered his parents always putting twiglets out at dinner parties and so thought them refined enough to grace the environment. A gaggle of naked smooth skinned beauties massaged various parts of his body while another specialised on the more sensitive parts under the water.

Some might take his position as a good point at which to do die happy but the frown on his face suggested that he felt differently. The extravagant bath had done quite a lot to assuage his worries over the last month but did nothing for him now. His angst was too deep, his situation too tense. Quite literally the fates and happiness of an entire planet of beings depended on him remembering exactly what the frequency of the tracking device he'd slipped into Shoop Winkles hat in Singapore emitted.

The Boss was losing his patience and the world was beginning to notice.

The Boss' identity was a very closely guarded secret and the most powerful men in the world barely knew what he looked like, but they knew when he wanted something and they felt the ripples of his poisonous will when he extended his claws. The most powerful people in the world got scared when The Boss' agents started shooting up ports, chasing people through city streets and generally causing a bit of a hoo-ha! The tension was palpable; palpable and *everywhere*. Favours were called in around the world, torture implemented when questions weren't answered, tension spread from the centre of The Boss' web like a cancer. The continued absence of Shoop Winkle was grinding The Boss down, sending him into sporadically cruel moods.

As the power men of the planet felt the anguish that seeped through the air and soaked all the places of the world with its ill intensions, they began making more and more unwise decisions. Presidents were on edge, the media moguls of the world were encased in black and heavy aura's. It is said that he who keeps his wits about him while all else fall apart can truly be called a man. There were no men standing in those tense days, everyone felt the bleakness, everyone made mistakes, everyone lost their cool and so the world went dark.

There were only two people on the planet that could stop The Boss' influence from bringing the human race further down into the pit and Justin Stain was one of them. This was why his bath wasn't feeling particularly relaxing. The world stood on a knife-edge because of The Boss and Shoop Winkle and the longer Justin's mind refused to work, the more chance there was of all hell breaking its gates and flooding the planet.

There was a very nimble fingered young Malaysian girl working wonders on Justin's submerged sensitive parts. There wasn't a man on the planet that she couldn't astound with her technique. Justin let her work, experiencing an odd mix of euphoria and pure panic at the weight that lay on his shoulders. The lack of memory and the destruction that it was causing danced with the unadulterated bliss coming from his groin, growing and filling every atom of his being with a tingle that made him start believing in God. Pleasure and panic grating against each other like gears without a clutch.

She stroked and stroked as the others massaged his thighs, arms, back neck, chest and any other area that could be fondled, kissed and stroked. It was ethereal, unreal and yet not once did the strained grimace of concern leave his face. For all of the sensual wonderment that rippled over his every sense there was no relief.

The Malaysian girls hands were conducting the rest of the entourage. She led the rest of them in a masterpiece of arousal and seduction. She was the Mozart of the body and her orchestra was playing perfectly yet still the pain never left Justin's face. She became more determined, working her orchestra up, slowly, then a little faster, faster still, gradually creating a whirlwind of physical music that wrapped around them all, creating an orgasmic air that seemed to give of a dark red light from all of those involved.

Justin's mind was breaking from the ecstasy. The fight between pleasure and the knowledge that his broken mind was making billions of peoples lives dark and painful tore him apart from the inside. He wasn't a bad man at heart, well,

not bad enough to want the world to suffer through mishap. He'd much rather there be a good reason for it and he didn't think the pointless rage between Shoop and The Boss was a very good reason at all.

The orgasm rose in him, the pain in his mind matched it move for move. If the euphoria swelled so did the anguish. If it slowed and stroked him, the pain dulled and grated. It was one of the single oddest sensations of his life. The pleasure and pain built together and he had no power or will to stop them. The volume of both reached fever pitch as he exploded. His mind felt like it was caving in on itself. He spasmed and rocked like a death row inmate in the electric chair, like a ten thousand volts were turning him to liquid, boiling him, the pain of it matched by the extreme pleasure.

The girls, still in the reverie, for a moment thought that they'd just done the best job of pleasuring a man that could ever be remotely possible, but the spasm was too long and the blood leaking from his nose was a bit of a give away that all was not well. They started to panic, darting confused looks at each other and not having the slightest idea of what they should do as Justin flapped around in the water, a strange wail emanating from his mouth. It was a cross between pure ecstasy and utter despair, like heaven and hell were colliding inside every molecule of his being.

Justin's mind popped.

The frantic convulsions reached their pinnacle, peaking in a freak rush of pleasure/pain and the only thing that his mind seemed capable of doing was to let off a strange little popping noise, like a cork firing out of a champagne bottle.

Pop!

Justin slumped back into the water, splashing back to Earth from wherever he'd wandered off to. He sucked in a massive lump of air as a look of shock and elation smacked him in the face like a wet kipper. The girls didn't quite know what to do. The energy in the room had covered most of the emotions that the majority of religious organisations try desperately to stop anyone feeling and then ended in what appeared to be some sort of ethereal revelation. Justin's face definitely had a sense of the dumbfounded about it, mixed with a fairly potent "Eureka" like visage.

One of the girls, slightly unnerved by the whole affair broke the silence.

'Are... are you okay?'

Justin's eyes darted around; sweat pouring from his forehead and for a moment didn't seem to know where the voice had come from. Eventually he realised that someone had talked and that the question had been directed at him. He swallowed, smiled and said, 'I can remember!'

Within minutes he was tearing past the Bosses secretary in the vast, plush reception hall of the Sphere head quarters.

'Hey! You can't...!' She said as the blur in a towelling robe ripped past her and thudded into the Bosses office door.

The Boss was sitting at his massive rectangular table flicking through some papers as Justin flew in. The Boss' bodyguard came out of nowhere,

pasting Justin into the expensive wallpaper by repeatedly beating his head against the wall.

'Its okay Tarquin, that'll do for now I think.' Said the Boss, only briefly glancing up to see the source of the disturbance. Tarquin held Justin firm against the wall waiting for the order to release him. The Boss idly flicked through the papers on his desk, pretending to finish some non-existent, non-important task before fully acknowledging the situation.

Some minutes later, Justin's blood ruining the wallpaper, The Boss looked up.

'Have a seat Mr Stain!'

'I've...' Justin started as he slumped into a chair.

'Before you say anything Mr Stain,' the Boss interrupted, 'I would like it made perfectly clear that if you don't give me some good news you will not make it out of this room alive. Do you know why?'

'I've got an inkling!' he said wiping the blood from around his mouth and nose.

'I have been very patient with you Mr Stain. You have received the highest possible treatment, have been nursed back to health by some very competent people and still you remember nothing. I was going to give you one more week and then I was going to personally make sure that the rest of your life would be spent in no small amount of discomfort. But you have violated my office without being invited, which means that unless the reason for your actions



is anything but memory related I will not wait for the week to play out. I'll damn well kill you with my bare hands right here.'

'I remembered!' said Justin.

The Boss' jaw dropped. He hadn't really expected the revelation to come at all. In fact, he'd become resigned to the idea that the hunt was well and truly over, that Mr Winkle had won.

'Tarquin,' Said the Boss once he'd regained his composure, 'break out the champagne... and I mean the good stuff.'

The Boss' phone rang, 'Yes...' there was a pause while the person on the other end of the phone spoke, 'well I suggest that you find your way down here, we're about to open a very choice bottle of bubbly and it'd be wonderful if you could join us and tell us all about it.'

The grin that spread across The Boss' pale, pasty, damp skinned face made Justin feel a little sick. It had malice in it that made the air smell like run over skunk, rotten carcass and burning flesh mixed with a little putrid bile. Hell was dripping from his intensions. His pleasure was hateful.

'Sir?' Ventured Justin.

'That was Cat, she just had a phone conversation from someone very important to our cause. Someone who knows a little about Mr Winkle' Said the Boss, and then hissed under his breath, 'I've got you, I've damn well got you now you bastard!'

Justin Stain found The Boss' expression gut wrenching.

'It appears that we now know where they are heading Mr Stain. Combined with the proper frequency for the tracking device, we should be able provide a nice big welcoming committee for the snivelling little shit!'

## Chapter 29

### The Sphere Agent in the Opium Den

Carl was doing one of his favourite things, he was lying in an opium den and whiling away the hours between bouts of violence in a smoke filled stupor when someone he recognised walked in.

The room he was in was the only one in the building. It was fairly sizeable, at least thirty foot square and had a number of yellow stained silk screens partitioning off the dozens of bunks. The bunks were littered with blankets and cushions, designed to induce the highest level of horizontal comfort that the single roomed bamboo hut could supply while the air bled thick plumes of reality altering smoke, paralysing its inhabitants with a deep joyful daze.

Carl, due to the chip in his head that turned him into a super soldier, took a great deal more opium than anyone else in the room and was still not completely stupefied. His wits were still very much with him; they pierced the catatonic daze no matter how vehemently and greedily he sucked on his opium pipe. For the most part the drug's job was to keep his propensity for bad judgement and psychotic behaviour to a minimum, it was just a bonus that it got him a bit stoned.

The person that had just entered the room was the kind of person that Carl would have much rather not bumped into, but as fate would have it the encounter was one that he would have hated to have missed.

The man was lead across the room by one of the hosts, a small Thai woman who carried an ornate wooden box in which the tools of the opium distributor were arranged with almost religious reverence. The man's eyes suspiciously scanned the room as Carl watched him through a crack in his silk and wood partition. There was no way that the man had seen Carl but he couldn't risk it. He would have to be eliminated.

The man was a mercenary, just as Carl was but unlike Carl he was still very loyal to the Sphere of influence. If he was in the area then others from the Sphere might be. Carl had to find out who was close by and then make sure that the man never told anyone that he'd seen him. It would almost definitely mean that he'd have to leave the area, which disgruntled him somewhat as the looting was good and the opium dens were second to none.

'So be it!' He thought as he scowled through the screen, preparing himself for the confrontation. He would have to be careful, nobody could be allowed to see what he was up to, which wasn't much of a worry as ninety nine percent of the people in there were completely incapacitated.

He waited until the man had settled into his cot, had his pipe stocked and lit for him and the host had gone back to her seat at the entrance. He dropped from his cot and tentatively crawled on his belly through the maze of intoxication, slowly creeping up on the man. He drew a very large and nasty looking knife as he approached him from behind, slowly edging the blade around to point at his jugular.

'Hello Kenny!' he whispered in the man's ear.

'Hello?' asked the man as if to the ether. His stone had well and truly kicked in, altering his perception, he didn't have a clue where the voice was coming from and for a moment thought that he was on the phone, but then he realised that he didn't even have a phone, then thought about how nice it would be to have a phone out in the jungle, you could call sex chat lines when you were bored or find out what time it was in Alaska.

'Kenny?' A voice brought him back from a little mental visit to Alaska.

'Is there someone there or is this just really good stuff?' Kenny asked the air.

'I'm here Kenny, its Carl and the sharp thing at your throat is called "a bloody huge hunk of metal designed to cut things into little pieces" and we'd like to have a little word.'

'Carl?' said Kenny, 'What... Carl Brown from North Berwick High school?'

'No you pillock, Carl, nasty piece of work with a computer chip in his brain that turned him into a maniac killer!'

'Oh *that* Carl!' Kenny grinned widely as if very pleased with himself for enacting some super natural feat of memory but then his expression began to change as memories of blood and violence crawled into his mind, linking with the man standing over him. His face dropped slowly, ending in something not far off absolute terror, which is impressive as it's quite difficult to be colossally stoned and terrified at the same time.

'Holy shit,' he said, '*that* Carl!'

'Now we're getting somewhere, I need to ask you a few things before I kill you. Now, you can answer and die quickly, or you resist and I can spend the rest of the night making you spectacularly uncomfortable.'

'Oh man, look I just came in here to chill out for a while man, what's with all the agro, here, let be buy you a big pipe.'

'I don't need a big pipe Kenny, I need you to answer some questions.' Carl's voice broke Kenny's battered senses like a heart attack in the middle of a laughing fit. 'How many other agents are there in the area?'

'Agents? There aren't any... hhhmmmmpppphhh!' Carl's hand had covered Kenny's mouth as the stupidly large knife started carving the word "bollocks" into his collar bone.

'Now... there are lots of bones in your body Kenny and I pretty much know how to get at them all in a very nasty way without killing you. So, I'll ask you again. How many agents are there in the area?'

'Come on man,' pleaded Kenny through a wall of pain, 'I saved your life back in school man!'

'That's a different Carl, we've already been through this!' said Carl as he carved the word "wanker" next to the other word.

'Jesus Christ man I'm telling you, they are no agents in the area!'

"Tosser" etched in the back of his skull.

'Stop it, God stop it... look, just relax for a second, I've got information for you, something you'll want to know, just stop that for a minute would man,

please, for me, for high school!' Said Kenny, in a strange mixture of extreme stone, terror and pain, too mashed to discern between old school friends and psychotic mercenaries with very big knives.

'Tell me and I'll make it quick'

'The whole organisation's been on tenterhooks ever since Shoop Winkle disappeared.' He rattled out, 'The Boss wants him really bad, and you, and all the other guys that he hired but the Boss found out where he's going next. He's planning an ambush.'

Carl couldn't believe his luck.

'Where!?'

## Chapter 30

### Shoop is a Blur

The silence at the castle was palpable. The bustling hordes that had been lapping up the atmosphere surrounding the Shoop TV evenings had gone. Over the months more and more of them had taken up permanent residence there but the news that Shoop Winkle and his cronies were on their way, and that Shoop was displaying higher, more vicious powers than ever before, had forced Jill to ask everyone to leave.

Shoop's sixth sense had gone haywire.

He was sharper, quicker, stronger and more brutal than anyone had ever dreamed possible. He was even surprising himself. His abilities had increased by a factor of fifty easily. His bones rattled, his teeth ached, his muscles were an odd mix of limber yet taught and sinewy. He was becoming something abnormal, unnatural. He was becoming exactly the sort of thing that he'd spent his whole life hunting and killing with such rampant abandon and he had no idea why.

Jill knew though.

She knew, which was why she opted to stay behind at the castle and wait for him, much to the pain of all her followers. Especially Ben.



The sun poked over the horizon, painting the highlands island landscape blood red and orange. The snows had melted and the interesting little winter flowers that Jill had created for a laugh had all withered to make way for the spring blooms. The trees hadn't blossomed yet as the last winter chills hung on for dear life and the entire vista looked barren, red and hellish.

It was going to be a very long day.

Jill stood on the ramparts of the castle with a good hot mug of herbal tea, scanning the view, absorbing it, taking in every moment as she knew that she wouldn't be back there again any time soon, if at all.

She was feeling pretty positive though. She knew that she was about to die and was quite looking forward to it. Dying was always really interesting; linking back in with the ether, the pull back to conscious reality. It was like no rollercoaster she'd ever been on and she'd been on a lot of rollercoasters. She really liked the way her tummy tickled when she plummeted down on them.

She was also looking forward to her new body. Whenever she got a new body it felt like the world's biggest ever shopping trip where you look good in absolutely everything you put on. Loads of fun, and this time she was going for a hot blonde of Amazonian proportions, a look she'd never messed around with before and was thoroughly looking forward to it. She'd bought loads of sexy underwear for the occasion and was planning on prancing around to the soundtrack from cabaret. She'd even bought a bowler hat.

She'd made everyone leave the castle, but one person hadn't. He'd hidden in a cupboard and waited for the rest of the house to vacate. He still had things on his mind and couldn't leave without getting Jill on her own.

Jill heard footsteps behind her.

'Hi Ben... how's it going?'

'How did you...?' the thought trailed off. 'Never mind, I'm sure I wouldn't understand how you knew I was still here anyway.'

'We've spent enough time together for me to know when you're planning on doing something sneaky.' Said Jill with a cheeky grin.

Ben walked over to the ramparts where Jill was standing to watch the sunrise with her.

The land went from bloody red, pink and orange to light orange, yellow and then the sun poked it's fiery head fully over the horizon, turning the sky blue and making shadows long. Freakishly, there were no birds singing. There was nothing but the sound of the wind brushing their ears. It was almost as if the island knew the wealth of carnage that was about to be visited on it.

Ben shivered.

'Cold?' asked Jill.

'Not really... I don't know what it is... something doesn't feel quite right and I can't put my finger on it but I know I don't like it.'

'Shall we go back in? They're almost here and I suspect that we should have a little chat before they arrive. Anyway, I need a new cup of tea.'

'Sounds like a plan.' Said Ben, trying to sound light but with clear heavy undertones in his voice.

They made their way down the stone spiralling stairway and along the ancient corridors to Jill's study where she put on the kettle and dropped some herbal tea into some mugs.

'So,' said Jill, 'are you gonna tell me about it?'

'What's that then?' Said Ben, still trying to sound light hearted but was soaked in the troubled undercurrents.

Jill simply looked at him and waited for him to drop his façade. He had no defence against her gaze and within seconds he saw the folly of pretending.

'Jeez Jill, just once I'd like to be able to fool you.'

'No you don't'

'Good point.'

'So what's going on Ben, why still here?'

'You know already!'

'Yeah but you need to tell me, otherwise you'd have left with the rest of them.'

Ben sighed, uncertain of how to start, 'do you want to start, tell me what it is I'm doing here?'

'No, love' said Jill warmly, 'I think on this occasion you should be telling me, but take your time though, we've still got a few hours.'

Ben stared off into the distance trying to arrange his thoughts. After a few minutes he piped up.

'I couldn't let it go. I just couldn't go and leave you to face my brother all on your own.'

'That's part of it,' said Jill, 'but not the root.'

Ben felt a small stab of resentment toward her. She was always so damn right, how did she do that? How did she know what was lying under the surface without even trying?

'Look... it's just...' another sigh. He realised that his anger at Jill's prodding was misplaced. He wasn't upset with her at all; he just didn't want to admit that he was feeling the way he was feeling. He just wanted to be left alone to do what he had to do and he knew that talking to Jill would almost certainly stop him.

'...it's just... HIM!' His face contorted as he said it, 'you've meant the world to me. You picked me up off the streets and you made me see another side to life, a side that isn't eternally painful and messed up. You helped me become the person that I've always wanted to be but there's something of the old me left. The scared me, the me that accepted that things always turn out bad in the end. There's a drop of cynicism left that *he* put there and I can't let it go. I can't get rid of it.'

'He's the personification of your torment isn't he?' Queried Jill.

'Exactly!' Ben exclaimed. 'I have to see him, to stop him. I have to put this demon to rest inside me, and if I manage to stop him doing you any harm in the process then that'd be a bonus. I only know you for the way you are now. Little Jill, the chilled, out cool as Christmas, black hippy lady. I can't imagine you any other way and part of me doesn't want you to change. Damn it Jill why does this have to happen?'

'Why does what have to happen?'

'Why can't you be somewhere else for fuck's sake,' tears began to well in his eyes and his voice shook slightly. He fought to keep control but he'd held it all in for far too long and there was no stopping the floodgates from opening. 'Why do you HAVE to stay here and be killed? It doesn't make any sense to me.' He was gushing now. Sobs shook him. 'I don't get it... I just don't get it man. You know what's going to happen and you're staying here anyway. You should leave and let ME deal with the Boss. This is what I was *meant* to do, not you, not you damn it. Facing him is meant to be, I can feel it in here!' Ben slapped his hand firmly into his chest, pleading with Jill with eyebrows that made a kind of upside down V shape, tears meandering down his face.

'You can't do this Jill, you've got to leave. You've got to leave him to me or I'll never be whole. Please Jill, please don't take this away from me.'

'You'll be killed!' said Jill

Ben saw this as a sign of her weakening her resolve, 'I don't mind... I'll be fine! That's what you always say right? When people die... they'll be fine! And I will be too but if you do this and leave me... without you... I won't be fine for Christ's sake... I won't be bloody fine!' Ben's voice was strained with emotion, thin and bubbling from the phlegm in his throat from crying. He dropped to his knees, begging for her to understand.

'You've got to do this for me Jill, you've just got to... it's meant to be!'

'Oh Ben... my dear Ben, how broken you've been.'

'You can't say no, YOU CAN'T!'

Jill lowered herself to her knees to face him, took one of his hands and stroked his face with the other.

'Your time *is* coming Ben. Believe me but you can't save me, do you know why?'

Ben made a gurgling sniff and his shoulders slumped. His pleading hadn't worked and he knew it.

'No! I don't bloody well know why. It doesn't make sense! Can't you see me? Can't you see what this is doing to me? can't you see what I have to do? Why can't you get it? This is meant to be the way it turns out. This is *my* fight and always has been, it's got nothing to do with you. I'll lock you up. I'll lock you in the dungeon until it's all over and you won't be able to stop me damn it!'

Jill kept stroking his face, a movement that would've melted the hardest heart but Ben's resolve was too firm. He wouldn't budge, dejected and harassed as he was, his resolve stood firm.

'You can't save me Ben. You can't save me because I'm already saved. There's nothing that The Boss or Mr Winkle can do to me that'll make the blindest bit of difference. You can't save me because what you believe to be "meant to be" is just a product of the damage that your brother has done to *you*. It's all just him talking through your mouth Ben. If you face him now you'll do nothing but make him right. Your time will come Ben. It WILL come but it's not now. Not today.'

'I don't get it Jill, I just don't get it!'

'You will, but right now you have to trust me. You have to be patient. If you stand up to your brother today, all the time that we've spent together will be in vane. He'll win. The destruction and anger that he sprouts will be proven, justified. Is that what you really want.'

Jill's words came in warm, calm rivulets, washing over Ben like bubbles in a hot tub, soothing his aching chest. He hated that she was winning him over, the anger rose inside him again and he made one last ditch attempt at getting what he wanted.

'You've never really known me have you!?' His voice was low, sly and suspicious. He snatched his hand away, 'you just want me to be another one of your damn minions, that's all it is! You've fucking brain washed me, your trying to

take away the one thing that I've always been meant to do, it's my fate and you're trying to kill it for me.' He stood, his face red, finger stabbing in Jill's direction accusingly, veins pulsing in his neck, the anger reaching it's pinnacle and his voice became harse and rancid. 'Who the fuck are you to be nannying ME!? I'm big enough and ugly enough to be making my own damn mistakes! I don't need you! You've done NOTHING but hold me back. You're fucking evil! EVIL! You're nothing but a manipulator, a traitor to everything that you ever taught me! Fuck you Jill! Fuck you AND the horse you rode in on!'

Jill slapped him.

Shock pulsed through Ben's body, electrocuting him. His central nervous system crashed, his muscles stiffened and he put his hand up to his face to feel where Jill's hand had collided with him. His eyes went wide in disbelief.

'Wh... what the... how... you actually... hit me!?'

'Feels kinda groovy doesn't it.' Said Jill smiling contentedly.

The waves of absolute mind pummelling shock racked Ben's brain and body, making his head spin and his body tingle. He had to admit it... it *did* feel kinda groovy.

'Yeah... it does... sort of... but why did you..?'

'You were turning a bit funny there for a minute Ben. Thought a short sharp shock might help.'

'You bloody well hit me! Weren't you Jesus at one point, what happened to turning the other cheek and all that?'



'Well you *could* turn the other cheek if you like.' Said Jill giggling a little.  
'Anyway, that was a misquote.'

'What did you really say then?'

'I don't actually remember saying anything of the sort. I think when it actually happened I was talking about tickling. Me and some of the disciples were trying to see if we could make each other wet ourselves through tickling, one of the rules was that you weren't allowed to fight off the ticklers. I think it came from then but I can't be sure.'

'You really know how to mess with my head you know that... shit!' Ben's shock started to subside a little and the reality of his rant poked it's way into his head, '... I just called you evil didn't I.'

'Yeah, I thought that was pretty funny. But not as funny as... ' Jill put on a fake Clint Eastwood voice, '...the "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on" line. That was brilliant! Absolutely priceless!' She fought to hold back a laugh.

Ben shook his head a bit, he looked at Jill trying to suppress her laughter and let out a giggle.

They both started laughing. Mildly at first but it soon built up momentum. Inside of a minute they were both rolling around on the floor making joyfully pained high pitched squeaking noises and holding their stomachs, laugh cramps making them convulse.

'oooohh... Christ on a bike!' said Ben through a tightened giggle throat, 'what the hell was I thinking!? Seriously,' he squeaked very un-seriously, 'what the hell was my head doing?'

'I slapped you!' Jill's voice was at the point where only dogs could hear her. 'Right in the face!'

They broke up again.

Fifteen minutes later they managed to gain some composure and attempted to claw their way up from the floor by using various pieces of furniture. At one point Ben toppled a chair and fell on his arse causing another uncontrollable fit of giggles.

Eventually they calmed down. Realising that their tea had gone cold. Jill put the kettle on again.

'Seriously though Jill, I'm really sorry, I don't quite know what came over me.'

'Oh it's fairly straightforward, you said it all yourself. You feel responsible for your brother and you'll not be happy until you've dealt with him. The thing is though, if you do deal with him, he'll infect you. You'll become a little more like him. The pain that he's given you will grow and you'll never be free of the bugger.'

'I still have problems with leaving you here.'

'It's too late for that anyway, they're almost here. You'll have to stay, which might mess your head up a bit but you can't lose your cool. That is very

important Ben. YOU MUSTN'T LOSE YOUR COOL! I cannot emphasise that enough.'

'How bad is it going to get exactly?' Ben's brow furrowed slightly.

'Well, there's no real way to be sure but you may have to witness me getting shot.'

'WHAT?'

'I said... you may well have to...'

'I heard what you said! I can't do that!'

'Yes you can Ben! And you will! There are more important things going on here than you know about. It is very important that you keep your cool and don't do anything silly while today's events transpire. If you don't, a lot of damage could be done. Besides. I may die today, but I'll see you soon.'

'But it won't be the same!'

'No, it won't, but that's the beauty of it. The change will help you.'

There was a loud crack of gunfire from off in the distance beyond the castle grounds, followed, a few minutes later, by a lot more.

'We've run out of time, they got here sooner than I'd thought and it sounds like they've got company.' Said Jill, 'quick, get in the cupboard and don't come out until everyone's either gone or dead.'

'But...'

'Ben... do this thing for me okay. It's important!'

Ben gave her a pained expression but nodded his head in agreement anyway. They hugged and Ben slouched off and crawled into a cupboard in the corner.

Shoop's journey had not been an easy one. The resistance that he and the Independents came across was far more stringent than anything they'd encountered during their quest. It was as if the Sphere had cottoned on to what they were doing. It didn't matter though as Shoop's abilities had despatched with all of the confrontations without any need for his cronies. They were starting to feel a little redundant, watching him tear people to shreds with his bare hands without even breaking a sweat. In fact, when he fought, it was as if the act of combat calmed the raging torrent of his sixth sense for a time. After any confrontation he felt a little bit calmer and was almost his old self, but not for long.

His bones still rattled and the aggression inside him quickly picked up pace. It was everything he could do not to start randomly massacring strangers in the street. Keeping control took everything he had.

By the time he reached the Isle of Skye he hadn't had a fight for far too long. His palms were sweaty, his bones hurt and his temper was borderline satanic. On top of that, the sixth sense seemed to be increasing massively the closer they got to their goal and by the time they rowed up to the tiny beach on the grounds of the castle he was a shivering wreck. Curled up in a ball, jaw clenched in crocodilic proportions and his body was a tight ball of agony. His

mind was breaking. He was losing control and he wanted to let his rage fly more with every passing second.

The small row boat crunched onto the gravel beach, Jim and Komodo jumped out to pull it all the way onto the land but as soon as Komodo started to pull, Jim upped and bolted up the beach like lightening.

‘Where the hell are you going?’ Shouted Komodo after him, not quite understanding what he was playing at.

‘Hey!’ He shouted again.

‘What’s happening?’ Grunted Shoop through the cold sweats and clenched teeth.

‘It’s Jim... he just upped and buggered off!’ Said Komodo scratching his chin, ‘Like a stray dog from a kebab shop! Weird that!’

‘We’ll deal with him later,’ said Shoop, ‘right now I’ve got to get to the vessel before I explode.’

Shoop hauled himself out of the boat and scrambled up the beach, using all his mental powers not to fold up and die on the spot. It felt as if he would quite literally burst at any moment, the pressure inside him was at the point of going super nova and, seeing a group of squirrels frolicking around under a tree near by, shot at them at such speed that Komodo and Yan didn’t even see him go. Whatever was happening to him had given him incredible speed, strength and agility. He was a blur and he hit the squirrels before they knew what was happening and erupted in a cloud of fur and entrails.

'JESUS!' exclaimed Komodo.

'Aaah,' sighed Shoop as the squirrel remains floated down to earth, 'that's better!' he slumped down onto the ground and started shaking with his equivalent of a smile on his face, which looked an awful lot like he was trying to pinch out a particularly uncooperative bowel movement.

Jim was quite some way away by then heading to a meeting point that he'd managed to arrange behind Shoop's back. It hadn't been easy keeping his intentions to himself but Shoop's worsening condition had made things easier for him. The woman in the red dress poured her poison into his ears with expert tones, lulling him into the belief that he could change his life. He could make things right, he could escape his wicked life and spent endless nights brushing his cheeks on those incredible thighs, sighing with contentment with every passing second of bliss.

He flew through the underbrush, eyes wide, drooling at the prospect of seeing her again, his heart fluttering like a hamster having a heart attack.

She'd put him well and truly under her spell. He hadn't even thought it odd when she asked him about the vessel that Shoop was hunting for. It hadn't occurred to him that it was slightly suspicious that she needed him to tell her exactly where they were all going and that she would meet him there. Her work had been done so well that he had offered up all the information without the slightest hesitation or inkling that she might be setting him up.

In his rabid desire to get to her he stumbled through the brush, tripping occasionally with a madman's eyes blurring his vision. He made it the main gates of the castle walls, headed through them over a road and into the Scot's pine forest beyond.

She'd told him to go in a direct line from the gate, into the forest and he'd come across a clearing. She would meet him there.

He fumbled away, tripping, cutting his face on a branch. Blood trickled down his face but he didn't feel a thing, his desire was all encompassing, he was blind with passion. He was finally going to see her again. For a brief moment he wondered if she looked good in anything other than the red dress and then called himself a fool for thinking it. He'd pictured her in a dozen outfits on his journeys. Every quiet moment had him talking to her inside his mind, sometimes in jeans, sometimes underwear, she even looked good in a damn boiler suit, he couldn't quite figure out why he'd dreamt that one up though. The weirdest one was her dressed as Nancy Reagan, wig and everything and it still gave him a boner.

He ran and ran until finally, without warning, the forest broke open into a sunlit glade with a slight rise in the centre.

There she was.

Standing in a beam of sunlight. The forest haze curling round her in rivulets, like she was floating under water, the wind playing with her hair curling around her face and framing it with ethereal expertise.

He dropped to his knees in awe. The sight was too much for his legs to handle and tears of joy began to trickle down his face.

'I found you.' He whimpered. He thought that he could die happy right there, which was quite ironic because that's exactly what was about to happen. Except for the happy part.

'I found you!' he was sobbing now.

She was wearing a black cat suit. He hadn't seen that one coming but it didn't matter as she was still fabulously striking.

He let his eyes drink her up for a moment.

'Hello Jim.' Her voice was warm treacle. He shuddered at the sound of it. Talking to her on the phone had taken away it's full power but faced with it in all it's glory, the poor bugger turned into a puddle of obedience and worship. From his knees he bend forward as if in praise.

'Are they here?'

'Yes my love, they're making their way to the castle now but Mr Winkle isn't in a very good way, somethings happening to him.'

'What?' her voice was orgasmically silken.

'I don't know, he's falling to pieces. The closer we got to the vessel, the worse he got. He could barely move on the beach.'

'That's excellent news.' She said.



Then something happened. Some other voice came out of her, a voice he thought he knew.

'I'm really glad you could make it Jimbo!' The voice was shrill, nasal, foul. It made his skin crawl. He couldn't understand what was happening and his face contorted into at least 14 different kinds of "what the fuck?" face.

'Aww, you look confused mate!' The shrill voice again, 'don't you recognise old friends.' It was an insult to all that was right and good in the world to hear this vision speak with such vile tones, vile tones he recognised... it was CAT!

His eyes widened in disbelief.

'No... no! You can't... but how the...!?'

Footsteps behind him, all around him, he was surrounded. It occurred to him then how stupid he'd been to run blindly into the forest, blinkers on and not check his surroundings. It was her. She'd blinded him with her words.

Men in dark suits appeared all around him out of the trees. He shook his head and smiled.

'You've got better Cat. I have to say that new voice, that new face... you've improved your game a hundred fold.'

She went back to the silken voice, 'Been a long time Jim.'

'A long time since you destroyed my life!' the confusion giving way to pure hatred. He felt like an absolute fool for falling for her while a second time.

'You're not still angry are you?' She said in mock concern

'Might say that!' His voice naught but a grunt.

The Boss emerged behind her, 'I'd like to thank you for helping us so willingly Jim, but I'm afraid you are going to have to die in a very slow and painful manner, you see, I can't have people defying me willy nilly now can I. It's starts to domino. So we're going to have to take our time over you, you know, for example purposes.' His voice was pure venomous glee.

'How vomitously predictable!' Said Jim and began to break down, sobbing and blubbing like a child. The Boss and his men didn't quite know what to do with this. Jim was supposed to be this immensely hard killing machine, yet there he was, hands over face weeping like a smacked bairn.

Cat couldn't quite figure it either. They all looked at each other in bemusement until, with stunning speed, Jim hurled a throwing knife into Cat's neck and leapt at her, landing on top of her, grabbing the knife and twisting in inside her, tearing away at her neck muscles and scraping her jugular.

The Sphere agents could took a moment to recover from his weeping distraction but when they did, a volley of gun fire tore Jim to pieces, sending, flesh and shattered bone up into a cloud but not before he made one final twist of the knife, severing Cat's artery.

Some of the men swore that the cloud of mashed gristle that Jim turned into had a smile in the middle of it.

Cat choked, gagged, wriggled, looked around for help but nobody gave it. She held her hand out to the Boss who just raised an eyebrow and said, 'what goes around comes around dearie!' And gave a slight smirk as she drifted off into hell.

'What the fuck was that!' said Komodo hearing the volley of gunfire in the distance.

'We've got company!' said Shoop, still shaking like George W Bush when he hasn't got anyone telling him what to do but looking strangely excited at the prospect of conflict. Finally, his increasing lust for extreme and ludicrous violence was about to be realised. He could still feel the pull toward the vessel but the idea of a fight calmed him, made him feel a little more in control. He figured that the vessel would still be there when he'd finished and if he didn't deal with the intruders now, then he'd have to when he came out. 'Sod it!' he thought, 'violence it is!'

'The Vessel can wait... we've got more important things to deal with. Komodo, head up that way, flank whoever comes through the main gate on the left, Yan head of to the right.' The sneer that spread across Shoop's face chilled both of them to their marrow, 'I'm gonna meet them head on!' Manic glee painted on his face as his voice, more gravel than human, croaked from his throat.

'GO... NOW!'

They all ran off in their separate directions, Shoop with inhuman speed. In fact Komodo and Yan swore that they heard a pop as he broke the sound barrier.

The Boss and his men made their way out of the forest to the min gate, the Sphere all with their guns pointing in random directions, vigilant and on edge yet deadly. They had no idea what they were about to meet.

The Boss walked through the gate, looked down the path, nothing there, then a voice.

'I'm afraid I can't let you go any further.'

Shoop Winkle had appeared out of nowhere.

'Jesus!' said one of the Sphere agents, 'Where the fuck did he come from!'

'Shut up!' The Boss spat back at him. 'My dear Mr Winkle,' his voice was black tar, 'You've given me far more trouble than I would normally allow, why would you believe that me and my two hundred or so men will be doing anything other than tearing you to pieces until you tell what it is you've been up to this whole time.'

'*You will go NO further!*' Something in Shoop's hissing voice made a number of men step back slightly.

'Maybe you didn't hear Mr Winkle, I have in excess of two hundred men hear... *it's over Winkle!*'

Something about Shoop's appearance was unnerving the men. The Boss hadn't noticed it, his over confidence blinding him. His joy at having beaten Shoop coursing through every fibre of his being but the agents noticed felt something odd. They couldn't put their fingers on it, it was an air of cruelty that seemed to leek from him. He had some sort of aura that couldn't be seen, only felt and it didn't feel very nice. Their mistake was to believe that their numbers would be more than enough to cope with whatever it was that he was emitting.

'This will be the last time I say this, and then things are going to get very sticky around here... *you will go no further!*'

'This is boring... blow his legs off!'

At the Boss' command dozens of guns were trained and fired at Shoop simultaneously, all perfectly aimed at his knees, which should have been disintegrated, and all missing. Shoop was gone.

The Boss, startled, began to fall back into the crowd of men.

'GET HIM!' He yelled as the huge number started to file through the gate some heading forward, some heading off to the side to flank him.

They'd barely gone a few feet when a blur whipped into them like a hell bent poltergeist, tearing at them, ripping them, sending limbs and bodies flying in a grotesque explosion of human anatomy. As more and more men filed through the gates, firing randomly into the air at where they thought the blur was, or might be, other men pulled the Boss to the back of the hordes of gun toting, black suited, soon to be dead agents.

'NO YOU FOOLS, PUSH ME TO THE FRONT!' Shoop heard the Boss yell as he disappeared into the crowd of agents. He would've wondered why if he hadn't been in such a blood drunk frenzy. The agents were simply too panicked, dead or dying to take any notice of anything but the body mangling blur.

The crowd got thicker and thicker and started to push Shoop further back into the gardens. Some men headed up the sides of the walls in an attempt to flank their enemy. They quickly became aware that the routes they were taking were nothing but thin corridors between the walls and the undergrowth. They pushed on none the less, until on one flank, some of the agents stopped for a minute, turned around and starting firing on their companions. At least seven men were felled before anyone thought to fire back.

Yan appeared behind the rebelling men, occasionally firing over their heads and when one of his converts were killed he'd stare at another one until he turned around and started firing at his own men. It was the perfect shield and the bodies were mounting fast.

Back over at the other flank Komodo was also building up a fair pile of carcasses. He'd decided to attack from above, confusing his adversaries long enough to build up a pile of bodies to hide behind but both Yan and Komodo knew that they wouldn't be able to hold of a number so great for very long.

A grenade hit the pile of bodies in front of Komodo, knocking him clean over the wall where he lay for quite some time, unconscious, half way up a tree but not before wiping out at least thirty men.

Yan was caught under an avalanche of bodies after killing a similar number. He was knocked out, barely able to breath, crushed but still alive. The agents couldn't see him after the avalanche and set about trying to combat the blur that was Mr Winkle who was still ripping and tearing at people with a supernatural brutality.

It seemed that the Sphere agents were doomed. There was nothing that could stop Shoop and his frenzy and the men started retreating back through the gates.

This suited the Boss just fine. He stood there, letting the panicked agents file past him. It took every ounce of self control as he was, after all, a snivelling little coward but he'd been told something not half an hour ago that would, hopefully, stand him in good stead.

The men ran and ran past him, the cloud of mangled bodies exploding from the front line getting closer and closer. The Boss got more and more nervous, beads of sweat dripping down his forehead even in the cold spring morning air.

"Hold fast!" he's been told, "You'll want to run but hold fast, trust me on this, it all depends on this!"

With every ounce of his being he wanted to run, he wasn't good at being brave and finally his mind let him down and he turned to run in panic. Luckily, though, he was such a gut-wrenching coward that he found himself petrified with

terror. He went to move but couldn't. His eyes darted wildly as if he was trying to make them drag him out of harms way.

Closer, closer, almost on top of him now.

He felt blood splatter his face and then, Like a flash, there he was. Shoop Winkle, face to face with the Boss, both absolutely static. The Boss was routed to the spot, eyes wide, unable to move and Shoop looked as if someone had found a pause button on him. He was in mid air, poised to strike, like a stuffed wild cat in a museum about to mince a stuffed rabbit. He hung there, like there was a barrier in front of him that he just couldn't get through.

One minute he was a fabulous blur of ultra-violence and the next he was as rigid as a porn stars under carriage.

They both looked at each other. The Boss with clear terror in his eyes and Shoop with potent hatred, neither of them able to do anything about there situation.

One of the agents took this moment to raise a weapon.

'Need him alive!' squeaked the Boss through his fear.

Shoop's eyes darted to the side. He wanted to attack but it was no good, he just had to wait while the tranquiliser dart made it's way to him. It didn't do much, so they fired another, and another until finally, with the seventh dart, Shoop slumped down to the ground. They bound him very tightly with heavy chains and took stock of their dead and dying.



By this time Komodo had managed to get out of his tree and was heading for the pre-arranged meeting point and Yan had dug himself out from under the piles of dead agents and limped of in the same direction.

Shoop fought the sleep that was gripping him. To be stumped at this, the final hurdle. For months he'd battled to rid himself of the Boss and this was where it all ended. He fought the sleep but it got the better of him.

He'd lost!

# Chapter 31

## Shoop Shoots Jill in the Face

'Jill? What's going on out there?'

'Be patient Ben, stay in your cupboard, it looks like the fighting's over, I believe this is where it'll get interesting. Now remember, no matter what you hear, stay in there and do *not* come out. *I* can find a new body to go and live in... *you* can't!'

'Any chance of a cuppa while I'm in here?'

'Oh how very rude of me, of course, I'll just put the kettle on shall I.'

When Shoop woke he was lying at the foot of the steps of the castle. Firmly bound but glad at the fact that his temporary paralysis seemed to have subdued.

Just before the violence had erupted The Boss had made a phone-call, the voice on the other end had told him that if he stood perfectly still as Shoop was attacking him that he would be fine, that Shoop would be unable to harm him. Remarkably, it had worked and now The Boss had Shoop at his mercy.

The man on the phone had also given him other instructions.

'You're probably wondering why you're alive.' Said the Boss

'Had crossed my mind.' Shoop grunted through blood spattered spittle.

'Well, I need you to go in there and get the vessel for me.'

'Piss off! Just put a bullet between my eyes, I'm never taking an order from you ever again you shivering cock weasel!'

'Oh I think you'll do exactly what I say. Just sit there for a minute and you'll realise that you have no choice. I'm a patient man, I can wait.'

Shoop lay still, trying to muster strength enough to break the chains that bound him, rebellion coursing through his veins. There was no way in hell that he was going to do the Boss' bidding, not after everything that he'd been through.

He waited as the strength ebbed back into him but with every second came that feeling again, the one that shook his bones, made him want to do extreme violence. The recent battle had made it subside a little but it was crawling back in, making every fibre of his being buzz antagonistically like he was being electrocuted.

The Boss saw the discomfort in Shoop's face and gave off a snide little grin. He bent down to Shoop's ear.

'You still don't get it do you? There's nothing you can do, you are going to have to go in there because every molecule in you wants to. You're aching to get in there and destroy the thing that you've waited and hunted so long for. The thing that you thought would set you free has made you a prisoner. You're mine Winkle!'

'Bastard I'll...'

'You'll what? Tear me limb from limb? You've tried that and you saw how it turned out. You're going to have to face it, this is the end for you. You're going to go in there, destroy the vessel, then you're going to come out here and I'm going to spend the rest of my natural life making sure that you feel nothing but crashing agony for as long as possible. You have no choice. You can't kill me, you'll freeze if you even try.'

Shoop felt the need well up inside him, the need to find the vessel. It was all consuming, it flooded his every sense until reality was nothing but a garbled mumble that he could barely make out.

'The vessel Mr Winkle... get the vessel!'

Every time The Boss said the word "Vessel", it made the need grow in Shoop just that little bit more. He was programmed, he was nothing but a machine that'd been set on a course. All that mattered was reaching the vessel, nothing else made any sense to him, only an echo of himself remained in his skull, fighting from the background to try and make sense of it all.

'I think he's about ready now!' The Boss was so happy it made a number of the few remaining Sphere agents feel a little queasy to look at him. 'Unlock his chains!'

The men looked a little perturbed at this order and a few sideways glances were exchanged before The Boss barked, '*Do it now!*'

The chains were duly removed and Shoop writhed around on the floor for a moment trying and failing to keep the urges within him under control.

'The Vessel Shoop, get the Vessel!' The Boss hissed in his ear.

'What have you done to me you wanker!?'

'Don't blame me Winkle, this urge has always been there. Now... get up and go and destroy the vessel'

Shoop had no choice. He could feel it in his very being. He HAD to get the vessel and he knew that when he found it that he would destroy it. There was nothing he could do, the buzzing inside him was too powerful.

He stood, his face a collage of pain, anguish and reluctant compliance and, shaking and gyrating, he made his way up the steps to the main door of the castle. The tiny part of him that remained unconsumed by these strange urges cursed the Boss, begging for the strength to turn, leap and rip the silly little bastards head clean off with his bare hands. Every time he considered it, however, he could feel his limbs stiffen, they threatened to cramp up and stop altogether. He didn't understand, why couldn't he just kill him, what the hell was going on. He felt like nothing more than an inanimate chess piece being sacrificed for a master that he didn't know and he was powerless to stop it. He was the pawn that he'd spent his whole life trying not to be. He was in his own personal hell.

He wobbled up the steps in a jerky fashion and went inside.

His legs knew exactly where to take him, he didn't even have to wonder at which direction to go, he just went. Up the main grandiose stone stairway,

turning left as it split up into separate directions. He followed the red carpet on the stone stairs as it got to the top and carried on down a corridor, up a spiral stair, along another corridor until he reached a door.

He leant against the door frame trying to gather himself. The thing that he'd been hunting for for so long was on the other side of this door, he knew it, he could feel it in the rattling of his sixth sense.

His jaw was tight, his knuckles white, his desperation at it's absolute pinnacle. He tried to reach for the door handle but his hand was shaking too violently, he simply couldn't grab a hold of the damn thing. He tried to steady his arm with his other hand, which only exacerbated the issue and his hand flopped about uncontrollably.

Suddenly, the door opened by itself. There was nobody on the other side letting him in, the door had just simply *decided* to be open. The part of Shoop's brain that wasn't consumed by the sixth sense took a moment to think "weird!" before he jerked into the room.

'Do come in Mr Winkle, would you like a cup of tea?'

He launched, the sound of the voice was beyond anything that he'd ever experienced, the need to kill, to wipe out that voice for all time was so uncontrollably massive that he could've run clean through every iron walled vault in fort knox to get at it and stub it out.

The voice was in a chair in front of a window, Shoop couldn't see the body that the voice belonged to until he was stopped dead in the middle of his rabid

pounce. He was in mid air, wondering how he'd got there, when a hand came out from behind the chair, palm facing him and all of a sudden the urge subsided, sank deep down inside him and his aggression faltered. His leap no longer held it's momentum and he came crashing down onto the ornate antique writing desk, bounced off it and tumbled to the floor on the other side taking a paper weight and a lamp with him.

The overwhelming desire to destroy wasn't quite gone, but it was very much reduced. His own mind came back into play, the one that hated to be trapped, that hated to be a pawn and a billion questions raced through his mind, as if the rage of his sixth sense had held his brain in a choke hold and now it was released, it bloody well wanted answers!

'WHAT THE FUCK... IS GOING ON HERE?!'

'Tea?' said Jill

Shoop saw her for the first time. This thing called the vessel, this person that he'd risked everything he ever had to find. The single most important find of his life and he couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. There'd been a huge build up to this moment and it didn't seem right to be faced with well, a tiny little hippy woman.

He'd expected some sort of Amazonian princess, or an alien life-form of some sort, even an ancient wizardess or something but not a hippy. Anything but a god-damn hippy!

'TEA? TEA? What the bloody hell are you talking about woman? TEA? NO I DON'T WANT A CUP OF FUCKING TEA YOU DAFT OLD BOOT! Haven't you got the slightest idea of what's going on here!?'

'A lot more than you do dear, now, are we going to talk like civilised beings or are you going to keep up your potty mouth and get nowhere?'

'Potty mouth? Who the fuck says potty mouth? Are you mental? I want fucking answers and I want them fucking now! I've been all over the bloody world looking for something called the vessel, I'm presuming it's you, and all of a sudden I've turned into this rabid killing machine that wants nothing more than to tear your head off and ram it up your own arse and I've got no idea why.'

'Yes I know Mr Winkle, now calm down and perhaps I can help things become a little clearer.'

'Bugger it, I'm just going to tear your head off!'

'You're more than welcome to Shoop, but you might like to know a few things before you do so, it'll help you I promise.'

'Bollocks, you don't know shit!'

'I know that you're lying on the floor instead of tearing me to pieces and I know that it's getting very hard for me to restrain the desire inside you. I've subdued it but I can't hold it off forever. I also know that I could've been a long way away from here by now but I'm not. Why do you suppose that is Mr Winkle?'

'Because you're suicidal?' Shoop half joked.



'I've been around for a very long time Mr Winkle, which I'm sure you're aware of, you found and deciphered my map did you not?'

Shoop looked puzzlingly at her. Maybe she did have something worth saying. It'd been a bloody long hard road, maybe he should relax his blood lust a little and find out some things that may be of import. Maybe he could still get out of this. Maybe he could still kill his way past the Boss and his cronies, though he couldn't see how.

He grappled his way up off the floor and walked around the desk, plonking himself down in a chair opposite the vessel, happy to be rid of his insane blood lust for a moment but still looking more miserable than ever.

'My, you *do* look awful!' Jill scanned Shoop up and down and smiled pleasantly. His clothes were anything but rags after his supersonic speed had burnt and ripped them, his face was a mass of bruises where the Sphere agents had taken a few free shots when he was unconscious and almost every inch of him was covered in the blood of the carnage that he'd visited on his enemies.

'Up yours!' Said Shoop.

'How's about that tea then?'

'I'd sooner have a gin!'

'Are you sure, tea's really good for unblocking your Chakras you know, and yours look quite nastily blocked.'

'Have you got any damn gin or are we going to chat about tea until I lose control again?'

'Well, it just so happens that I got some gin in special. I knew you were coming you see.'

Jill got a glass out and went to find some ice in the corner of the room. 'just gimme the fucking bottle!' Grumbled Shoop.

'As you wish,' said Jill with a saintly smile and lobbed the bottle across the room at Shoop. He caught it, flicked off the cap and skulled a third of the bottle in one draught.

He slumped, the first throws of something close to satisfaction running through him for weeks. He let out a heavy sigh.

In the back of his mind he could feel the monster of his sixth sense lurking, the vessel was in there too, holding it back, keeping it caged for the time being.

'How are you doing that?'

'There's no way I would be able to explain in the short time we've got, in fact I could probably yabber on at you for a decade and you'd probably still be lost.'

'Try me!'

'I don't think you'd get it.'

'Just give it a go before I go mental and turn you into a rearranged version of yourself!'

'Shoop, I've been around for so long and have knowledge of so many things that the merest hint of what I'm capable of would probably turn your brain

into a raisin, but what I will say is this; what's happening to you has happened to others before you, but nobody's managed to get this close before. I must say, Babarus did a good job this time! You've done very well Mr Winkle.'

'Babarus? What the hell are you talking about?'

'I'm sorry, I'm getting ahead of myself, The thing is.. well... we don't have much time, so I'm going to have to talk at you for a while and it's going to be an awful lot to take in. I'll give you a moment, just relax, gather yourself and I'll try and explain.'

Shoop swigged another inordinate amount of gin.

'Okay... relaxed... start talking or I'll fucking dice you!'

'Okay... If you insist, are you sure you wouldn't like a little more time to gather yourself?'

Shoop gave her a look that would've turned a warm-blooded animal's veins icy.

'Fair enough... well this isn't going to be all too easy to hear but I'll try and start at the beginning shall I?'

Another icy stare over a glug of gin.

'Right... well... Here goes. I'm capable of conscious reincarnation and have been for millions of years,'

Shoop raised an eye brow, wondering if he should cut off the discourse to do violence but then feeling the bottle of gin in his hand, decided otherwise.

'About two thousand years ago I thought I'd spend a few lifetimes on Earth, see what it was like, how life here was getting on, but something happened to make me stay for a little while longer than I'd intended.'

Shoop looked at her suspiciously, not quite believing her but it rang true with what George had said before about the vessel having been around for thousands of years. He took another draught of the gin.

'Go on!'

'Well, this Babarus character was one of my disciples, I was Jesus by the way.'

'Course you were!' Said Shoop dryly.

'Well, Babarus turned against me...'

'I thought that was Judas!'

'Don't be daft, Judas was lovely, he wouldn't say boo to a goose and would've done anything for me. The Catholic church painted him bad so that they had a name closer to Judaism to demonise, Babarus made sure of that.' Jill sat in her seat, leaning back and making herself comfortable. Shoop didn't know why, but something about the woman made him feel at ease. People that put him at ease pissed him off and he made a mental note to himself to not restrict any desire to kill her that may come up in the immediate future.

'So anyway,' Jill continued, 'Babarus found out about some of the things I could do, the reincarnation, the making of creatures, creating things and he wanted to be part of it. Over years and years he worked against me behind my

back, trying to find out my secrets. He wanted the power for himself you see, he'd become drunk by the prospect of the power of never ending life and creation.

'It was him that handed me over to the Roman's for torture. He thought that he could get the rest of the information that he needed while they beat and whipped me. It didn't do any good of course.'

'Okay... but how come you didn't know what he was up to, you being sort of other worldly and all.'

'Well... I was a tad naive you see. First time on the planet and all.'

'I feel like I'm tripping!'

'Just bare with me Mr Winkle, I'd take more time but we haven't got it.'

'Whatever!' Shoop finished the bottle and gestured for another, Jill had anticipated Shoop's massive appetite and brought forth another bottle.

'So after they killed you on the cross you simply reincarnated yourself?'

'Oh no, the crucifixion didn't kill me. I was only up there for three hours and crucifixion takes days. No... my mate Mary came into the crypt with healing balms and patched me up. The whole resurrection thing was all blown well out of proportion.'

Shoop was, by this point, feeling a little overwhelmed by everything and drooped further into his chair, not able to argue against the seemingly ridiculous stream of nonsense leaking from the woman's mouth.

'So... what do I call you then? Jesus? The Vessel?'

'Jill will do just fine for now.'

'Jill?'

'Yes... Jill.'

'I can't see today getting any weirder!'

'That's because you haven't let today finish yet.'

'Oh Christ!' Shoop sighed and slumped a tad further into his chair, putting his hand up to his face in despair. The prospect of things actually getting weirder was not a welcome one. He'd expected to get to the Vessel, tap into it's power and blast all his enemies to dust. Living the rest of his life without having to answer to anyone, free to walk the Earth and kill anything even vaguely weird that crossed his path. Power beyond anything he'd ever known. Freedom above any freedom he'd ever dreamt of. Instead he was broken, battered, facing certain death and listening to a tiny little black tea drinking hippy spout a world of verbal bollocks at him.

At least he had a bottle of gin in his hand.

He could die pissed, that was all he could hope for.

'Anyway, after the crucifixion I decided to go back to India. I lived a long happy life, then another, and another, and just as I was about to head off and leave the planet, I started hearing about some strange and peculiar things, stories of monsters were being reported, creatures were coming into existence that shouldn't have been. Goblins, were wolves, vampires, vicious gnomes and

the like. I got curious and started sending some of my followers out to investigate the stories.

‘It seemed that Babarus had managed conscious reincarnation, he was still alive long after I’d been crucified. A hundred odd years after and that didn’t make any sense. He was mortal and should’ve been long gone.

‘It turned out that he’d been experimenting with some of my methods, but his twisted need for power had warped his experiments into hell-bent unwholesome beings who’s sole purpose seemed to be the destruction of everything that I had tried to accomplish. His experiments and his mind, it seemed, had gone somewhat array.’

‘And what has all this got to do with me?’

‘Haven’t you figured it out yet?’

‘Enlighten me!’ the sarcasm and exhaustion in Shoop’s voice was palpable. He clearly couldn’t care less and was just simply enjoying a bit of time with some gin, that and a slice of time off the manic sensations that had been raping his every molecule since Florida.

‘I stayed because Babarus had upset the natural course of the planet. We’ve been trying to find and destroy each other ever since. For two thousand years we’ve been trying to find each other, to stop each other.’

Shoop’s eyes were bleary now, tired, starting to feel the sweet release of alcohol and ready for sleep. He was only half listening to Jill.

‘Again... what the fuck has this all got to do with me?’ he drawled.

'Don't you get it? *You* are one of Barabus' creations! You are *the* creation. You're what he's being trying to achieve for two thousand years Shoop. You are the monster that found me!'

Shoop took his hand away from his face and looked up, jaw heading southward as far as it could go and a questioning in his eyebrows that has not been rivalled before or since.

He was suddenly more awake than he'd *ever* been.

'Had you not thought about why your "sixth sense" had been acting up so violently the closer you got to me? Hadn't it occurred to you that your irrational hatred of everything odd was so venomous?'

'No...' Shoop shook his head as if to clear it of cobwebs, 'no... I hated strange things because of something that happened to me... years ago... when I was a child!'

'You mean the dream! The one where you lose your hamster.'

'Exactly!'

'Think about it, what happens in the dream?'

Shoop's eyes darted around, searching for reason in the memory, 'There was a séance, they summoned something that shook the room up and my hamster was thrown across the room...'

'Really? Or did the room start to go into disarray when you started to mock the séance leaders voice?'



Shoop scanned his memory with fresh perspective. He wandered around the memory and to his horror and surprise, he found that she was right. He'd never thought about it before but she was right. In the dream, as soon as Shoop started mocking the woman's voice, saying "is there anybody there?", that was when the room started spinning, not because of the bloody hippies. It wasn't the crazy misguided ether believers that had brought about the death of his hamster, had brought the strange spirit into the room, it was *him!*

The strange things hadn't started happening until he had opened his mouth. Before he had piped up they'd been praying for an ethereal reaction for hours. It was him, he'd made the strange things happen.

'You've always hated the strange Mr Winkle, you just used that memory as justification for your hatred. You never saw the truth of it!'

Shoop's head was a whirlwind. Everything that he'd based his life on had been turned on its head in a matter of seconds.

It dawned on him that he'd hated weird things *before* the séance.

He'd hated the séance before it had killed his only childhood friend... Barry the hamster.

He realised that he'd hated his parents long before the séance, solely because they were odd, strange and unusual. He'd hated everything even vaguely abnormal since his birth.

It all clicked into place.

He'd spent his entire life attracting the weird and peculiar in a way that he couldn't explain. Strange things always happened to him and he had no idea why until now. What could be stranger to someone obsessed with protecting the norm than a being who'd been around since the dawn of life on Earth? What could be more worthy of destruction than the idea of a being that went against all human experience. A being that laughed in the face of everything that human's took as fact, that spat at all human reason and religion, that pissed on the human races ideologies from such a great height.

The more he thought about it the more sense it made. He had been designed to find this woman, this Vessel. Everything that he hated and hunted had been pointing at her for his whole life. He was a programmed machine of destruction.

He thought back to when his sixth sense had subsided, those lost and troubled years when his sense of destiny had become so rancidly lost. He'd been jaded, when he stopped hunting so vigorously, when he stopped caring about what he was doing, his sixth sense had subsided.

It had taken that small sniff of a trail to the Vessel to wake up his true vemon, his ultimate malice. As soon as he'd seen the seal on Bunty Auntumn's belt in that dark alley in Edinburgh he'd felt it. A trail had started. The sixth sense had been designed to find Jill.

He'd been built to find this person sitting in front of him, to *kill* this person. He was a pawn. Nothing more than a pawn in a much bigger game.

This didn't sit well with him.

'Wanker!' Shoop spat. 'Who the fuck is this piss-ant and where can I find him?'

'We have other hurdles to hop over before that Mr Winkle... for starters, when I release this hold on your sixth sense you will turn into a rabid homicidal maniac. You will kill me and then you'll be exhausted. You'll have little or no strength left.'

'It's the Boss isn't it? I can find the strength to kill him!'

'It's not the Boss Mr Winkle, he's as much a pawn as you and you *can't* find the strength to kill him. You've been programmed to freeze when you try to, there's nothing you can do about that, it's built into your genes.'

'No... one thing at a time. Firstly, you're going to kill me, throw me out of the window at the men down below as a distraction and hopefully you'll have enough strength and time to slip past them. After that, you'll come and find me in Iceland.'

Ben shifted uncomfortably inside the cupboard at hearing this.

'Sorry... but that sounds like a terrible plan. Firstly, there's no way I'll just "slip" past the Sphere, and secondly, what the hell makes you think that I won't just want to rip you apart when I find you again?'

'Once you've killed me, your sixth sense will be your own. I've had a lot more experience at this than Babarus and I'm pretty sure that killing me will stop your manic desire for my destruction. You'll still attract the abnormal but you

won't have the unreasonable powers that you've shown over the last few weeks. You'll be free to use your senses at your own discretion. You'll have the choice to kill me again or not. You'll be free Mr Winkle. As for escaping, there are factors that will become clear soon enough. I'm fairly confident that you'll make it away from here with your life but there's always the outside chance that you'll be captured. I can't guarantee your safety but it's looking like a possibility right now.'

This sat somewhat better with Shoop. It was why he'd thought he'd started this whole thing. To be rid of the Boss and the Sphere of Influence. To live his life doing everything that he'd always wanted to do, to be free to hunt down the oddness of the planet and cut large lumps out of it all. Grinning maniacally as he did so and without the hindrance of anyone else.

'So what happens if I do get away.'

'You come to work for me.'

This was not an idea that Shoop relished, it got in the way of his need for independence.

Jill saw the look of discontentment on his face.

'Don't worry, it'll only be for a short time. Your only chance is to hunt down Babarus and help me stop him. Once that's done, I will leave and you will be your own man. Free to clean up the mess that Babarus has made. It should keep you busy for quite a long time. Luckily, because of the way you are made,

you should have somewhere in the region of three hundred years in which to keep fighting.'

'You what?'

'Your genetic make up will give you exceptionally long life and you'll need it to do what you have to do.'

'Three hundred years!?'

'Yup!'

'Jesus!'

'No... Jill!' She chuckled a little to herself while Shoop showed the normal amount of distain for such a groan-worthy Dad joke.

'So what happens now?'

'Well... in a moment I'm going to release my hold on your sixth sense,' Jill reached into one of the drawers in her desk, 'and you're going to shoot me with this. I don't mind dying, but it's always nicer when it's quick, so just plug me between the eyes and we'll be done here.'

The door to the cupboard burst open and Ben flung himself out, darting across the room, grabbing the gun and, standing between Shoop and Jill, pointed the gun at Mr Winkle.

'NO JILL! You can't do this, I won't let you... I'll kill him first I swear! I'll... how do they say it in the films... oh yes... I'll blow his tiny little brains out!'

Shoop hadn't moved.

Normally he would've snapped the silly little pillock in half by the time he'd got half way across the room but something held him fast, kept him calm.

'Ben, this is Shoop Winkle. Mr Winkle, this is Ben, the boss' brother.'

'Boss' brother? Oh that's just perfect. Well done... that means I've got a hostage, if not, at least another distraction.'

'I'm sorry Mr Winkle but Ben's time isn't here yet. You'll have to deal with the Boss without him I'm afraid.

'Now... Ben... look at me.'

'No! You'll just try and stop me and I refuse to let this twisted little cretin from doing you any harm. I don't care what you say I just can't handle it... I can't let you go!' Ben was weeping now. The desperation in his voice dripped over the room as he pointed the gun at Shoop and started to squeeze the trigger.

Jill spoke calmly and with compassion.

'Ben,' her voice soft and enchanting, even Shoop felt it's effects. 'look at me.'

Ben resisted but the pull of her voice was too strong. Sobs wracking him he turned slightly, still keeping the gun trained on Shoop.

'Please Jill! For my sake... don't do this!'

'Look in my eyes Ben.'

He matched her gaze.

'You're stuck Ben. I understand that you don't want to be lonely any more and that you found a companion in me but you will find another companion. Different but the same. Your life won't be over just because Jill won't be in it,' it shocked Ben to hear Jill talk about herself in third person but it made him begin to realize that he had attached himself to a incarnation, not the true being.

'Your stuck in what you want Ben, and it's not letting you move forward. We *have* to move forward Ben. It's the only truth to it all and believe me... I know! Change is the only constant.'

Ben heard the words and knew them to be true but battled against it anyway. He couldn't face being alone again. Not *again!* He'd been alone for so long and the thought of doing it again, even for the briefest time, made him feel physically sick. The despair was acute.

'I can't Jill... I just can't!' His voice a pained whisper.

'Jesus! Grow a set of balls will ya!' Shoop spat out. He could never understand bleeding hearts. They made him feel angry. No damn self control.

Ben raised the gun a little, pointed it at Shoop's face and fired.

To Shoop's amazement, the bullet stopped right in front of his forehead, hovered there for a moment and dropped to the floor.

'You're welcome.' Jill nodded at Shoop.

Shoop barely even blinked, he just raised his second bottle of gin and slugged hard.

'Oh god I'm sorry!' Ben dropped the gun onto the table and started to cry. 'I'm so sorry,' sobs shaking him, 'I know that you're right but I just... I'm finding it... I can't let go. I can't lose you!'

Jill stroked his head to comfort him and Shoop was nearly sick on the floor.

'I'll always be with you Ben. Never forget that you are loved... never!'

Shoop was sick on the floor. Then he drank some more gin as he didn't like the idea of losing what he'd already guzzled to a sickeningly emotional moment.

'Ben, we don't have much time. Please believe that you'll find me again. I won't look the same but your feeling will be, if not better. You have to leave now. You have to find a place to hide. This is meant to be Ben.'

Ben stood, soaked up her visage. Drank her in with his eyes trying to make sure that he wouldn't forget the one person in the world that had changed his life for the better. Had taken the time to try and see him. He was angry at the loss but he knew that blaming her was be foolish.

'For fuck's sake man! Take a picture or something will ya... there's killing to be done!'

Ben went to pounce at Shoop but Jill stopped him with a simple hand on his shoulder.

'Please Ben.'



The feeling of loss was almost unbearable. He knew he'd see her again, but it wouldn't be the same. Something was ending.

He walked to the door, turning before he left so see her one last time. She smiled and it pierced him.

He closed the door behind him and was gone.

'Poor lad.' Said Jill

'Fuck him... when do I get to shoot you?'

It hit Shoop like a truck. Jill took away the barrier to the violent frenzy of the sixth sense and Shoop felt like he'd jusy licked a plug socket. His muscles contracted, his bones rattled again his mind was leaving him.

With the last vestiges of control he had left, thin as they were, he grabbed the gun off the table, one hand biting into the wood of the desk making finger sized holes and inch deep in his fury.

He raised the gun and fired.

The bullet entered Jill through her nose and took most of her brain with it as it came out in a spray of matter, blood and bone through the back of her head.

Still smiling she faltered back, crashing through the window and plummeting to the ground at the foot of the steps to the castle. She landed in a broken bloody mass, making the Boss and his few remaining henchmen jump back in shock.

It was over.

Ben heard the shot and his eyes screwed together. He knew she was right but still, he wasn't looking forward to the weeks of pain he'd feel at her loss.

Shoop was on his knees in Jill's study.

The sixth sense had spread out the second he'd shot her. It'd had been so concentrated and deadly, like a hurricane in a shoe box but the moment that Jill died the feeling fanned out, covered everything. He could feel every single one of Babarus' creations. All of them around the world, and some of them under water. He could feel the size of what Babarus had done, the emensity of two thousand years of creating monsters to track down and kill the vessel, most of which could barely think coherently. They were all his brothers and sisters and he hated them.

The hate wasn't furious though. It wasn't out of control. It was just there.

Shoop reeled in exhaustion. He tried to stand but couldn't quite make it. Instead he crawled over to the bottle of gin that he'd apparently dropped on the floor and drank it down laying flat on his back.

Ben sat in a room, too despairing to sob any more. He sat with a furrowed brow staring at the floor eyes leaking, crying until dust appeared.

Some time later Shoop managed to scrape himself off the floor.

He didn't know how long he'd been there, probably only a few minutes but it felt like hours.

A cold spring wind was whistling in from the broken window and had blown some papers of the desk and strewn them around the room. The breeze tickled Shoop's skin making him shudder slightly in his exhausted state. The more he came round the more he became aware of how utterly spent he felt. His limbs weighed a ton and his muscles ached from the rattling that had shot through his body. He'd never felt so bushed in his life.

As he struggled to get to his feet he heard voices outside. It couldn't make out the words but the mumblings reminded him of the henchmen and the Boss waiting outside for him. He didn't know if he had the strength to fend them off. He had a gun but what use would that do against the Boss' failsafe device that disallowed Shoop from doing the bastard any harm.

He didn't know what to do.

He could find a back exit and try and make a run for it, but he knew that he wouldn't get far. Not in the state he was in.

He could throw himself out of the window and kill himself before the Boss got a chance to torture him for a number of decades but he was too damn stubborn to stop living without someone else stubbing him out.

It seemed his only option was to walk out the front door, shoot as many people as he could before he was taken prisoner and hope for the best.

Not much of a plan but better than lying down and taking the defeat without a fight.

The Boss was standing over the mangled corpse of the vessel rubbing his hands together with glee and prodding it with his foot.

'We've done it... we've actually done it! My god I never thought we'd actually get here... actually kill the witch! With any luck she won't come back. She shouldn't do, Shoop was designed very well. A normal bullet wouldn't have made a difference but coming from Mr Winkle... well... we'll just have to wait and see but wow! We got her! We damn well got her!'

Just as he was about to do a little jig over the still warm body of the creator of life on earth, one of his henchmen's face half disappeared as a bullet ripped through it.

The other men whipped out their guns and returned fire to the castle door where the shot had come from.

'I WANT HIM ALIVE! DO YOU HEAR ME? I WANT THAT LITTLE SHIT ALIVE!'

Bullets ripped at the front of the building as Shoop calmly took cover and waited for the barrage to stop. When it did, he poked his head out for a split second and picked another man off, this time going for a gut shot as those *really* hurt.

Another barrage, then a little pause.

'WINKLE!' barked the Boss, 'YOU HAVE NO WAY OUT OF THIS. YOU CANNOT KILL ME. YOU KNOW THIS. STOP PROLONGING THE INEVITABLE AND GET OUT HERE!'

Shoop coughed, it stabbed through his every muscle.

'If you don't mind...' his voice was weak and harsh, 'I think I'll spend a little time killing some more of your men before you get to have your way with me.'

Out popped his head again and another agent dropped to the floor bleeding. Their lesson learned, they dove for cover behind a small wall as they fired redundantly at the front of the castle.

Shoops head popped out again but there was no shot this time. Their cover was working. One of the men glanced over the wall and lost the top of his head. A small piece of brain slapped the Boss in the face.

'DAMN IT WINKLE! THIS IS A STAND OFF. YOU HAVE NO WHERE TO GO!'

'I'm quite happy to wait here for as long as I'm breathing.' Said Shoop defiantly through some pained coughing.

'You!' said the Boss to one of the men behind a wall on the other side of the path, 'throw a smoke grenade in that door!'

'Yes sir.' He said, pulling out a grenade and yanking the pin. Understandably reluctant to stand and throw the thing, he took two very deep breaths and went to make his move. Before he could though, his hand was blown off at the wrist.

'What the fu...'

but his words were cut off by another gunshot. The grenade fell to the ground as did two more agents, blood squirting from fresh wounds. It took a moment for them to realise it but some one was shooting them from behind.

The grenade went off and chaos moved into the area and set up camp for a while. There were shouts, shots, screams and a lot of smoke. Shoop peaked round the doorway to see what was going on but all he could see was smoke and the occasional shadowy figure.

Some of the agents emerged from the pandemonium and he picked them off.

Who the hell was out there, maybe Komodo or Yan had made it out of the battle and come back.

The bedlam went on for a good two or three minutes and some of the agents managed to escape the smoke and run to safety.

Then the Boss emerged, coughing into a handkerchief.

Shoop stepped out of the castle and raised his gun. The Boss saw him and smirked, challenging Shoop to try it.

He tried to squeeze the trigger but it was like it had suddenly been turned to stone. His desire to kill this pathetic little man was immense. He was convinced that his need to see him dead would override any daft restriction that had been built into him but when push came to shove, he froze.

The Boss smiled a little wider, staring at Shoop for a moment and then dashed off into the undergrowth.

'FFFUUUUUUUCCCCCK!' Shoop dropped to his knees screaming and firing his gun in the air.

When the smoke cleared there were a dozen dead and dying men lying on the ground. Only one man was left standing. He passed through the remaining smog and it took a moment for Shoop to recognise him as the silhouette floated over the bodies. Then it struck him.

'Jesus... Carl? Is that you?'

'Sorry I'm late Boss. Had a few problems getting out of a terrorist organisation.'

'I should bloody well shoot you right now you stupid tosser! You almost screwed the whole thing up in Singapore, what the hell were you thinking? You know how Jack Daniels effects you when off the weed you daft prick!'

'So... no thank you then?' Said Carl with a slight smirk.

'We'll call it even shall we?'

'Seems fair.'

'You're bleeding.' Said Shoop.

'Yeah, took one in the leg, nothing serious.'

'Shit!' hissed Shoop.

'I'm fine, really, there's no need to get emotional.'

'What? No, I mean shit that means neither of us can run after the Boss.

He got away through the bushes'

'You saw him?'

'No... a fucking squirrel told me!'

'Why didn't you shoot him?'

'Long story!' Shoop slumped onto a step, the fatigue really starting to weigh him down.

'Shouldn't we be getting out of here.'

'Just give me a minute!'

'I don't think that's such a good idea. We need to get as far away from here as humanly possible, as soon as humanly possible, here, let me give you a hand.'

Carl put Shoop's arm over his shoulder and lifted him up. Shoop groaned from the pain.

'We need to find some more gin!'

'The first chance we get. No problem.' Said Carl, 'So... tell me... what did I miss.'

'Where the hell do I start?'

'Let's start with Singapore.'



They hobbled off into the twilight as the sun sank down over the baron hills.

## Epilogue

George and Chunt Walked up to the main gate of the castle. George had spent a long time locked up in his dismal little dungeon in Edinburgh and hadn't seen or heard of carnage on the level he was seeing for a very long time, if ever.

Chunt was in shock.

'Oh my sweet Jesus! They're everywhere! How many do you think there are?'

'I don't know,' said George, 'come on, we're going to have to climb over them.'

George awkwardly started climbing over the minced corpses of countless Sphere agents, trying desperately not to gag and add to the rancid reek.

They got through the gate, over the bodies and body parts and, reaching a piece of ground that wasn't covered in gore, looked back at the butchery. There were arms in trees, ears in bushes hands dangling from branches and intestines dripping of gates and walls. It was the most horrendous site that Chunt had ever witnessed and hoped she'd never have to see anything on par with it for the rest of her life.

'I'm starting to see why Shoop didn't want us here!' Said George and took a large swig from a brandy bottle. 'I don't suppose there's any point in this any more.' He said and took off the small rubber band that emitted his hard light disguise. Chunt followed suit.

'Hold it right there! Hands in the air and don't fuckin' move!'

A head popped up over the pile of human wreckage, then another and another, all pointing police issue fully automatic weapons straight at them.

'You even breath wrong and I'll drop you like a one night stand with V.D.!'

'Shit!' said George.

THE END... for now.

# The Gallery

All drawings by Rufus















